

Locating Preschool Literacy Practices:  
A Bio-Ecological Perspective on Irish Preschool Literacy Provision

A thesis submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the School of Education  
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

By Clara Maria Fiorentini

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### **Declaration**

I declare that this these has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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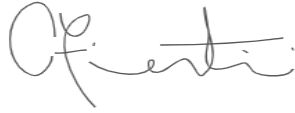
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“Anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you.”

Nelly Copeland

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## **Abstract**

The preschool years offer a unique window of time to support young children in developing emergent and early literacy skills prior to formal schooling. Ultimately, optimal emergent literacy support and early literacy learning experiences in preschool settings are dependent on educator knowledge and competence. While research on the educative nature of early childhood education demonstrates the crucial role of the early childhood educator in micro- and mesosystemic interactions, research demonstrating the role of the preschool educator as an early literacy educator, continues to be sparse.

This research study explores early literacy practice and provision within the two final years of early childhood education in Ireland prior to beginning formal primary school education, more commonly known as the ECCE years. Reflecting on a systems-based approach to preschool literacy provision and the nature of meaningful interactions, this study acknowledges the unique and dynamic role of the preschool educator as an early literacy educator and the factors affecting the potential of their individual influence on children's early literacy learning experiences and development across the preschool years.

Using a Mixed Methods Sequential Exploratory Design approach under a pragmatist methodology, this research explores the perspectives of preschool educators, managers and CPD providers on preschool literacy provision through two phases of data collection. Phase 1 offers quantitative data through a questionnaire of 194 preschool educators, consolidated and explored in greater depth through qualitative data generated through 20 semi-structured interviews with preschool educators (10), preschool managers (6), and preschool literacy CPD providers (4).

This study offers an informative interrogation of existing priorities for preschool literacy provision in Ireland. The study confirms that appropriate recommendations and guidance

for preschool literacy learning in Ireland are limited, leading to significant variety in preschool early literacy approaches and methods. Such uncertainties often result in a premature focus on overly formalised or ‘schoolified’ literacy practices in Irish preschool settings. Through a Bioecological lens, this study considers what currently informs existing early literacy practices in Irish preschools and unpacks a range of ongoing challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in terms of educator knowledge, pedagogical practices, resourcing, and broader sector-wide issues.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into patterns within existing priorities for preschool literacy practices, with particular attention to accommodations for, and value of, the read aloud as an intentional early literacy method and proximal process in the preschool years. Findings also offer insights into inconsistencies in the early literacy training experiences of preservice early childhood educators, the lack of practical supports across relevant frameworks and curricula, and an absence of suitable continuous professional learning opportunities for preschool educators.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory emerges as a fundamental element of the study providing a valuable theoretical framework for studies of preschool literacy learning and research examining the educative nature of the preschool learning environment. Key recommendations for policy and practice in relation to preschool literacy provision and the quality of preservice educator literacy training are identified in the context of preschool and national domains.





## **Abbreviations**

|        |                                                                     |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DBR    | Design-Based Research                                               |
| CELM   | Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model                               |
| CPD    | Continuous Professional Development                                 |
| ECE    | Early Childhood Education                                           |
| ECCE   | Early Childhood Education and Care                                  |
| ELC    | Early Learning & Care                                               |
| ELD    | Early Literacy Development                                          |
| ELINET | European Literacy Policy Network                                    |
| EPPE   | Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project London          |
| DCEDIY | Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth |
| DCYA   | Department of Children and Youth Affairs                            |
| DE     | Department of Education (Ireland)                                   |
| DES    | Department of Education and Skills (Ireland)                        |
| ILA    | International Literacy Association                                  |
| ILNDLS | Irish Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy               |
| NAEYC  | National Association for the Education of Young Children            |
| NCCA   | National Council for Curriculum & Assessment                        |
| NEPS   | National Educational Psychological Services                         |
| NELP   | National Early Literacy Panel                                       |
| NFQ    | National Framework for Qualification                                |
| NSLN   | National Strategy for Literacy & Numeracy                           |
| OECD   | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development              |
| PCF    | Primary Curriculum Framework                                        |

|        |                                                                  |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PIACC  | Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies |
| PIRLS  | Progress in International Reading Literacy Study                 |
| PISA   | Program for International Student Assessment                     |
| PL     | Professional Learning                                            |
| PLC    | Primary Language Curriculum                                      |
| PPCT   | Person Process Context Time                                      |
| QQI    | Quality and Qualifications Ireland                               |
| SAC    | School-Aged Childcare                                            |
| SEQ    | Sequential Explanatory Design                                    |
| SLT    | Speech and Language Therapy                                      |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |

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# **Chapter 1:**

## **Introduction**

Come then. What is it to be literate? We have to draw our own maps, trace our own histories, acknowledge our own debts and consider ways not taken. Our literacy autobiographies reveal riches and gaps, but these narratives are not the tale of solitary journeys. We were always in dialogue with others – those who taught us to read, those for whom we wrote, who lent us books, shaped our preferences, encouraged us, forbade us even. There were dead poets, living authors and cynical critics. We remember them as friends who made our world more habitable, who helped us, as we read and wrote, to discover who we were and could become. As memory reveals literacy as a series of dialogues there were always significant encounters.

(Meek, 1991, p. 243)

Literacy development begins early in life and is highly correlated with all the interrelated and interdependent domains of young children’s development (Brown, 2014; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Roskos & Vukelich, 2006; Seefeldt, 2005; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). The preschool years offer a unique window of time to support young children in developing emergent and early literacy skills prior to formal schooling and facilitates consistent opportunities for what Meek (1991, p.243) refers to as those “significant encounters”. Across this study, the term preschool refers to preschool settings in the Irish early childhood education context. Specifically, the study reflects on early literacy practice and provision within the two final years of early childhood education in Ireland prior to beginning formal primary school education, more commonly known as the preschool years. Early literacy plays a significant role in fostering early learning experiences connected to academic achievement. Those who work with young children require a significant wealth of professional knowledge and competence in best supporting young children’s early literacy development across early childhood education and care experiences (Weadham, Serry & Snow,

2021). All preschool-aged children in Ireland are entitled to access preschool experiences with strong, evidence-based early literacy components across their provision.

This thesis focuses on the examination of existing preschool literacy practices and provision across preschool settings in Ireland. This includes examining preschool educator' and managers' perceptions and experiences of preschool literacy provision and insights into existing preschool literacy practice. It also includes a specific investigation of the use of and knowledge of the read aloud as an example of a pivotal early literacy learning experience and proximal process in the preschool years. The study seeks to explore patterns in preschool literacy practices and, in particular, what informs existing early literacy practice across Irish preschool settings. The study also strives to uncover the challenges currently associated with and impacting preschool literacy provision in Ireland. The study considers educators' experiences of literacy across their training and qualification journeys in an effort to reflect on the role this may play in preschool literacy provision.

This chapter provides an overview of the study, with reference to key elements of the study and its learning context. A brief summary of the preschool education context in Ireland and preschool literacy is outlined in Section 1.1. The rationale, aims, and research questions of the study are subsequently presented in Section 1.2. Section 1.3 presents an overview of the thesis structure and the focus of each chapter therein.

## **1.1 Introduction to Preschool Literacy**

Preschool is a foundational stage in a child's educational journey, affording consistent opportunities for knowledgeable educators to recognise, support and nurture the development of young children's emergent reading and writing skills in engaging, meaningful and appropriate ways (Brown, 2014; Sheridan, 2009). Regardless of context, this preschool period offers a critical pocket of time to build a foundation for later success in reading, writing and

oral communication while still resisting a rush towards prematurely formal or schoolified literacy practices. Within the preschool years countless, crucial opportunities exist for the development of fundamental early literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, narrative skills, knowledge development and print awareness. Core practices such as intentional interactions, interactive book reading, song singing, reciting nursery rhymes, language games and interactive play are crucial in fostering a love of reading, writing and communicating and are essential components in influencing literacy and language development across childhood (Dickinson & Donner, 2022; Lawson-Adams, Nicolopoulou *et al.*, 2015; Sinclair *et al.*, 2019; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2009). Preschool early literacy experiences support cognitive development, social skills, creativity and imagination. Early childhood educators can play a critical role in children's early literacy development and can intentionally create opportunities to foster early literacy learning in the preschool years (Siraj, Melhuish & Howard *et al.*, 2023; Wright *et al.*, 2022). Such efforts can contribute to compensation for “unequal opportunities for language and literacy development” (Dahlstrom, Damber & Rasmusson, 2024, p.1417). An awareness, appreciation and understanding of early literacy skills and early literacy development enables preschool educators to provide relevant, meaningful, and engaging early literacy learning experiences in support of developing firm foundations for successful literacy development throughout childhood (Weadham, Serry & Snow, 2021). Rich early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years can ensure that all children are enabled to begin school with more equal literacy opportunities regardless of their home environment (Dahlstrom, Damber & Rasmusson, 2023; Salameh, 2018).

### **1.1.1 The Irish Preschool Context**

The Irish preschool context has undergone significant development and growth over the past two decades (Walsh *et al.*, 2024). In Ireland, preschool education is typically provided through a variety of settings, which includes playgroups, crèches, Montessori

preschools, independent preschool providers, and community-based services. Walsh (2020) highlights the notable, historical absence of the Irish State in its provision of childcare or preschool education in Ireland. Such absence has ultimately resulted in the development of necessary provisions amongst a variety of private, community, and voluntary providers (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017). The Irish preschool context has evolved significantly to accommodate the diverse needs of children and families and societal developments thanks to “enhanced levels of State involvement and support for the care and education of preschool children” (Walsh, 2020, p.35). Continuous developments in policy, funding, research, and professional training have enhanced the quality of preschool services and preschool provision in Ireland yet the dimension of quality continues to pose challenges attributed to a range of factors such as educator skill level, qualifications, training, experience, working conditions and career pathways (OECD, 2018, 2021; Walsh *et al.*, 2024). A focus on “process quality” is increasingly evident across quality concerns for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and “encompasses the daily interactions of children through their ECEC settings with other children, staff and teachers, space and materials” (OECD, 2021, p.9).

#### **1.1.1.1 Varying Terminology and Labelling across the Irish ECEC Sector**

A result of the rapid development of the early childhood education landscape in Ireland is the varying terminology and labelling used to describe the sector and its provision. A variety of terms are used interchangeably such as, Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Early Learning and Care (ELC), Preschool and Pre-primary education. The use of varying terms and continued introduction of new terms can sometimes cause uncertainty and leads to frequent debate within the field. Ultimately, the diversity in terminology directly reflects “the pace of change over the last 20 years, seen in rapid growth in provision (with changes in public funding driving changes in the character of ECEC provision),

formalisation (with introduction of regulations, and quality and curriculum frameworks) and professionalisation (with rapid growth in third level courses and, soon, minimum qualifications)” (Wolfe, 2015, p. 2). For the purpose of this study, a focus will be placed on the two ECCE years. The term preschool will be referenced as a means of highlight this study’s attention to the later stages of early childhood education in Ireland - the two years of early childhood education provision Irish preschool-aged children are enabled to engage with prior to beginning primary school education.

### **1.1.2 The ECCE Programme**

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme in Ireland was launched in 2010 with the aim of providing young children with access to free preschool education across the Republic of Ireland. Commonly known as the ‘ECCE scheme’, this is a universal childcare programme, designed to provide all children with access to two years free preschool education prior to beginning primary school (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). The scheme is funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality<sup>1</sup> and is currently offered in approximately 5000 early years settings (preschools, Montessori’s, crèches and playgroups) for three hours a day, five days a week across 38 weeks of the year. All children in Ireland are entitled to two full academic years on the ECCE scheme. Children can avail of ECCE from the age of 2 years and 8 months until the age of 5 years and 6 months. The DCEDIY (2024) state that all childcare services participating in the ECCE Programme must provide an appropriate preschool educational programme adhering to the principles of

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). The nomenclature of this department should be noted as it has gone through significant redevelopment in recent years which will be reflected across much of the literature referenced. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in June, 2011. In 2020, it was renamed and reconfigured as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This was renamed and once again reconfigured as the Department of Children, Disability and Equality in May, 2025.

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009; 2024) and Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006). As it stands, there is no universal programme or collective guiding materials to specifically support early literacy provision in the ECCE years.

### ***1.1.3 Emergent Literacy and Early Literacy Learning in Preschool***

As Hunkin (2024, p.17) states, “the ability to read and write is fundamental to daily life; therefore, the development of emergent literacy skills is essential.” Emergent literacy is a term synonymous with the early stages of a child’s development of language, reading and writing skills. From birth to the earliest weeks and months of primary education, the developmental precursors to reading and writing unfurl (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2008). The term “emergent literacy” demonstrates that literacy acquisition resides along a developmental continuum and moves beyond historical interpretations of readiness for literacy (Strickland, 1990; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2008). Emergent literacy is a critical feature in a child’s development where a motivation to communicate and behave in literate ways becomes apparent. Emergent literacy skills can be and should be nurtured long before children are ever expected to conventionally read or write (Lonigan *et al.*, 2011; Norling, 2015). Emergent literacy skill development is a pivotal stage in a child’s early literacy learning journey (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009; Kress, 1996). Early literacy refers to the foundational skills and knowledge acquired by children prior to conventional literacy development. When considering early literacy learning in the preschool years, it is important to recognise that this is not a matter of preparation for conventional literacy at primary level through rapid and premature progression to formalised practices such as phonics and handwriting. Instead, early literacy within the preschool years is a matter of creating a language-rich, print-rich and literature-rich early literacy learning environment. Foundational experiences (play, nursery rhymes, reading aloud, language games, intentional interactions,

mark making, exposure to environmental print) facilitated by knowledgeable preschool educators, support children in the development of key emergent literacy skills such as print motivation, print awareness, vocabulary, phonological and phonemic awareness, knowledge, and narrative skills (CLEL, 2025). The development of emergent literacy skills is crucial and can be directly influenced by the quality of early literacy provision (or lack thereof) across the preschool years (Castro & Barrera, 2019). Emergent literacy in its broadest sense goes beyond merely defining the skills, knowledge and attitudes “presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing” (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2008 p.849) but also recognises the environments supporting such developments (i.e. preschool) and the significance of social interactions in literacy-rich environments for young children (Fitzgerald, Schuele & Roberts, 1992; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2008).

## **1.2 Rationale, Aims & Research Questions**

This section will discuss the rationale of the study, the aims of the study, as well as introducing the research questions of the study.

### **1.2.1 Rationale**

Research consistently demonstrates the significant role early childhood educators can play in nurturing young children’s early literacy development (Hunt *et al.*, 2020; McLachlan, 2020; McLachlan *et al.*, 2013; NELP, 2009; Piasta, 2014; Teale, Whittingham & Hoffman, 2020; Sénéchal & le Fevre, 2014; Snow & Matthews, 2016; UNESCO, 2004). Research has shown the conditions required for the development of language and literacy within the preschool years (Castro & Barrera, 2019; Gillen & Hall, 2013; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010; Snowling & Hulme, 2013; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001) and that a focus on emergent literacy requires consistent use of effective, evidence-informed early literacy practices (Kosanovich, Phillips & Willis, 2020; Rohde, 2015). Ultimately, optimal emergent literacy

support and early literacy learning experiences in preschool settings relies on educator knowledge and competence (Weadman, Serry & Snow, 2023). In Ireland, a universal *Free Preschool Year* was launched in 2010 in an effort to highlight the value of early education and ultimately meet targets in the provision of increased affordability of childcare options for parents and guardians<sup>2</sup>. This was extended to two years in 2016 enabling all children to access up to 76 weeks of preschool prior to beginning school (Moloney & French, 2022). While components of emergent literacy are acknowledged across Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009; 2024), specific guidance or support material for educators on early literacy within each of the ECCE years has not yet been established.

This study seeks to explore Irish preschool literacy practices, particularly the existing priorities for preschool literacy provision. Through a Bioecological lens, this study explores what currently informs existing early literacy practices in Irish preschools and the challenges associated with early literacy provision. The study is called ‘Locating Preschool Literacy Practices’ in a nod to Bronfenbrenner’s model which in keeping with a Bioecological approach, places the child at the centre of a complex network of influences in their learning environment (Hayes, Halpenny & O’Toole, 2023). The study acknowledges the unique and dynamic role of the preschool educator as an early literacy educator and their individual influence on children’s early literacy learning experiences.

In a small study, such as this, it would be impossible to capture or discuss in detail, the breadth of methods recommended to support emergent and early literacy development in the preschool years. The read aloud, however, is a longstanding, evidence-informed method, consistently and continuously proven by extensive research studies to support, nurture and foster the development of a wealth of emergent and early literacy skills (Duursma, Augustyn,

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<sup>2</sup> From this point forward in this thesis, the term parent is used to describe parents, guardians and other cares.

& Zuckerman, 2008; Klass *et al.*, 2024; Lonigan, 2006; 2004; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1999; Swanson, 2011; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2008). A multifunctional method, the read aloud is associated with early learning but also closely linked to building relationships and connections with educators and caregivers (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Additionally, the read aloud can be considered as one of the most well-known, well-loved and recognised early literacy practices (Hoffman, Teale & Yokota, 2015). Ultimately, it is a critical method, that should be present in all early childhood educational environments (Halim, 2022). The read aloud is also an example of a method that can draw direct relatability to Bronfenbrenner's concepts of interactions and proximal processes, which are explored in greater detail in chapter two. For such reasons, the read aloud acts as a useful and relevant starting point in an exploration of Irish preschool early literacy practices and provision.

### ***1.2.2 Aims of the Study***

The current study seeks to explore existing preschool literacy provision in Ireland. This research study began with the underpinning goal of unpacking the factors affecting Irish preschool literacy provision in order to learn about the current state of early literacy provision in Irish preschool settings and the challenges associated with early literacy learning in Irish preschools.

The study was divided into four specific aims:

1. To explore the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland.
2. To examine preschool educators', preschool managers' and preschool literacy CPD providers' existing priorities for preschool literacy learning in the current ECCE scheme.
3. To investigate the place of the read aloud as an early literacy method in Irish preschools.

4. To add to the field of knowledge in relation to preschool early literacy learning and provision.

***1. To explore the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland***

This study seeks to examine the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland in terms of educator knowledge, pedagogical practices, resourcing and broader sector-wide issues. Preschool literacy learning is a fundamental aspect of early childhood provision, laying the groundwork for future social and academic success – however, current examples of practice across existing preschool provision demonstrate potential challenges associated with and impacting the quality of preschool literacy provision.

***2. To explore preschool educators', preschool managers' and preschool literacy CPD providers existing priorities for preschool literacy learning in the current ECCE scheme***

This study seeks to identify the existing priorities for preschool literacy learning and to examine patterns across preschool educators' and preschool managers' beliefs and experiences pertaining to preschool literacy learning. Early literacy practices within preschool settings are usually dependent on the priorities of individual settings and staff members; therefore, this study seeks insights into literacy practices and priorities within Irish preschool settings.

***3. To explore the place of the read aloud as an early literacy method and proximal process in Irish preschools***

To consider literacy learning and pedagogic practices in preschool would require examination of a wide array of early literacy activities. For the purpose of this small-scale study, the read aloud has been selected. Read alouds' continue to be the most recommended early literacy practice (Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Gurdon, 2019; Isik, 2016; Phillips, 2000; Shickedanz &

Collins, 2012; Suggate *et al.*, 2013) and this study seeks to examine the place of the read aloud in existing preschool literacy provision in Ireland.

#### ***4. To add to the field of knowledge in relation to preschool early literacy learning and provision***

The final aim of this study is to add to the field of knowledge and practice concerned with preschool literacy learning and the role of the preschool educator in supporting such learning in Irish preschool settings. Adding to the field of knowledge may offer positive opportunities in terms of influencing educator practice, preschool literacy provision at national level, and policy pertaining to early literacy learning in the ECCE years. The Department of Education Inspectorate, in their recent publication, *Early Years Insights*, noted that the development of children's early literacy skills "could be further enhanced across many ELC settings" (DE, 2024, n.p). This study could possess the potential to contribute to such enhancements.

#### ***1.2.3 Research Questions***

The research questions evolved from the rationale and aims of the study. It should be noted that this doctoral study focuses on educators' early literacy practices within Irish preschool settings but also considers the existing policy base; as a result, the research questions will be addressed from that point of view.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the existing priorities of preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. How are 'read alouds' currently utilised in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?
4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

The Bioecological Systems Theory supports interpretations of literacy development and its position at the “site of transaction between cognitive processes and social practices” (Jaeger, 2016, p. 163). Bronfenbrenner’s model underpins each of the research questions as it reinforces the importance of meaningful consideration of day-to-day practice in early childhood education and care. As Hayes, O’Toole and Halpenny (2017, p.145) state:

In the decisions we make when working with children, individually or collectively, we are shaped by our awareness of the variety of interacting factors influencing those decisions. Being able to visualise as well as articulate the wide variety of influences and their various impacts on different elements of the systems within which we develop enriches the way we work with young children and their families.

The first research question seeks to explore patterns and differences across priorities for preschool literacy provision and how this may impact children’s preschool literacy learning experiences and educator experiences of preschool literacy provision. The second research question seeks to explore the place of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision in the hope of uncovering insights into educator experience and competences connected to this early literacy method. The third research question focuses on the range of programmes, curricula, resources, and insights informing existing preschool literacy provision. The final question then considers the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland in terms of their influence on day-to-day practice for preschool educators.

### **1.3 Summary of the Thesis Structure**

This thesis begins in Chapter 2 by outlining the theoretical framing of this study. An overview of the problem statement and research questions is presented. An explanation is provided of Uri Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and its relevance to this study. A Bioecological Framework for Irish preschool literacy learning is explored with an examination of Bronfenbrenner's model and how it can be applied within research pertaining to preschool early literacy practices and early literacy development. Through this, five systems of Bioecological theory are examined to highlight the crucial nature of interactions across the preschool context and the preschool educator in the provision of early literacy learning experiences and early literacy development in the Irish preschool context. The chapter offers an insight into the role of the developing person, in this case the child as an early literacy learner. This is followed by an exploration of the preschool educator and their unique role as an early literacy educator. This leads to an examination of proximal processes with particular focus on the read aloud methodology as an example of an enduring method facilitating the provision of complex, reciprocal interactions between child and adult in the preschool context.

Chapter Three presents a review of the relevant literature. The chapter is divided into five overarching sections, which encompasses an exploration of: (i) definitions of literacy (ii) the Irish policy and curricular context pertaining to literacy in early childhood education (iii) emergent literacy (iv) priorities for preschool literacy development and finally (v) reading aloud. The literature review begins with an overview of definitions of literacy with particular attention to New Literacies, multiliteracies, and contemporary definitions of literacy. This leads to an examination of the representation of literacy and early years' literacy priorities across policy and curricula pertaining to the Irish preschool context in an effort to uncover priorities for existing Irish preschool literacy practice. Patterns across the wider global

context are highlighted and a demonstration of patterns of preoccupation with formalised literacy practices due to disparities in policy recommendations, curricular guidance, and educator priorities reflecting uncertainties surrounding existing literacy provision in preschool contexts. This is followed by a discussion of emergent literacy leading to an examination of constrained and unconstrained literacy skills which offers an opportunity to highlight the relationship between oral language development and early literacy development and its relevance to preschool literacy provision. This is followed by a discussion of priorities for preschool literacy development which spotlights the role of the preschool educator in early literacy development. The chapter concludes with an examination of reading aloud which offers empirical evidence for the read aloud practices, its role in early literacy skill development and a range of factors impacting the facilitation of read alouds in preschool.

Chapter Four offers an overview and analysis of the methodological structures and progression which underpins the research undertaken in this study. It lays the methodological foundation in order to explore the two research cycles that evolved and the subsequent generation of findings to explore existing Irish preschool literacy practices. The philosophical underpinnings of the study are presented, and the ontological and epistemological components of the study are explored leading to a rationale for the research methodology adopted. The informed selection of mixed methods sequential explanatory design is provided. The researcher's statement of positionality is presented alongside an overview of the research context and participants. The statement of positionality is shared, followed by an explanation of the research tools employed throughout the study. The two-phased data analysis process is outlined with a focus on the thematic analysis process and a rationale for thematic analysis. The chapter concludes with an overview of validity and limitations of the study.

Chapter Five outlines the analysis and findings from the data collected across Phase 1 of the study. This phase provided a needs analysis which enabled the development of Phase 2.

The analysis of Phase 1 is structured in response to the guiding research questions and thus presents findings in relation to each. Data are presented on three broad components: (i) experience and qualifications of preschool educators (ii) preschool literacy practices (iii) book use and reading aloud. The findings from phase 1 are presented under five bespoke categories: (i) variety in literacy training experiences (ii) educator knowledge on early literacy development (iii) varying perceptions of early literacy (iv) early literacy practice (v) continuous professional development and professional learning, and lastly, (vi) read alouds' in preschool.

Chapter Six outlines the analysis and findings from the data collected across Phase 2 of the study which facilitated qualitative data collection and reflexive thematic analysis. The findings of Phase 2 are explored under four broad themes, reflecting the research questions and other significant elements that emerged from the process of data reduction and analysis: (i) priorities for preschool literacy practices (ii) the read aloud in preschool literacy provision (iii) informing preschool literacy provision, and lastly, (iv) challenges in preschool literacy provision. The chapter begins with an exploration of the priorities in preschool literacy practices in the interview participants' settings will be explored with a discussion on patterns uncovered. Emerging differences in priorities between educators and setting managers are explored. Across this, the data on preschool literacy resources is examined indicating varying programmes, resources and materials being used across settings in support of preschool literacy learning experiences. Next, the place of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision is outlined, demonstrating insights into participants' perceptions of the preschool read aloud and literacy skill development through such provision. Insights into participants' preferences in text choices are shared. Following this, efforts are made to unpack the findings pertaining to what currently informs preschool literacy practices offering insights into frameworks and curricula utilised to support preschool literacy practices. Participants' perspectives of the original Aistear Framework (2009) are examined and perceptions of its role in supporting

preschool literacy provision. Throughout the varying interpretations of early literacy presented by participants, insights into educator literacy knowledge and literacy training are shared. Chapter Six concludes with an examination of challenges in preschool literacy provision, unpacking a variety of difficulties and obstacles participants face in their efforts of preschool literacy provision.

Chapter Seven further consolidates the findings of the study, locates the relevant findings within the pertinent literature and addresses the research questions. This discussion chapter is structured in response to the study's underpinning research questions. The first research question is addressed by discussing the current study's findings in relation to the existing preschool literacy practices and priorities within Irish preschool settings. The second research question is addressed by reporting on the findings connected to the place of the 'read aloud' in existing Irish preschool literacy provision. This also considers participants' perceptions and awareness of the read aloud as a fundamental early literacy method in preschool provision. The discourse and practices, which currently inform preschool literacy practices, are explored in detail, addressing research question three. An examination of the challenges currently influencing existing preschool literacy provision in Irish preschools addresses research question four. The chapter concludes by highlighting the key points addressed and questioned across the discussion.

Chapter Eight summarises the thesis and the specifics of each chapter. The final chapter outlines the contributions of the study, presents recommendations based on the findings of the study in the areas of practice, policy and research, and identifies future work in this field both for the educators, managers, researchers and the wider preschool policy context. Chapter Eight brings the thesis to a close. This final chapter offers the contributions of the study to the field followed by recommendations for preschool literacy practice, policy, and research.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This chapter outlines in detail the theoretical and conceptual framing of this study. Section 2.2 provides an overview of the problem statement and research questions. Section 2.3 explains Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System's Theory and its relevance to this study. In section 2.4, a Bioecological Framework for Irish preschool literacy learning is explored with an examination of Bronfenbrenner's model and how it can be applied within research pertaining to early literacy practices and early literacy development. Through this, five systems of bioecological theory are unpacked to highlight the crucial nature of interactions across the preschool context and the preschool educator in the provision of early literacy learning experiences and early literacy development in the Irish preschool context. Section 2.5 offers an insight into the role of the developing person, in this case, the child as an early literacy learner. This is followed by an exploration of the preschool educator and their role as an early literacy educator. Section 2.7 provides an examination of proximal processes with particular focus on the read aloud methodology as an example of an enduring method facilitating the provision of complex, reciprocal interactions between child and adult in the preschool context.

#### **2.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions**

Urie Bronfenbrenner was one of the first theorists to address the fact that a significant gap existed in developmental psychology – the role of context in development (Jaeger, 2016). Bronfenbrenner was also known for his discussions on and consistent reference to the role of close interactions between children and adults; interactions that were later come to be known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). This research study relates closely to both context and proximal processes, in this case, the preschool context and the proximal processes associated with preschool literacy learning. Research demonstrates the valuable space the

preschool context offers in support of children's early literacy development (Cabell *et al.*, 2015; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Weadham, Serry & Snow, 2021). Traditions in existing Irish preschool literacy practice demonstrate uncertainties in priorities for preschool literacy provision. A lack of specificity in policy and curriculum frameworks leaves educators in a space that affords significant autonomy but little direction or guidance on the early literacy learning experiences to provide and the early literacy skills requiring attention, development and nurture. Little exists in support of developing educator practice and knowledge of early literacy learning and development. As a result, early literacy experiences vary from setting to setting and educator to educator. More specifically, proximal processes vary significantly and are ultimately educator and setting dependent. Currently, even the mere existence of early literacy learning experiences in Irish preschools depends on a range of diverse factors such as educator interest, setting priorities, educator confidence and competence, educator knowledge and setting resourcing. The preschool years offer a crucial window of opportunity for educators to nurture emerging literacy skills that aid in the attainment of literacy success in later years (Neuman, 2016; Weadham, Serry & Snow, 2021). Kelley (2021) highlights that children's attendance at preschools with a strong early literacy provision is highly correlated with reduced special education placements and retention in later elementary school and is especially impactful for children who grow up in poverty (Meloy *et al.*, 2019; Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2013). Such an opportunity should not be left to chance. This research study began with the underpinning goal of unpacking the factors affecting Irish preschool literacy provision and revolved around four overarching research questions:

1. What are the existing priorities of preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. How are 'read alouds' currently utilised in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

#### 4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

### **2.2 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory is synonymous with research pertaining to early childhood education. His theory was fundamental in spurring the renowned Head Start federal child development programme, which provides early childhood education for children and support services to low-income families in the USA (Vinovskis, 2008). However, despite its consistent citation across thousands of studies, it is argued that Bronfenbrenner's model has rarely been used correctly (Navarro *et al.*, 2022) and that a shallow, preoccupation with the infamous concentric rings leads to misinterpretation and underestimation of the "bidirectional, synergistic interrelationships" across basic constructs, the systems and proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.799). Tudge *et al.*, (2009, p. 207) stipulate that Bronfenbrenner's "theory has a great potential to allow us insight and understanding of the processes of human development and deserves to be tested appropriately." More recently, they have warned that misuse of the theory "misleads scholars and students about the tenets and applications of the theory and does not allow for the theory to be adequately tested" (Navarro *et al.*, 2022, p234). Jaeger (2016) echoes such criticisms and argues that describing the child as 'sitting' within a microsystem, which exists inside a mesosystem, is fallible. Jaeger argues that such depictions of the model break down, as microsystems cannot sit within mesosystems. Jaeger asserts: "mesosystems exist at the overlap between two or more microsystems" (p.164) and states that clearer visual representations of the framework are necessary in dispelling confusion and misinterpretation of the systems.

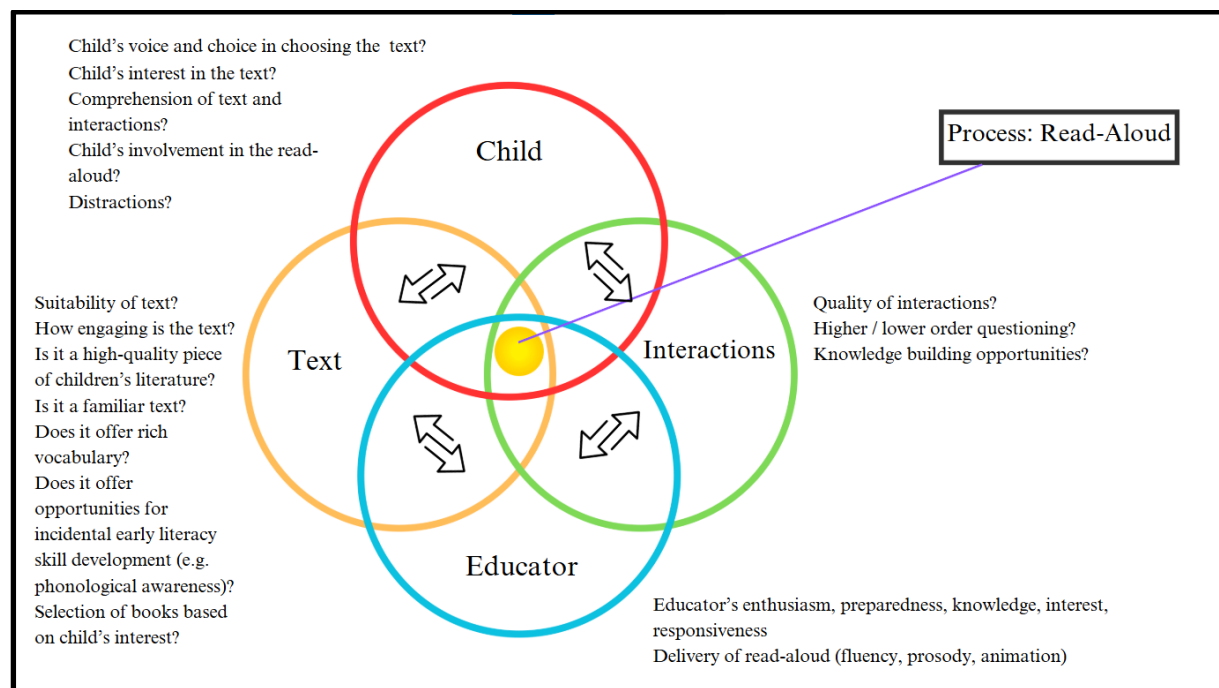
### **2.3 Literacy Ecology**

According to Elizabeth Jaeger (2016), adoption of the bioecological systems theory increases the likelihood that literacy development will be understood as occurring at the site of transaction between cognitive processes and social practices (p.163). The concentric systems

formulating the bioecological model provide a thorough blueprint for plotting the intricate influences and purposeful practices required for early childhood literacy development and for establishing literacy ecology (Jaeger, 2016). An overview of preschool literacy ecology is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**

*Preschool Literacy Ecology (Fiorentini, 2025)*



## 2.4 A Bioecological Framework for Preschool Literacy Learning

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems model has long been associated with early childhood education and the field of child development; however, it is not a model commonly associated with literacy research. The Bioecological System's theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for a study of preschool literacy learning and research examining the educative nature of the preschool learning environment. Specifically, the theory provides a helpful model for illustrating how literacy development in the early years can be interpreted and is also extremely valuable in highlighting the site of transaction between cognitive processes and social practices (Jaeger, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's nested systems offer an

applicable framework for exploring the influence of the preschool experience on early literacy development. Five contextual systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) are helpful in outlining and pinpointing the factors conducive to early literacy development but are also valuable in illustrating how gaps in such systems can undermine development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) and, in the case of this research study, limit practice. All five contextual systems are indeed influential to early literacy development, yet the most significant impact arises from the interactions among and within the five systems.

#### **2.4.1 *Microsystem***

Microsystems are proximal contexts that the child is an active member of. The preschool is an example of an early microsystem. A valuable microsystem can offer a space of calm, stability, nurture and predictability. When reflecting on the preschool literacy learning environment, the routine of the microsystem is worth reflecting on and what routines are conducive to early literacy development. Routines are commonplace across education systems, routines are part of what provides structure and organisation to one's day. Routines within the context of the preschool as an early literacy learning environment, may vary and may be conducive or inhibitive to early literacy learning and development. For the purpose of this study, one such routine, the preschool read aloud, is explored to ascertain educators' values, perceptions and priorities for a routine considered one of the most valuable, most impactful, most recommended and most long-standing early and conventional literacy practices (McCormick, 1977; Morrison & Włodarczyk 2009; Scarborough *et al.*, 1991; Snow, 2006; Trelease, 2001).

#### **2.4.2 *Mesosystem***

As a child will be a member of multiple microsystems and these microsystems will interact and the intersection of two or more microsystems is known as a mesosystem. Often, there may be little interaction between members of a child's various microsystems and in other

instances, there may be significant interaction. Bronfenbrenner maintained that mesosystem interactions can lead to microsystems that will reinforce one another (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Such interactions are worth considering in the instance of this research study when we reflect on the interactions between preschool educators and setting managers (and vice versa) and the interactions between preschool educators and the parents of the children in their care. Interactions between preschool educators and parents are particularly worth reflecting on when considering preschool literacy provision and the potential influence of parental expectations for preschool-aged children's literacy learning and skill acquisition.

### **2.4.3 Exosystem**

Jaeger (2016) maintains that systems of which the child is not a member can also significantly influence development. The preschool itself may be a microsystem for the child, but for the educator it is their workplace and place of educational practice. If said workplace management either values or undervalues preschool literacy learning, this impacts the educator's practice, ultimately influencing the children's early literacy learning within that context. Even more significantly, a preschool or early childhood education sector with loose or a lack of guidance and support for early literacy educators, creates an exosystem that is reciprocal in nature, whether the reciprocity is beneficial or not. Such an exosystem ultimately impacts the microsystem and the capacity of the proximal processes within that microsystem. Similar considerations can be given to resourcing within an exosystem. Ultimately the access to, or lack thereof, funding and investment in early literacy resources such as high-quality books, toys and educator support materials, will have a likely impact on the quality of early literacy experiences facilitated (or not) in the preschool.

### **2.4.4 Macrosystem**

The macrosystem surrounds all other systems. Bronfenbrenner (1976) maintained that within a macrosystem there are expectations about the roles people play, the activities they

engage in, and the way in which they interact with each other. The macrosystem is particularly pertinent when reflecting on preschool experiences, particularly within the Irish context. Although preschool regulations have been in existence since 1996, the early childhood education and care sector itself continues to exhibit longstanding challenges and limitations due to factors such as funding, qualifications, under resourcing and general underappreciation. Such issues will only naturally seep into the practice and the way in which the other systems interact within the macrosystem. Ultimately, the macrosystem of which the child is part of holds significant implications for their literacy development (Jaeger, 2016). Hayes *et al.*, (2017, p. 17) remind us that “although children are not in direct contact with macrosystems, the decisions generated at this level significantly influence their lives.”

#### **2.4.5 Chronosystem**

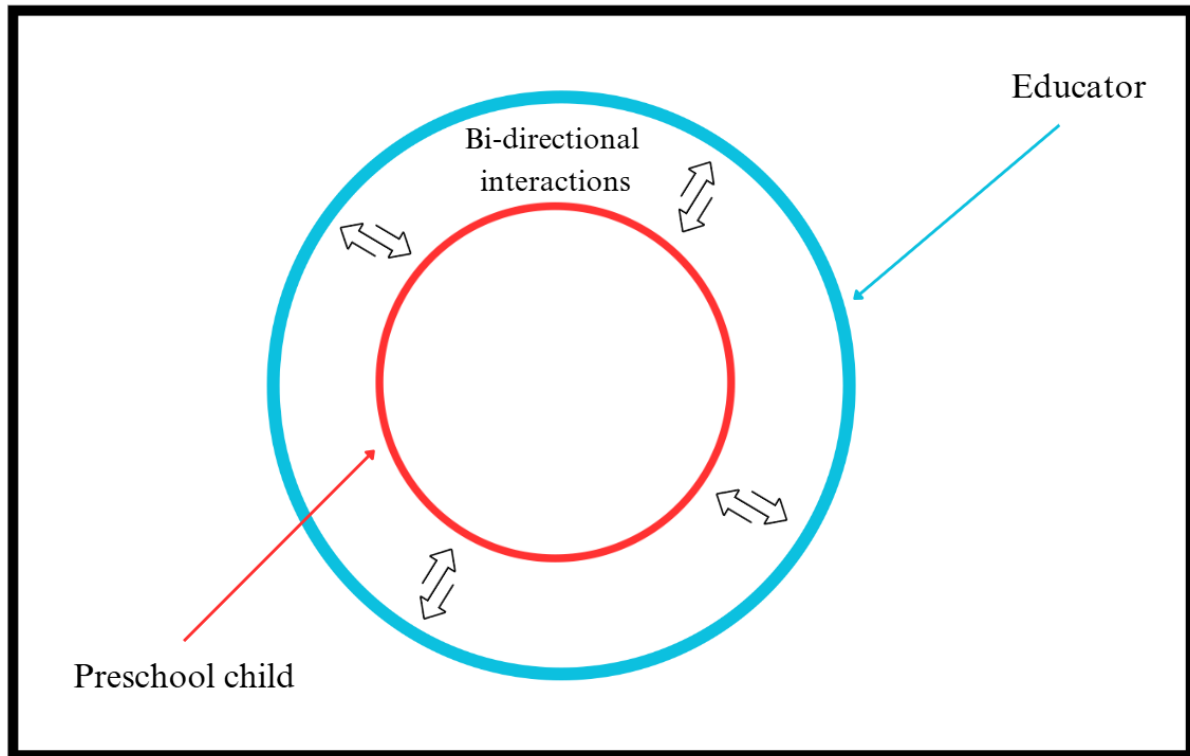
Bronfenbrenner introduced the Chronosystem in 1979 in an effort to reflect change and continuity across time and how this influences the other systems (Hayes *et al.*, 2017; Neal & Neal, 2013). Hayes *et al.*, (2017, p. 17) assert that “the chronosystem also has relevance regarding the particular values and attitudes to childhood evident at a particular historical time. It should be noted that this research study took place during and after the SARS COVID19 global pandemic, a time which caused unprecedented upheaval to young children’s early childhood education and care experiences in Ireland. Mass closures of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Services across the country from March – June 2020 “was enormously challenging for services, staff, parents and children” (Pobal, 2021, p.3). A time of such lengthy closure will not only have been likely to significantly disrupt and impact young children’s early literacy learning experiences but also may have impacted educator choices and priorities on reopening.

## **2.5 The Role of the Developing Person: The Child as an Early Literacy Learner**

Bronfenbrenner openly criticized research that demonstrated an over-focus on the contextual systems. While evidentially important, he warned against the underrepresentation of development within studies utilising his ecological model and lamented the wealth of studies focusing on “context without development” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p.288). This led to a greater presence of the developing child in further iterations of his model. Once again, this is extremely relevant when reflecting on the preschool literacy learning experiences of young children. For example, in the school year of 2022/23 108,616 children were registered for the ECCE programme across 3,970 contracted ECCE services in Ireland (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Although all registered for the same programme, in similar contexts, most will have varying early literacy learning opportunities due to the role of the interactions between the individual child and the preschool educator and setting they find themselves in. The environmental factors cannot be underappreciated. Duncan *et al.*, (2008, p. 115) stress that the “learning architecture” of the educational setting can work to support or inhibit interactions. The bioecological model envisions the child as an active agent in their world and that the child exists in a state of both being influenced by and influencing the environment, context and interactions around them (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017). As Bronfenbrenner & Ceci (1994) explained, environments change people and people change environments. Once again, this bidirectional influence is of significant relevance when considering the preschool child as an early literacy learner and the significance of interactions with preschool educators, who can also be considered as early literacy educators. Such bidirectional influence is illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Bi-Directional Interactions between Preschool Educators and Children (Fiorentini, 2025)*



### ***2.5.1 The Preschool Educator as an Early Literacy Educator***

The ordinary spaces, places and people that young children come into contact with have a profound impact and influence on them (Hayes, 2013). Bronfenbrenner outlined the significance of relationships in proximal processes and the importance of adults being “fine-tuned to the child’s response” to tasks and learning experiences so interactions can be at their most responsive and reciprocal (Jaeger, 2016, p. 177). The quality of the proximal process ultimately depends on the child’s sense of security with the educator, which will influence motivation and outcomes (Jaeger, 2016; Otrosky, Gaffney & Thomas, 2006). The quality of the relationship between the educator and child directly influences early literacy development (Jaeger, 2016). The quality of interactions will be variable dependent on the educator’s commitment, knowledge, preparation, flexibility and responsiveness (Hayes, 2007). Hayes *et al.*, (2017, p. 27), describe this process of interaction and influence as a “spiral dynamic” which

facilitates “an ongoing cycle of transformation”. As an early literacy educator, the preschool educator requires embracing a level of intentionality in maximising the possibilities of interactions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Hayes *et al.*, 2017). Here, Bronfenbrenner’s concept of Proximal Process requires consideration.

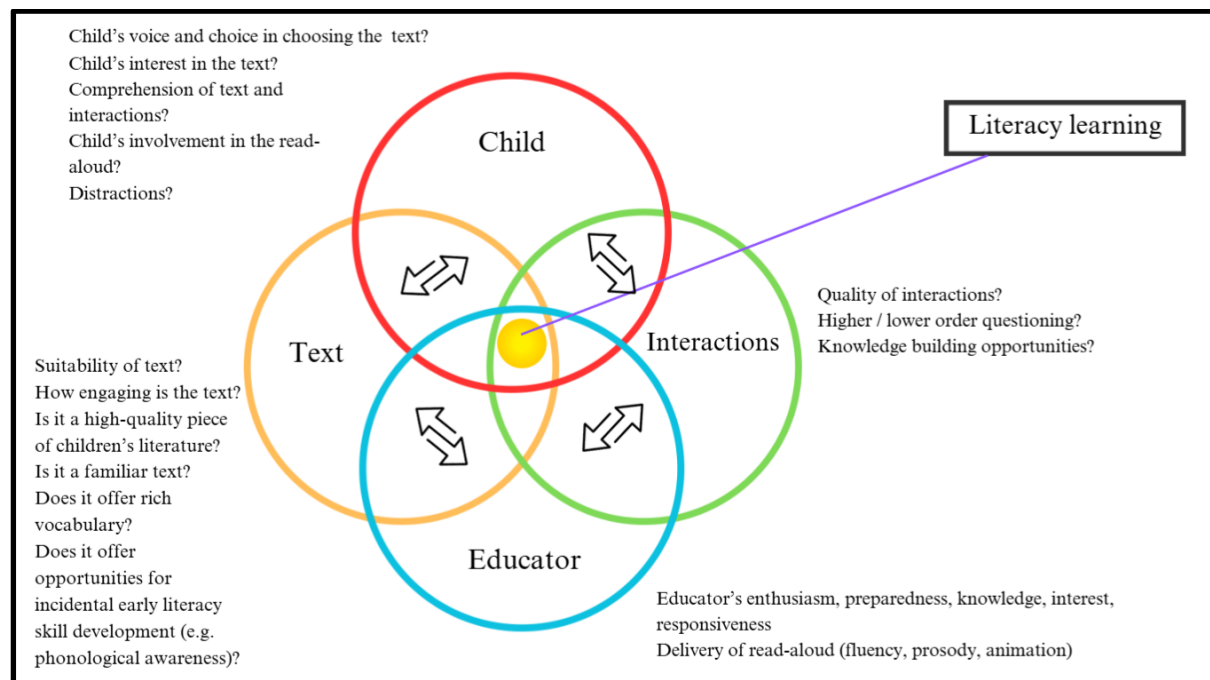
## **2.6 Proximal Processes**

Bronfenbrenner defined proximal processes as regular, ongoing, complex, reciprocal interactions between the developing person and the people, objects, and symbols present within a given microsystem. He believed that these were the engine of development and in fact the single most important factor in development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Bronfenbrenner’s specifics surrounding proximal processes are hugely applicable to preschool literacy provision and in particular, when examining opportunities for literacy learning through intentional, considered interactions between educators and children within the preschool learning environment. Proximal processes are distinctly different to the environment. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, p. 995) note that the model demonstrates “features of the environment that foster versus interfere with the development of proximal processes”. They also caution against the “growing hecticness, instability and chaos in the principal settings in which human competence and character are shaped.” According to Hayes, O’Toole and Halpenny (2017, p.9) within Bronfenbrenner’s model, process “encompasses particular forms of interaction between organism and environment”. It was Bronfenbrenner’s belief that processes are influenced by the individual characteristics of the developing person, by the range of contexts that surround them, by the historical period in which they live, and by those with whom there are proximal interactions. Bronfenbrenner (1978) asserted that proximal processes nudge the child beyond their current level of functioning. Literacy inquiry, such as exploring read aloud practices, is heavily dependent on transactions. To draw on Jaeger (2016) once again, transactions are, at

their most productive, proximal processes. The adult (preschool educator) affects and is affected by the literacy learning experiences of the children in their care. Literacy-related proximal processes (such as read alouds) should occur on a consistent basis across days and weeks and will be characterized by strong attachment between those involved. Ideally, these interactions will increase in complexity over time, as both parties increase in skill level, confidence, familiarity with the process and attentiveness to each other's needs. These interactions will ultimately be affected by the personal characteristics of those involved (ideally, including a third party who supports the other two, i.e. setting managers, parents, colleagues, CPD providers) and the contexts within which the proximal experiences occur (Jaeger, 2013, p. 174). A visual outline of the proximal processes across the preschool read aloud (Fiorentini, 2025) is provided in Figure 3. Proximal processes cannot be truly considered without reflection on the role of time. Proximal process will only naturally be affected by the historical period in which they occur (Jaeger, 2016). Policy decisions will continue to be shaped by the time period in which they were composed and will undoubtedly impact proximal processes ongoing within the microsystem. As referenced, the Irish early childhood education and care sector is a sector under continuous development (Barnardos, 2022) and it is likely that the proximal processes most crucial to early literacy development will find a more dominant place in future iterations of preschool policy and frameworks of the future.

**Figure 3**

*Proximal Processes across the Preschool Read Aloud (Fiorentini, 2025)*

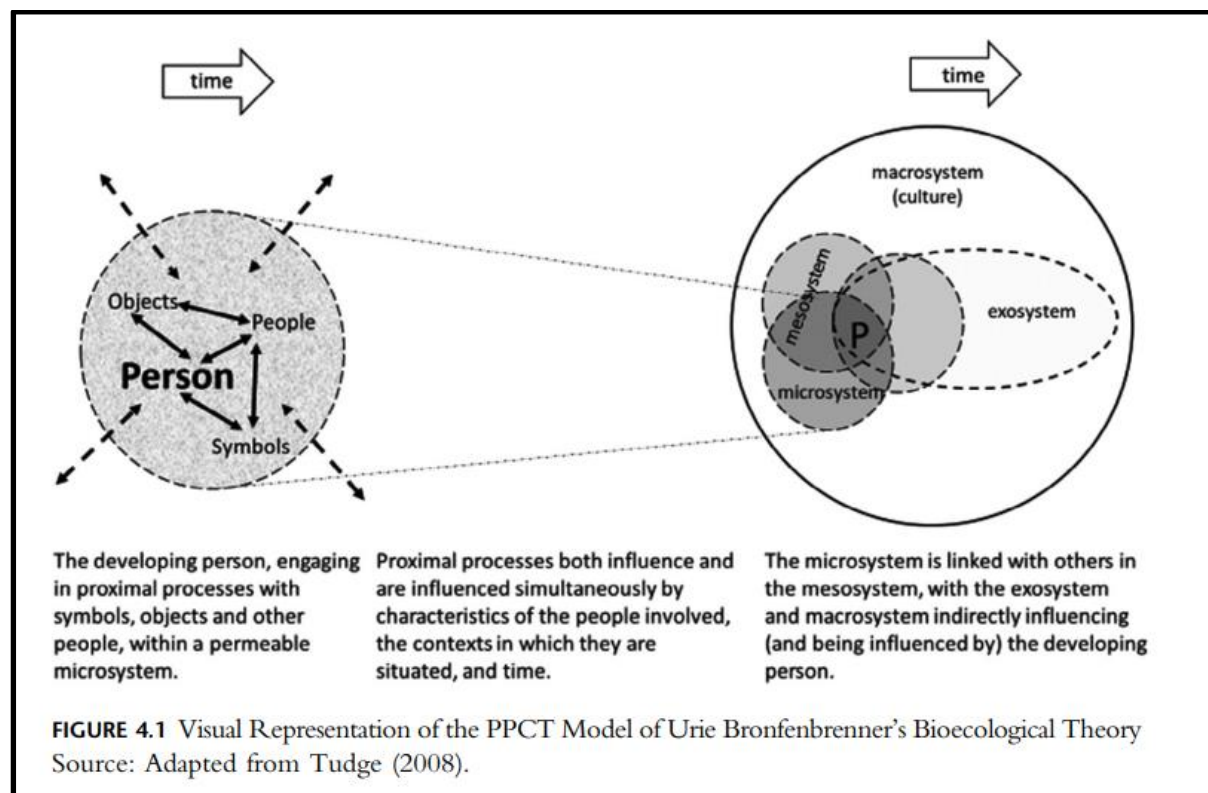


## 2.7 PPCT: Process, Person, Context and Time

Bronfenbrenner argues that we must understand process, person, context and time if we are to understand the child (Hayes *et al.*, 2017). However, the same can be said of the preschool educator and the pedagogical motivations and practice; particularly in terms of early literacy learning and development. All four components of the PPCT model “function interdependently and synergistically” and demonstrate the “interconnected forces at work in human development.” Mirroring that of early literacy learning and early literacy skill development, the PPCT acknowledges that children “do not develop in isolation”, development is dependent on real environments and real interactions (Navarro *et al.*, 2020, p. 60). The permeability of the preschool microsystem offers a space where synergistic forces can positively shape and change each member of the dyad. The complexity of the bidirectional influences is portrayed in Figure 4 below where Navarro *et al.*, (2020) have developed Jonathan Tudge’s (2008) visual representation of the PPCT model.

**Figure 4**

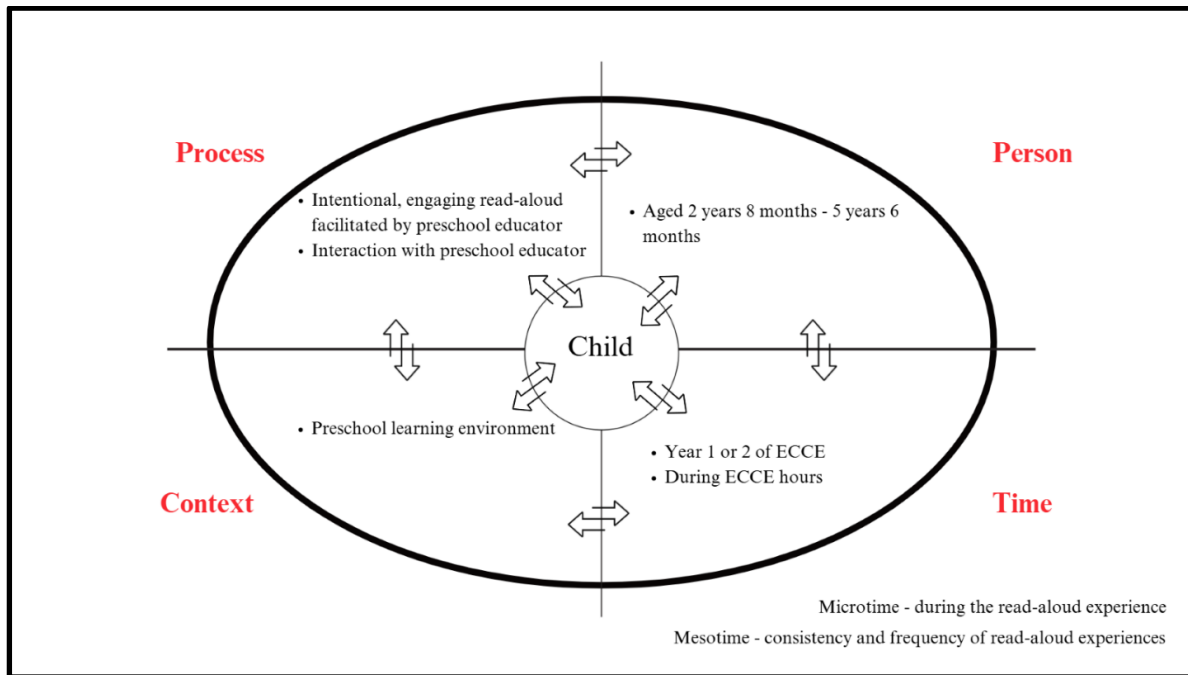
*Visual Representation of the PPCT Model of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory. Source: Navarro et al., (2020).*



Once again, the preschool read aloud as an example of a proximal process, can be utilised as a template of a process that can be influenced and enhanced positively by a series of simultaneous interactions at a time arising from each of the PPCT spaces. The tapestry of such interactions is demonstrated in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5**

*Interactions across the Preschool Read Aloud as a Proximal Process (Fiorentini, 2025).*



Bronfenbrenner's theory places children and their interactions at the heart of development (Navarro *et al.*, 2020). For optimal development (intellectual, emotional, social, and moral) children require participation in "progressively more complex reciprocal activity, on a regular basis over an extended period in the child's life, with one or more other persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational emotional attachment, and who is committed to the child's well-being and development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The preschool read aloud provides an example of a complex reciprocal activity, which facilitates interaction and emotional attachment all the while enabling the preschool educator to foster a wealth of fundamental early literacy skills in young children.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In the decisions we make when working with children, individually or collectively, we are shaped by our awareness of the variety of interacting factors influencing those

decisions. Being able to visualise as well as articulate the wide variety of influences and their various impacts on different elements of the systems within which we develop enriches the way we work with young children and their families. (Hayes *et al.*, p. 145)

This chapter demonstrates how Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model can provide a robust and practical framework for understanding the components necessary to support educators in preschool literacy provision and preschool literacy learning. Appreciating the varying multifaceted influences, relevant stakeholders will be enabled to attend to the conditions within the various ecological systems in the creation of preschool literacy learning experiences and literacy learning environments that will meaningfully nurture and support early literacy development across the preschool years. The nested systems at the core of the bioecological framework provide a model useful for pinpointing the dynamic network of interactions within the preschool environment and how interactions across each system can influence and support the cultivation of optimal preschool literacy practices, of which quality proximal processes are crucial (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Hayes *et al.*, 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge, 2008).

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Literature Review**

The origins of conventional literacy skills are evident in early childhood development. (Spencer *et al.*, 2013) Research and findings aligned to longstanding empirical literacy research (Colker, 2015; Elkind, 1981; Durkin, 1966; Flesch, 1955, 1988; IRA & NAEYC, 1998, 2009; Saracho, 2017; Sénechal *et al.*, 2001) and those linked to the *Science of Reading*<sup>3</sup> reaffirm that emergent literacy skills are strong predictors of later literacy achievement (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010; NELP, 2008; Neuman & Dickinson, 2011; Seidenberg, 2017). A context frequently noted as important in the development of emergent literacy skills and early literacy learning is preschool (Cunningham, 2010; Dickinson, McCabe & Essex, 2006; Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

The purpose of this literature review is to explore contemporary definitions of literacy and investigate representations of literacy across policy and curricula pertaining to the Irish preschool context to uncover priorities for existing Irish preschool literacy practice. Patterns across the wider global context will also be highlighted. Emerging from the literature are patterns of preoccupation with formalised literacy practices due to disparities in policy recommendations, curricular guidance, and educator priorities. Considerations in the literature about priorities for preschool literacy priorities reflect uncertainties surrounding existing literacy provision in preschool contexts. These considerations raise questions surrounding priorities for Irish preschool literacy practices:

- within relevant policy, curricula, and support materials
- within the views of preschool educators

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<sup>3</sup> The Science of Reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages (Reading League, 2024).

- within the existing literacy practices employed by preschool educators

An examination of these issues will frame the literature review. Specifically, section 3.1 explains the steps taken towards reviewing the relevant literature followed by an exploration of New Literacies, multiliteracies and contemporary definitions of literacy in section 3.2. To follow, section 3.3 offers an investigation of emergent literacy, including literature on emergent literacy skills, constrained and unconstrained literacy skills, the Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model, and the role of oral language in early literacy development. Section 3.4 provides an insight into the Irish policy and curricula context pertaining to literacy in early childhood education. This includes examination of *Síolta*, *Aistear*, national strategies for literacy, First 5, shifting theoretical perspectives, and qualifications and professionalisation of early childhood educators in Ireland. Section 3.5 unpacks priorities for preschool literacy development - including exploration of the role of the educator in early literacy development and what appear to existing preoccupations in preschool literacy provision. Section 3.6 explores the role of the read aloud as an interactive early literacy method in preschool literacy development; with an examination of empirical evidence for the read aloud, the role of intentionality in preschool read alouds, the read aloud and early literacy skill development, and factors influencing the facilitation of preschool read alouds. Finally, section 3.7 offers the conclusion to this chapter and outlines the specific research gap in question.

### **3.1 Reviewing the Relevant Literature**

Initially, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify and synthesise existing research on preschool literacy education, its role in early literacy development and the role of preschool educators in this process. This review aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of current findings, identify trends, and uncover gaps in the literature that inform the direction of this study. Following this, a narrative literature review was undertaken to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of existing research and policy relevant to the

thesis topic. This approach allowed for a flexible and interpretive synthesis of findings across a wide range of theoretical and empirical studies while also closely examining policy and curricular documents relevant to the global and Irish preschool context. Studies, documents, strategies and policies were selected based on their relevance to the research aims and early childhood context. Emphasis was placed on identifying key themes, theoretical developments and gaps in the literature. Rather than aggregating data statistically, the narrative review focused on critically analysing and organizing the literature to establish a rigorous review and highlight areas requiring further investigation. This review served as the foundation for the refinement of the research questions and informed the design and theoretical positioning of the study, particularly in terms of the data collection.

### **3.2 Defining Literacy**

Literacy is a labyrinthine, a maze of studies to match a multitude of practices, full of contradictions and paradoxes. History, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, social and cultural theories all contribute to understandings of literacy, but it still eludes any final description.

(Meek, 1991, p.230)

Conceptions and definitions of literacy vary enormously (Snow, 2006). This section provides a brief overview of definitions and factors contributing to current interpretations of contemporary literacy. Traditional definitions of literacy associate literacy with the ability to read, write and understand print (Frey, 2018). Long-standing interpretations of teaching and learning in literacy revolve around equipping learners with a range of constrained literacy skills facilitating societal and cultural participation (Sang, 2017). Contemporary definitions of literacy are increasingly flexible acknowledging the many lenses and components of literacy and the impact of societal, instructional, and social contexts (Gee, 2000). The New London

Group (1996, p.60) claimed that the conventional view of literacy is limited to the mastery of “page-bound, official, and standard forms of the national language”. Theories of New Literacies (Leu, 1997, 2000; Leu *et al.*, 2017; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003) require consideration when exploring current and contemporary portrayals of literacy as both indicate significant efforts to embrace societal and technological evolution and encourage correlating development in interpreting a term such as literacy.

### **3.2.1 New Literacies**

Hoffman (2011, p.184) states that longitudinal data (e.g. that of the National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) demonstrate that levels of literacy achievement have not changed dramatically over time however “requirements for full participation in our society have changed, and demands for new literacies necessitate a focus on interpretive, critical meaning construction”. The theory of New Literacies arose as a response to innovation and progress in technological developments (Tang, 2015). Simultaneously, educators recognised that traditional interpretations of literacy and priorities in literacy practice were less likely to fully prepare learners for the challenges, demands and expectations of contemporary society (Frey, 2018; Gee, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Luke, 1998). Traditional definitions of literacy associate literacy with the ability to read, write and understand print (Frey, 2018). Long-standing interpretations of teaching and learning in literacy revolve around equipping learners with a range of constrained literacy skills facilitating societal and cultural participation (Sang, 2017). Contemporary definitions of literacy are increasingly flexible acknowledging the many lenses and components of literacy and the impact of societal, instructional, and social contexts (Gee, 2000). The New London Group (1996, p.60) claimed that the conventional view of literacy is limited to the mastery of “page-bound, official, and standard forms of the national language”. Theories of New Literacies (Leu, 1997, 2000; Leu *et al.*, 2017; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995, 2003) require consideration when exploring current and contemporary

portrayals of literacy as both indicate significant efforts to embrace societal and technological evolution and encourage correlating development in interpreting a term such as literacy.

### **3.2.2 Multiliteracies**

Much of the literature relating to New Literacies emphasises the significance of embracing a definition of literacy which incorporates and acknowledges multiliteracies. Multiliteracies indicates how literacy has been influenced by “social, cultural, and technological change” (Anstey & Bull 2006, p.23). A “pedagogy of multiliteracies” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000 p.5) encompasses a broader representation and multimodal communication (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Walsh 2010). Definitions of literacy which embrace a multiliteracies pedagogical approach acknowledge that ‘text’ may be non-linear and may take the form of multimodal ‘text’ which can include audio, images, sound, graphics, and film through technology (Cope & Kalantzis 2000; Walsh 2010). Researchers (such as Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu) investigating New Literacies and multiliteracies recommend the extension of literacy pedagogy beyond alphabetical representations to encompass a literacy that correlates with the literate demands of contemporary, multimodal communication systems across society and technology (New London Group, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Leu *et al.*, 2017; Sang, 2017; Walsh, 2010). This is particularly relevant to the representations and definitions of literacy used in guiding pedagogical material for early childhood educators as prematurely formal literacy practices, particularly written work such as handwriting and letter formation, are associated with an increasing *schoolification*<sup>4</sup> or *academisation* of the sector (Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Husa and Kinos 2005; Kamerman 2005). Kennedy *et al.*, (2014) stress that even in a digital era, printed and written literacy will always be important, but it is imperative that literacy educators across sectors recognise that it represents only one form of

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<sup>4</sup> Schoolification is the ideology that circulates preparing children for school. Schoolification of early childhood education results in the premature introduction of formalised learning experiences and conventional instruction associated with primary school education (Schofield, 2022).

literacy and that priorities for literacy development reflect this (Miners & Pascopella, 2007). Sang (2017, p. 19) reminds us that “as the notion of literacy is broadened, literacy education changes accordingly”.

### ***3.2.3 Contemporary Definitions of Literacy***

Increased acknowledgment of multiliteracies is evident across contemporary definitions of literacy. The International Literacy Association (ILA, 2021, n.p.) define literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context.” This mirrors the definition adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2004; 2007, n.p.) which adds that literacy “involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society”. Most recently, UNESCO (2024, n.p.) have updated their definition of literacy to demonstrate a broadened, more encompassing portrayal of an evolving web of components ranging far beyond a set of reading, writing and counting skills in an increasingly dynamic, demanding and rapidly developing world:

Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills. Literacy skills themselves are expanding and evolving as people engage more and more with information and learning through digital technology.

The European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET) in their European Declaration of the Right to Literacy (2012) refers to the ability to read and write at a level whereby individuals can effectively understand and use written communication in all media (print or electronic), including digital literacy and recommend “a multi-layered definition of literacy, from baseline literacy to functional and multiple literacy” (ELINET, 2012, n.d.). Four years later, the OECD Survey of Adult Skills as part of the PIAAC (Programme for the Assessment of Adult

Competencies) defined literacy as “understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential” (OECD, 2016, p.19).

Due to continued interdisciplinary research and cognitive, scientific, and neurological studies, literacy will continue to become an ever-broadening realm of study and with this, definitions and contextualised specifics will continue developing over time. The term literacy currently encompasses a variety of crucial components, pertaining to the specific developmental periods of childhood in question (Kennedy *et al.*, 2015). This includes word recognition, vocabulary development, reading fluency, reading comprehension, the development of writing and spelling, and ultimately, the development of receptive and expressive oral language which is intrinsically fundamental to the successful development of each literacy component (Kennedy *et al.*, 2015; McIntyre *et al.*, 2017; Moats, 2018; NEPS, 2015; Shiel *et al.*, 2012). In order to establish the priorities for preschool literacy practice, it is essential to explore the existing definitions of literacy and how they are currently portrayed in the relevant research, policy and curricula pertaining to early childhood education and care in Ireland, and, in the case of this study, the preschool years.

### **3.2.4 Summary**

In this section, varying definitions of literacy were presented and discussed. The literature demonstrated that definitions, though useful for periods of time, cannot be expected to remain concrete in a world of rapid development. Definitions and interpretations of literacy, therefore, must remain flexible to the yet unknown societal changes and technological developments ahead. New Literacies and Multiliteracies were explored in relation to their influence on shaping contemporary interpretations of literacy. New Literacies demonstrates the ever-evolving essence of society and the need for an appreciation of the deictic, multifaceted nature of literacy in contemporary society and a complex, multidimensional definition. An

appreciation for multiliteracies offers a further layer to perspectives on literacy by acknowledging the literacy demands connected to navigating multimodality across societal and technological communications systems. Research connected to the Science of Reading offers increased cognitive and neuroscientific findings on literacy and the “reading brain” (Wolf, 2008, p.10) which affords opportunities to define literacy in line with evidence emerging from multiple perspectives, disciplines and contexts. Contemporary definitions of literacy associated with international bodies concerning literacy were explored. While similarities are notable across definitions employed by bodies such as UNESCO, ILA, ELINET and the OECD and nods to New Literacies, Multiliteracies and societal developments are evident, each definition demonstrated their own unique levels and layers concerning elements of life and participation, which are impacted by literacy.

The next section, 3.3 unpacks the concept of emergent literacy and offers an examination of emergent, constrained and unconstrained literacy skills and their relevance to preschool literacy provision.

### **3.3 Emergent Literacy**

When considering the establishment of solid foundations for literacy attainment, it is important to recognise that prior to conventional literacy learning, the period of emergent literacy holds a significant impact on a children’s overall literacy development (Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2022; Tindal, *et al.*, 2015; Whitehurst, 1998). Emergent literacy precedes conventional literacy (Kennedy *et al.*, 2012) and is recognised as the stage when children explore and acquire skills which ultimately lead to competent communication, through speech, reading and writing. Conventional literacy builds on the foundations of language to include the advanced ways we eventually use language to communicate – through reading, writing, listening, watching, and speaking (Homer, 2021).

### **3.3.1 Emergent Literacy Skills**

Emergent literacy is typically broken into two sets of skills, code-related skills and meaning related skills. Code related skills include print knowledge, alphabetic knowledge, sound awareness and letter-sound knowledge (Stein, 2019). Meaning-related skills include vocabulary, comprehension, and inferencing. Each component within each skill set listed can be further broken down into a variety of sub-components and levels. Emergent literacy begins in the period before young children receive formal reading instruction (Zeece, Harris & Hayes, 2018) and is hugely dependent on the variable relationships, settings and experiences afforded to young children during this formative period. Historically, emergent literacy reflects a move from a ‘readiness’ perspective – that children are biologically determined to become ready to begin literacy around the school-going age (Benda, 1952, p.1128) (popular in the 1960s and 70s), to a more emergent, developmental perspective – which acknowledges that that literacy ‘emerges’ gradually in the early years (Epstein, 2007), begins long before formal education, and is impacted by a series’ of interactive processes and relationships (Rhode, 2015; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Smith-Chant, & Colton, 2001). A multidimensional interpretation of emergent literacy, reflective of the episodic development of young children, is required when establishing contemporary aims for early childhood literacy practices. Whitehurst and Lonigan define emergent literacy as the “skills, knowledge and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing” (1998, p.849). Emergent literacy skills are commonly referred to as the basic building blocks of learning to read and write (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010). Strickland and Riley-Ayers discussed emergent early childhood literacy skills that have been identified as strong predictors of later literacy achievement – and stated that these include “a large vocabulary, being capable of explanatory talk, demonstrating some letter identification before age five, understanding narrative and story, understanding writing functions, knowing nursery rhymes,

and demonstrating phonological awareness” (2006, p.3). Language skills and literacy skills are highly correlated and research has continuously highlighted the fundamental role of spoken language in equipping children for reading and writing success (Burns *et al.*, 1999; Mehta *et al.*, 2005; Pennington *et al.*, 2019; Sedita, 2024; Snow, 2024). Literacy learning experiences in the early years requires acute attention be paid to the fostering of receptive and expressive oral language skill development in advance of beginning primary school (Calderon, 2011; Sedita, 2024). When considering this study, a perception of early and emergent literacy with spoken language skill development to the forefront (such as that referred to by the likes of Burns *et al.*, 1999; Mehta *et al.*, 2005; Pennington *et al.*, 2019; Sedita, 2024; Snow, 2024) is most relevant. The relationship between oral language and early literacy development is explored further in section 3.3.5.

### **3.3.2 *Constrained and Unconstrained Literacy Skills***

In the seminal article *Reinterpreting the Development of Reading Skills* (2005, p184-202) Paris suggests that literacy skills reside upon a continuum. Stretching from the finite, constrained skills to the boundless unconstrained skills, these are skills that the learning outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) emphasise. Within his Constrained Skills Theory (2005), Paris stresses that skills may be constrained developmentally, conceptually, and by measurement. The PLC states that constrained skills are fundamental to children’s subsequent learning and development and can be achieved over a particular period of time. Once demonstrated these skills enable children to engage in the further development of their literacy (NCCA, 2019, p.18). Table 1 below provides a succinct overview of the categorisation of constrained and unconstrained literacy skills. Conceptually unbounded, unconstrained literacy skills develop across the lifespan of the child. As stated in the PLC “Progression and development of unconstrained skills require children to engage with and create increasingly-complex oral and written texts” (p.18) and such development and

engagement can be fostered long before school-going age, in our preschool and early learning and care settings. As Cregan (2013) reminds us, contemporary conceptualisations of literacy acknowledge many facets - as demonstrated by Stahl & Paris' depictions of the continuum of literacy skills.

**Table 1**

*A Visual Representation of Constrained and Unconstrained Literacy Skills (Fiorentini, 2025), based on the work of Paris, S.G. (2005) and Stahl, K.A.D. (2011)*

| <b>Constrained Literacy Skills</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>Unconstrained Literacy Skills</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A small number of elements</li> <li>• Specific Influences</li> <li>• Precise assessments; easily measured</li> </ul> <p>Constrained skills are a bridge that take children across specific, important, developmental boundaries</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptually unbounded</li> <li>• Connected to cognitive skills</li> <li>• Less-precise assessments; difficult to measure</li> </ul> <p>Unconstrained skills support our cognitive development. Such skills can develop continuously and have broad utility.</p> |
| ▪ Name writing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | ▪ Vocabulary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| ▪ Letter naming                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | ▪ Oral language skills                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| ▪ Letter shaping                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | ▪ Writing / Composition skills                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| ▪ Concept of word (oral)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ▪ Reading (of increasing depth)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| ▪ Phonological Awareness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ▪ Procedural knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| ▪ Phonemic Awareness                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | ▪ Meta-knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| ▪ Letter/Sound knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ▪ Factual knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| ▪ Identifying words from beginning consonants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | ▪ Conceptual knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| ▪ Concepts of word (print)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ▪ Critical thinking                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| ▪ Full phoneme segmentation & blending                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | ▪ Problem solving skills and project-based learning                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| ▪ Word recognition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | ▪ Motivation, identities and attitudes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| ▪ Phonics knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| ▪ Orthography & Morphology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| ▪ Syntactic parsing / Grammatical command                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| ▪ Oral reading fluency (accuracy, rate & prosody)                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

### **3.3.3 The Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model**

The Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model (CELM – Rohde, 2015) emphasises again that emergent literacy is an interactive process rather than a series of individual components. This interactive process is particularly relevant when considering the approaches and skills to the interactions and learning associated with literacy in the preschool years. Rohde argues that previous models of emergent literacy, like those of Mason & Stewart (1990), Senechal *et al.*, (2001) and Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) do not credit the significance of setting and context within which children learn emergent literacy skills. These issues of setting and context fall under what Rohde's regards as environmental factors. Rohde's environmental factors include culture, demographics and community. The CELM emphasises that a child's development of emergent literacy skills is influenced by environmental factors that dictate access to emergent literacy opportunities. These factors can be supports or barriers to young children's development of emergent literacy. Considering the Irish ECE context, the significance of the environment was illustrated in research by Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor (2012, p.113) who stress that environmental factors play an important role in language development and ascertains that "secure, warm, responsive relationships with caregivers are necessary to maintain motivation and to provide feedback. Children need interaction with familiar and non-familiar adults and children." According to Sylva *et al.*, (2011) predictive studies of developmental trajectories rarely consider differences in children's preschool environments, particularly in terms of the quality of curricular provision. Considering this, language and interaction should form a fundamental part of the daily experience of young children. The critical importance of an inclusive, oral environment cannot be overstated (Hayes, 2010) and mirrors the recommendations of Bronfenbrenner is his detail on the crucial nature of interactions in the microsystem through proximal processes in early childhood (1994).

### ***3.3.4 The Relationship between Oral Language and Early Literacy Development***

Greater knowledge surrounding how young children develop literacy skills and become literate, and more contextualised research relevant to the Irish early childhood education context has fostered an increased appreciation for the significance of spoken language and communication competences and the role they play in the early years of literacy development. French (2013, p.35) reminds us that “literacy is not rooted in letters and words initially, but in communication and language”. When exploring functions and goals of literacy, reading literacy is never far from reach. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021, N.P.) defines reading literacy as “the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment”. Such a definition, while relating to conventional reading literacy, acknowledges constructive and interactive processes at hand, the repertoire of linguistic skills, cognitive and metacognitive strategies required, as well as background knowledge to construct meaning – all of which are enhanced and depend on the mastery and utilisation of competent spoken language. Contemporary findings of interdisciplinary scientific inquiry surrounding literacy learning, such as that of Moats (1999; 2020), indicate the mechanisms of reading acquisition are now clear. While ostensibly, “reading appears to be a visually based learning activity, it is in-fact primarily a language-based learning activity. Proficient reading requires unconscious and rapid association of spoken language with written alphabetic symbols” (Moats, 2020, p11). According to Moats (2019), literacy is an achievement that rests primarily on language processing at all levels, from elemental sounds to the most overarching structures of text. Strickland & Riley-Ayers (2006) assert that the fewer experiences young children have with literacy and language before primary school (i.e.

vocabulary and talk), the greater the chance that they will have difficulty learning to read thus re-emphasising the significant role early childhood education plays in young children's overall capacity and potential for successful literacy development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; French, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1996).

As the literature indicates, communication and oral language skills of babies, toddlers and young children underpin their development of literacy (Epstein, 2007) and the significance of these communication and oral language competences in terms of the development of unconstrained literacy skills must be appreciated at classroom level. For this purpose, Epstein (2007) recommends that policymakers, practitioners, teachers, and parents must acknowledge and appreciate that speaking, listening, reading and writing develop concurrently rather than sequentially. Epstein's findings possess similarities to the aims of the PLC (2019, p.12) which envisions children as "communicators, readers, writers and thinkers" and to realise these visions, the skills must be approached and developed in tandem but by first exploring what can create solid foundations to support the continuum of literacy learning (Cain and Oakhill, 2006; Clark, 2012; Snow & Matthews, 2016). When considering early literacy learning, focus is often placed on the perceived goals and milestones young learners 'need to meet' and placing instructional attention on components of literacy yet to be achieved. This is often recognised as a preoccupation with text and conventional reading attainment (Cregan, 2012). Locke (2007, p.220) recommends that those who work with very young children recognise the spoken language skills that are the most important to eventual progress in school. Spoken language is the foundation of learning to read and write and the speaking and listening skills acquired in preschool and infant primary classes are crucial to future literacy attainment and school success (Hill, 2009; Morrow, 2016; NEPS, 2015; Roulstone *et al.*, 2011; Shiel *et al.*, 2012; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). As Seidenberg (2017, p. 106) puts it, "The earliest events on the path to reading are the acquisition of a lot about spoken language and a bit about print." Similarly,

several decades previous, Meek (1991, p.15) stated that “our understanding of literacy must begin with the recognition that orality and its continuing presence in our lives.” Underdeveloped oral language skills increase the likelihood that children will struggle to keep up with their peers (Roskos, Tabors, and Lenhart, 2004). The literature consistently indicates that oral language is a prerequisite for literacy competence (Shiel *et al.*, 2012) and school readiness (Neuman, 20200). As outlined by Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer (2012, p7):

Oral language is the child’s first, most important and most frequently used structured medium of communication. It is the primary means through which each individual child will be enabled to structure, to evaluate, to describe and to control his / her experience. In addition, and most significantly, oral language is the primary mediator of culture, the way in which children locate themselves in the world, and define themselves with it and within it.

With such recognised appreciation for the role of oral language in literacy development at policy and research level, it is essential that such recognition is portrayed at practice level so as to avoid the risk of oral language merely developing as a result of being the “incidental by-product” (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p.391) of all other preschool interactions, learning experiences and routines.

### **3.3.5 Summary**

This section explored the concept of emergent literacy, and the skills associated with this developmental literacy phase. The literature demonstrated the necessity of prioritising oral language development as a worthy foundation and precursor to early literacy development, and ultimately school readiness.

The continuum of literacy skills was examined and outlined the relevance of constrained and unconstrained literacy skills. An appreciation of the role of unconstrained literacy skills offers valuable opportunities for meaningful, beneficial and appropriate literacy

learning experiences in the preschool years. Rohde's Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model offers a valuable means of considering the interactive nature of emergent literacy skill development and highlights the critical influence of environmental factors, which affords valuable opportunities for reflection on the environmental factors influencing language and literacy learning experiences and development in the preschool years.

An overview was provided on the intricate relationship between oral language and early literacy development demonstrating an increased appreciation for the significance of spoken language on eventual literacy success. The literature demonstrated a move from a longstanding, traditional habit of depicting and describing reading as a visual skills to a more contemporary agreement that reading is in fact a primarily language based activity – further reinforcing the valuable window of time afforded by the preschool years in efforts to build a solid language foundation to enable successful literacy development.

The literature demonstrated the critical need to ensure that the relevant stakeholders recognise the significance of affording time and effort to unconstrained literacy skill development in the preschool years and avoiding the premature preoccupation with text and conventional reading attainment.

The next section, 3.4, provides an examination of the Irish policy and curricula context pertaining to literacy in early childhood education, particularly that of the preschool years.

### **3.4 Irish Policy and Curricula Context Pertaining to Literacy in Early Childhood Education**

When considering early childhood education and the formative years of early literacy development (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006), certain areas within literacy require careful consideration and clear-cut, context specific priorities. Despite consistent, growing bodies of relevant research, (since 1999, in particular) and exploring the existing literature pertaining to

the Irish early childhood context, it is apparent that a fundamental consistency within guidance for the specifics around early childhood literacy development and what this means for daily practice, is lacking.

#### ***3.4.1 Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education***

*Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was launched in 2006 and encompasses 16 standards for quality in Irish early childhood education provision. Each of the standards are supported by an accompanying Research Digest, which elaborates on the standard and contextualises its meaning for early childhood education. Worth noting, is that Research Digest 2 (CECDE, 2017) which supports learning ‘Environments’ contains no mention or recommendations surrounding literacy or emergent literacy across the document. Similarly, those for both Communication and Curriculum lack any direct reference to children’s early literacy or emergent literacy learning.

#### ***3.4.2 Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework***

Aistear is the curriculum framework for early childhood education for all children from birth to six years in all settings in Ireland other than primary and special schools. The original publication of the framework in 2009 was notably the first curriculum framework published for early childhood education in Ireland providing evidence-informed information and guidance to support the early learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children. The NCCA updated the framework through a rigorous process of consultation, research, networking and deliberation to provide a contemporary framework reflecting a range of key components of early childhood education attuned to children’s rights, identities, diversity, heritages and interdisciplinary networks which can be found across the intricate web of partnerships and collaboration “between educators, babies, toddlers young children, families and communities” (NCCA, 2024, p.9).

**3.4.2.1 Aistear (2009).** The definition of literacy in *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) recognised the importance of multiple modes and multiple representations in literacy. The framework also defined literacy from a semiotic position to include linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication. Echoes of New Literacies and multiliteracies are evident across the original framework's references to literacy. Within the initial iteration of *Aistear*, most references to literacy relate to emergent literacy, which was outlined as being concerned with children developing a growing understanding of print and language as a foundation for reading and writing (NCCA, 2009, p.54). The 2009 framework is recognised for its role in altering the face of early childhood education, both in ECEC settings and primary (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Almost fifteen years on, as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have published the updated framework (2024), it is evident that limitations existed within the original publication, particularly surrounding the application of the themes of the framework into purposeful and appropriate practices (NCCA, 2021b). Application of the framework from theory to practice in its full capacity and potential was an area highlighted for development. *Aistear* (2009) emphasised the role of adults in providing children with experiences which enrich their understanding of the role of literacy [and numeracy] in the world around them (NCCA, 2009). However, acknowledgement of the intricate, multidimensional role of the adult in transferring the guidance within the framework to everyday, purposeful, early literacy practice within the individual ECE settings, was vague. Stone (2002, p.28) reminds us that “interpretations are more powerful than facts”, a worthy point when we consider the duty of the early childhood educator in their application of policy guidance to the realities of everyday early childhood practice. According to Terrell and Watson (2017, p.148) one of the most powerful tools

an early years' educator can have, is the ability to understand theories associated with language acquisition along with the ability to translate theory to practice. In review of the Aistear framework, within *Aistear: A Journey with No Roadmap* (2013) Dr Geraldine French (DCU) asserts that without “support from knowledgeable tutors/mentors and organisations, early childhood educators will not be able to reflect on their practice and embrace the valuable factual messages that Aistear contains” (p.10). French questioned early implementation of Aistear and how support plans placed greater emphasis on support of primary teachers as opposed to early childhood educators, as ignoring the importance of early childhood education, particularly in its role in language and literacy development and reminds us that “engaging children in ways that promote the cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, creative and social development requires understanding, knowledge and skill” (p.8). This points towards the necessity for a “top-down, bottom-up approach” (p.6) in crafting defined guidance surrounding the role and value of early literacy and language practices in early childhood settings. As French stated: “Successful implementation of Aistear could produce identifiable outcomes in relation to the social, language and cognitive learning and development of children attending those settings” but this is dependent of specific detailed plans, upskilling, and continued professional development for early childhood educators to ensure quality, developmentally appropriate preschool provision (p. 8). Support for the updated framework is yet to begin and what the professional development opportunities will consist of, remain to be seen.

**3.4.2.2 Aistear (2024).** The updated edition of Aistear was published in December 2024. The NCCA has outlined that this redeveloped framework builds on the original framework and Guidelines for Good Practice (NCCA, 2009). The updates are stated as reflecting “societal and policy changes that have taken place since the publication of

the original Framework”, the “pace of educational research”, and “how babies, toddlers and young children can learn and develop and how educators can enrich and encourage this appropriately” (NCCA, 2024, p.6). Reference to literacy is in fact less in this iteration than that of the 2009 publication. Once again, most (of the nine) references to the word literacy across the framework are connected to the term ‘emergent literacy’. Emergent literacy is most noticeable within the Theme of Communication within the Framework. Yet, despite citing emergent literacy and emergent literacy skills within Aim 3 and Aim 4 and two of their respective Learning Goals (p. 27), no specific emergent literacy skills are cited or described. Notably, the term literacy is listed once across the updated Guidelines for Good Practice (NCCA, 2024). A definition of emergent literacy exists in the glossary of the framework alone and states that:

Babies, toddlers and young children develop a growing understanding of language(s) and print as a foundation for communicating, reading and writing. Literacy in early childhood involves the development of communication and language and the exploration and development of literacy skills, concepts, knowledge and understanding. Through play and hands-on experiences, babies, toddlers and young children see and interact with print as they become curious about and build an awareness of its functions and conventions and learn they can be understood by others. (p.31)

**3.4.2.3 Curriculum versus Curriculum Framework.** When considering the varied approaches and provision across early childhood education in Ireland, it may be helpful to highlight the differences between a curriculum and a curriculum framework within the Irish early childhood educational landscape. According to the NCCA (2021, p.3), a curriculum framework “sets out a clear vision and the principles for teaching and learning.” In a more recent and specific definition, the NCCA (2024, p. 3) state that a curriculum framework such as Aistear, is “a scaffold to curriculum development to help educators plan and develop an emergent, inquiry-based, child-led curriculum

underpinned by play and relationships and specific to their own context.” A tall ask and ultimately demanding that educators and relevant leadership demonstrate a high level of professional knowledge and competence. Curriculum frameworks tend to be an organised plan or in the case of Aistear, a set of principles, themes and learning goals outlining broad standards of what children should know or be able to do. A curriculum, on the other hand, is traditionally more prescribed detailing “all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment that babies toddlers and young children experience” (NCCA, 2024, p.3). While a small amount of evaluative and reflective papers exist on the topic of the implementation of early childhood frameworks and curricula in Ireland, Walshe (2024, p.2), points to the “significant dearth of academic literature and research pertaining to the implementation of Aistear.”

### ***3.4.3 Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011)***

As a response to falling national standards in literacy and mathematics, the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (DES, 2011) was designed and published in 2011, outlining national efforts and plans to improve practice and results. Under this National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy (NSLN), the Department of Education defined literacy as including “the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media and digital media” (DES, 2011, p.8). The NSLN initiated significant revisions and changes within developments and approaches to literacy at a national level, yet questions can be raised pertaining to conflicting messages emerging from the strategy. Cregan (2012) flagged that when literacy is referred to as the NSLN document progresses, it does not live up to the literacy initially defined at the outset. Despite stating that the policy aims to “raise public

awareness of the importance of oral and written language in all its forms”; the references to literacy throughout the plan “are more closely allied with a definition of reading literacy” rather than an all-encompassing definition (p.17). Inconsistency surrounds definitions of oral language within the strategy; ‘spoken language’, ‘speaking’, ‘speaking and listening’ are used interchangeably – with a complete absence of specific explanation. Such lack of clarity resulted in what Cregan describes as “tensions” in policy and practice, when she reports on “an inevitable dilution of emphasis on oral language development throughout the policy document” (Cregan, 2012, p.18).

Studies have continuously demonstrated that language competence is positively correlated with success in the educational system (Cregan, 2008; Riley, Burrell & McCallum, 2004) yet inconsistencies in defining and prioritising for what research has proven as the foundation of literacy development (Hulme *et al.*, 2015), may continue to position oral language as a strand lesser in importance than other elements of literacy, such as reading and writing. Despite the crucial and formative space of the early childhood period in eventual literacy success, reference to early years as a whole were minimal and lacked bespoke aims beyond targeting “the oral-language competence of very young children in early childhood education settings” (DES, 2011a, p.5). National priorities were cited, including outlining the need for clarity in what young children should be learning in ECCE settings and the need to improve professional skills of those teaching in ECCE settings (DES, 2011b, p. 14). The priorities and national detail as a whole pertained to primary, post-primary and initial teacher education matters. Despite less attention than its fellow educational sectors, several improved outcomes at early childhood level can be attributed to NSNL. These include:

- The significant uptake of the State-funded ECCE programme since 2011.

- Increased the skills and qualifications level of the workforce, where almost all practitioners now have a minimum of QQI Level 5 qualification in Early childhood Education and Care.
- The launch of the Better Start National Quality Development Service by the Department of Children and Youth affairs in 2015
- The publication of the AistearSíolta Practice Guide (2015).
- The introduction of externally conducted education-focused inspections in early years' settings by the Department of Education and Skills in 2015.

(DES, Interim Review: 2011 – 2016)

#### ***3.4.4 Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033***

Building on the progress achieved with the NSLN (2011), Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy (2024-2033): Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood (ILNDLS) portrays a broad and contemporary depiction of the learner's journey from early learning and care to post-primary education. The increased inclusion and specifications for early childhood education are notable from the opening summary with explicit reference to the necessity of high-quality professional learning for early years' educators, childminders and ELC settings. The interconnectedness of literacy (and numeracy and digital literacy) learning is evident across the key pillars. The strategy provides explicit reference to the necessity of "prioritising early literacy" and cites the importance of shared reading programmes, language-rich environments, fostering language acquisition, vocabulary development and pre-reading skills (ILNDLS, 2024, p. 17). Notably, the strategy (p.22) outlines the role early years' educators can play in using ongoing assessment to gather, record, interpret and communicate on the learning process and the necessity of supporting understandings of assessment in ELC settings. Worth noting is that the vision of the strategy states that "every learner from birth to young adulthood,

develops the necessary literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills to thrive and flourish as an individual, to engage and contribute fully as an ethical, active member of society and to live a satisfying and rewarding life” (p. 22). An all-encompassing depiction of early childhood literacy is presented; acknowledging a wide range of early literacy skills and components reflective of contemporary literature and studies on early childhood literacy. These include:

- Developing an awareness of sound and the structure of language.
- Listening skills, such as sound discrimination, aural attention span, auditory memory, communication exchanges and taking turns in communication and in conversation.
- Multiple forms of communication (gesture, posture, expression, tone, eye gaze, Irish Sign Language (ISL), Lámh, Braille, assistive technologies, and augmentative and alternative communication).
- Communicating in home languages and having an awareness and appreciation of the languages of others.
- Using and understanding expressive and receptive language, and the development of an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, rhymes, and stories.
- Using language to give and receive information, ask questions, request, refuse, negotiate, problem solve, clarify, and share thinking, ideas, and feelings.
- Exploring movement which promotes the development of literacy skills
- Becoming print aware and using a variety of print, books, literacy props and mark making materials in an enjoyable and meaningful way.
- Identifying and understanding symbols and their purpose and using symbols in play.
- Exploring real-world digital tools and resources to enhance developmentally appropriate literacy learning experiences.

- Developing positive learning dispositions such as independence, creativity, imagination, wanting to communicate and learn, being a good listener and cooperating with others.

(ILNDLS, 2024)

### ***3.4.5 First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028***

Translations of theory to practice across the literature are a recurring theme. Concurrently to those explored surrounding *Aistear*, similar patterns and questions emerge from the issues that follow the transfer of policy, recommendations, or government strategies to practice too. Such examples can be found when exploring the First 5 Strategy (2018) in terms of early literacy practice. The First 5 Strategy is defined as a whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children, and their families. A ten-year plan to support positive early experiences and strong starting points in life, the strategy's vision is outlined as aiming to “identify goals, objectives and the specific actions required from across Government to support children (and their families) in the early years of life (p.4). Although loose reference to literacy can be found across First 5, references made, lack priorities and specifics surrounding early childhood literacy. For example:

- Provision of “High quality play based early learning experiences” (p.12) is recommended yet a definition or guidance on what such learning experiences resemble is not included.
- A list of statistics surrounding early reading and nursery rhymes is included (p.70) however information is not provided to support these statistics. No guiding information or direction is provided on why or how nursery rhymes should be utilised in early years.

- The strategy acknowledges how “certain dispositions, skills and knowledge, including self-esteem, social skills, independence and language and communication skills, have also been found to help ease transitions” (p. 226) yet such dispositions, skills and knowledge are not elaborated on, nor definitions provided.

Conflicting messaging is apparent across references to transitions from Early Learning and Care to primary school. For example, on p.98 it states that:

Time in ELC before commencing formal schooling provides unique opportunities to nurture these as well as to engage in transition activities that can help prepare a child. The high proportions (approximately 96% of the eligible cohort) of children participating in the universal pre-school programme facilitate this.

The language and phrasing adopted here rings a particular tone of contradiction by suggesting that the goal of the preschool period is preparing the children for school as opposed to accommodating learning needs in the moment of early learning and care. The strategy acknowledges that during data collection, researchers learned of how ELC practitioners often feel “under pressure to get everything done before children started school” (p.232) and recognises that further clarification is needed regarding the purpose of the universal preschool programme and the desired curricular and pedagogical approaches. The documentation does not, however, allude to where, when, and how this clarification will be provided.

Within First 5, strategic actions proposed to fulfil the strategy are outlined. Several actions are closely related to children’s early learning experiences – particularly early literacy. Strategic Action 9.2 for example, describes an increase in continuity in curriculum and pedagogy across ELC settings and the early years of primary school. Lacking, however, is any detail on how this may be achieved. Within Strategic Action 9.2, it suggests that “clarification for ELC settings and primary schools on the appropriate dispositions, skills and knowledge for children as they make the transition into primary school” will be provided (DCYA, DES, p.98).

Again, this highlights a confusion in focus and aims. While it is known that preparation for transitions is imperative, the language used directs attention towards the future as opposed to children in the immediate now (Hayes, 2003). Efforts to support transitions from preschool to primary are ongoing in various contexts and regions across the country with examples of collaborative communities of practice emerging between County Childcare Committees, Education Centres, Primary Schools and Preschool Settings (e.g. *Tús Maith: Transitions in Action*, The Northwest Transitions Project<sup>51</sup>). However, rather than system-wide professional learning, this continues to exist as bespoke, provider-led efforts. While transitions supports indeed have merit and are both necessary and welcome, the set guidance continues to be limited and recommendations for early literacy for example, will continue to remain provider specific until clarity is provided at national level which raises uncertainties in terms of equity and access.

### **3.4.6 The Primary Language Curriculum**

2019 brought with it the highly anticipated, revised Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019); which places language at the forefront of importance in terms of achieving success in developing children's literacy at primary level. The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) builds on the foundations and principles of the Aistear Curriculum Framework and aims to provide a cohesion in transitions from emergent literacy and playful approaches in the early years to eventual conventional literacy at primary level. The Primary Language Curriculum has been hailed for progressing from the aims of the 1999 curriculum and creating an integrated language curriculum, complementing and supporting the diversity of the contemporary Irish primary classroom. Its design places the teacher in the role of facilitator of learning and the intention of the *Learning Outcomes* within the curriculum, is to facilitate greater opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> Tús Maith is the North West Transition Project is a pilot project for preschools and primary schools across Counties Donegal, Longford, Leitrim, Sligo and Mayo facilitated by Lisha O'Sullivan (MIC), Clara Fiorentini (MIE), Fiona Giblin (DCU), Maria Furlong (UU) and Donegal, Sligo, Carrickonshannon and Mayo Education Centres.

for teacher agency and autonomy in planning, teaching and assessing (p18, NCCA, 2019). However, with this comes weighty responsibility and the onus on teachers to remain informed and aware of key concepts and priorities for literacy (Coldwell *et al.*, 2018). It also sets an expectation that those interpreting curricula or curriculum frameworks are knowledgeable, skilled practitioners (NCCA, 2019) with an acute awareness and understanding of early literacy development and its broad corresponding components. Mirroring such responsibility is the role of early childhood educators in applying the themes and guiding principles of the Aistear framework into the realities of everyday practice (Aistear, 2009; 2024). Closer focus on the transfer of pedagogy to practice is imperative – but in an accessible, straightforward, applicable manner (French, 2019). Literature indicates that often a reluctance exists for practitioners with engaging in discussion around specifics of practice and theoretical underpinnings of practice (Hayes, 2019; Moyles, 2002; Stephen, 2010).

**3.4.6.1 Curriculum Redevelopment.** In 2023, the Primary Curriculum Framework was published outlining a redevelopment of the primary curriculum. As opposed to the traditional subject-based approach to the 1999 Primary Curriculum, the new outcomes-based framework presents five broad curriculum areas:

1. Arts Education
2. Language
3. Social and Environmental Education (SEE)
4. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education
5. Wellbeing.

The NCCA (2023, n.p.) state that the PCF “links with Aistear: The Early childhood Curriculum Framework and connects with the Framework for Junior Cycle supporting continuity of experiences for children from early childhood through primary school and into their post-primary education.” With continuity of experiences in mind,

explicit guidance will be necessary to facilitate what Sinnema (2011) refers to as “multi-dimensional collaboration” so as educators and primary teachers alike, are suitably informed and can appreciate the nature and necessity of the relevant experiences in question. Literature demonstrates consistent appreciation for the need to design policy strategy and policy documentation with a focus on continuity of education, knowledge experiences and skills (Dunlop, 2013; Education Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2013; Kenig & Margetts, 2013; O’Kane, 2016; Weadham, Serry & Snow, 2021). That said, a gap continues to remain in specific, bespoke and evidence-informed recommendations and practices to support daily practice connected to transitions and early literacy in the Irish context.

#### **3.4.7 A Shift in Theoretical Perspectives**

According to Baker (2000), “the nature of literacy is characterized by the theoretical lens that is used to examine it” (p. 101). When establishing priorities or recommendations for literacy practices in early childhood education, it is imperative that in the design process, accommodation is made for the variable nature of learning in the early years. During early childhood, children’s learning is greater than in any other period and learning in this period is rapid, episodic and susceptible to environmental conditions (Shepard, Kagan & Wurtz, 1998). Careful alignment to suitable theory for this rapid and impressionable developmental period is crucial, particularly for emerging literacy skills. Within the Irish context, the alignment to a socio-cultural context for language and literacy learning is still most dominant in the pertinent curricular documents. The NCCA (2012) describes three paradigm shifts which literacy in Ireland has undergone – from behaviourist to cognitive to socio-cultural perspectives. Kennedy *et al.*, (2012) outline that the semiotic perspective is seen as inclusive of the various influences on children’s literacy development. According to Sylva *et al.*, (2011b) theoretical conceptualisations “have adopted a more complex multilevel, interactive view of

developmental change in which children are embedded in a larger context of influence spanning more distal (socio-cultural) to more proximal influences” (p.111). Although not yet commonly adopted by literacy researchers, Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Model provides a multidimensional, applicable perspective for which to envision the influence of early childhood educational experiences on children’s early literacy development. In fact, as demonstrated in chapter two, the Bioecological systems theory is a useful template for literacy research due to its fundamental dependency on the influence of person, process contexts and time (PPCT). This is explored in greater detail in the previous chapter.

### ***3.4.8 Qualifications and Professionalisation of Early Childhood Educators in Ireland***

For the purposes of this study, it is important that the existing profile of qualifications and professionalisation of early childhood educators in Ireland be considered. For the most part, the ECEC landscape has changed experienced ongoing development across the past two decades in particular, which in turn has continued to influence the profile of educators within the sector.

Due to the fragmented nature of qualifications across the sector, workforce plans have been a common discussion point across the ECE policy and professionalisation landscape. In 2010 a Workforce Development Plan for Early Childhood Care and Education was published by the Department of Education and Skills and has led to significant progress in the education and training programmes for educators across levels 5 through to 9 on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). While qualifications across the sector still vary enormously, for the most part, efforts and progress can be noted nationally in the level of improvement across qualifications of educators. Many continue to contest the suggested “low benchmark” for staff working with pre-school aged children, with preschool leaders requiring a minimum of a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 6 award and all other staff needed just a minimum of QQI Level 5 award (Murphy, 2014, p. 295). Such qualifications stand in stark

contrast to the level of qualifications required of primary school teachers in Ireland as well as what Murphy deems as the “poorer pay levels and less favourable working conditions that prevail” (p.295).

*Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC)* was published in 2022 with the aims of continuing efforts at strengthening the professionalisation of the ELC and SAC and raising the profile of careers in the sector by 2028. The plan cites the critical role of a graduate-led workforce, professional development of educators and the necessary introduction of minimum qualifications across the sector. Ideally, an increase in degree qualified educators should lead to an increased level of academic, pedagogic and content knowledge and competence to support preschool provision however this has continued to prove challenging to measure with researchers such as Walshe (2024) and Urban, Robson, and Scacchi (2017) flagging continued concerns on the variations across preservice education and training provision. Moloney’s (2011) concerns on the non-statutory approach to ECEC policy and best practice still ring true today with continued dependence and expectation placed on the educator to independently seek out training and supports on their own steam. Walshe (2024) called for the urgent need to address opportunities for high quality training for educators during the roll out of the updated Aistear Framework (2024) to match what the OECD (2021, p.19) recommends in the provision of training and supports for educators that are “consistently accessible” and of “good quality”. Such opportunities could offer a critical entry point for the necessary review of existing preschool literacy training experiences for both preservice and in-service early childhood educators (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021).

### **3.4.9 Summary**

This section offered an examination of the Irish policy and curricular context pertaining to literacy in early childhood education. Representation and depictions of literacy were

explored across guiding documents for early childhood education in Ireland including Síolta, Aistear (2009 & 2024), National Strategies for Literacy (2011 & 2024) and First 5. Variety is apparent and inconsistencies in how literacy is portrayed and detailed were evident across each of the documents. Specific recommendations for early literacy provision in early childhood education were lacking. Those which exist were vague and fail to demonstrate meaningful attention to offering support in the transfer of pedagogy to practice and the application of broad recommendations weighted in theory to everyday practice. Despite being the national quality framework for the sector, Síolta offers nothing on early literacy or children's early literacy development. Conflicts were evident between associations with literacy across some of the documents, with content in First 5, for example, depicting narrow, future-focused examples of literacy as a means of preparation for starting school. Reference to early and emergent literacy is evident across both iterations of the Aistear Curriculum Framework, however the 2024 updated framework portrays less explicit reference to literacy undermining and undervaluing the necessity of supporting educators in applying the framework to everyday practice.

A brief overview of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) and the redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) was provided. Both documents have been carefully curated and designed to support primary teachers in everyday practice. Both documents are hailed as building on the pillars of the Aistear Curriculum Framework. However both the PLC and the PCF demonstrate significantly more specificity in their portrayals of the types of learning experiences and provision necessary while still affording significant autonomy and agency to the teacher. Granted, agency of the educator is noted across both iterations of the Aistear Curriculum Framework, yet it could be considered that agency is likely to be limited or empty for early childhood literacy provision when specificity of what early literacy learning and development resembles is overwhelmingly lacking.

When considering literacy in the Irish early childhood education context, a shift in theoretical perspectives was noticeable. This has been demonstrated in the move from cognitive, to behaviorist to socio-cultural perspectives over time. The semiotic perspective is more inclusive and demonstrates a lean towards acknowledgement of proximal processes; further reinforcing the potential for a bioecological perspective on early childhood literacy, as was discussed in Chapter Two.

Lastly, the qualifications and professionalisation of educators was highlighted - demonstrating the ongoing challenges experienced across the sector due to continued varying qualification levels across educators and varying preservice training experiences.

The next section, 3.5, unpacks existing priorities for preschool literacy development and presents an examination of recommendations for preschool literacy development outlined in empirical evidence and global trends in early childhood literacy research. The role of the preschool educator in early literacy development and a potential imbalance in preschool literacy practice is explored.

### **3.5 Priorities for Preschool Literacy Development**

Early literacy development involves the nurture of many different skills (NELP, 2008). Strong expressive and receptive language skills underlie acquisition of the specific skills necessary to develop later conventional reading and writing skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding and rapid automatic naming (NCFL, 2008). More rapid acquisition of early language and literacy skills has been proven to occur when young children experience sensitive and cognitively stimulating early childhood education (Burchinal & Forestieri, 2011). Increased attention has been drawn to differences in children's literacy achievements during the early years of primary school and how this is often connected to differences in their early literacy experiences in the preschool learning environment (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm,

& Walfogel, 2004). The findings of EPPE<sup>5</sup> study in England (1997-2003) indicated that the development of literacy skills is shaped powerfully by the preschool emergent literacy environment. Empirical evidence indicates that high-quality early literacy experiences in preschool settings, provides children with a stronger literacy profile at the start of school (Sylva *et. Al.*, 2011). The literature indicates that those who work with young children cannot ignore the impact of these early literacy environments on literacy acquisition and recognise that such impact is long-lasting and cumulative, fundamentally changing children's developmental trajectories (French, 2013; Sylva *et al.*, 2011).

The research base on early literacy learning and development for young children has grown considerably over the last two decades, however reviewing the literature indicates that far less is still known about how best to support and guide early childhood educators in effectively facilitating these instructional practices in their settings. This is especially true regarding the creation of early learning and care environments that nurture early language and literacy development and ultimately depend on pedagogically unique approaches to discourse (Wasik & Hindman, 2011). Across much of the literature at hand, we are consistently reminded of the important role of a variety of key early literacy practices. Again, this does not mean a premature introduction of conventional literacy skills (i.e. phonics, handwriting and encoding) but in fact promoting developmentally appropriate, all-encompassing practices which “float on the sea of talk” (Mills, 2009). Such buoyant practices include rich conversation, meaningfully and attentively listening to children, modelling high-quality sentence structure, singing, and reciting rhymes and consistent exposure to high quality children's literature through shared reading experiences. Once again, however, it must be noted that each such practice is highly dependent on the learning environment, resources, and ultimately the educator facilitating the literacy learning experiences. Frequent warm, scaffolded interactions during preschool years

are necessary in promoting early and emerging literacy skills in young children. As Hayes affirms:

For good quality, fluent speech to emerge children need to have good language models, the opportunity to practise and the motivation and need to communicate. To encourage good language, you must be a clear and exciting communicator and a careful and thoughtful listener. Opportunities for conversation and dialogues between adults and children, and children and children, should be created, and they often do need to be created. (2010, p.112)

It is commonly understood that literacy priorities can often become misconstrued in the preschool years and initial months of primary school (Bennett, 2013; Fallon, 2013; Moss, 2015). Research, findings and publications are consistent and plentiful, however advancements and practice on the ground do not always reflect this. A tendency to lean towards outcomes-based practice can arise from what Hayes (2019) labels as “external demands” (p.21). Demands such as parental expectations of skills-based results (i.e., letter work, conventional reading and writing evidence) can influence practice immensely. It can be questioned as to whether the messages uncovered, promoted, and delivered through the most recent and empirical educational research are actually filtering down to those on the ground – those working firsthand with young literacy learners. Such missed messaging can lead to an unfortunate, unnecessary, and untimely push-down of primary literacy practices into early childhood education settings (Power, 2003; Bennet, 2013). More definitive definitions and guidance surrounding early literacy practices and developmentally appropriate interpretations of practices in early childhood education are required to support early years’ educators, leaving settings better primed to resist and deflect this push-down of premature practice, or what Moss deems as the “baleful effects on early childhood education” (2018, p.11). This raises the question on the intentionality of early literacy learning experiences within Irish preschool settings. Schachter, Matthes and Piasta (2021) maintain that it is critical that educators make clear what their

intentions and thinking are when selecting or employing methods to foster or support early literacy learning in the preschool years. Research has indicated that intentional early literacy practice is important and requires ongoing reflection of practice and knowledge development on behalf of educators (NAEYC, 2021). Intentional provision facilitates meaningful and necessary opportunities for educators and relevant leadership to consider the relevance of literacy practices and ensure that schoolification and pushdown of formalized practices can be resisted (Moss, 2017; Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023).

Kamhi (2002) reminds us of the gap between evidence-informed effectiveness and what is actually applied within the context of early childhood settings. Once again, challenges arise from applying policy guidance to practice and inconsistencies in the questions asked by researchers and the information required by and provided to educators. Rhode (2015) stresses that “early literacy learning opportunities are more likely to happen when teachers have a solid knowledge base of emergent literacy and child development” (p.1). Research has shown that preschool educators with limited knowledge about literacy development are significantly less able to provide such experiences for children (Fosnot, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Pellegrini, 2001; Rhode, 2015). According to Rhode (2015, p.2), teachers are more equipped to facilitate the components of emergent literacy if they have access to and understanding of a model that describes the components, their interactions, and the importance of environmental factors in supporting children.

### ***3.5.1 The Role of the Preschool Educator in Early Literacy Development***

A major influencing factor in the provision of literacy-based experiences in preschools is the belief that preschool teachers hold about how young people learn to read and write (McMullen *et al.*, 2006; Mills and Clyde, 1991). Such beliefs will ultimately impact the adult’s role in the provision (or lack thereof) of literacy-based learning or instructional experiences.

When considering literacy in early childhood education, the role of the adult requires acknowledgement and must be accommodated for accordingly (French, 2013). Significant levels of research at international level (i.e. Belling *et al.*, 2016; Elkind, 2001; Sommer, 2014; Whitehurst, 2001) has found that children need “both free play and playful learning under the gentle guidance of adults” (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009). In early childhood education, it is imperative that educators, both primary and early childhood, remain familiar with pedagogy and contemporary research developments surrounding emergent and early literacy to best support the holistic literacy development of their learners, particularly in nurturing emerging literacy skills and avoiding premature formality in practice (Bennett, 2013; French, 2013; Hayes, 2003; Moss, 2018). Athey (1990) maintains that the role of the adult in early childhood education must be acknowledged as crucial and multi-faceted and recognised as what Hayes (2012) defines as a combination of listener, questioner, adviser, demonstrator, actor, sympathiser, negotiator, assessor, and guide. French (2013), explored the role of adults and conversations in her article *Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters*. Within this seminal piece, she drew upon findings from the final report Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project in London (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) stating that “it is what parents, carers, and educators do with children (reading with children, talking to them, sharing stories), more so than their socioeconomic status, which makes the difference to children’s literacy learning outcomes.” For such reasons, it is critical that educators appreciate the value of their role in positively influencing and nurturing young children’s early literacy development and ensure that their efforts consider both the physical literacy environment and the psychological literacy environment. While patterns in practice continue to demonstrate greater focus on the physical preschool literacy environment, it is the development of and consideration of the psychological literacy environment that poses the most potential benefit for young literacy learners (Guo *et al.*, 2012; Justice *et al.*, 2008; LoCasale-Crouch *et al.*, 2007). Similar points are highlighted by

Neuman (2022) and Farkas & Baron (2004) who stipulate that it is during the preschool years where the highest rate of vocabulary development can be seen progressing at its most intense rate. As a result, the knowledge, efforts and responsiveness of the preschool educator have vital roles to play in such fundamental early literacy development (Mol & Neuman, 2012).

**3.5.1.2 Literacy Leadership.** As it stands, there is no expectation, obligation or mandatory requirement for early childhood settings in Ireland to accommodate any form of pedagogical literacy leadership within their practice or provision. Research consistently demonstrates the critical role preschool attendance plays in young children's early literacy development (Barnett & Esposito Lamy, 2006; Barnett *et al.*, 2011; French, 2013; Guo *et al.*, 2012; Mol & Bus, 2011; Pelatti *et al.*, 2014) and simultaneously, the role of leadership practices in influencing the quality and effectiveness of provision (Cordova Jr. *et al.*, 2024). Teale (2020) stipulates that the conditions necessary for the success and development of preschool literacy provision is dependent on a broader interpretation of leadership. Similar points were flagged by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008), who argue for leadership beyond administration, leadership that will positively influence pedagogical practice. Such leadership would certainly relate to aspirations within the new National Strategy for Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy (2024) which calls for the empowerment of early childhood educators through the development of skills and knowledge to influence and develop practice within their settings.

### **3.5.2 Preschool Preoccupations**

There exists an evident imbalance between what is promoted by research and what is currently provided at early childhood level in terms of early literacy instruction (Bennet, 2013; Cregan, 2012; French, 2012). Mounting pressure to 'prepare' children for school can often detract from essential pre-literacy skill development, vital for fostering success in conventional

literacy. Patterns indicate that in many cases educators can become preoccupied with constrained elements of formal literacy before adequate time has been dedicated to the nurture of the key emergent, foundational skills for literacy. As Cregan (2012) puts it “pressuring teachers and children into literacy without first tackling the issues of spoken language competence results in literacy strategies which fail to have an impact where they are needed most.” When working with our youngest learners, recognising oral language as a vehicle for all literacy learning to come is imperative however “challenges in realising oral language potential in the classroom create substantial tensions in the teaching of literacy for policy-makers, curriculum developers, teachers and parents, who have traditionally been pre-occupied with the written word” (p. 18). Worth noting, here, is the power of our communication on the perceived value of particular skills, academic and curricular areas. Whether intentional or unintentional, such communication can transmit subtle and implicit messages to educators, parents and children, depicting shallow and narrow definitions of academic success and what O’Breacháin and O’Toole refer to as “going round and round with the 3 R’s” (2013, p. 408).

According to Shanahan & Lonigan (2012) improving young children’s oral language development should be a central goal during the preschool and kindergarten years. Echoing the ‘preoccupied’ suggestions raised by Cregan (2012), the literature consistently indicates that this goal may become obscured when teachers and educators become preoccupied with more formal, scripted styled learning activities that impede the natural flow of language and conversation in the preschool learning environment. Consequentially, it is often the children’s oral language development – fundamental to literacy – which is prevented from developing in accordance with best practice (Fallon, 2013). According to Merritt & Culatta (1998), learning depends on the use of language knowledge for the purpose of acquiring more language, concepts, and information. In *Tilting the Balance: Tensions in Literacy Teaching* (2012), Cregan recommended that the status of the oral domain for language be represented

appropriately in government policy documents and that oral language must be a key priority in literacy instruction. For purposes of practice and planning, educators must ensure that oral language as an element of literacy does not become what Kirkland and Patterson (2005) once again refer to as the ‘incidental by-product’. Cregan states that teachers of literacy require enhanced knowledge of discrete language skills to be taught, knowledge of how children learn language, and knowledge of the needs of the community of learners they serve, “in order to include oral language development as a key focus in their teaching with the concomitant effect of improved language skills among the children” (2012, p.11).

A review of the national and international literature surrounding school readiness was conducted between 2012 and 2016 and published in 2016. The longitudinal report compiled by Mhic Mhathúna, Ring, Hayes *et al.* (2016), contains several significant points worth noting from educator perspectives around school readiness, most of which relate to children’s early literacy development. A theme which is prominent throughout the review is once again, that of ‘schoolification’. Confusion still exists surrounding conceptions of school readiness and the report findings suggest this arises from a misinterpretation of the purpose of preschool years and what Moloney (2011) refers to as preschool being viewed as a scaled-down version of school. The report highlights how tendencies for preschool practices to lean towards prematurely over-formalised practices can sometimes be a result of bowing to parental pressure to give children a head-start in literacy (and numeracy) before starting school. Notable in terms of this research study, is that many of over-formalised practices listed within the Readiness Report, tend to fall into the category of literacy. A small sample of such examples are provided below:

- Priorities and concerns for pre-academic skills were noticeable across the report, including differing views between practitioners and primary teachers on necessities for the transition to primary school. These included children’s ability to hold a pencil or

crayon and to recognise and write letters - all of which are connected to handwriting and formal reading instruction.

- Evidentially, early years' educators attached greater importance to children's ability to recognise letters on starting school than primary school respondents. More than 47% of early years respondents rated this skill as 'important' or 'very important', whereas only 24% of primary school staff rated it as such. Letter recognition is not the first step in reading instruction and should be preceded by systematic oral language development and in-depth phonological awareness development in the form of rhyming, word awareness, onset and rime awareness and phonemic awareness (The Literacy Channel, 2021).
- As the literature indicates, 'schoolified' practices in preschool are often the results of parental influence or expectations. Overall, 21 of the 30 parents interviewed in the readiness study listed the importance of children knowing letters and numbers and being able to hold a pencil and write before beginning school. These skills were considered as important as social and emotional skills by both parents and early years respondents - reiterating what Cregan (2012) classes as the preoccupation with the written word.
- Examples of school type 'work' being adopted by preschools was evident across the responses from preschool practitioners, including, the use of phonics schemes designed for primary schools, join-the-dot worksheets, skill-and-drill flashcard activities, and even homework. Again, reasons provided for use were in line with 'preparing' children for school and associated school style 'work', indicating again the premature introduction of conventional reading and spelling instruction.

The report continues to highlight confusions around the role of the adult in the preschool context, particularly in terms of early literacy learning and misinterpretations of the very nature

of priorities for preschool literacy practice. Ultimately, it highlights the need for specific pre-service and in-service early literacy training and continuous professional development opportunities for preschool educators. Walsh (2016) reminds us that despite the increased qualification requirements for ECCE and extension of the programme, no provision was allocated to support the continuous professional development of educators.

### **3.5.3 Summary**

This section presented an overview of priorities and relevant recommendations for preschool literacy development as demonstrated through empirical evidence and global trends in early childhood literacy research. It highlighted pedagogical practices that are most likely to nurture early language and literacy development. The literature highlighted, once again, the critical roles and influence of the preschool educator and the preschool learning environment in children's early literacy development. The literature illustrated the multifaceted nature of the educator's role as an early literacy educator. Once again, patterns returned to the rate of vocabulary development in the preschool years and the unique space this offers to educators to enable meaningful and appropriate nurture of emerging literacy skills, fundamental to a strong foundation for conventional literacy development. The imbalance in preschool literacy practice and what is recommended by research was highlighted. Patterns, once again, return to the influence of preparations for school transitions and a lean towards literacy skills of a more constrained nature despite the growing awareness and appreciation for oral language development in the early years.

Each of the areas explored in this section returns to a similar factor – the role of the preschool educator and the critical need for clear guidance and appropriate priorities for preschool literacy provision. Section 3.6 explores the read aloud method and its value as a transformational, meaningful and essential early literacy learning experience in the preschool years.

### 3.6 Reading Aloud

Building on Hayes' (2010) points surrounding the necessity of creating opportunities for dialogue, the literature now turns to the shared reading practice known as the 'read aloud'. Frequent and consistent exposure to high-quality literature has long been recommended as a fundamental practice in the early years. Moynihan (2012, p.235) stresses that early literacy development "parallels a child's earliest experiences with books and stories". According to Cunningham & Zibulsky (2011), the read aloud is a reading strategy that "includes an adult or skilled reader and a child or group of children reading together. It may or may not introduce conventions of print, new vocabulary, rhyming, discussion of pictures, or include other interactive experiences" (p. 397). It is commonly understood that young children can listen on a higher language level than they can read, and as a result, the read aloud experience presents children with complex ideas and content in an accessible means exposing them to sophisticated vocabulary syntax, sentence and text structures which are not typically part of everyday speech (Reading Rockets, 2001). Catts and Kamhi (2024) stress the significance of recognising the similarity of conventional reading and listening comprehension, such similarities only further emphasise the necessity for frequent read aloud experiences in the early years to support the development of such listening comprehension. The accompanying discourse and chatter or 'book blether' (Cremin, 2014) linked to the read aloud cannot be underestimated and is a critical platform for meaningful, engaging language and literacy development. As demonstrated in chapter two, Bronfenbrenner (1974; 1977; 1979; 1995) cites the significant role and purpose of interactions in child development. Moynihan (2012, p.235) reminds us that "interaction is the single most important factor in the development of literacy skills" and that the read aloud experience facilitates two vital areas of interaction, material interactions (those with literacy materials) and social interactions (those with adults or older children surrounding literary materials). Research such as that of Ard and Beverley (2004) has repeatedly indicated

that material and social interactions relating to children's literature, provide the "fertile soil for language, reading and writing development, as well as future academic success and social skills" (p.17). Following the patterns of the literature reviewed thus far, Dickinson and Tabors (2001) highlighted the importance of developing children's language as a valuable goal and as a precursor to later literacy development. Similar to Shiel *et al.* (2012) and Foy and Man (2013), they also highlight the value of extended discourse, particularly around books, in developing executive functioning and in preparing children for some of the skills required for literacy. Referring to New Literacies (Miners & Pascopella, 2007), Moynihan advocates for the place of the read aloud and children's literature in facilitating multiliteracy practices in the preschool context citing their valuable role in celebrating children's individual, cultural and social skills (2012, p.236).

### **3.6.1 Empirical Evidence for the Read Aloud**

Through a meta-analysis conducted by National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2009), findings indicated that reading aloud to children raises children's verbal language abilities and knowledge. Catts and Kamhi (2024, n.p.) stress that "the focus on knowledge is important because of the critical role it plays in comprehension (both in reading and listening comprehension). Knowledge lays the foundation for building our understanding of text (or speech) and provides an anchor for holding new information in memory." Meek (1991, p.52) stated that information "is the difference that makes a difference." Knowledge also influences meaning making, inference making and reading motivation (Catts & Kamhi, 2024; Knowledge Matters, 2024). Smith *et al.*, (2021) highlight the compensatory effect of background knowledge in that it enables children to better comprehend a text. Such points correlate with findings of Beck *et al.*, (2002), Biemiller and Boote (2006) and Pollard-Durodola *et al.*, (2011) which indicate that read aloud experiences help increase children's vocabulary and oral comprehension skills. Neuman (2022) highlights that book reading is known as the single most

powerful activity for children's vocabulary development. Hoffman (2011) emphasises that literacy development is most significantly impacted through interactions amongst adults and children about texts. When words are discussed as well as read, children learn new words and develop their vocabularies.

Consistent across much of the research on language and literacy benefits associated with read alouds, was the necessity of the repeated read aloud. Chien (2020, p.2) highlights that only through repeated read aloud can "the process of acquiring new vocabulary and textual information become complete". Hoffman (1976) suggested that it can take up to three read alouds for children to acquire new vocabulary from a text and its meaning. This is echoed by Massaro who states that "children listening to a reading aloud of a picture book are roughly three times more likely to experience a new word type that is not among the most frequent words in the child's language" (2017, p. 64).

### **3.6.2 Intentional Read Alouds**

Intentionality supports educators in ensuring that planned read alouds have a focus and a specific purpose. Intentional read alouds require a level of "conscious planning" from educators, this can range from considering key vocabulary, your chosen reading style, discussion opportunities, questioning, background knowledge and careful text selection (Lennox, 2013; Joy, 2016; Nueman, 2011; Santoro, *et al.*, 2008). Laminack (2016, p.33) states that educators "must pay careful attention to our intentions for the read aloud" A lack of intentionality can detract from the literacy development opportunities this critical method affords (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Beck & McKeown, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2004).

### **3.6.2 Reading Aloud and Early Literacy Skill Development**

Reading aloud to young children has been hailed as the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading (Bredekamp, Copple, & Neuman, 2000). According to McGee & Richardson (2003), "the books teachers read aloud

promote deeper understanding and interpretation of a story, allow children to take an active role in understanding the text, and prompt children to start using mental activities that will become automatic as they begin reading independently.” Ultimately, reading aloud is the foundation for literacy development, providing children “with a demonstration of phrased, fluent reading” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and reveals “the rewards of reading, and develops the listener's interest in books and desire to be a reader” (Mooney, 1990). It can be a challenge to meaningfully portray the sheer level of interconnected and interdependent literacy skills developed throughout intentional read alouds in the early years - many components are fostered in tandem, some through explicit activity and others incidentally. Based on contemporary findings on early literacy skill development and reading aloud, Table 2 below depicts the broad variety of early literacy components, which can each be developed and nurtured through read aloud experiences in preschool. The components listed reflect the literacy skills and dispositions of contemporary, correlating models of reading and literacy, in particular those of The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough 1990), The Construction-Integration Model (Kintsch, 1988), Scarborough’s Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), The Componential Model (Aaron & Joshi, 2000; Aaron, Joshi & Quatroche, 2008) and The Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). These models demonstrate the evidence most commonly used within rigorous literacy research to best explain the development of reading and the processes and skills underpinning a child’s ability to learn to read and spell (Seidenberg, 2017). The table also illustrates the connected themes and dispositions of the existing and updated Aistear (2009; 2024) frameworks and examples of their links to reading aloud and preschool read aloud experiences (Fiorentini, 2025).

**Table 2**

*Reading Aloud and Early Literacy Skills (Fiorentini, 2025)*

| <b>Early Literacy Practice</b> | <b>Early Literacy Development</b><br>(Aaron & Joshi, 2000; Aaron, Joshi & Quatroche, 2008; Burns, Duke & Cartwright, 2023; Duke <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough 1990; NELP, 2002; Scarborough, 2001)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>Themes</b><br>(Aistear – NCCA, 2009; 2024)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Dispositions</b><br>(Aistear - NCCA, 2009; AistearSiolta Practice Guide – NCCA, 2015; Aistear – NCCA, 2024)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Read Aloud                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary development</li> <li>Print awareness               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Alphabetic knowledge</i></li> <li><i>Sight vocabulary</i></li> <li><i>Name recognition</i></li> </ol> </li> <li>Conventions of print</li> <li>Book Handling</li> <li>Emergent Reading               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Reading the pictures</i></li> <li><i>Retelling from memory</i></li> </ol> </li> <li>Phonological Awareness               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Word awareness</i></li> <li><i>Alliteration</i></li> <li><i>Syllabic awareness</i></li> <li><i>Onset &amp; Rime Awareness</i></li> <li><i>Rhyming</i></li> <li><i>Phonemic Awareness</i></li> </ol> </li> <li>Summarising</li> <li>Sequential Language</li> <li>Recounts</li> <li>Connection making</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating<br/><i>Interactions with others about the text; building awareness about print and its functions; mark making in response to RA experiences.</i></li> <li>Well-being<br/><i>Reading for pleasure; reading texts to explore emotions, experiences and relationships; expressing choice about texts</i></li> <li>Identity and belonging<br/><i>Reading texts to explore their identities and those of others; reading texts that celebrate a sense of community, spaces, social justice and belonging. Reading diverse literature during RA experiences.</i></li> <li>Exploring &amp; Thinking<br/><i>Reading texts that build knowledge about the world around them; sensory awareness; problem solving in response to the text; play experiences connected to the text; a sense of place and being present.</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Independence<br/><i>Asking for a read aloud; initiating interactions.</i></li> <li>Curiosity<br/><i>Asking questions triggered by a text; wanting to learn more about a topic or concept raised in a text.</i></li> <li>Concentration<br/><i>Concentrating on a text being read aloud by an adult; paying attention and self-monitoring for comprehension – asking questions if unsure or uncertain.</i></li> <li>Creativity<br/><i>Responding to the text creatively through play or mark making. Using imagination to consider predictions, inferences, different scenarios or potential outcomes of a text.</i></li> <li>Responsibility<br/><i>Handling books with care; turning pages carefully; being considerate of others during a read aloud experience.</i></li> <li>Resilience<br/><i>Listening to a text even if it was a text chosen by someone else; reading texts that celebrate resilience.</i></li> <li>Patience<br/><i>Demonstrating patience during interactions with others connected to a read aloud; demonstrating patience with the pace of a read aloud; reading texts that celebrate patience.</i></li> <li>Perseverance<br/><i>Persevering and listening to a text chosen by someone else.</i></li> <li>Playfulness</li> </ul> |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>1. <i>Text to text</i></p> <p>2. <i>Text to self</i></p> <p>3. <i>Text to world</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical Thinking</li> <li>• Comprehension skills</li> <li>• Narrative Language / Expression</li> <li>• Motivation &amp; interest</li> <li>• Executive function skills</li> <li>• Knowledge development</li> <li>• Verbal reasoning</li> <li>• Theory of mind</li> </ul> |  | <p>Playful interactions connected to a text; engaging in playful language (e.g. rhyming) connected to a text.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Imagination</b><br/>Discussing imaginative scenarios in response to what has been read aloud; Using the experiences of the text as a stimulus for imaginative play.</li> <li>• <b>Interest</b><br/>Maintaining interest during a read aloud; choosing texts to be read aloud; asking questions about what has/is being read; seeking out similar texts / more texts from the same author.</li> <li>• <b>Problem solving</b><br/>Problem solving in response to issues raised in a text.</li> <li>• <b>Listening</b><br/>Listening to a text being read aloud; listening to others discuss the text and the responses of others.</li> <li>• <b>Assessing and taking risks</b><br/>Volunteering to speak out about a text; choosing texts to read together.</li> <li>• <b>Being friendly</b><br/>Sharing the RA space with others; showing consideration / turn taking during discussions.</li> <li>• <b>Wanting to communicate</b><br/>Volunteering to speak up during RA; initiating discussion during RA; asking questions; recalling information about the text / RA experience.</li> <li>• <b>Being accepting of others and of differences</b><br/>Exposure to diverse literature; demonstrating patience, understanding and listening skills to others.</li> <li>• <b>Being considerate</b><br/>Being mindful of others during group RA experiences.</li> <li>• <b>Being happy</b><br/>Enjoying the RA experience / literature; responding positively to RA experiences; demonstrating enthusiasm and enjoyment before, during &amp; after RA.</li> <li>• <b>Cooperating with others</b><br/>Sharing the RA space; sharing choices of texts; sharing the discussion(s).</li> </ul> |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### ***3.6.3 Factors Influencing the Facilitation of Preschool Read Alouds***

Misconceptions surround the sophisticated skill sets required to facilitate high quality read alouds in the early years' environment. Factors include teacher knowledge, confidence, practices and planning. Ineffective use of the read aloud is frequently cited across relevant literature. Beck and McKeown (2001) argued that educators tend to avoid engaging children in discussing major story ideas during read alouds. Dickinson (2001) reported that most educators do not approach reading aloud in an “intentional manner” (p.201) and Teale (2003) states that in the history of reading aloud, “studies converge to indicate that the typical read aloud leaves much to be desired” (p.123).

When it comes to reading aloud, the quantity of opportunities provided matters immensely, however the quality of the experience within these opportunities matters even more so. A fundamental goal of a read aloud is to model fluent reading (Okello, 2021). Fisher, Flood, Lapp and Frey (2004) advocate for prior practice and planning, and indicate that many educators choose books to read aloud without practising leading to inconsistent and interrupted experiences with mispronunciations, errors and being caught off guard by unexpected events within the text. Ultimately, the very nature of a read aloud experience is the quintessential approach that demonstrates the intricate interconnectedness between reading, writing and oral language.

It is imperative that a holistic (Christenson, 2016) and multifaceted (Leipzig, 2001) depiction of the read aloud is shared. Moving beyond the notion that the read aloud experience is a transition tool, a time-filler or something that educators ‘just do’ to begin or end the day. A read aloud will always harbour the potential to be more than just a simple and enjoyable reading experience (Magennis & Fiorentini, 2021; Magennis, Fiorentini & Pratt, 2024). It is of the utmost importance that preschool educators recognise, appreciate and envision the read aloud as closely connected to the theoretical underpinnings of the most recent findings in

reading research and locate the read aloud as a fundamental practice for supporting the nurture of the many concurrent components of early literacy development (Gurdon, 2019; Isik, 2016; Schickendanz & Collins, 2012; Suggate *et al.*, 2013).

Striking the balance between flexible and meaningful early literacy methods and dynamic preschool early literacy experiences that do not compromise or betray the very nature of early childhood education, and avoid further schoolification of preschool contexts, is important. Leontjev (1978) stressed that children's activities will facilitate development when the activity is meaningful. Brostrom (2017) warns about the disconnection between motive and goal which detracts from the experience of meaning for the children – further cementing the need for educators' efforts in planning and preparing for preschool read aloud experiences that ensure the child's role as an active subject, participant, agent and social constructor in the experience (Brostrom, 1999; 2017). Learning activities in preschool are useful when children are constantly involved in social interaction with adults and other children in the environment (Brostrom, 2017), which the meaningful preschool read aloud can facilitate.

#### **3.6.4 Summary**

This section provided an overview of reading aloud and the read aloud as an early literacy method in preschool. Details on the value of the read aloud in creating opportunities for meaningful and high-quality interactions between adults and children were shared, highlighting how such interactions facilitate the nurture of a wealth of early literacy skills. The literature explored demonstrated the value connected to the discourse and dialogue associated with reading aloud in the preschool years. Empirical evidence also highlighted the value of the read aloud in developing young children's knowledge, which in turn impacts many fundamental components of early and conventional literacy skills including reading and listening comprehension, information retention, inference making, reading motivation, vocabulary and oral comprehension. The connections to the read aloud method and the themes

and dispositions of Aistear were outlined demonstrating the value and versatility of the read aloud in preschool settings. Factors impacting the facilitation of preschool read alouds' were explored highlighting a range of issues such as planning, knowledge and practice.

Section 3.7 offers the conclusion to this chapter and outlines the research gaps emerging from this literature review which are most relevant to this study.

### **3.7 Conclusion and Research Gap**

This chapter sought to explore definitions of literacy with specific attention paid to traditional and contemporary interpretations of literacy. This facilitated space to unpack the relevance of New Literacies and Multiliteracies in contemporary interpretations of literacy. National guidance through the Irish policy and curricula context pertaining to existing early childhood education in Ireland was explored to share insights into perceived confusions and inconsistencies across language and expectations for educators pertaining to early literacy provision. Patterns of prematurely formal literacy practices and schoolified approaches in preschool years are evident across the literature explored. The concept of emergent literacy was examined providing an overview of emergent literacy skills with particular exploration of constrained and unconstrained literacy skills. The Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model was explored as a means of highlighting the interactive nature of early literacy development as opposed to isolated skill development. Priorities for preschool literacy development were explored in depth with specific reference to the pertinent role of the preschool educator in children's early literacy development. This was followed by an overview of the possible preoccupations in existing preschool literacy practice. Insights were shared into the read aloud as a fundamental proximal process in the development of key emergent literacy skills prior to conventional and formal literacy learning.

Ultimately, the literature reviewed demonstrates that there is limited empirical research exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and pedagogical decisions of educators in relation to early literacy provision, particularly within the Irish preschool education context. The literature review demonstrates several gaps relevant to this study, most notably:

1. A gap in research meaningfully examining policy intentions and practitioner understanding or implementation of Irish preschool policy and curricular documents.
2. A gap in empirical study on the evident disconnect between developmentally appropriate preschool literacy practices and what is actually happening on the ground as evidenced by patterns of prematurely formal literacy practices and schoolified approaches in preschools.
3. A gap in research into how educators perceive their role, choose priorities, and carry out preschool literacy practices—particularly in relation to early literacy learning and read aloud provision.
4. An evident gap in the impact of preschool read alouds for early literacy development. While the read aloud is frequently referenced as a critical method in the early years, the extent to which educators are trained in, value, or apply this strategy effectively is unclear indicating an obvious and timely need for further investigation.

Specifically, a connection across the gaps outlined, highlights that the role of the preschool educator in implementing developmentally appropriate literacy practices—such as read-alouds and support for both constrained and unconstrained literacy skill development in preschool—has not been sufficiently examined. This study seeks to address this by investigating how Irish preschool educators understand, value, and implement emergent literacy practices in light of current national policy, curricular guidance, and contemporary literacy theory. While it is evident that, globally, there is considerable theoretical and policy

discussion around emergent literacy and the role of preschool educators in early literacy development, there appears to be a lack of empirical research into how these theories and policies are actually interpreted and enacted in preschool settings – both globally and nationally. In particular, how preschool educators understand and implement emergent literacy practices—especially in light of conflicting, unclear or absent policy language—and how these practices align or conflict with the principles of contemporary research findings (such as those connected to the *Science of Reading*, New Literacies and Multiliteracies) remains significantly underexplored.

Following on from the literature examined, the next chapter presents the methodology of the study, which facilitates an exploration of existing preschool literacy practices which frames the relevant methods employed in data collection. Details of the methodology and data collection processes are outlined in detail across the entirety of chapter four.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In joint consideration of the research context and the pedagogical potential of the Bioecological Framework, this current study sets out to address the following research questions:

1. What are the existing priorities of preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. How are ‘read alouds’ currently utilised in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?
4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

This chapter provides an overview and analysis of the methodological structures and progression which underpin the research undertaken in this study. It lays the methodological foundation in order to explore the two research cycles that evolved and the subsequent generation of findings to explore existing Irish preschool literacy practices.

Section 4.2 outlines the philosophical underpinnings of the study. The ontological and epistemological components of the study are explored and lead to a rationale for the research methodology adopted in Section 4.3. The researcher’s statement of positionality is presented in Section 4.4, followed by an overview of the research context and participants in Section 4.5. Ethical considerations are outlined in Section 4.6. Section 4.7 identifies and describes the research tools employed in the study in order to generate data. This section also outlines the piloting and co-design of specific research tools. Section 4.8 details the data analysis processes, with reference to the approach taken, the methods of data analysis employed, the

validity of processes, and dissemination. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the realities of the study in Section 4.9.

## **4.2 Philosophical Underpinnings of the Study**

### ***4.2.1 Paradigms underpinning educational research***

To construct a methodology, one must explore and locate the research within an appropriate paradigm. A ‘paradigm’ can be defined as “a world-view that provides a lens on the topic being studied, in terms of both ontology (views of reality) and epistemology (views of knowledge)” (O’Toole, 2016). A research paradigm refers to the theoretical or philosophical ground for the research work. Kuhn (1962) used the word paradigm to define a philosophical way of thinking. In educational research, a paradigm describes a researcher’s ‘worldview’ (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This worldview is the perspective informing the interpretation and application of the research data. Many paradigms exist in research. Candy (1989) suggested that all could be grouped into three main taxonomies, Positivist, Interpretivist, or Critical paradigms. On occasion, particularly during educational research, mixed method approaches result in aspects of several paradigms requiring adoption. For this reason, researchers such as Tashakkori (2003) and Teddlie (2003) encourage the use of another paradigm, the Pragmatic paradigm. This paradigm provides appeal to researchers utilising mixed-methods research methods as it borrows elements from Positivist, Interpretivist and Critical paradigms.

**4.2.1.1 The Positivist Paradigm.** The Positivist paradigm was initially proposed by a French philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857). Comte (1856) suggested that experimentation, observation, and reason based on experience ought to be the basis for understanding human behaviour. Frequently classed as the ‘scientific’ method, it typically involves a process of experimentation to explore observations and answer questions. A paradigm used to search for cause-and-effect relationships in nature, the

Positivist paradigm is a preferred worldview for research, which tries to interpret observations in terms of facts or measurable entities (Fadhel, 2002). Research conducted through this paradigm relies on deductive logic, formulation of hypotheses, testing those hypotheses, offering operational definitions and mathematical equations, calculations, extrapolations, and expressions, to derive conclusions (Kivunha & Kuyini, 2017). It aims to provide explanations and to make predictions based on measurable outcomes supported by four assumptions that Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) cite as determinism, empiricism, parsimony, and generalizability.

**4.2.1.2 The Interpretivist Paradigm.** Understanding the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) lies at the heart of the Interpretivist paradigm. Those utilising an Interpretivist paradigm seek to explore the thinking of those being studied. Kivunya and Kuyini (2017) describe this approach as being an effort to “get into the head of the subject being studied” with the aim of understanding and interpreting thoughts or meaning the subject is making of the context (p.33a). Under an Interpretivist paradigm the viewpoint of the subject takes priority, rather than the observer. Understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them takes precedence (p.33b). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998) the key principle of the Interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed. This paradigm is frequently referred to as the Constructivist paradigm. When conducting research through this paradigm, data are gathered and analysed in ways which echo grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Research precedes the theory so that it will be grounded on the data generated during the research process.

**4.2.1.3 The Critical Paradigm.** The Critical paradigm situates its research in social justice issues and seeks to address political, social, and economic issues, which lead to social oppression, conflict, struggle, and challenge of power structures. It is a

paradigm associated with social change, seeking to change politics, confronting social oppression, and improving social justice. Due to this change-seeking undercurrent, this paradigm is frequently referred to as the Transformative paradigm. The Critical paradigm is heavily dependent on interactions between the researcher and participants leading to what can be deemed a transactional epistemology. It has an ontology of historical realism, especially as it relates to oppression. The critical paradigm requires a dialogic methodology and an axiology respectful of cultural norms.

**4.2.1.4 The Pragmatic Paradigm.** Pragmatism research is based on ontological underpinnings that combine both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. It is described as a coherent and integrated paradigm that addresses the differing assumptions of these paradigms (Kolb, 2008). Pragmatism is criticized for not adequately addressing these differing assumptions, but recent studies argue that it provides a useful framework for social science research. Pragmatism views beliefs, knowledge, and scientific concepts as provisional and defined by their practical application in ongoing experience, rather than by their correspondence with antecedent truth or reality. It emphasizes the importance of practice-based approaches and the harvesting of intersubjective knowledge. Pragmatism is considered a methodology rather than a strict ontology or epistemology, and it differs from positivism and constructivism in its assumptions about reality and knowledge. Pragmatic research tends to appreciate multiple factors involved in people's actions on a particular subject or issue. Pragmatic researchers recognise that their inquiry may not lead to certainty, as nothing in the world is wholly certain. This reflects William James' philosophy, which maintained that pragmatic studies must avoid abstract, fixed principles and will not stipulate that there is only one final truth. This mirrors this study on preschool literacy practices, which demonstrates a variety of factors

influencing the current and ever-evolving state of practice in preschool literacy provision. According to Kolb (2008, p.1652) “pragmatism recognized the relative, contingent, and fallible (yet still authentic) character of human reason rather than perpetuating the dubious ideal of philosophy as a system of eternal truths”. To support educational research, philosophers such as Alise and Teddlie (2010), Biesta (2010), Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) and Patton (1990) believed that there was a need for the use of an additional paradigm, which would be best suited to a combination of methods; facilitating approaches to research that could be more practical and pluralistic. This combined approach could shed light on the actual behaviour of participants, the beliefs that stand behind behaviours and the consequences that are likely to result from these different behaviours. This gave rise to a paradigm that advocates the use of mixed methods as a pragmatic way to understand human behaviour. As a paradigm, pragmatism is located within the center of the continuum of paradigms, in terms of inquiry modes. Pragmatism adopts quantitative methods and deductive reasoning (commonly associated with positivism / post positivism) along with qualitative approaches and inductive reasoning (commonly associated with constructivism). A mixed approach creates an extremely flexible, reflexive approach to research design (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Feilzer 2010; Morgan 2007; Pansiri, 2005) affording the pragmatist researcher significant recourse in the selection of an appropriate research design and methodology to address research questions. According to Kaushik and Walsh (2019), “Pragmatism is typically associated with abductive reasoning that moves back and forth between deduction and induction”. This back and forth ensures that during the research process, the researcher creates data as well as theories (Goldkuhl, 2012; Morgan, 2007). Pragmatic ideals differ significantly in interpretations and beliefs surrounding knowledge

acquisition to that of their Positivist and Constructivist counterparts. Positivist researchers stress that objective knowledge is solely acquired by examining empirical evidence and hypothesis testing. Constructivists, on the other hand, assert that knowledge is relative, and reality is too complex. Contradictory to this, pragmatists tend to believe that the process of acquiring knowledge is a continuum rather than two opposing and mutually exclusive poles of either objectivity or subjectivity (Goles & Hirschheim 2000).

#### ***4.2.2 Ontology and Epistemology***

Gray (2013) suggests that ontology can be defined as the perception regarding the existence of man, society and the world in general and the relationship among them. Ontology relates to the nature of the entities of the world and the assumptions about them (Bryman & Bell, 2010). Generally, in research, ontological perspectives are usually positioned as objective or subjective. When employing mixed methods research, researchers may align themselves with an intermediate ontological position and acknowledge both objective and subjective views of the reality, particularly when considering the nature of educational research. Ansari, Panhwar and Mahesar (2016) state that an intermediate position on ontology in mixed methods research can help in offering a more credible and complete picture of the phenomenon at play. Pragmatist epistemology is underpinned with the assertion that knowledge is based on experience and that our perceptions of the world are influenced by our social experiences. Although individual knowledge is unique and influenced by our unique experiences, much knowledge is shared and acquired through socially shared experiences. According to Morgan (2014) all knowledge is social knowledge. Under pragmatist epistemology, knowledge is not reality (Rorty, 1980) and instead will be constructed with an underlying goal of better managing purpose to better manage one's existence and to take part in the world (Goldkuhl

2012). Frega (2011) asserts that empirical is preferred over idealistic or rationalistic approaches in the Pragmatic paradigm. As a researcher adopting a Mixed Methods approach to data collection, the relational epistemology of the pragmatic paradigm offers significant appeal. The non-singular reality ontology combined with the reflexive nature of creating a mixed methods methodology supports the value-laden axiology of an exploration into preschool literacy practices. Pragmatism is not merely a useful philosophical paradigm for research but as Biesta (2010) reminds us, pragmatism is also a very useful set of “philosophical tools of value for addressing problems” (p.96). It is reassuring as a mixed methods researcher that Pragmatism is a paradigm linked to the solution of practical problems in the real work and is a suitable method of inquiry for practical minded researchers (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Maxcy, 2003; Rorty, 2000).

#### ***4.2.3 Dewey’s Five Step Model***

Pragmatists embrace both Interpretivist and Positivist views, and by integrating these two viewpoints, Pragmatism allows a more complete understanding of research objectives (Creswell, 2009). Pragmatism depends on identifying a socially situated problem and designing adequate action to tackle this. Dewey’s (1933) five-step model for understanding problem solving (revised by Morgan, 2014) is a useful model to demonstrate the system of Pragmatism required for this research methodology. It provides a framework for outlining the steps taken in formulating the research process, the development of the research questions and the finalised data collection cycles. Additionally, Dewey’s Five Step Model correlates with the flexible phasing of the Mixed Methods methodology at the heart of this research study. Dewey’s model provides a succinct overview of the research study at hand; yet illustrates a complex web of research components which will ensure that a researcher is not only guided by their beliefs but by the shared beliefs of the research community, and learns from the personal experience of conducting the research and from the experiences of those

participating in the research study (Kaushnik & Walsh, 2019, p. 8; Morgan, 2014, pp. 29-31). Dewey's Five Step Model provides five logically distinct steps to problem solving. Each step is outlined below with an overview in relation to the context of this research methodology.

#### **4.2.3.1 Step 1: Encountering the situation and recognising the research problem.**

As evident across the literature review, trends in current Irish preschool literacy provision indicate that this is a period of Irish early childhood education that can become dominated with a preoccupation with future preparation. When considering early literacy practices, this can often materialise as a premature focus on over-formalised, or 'schoolified' literacy practices and preparation for the transition to primary school. Such patterns become outcome driven and detract from a more necessary and relational focus on the "present child" (Hayes & Filipovic, 2018, p221) and relevant nurturing and interactive proximal processes. As it stands, the two 'free' ECCE years present a valuable space to nurture early literacy development yet a consistency in early literacy provision is often lacking due to a plethora of factors, many of which will be explored across this thesis. Through recognising an apparent problem in practice, a principal theme of **preschool literacy practice** was identified to guide the research study at hand. Under this theme, four guiding research questions were identified; each of which were employed to guide the data collection, analysis and discussion.

1. What are the existing priorities for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. Are 'read alouds' used as an early literacy method in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?
4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

**4.2.3.2 Step 2: Reflection on the nature of the problem using the researcher's existing beliefs.** In this step, Dewey (1910; Morgan, 2014) recommends reflecting on the nature of the problem using the researcher's existing beliefs. This process of reflecting may sometimes lead to developing a new version of the problem and reformulation of research questions identified in step one. As literacy is an extremely broad concept and early literacy skills reside along an intricate, broad continuum, significant consideration was required in establishing approaches to questioning and examining existing practice. As a third level, literacy educator, the researcher possesses strong beliefs on the value of early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years. At research level in Ireland, frequent discussions revolve around taking greater consideration of the educative nature of early childhood education. Within this narrative, it is globally recognised that existing preschool early literacy practices continuously leave room for development due to the ever-evolving nature of educational, cognitive psychology and neuroscientific literacy research. However, through investigating existing early literacy practice, the researcher did not wish to approach data collection through a lens of deficit. Questions were carefully and sensitively designed to prevent researcher bias and to wholly lean into the perceptions and practices of those surveyed and interviewed. Again, to challenge the breadth of literacy practices and provide insights into an influential, critical early literacy method, it was decided that the read aloud would be selected as the primary early literacy method to examine within preschool literacy provision, a method that the researcher deemed was most likely to exist in most preschool settings to some extent.

**4.2.3.3 Step 3: Considering possible actions.** The third step involves considering possible actions and provides an opportunity for researchers to consider the best

possible ways to address the research question and the potential research design (Kaushnik & Walsh, 2019). The researcher required insights into the early literacy practice and experiences of preschool educators, preschool setting managers and ECE literacy professional learning (CPD) providers. To address the research questions the following actions were considered:

- Distributing anonymous mixed questionnaires to establish a measurable overview of existing preschool literacy provision.
- Facilitating anonymised interviews to explore preschool educators', managers' and preschool literacy CPD providers' perceptions of preschool literacy practices and examine their collective priorities for preschool early literacy provision
- Facilitating anonymised interviews with preschool literacy CPD providers to ascertain an understanding of the early literacy practices recommended to preschool educators
- Investigating current utilisation of the 'read aloud' as an early literacy methodology in preschool literacy practices
- Completing documentary analysis of literacy modules in initial educator degree programmes

Once again, the evidential breadth of inquiry modes required reinforces the pragmatist nature of this research study.

**4.2.3.4 Step 4: Reflecting on research methods (abduction).** Applying for ethical approval provided the researcher with continued opportunities to reflect on the research methods necessary and appropriate for this study. The COVID19 Pandemic provided opportunities to reflect on the perceived impact on early literacy practices and an urgency to 'make up' for time lost during setting closures. While the research questions and

direction of data collection remained consistent, the research design was reflected upon in terms of considering participants and how data on literacy practices could be collected without a risk of educators feeling that their existing literacy practices were being criticised, scrutinised or questioned. Morgan (2014a, p. 29) recommends that prior to proceeding to step five and conducting the research, the researcher may go through several rounds of designing the research, selecting methods, reflecting on choices, and reconsidering the questions. This reflective process, known as “abduction” (Kaushnik & Walsh, 2019, p. 8) has been particularly beneficial in assisting the researcher in outlining defined processes and instruments for data collection.

**4.2.3.5 Step 5: Conducting the research.** The research was conducted between December 2022 and January 2024. A pilot process was adopted initially, which enabled questions to be refined as necessary. The research was completed across two phases which enabled consistent opportunity for reflective thought. Dewey reminds us that reflective thought is the antidote to autopilot as it “affords the sole method of escape from purely impulsive or purely routine action” (Dewey, 1910, p.14). Details in full of the research design process and collection cycles are provided in section 4.7.

#### ***4.2.4 Pragmatism and Literacy Research***

Pragmatist philosophy suggests that reality is not static and is in a constant state of change. Similarly, the world is also not static and exists in a continuous state of becoming and like reality, the world is influenced by action. Actions assume the role of an intermediary and are pivotal in pragmatism (Kaushnik & Walsh, 2019; Goldkuhl 2012; Maxcy 2003; Morgan 2014). A research study exploring literacy practices is suited to a Pragmatist paradigm as literacy itself is not static and development is highly dependent on the influences and actions of others. Similarly, literacy research is not permanently fixed, and many influential global literacy researchers are increasingly leaning towards recognition of literacy development as a

science of its own – the Science of Literacy; encompassing the Science of Reading, the Science of Writing and the Science of Knowledge Building (McGraw Hill, 2024). When considering the Science of Literacy, like any other science, it is never complete (NCIL, 2022). This is relevant when considering the theoretical framing of this research study in the person-process-context-time lens of the Bioecological framework. Echoing the work of Mosenthal (1999), Dillon, O'Brien and Heilman (2000) suggest that a pragmatic perspective offers literacy researchers a valuable means of approaching inquiry. They state that it enables us “to agree to disagree, to get over it - ego involvement, and to get on with it - the important work of defining the literacy problems we need to solve, determining how best to solve these problems, and ensuring that the results inform practice” (p. 19).

When considering Pragmatism in literacy research, particularly research involving early childhood literacy practices, Dewey's 'habits' are relevant. Dewey commonly referred to experimental learning as 'habits' (Biesta, 2010). Reflecting on Dewey's philosophy, he postulated that as humans, we can establish and maintain a dynamic coordination with our environment; a process which results in habit formation (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Through this process, our habits become part of our being in an ever-changing environment. According to Biesta (2011) this is a learning process which is a process of trial and error, through which we gain a set of habits for action which are complex yet flexible to the situation at hand. Habits can support the actions required across a wide range of daily situations and experiences and they tend to occur in a semi-automated state that may not require much careful decision making (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This research study explores habits associated with literacy practice in the preschool years, in the hope that more appropriate supports and refined guidance can be established. Such habits have been explored through accounts of the experiences of participants in the study. Such inquiry affords opportunity to re-envision habits as a more self-conscious process of decision making (Morgan, 2014b) and choosing intelligent action, rather than blind

trial and error, aimed at achieving desired consequences (Biesta, 2010). Considering habits and habit formation of preschool educators, once again links can be drawn to Bronfenbrenner, in particular his concept of dispositions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's dispositions refer to the inherent qualities, traits and characteristics of educators that may dictate their attitudes, behaviours and interactions. For preschool educators, dispositions are the characteristics most likely to influence practice because they are directly linked to behaviour (Krebs *et al.*, 2018). Dispositions merit consideration when evaluating the quality of proximal processes such as reading aloud; positive proximal processes will lead towards developing generative dispositions whereas inverse proximal processes are more likely to lead towards the development of disruptive dispositions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

#### **4.3 Research Methodology**

The research methodology evolved from the philosophical assumptions of this study and the refinement of the aims and research questions over time. The rationale for the choice of methodology is explored in relation motivations for the choice of methodology and the reasoning for the use of a Mixed Methods Sequential Exploratory Design.

##### **4.3.1 Methodology motivations**

In the early stages of study design, it was anticipated that a Designed-Based Research (DBR) approach would be employed. In the study's infancy, Action Research was considered, as when initially planning the research study, the researcher was still classroom based. However, a change in employment circumstances meant that the researcher would no longer be in the role of practitioner, and therefore would not be working 'on the ground' within the study site. At that time, it was decided that DBR would be more appropriate due to the need to assume the roles of both researcher and designer (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Design-based research (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992) is an emerging approach for the study of

learning in context through the systematic design and study of instructional strategies and tools. Bell, Brophy, Hadley and His (2003) argue that design-based research can help create and extend knowledge about developing, enacting, and sustaining innovative learning environments. Design Based Research (DBR) was the initial approach for this research process as its systematic but flexible methodology would have lent itself well to the research and intervention processes originally planned for this study. DBR is also closely aligned to research that aims to "improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings" (Wang & Hannafin, 2005, p. 6). However, on deciding that an intervention would be unnecessary, the motivations for a DBR approach became obsolete, and it was deemed that this study would become a Mixed Methods methodology.

#### ***4.3.2 Mixed Methods***

Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010), consider Mixed Methods research to be a comparatively recent form of inquiry in educational research. It is a flexible approach which adopts Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological positions in a different way as compared to either qualitative or quantitative approaches. To support the integrity and credibility of the research process when employing a Mixed Methods approach, a researcher should possess an understanding not only of the philosophical positions such as ontology, epistemology and methodology (Seliger, 1989), but also how they may be addressed in a mixed methods study (Ansari, Panhwar & Mahesar, 2016; Collis & Hussey, 2003; Dornyei, 2007). The rationale for mixing both kinds of data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation. When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each (Ivankova, Creswell, Stick, 2006; Green, Caracelli, and Graham 1989;

Miles and Huberman 1994; Green and Caracelli 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). As outlined in Section 4.3.2, in its earliest stages, Design-Based Research was the preferred method for this study, however on reflection and refinement of questions and aims, the research deemed an intervention to be less of a necessity and facilitated a more extensive investigation of the data collected through a questionnaire and three cycles of interviews. After reflection, it was decided that the design most reflective of the study, was in fact Sequential Explanatory Design.

#### ***4.3.3 Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Design***

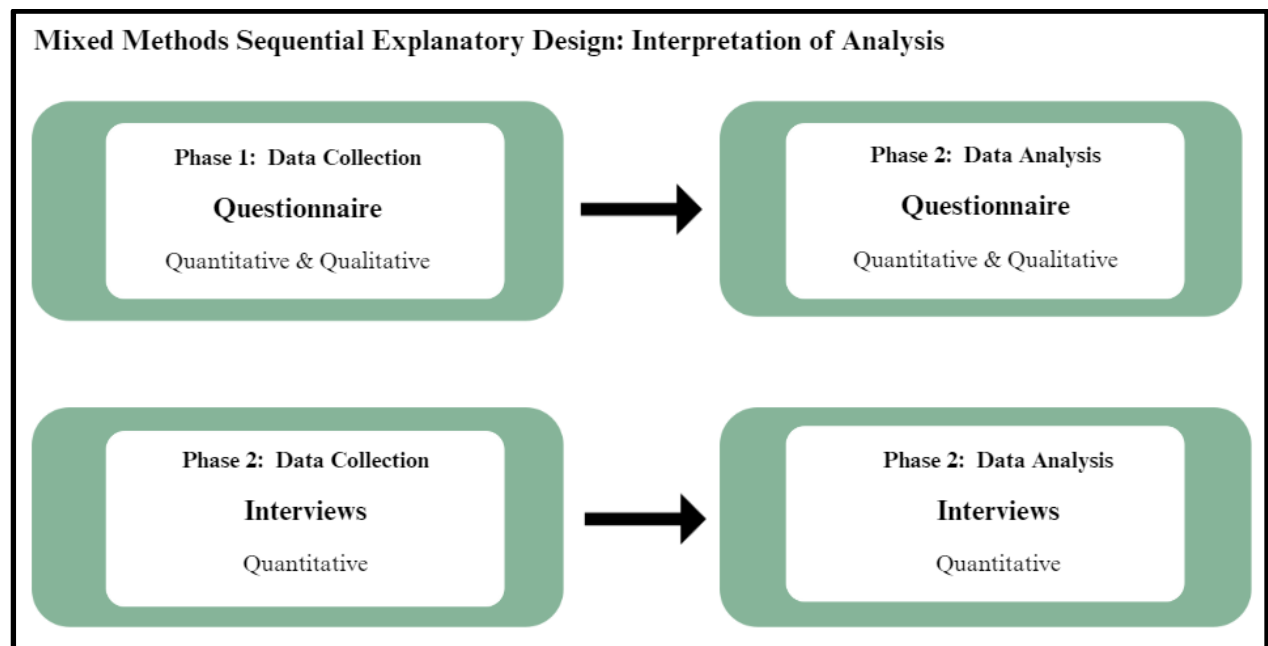
In Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Design (SED), quantitative data is collected first, followed by qualitative data. This design is deemed beneficial when a researcher wishes to further explain a set of quantitative data with additional qualitative information. The goal of the quantitative phase in this study was to identify existing perceptions and priorities of early literacy learning in Irish preschool settings. For the researcher, this was deemed to be a form of ascertaining a ‘lay of the land’ for preschool literacy practices in Ireland. While completing a range of interviews was always a core aim for the data collection stage, the researcher felt that creating a questionnaire would be beneficial in terms of carving out the necessary questions and format of the interviews in Phase Two. The quantitative data were collected via a web-based, cross-sectional questionnaire using Qualtrics.XM Software. SED offered a valuable framework for the methodology as it facilitates the mixing of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in stages to gather a more nuanced view of the research questions. An example of this is a study that first has an online survey to collect initial data and is followed by in-depth interviews to gain further insights. Pragmatist methodology facilitates continuous opportunity for reflection, particularly surrounding the nature of the problem at hand and potential solutions and the associated actions (Morgan, 2014a). A Mixed Methods Sequential

Exploratory Design approach under the pragmatist methodology ensures that the research design is closely attuned to the guiding research question to bridge the gap between the research questions and research methods (Kaushik & Walsh, 2014).

An overview of the SED approach employed for this study is provided in Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6**

*Mixed Methods SED: Interpretation of Analysis (Fiorentini, 2025)*



#### 4.4 Mixed Methodologies and a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) approach

Baker (2000) suggests that “the nature of literacy is characterized by the theoretical lens that is used to examine it” (p. 101). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (1977) is the theoretical lens through which this research study is framed. Bronfenbrenner is not commonly associated with opinion on literacy development or instruction, however Jaeger (2016), argues that “his bioecological systems theory has the potential to serve as the foundation for literacy research because it promotes careful attention to the range of factors that influence literacy practices” (p. 164). By utilising the Bioecological Systems Theory as a frame, literacy researchers are enabled to

apply an increased level of specificity to descriptions of reading and writing behaviour alongside guidance for literacy instruction and learning experiences (p. 170).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems offer a view of experience in what Jaeger (2016) deems as a complex and nuanced process amenable to systems thinking, a view particularly applicable to fields of literacy research. This research demonstrates the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies within a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) model to examine the literacy practices and processes informing literacy practice within preschool settings. Notable about the use of the Bioecological Systems Model, is that the research space does not reside within a single microsystem. It will occur, in a conceptual sense, at the intersection of all the microsystems (Jaeger, 2016) of which the early literacy learner is a member and where the proximal processes are at their most productive – the space which Bronfenbrenner referred to as 'the mesosystem'.

In terms of this Mixed Methods SED methodology, the PPCT model was employed as follows:

### **1. Process:**

For the methodology, it is important to envision proximal processes from a somewhat broader perspective than Bronfenbrenner originally described. When considering Process, Xia, Li and Tudge (2020) agree that while observational methods work well, surveys can offer effective means of gaining insights into processes. Anonymous surveys aimed to explore the processes pertaining to literacy learning experiences and provision in preschool settings. In terms of limitations, it should be noted that while anonymous surveys offered encouragement for honest responses, they do limit follow-up, detailed analysis and investigations of context behind responses.

### **2. Person:**

Educator, manager and CPD provider questionnaires and interviews focused on a range of early years' literacy components such as practitioner knowledge, priorities for and existing preschool literacy practices and the read aloud as a method of early literacy learning. This accommodated exploration of perceived practice strength, challenges, beliefs and experiences. Questionnaires and interviews assisted in the acquisition of evidence relative to proximal processes such as read aloud experiences and examples of the connections participants draw from read alouds and literacy learning in the preschool learning environment and so the 'persons of interest' in this study are the preschool educator and the preschool child. As Xia, Li and Tudge (2020) outline, the person component of the PPCT model offers a valuable space to consider obvious teacher characteristics such as teachers' knowledge of early literacy or experience teaching it (resource), and motivation for or liking of teaching it (force). With such application of the PPCT model, the researcher was enabled to assess the extent to which variability in relevant characteristics influence proximal processes within the preschool learning environment. In such examinations, opportunities were created to consider two key 'persons' in the study, the preschool educator as an early literacy educator and the child as an early literacy learner.

### **3. Context:**

Data collected pertains to the preschool [ ECCE sector only]. It was intended that questionnaires would be completed by practicing preschool educators and that interviews would be completed by preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers, all being actively involved in preschool provision. It was anticipated that this would provide a more meaningful opportunity to explore the proximal processes within the microsystem of the

preschool literacy learning environment. It was hoped that interviews would provide an insight into mesosystem interactions with preschool microsystem practices. Xia, Li and Tudge (2018, p.15) stress that “it is possible to include more than one aspect of Context; however, appropriate operationalizing of the PPCT model does not require the inclusion of all contextual layers”.

#### **4. Time:**

Chronosystem considerations are also vital in this instance, particularly in terms of impacts on proximal processes. In Ireland, the age ranges of children attending preschool within the ECCE system range from 2 years and 8 months to five years of age. It must be noted, that in preschool the children move closer towards an extremely pivotal life transition (moving from preschool to primary), a shift in priorities of practice may be likely, in preparation for this transition. For such reasons, macrotime is relevant in this study; particularly as the data collection took place following the lifting of restrictions from the SARS2Covid Pandemic; a time which impacted practice right across educational sectors. As Xia, Li and Tudge (2020, p.16) outline: “Even if the study does not take place during a time of great changes, it is always important to recognize that just as one cannot generalize from one spatial context to another, one should also beware of generalizing across temporal contexts.”

#### **4.5 Reflecting on Researcher Positionality**

Very little research in the social or educational field is or can be value-free (Greenbank, 2003; Holmes, 2020). As an Early Literacies lecturer and field placement supervisor on an Early Childhood Education degree programme, the researcher deals first-hand with student-practitioners as they prepare for early literacy learning experiences for field placement in ECE settings. Through placement observations, student discourse and visits to settings, the researcher is increasingly concerned with what can be classed as a premature, preoccupation with the written word - particularly in preschool settings. Despite the recommended exploratory approach to early literacy as outlined in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), an evident confusion can exist surrounding what are considered necessary and appropriate literacy practices for children in the preschool or ECCE years in Ireland. As outlined in detail within the literature review, conflicting and vague messaging within policy and practice documents appears to have a part to play in a premature focus on ‘schoolified’ (Bennett & Kaga, 2010) literacy practices that can pervade preschool provision. As an early career researcher, the researcher’s positionality is deeply rooted in a commitment to advocating for the educative nature of preschool and the unique and precious role preschool educators can play in young children’s early literacy development. The researcher recognised that their own experiences as a parent, an infant teacher, a literacy lecturer and CPD provider influences their perspectives and approaches to research on early literacy development and early literacy provision. Coming from a diverse educational and professional background, the researcher is acutely aware of the systemic barriers that many preschool educators face in facilitating quality literacy provision in the preschool years. This doctoral research is driven by a passion for delivering solutions to existing challenges and promoting early literacy practices that support all preschool educators, and ultimately children attending preschool in Ireland. A commitment to educational research comes with the necessity that the research be

relevant and empowering to the context at hand. It is the intention of the researcher to provide support through the study rather than approach the issues explored from a deficit lens. The researcher endeavoured to approach the research with humility, acknowledging the value of diverse literacy practices and the value of variety in educators, managers and CPD providers across the sector. By centering on the voices and experiences of educators and their practice, the research aims to contribute to more evidence-informed and effective preschool literacy provision.

#### **4.6 Research Context and Participants**

The research pertains to preschool literacy practices. In Ireland, preschool spans two years of early childhood education, in which children can attend from 2 years and 8 months until school age. A variety of stakeholders impact the provision of early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years – early childhood educators, preschool setting managers and early literacy professional development (CPD) providers. In the context of research involving preschool educators, it is essential to appreciate the environment in which they work and the demographics they represent. Participants across both cycles of data collection held varying levels of qualifications and varying levels of practice experience – reflective of the current reality across the early childhood education and care sector. Appreciation of such aspects, aided in tailoring the methods necessary to gather the relevant data, which lead to in-depth insights into existing practices, challenges faced, and areas for development pertaining to early literacy provision in the preschool years.

##### **4.6.1 Questionnaire Participants**

Questionnaire participants were practicing preschool educators. No set level of experience or qualifications were required, simply ongoing employment and practice as a preschool educator in Ireland. Qualification levels ranged from Level 5 to Level 10 and participants undergoing their qualification journey part-time as they worked. A breakdown of

the demographics of questionnaire participants is provided in Tables 3 and 4 below. A target of 100 questionnaire participants was set, with the capacity capped at 200 participants. In the end, 198 responses were recorded.

**Table 3**

*Experience of Practicing Preschool Educators*

| <b>Experience</b>                                                            | <b>One year or less</b> | <b>2 – 5 years</b> | <b>6 – 10 years</b> | <b>10 years +</b> | <b>Declined to answer</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>How many years' experience do you have working in preschool settings?</i> | 19                      | 38                 | 34                  | 71                | 36                        |

**Table 4**

*Qualifications of Practicing Preschool Educators*

| <b>Qualifications</b>                                                                                                | <b>ECE Student</b> | <b>Level 5 Certificate</b> | <b>Level 6 Certificate</b> | <b>Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree</b> | <b>Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree</b> | <b>Level 9 Masters Degree</b> | <b>Level 10 Doctoral Degree</b> | <b>Declined to answer</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education that you have fully achieved to date?</i> |                    |                            |                            |                                         |                                        |                               |                                 |                           |
| <b>No. of questionnaire participants</b>                                                                             | 13                 | 4                          | 21                         | 22                                      | 69                                     | 34                            | 6                               | 29                        |

#### **4.6.2 Interview Participants**

As iterated, a variety of stakeholders continue to impact the day-to-day provision of early literacy learning experiences across the preschool years. As a result, the researcher wished to interview ten preschool educators, six preschool managers and four preschool literacy CPD providers. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Demographics of the interview participants can be found in table 5 below.

**Table 5***Interview Participants: Demographics*

| <b>Participant's ID</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Role</b>  | <b>Qualification</b> | <b>Years Experience in Current Role</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>EDU1</b>             | F             | Urban           | PS Educator  | ECE student          | 2                                       |
| <b>EDU2</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L7               | 20                                      |
| <b>EDU3</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 5                                       |
| <b>EDU4</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 8                                       |
| <b>EDU5</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 12                                      |
| <b>EDU6</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 6                                       |
| <b>EDU7</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L7               | 2                                       |
| <b>EDU8</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 18                                      |
| <b>EDU9</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L7               | 6                                       |
| <b>EDU10</b>            | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L5               | 10                                      |
| <b>MAN1</b>             | F             | Urban           | PS Manager   | QQI L9               | 11                                      |
| <b>MAN2</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L9               | 15                                      |
| <b>MAN3</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L9               | 21                                      |
| <b>MAN4</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L9               | 18                                      |
| <b>MAN5</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L9               | 26                                      |
| <b>MAN6</b>             | F             | Rural           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 6                                       |
| <b>CPD1</b>             | F             | Urban & Rural   | CPD Provider | QQI L8               | 6                                       |
| <b>CPD2</b>             | F             | Urban           | ✓            | QQI L8               | 1                                       |
| <b>CPD3</b>             | M             | Urban & Rural   | ✓            | QQI L8               | 2                                       |
| <b>CPD4</b>             | F             | Urban & Rural   | ✓            | QQI L9               | 5                                       |

## 4.7 Ethics

“Any research with human respondents requires a thorough consideration of ethics.”

(O’Toole, 2016)

Informed consent was sought for all questionnaire and interview participants. Level 2 ethical approval was garnered from the TCD Research in Ethics Committee in October 2021, however as the study progressed it was decided that there would be no child involvement, directly or indirectly during the data collection. The application for ethical approval from the Trinity Research in Ethics Committee was an extremely valuable learning experience as it afforded the researcher opportunity to tighten the research methods in terms of ethics and protect the integrity of the data collection process.

### ***4.7.1 Consent, Ensuring Anonymity and Data Retention***

Careful consideration of informed consent is an important ethical aspect of this research study (Harcourt and Conroy, 2011). For participating adults, this involved providing clear messaging in all documentation and emphasis of the right to withdraw from the research at any point. Written consent was obtained before all participants could engage with the research.

All questionnaire and interview participants were:

- i. Informed that participation was voluntary.
- ii. Provided with a summary of the research, its purpose and duration.
- iii. Informed of any reasonable, foreseeable risks or discomforts during the interview process.

The researcher received and stored consent for each of the 20 interview participants retaining one copy of the consent form signed by both themselves and the relevant participant. Each

participant was provided with a copy of the relevant consent form as a record of the research process and their voluntary commitment to the data collection process. A time period of seven days was allocated to provide the participants with a sufficient opportunity to reflect on the information provided and to ensure that participants would understand the exact purpose of the research process. Participants were therefore enabled to make an informed decision if they were willing to proceed with or decline participation in the process. This provided ample time for participants to discuss and liaise with setting management, if applicable. The researcher ensured that the process is GDPR compliant, and that this was flagged with the participants accordingly. Anonymity was maintained at all times; all identifiable information was removed from the data so as no participants could be linked to their responses.

A rigorous data management plan was employed to ensure ethical standards were adhered to and to maintain the integrity of this study. Data storage complied with TCD's ethical guidelines. Password encrypted storage on TCD Microsoft Teams ensured that the data was protected from unauthorised access.

#### ***4.7.2 Wider Ethical Considerations***

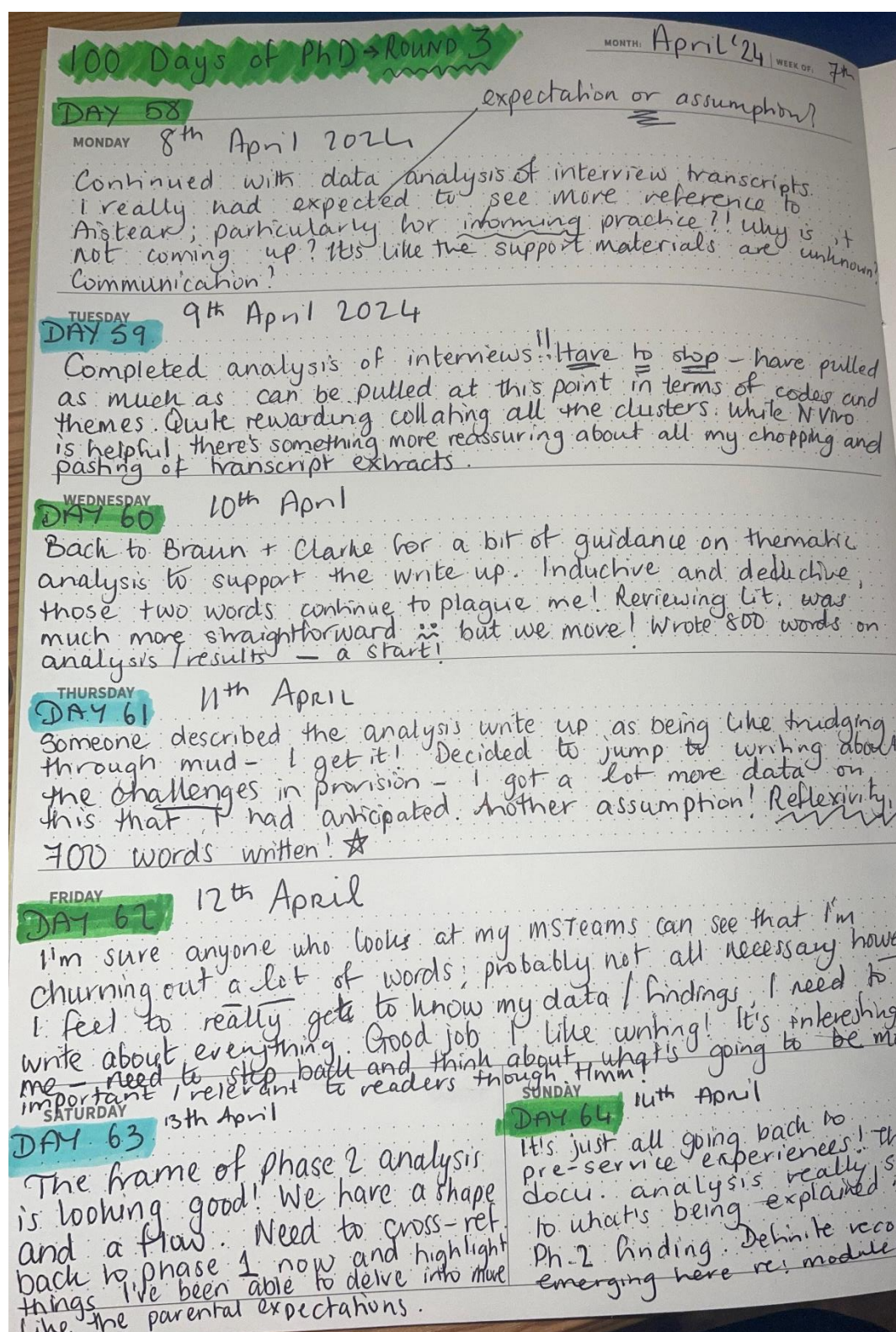
Kaaristo (2022, p.744) states “a researcher is never a neutral, objective data collector”. Bearing this in mind, there were several wider ethical considerations that were explored and employed to enable the integrity and validity of this study. One aspect in particular was considering the means in what power dynamics between the researcher and participants could be minimised. For the questionnaire, efforts were made to ensure that the open-ended questions felt exploratory but neutral in tone and extremely non-judgemental. Coming from a Primary Education background as a researcher it was important that participants felt that their practice was not being criticised or compared to that of primary practice. Olmos-Vega (2022, p.241) maintains that “failure to account for unexpected power dynamics between participant and interviewer can lead to situations where some participants feel pressured to disclose personal

details that they are not comfortable talking about, or feel silenced, preventing them from sharing the fullness of their experience.” For the interviews, efforts were made to ensure a friendly, relaxed and egalitarian atmosphere was maintained. At the outset of the interviews, all participants were advised that there were no right or wrong answers, that all their input would be most greatly appreciated. It was hoped that this would ensure honest answers, reflective of the realities of their practice and that it would prevent participants from answering in a way that meant they were only sharing what they thought the researcher might like to hear. Conscious efforts were made to demonstrate active listening and acknowledgement of their responses, which helped ensure that interview participants were comfortable and empowered to share their experiences without duress or discomfort.

In order to mitigate any potential bias, journaling proved a valuable means of not only tracking progress and accountability on behalf of the researcher, but also as a means of reflecting on personal biases and assumptions. The journaling ensured that detailed documentation was maintained across the study; facilitating transparency and encouraging consistent self-reflection and reflexivity. Journaling is likely to be most effective and beneficial when used over sustained periods of time (Jans-Beken *et al.*, 2019; Prieto, 2021; Smyth *et al.*, 2018). Throughout this study the ‘100 Days of PhD’ writing method was employed. This consisted of 100 days of consistent writing and journaling. Figure 10 below demonstrates an example of an extract from a cycle of 100 Days of PhD during data analysis in spring 2024.

Figure 7

Extract from 100 days of PhD Journal, April 2024.



#### **4.7.2 Conflicts of Interest**

Leedy (1997, p. 116) reminds researchers of the guiding principles of ethical propriety and stresses the “...simple considerations of fairness, honesty, openness of intent, disclosure of methods, the ends for which the research executed, a respect for the integrity of the individual.” As the data collection was exploring the literacy practices of preschool educators and educators’ knowledge, there was an underpinning goal of exploring the choices or motivations for prioritising particular literacy approaches or methods. The intention was never to openly criticise practice but learn about why and how practitioners make their literacy practice choices and attempt to uncover the basis and reasons behind what informs these choices. This was clearly explained to all participants in the relevant documentation prior to engagement with the questionnaire or interviews. Interview participants were also reminded of this verbally prior to beginning the recordings. It was explained to all participants that the aim of data collection was not to critique their work or chosen approaches but to learn from them for the research's purpose.

#### **4.8 Research Tools**

This section examines the research tools of the study and outlines the chronology of the data collection cycles. A variety of research instruments were utilised across the data collection cycles. These included:

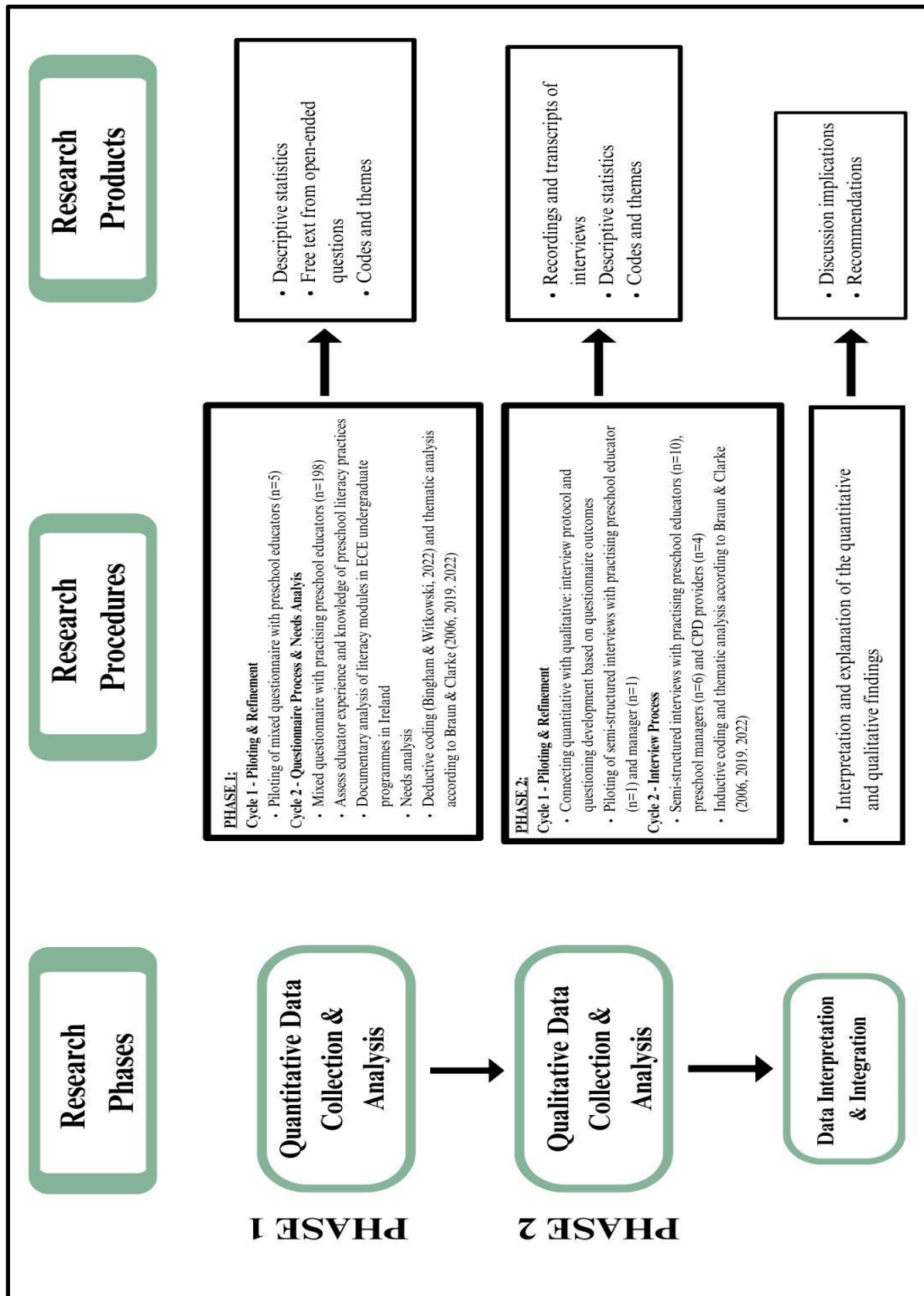
- A questionnaire
- Documentary analysis
- Semi-structured interviews
- Reflective journal

#### ***4.8.1 Data Collection Cycles***

For the purposes of this study, the data collection spanned two phases - each comprising of two distinct cycles. An overview of the data collection phases and cycles is provided in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Research Phases, Procedures and Products



**4.8.1.1 Phase 1.** The first stage of the Data Collection process, Phase 1 was divided into two cycles, Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Cycle 1 consisted of piloting and refining the data collection instruments. Cycle 2 took the form of a needs analysis which facilitates empirical design of the data collection process required in Phase 2 and its pilot processes. An additional element of Phase 1 was some small-scale documentary analysis on early literacy training as part of undergraduate early childhood education degrees. The Data Collection process from Phase 1 informed the final requirements for the interview process (Phase 2), ensuring that the process remained purposefully reflective and evaluative throughout.

#### **4.8.1.2 Phase 2**

Similarly, Phase 2 was divided into two cycles, Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Cycle 1 consisted of piloting and refinement of the interview process and questions. Cycle 2 took the form of the interview process.

### **4.8.2 Research Instruments**

The majority of the data were collected through anonymous questionnaires and anonymous semi-structured interviews with E.C.E. educators (preschool), E.C.E. setting managers (preschool) and C.P.D. providers (early literacy / language). Each explored the following areas:

- Preschool early literacy provision in the Irish context (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3 & RQ4)
- Educators' knowledge of early literacy skills / development (RQ1, RQ3 & RQ4)
- Educators' training in early literacy learning / skills / development (RQ3 & RQ4)
- Educators' priorities for early literacy practice (RQ1 & RQ4)
- Educators' knowledge of read aloud practices (RQ1 & RQ2)

- Educators' confidence in providing high quality, interactive read aloud experiences for young children (RQ2 & RQ4)

Data were also collected on literacy training opportunities (RQ3 & RQ4) across undergraduate early childhood education degree programmes in Ireland through desktop documentary analysis. This is detailed in full in section 5.2.8.2.

#### ***4.8.3 The Questionnaire***

Anonymous questionnaires are proven to be a quick and efficient way of collecting a significant amount of information from a large number of people in a short period of time (Macintyre, 2000, p. 74). A mixed, anonymous questionnaire was designed for phase one of data collection. The use of mixed questioning allowed for the development of a robust and educator-centred questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 30 questions, a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Mixed questions facilitated an integration of quantitative and qualitative data to analyse and explore to support and refine the data collection design of phase two (Creswell, 2022). Demographics of participants can be found in Table 6 below. Qualtrics was the platform used to design and host the mixed questionnaire. Qualtrics was selected as it is an innovative survey platform enabling the design of an engaging and efficient survey with a wide variety of question formats in the hope that comprehensive and actionable insights could be gathered from respondents.

**Table 6**

*Participant and Data Collection Overview*

| <b>Cycle 1: Phase 1 – Piloting &amp; Refinement:</b> |                              |                                                                   |                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Participants</b>                                  | <b>Participants Required</b> | <b>Requirements</b>                                               | <b>Data Collection Instrument</b> |
| ECE Educators                                        | 5                            | Must be practicing in a preschool setting                         | Web-based pilot questionnaire     |
| <b>Cycle 1: Phase 2: Needs Analysis</b>              |                              |                                                                   |                                   |
| <b>Participants</b>                                  | <b>Participants Required</b> | <b>Requirements</b>                                               | <b>Data Collection Instrument</b> |
| ECE Educators                                        | 100                          | Must be practicing in a preschool setting                         | Web-based questionnaire           |
| N/A                                                  | N/A                          | Undergraduate early childhood education degree courses in Ireland | Documentary analysis              |
| <b>Cycle 2: Phase 1: Piloting &amp; Refinement</b>   |                              |                                                                   |                                   |
| <b>Participants</b>                                  | <b>Participants Required</b> | <b>Requirements</b>                                               | <b>Data Collection Instrument</b> |
| ECE Educators                                        | 1                            | Must be practicing in a preschool setting                         | Face-to-face pilot interview      |
| ECE Setting Managers                                 | 1                            | Must be manager a setting with preschool provision                | Face-to-face pilot interview      |
| <b>Cycle 2: Phase 2: Interview Process</b>           |                              |                                                                   |                                   |
| <b>Participants</b>                                  | <b>Participants Required</b> | <b>Requirements</b>                                               | <b>Data Collection Instrument</b> |
| Preschool Educators                                  | 10                           | Must be practicing in a preschool setting                         | Online interview via MSTeams      |
| Preschool Manager                                    | 6                            | Must be managing an ECE setting with preschool provision          | Online interview via MSTeams      |
| Preschool Literacy CPD Provider                      | 4                            | Must be providing literacy CPD to preschool educators             | Online interview via MSTeams      |

#### **4.8.4 Preliminary Data Collection Stage: Pilot Process**

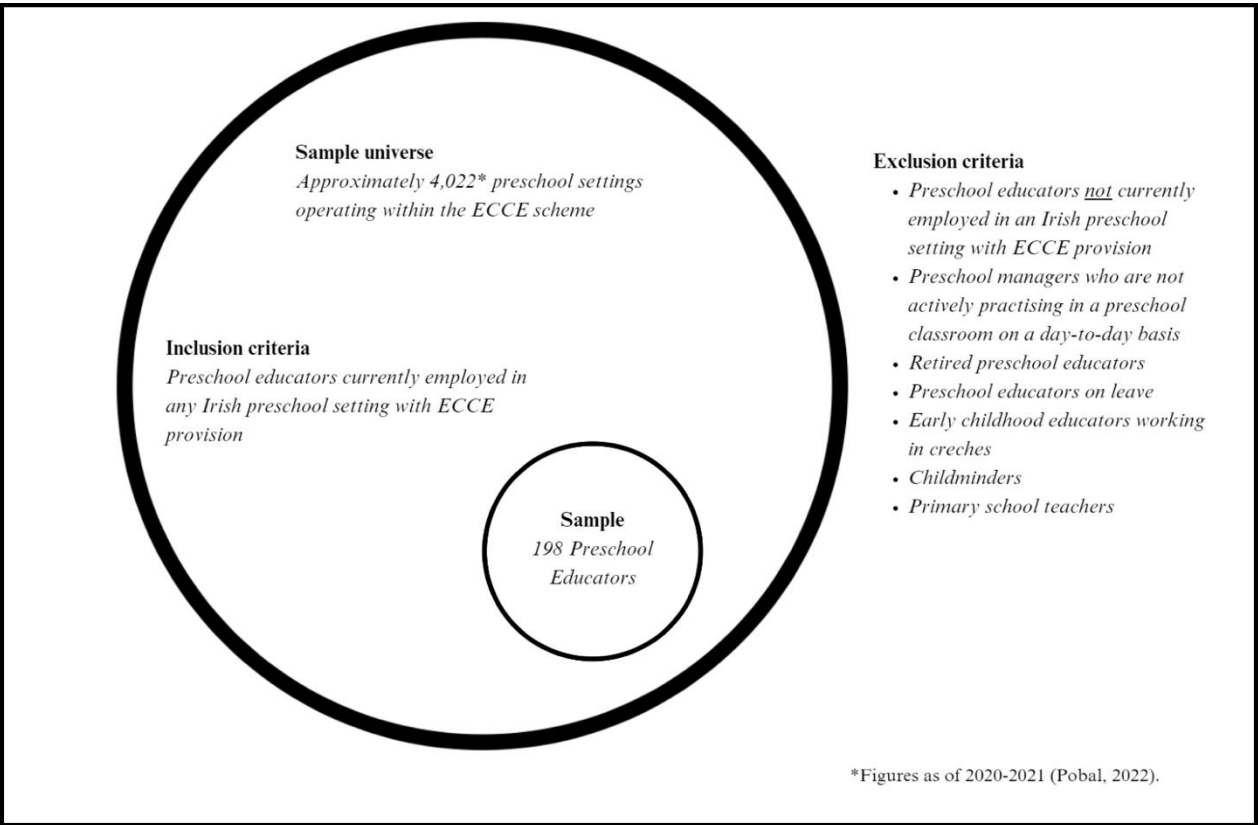
To facilitate an effective and purposeful data collection process, it was imperative to the researcher that an adequate piloting process was adopted. According to Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour (2013, p.2), “pilot studies can provide unique opportunities to improve skills of a qualitative researcher”. For this study, the pilot process consisted of five survey participants and two interviews (one preschool practitioner and one preschool setting manager). This provided the researcher with greater flexibility in opportunities to reflect on and refine survey and interview questions. Without modifications the researcher could have run the risk of data collected being limited or flawed. The flexibility associated with a pilot study process supported the researcher in tailoring the questionnaire and interview processes so that they were more closely aligned to the direction of the research and to increase the likelihood of a purposeful and efficient data collection process. Drawing on the recommendations of Thabane *et al.*, (2010) a pilot process in PhD data collections assists in defining the research question and to test the feasibility, reliability, and validity of the proposed study design. Frankland and Bloor (1999, p. 154) suggest that piloting provides the qualitative researcher with a ‘clear definition of the focus of the study’. The researcher is of the belief that completing a rigorous and careful piloting process facilitated the concentration and productivity of their overall data collection. It should be noted that throughout the piloting and data analysis processes critical friends were engaged with as a means of seeking neutral, external perspectives and welcome, constructive, critical feedback. According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), a critical friend “is an advocate for the success of the work, takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented, and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward.” This was another valuable approach to maintaining consistent reflexivity and self-reflection.

4.8.5 Finalised Data Collection Process, Sampling and Recruitment

This section provides an overview of the finalised data collection process including sampling and recruitment.

**4.8.5.1 Phase 1: Study population.** A sample universe was defined for phase 1 of data collection. The sample universe is illustrated in Figure X. Robinson’s (2014) Defining the Sampling Universe was a model replicated for the purpose of defining the sampling for this study. The sampling universe for this phase of study was designed to be homogenous, as it pertained to the set topic of preschool literacy, and it required respondents to be actively working in an Irish preschool setting.

**Figure 9**  
Phase 1: Sample Universe Outlining Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria (Fiorentini, 2025)



**4.8.5.2 Phase 1: Sampling for Anonymous Mixed Questionnaire.** Two non-probability sampling techniques were employed for the distribution of the questionnaire. Purposive sampling was adopted for the purposes of the initial data collection. This involved targeting participants throughout the County Childcare Committee Network across the country. This was a way to connect with educators practicing in preschool settings. Participants of various Professional Development projects facilitated by the researcher for preschool educators at the time were also invited to complete the survey; this included participants of two existing professional learning projects:

1. **Tús Maith-** The Northwest Transitions Project (Giblin, Fiorentini, O’Sullivan & Furlong, 2022 – 23)
2. **Aistear & Your Local Library,** (Dun-Laoghaire-Rathdown Libraries, DLR County Council, Creative Ireland & Fiorentini, 2022 - 23)

Once a base sample had been established, a transition to Snowball Sampling was made as the questionnaire began to circulate. Existing study subjects were encouraged to recruit future subjects from acquaintances and colleges to facilitate a chain referral system. Snowball Sampling at this point suited the quantitative nature of the questionnaire (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). It was hoped that leveraging the social networks of initial participants would expand the sample pool. At this time, the questionnaire was distributed via social media (Instagram and X) which increased the reach of the survey significantly. The combination of methods enhanced the depth in response and the breadth of reach in participants facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the study phenomena at play.

**4.8.5.3 Phase 1: Saturation of Anonymous Mixed Questionnaire.** Saturation is accepted as a methodological principle which is frequently adopted by researchers to indicate that after a certain point in data collection further collection or analysis are unnecessary (Saunders *et al.*, 2017). While the initial aim for questionnaire participants was 100, it was decided to keep the questionnaire open until saturation was visible across the responses and emerging analysis themes. Fusch and Ness (2015, p.1408) assert that “failure to reach saturation has an impact on the quality of the research conducted”. By 198 responses it was evident that no additional data were being found, and the researcher was “empirically confident” that saturation was evident, and the questionnaire could be closed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

**4.8.5.4 Phase 1: Documentary Analysis.** While documentary analysis was always intended; from initial review of questionnaire data, it was evident that perceptions and practices across preschool literacy provision were varying. This led to a reaffirmed decision to include an additional element of data collection – documentary analysis. Bowen (2009, p.1) describes documentary analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic material” which is useful in developing empirical knowledge and a valuable complement to other research methods. For the purpose of this study, the course overviews and module descriptors for all Level 8 courses in Early Childhood Education in Ireland were analysed. This information was sourced from open-access information from college websites and available module descriptors to which a form of thematic content analysis was applied involving a careful and focused reading and review of the data (Bowen, 2009). This iterative procedure was followed in order to gather information on the presence (or lack thereof) of early literacy and children’s literature modules across undergraduate programmes in early childhood education in Ireland. Level 8

courses were selected for two reasons; the first being that Level 8 is the course that the researcher works with as an initial teacher educator and the second being that strives in policy are ensuring that the ECE sector in Ireland is consistently, albeit slowly moving towards degree-led qualifications. At Level 8, one would expect a certain level of early literacy to feature due to the fact that early literacy is listed as essential programme content under educator knowledge development for all Level 8 ECE degree programmes as stated in the Department of Education and Skill's 'Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland' (2019).

#### ***4.8.6 Phase 2: Semi-Structured Anonymous Interviews***

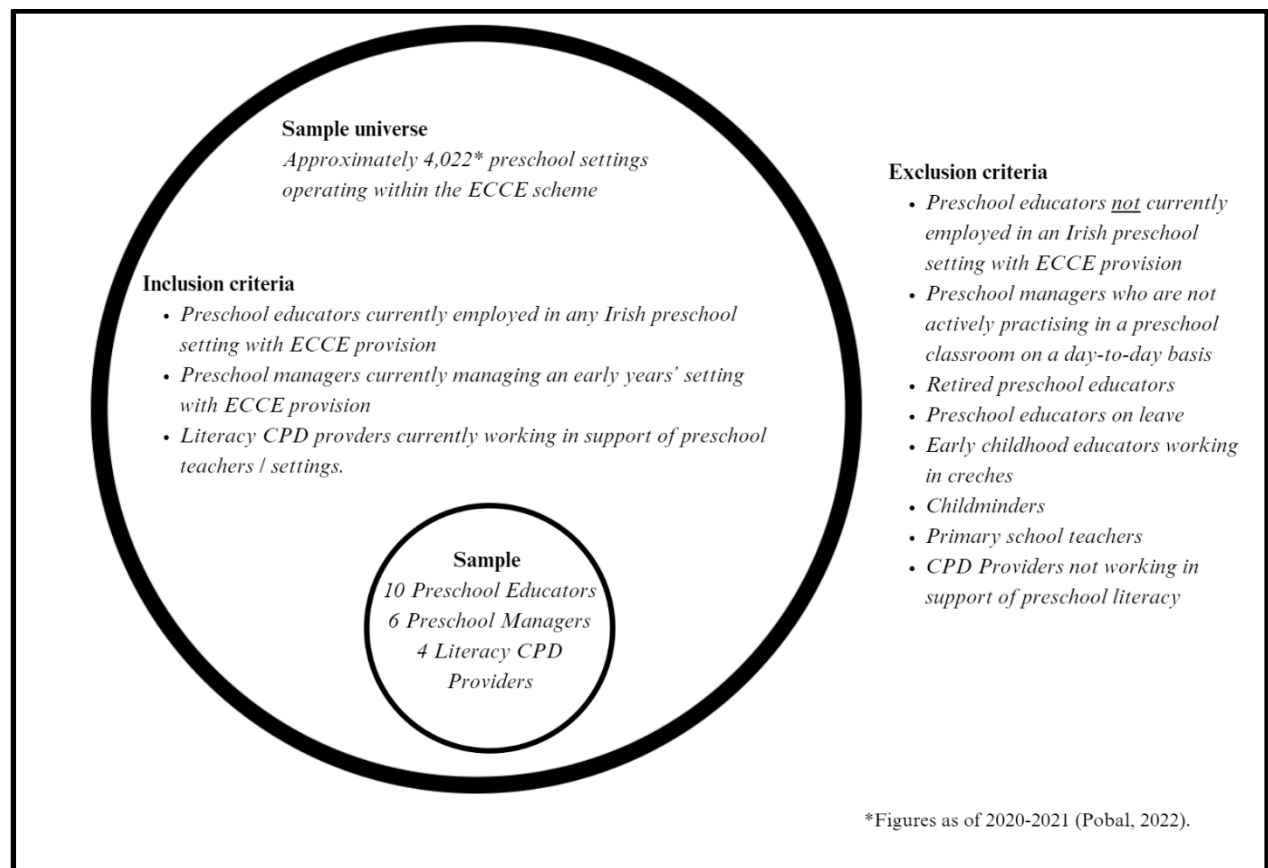
Semi-structured interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalised understanding of a phenomenon (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). For the purposes of this research study, semi-structured interviews provided a more curated approach to analysis with the pre-determined guides and a wealth of specific data collected which led itself particularly well to the deductive thematic analysis and coding applied during data analysis.

##### **4.8.6.1 Phase 2: Study Population**

A sample universe was defined and designed for phase 2 of data collection. The sample universe is illustrated in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**

Phase 2 – Semi-structured Anonymous Interviews: Sample universe inclusion / exclusion criteria (Fiorentini, 2025)



**4.8.6.2 Phase 2: Sampling for Semi-Structured Interviews.** As commonly seen with qualitative research, non-probability sampling was the sampling of choice. The form of non-probability sampling applied was purposive sampling as participants were required to meet a certain criterion. The researcher required interviews with preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers, all of whom were required to be working in Ireland. Educators and managers were required to be working in settings with ECCE provision and CPD providers were required to be actively working in support of educators and children in preschool ECCE settings.

**4.8.6.3 Recruitment.** Recruitment for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling is a strategic process aimed at selecting participants who can provide contextual insights relevant to the research topic (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). True to the

patterns of purposive sampling, interview participants for this study were chosen based on specific characteristics that align with the study's objectives. This demonstrates a non-random sampling technique which ensured that the individuals selected had firsthand experience or knowledge about the preschool literacy provision. The recruitment process involved identifying key criteria for participant selection, such as demographic factors (e.g. *rural or urban preschool settings with ECCE provision*) and professional background (e.g. *Preschool Educator, Manager, Literacy CPD Provider*) (Negrin, Slaughter, Dahlke & Olson, 2022). The researcher contacted potential participants through 'opt in' email addresses provided during the questionnaires and via social media platforms, such as X, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. As the 'opt in' option was not available for CPD Providers (as they did not participate in the questionnaire), a separate call via social media was shared for Literacy CPD Providers.

**4.8.6.4 Phase 2: Saturation of Interview Responses.** Consistently relevant to the study, is the iterative nature of qualitative research. Phase 2 of the study was predominantly qualitative, and the iterative process facilitated data collection and initial analysis to be ongoing simultaneously. Historically, and methodologically, the concept of theoretical saturation has emerged from Grounded Theory research and refers to iterative, qualitative research which eventually reaches “the point when further increasing the size of the sample will not provide any more insights that could further amend the theory that has been developed so far” (Malterud *et al.*, 2016, p. 1758). The conflict associated with the notion of saturation emerges from the underpinning belief that reaching the point of saturation can only be truly decided by analysing the data as it is collected (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Only this way can researchers meaningfully assert that results are lacking new insights and make an

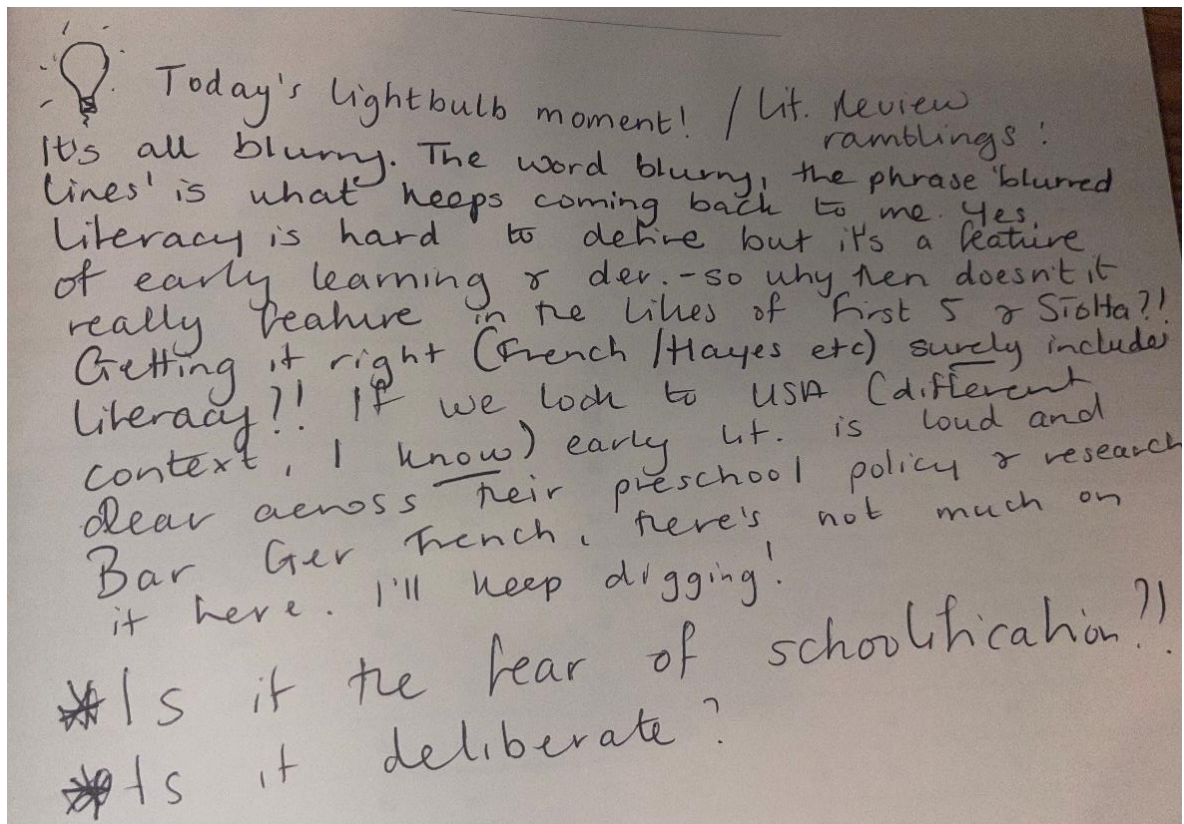
informed decision to cease collection. While the researcher began interviews with an open mind on how many interviews would be required, by the completion of interview 20 it was evident that the sample size was sufficient as no new coders or themes could be meaningfully generated by that stage. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021, p.1361) define this as “thematic saturation”. At this stage, the sample size of 20 interviews was more than sufficient.

#### **4.8.7 Reflective Journal**

Reflective journals are widely recognised as a valuable tool in promoting and reinforcing doctoral students’ learning (Draissi, BaoHui, ZhanYong, 2021). Reflective journaling has been proven as an effective learning technique which facilitates learning during writing (Farrah, 2012). The reflective journal utilised in this study was an informal, flexible and fluid entity consisting of a series of hand-written journals. Points of note, progress monitoring and ‘light bulb’ moments were recorded. The reflective journal was a means of recording ongoing reflection, emerging theories (Dyment & O’Connell, 2011) development of metacognitive skills (Bashan *et al.*, 2017), critical thinking (Beavers *et al.*, 2017) and problem solving (Manning *et al.*, 2009). Most significantly, the journal served as a vital vehicle for fostering reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and maintaining research motivation and resilience (Farrah, 2012). Figure 11 below provides an example from one of the three reflective journals completed across this study.

Figure 7

Sample Extract from Reflective Journal 1



#### 4.9 Data Analysis

The previous section 4.8 outlined the various research tools employed during the course of the study. Given the broad range of data accumulated from both phases of collection, it was clear that data analysis for this study needed to be adequately responsive to this mixed methods data set. This section provides an overview of the theoretical approach to data analysis developed through the lens of a sequential explanatory design.

##### 4.9.1 A Mixed Methods Approach with an SED lens

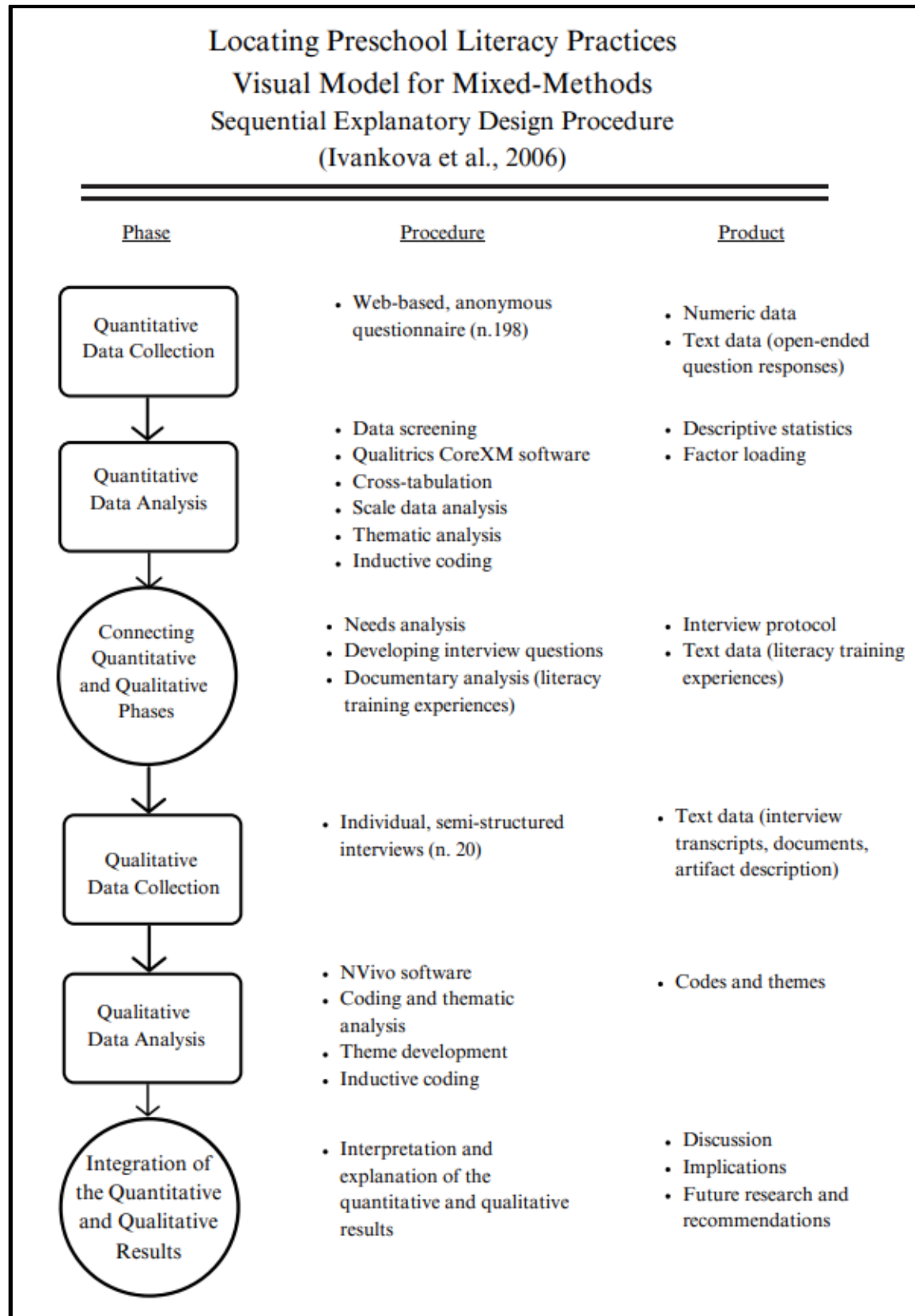
By definition, mixed methods is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and “mixing” or integrating both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Creswell 2005). The rationale for mixing both kinds

of data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation. When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each (Green, Caracelli, and Graham 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994; Green and Caracelli 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998).

According to Creswell (2022) we can connect the two databases so that they remain distinct but are related where one builds on the other. Through this study with a sequential explanatory design, it was intended that the researcher could further explain the quantitative results with qualitative data by using the procedure of connecting the two databases and using the results of the quantitative data to inform both the questions and the selection of participants for the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2022, p.98). For this study, the SED lens suitably illuminates the integration position of this mixed methods process, where the quantitative and qualitative data intersect (Creswell, 2022). It was anticipated that mixing of methods would yield a higher quality of inferences (Ivankova *et al.*, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and the potential for meta inferences to emerge from the study. Creswell (2022) explains that meta inference insight mines the databases in greater depth adding multiple perspectives from extensive data.

**Figure 12**

*Visual Model for Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design Procedure Adapted from the work of Ivankova et al., 2006. (Fiorentini, 2025)*



#### ***4.9.2 Phase 1: Data Roundup and Categorisation of Data***

The Data Roundup stage involves a systematic approach to gathering, organising and analysing data to gain meaningful insights and a “deep acquaintance” with the data (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The data collected in Phase 1 was organised using QualtricsXM software, which facilitated ease of access and the efficient, streamlined visualisation of results through statistics and factor loading. Statistical software, such as Qualtrics, enables descriptive and inferential analyses, which assisted in identifying patterns and relationships within the questionnaire response data. The questionnaire data were initially categorised into three main categories (i) experience, qualifications and training, (ii) preschool early literacy practice, (iii) book use and reading aloud. Broadly, the data collected and categorised from Phase 1 addresses research questions one and two and offered valuable material for reflection in support of the design and refinement of interview protocol for Phase 2.

As outlined in section 4.8.3, small-scale documentary analysis was a feature of Phase 1. Documentary analysis acted as a complementary data collection procedure to the questionnaire as it offered additional information on educators’ experiences of early literacy training. Ten undergraduate degree programmes in early childhood education were analysed. Course information and module descriptors were studied. An overview of how data were categorised for analysis is presented in table 7 below.

**Table 7***Categorisation of Documentary Data*

| <b>Document selected</b>                                                                                                | <b>Data analysed</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Course information on undergraduate Early Childhood Education degree programmes (Module descriptors & course overviews) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presence of independent / stand-alone early literacy modules</li><li>• Presence of literacy as an embedded element across other modules</li><li>• Whether the institution also offers undergraduate courses in primary school teaching</li></ul> |

#### **4.9.3 Phase 2: Data Roundup and Categorisation of Data**

The data generated in Phase 2 were organised and analysed using the NVivo software, which facilitated the distribution of codes electronically (QSR International, 2013). Auld *et al.*, (2007) recommend NVivo for analysis of data as it can “enhance the qualitative research process, quickly process queries and expand analytical avenues” (p.37). The categorisation process using NVivo featured a four-step process of coding, sorting, connecting and theorising. Description-focused coding was employed as this illustrates when data can directly address the research questions (Adu, 2019). Codes were initially categorised into clusters under each research question. In order to assign codes clusters to relevant research questions, labels were assigned to each cluster and anchor codes were designed for each research question. In the case that significant information exists that cannot be categorised with a research question, then a new code is created (Adu, 2019). An example of this process is illustrated in table 8 below.

**Table 8**

*Cluster Codes Assigned to Research Questions*

| <b>Research question</b>          | <b>RQ1</b> | <b>RQ2</b> | <b>RQ3</b>       | <b>RQ4</b> | <b>Other</b> |
|-----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------------|------------|--------------|
| <b><i>Cluster anchor code</i></b> | Priorities | Read aloud | Informs practice | Challenges | Aistear      |

A table was generated for each of the interview types – educator, manager and CPD provider.

All cluster tables can be found in the appendices.

#### **4.9.4 Data Analysis Methodology**

Thematic analysis proved the most relevant and pragmatic approach to the data analysis required for this study. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis was applied, enabling a “rigorous and systematic coding process, before starting to explore, develop, review and refine themes, and finally producing a written analytic report” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 34). The six phases offered appeal to an early career researcher, like myself, as they offer a flexibility to what may often be a “progressive but recursive process” (p. 36). The phases are: (1) Familiarising yourself with the data, (2) Coding, (3) Generating initial themes, (4) Developing and reviewing themes, (5) Refining, defining and naming themes, and (6) Writing Up. A visual reference can be found in Appendix X. The thematic approach to data analysis provided a straightforward method towards addressing the research questions and enabled the clearest synthesis of the findings.

**4.9.4.1 Analytic Process.** The six phase reflexive thematic analysis was utilised to explore patterns across all three datasets (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2013, 2022). While each phase offers distinct processes, the reflexive nature of the process enabled repeated visits and review of various phases for deeper inquiry and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Terry, *et al.*, 2017).

### ***(1) Familiarisation***

As this is a study on a topic of significant interest and passion of mine, it was important that although much of the data resonated with my own beliefs, that I became familiar with the dataset as a whole. This involved multiple close readings and re-readings of all data and notetaking of analytic ideas and insights which arose.

### ***(2) Coding***

Each component of the dataset was coded systematically and thoroughly. This involved significant sorting of data through a rigorous process of coding, sorting, connecting and theorising (Adu, 2019). Coding moved between inductive and deductive modes during the coding process. Inductive coding was employed initially to explore possibilities and patterns emerging from the data. This facilitated an organic development of codes from each passage of transcript based on the patterns that were evident (Jansen & Rautenbach, 2024). Deductive coding then ensured that general theories the researcher held about the data could be tested against existing data, knowledge and literature. The deductive coding process meant that the researcher approached the data with some predefined codes and themes that then were applied to data as relevant passages or words were identified (Jansen & Rautenbach, 2024). Coding initially produced approximately 100 codes however many were similar, connected, and offered micro differences. Clustering assisted with reducing codes to create broad patterns of meaning connected to: practice, priorities, reading aloud, challenges, and other. Dominant codes were established, and all further codes were categorised into clusters.

### ***(3) Generating Initial Themes***

This stage presented the opportunity to begin refining the identified patterns of meaning across the dataset. Tables were created to create containers for each research

question and clusters were carefully mapped to relevant research questions. Clusters were labelled based on content within them, which enabled the basis for solid theme development. This was an extremely active and iterative process which developed rapidly and required significant collation of coded data. Labels included: informs practice, priorities, read aloud, challenges and Aistear.

#### ***(4) Developing and reviewing themes***

This involved revisiting research questions and reflecting on the viability of overall analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Significant efforts of “situated analytic practice” (p.128) were made to ensure that: (i) themes made sense, and (ii) highlighted the most important patterns across the dataset. This phase also required a crucial element of “letting things go” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.234); when a significant dataset has been generated, holding on to everything collected feels important, until the process of dissemination begins to appear never-ending.

#### ***(5) Refining, defining and naming themes***

This involved examining each theme closely and reflecting on the story behind each theme. Writing a synopsis for each was a beneficial journal task and provided an opportunity to ‘flesh’ the themes out on paper. Table 9, below, provides a visual outline of the overarching themes and sub-themes generated throughout the refining, defining and naming process.

**Table 9***Outline of Overarching Themes and Sub-Themes*

| <b>Research question</b> | <b>RQ1</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>RQ2</b>                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>RQ3</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>RQ4</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Overarching theme        | Priorities for preschool literacy provision                                                                                                                                                                                                     | The read aloud (RA) in preschool literacy provision                                                                                                                           | Informing preschool literacy provision                                                                                                                                                                            | Challenges in preschool literacy provision                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Sub-themes               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language -related priorities</li> <li>• Print - related priorities</li> <li>• Book-related priorities</li> <li>• Differing priorities between managers &amp; educators</li> <li>• Resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of RA</li> <li>• Facilitation of RA</li> <li>• Disconnect of RA from early literacy</li> <li>• RA text choice</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligning PS literacy provision to curricula &amp; curriculum frameworks</li> <li>• Preschool literacy programmes</li> <li>• Educator knowledge &amp; training</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources &amp; materials</li> <li>• Sector-wide issues</li> <li>• Professional learning</li> <li>• Preschool Literacy Support Services</li> <li>• Literacy leadership</li> </ul> |

**(6) Writing up**

Although writing featured across all of the phases, this phase featured finalised writing of analysis leading into findings. It helped to write about everything; to reflect on everything of interest and then begin the process of prioritising what was of most importance to reinforcing the research at hand.

**4.9.5 Validity**

The issues of validity within mixed methods research are complex (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2014). According to the fundamental principle of mixed research, to enable validity, mixed research should combine quantitative and qualitative methods, approaches and concepts that have complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses (Brewer &

Hunter, 1989; Johnson & Turner, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2014). Sequential design in mixed methods offers opportunities for researchers to consider sequential legitimation. Researchers must be conscious of whether meta-inferences are arising simply due to the effect of the sequencing itself. In this study, the use of phasing in each round of data collection and analysis challenge such potential for validity weakness; with cycle 1 and cycle 2 within each of the two phases ensuring that data collection and analysis can oscillate multiple times (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2014; Sandelowski, 2003).

Once again, the reflexive nature of a sequential design mixed methods study such as this helps ensure the credibility, trustworthiness and dependability of the process. Reflexivity ensures that researchers are consistently conscious of biases and assumptions, particularly when analysing qualitative data, which can be challenge when researcher subjectivity is concerned, particularly when considering educational research such as an exploration of existing preschool literacy practice and provision. Rees *et al.*, (2020) state that qualitative data analysis depends on subjectivity but that the reflexivity ensures that researchers meaningfully account for how subjectivity shapes their investigations. Olmos-Vega *et al.*, (2022) maintain that while researcher subjective perspective is important to qualitative study neglecting reflexivity can “negatively impact the knowledge built via qualitative research and those connected to it” (p.241).The audit trail facilitated through consistent journaling provides a transparent overview of the honest “messiness” of decision making, generating data (Finlay, 2002; Olmos-Vega, 2022, p.241).

Collecting data from multiple sources (questionnaire, interviews and documentary) facilitated cross-verification of findings and themes. Utilisation of several data collection methods and sources enables researchers to corroborate information from multiple angles, “enhancing the credibility of the interpretations and reducing the impact of potential biases from a single method or data source” (Khalid Ahmed, 2024).

#### **4.10 Limitations of the Study**

As to be expected with any methods of data collection, limitations exist within this research study.

##### ***4.10.1 Sample size***

Ultimately, this is a relatively small-scale research study; a sample of 198 survey responses and 20 interview responses may not be wholly reflective of all early literacy practices in Irish preschool settings. Future research in this area should include theoretical sampling from a wider population of preschool educators, managers and CPD providers from more counties and contexts in Ireland. Future studies with a larger sample would also allow for representation from a greater number of preschool settings.

##### ***4.10.2 Questionnaire participants***

While the initial anticipated quota of questionnaire responses was surpassed and a rich array of data were acquired, researchers must be conscious of the limitations associated with online questionnaires. Sample bias is always a concern. Not all practicing preschool educators will have had the option to complete the survey, which may skew results towards a particular demographic of educator. Additionally, in an era of significant communication overload, recipients can ignore or avoid online communications. This was also a lengthy questionnaire and answer fatigue can be an issue for respondents with the quality and effort in answers reducing the further they progress through questions. The lack of personal interaction associated with online questionnaires may limit the depth of responses and the ability to clarify questions or terminology for participants. Additionally, the analysis is based entirely on self-report and participants may actually be doing more (or less) than articulated in their responses to the questionnaire and interview probes. Future research should include observations or other data collection methods to corroborate findings. Finally, participants self-selected to complete

the questionnaire, which may have resulted in a specific subgroup comprising those who were particularly interested in preschool literacy.

#### ***4.10.3 Remote Interviews***

Although it was initially intended that interviews would take place in a face-to-face capacity, remote interviews were necessary due (a) the researcher's need to isolate due to the continued prevalence of SARS COVID 19 and (b) distance to rural interview participants. Online interviews, while convenient and cost-effective, pose several limitations. Although each interview was more than satisfactory, online interviews can lack the richness of face-to-face interaction and non-verbal cues, and body language proves much harder to read or even witness. Some technical difficulties arose due to internet connections and software challenges, which at times interrupted the flow of conversation and affected time management. Additionally, some interviews for educators took place in the workplace, which may not have been conducive to participating in an online interview about their practice. Participants may have feared being overheard by colleagues, management or visitors, and may not have answered questions as freely as they may have hoped. Additionally, participants volunteered to partake in the interviews, which may have resulted in a specific subgroup comprising those who were particularly interested in preschool literacy.

#### ***4.10.4 Documentary Analysis***

The documents analysed on the various ECE degree programmes, were the materials that were available at a set point in time. Module descriptors and course overviews may not have been wholly reflective of exact details and specifics of each individual module on course as updates may happen prior to documents being updated online.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study. The philosophical underpinnings were explored followed by an examination of relevant paradigms. The ontology and epistemology of this pragmatic study were described followed by insights into the application of Dewey's Five Step Model for the purpose of framing the formulation of the research process. An examination of Pragmatism and its application to literacy research was presented. Section 4.3 outlines the research methodology in detail with reference to mixed methods and the sequential explanatory design approach adopted. Details were shared on mixed methods and a PPCT approach. Research positionality was outlined in section 4.5 followed by detail on the research context and participants. Ethical considerations were addressed in section 4.7 followed by an overview of the research tools in section 4.8. Section 4.9 presented details on data analysis including the categorisation of data, the thematic analysis process and validity. Lastly, the limitations of the study were addressed in section 4.10.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Data Analysis and Findings: Phase 1**

This chapter outlines an analysis and findings from data collected across Phase 1 of the study. It was intended that Phase 1 of data collected would provide an opportunity to delve beyond the literature underpinning the research questions, providing the researcher with an opportunity to explore the thoughts and perceptions of practicing early childhood educators surrounding current literacy practices in Irish preschool settings, whilst ascertaining an insight into the patterns of existing priorities for preschool literacy practices. It was also intended that Phase 1 might provide an opportunity for the researcher to learn about existing accommodations for, and value of, the read aloud as an early literacy priority in the preschool years.

Having discussed the design and administration of the questionnaire and interviews in the previous chapter, the findings in relation to the knowledge, perceptions and practice of early childhood educators and early literacy learning are presented here.

Both quantitative and qualitative data are used concurrently to address the following research questions:

1. What are the existing priorities of preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. How are ‘read alouds’ currently utilised in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?
4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

The findings are discussed under several broad headings reflecting these research questions and other significant elements that have emerged from the process of data reduction

and analysis. To support reader navigation through the significant wealth of data presented across this chapter, the broad themes addressed in this chapter are outlined in Table X with an overview of subthemes and a brief description of each. This assists in categorising the data analysed. Within this table the key emerging findings connected to each theme are briefly outlined.

**Table 10**

*Themes, Subthemes and Findings concerned with Phase 1 Analysis*

| <b>Main Theme</b>                                | <b>Subtheme</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>Finding</b>                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Experience, Qualifications, Educational Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Literacy Training</li> <li>• Continuous Professional Development</li> <li>• Early Literacy Knowledge</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   | <p>How Early Literacy featured in pre-service training experiences (if at all)</p> <p>Whether participant(s) have engaged in CPC connected to preschool early literacy provision</p> <p>How participant considers their level of pedagogical knowledge and competences on early literacy development and early literacy practice</p>                                                                                                                                                         | <p>Variety in Early Literacy Training Experiences</p> <p>Educator Knowledge on Early Literacy Development</p>                                    |
| Preschool Early Literacy Practices               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing Early Literacy Practices and Priorities</li> <li>• Existing Early Literacy Provision and Programmes</li> </ul>                                                                                                                 | <p>Patterns in existing preschool literacy practices and the priorities of educators / within settings.</p> <p>Patterns in existing early literacy provision and use of early literacy programmes in preschool literacy provision</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <p>Early Literacy Practice</p> <p>Varying Perceptions of Early Literacy</p> <p>Continuous Professional Development and Professional Learning</p> |
| Book Use and Reading Aloud                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive Read Aloud</li> <li>• Sourcing Texts</li> <li>• Reading Aloud and Early Literacy Skills</li> <li>• Child Agency and Autonomy during Read Alouds</li> <li>• Read Aloud Resources</li> <li>• Read Aloud Challenges</li> </ul> | <p>Evidence of existing interactive read aloud practice and its place / value.</p> <p>How / where educators sources texts to read aloud</p> <p>Reading aloud and connection to early literacy skill development concerning existing practice.</p> <p>Considerations for child agency / autonomy during existing preschool read alouds.</p> <p>Resources utilised to support preschool read aloud experiences.</p> <p>Challenges educators face in facilitation of preschool read alouds.</p> | <p>The Existing Place of Read Alouds in Preschool</p>                                                                                            |

## 5.2 Experience, Qualifications and Educational Training

To begin, some demographic data have been presented, to understand representativeness of the sample in terms of qualifications and years of service in the Irish early childhood education sector. Following this, data on engagement with professional development have been presented. Efforts were made to compare data to uncover statistical significances across educator experience, qualifications and the target matters investigated connected to early literacy provision across the preschool years. Descriptive statistics are provided across each of the themes and sub-themes adhered to in this chapter. This chapter concludes with an analysis of emerging findings, which scaffolded the design of Phase 2 of data collection (interviews). Participants shared insights into their highest levels of qualification to date. Reflective of the current practice patterns across early childhood education in Ireland, a wide variety of qualifications were identified across participants (Eurydice, 2023). At the stage of survey, all participants were practicing ECE educators, and out of the 168 participants who answered this question:

- 13 participants (8%) were currently ECE students studying for a level 8 honours degree
- 4 participants (2%) had a Level 5 Certificate
- 21 participants (13%) had a Level 6 Higher Certificate
- 22 participants (13%) had a Level 7 Ordinary bachelor's degree
- 68 participants (40%) had a Level 8 Honours bachelor's degree
- 34 participants (20 %) had a Level 9 master's degree.
- 6 participants (4%) have a Level 10 Doctoral Degree.
- 36% of participants surveyed are currently working with a level 7 Ordinary bachelor's degree or less.

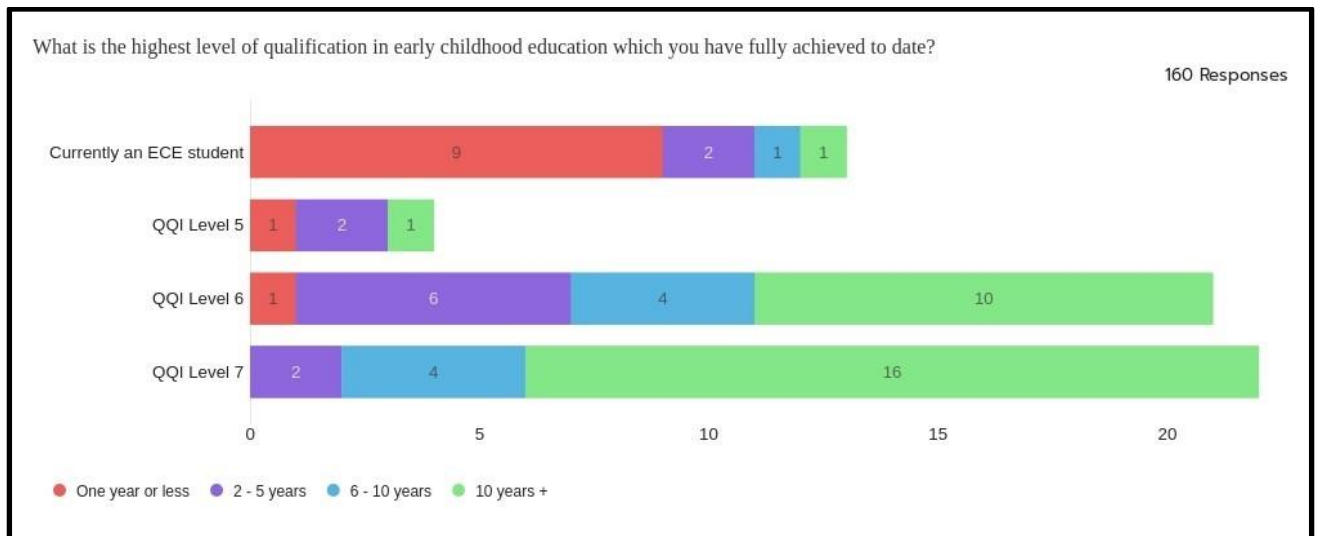
The variety in qualifications of survey participants is reflective of existing and longstanding trends across the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland which is well known for an “extremely diverse range of qualifications amongst practitioners” which has had a lasting impact on “a coherent system for CPD” and reflective of the limited incentives for practitioners to undertake higher education qualifications (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020, p.19). To gain a deeper insight into data surrounding qualifications, the variety in qualifications was explored across the range of years of experience. Out of the 160 participants who chose to answer the question outlining their length of experience working in preschool settings, at the time of survey, the majority of participants (71) indicated that they had been working for 10 years or longer. Additionally:

- 34 participants indicated that they had been working for 6 - 10 years
- 37 participants indicated that they had been working for 2 - 5 years
- The majority of participants working for 2 – 5 years were listed as having a level 8 qualification.
- 18 participants had been working for just one year or less

The majority of participants working one year or less were listed as still being an ECE student, which runs in line with patterns across the preschool system, where many employed educators are completing their qualifications as they work (Murphy, 2015). A further breakdown of statistics on experience compared to qualifications is outlined in the stacked charts, below. Across the analysis qualification varieties are broken into two groups; Group 1 pertains to ECE students and QQI’s Level 5, 6 and 7, while Group 2 pertains to QQI’s Level 8, 9 and 10.

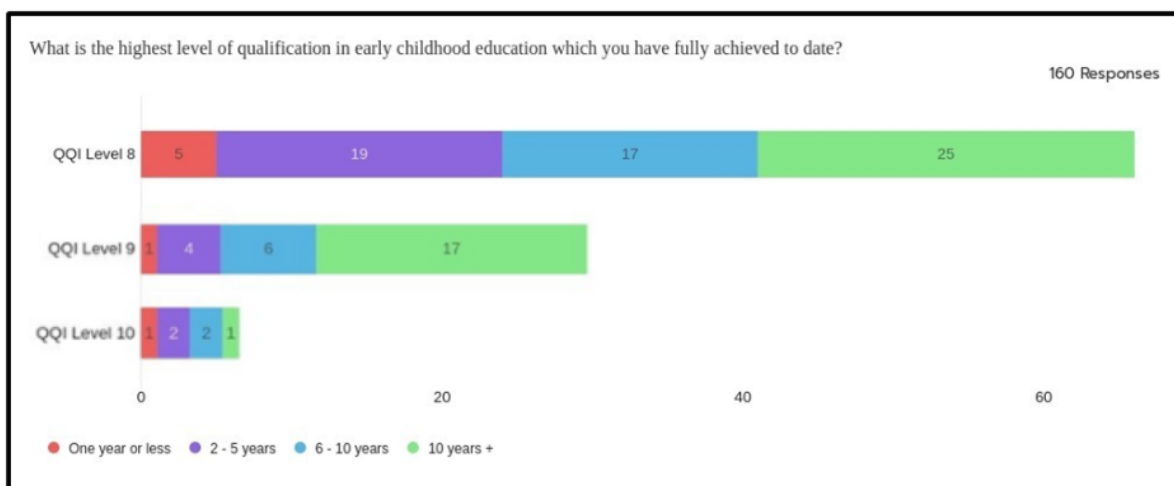
**Figure 13**

*Experience and Qualifications of Questionnaire Respondents - Group 1*



**Figure 14**

*Experience and Qualifications of Questionnaire Respondents - Group 2*



### 5.2.1 Early Literacy Training

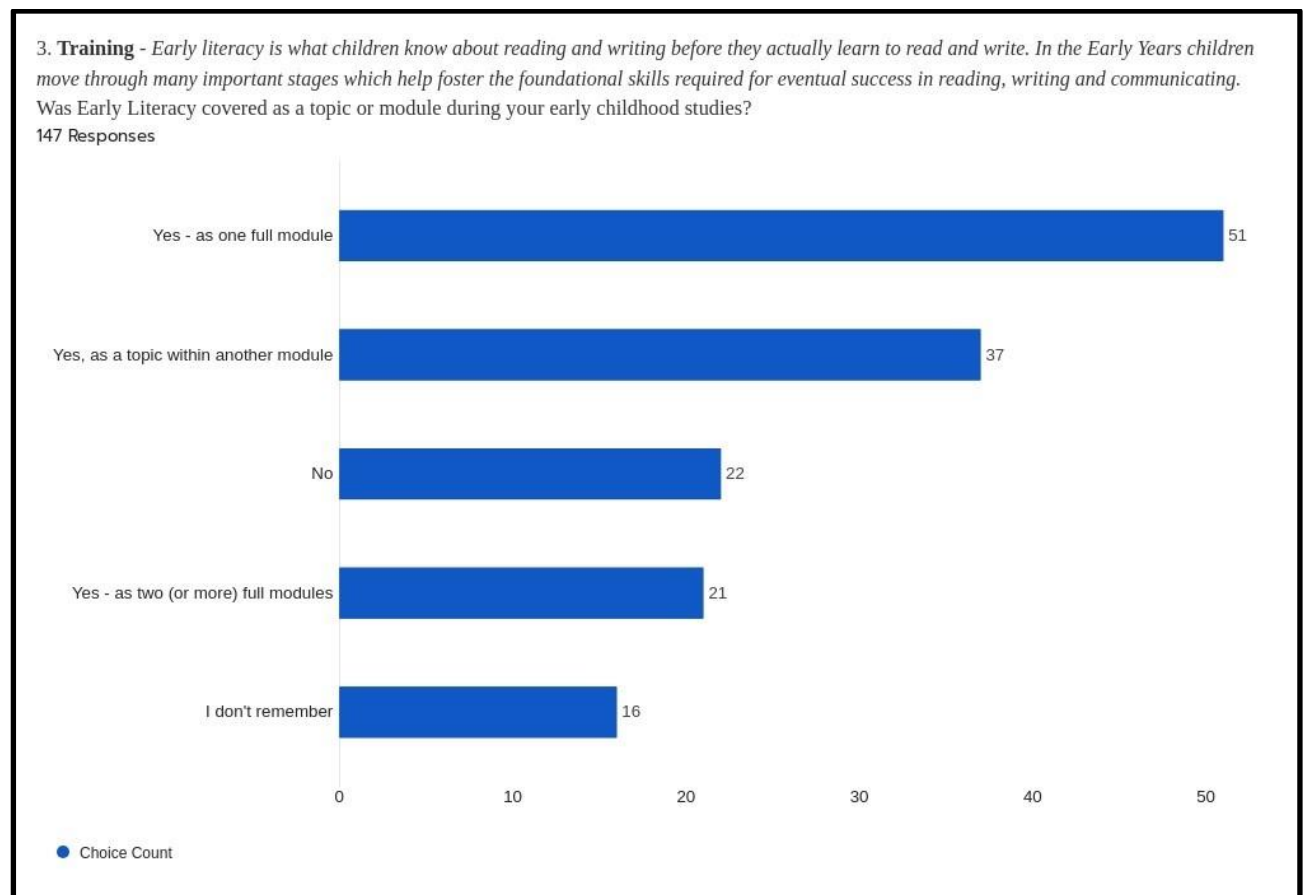
Participants were asked about their recollections on training in early literacy during their qualification journeys. 147 participants engaged with this question and as expected, responses were varied with 51 participants (35%) indicating “**Yes**”, Early Literacy was covered “**as one full module**”. Furthermore:

- 21 participants (14%) indicated that Early Literacy was covered across at least two or more full modules.
- 37 participants (25%) indicated that Early Literacy was embedded as a topic within another module.
- 22 participants (15%) indicated that they did not engage in an Early Literacy module

An additional 16 participants (11%) indicated that they did not remember engaging in an Early Literacy module across their early childhood education studies which raises questions about the place and prevalence of early literacy as part of early childhood education degree programmes and relevant modules. As highlighted in the literature review, one of the most significant factors influencing literacy provision in the preschool context is preschool educators’ beliefs about young children’s reading and writing development (McMullen *et al.*, 2006; Mills and Clyde, 1991).

**Figure 15**

**Early Literacy Training during Qualifications**



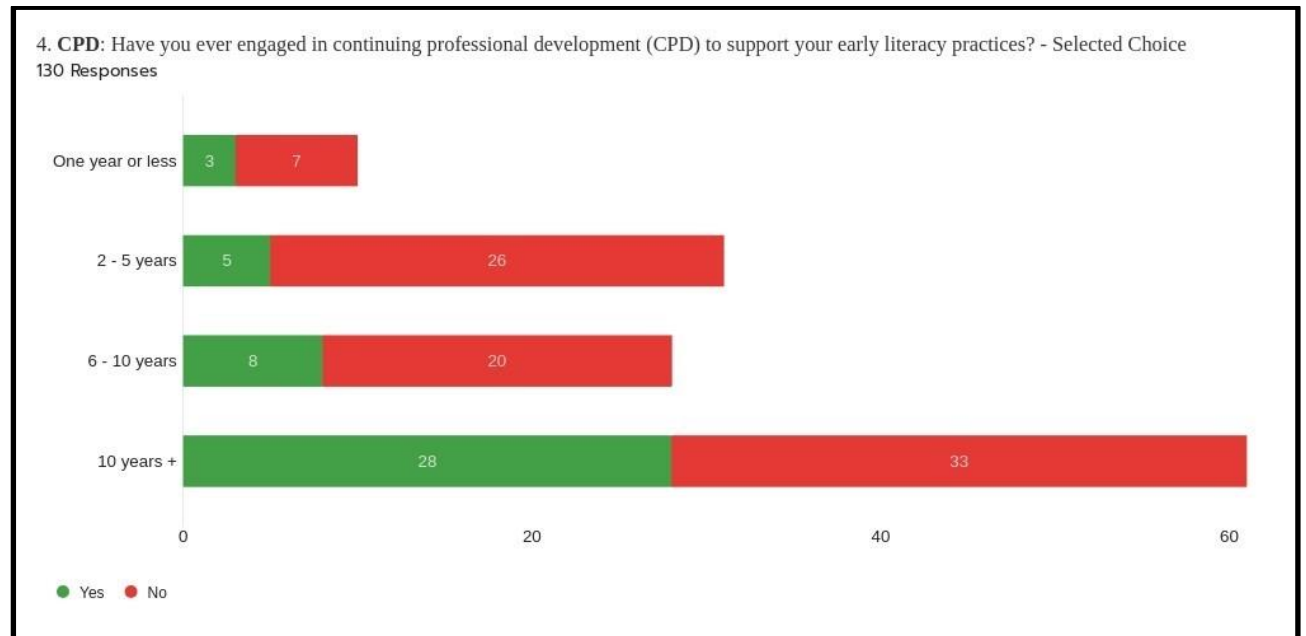
### 5.2.2 Continuous Professional Development

Engagement with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is encouraged across the years of service of an early childhood educator (Daly, *et al.*, 2014; Murphy, 2015). Participants were invited to share insights into the CPD engaged with pertaining to Early Literacy. Across the 130 responses, answers were varied, with 44 participants indicating **Yes**, they have engaged with Early Literacy CPD and 86 indicating **No**, they have not. The researcher sought to compare these answers to the years of experience connected to each participant. For example, out of the 61 participants with 10 years or more experience, 33 indicated **Yes**, that they have engaged with CPD connected to Early Literacy, while an additional 28 indicated, **No**, that they have not.

Further details can be found in the graph below in line with the relevant years of experience of the respondents.

**Figure 86**

*Engagement with CPD to Support Preschool Early Literacy Practices*



To elicit a deeper insight into the breakdown of results across experience and CPD engagement, the researcher then compared CPD engagement to qualification levels. The majority of participants who answered this question were participants with a QQI Level 8 qualification, with 17 indicating **Yes**, they have engaged with Early Literacy CPD and 34 indicating **No**. A visual overview of said results is provided in Table 11.

**Table 11**

*Qualifications Compared with Literacy CPD Engagement*

| CPD & Qualifications                                                                                                 |                         | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                                                                                                      |                         | Total                                                                                                                              | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| 4. CPD: Have you ever engaged in continuing professional development (CPD) to support your early literacy practices? | Total Count (Answering) | 129.0                                                                                                                              | 10.0        | 3.0         | 21.0        | 21.0        | 50.0        | 23.0        | 1.0          |
|                                                                                                                      | Yes                     | 43.0                                                                                                                               | 1.0         | 0.0         | 6.0         | 7.0         | 17.0        | 12.0        | 0.0          |
|                                                                                                                      |                         | 33.3%                                                                                                                              | 10.0%       | 0.0%        | 28.6%       | 33.3%       | 34.0%       | 52.2%       | 0.0%         |
|                                                                                                                      | No                      | 86.0                                                                                                                               | 9.0         | 3.0         | 16.0        | 12.0        | 34.0        | 11.0        | 1.0          |
|                                                                                                                      |                         | 66.7%                                                                                                                              | 90.0%       | 100.0%      | 76.2%       | 57.1%       | 68.0%       | 47.8%       | 100.0%       |

Participants who answered **Yes** to having engaged in Early Literacy CPD opportunities were invited to provide additional detail on the format of said CPD. While a variety of formats were listed, the most common were webinars and short courses. A full breakdown of examples provided can be found in Table 12 below.

**Table 12**

*CPD Format and Engagement Numbers*

| Field<br>CPD Format                             | Count<br>Number of participants who have engaged in such models of CPD |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Webinars                                        | 17                                                                     |
| Short courses                                   | 16                                                                     |
| Free downloadable resources                     | 8                                                                      |
| Own research                                    | 7                                                                      |
| Self-guided reading / books                     | 5                                                                      |
| Events organised by County Childcare Committees | 4                                                                      |
| In-house training                               | 3                                                                      |

41 responses

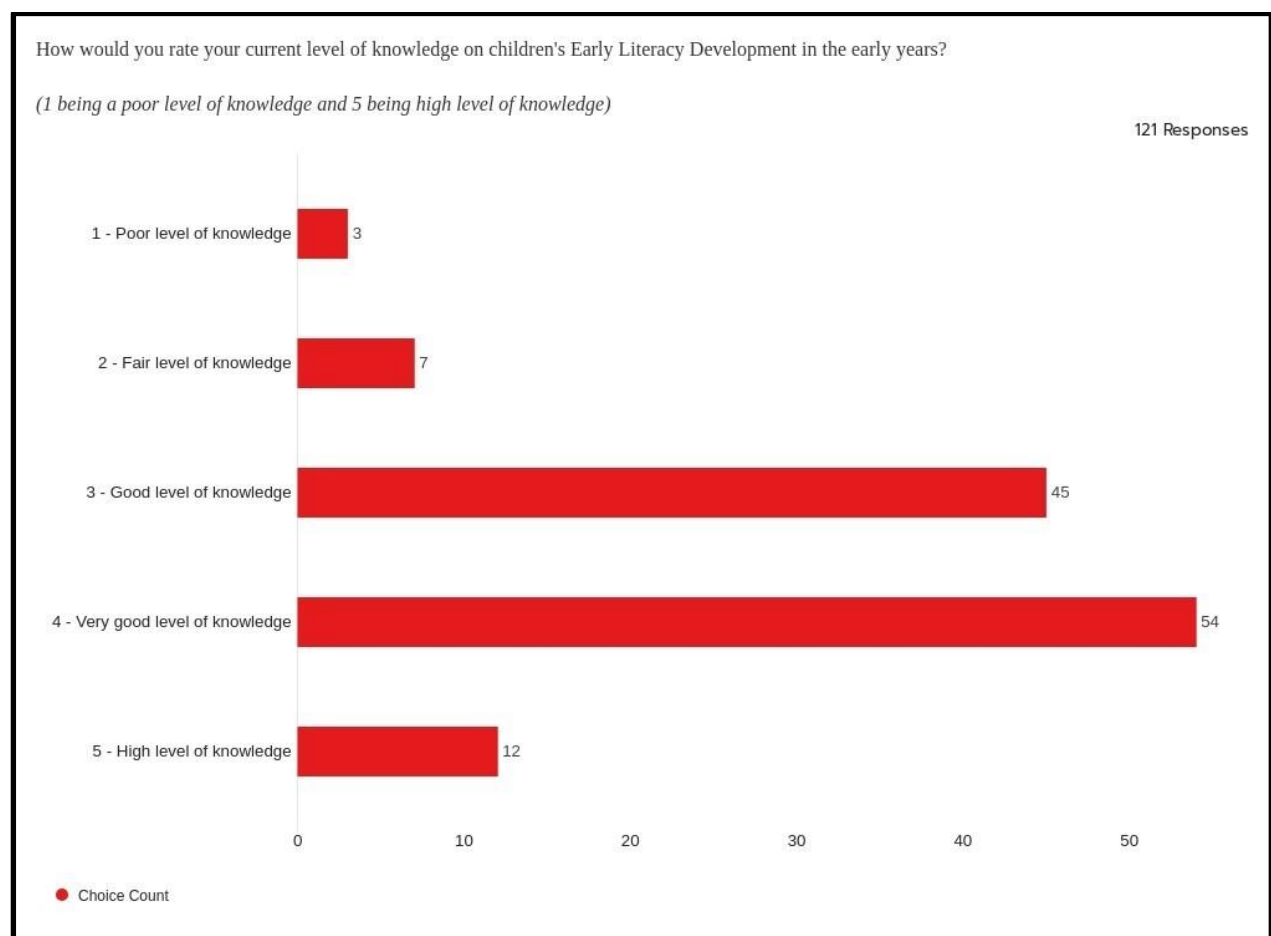
### 5.2.3 Early Literacy Knowledge

Participants were asked to rate their current level of knowledge on children's early Literacy development in the early years, 1 being a poor level of knowledge and 5 being a high level of knowledge. Across the 121 responses, 12 educators (10%) indicated that they felt they had a high level of knowledge on children's early literacy development (ELD). In comparison:

- 3 respondents rated their knowledge of ELD as 1 (2%)
- 7 respondents rated their knowledge of ELD as 2 (6%)
- 45 respondents rated their knowledge of ELD as 3 (37%)
- 54 respondents rated their knowledge of ELD as 4 (45%)

**Figure 97**

*Respondents' Self-Rated Knowledge of Early Literacy Development*



To explore this in more detail and uncover potential opportunities for statistical significance across the levels of qualifications, these figures on knowledge of early literacy development were compared to the varying QQI levels across the respondents as outlined in Table 13 (Group 1) and Table 14 (Group 2).

**Table 13**

*Self-Rated Early Literacy Knowledge and Educator Qualification Levels – Group 1*

| ELD Knowledge & Qualifications                                                                                                                                                                                    |                | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                | Total                                                                                                                              | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 |
| 5. Knowledge: How would you rate your current level of knowledge on children's Early Literacy Development in the early years?<br><br><i>1 being a poor level of knowledge and 5 being high level of knowledge</i> | Total Count    | 51.0                                                                                                                               | 8.0         | 3.0         | 20.0        | 20.0        |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 1              | 1.0                                                                                                                                | 0.0         | 1.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 2              | 3.0                                                                                                                                | 0.0         | 0.0         | 1.0         | 2.0         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 3              | 28.0                                                                                                                               | 5.0         | 2.0         | 13.0        | 8.0         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 4              | 15.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 5.0         | 8.0         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 5              | 4.0                                                                                                                                | 1.0         | 0.0         | 1.0         | 2.0         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Average rating | 3.4                                                                                                                                | 3.5         | 2.3         | 3.3         | 3.5         |

**Table 14**

*Self-Rated Early Literacy Knowledge and Educator Qualification Levels – Group 2*

| ELD Knowledge & Qualifications<br><br>(Group 2)                                                                                                                                                                   |                | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                | Total                                                                                                                              | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| 5. Knowledge: How would you rate your current level of knowledge on children's Early Literacy Development in the early years?<br><br><i>1 being a poor level of knowledge and 5 being high level of knowledge</i> | Total Count    | 68.0                                                                                                                               | 45.0        | 22.0        | 1.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 1              | 2.0                                                                                                                                | 0.0         | 1.0         | 1.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 2              | 4.0                                                                                                                                | 2.0         | 2.0         | 0.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 3              | 16.0                                                                                                                               | 10.0        | 6.0         | 0.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 4              | 38.0                                                                                                                               | 28.0        | 10.0        | 0.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 5              | 8.0                                                                                                                                | 5.0         | 3.0         | 0.0          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Average rating | 3.7                                                                                                                                | 3.8         | 3.5         | 1.0          |

#### **5.2.4 Experience, Qualifications and Early Literacy Training: Summary Response**

This section provided an overview of the findings and statistics collected on preschool educators' experience, qualifications and experiences of early literacy in their training journeys. Evident were a broad variety of qualifications across respondents, mirroring patterns across the ECCE sector in Ireland currently. Significant differences existed between the early literacy training experiences of educators throughout their qualification journeys varying from one module to none across their various years of training. In terms of CPD opportunities in early literacy, most participants indicated that this is not something that they have availed of. Gaps in early literacy provision across educator training and a reluctance to engage in early literacy CPD options, will only naturally impact the level of knowledge and competence possessed on early literacy learning and development. Coldwell *et al.*, (2018) stress the importance of the responsibility of staying informed and abreast of developments in practice – with the ever-evolving nature of literacy research, CPD is central to this. Despite the variance in training experiences, educators' self-rated knowledge on early literacy remained positive with the majority rating their knowledge as good or very good. Those who were most likely to rate their literacy knowledge as such were educators possessing a Level 8 Honours bachelor's degree. The data analysed in this section demonstrates a need to examine early literacy training experiences and professional learning opportunities more thoroughly in Phase Two of the study.

#### **5.3 Preschool Early Literacy Practices**

To further elicit detail on preschool literacy practices, respondents were invited to share insights into their existing early literacy practices, priorities, and provision.

### 5.3.1 Existing Early Literacy Priorities and Practices

Survey participants were presented with an open-ended question: “*What (if any) do you feel should be the priorities for preschool literacy practices?*”. 76 respondents engaged with this question, sharing a variety of responses, indicating some commonalities across a wide range of activities and experiences. Key words were drawn, collated and categorised from the responses and a breakdown of their occurrences are outlined in Table 15.

**Table 15**

*Educators' Self-Outlined Preschool Early Literacy Priorities*

| 76 responses          | Field:<br>Priority                | Count:<br>No. of participants who named this as a priority |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Oral Language related | Language and interactions         | 22                                                         |
|                       | Nursery Rhymes                    | 15                                                         |
|                       | Vocabulary Development            | 10                                                         |
|                       | Songs / Song singing              | 9                                                          |
|                       | Phonological Awareness            | 6                                                          |
| Reading related       | Stories / Reading to children     | 34                                                         |
|                       | Creating a print-rich environment | 12                                                         |
|                       | Alphabet / Letter Work            | 8                                                          |
| Writing related       | Mark making                       | 11                                                         |
|                       | Engaging with literacy materials  | 5                                                          |
|                       | Handwriting skills                | 5                                                          |
| Other                 | Play                              | 7                                                          |
|                       | Fine Motor Skill Development      | 5                                                          |
|                       | Gross Motor Skill Development     | 3                                                          |
|                       | Liaising with parents             | 2                                                          |

Participants were invited to choose from a list of early literacy practices to indicate existing literacy practices in place in their preschools. A broad list of practices was provided, including informal and more constrained, conventional literacy activities, presented in no particular order. Results were collated in line with years of experience of practitioners to uncover any potential statistical significance pertaining to particular practices. For the

purpose of analysis, practices have been organised into four categories; oral language related, reading related, writing related and other. How the 106 respondents who engaged with this question responded is outlined in Table 16 below.

**Table 166**

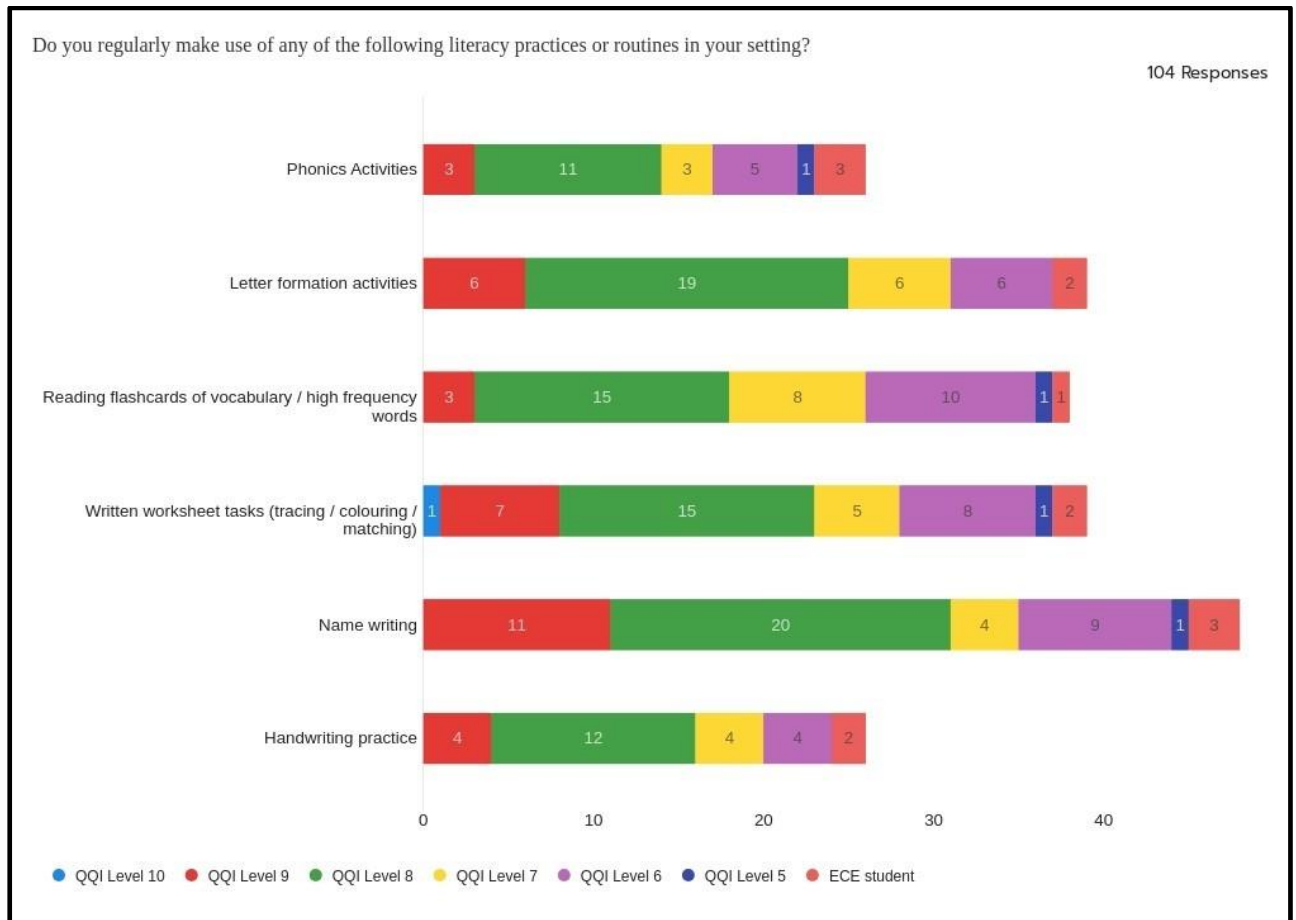
*Existing Early Literacy Practices*

| Existing Practices & Experience                                                                                                                                          |                       | 2. Experience: How many years' experience do you have working in preschool settings? |                  |           |            |          |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|------------|----------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Total                                                                                | One year or less | 2 - 5 yrs | 6 - 10 yrs | 10 yrs + |      |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       |                                                                                      |                  |           |            |          |      |
| Do you regularly make use of any of the following literacy practices or routines in your setting?<br><br>Please tick as many as are applicable to you. - Selected Choice |                       | Total Count                                                                          | 161.0            | 18.0      | 38.0       | 34.0     | 71.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          | Oral Language related | Song singing                                                                         | 99.0             | 6.0       | 20.0       | 19.0     | 54.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Reciting Nursery Rhymes                                                              | 95.0             | 6.0       | 20.0       | 18.0     | 51.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Daily news - discussed orally                                                        | 75.0             | 4.0       | 18.0       | 13.0     | 40.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Listening games                                                                      | 71.0             | 4.0       | 10.0       | 13.0     | 44.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Discussions before / after free play sessions                                        | 59.0             | 3.0       | 10.0       | 8.0      | 38.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Playing oral language games                                                          | 74.0             | 5.0       | 14.0       | 12.0     | 43.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Circle time                                                                          | 90.0             | 6.0       | 21.0       | 16.0     | 47.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Learning and reciting poetry                                                         | 48.0             | 4.0       | 4.0        | 8.0      | 32.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Learning and reciting tongue twisters                                                | 30.0             | 1.0       | 1.0        | 5.0      | 23.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Phonological Awareness Activities                                                    | 42.0             | 2.0       | 8.0        | 8.0      | 24.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          | Reading related       | Letter formation activities                                                          | 40.0             | 2.0       | 9.0        | 7.0      | 22.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Phonics Activities                                                                   | 26.0             | 1.0       | 5.0        | 4.0      | 16.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Reading flashcards of vocabulary / high frequency words                              | 38.0             | 2.0       | 7.0        | 8.0      | 21.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Audio books / listening stations                                                     | 29.0             | 1.0       | 3.0        | 6.0      | 19.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Storybook reading (Read alouds')                                                     | 98.0             | 6.0       | 22.0       | 19.0     | 51.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          | Writing related       | Written worksheet tasks (tracing / colouring / matching)                             | 39.0             | 4.0       | 9.0        | 9.0      | 17.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Daily news - written with and displayed for the children                             | 20.0             | 1.0       | 4.0        | 2.0      | 13.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Handwriting practice                                                                 | 26.0             | 2.0       | 3.0        | 2.0      | 19.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Name writing                                                                         | 48.0             | 3.0       | 9.0        | 7.0      | 29.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          | Other                 | Free play with access to reading / mark making materials                             | 90.0             | 6.0       | 18.0       | 14.0     | 52.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Board games / dice games                                                             | 58.0             | 2.0       | 8.0        | 11.0     | 37.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                          |                       | Learning Journeys                                                                    | 58.0             | 0.0       | 9.0        | 10.0     | 39.0 |

Following this question, an open-ended text box was provided for respondents to add examples of ‘other’ early literacy practices they may engage with regularly if necessary. Only seven respondents chose to engage with this additional option and inputs were: reciting prayers, visiting the local library, pretend play, access to books, a print rich environment, name writing, use of speaking objects. To explore the possibilities of statistical significance across the listed literacy practices, these figures were compared to educator qualification levels. Results were mixed with most activities featuring across the practice of most respondents. The highest number of responses were from participants holding a QQI Level 8 (38 participants). Responses were extremely mixed, with many of the informal activities being selected along with many of the conventional or formal literacy practices too. Only two respondents holding a QQI Level 5 engaged with this question. The researcher also noted that only 1 participant holding a QQI Level 10 qualification engaged with this question offering no statistical significance or impact on results indicated that written worksheet tasks were the only literacy activity prioritised in their practice. To explore this further, the results were categorised into preschool and primary related practices. Despite common prevalence in ECE literacy practice many preschool literacy practices demonstrate a premature formality, with formal or conventional practices more commonly associated with primary school being the norm (Moss, 2007). Figures for such examples of primary school literacy practices are outlined in Figure 18 and have been compared alongside educator QQI levels.

**Figure 18**

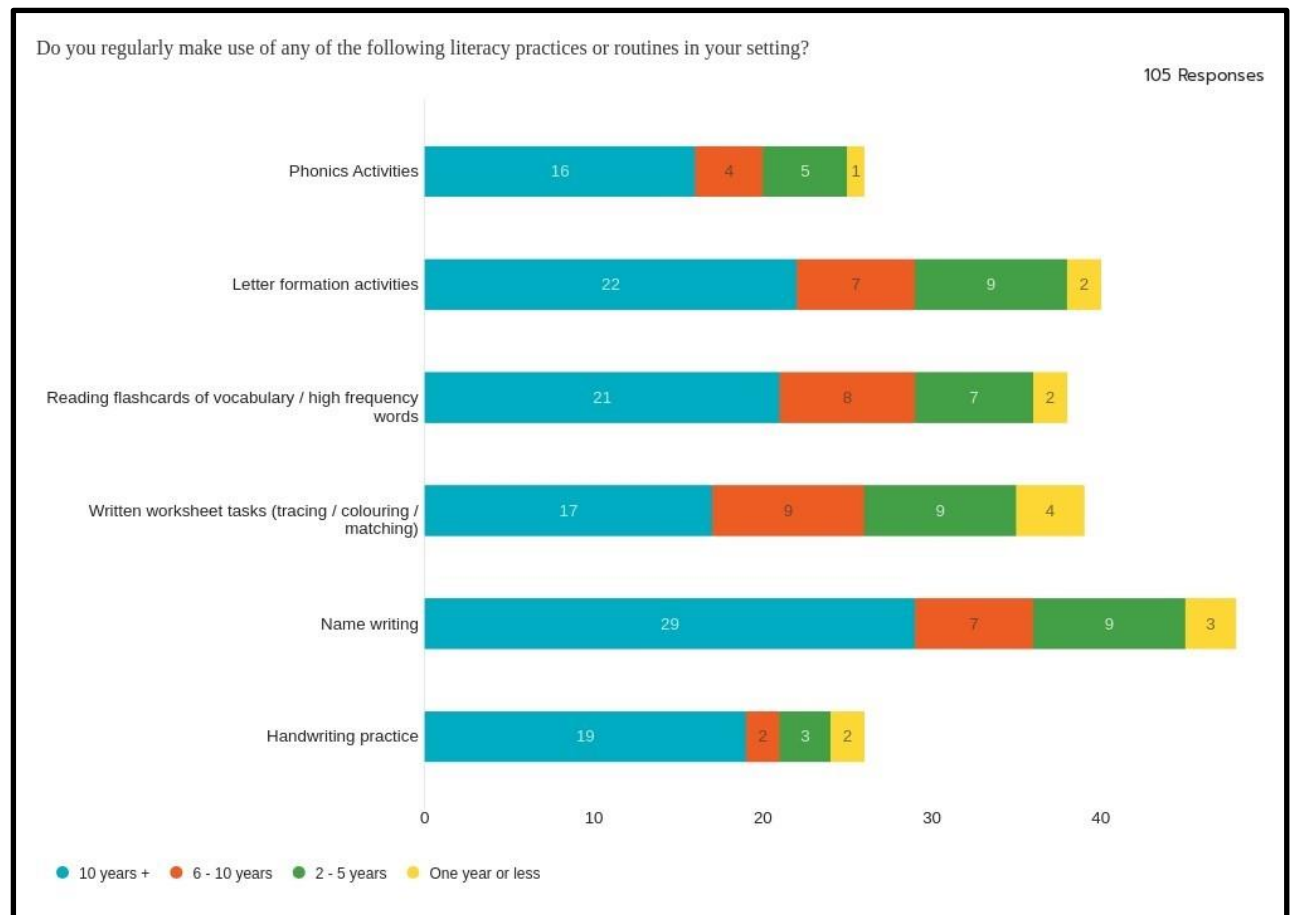
*Existing Preschool Literacy Practices and Educator Qualifications: Formal Literacy Practices (i.e. those more commonly associated with or more suited to Primary School and conventional literacy learning).*



Due to the variability in responses the researcher also took the opportunity to compare existing literacy practices to years of educator experience with participants with 10+ years' experience being the group most likely to engage with formal or 'schoolified' (Bennet, 2006; Moss 2007) literacy practices. Newer understandings of a less formalised approach to early literacy may be an issue for those in situ a long time without recent engagement in CPD or professional learning on early literacy.

**Figure 19**

*Existing Preschool Literacy Practices and Educator Experience: Formal literacy (i.e. more suited to Primary School and conventional literacy learning).*

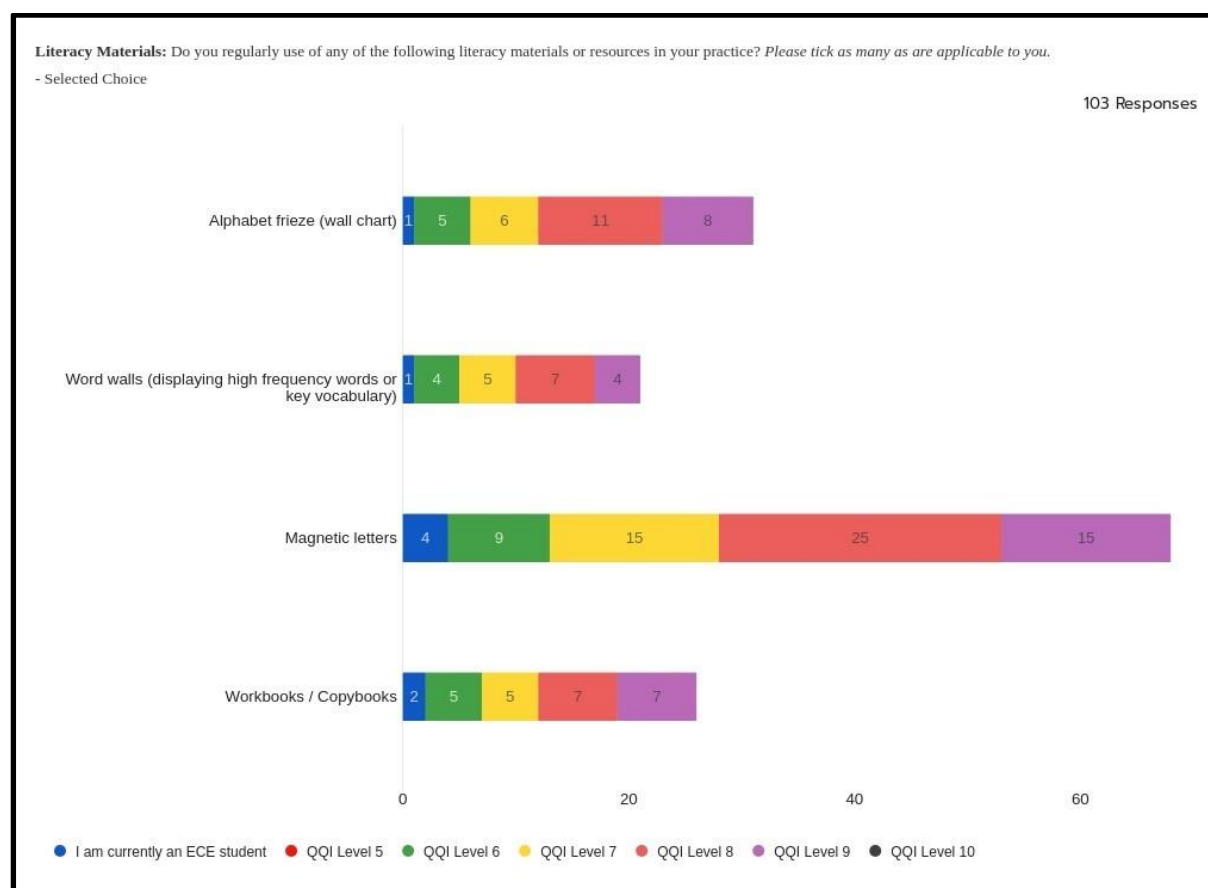


**5.3.1.1 Use of Early Literacy Materials.** Whilst exploring educator early literacy priorities, the researcher felt that gaining an insight into materials or resources regularly used would be beneficial, as some materials may be considered more associated with formal / conventional or even school-based literacy practices rather than suited to preschool. Respondents were provided with a list of 15 materials, organised in no particular order, and were invited to indicate as many as were applicable to their regular literacy practice. For a deeper insight into the statistical significance of these selected choices, results were again compared with educator qualification levels. Again, it should be noted that out of 103 respondents, only one

held a QQI Level 10 and listed just one literacy material, Story Sacks. Again, the researcher explored the results in terms of informal early literacy materials and what would be considered primary school related resources. The number of participants who utilise more formal or conventional literacy resources are detailed in Figure 18 below, with the preponderance leaning towards those with a QQI Level 8 or 9 qualification.

**Figure 20**

*Examples of 'Formal' Literacy Materials and Qualification Levels*



### 5.3.2 Existing Preschool Early Literacy Provision and Programmes

In Ireland, preschool provision occurs across two years. This provision is funded under the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) entitling all children in Ireland to two years of free preschool provision (3 hours per day, 5 days per week during the school

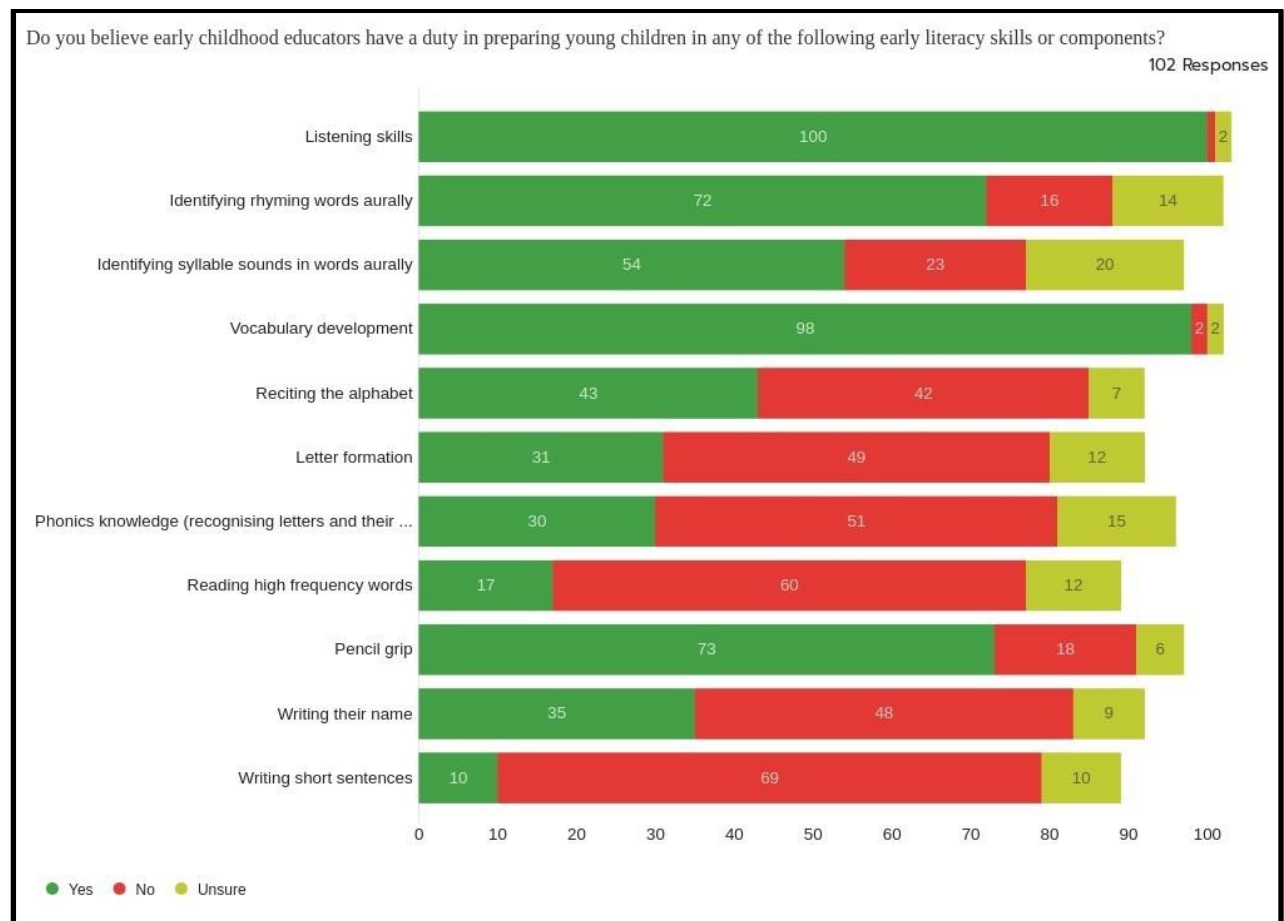
year) from the ages of 2 years and 8 months until 5 years and 6 months(DCEDIY, 2019).

Despite the establishment of the programme in 2010, there are no set guidelines or expectations on educators in support of the development or nurture of children's early literacy learning across the rules for the programme (DCEDIY, 2022). As part of the data collection process, the researcher endeavoured to uncover insights into literacy provision across year one and year two of ECCE.

**5.3.2.1 Educator perceptions of their duties in supporting young children's literacy skill development.** Participants were invited to consider their beliefs on educator duty in preparing young children for particular literacy skills. Again, a mixed variety of skills and components were provided with 11 practices ranging again from informal, emergent literacy skills to more formal, conventional literacy skills or components. Details of responses are outlined throughout Figure 19 below.

**Figure 21**

*Respondents' Beliefs on Educator Duty in Preparing Young Children in Literacy Skills and/or Components.*



There was a majority in agreement surrounding phonological (sound-based) and oral language skill development, such as listening skills, rhyme awareness and vocabulary development. However, with the more code related skills, there existed less certainty with many of the results being more split. For example, for letter formation, 31 participants indicated **Yes**, that ECE educators do have a duty to prepare preschool-aged children in these skills. 12 participants indicated that they were **Unsure** and a further 49 indicated **No**. Similarly, 35 participants indicated **Yes**, that ECE educators have a duty to foster name writing skills and 9 indicated that they were **Unsure**. On the other hand, 48 participants indicated **No**, that this is not a duty of ECE educators. Data from respondent's beliefs on educator duties surrounding literacy skill development was explored in greater depth by

comparing these again to educator qualification levels. Insights into a selection of conventional or what are often perceived as more formal or conventional literacy practices relevant to primary education are provided in pivot tables portrayed in Tables 7 to 13 below. Some contradictions are evident across the results, for example, when comparing reciting the alphabet, letter formation, name writing and phonics knowledge, particularly as each of these skills are underpinned by an awareness of print and its functions.

**Table 177**

*Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Reciting the Alphabet.*

| Educator Duties       |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|-----------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----|
|                       |             | Total ECE student                                                                                                                  | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |     |
| Reciting the alphabet | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0         | 6.0 |
|                       |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|                       | Yes         | 43.0                                                                                                                               | 5.0         | 1.0         | 12.0        | 4.0         | 16.0        | 5.0          | 0.0 |
|                       | No          | 42.0                                                                                                                               | 1.0         | 1.0         | 5.0         | 10.0        | 15.0        | 10.0         | 0.0 |
|                       | Unsure      | 7.0                                                                                                                                | 1.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         | 2.0         | 2.0         | 2.0          | 0.0 |

**Table 18**

*Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Developing their Pencil Grip.*

| Educator duties |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----|
|                 |             | Total ECE student                                                                                                                  | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |     |
| Pencil grip     | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0         | 6.0 |
|                 |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|                 | Yes         | 72.0                                                                                                                               | 3.0         | 1.0         | 15.0        | 16.0        | 26.0        | 11.0         | 0.0 |
|                 | No          | 18.0                                                                                                                               | 1.0         | 0.0         | 2.0         | 3.0         | 8.0         | 4.0          | 0.0 |
|                 | Unsure      | 6.0                                                                                                                                | 2.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         | 2.0         | 2.0          | 0.0 |

**Table 18***Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Teaching Letter Formation.*

| Educator duties  |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                  |             | Total                                                                                                                             | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| Letter formation | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                             | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0        | 6.0          |
|                  |             |                                                                                                                                   |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|                  | Yes         | 31.0                                                                                                                              | 3.0         | 0.0         | 8.0         | 5.0         | 10.0        | 5.0         | 0.0          |
|                  | No          | 49.0                                                                                                                              | 2.0         | 1.0         | 6.0         | 10.0        | 19.0        | 11.0        | 0.0          |
|                  | Unsure      | 12.0                                                                                                                              | 2.0         | 0.0         | 3.0         | 2.0         | 4.0         | 1.0         | 0.0          |

**Table 20***Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Teaching Name Writing.*

| Educator duties |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                 |             | Total                                                                                                                              | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| Name Writing    | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0        | 6.0          |
|                 |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|                 | Yes         | 35.0                                                                                                                               | 3.0         | 1.0         | 8.0         | 3.0         | 12.0        | 8.0         | 0.0          |
|                 | No          | 48.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 9.0         | 11.0        | 19.0        | 7.0         | 0.0          |
|                 | Unsure      | 9.0                                                                                                                                | 2.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         | 3.0         | 2.0         | 2.0         | 0.0          |

**Table 21**

*Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Developing Phonics Knowledge (letter-sound correspondences)*

| Educator duties   |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|-------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                   |             | Total                                                                                                                              | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| Phonics knowledge | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0        | 6.0          |
|                   |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|                   | Yes         | 30.0                                                                                                                               | 3.0         | 0.0         | 7.0         | 5.0         | 12.0        | 3.0         | 0.0          |
|                   | No          | 51.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 1.0         | 8.0         | 11.0        | 18.0        | 11.0        | 0.0          |
|                   | Unsure      | 15.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 3.0         | 2.0         | 4.0         | 4.0         | 0.0          |

**Table 192**

*Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by Teaching High Frequency Word Reading*

| Educator duties              |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                              |             | Total                                                                                                                              | ECE student | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |
| Reading high frequency words | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0        | 6.0          |
|                              |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |             |              |
|                              | Yes         | 17.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 5.0         | 2.0         | 5.0         | 3.0         | 0.0          |
|                              | No          | 60.0                                                                                                                               | 3.0         | 1.0         | 11.0        | 10.0        | 24.0        | 11.0        | 0.0          |
|                              | Unsure      | 12.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 1.0         | 4.0         | 2.0         | 3.0         | 0.0          |

**Table 203**

*Preparing Young Children for Literacy Learning by practicing writing short sentences.*

| Educator duties         |             | 1. Qualifications: What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education, which you have fully achieved to date? |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|-------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----|
|                         |             | Total ECE student                                                                                                                  | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6 | QQI Level 7 | QQI Level 8 | QQI Level 9 | QQI Level 10 |     |
| Writing short sentences | Total Count | 168.0                                                                                                                              | 13.0        | 4.0         | 21.0        | 22.0        | 68.0        | 34.0         | 6.0 |
|                         |             |                                                                                                                                    |             |             |             |             |             |              |     |
|                         | Yes         | 10.0                                                                                                                               | 2.0         | 0.0         | 3.0         | 1.0         | 3.0         | 1.0          | 0.0 |
|                         | No          | 69.0                                                                                                                               | 4.0         | 1.0         | 14.0        | 12.0        | 27.0        | 11.0         | 0.0 |
|                         | Unsure      | 10.0                                                                                                                               | 1.0         | 0.0         | 0.0         | 2.0         | 3.0         | 4.0          | 0.0 |

**5.3.2.2 Early literacy programmes and resources.** Through an open-ended question, “*Are there particular early literacy programmes or resources you use to support planning and preparation for early literacy learning experiences in your setting?*”, participants were invited to share the names of literacy programmes or resources they utilise to support their early literacy practices. 25 respondents engaged with this question, sharing a variety of responses, indicating some commonalities across a range of programmes and resources. Key words and named commercial programmes and resources were drawn and collated from the responses and a breakdown of their occurrences can be found in Table 24 below. Programmes and resources that are designed for or more commonly associated with primary education are highlighted and marked with an asterisk.

**Table 24***Literacy Programmes and Resources Used by Questionnaire Respondents.*

| <b>Field</b>                                                      | <b>Count</b>               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Programmes / Literacy Resources</i>                            | <i>No. of participants</i> |
| Jolly Phonics*                                                    | 5                          |
| Learning to Write and Loving It (Preschool to Kindergarten), USA* | 1                          |
| Heggerty, USA*                                                    | 1                          |
| Alpha to Omega*                                                   | 1                          |
| Sound Around*                                                     | 1                          |
| Starfall*                                                         | 1                          |
| Montessori Curriculum                                             | 5                          |
| Twinkl                                                            | 2                          |
| Aistear-Síolta Support Materials                                  | 1                          |
| Just Phonics (3-5)                                                | 1                          |
| Early Talk Boost (HSE)                                            | 1                          |
| Babbling Babies                                                   | 1                          |
| The Measured Mom's Resources                                      | 1                          |
| The Play-Based Podcast by Kristen Peterson                        | 1                          |
| Phonetic resources recommended by Speech & Language therapist     | 1                          |
|                                                                   | 25 responses               |

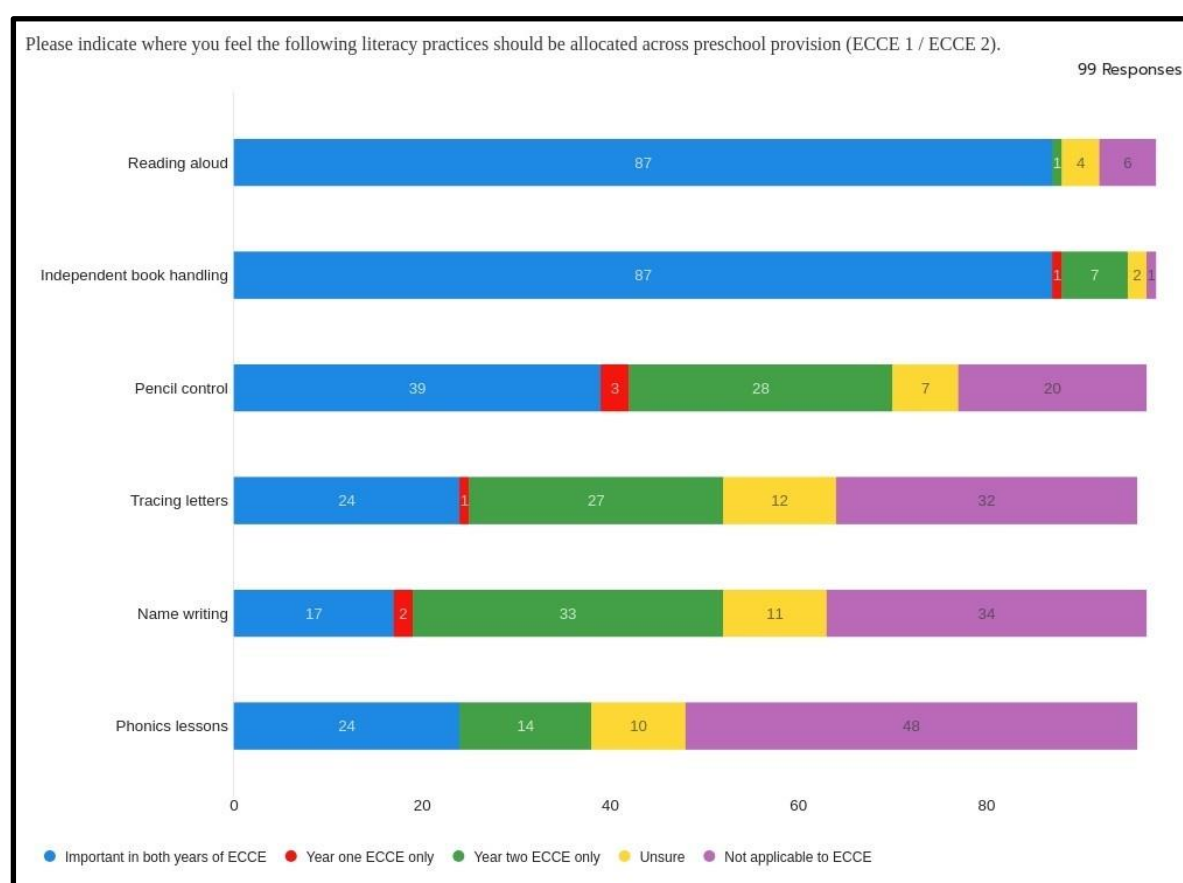
\*Asterisk indicates programmes designed for primary literacy education.

**5.3.2.3 Early Literacy Practices and ECCE Provision.** Participants were provided with an opportunity to share where they felt particular literacy practices ‘belonged’ in terms of the two years of preschool ECCE provision. Services participating in the Irish ECCE scheme are expected to provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme adhering to the principles of Síolta and Aistear yet specifics on the skills or elements of early literacy pertaining to each of the two free preschool years are not

provided to educators. A variety of common early literacy practices were listed, and participants had options to indicate whether they felt such practices were relevant to both years of ECCE, year one only, year two only. Participants also had the option to indicate whether they were unsure or whether they felt the practices were not applicable to ECCE at all. Patterns were similar to those of previous questions on literacy practices and educator duties with the more formalised routines of pencil control, tracing letters, name writing and phonics drawing more splits in figures. The full breakdown of results is outlined in Figure 22 below.

**Figure 102**

*Respondents' Beliefs on Allocation of Literacy Skills across the ECCE Years.*



**5.3.2.4 Early Literacy Practices and School Transition.** The preschool years are more than a preparation period for the transition to primary school (O’Kane, 2016),

yet significant narratives exist surrounding the necessity of preparing young children for school, particularly in the second year of ECCE. The researcher sought to learn about existing literacy practices adopted in Irish preschools to support school transitions. Participants were asked if there are early literacy practices used to support children in ECCE in preparation for their transition to primary school. 57 respondents engaged with this question with 40 indicating, **Yes**, and 17 indicating **No**. To explore these responses further, participants who indicated **Yes**, were invited to list examples of these practices. 39 respondents engaged with this open-ended question, sharing a variety of literacy practices. Some commonalities existing across the responses, including repetitions of programmes and practices listed in earlier questions. Key words and categories were drawn and collated from the responses and a breakdown of their occurrences can be found in Table 25 below.

**Table 25**

*Literacy Activities Utilised to Support Children in Preparing for their Transition from Preschool to Primary School.*

| Field                                                                          |                                                | Count                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <i>Literacy activities to support Transition from<br/>Preschool to Primary</i> |                                                | <i>No. of participants (out of 39)</i> |
| Oral Language related                                                          | Social stories / Story books                   | 15                                     |
|                                                                                | Nursery Rhymes                                 | 2                                      |
|                                                                                | Word games                                     | 1                                      |
|                                                                                | Listening games                                | 1                                      |
| Reading related                                                                | Phonics                                        | 8                                      |
|                                                                                | Introducing sight words (High frequency words) | 1                                      |
|                                                                                | Mark making                                    | 5                                      |
| Writing related                                                                | Worksheets                                     | 2                                      |
|                                                                                | Fine motor skill development                   | 6                                      |
|                                                                                | Pencil grip / control                          | 5                                      |

|       |                           |              |
|-------|---------------------------|--------------|
|       | Name writing              | 12           |
|       | Tracing                   | 1            |
| Other | <i>Mo Scéal</i> templates | 2            |
|       |                           | 39 responses |

### 5.3.3 *Preschool Early Literacy Practices: Summary Response*

This section provided an overview of the data collected and analysed on preschool early literacy practices. This included an examination of existing early literacy priorities and practices across the preschools of the respondents which demonstrated significant variety across responses. Many examples of the literacy practices cited were more suited to the primary school, highlighting educator priorities which could be considered prematurely formal or schoolified. Detail was provided on the use of early literacy materials and the place of early literacy programmes within existing preschool literacy provision. Again, variety prevailed with 15 different literacy programmes, resources or supports outlined, demonstrating potential gaps in consistency of early literacy learning experiences from setting to setting. Perceptions of the duties of preschool educators were explored in consideration of their role in supporting the preschool child as an early literacy learner. Again, perceptions were varied with a mix of responses spanning from more informal priorities to more structured, formalised routines such as phonics instruction and alphabetic knowledge. Notable were patterns in the selection of ‘Unsure’ as an answer when considering some of the more formalised literacy practice indicating uncertainties in the early literacy provision necessary in the preschool years. Patterns across responses indicated that many preschool early literacy routines continue to be associated with preparation for the transition to primary school as demonstrated through a broad list of oral language, reading and writing

routines. The data across section 5.5 demonstrated a need to explore intentionality of early literacy learning experiences in greater detail across Phase Two of the study.

## **5.4 Book Use and Reading Aloud**

The final section of data collected across the questionnaire related to book use and reading aloud in the preschool years. General information was firstly gathered on book use and access. Book spaces or libraries existed in all settings with 94 out of 99 respondents indicating that the children are free to access the book / library space independently during the preschool day. All participants indicated that they believe reading aloud to children in preschool is important.

### **5.4.1 Reading Aloud**

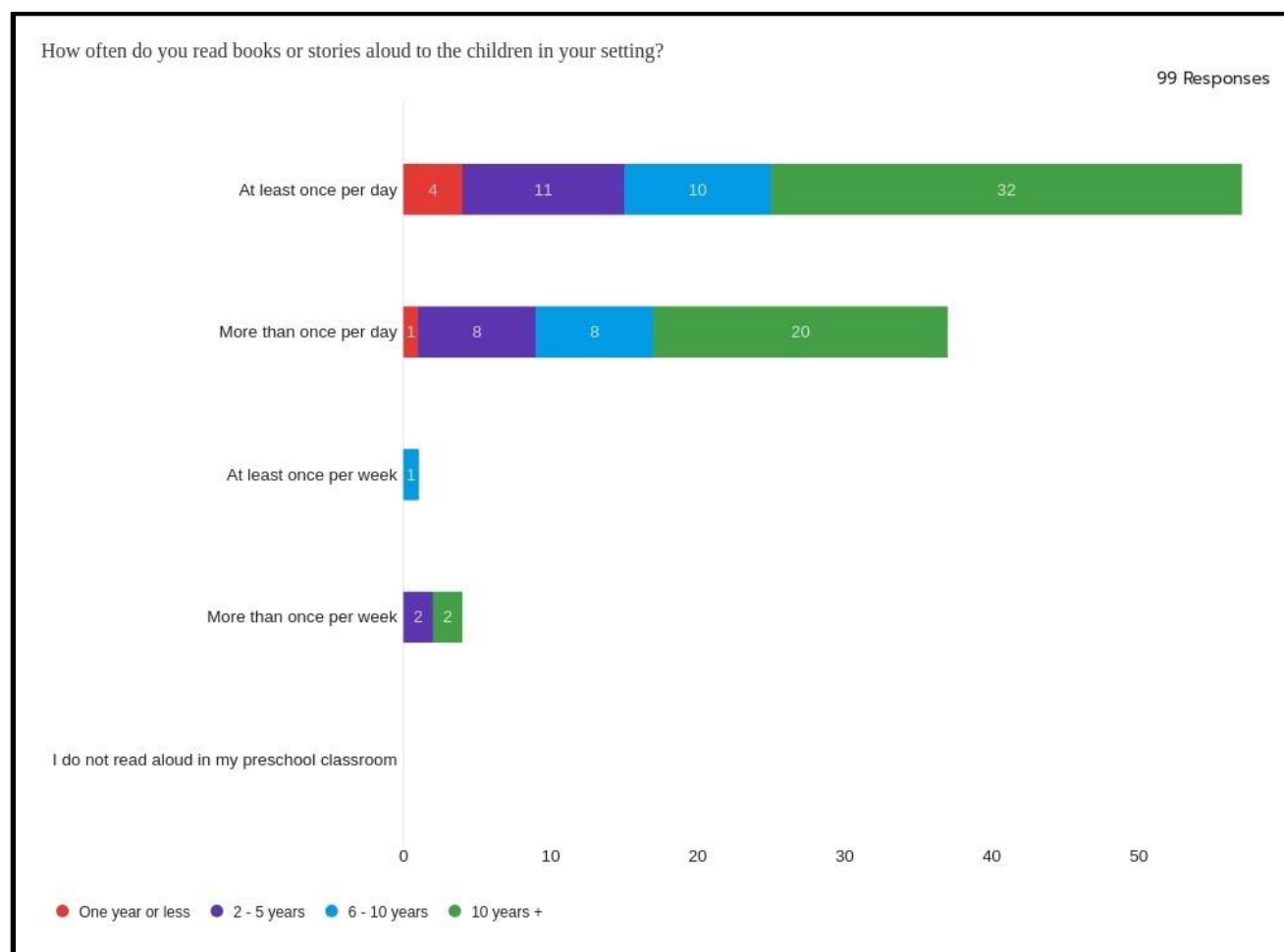
Participants were asked to declare how often books or stories are read aloud to children in their preschool settings. Out of the 99 participants who engaged with this question:

- 58 indicated that they read aloud at least once per day (58%)
- 37 indicated that they read aloud more than once per day (37%)
- 4 indicated that they read aloud more than once per week (4%)
- 1 indicated that they read aloud at least once per week (1%)

For deeper analysis and to uncover any potential statistical significance, these responses were compared to qualification levels. Similar to previous patterns, participants with 10+ years experience are shown to be more likely to facilitate daily read alouds' or facilitate read alouds' more than once per day.

**Figure 23**

*Read Aloud Frequency for Preschool Educators*



When asked about child voice and choice in stories or books read aloud, 86 participants indicated that **Yes** the children have a choice in texts read aloud. 12 indicated that **Sometimes** the children have a choice in texts read aloud. Only 1 participant indicated that **No** the children do not have a choice.

All participants indicated that they enjoyed reading aloud to young children with 75 choosing to elaborate on why they enjoy reading aloud to young children. Responses were rich and varied, with most relating to learning, love of literature, imagination, building relationships, relaxation, interactions and child engagement. The term literacy featured just once across the entire 75 responses. Developing language skills was mentioned three times

with vocabulary mentioned just once indicating a potential disconnect between reading aloud and early literacy development.

**5.4.1.1 Interactive Read Alouds.** The researcher wished to learn about the format or type of read alouds' facilitated in preschools. During effective read alouds', adults read and interact with children before, during and after reading (Fiorentini & Magennis, 2023). Children are active participants as the text is read (Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004). The adult asks children questions and draws the children's attention to what may be happening within illustrations; how they might be feeling about events in the story and their thoughts during the reading experience.

Participants were asked about how often they engage in such instances of interactive read alouds (IRA). Out of 97 responses:

- 59 respondents indicated that they facilitate IRA at least once per day (61%).
- 28 respondents indicated that they facilitate IRA multiple times per day (29%)
- 7 respondents indicated that they facilitate IRA not every day but a few times per week (7%)
- 2 respondents indicated that they facilitate IRA once per week (2%)
- 1 respondent indicated that they rarely facilitate IRA (1%)

**5.4.1.2 Sourcing Texts to Read Aloud.** Participants were asked about where the books they choose to read aloud are sourced and were invited to tick as many listed options as were applicable to them. Across the 98 responses:

- 73 respondents indicated that they read the texts already in the learning environment.
- 50 respondents indicated that they source texts from the local library.

- 66 respondents indicated that they source texts from their own personal collection.
- 57 respondents indicated that the children bring their own books from home to be read aloud.

An additional 16 respondents indicated that they had other sources for their read aloud texts. These included a wide variety of sources, details of which can be found in Table 26 below.

**Table 26**

*Other Sources of Texts to Read Aloud in Preschools.*

|                                                                                |                                                                                 |                                                                                   |                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Made-up stories                                                                | Dolly Parton's Library                                                          | I sometimes purchase my own.                                                      | We invite the local librarian in to read to us.                                        |
| We visit the local library once a week.                                        | The children write their own stories and we record them alongside the children. | We work with Little Voices and they supply us with lots of great books and props. | Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, Foras na Gaeilge & Tuismitheorí na Gaeilge              |
| Each month we change our books. Some children bring books in from the library. | Donations from parents                                                          | St Vincent de Paul                                                                | Children can bring in books from home.                                                 |
| Charity shops                                                                  | Book shops                                                                      | Second hand shops                                                                 | We have a library of 1700 books in our service, catalogued by theme, author and title. |

**5.4.1.3 Reading Aloud and Early Literacy Skills.** Literacy skills were explicitly mentioned just once in relation to reading aloud so far, yet when asked *“Do you believe that children’s early literacy skills are being developed*

*during read alouds"?*”, 95 out of 98 respondents indicated **Yes** with just three respondents indicating that they were **Unsure**.

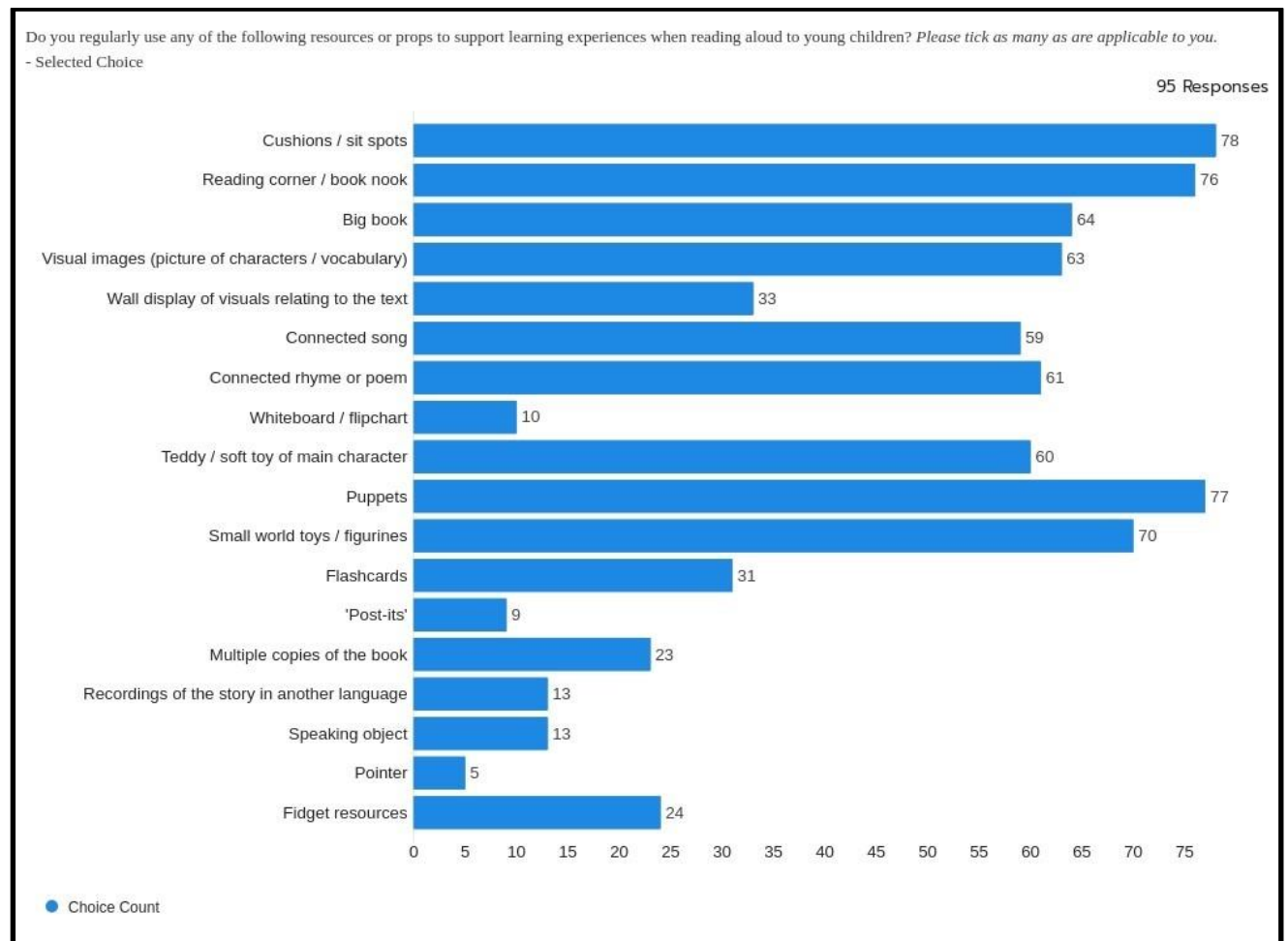
Research demonstrates that good read alouds' do not just happen (Laminack, 2016). For read aloud sessions to be most effective, planning in advance is necessary. When asked on their beliefs surrounding preparation and planning for read alouds in advance, responses were mixed. Across 97 responses, 50 participants (52%) indicated that **Yes** educators should prepare and plan in advance for read aloud experiences. 43% indicated that preparation and planning is only **Sometimes** necessary.

**5.4.1.4 Child Agency and Autonomy During Read Alouds’.** Participants were invited to share whether they felt children should interrupt, comment or question during read aloud experiences. Across 96 responses, 90 respondents indicated that **Yes** children should be allowed to interrupt, comment or question and a further five indicated that they were **unsure**. When asked as to whether they believed that the children should be asked questions about the story or their emerging thoughts during the read aloud, 96 out of 97 respondents indicated **Yes**.

**5.4.1.5 Read Aloud Resources.** On occasion, educators may choose to use additional resources or props to support learning experiences when reading aloud to young children. A list of materials was provided to respondents, with the option of ticking as many as were applicable to their practice. Across the 95 responses, participants demonstrated significant use of engaging materials and props which are detailed in Figure 24 below.

**Figure 24**

*Resources Utilised to Support Learning Experiences when Reading Aloud in Preschools*



**5.4.1.6 Read Aloud Challenges.** Participants were invited to rate a selection of challenges associated with reading aloud to young children. Challenges included class size, children's disinterest, language barriers, lack of high-quality literature, educator confidence, time constraints, classroom management, behavioural issues, and lack of staff. Participants rated these read aloud challenges from 0 to 3, not a challenge to extremely challenging. Full details on responses to challenges and comparisons to years of educator experience are outlined in Table 27 below.

**Table 27**

*Read Aloud Challenges for Preschool Educators.*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | Years working in preschool settings |                |           |            |          |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------|----------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | Total                               | 1 year or less | 2 - 5 yrs | 6 - 10 yrs | 10 yrs + |      |
| How would you rate the following challenges for early childhood educators when reading aloud with young children?<br><br>0 - Not a challenge<br><br>1 - Slightly challenging<br><br>2 - Very challenging<br><br>3 - Extremely challenging | Total Count                                   | 94.0                                | 5.0            | 21.0      | 17.0       | 51.0     |      |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Class size                                    | 0                                   | 14.0           | 0.0       | 1.0        | 3.0      | 10.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 19.0           | 2.0       | 1.0        | 3.0      | 13.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 36.0           | 3.0       | 12.0       | 9.0      | 12.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 15.0           | 0.0       | 6.0        | 0.0      | 9.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Children's disinterest                        | 0                                   | 17.0           | 1.0       | 2.0        | 3.0      | 11.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 34.0           | 3.0       | 5.0        | 6.0      | 20.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 20.0           | 1.0       | 10.0       | 4.0      | 5.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 9.0            | 0.0       | 3.0        | 1.0      | 5.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Language barrier                              | 0                                   | 22.0           | 2.0       | 5.0        | 4.0      | 11.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 25.0           | 0.0       | 5.0        | 6.0      | 14.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 22.0           | 0.0       | 6.0        | 5.0      | 11.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 15.0           | 2.0       | 4.0        | 1.0      | 8.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Lack of high-quality children's literature    | 0                                   | 25.0           | 0.0       | 2.0        | 6.0      | 17.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 13.0           | 0.0       | 4.0        | 2.0      | 7.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 18.0           | 4.0       | 6.0        | 2.0      | 6.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 8.0            | 0.0       | 5.0        | 0.0      | 3.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Educator confidence in reading aloud          | 0                                   | 23.0           | 0.0       | 3.0        | 7.0      | 13.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 20.0           | 1.0       | 6.0        | 2.0      | 11.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 12.0           | 1.0       | 4.0        | 2.0      | 5.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 12.0           | 1.0       | 3.0        | 3.0      | 5.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Time constraints                              | 0                                   | 24.0           | 1.0       | 3.0        | 7.0      | 13.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 19.0           | 1.0       | 5.0        | 2.0      | 11.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 15.0           | 1.0       | 9.0        | 2.0      | 3.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 14.0           | 1.0       | 4.0        | 2.0      | 7.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Classroom management / behavioural challenges | 0                                   | 11.0           | 0.0       | 0.0        | 5.0      | 6.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 32.0           | 3.0       | 4.0        | 5.0      | 20.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 18.0           | 0.0       | 7.0        | 4.0      | 7.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 19.0           | 1.0       | 8.0        | 2.0      | 8.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Lack of staff                                 | 0                                   | 17.0           | 0.0       | 2.0        | 3.0      | 12.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 1                                   | 18.0           | 1.0       | 3.0        | 4.0      | 10.0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 2                                   | 10.0           | 0.0       | 4.0        | 3.0      | 3.0  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                               | 3                                   | 25.0           | 2.0       | 11.0       | 5.0      | 7.0  |

#### ***5.4.2 Reading Aloud and Book Use: Summary Response***

This section provided an overview of the data collected and analysed on reading aloud and book use in preschool. This included an examination of the read aloud routine and the frequency of read aloud experiences on a weekly basis in the preschool setting. Notably, educators with more experience were the participants most likely to facilitate multiple read aloud experiences across the preschool day. Insights were gained on interactive read aloud facilitation also with similar response patterns to that of the general read aloud. Time was spent presenting the analysis of reading aloud and early literacy skills with 93 out of 95 educators being in agreement about the development of literacy skills during read alouds but only 52% of participants stating that they plan and prepare for read alouds. Detail was also shared on challenges faced by educators in read aloud provision with a range of challenges arising.

### **5.5 Phase 1 Summary Findings**

Data collected across Phase 1 provided valuable insights into many of the relevant uncertainties pertaining to the research questions. The data collected and potential gaps uncovered in this data provided valuable opportunities for broader exploration through the interviews planned for Phase 2.

#### ***5.5.1 Variety in Early Literacy Training Experiences***

Notable across the data collected on educator training and qualifications was that it became increasingly evident that literacy may not be a sole module in all institutions providing ECE qualifications. Early literacy may be combined with other topics and subject

areas, such as numeracy or children's literature. Engagement with early literacy modules may also be optional for students. The researcher found it surprising that **22 participants** answered *No, early literacy was not covered as a module or topic during their studies*. An additional **16** answered that they *did not remember*. Phase 2 presented a valuable opportunity to explore this question in greater detail. Findings from Phase 1 also demonstrated a need for further documentary analysis on degrees in Early Childhood Education in Ireland and the existence of compulsory literacy provision across QQI Level 8 undergraduate courses. Participants across the survey acknowledged their varying experiences and with some recognising the need for greater attention and focus on early literacy throughout qualification journeys. When sharing their beliefs on priorities of early literacy learning in preschools, one educator articulated a necessity for "highlighting the importance of early literacy through mandatory modules in training and degrees and bringing it to the forefront in quality and the curriculum framework."

**5.5.1.1 Documentary Analysis.** To examine such findings in training experiences further, some small-scale documentary analysis was carried out. All data were collected from open-access information listed on the relevant institutions' websites and available module descriptors. An anonymised overview is provided in Table 28 below.

**Table 28**

*Literacy Modules across Irish Undergraduate ECE Courses*

| Institution 1                                                                                                                                                                           | Institution 2                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Institution 3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Institution 4                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Institution 5                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p><i>Possibly embedded within other modules?</i><br/>E.g. Year 2: Diversity and Pluralism in Learning Language and Literacies</p>  | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Reference to literacy / language learning across other modules:<br/>Year 2: Language &amp; Cultural Diversity<br/>Year 3: Language, Literacy &amp; Culture</p> | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Reference to literacy / language learning across other modules:<br/>Year 2: Language, Literacy &amp; Numeracy</p>                                                                                                                 | <p><b>Two independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Year 1 - Early Literacies: Language Acquisition<br/><br/>Year 3: Early Literacies<br/><br/><b>Additional:</b><br/>Year 3: Children's Literature: Constructs of Childhood</p> | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Reference to literacy / language learning across other modules:<br/>Year 2: Language &amp; Multilingualism</p>                                                                                                                                                                   |
| This institution <b>does not offer</b> Primary Education (PrimEd) courses                                                                                                               | This institution <b>does offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                     | This institution <b>does not offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | This institution <b>does offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                    | This institution <b>does not offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Institution 6                                                                                                                                                                           | Institution 7                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Institution 8                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Institution 9                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Institution 10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Reference to literacy / language learning across other modules:<br/>Year 4<br/>4 - Literacy, Numeracy and Scientific Enquiry</p> | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p><i>Possibly embedded within other modules?</i><br/><br/>E.g. Year 4 - Children's Literature</p>                                                                | <p><b>Two independent early literacy modules:</b></p> <p>Year 1: Language Development in Early Childhood<br/><br/>Year 3: Language and Literacy in the Early Years<br/><br/><b>Additional:</b><br/>Year 4: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: Implications for Professional Practice</p> | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p><b>No independent early literacy modules</b></p> <p>Reference to literacy / language learning across other modules:<br/><br/>Year 2: Speech, language &amp; communication difficulties<br/><br/>Year 2: Exploring Numeracy and Literacy in Early Childhood<br/><br/>Year 3: Pretend play, storytelling and children's literature</p> |
| This institution <b>does offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                       | This institution <b>does not offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                 | This institution <b>does offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | This institution <b>does not offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                | This institution <b>does not offer</b> PrimEd courses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

This analysis reflects the early literacy training provision across 10 third-level institutions offering level 8 qualifications in early childhood education. Out of 10 institutions, only two offer independent early literacy modules, both of which offer early literacy modules in year 1 and year 3 of training. Both institutions offer an additional early-literacy related module which ensures that student-early childhood educators in these institutions are enabled to attend three modules connected to and impacting early literacy provision. Five institutions do show examples of early literacy being integrated within other modules or combined with other subject areas (e.g. early numeracy). One institution offers no early literacy or early language content at all. Two institutions offer independent modules in children's literature and one institution lists children's literature as a feature within a combined module. Four out of the ten institutions listed offer courses in primary education too, and notably two of these institutions are institutions offering two specific early literacy modules while the other two feature literacy within a combined module.

### ***5.5.2 Educator Knowledge on Early Literacy Development***

When sharing beliefs on priorities for preschool literacy practices, one participant suggested that preschools require “knowledgeable early years’ educators who know what to do to encourage early literacy.” Only 12 participants out of the 121 surveyed considered themselves as having a high level of knowledge on children’s Early Literacy Development. 56 participants (53%) rated themselves at either level 3, 2 or 1. Alternatively, 54 considered themselves to have a very good level of knowledge (level 4) of ELD. When exploring participants opinions on ECE educators’ duties pertaining to particular early literacy practices, uncertainties were evident and varying opinions of activities that should or should not be happening in preschool, such as name writing, letter formation, phonics instruction, reading high frequency words and even writing short sentences. Comparisons across the

responses were consistently varied indicating that experiences to develop knowledge on early literacy developed may be linked to a variety of factors - such as whether early literacy featured in their training and qualifications, educator knowledge and whether early literacy is in fact a priority in their respective preschool practice. Such variables were utilised and integrated into Phase 2 of data collection, the interviews for further exploration.

### ***5.5.3 Varying Perceptions of Early Literacy***

Developing from initial analysis of educator knowledge of early literacy development, it was evident across the data collected in Phase 1 that significant variances exist across perceptions of early literacy and early literacy skills relevant to the preschool years. Priorities range from informal literacy practices which align to the stage of emergent literacy (motor development, mark making, shared reading, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, narrative skills) to more code-related, conventional or formal literacy practices (such as reading phonetically, letter recognition, phonics and name writing). With such a significant variety, it is evident that perceptions of early literacy are broad and, in some cases, even contradictory of the stages of emergent literacy development and even contradictory of the self-assigned levels of knowledge of early literacy development, which participants articulated previously. One educator argued that it is important for educators to possess “an understanding of the basic stages of pre-literacy” yet many responses stand in contrast to such an awareness or appreciation of basic components of pre-literacy. For example, one educator stipulated that “learning to read phonetically is important at this age along with opportunities to learn about letters and numbers.”

Others echoed such thoughts, with another educator articulating the importance of “encouraging the children to read themselves and introduce sounds and letters to build up their confidence.”

In Phase two of data collection, for the purpose of the interviews, a breakdown in perceptions of educators and managers and commonalities or differences in perceptions of early literacy was provided to glean a potential insight into varying priorities across educators, managers and literacy CPD providers.

#### ***5.5.4 Early Literacy Practice***

Similar to patterns across all topics investigated in the questionnaire, existing preschool early literacy practices were extremely varied and demonstrate engagement with a broad range of emergent and conventional literacy activities. One educator stipulated that there is “no point in having ABC on the walls if children don’t know what they are about”, while in contrast another educator argued for the necessity of “learning the first letter of your name by recognition and writing.” Once again, patterns in responses indicated contradictions in perceived understandings of early literacy but also patterns that demonstrate a premature formality in literacy practices. When asked about regular existing early literacy practices, activities such as phonics (26), letter formation (40), name writing (48), handwriting practise (26), reading flashcards of high frequency words (38) and written worksheet tasks (39) were recurrently listed as being frequent literacy practices in preschool settings. Once again, this raises questions around where such priorities for practice arise and whether it may be connected to experiences and content in training. This was echoed by one participant who explained that:

I used to use worksheets and flashcards when I first came out of college but have done extensive research on the power of play and have totally changed my view on worksheets and phonics in the preschool setting.

Regardless of informal or formal literacy practices, it is notable that those with 10+ years of experience indicate the highest rates of engagement with existing early literacy

practices demonstrating a possibility that early literacy practices may be less of a priority for those with less experience in preschool education. This in itself raises questions surrounding the guidance for the sector on the provision of early literacy learning experiences in Irish preschools. Once again, it points to the recurring question on the quality and focus of early literacy provision within qualification journeys.

**5.5.4.1 Inconsistencies in Preschool Early Literacy Provision.** The variety in experiences and activities demonstrated across the survey responses highlight an obvious pattern of inconsistency in early literacy provision in preschools. Across those surveyed, an evident imbalance exists in focus on meaning related and code related literacy skills and understandings around their appropriateness for preschool literacy attention. While some educators affirm that through preschool literacy experiences “we prepare for learning not schooling” and what matters is “a fun and engaging environment with a focus on phonological awareness and not the alphabet song”, many opinions were contradictory of such points. For others, what matters is “letter sounds and phonemes”, “exposure to the written word” and “encouraging early writing abilities, how to write and draw words and letters, even their name is important in preschool.” With such variety in beliefs and priorities, it is only natural that imbalances in early literacy provision will exist for preschoolers from setting to setting and even room to room within settings.

**5.5.4.2 Preschool Literacy Programmes and Resources.** Across survey responses, only 25 participants (out of 194 respondents) listed early literacy programmes or resources which they use to support planning and preparation of early literacy learning experiences. An obvious observation and reflective of supports in Ireland for early literacy learning, is that there is no one definite or bespoke early literacy programme or resource for Irish preschools. While it is important to avoid heavily

structured or ‘schoolified’ approaches to learning in the preschool years (Bennett, 2006; Moss, 2007), no one source of guidance or information leads to disparities in focus and what could be considered a literal ‘free for all’ in outlining priorities and expectations. Notable across the responses was the prevalence of primary programmes, most of which are designed for phonics instruction and have not been designed for preschool education.

Another noteworthy observation is the very minimal reference to Aistear: The Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland, across the survey responses. One of the four strands of the Aistear Framework is Communication and within this strand much of the early literacy and language guidance and reference can be found, yet no reference to this strand (or any strands) was made across the responses at all. To support facilitation of the Framework, the NCCA house support materials on their website for early childhood educators to support their application of the framework. Despite the variety of support materials pertaining to early literacy available to ECE educators, these were mentioned just once across the responses of 194 educators across the survey. This suggests a lack of awareness of the availability of such supports but also a potential break-down in communication to educators. It is also indicative of the fact that many educators working in the ECCE scheme are employed only for little more than the hours of the scheme, leading to little time or support for self-directed upskilling despite national investment on the existing, apparently underused resources.

#### ***5.5.5 Continuous Professional Development and Professional Learning***

CPD or what is now more commonly referred to as professional learning (PL), is essential in enabling early childhood educators to provide the highest standards of care and

education for young children and ensures that educators' skills, knowledge and working practices remain up to date and relevant (Longford Childcare Committee, 2016).

Across responses on educator engagement with CPD and PL, results indicated that the majority of participants had not engaged with CPD / PL opportunities pertaining to early literacy learning. Those who have engaged with Early Literacy CPD were once again educators with 10+ years' experience, with those of less experience being much less likely to have engaged in CPD for Early Literacy. In Ireland, the barriers to engagement with meaningful CPD / PL opportunities for ECE educators have been longstanding – lack of incentives, timing, affordability and working hours are well-known issues affecting engagement with professional development across the sector (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020). While an initial inspection of results from the survey may point to the possibility of differing priorities and interests, on closer analysis it indicates an obvious lack in availability of accessible and relevant early literacy CPD opportunities for Irish preschool educators. This was echoed by one educator who suggested that there is a need for “CPD for early childhood educators around what early literacy looks like in preschool.”

#### ***5.5.6 The Existing Place of Read Alouds' in Preschool***

For the researcher, it was welcome to learn about participants' overwhelmingly positive responses on use of the read aloud in their preschool practice. Educators listed reading aloud as an 'enjoyable' experience which encourages a range of factors such as relationship-building, fostering imagination, child-engagement, relaxation, listening skills, critical thinking and creativity. One educator pointed out that “I've always liked it. I enjoy the relaxing downtime when everyone is in the zone listening and enjoying it too.” Another articulated that:

I enjoy it because it is an activity that slows down practice. I get to sit on the floor with maybe one or two children and by the end there could be four or five children.

Children have a genuine interest in stories. For me, it is an activity that occurs naturally within practice and cements our relationships with each other.

Evident across responses however was a possible disassociation with the true value of read alouds for early literacy and language development. Despite 95 out of 98 participants indicating that **Yes**, they believe **early literacy skills are being developed during read alouds**', language and literacy skill development only featured in one response across their reasons for enjoying reading aloud with young children. As indicated in the literature review, effective read aloud experiences require planning and preparation on behalf of the educator (Hisrich & McCaffrey. 2021), yet results were more split on this with 43% of participants indicating that this is only sometimes necessary.

Educators shared that read alouds' in preschools are not without challenges with lack of staff being listed as the biggest challenge for educators in facilitating read alouds' for young children in preschool which echoes well reported challenges across the ECE sector in Ireland relating staffing issues and ratio requirements (Early Childhood Ireland, 2023).

### **5.5.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the data analysis and findings for phase 1 of the study were presented, analysed and discussed. Firstly, in section 5.2 insights on demographic data were shared, featuring educator experience, qualifications and early literacy training. Section 5.3 provided detail on preschool early literacy practices with a focus on existing priorities and practices, use of materials, existing provision, programmes and resources, the ECCE years, and school transitions. Section 5.4 focused on book use and reading aloud demonstrating a range of analysis on interactive read aloud, read aloud and early literacy skills, child agency and autonomy during read aloud, read aloud resources, read aloud challenges. Section 5.5 provided a thorough overview of the findings accumulated across Phase 1 of data collection

and analysis, which offered insights into varied early literacy training experiences, educator knowledge, varying perceptions of early literacy, early literacy practice, preschool programmes and resources, continuous professional development, and read alouds in preschool. Chapter 6 presents the data analysis and findings from Phase 2 of data collection.

## Chapter 6

### Data Analysis and Findings: Phase 2

This chapter outlines and analyses the findings from data collected across Phase 2 of the study. In line with Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design, Phase 2 facilitated qualitative data collection and reflexive thematic analysis to assist in further explaining, exploring and refining the results from Phase 1's questionnaire. The findings of Phase 2 are explored under the following broad themes, reflecting the research questions and other significant elements that emerged from the process of data reduction and analysis:

1. Priorities for preschool literacy practices
2. The read aloud in preschool literacy provision
3. Informing preschool literacy provision
4. Challenges in preschool literacy provision

To support reader navigation through the significant wealth of data also presented across chapter six, the broad themes addressed in this chapter are outlined in Table 29 with an overview of subthemes and a brief description of each. This provides the framing of the structure and findings from Phase 2 of the study.

**Table 21**

*Themes and Subthemes Concerned with Phase 2 Analysis*

| Main Theme | Subtheme                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Priorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Language-related priorities</li><li>• Print-related priorities</li><li>• Book-related priorities</li><li>• Play-related priorities</li><li>• Differing priorities between preschool educators and managers</li><li>• Preschool literacy resources</li></ul> | <p>How priorities are outlined and considered by participants concerning early literacy.</p> <p>Examples of the varying value of methods and practices between educators and managers.</p> <p>Variety of resources utilised to support existing preschool literacy provision.</p> |

|                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read Aloud</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of the preschool read aloud</li> <li>• Literacy skill development through the preschool read aloud</li> <li>• Read aloud text choice</li> <li>• Access to books</li> </ul> | <p>Examples of varying perceptions of preschool read aloud and its place in preschool provision.</p> <p>Varying examples of literacy skill development considered by educators and managers as connected to preschool read alouds.</p> <p>Examples of children's literature used by educators and managers.</p> <p>Concerns with access to and sourcing of books for preschool read alouds</p> |
| <b>Informing preschool literacy provision</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frameworks and curricula</li> <li>• Interpretations of early literacy</li> <li>• Educator literacy knowledge and training</li> </ul>                                                   | <p>Varying frameworks and curricular cited.</p> <p>Varying interpretations of early literacy across participants.</p> <p>Detail on participants' literacy knowledge and their pre-service training on early literacy</p>                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Challenges in preschool literacy provision</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sourcing preschool literacy resources and materials</li> <li>• Sector-wide issues</li> <li>• Access to literacy-related professional learning opportunities</li> </ul>                 | <p>Challenges in sourcing preschool literacy resources and relevant literacy materials</p> <p>Detail on various sector-wide issues impacting existing provision</p> <p>Challenges concerned with professional learning opportunities for educators and managers in service</p>                                                                                                                 |

To begin, the priorities in preschool literacy practices in the interview participants' settings will be explored. Such patterns indicated a variety of language-related, print-related, and book-related priorities. Emerging differences in priorities between educators and setting managers are explored, demonstrating contrasting and contradictory priorities in some cases. Across this, the data on preschool literacy resources are examined indicating varying programmes, resources and materials being used across settings in support of preschool literacy learning experiences. Following this, the place of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision is outlined, demonstrating insights into participants' perceptions of the preschool read aloud and literacy skill development through such provision. Insights into participants'

preferences in text choices are shared demonstrating narrow patterns in text selection and book exposure for children.

Next, efforts are made to unpack the findings pertaining to what currently informs preschool literacy practices. This sheds light on frameworks and curricula utilised to support preschool literacy practices and offers insights into participants' perspectives of the existing<sup>6</sup> Aistear Framework (2009) and its role in supporting preschool literacy provision. Across the responses, varying interpretations of early literacy are presented by participants, which ultimately provide insights into educator literacy knowledge and literacy training.

Lastly, this chapter concludes with an examination of challenges in preschool literacy provision, unpacking a variety of difficulties and obstacles participants face in their efforts towards preschool literacy provision which includes access to professional learning, sourcing literacy resources and materials, and sector-wide issues.

## **6.1 Priorities for Preschool Literacy Practices**

Patterns of practice across Irish preschools indicate a broad variety in preschool literacy provision. When asked about whether their setting possesses specific priorities or methods for early literacy, answers were notably diverse. Responses reflected a greater alignment to literacy materials and activities rather than an obvious focus on specific early literacy skill development. Emergent literacy skills that have been identified as strong predictors of future literacy achievement include vocabulary attainment, explanatory talk, understanding narrative and story, print awareness, familiarity with nursery rhymes, awareness of environmental print and phonological awareness (French, 2013; Strickland & Riley Ayers, 2006). Across the educators' responses, priorities indicated a mix of some constrained and unconstrained literacy skills and a mix of formal and informal literacy

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<sup>6</sup> Existing at the time of data collection.

practices and activities. Self-outlined priorities for educators and managers are depicted in the comparison table below. Answers also indicated notable differences in the literacy priorities outlined by managers and those outlined by practicing educators.

**Table 22**

*Comparison Table: Educators' and Managers' Self-Outlined Priorities for Preschool Literacy Practices*

| Literacy Priorities                                      | Educators<br>(N=10) | Managers<br>(N=6) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Language-related priorities</b>                       |                     |                   |
| Supporting parents re: language & vocabulary development | 1                   | 0                 |
| Interactions                                             | 2                   | 0                 |
| Communication                                            | 2                   | 0                 |
| Nursery Rhymes                                           | 2                   | 0                 |
| Vocabulary                                               | 1                   | 0                 |
| Language development                                     | 2                   | 3                 |
| Talk                                                     | 0                   | 1                 |
| <b>Print-related priorities</b>                          |                     |                   |
| Displaying vocabulary on walls                           | 1                   | 1                 |
| Displaying vocabulary in play spaces                     | 1                   | 0                 |
| Letter awareness / Phonics                               | 4                   | 0                 |
| Creating a print-rich environment                        | 3                   | 4                 |
| Writing their name                                       | 2                   | 0                 |
| Mark making                                              | 0                   | 4                 |
| <b>Book-related literacy priorities</b>                  |                     |                   |
| Visiting the local library                               | 1                   | 3                 |
| Reading stories                                          | 2                   | 0                 |
| Book of the week                                         | 1                   | 0                 |
| Reading pictures                                         | 1                   | 0                 |
| Story time                                               | 1                   | 1                 |
| Having a library area in the learning environment        | 2                   | 2                 |
| Story sacks                                              | 3                   | 2                 |
| Visibility of books in learning environment              | 0                   | 3                 |
| Instilling a love of books                               | 0                   | 2                 |
| Children's access to books throughout the day            | 0                   | 2                 |
| Use of picturebooks                                      | 0                   | 2                 |
| <b>Play-related literacy priorities</b>                  |                     |                   |
| Playful literacy experiences                             | 1                   | 1                 |
| Sensory play                                             | 2                   | 1                 |
| Role play                                                | 2                   | 3                 |
| Small world play                                         | 0                   | 0                 |
| Access to writing materials outdoors                     | 0                   | 1                 |
| Vocabulary displayed in play areas                       | 0                   | 1                 |
| Putting letters into their play spaces                   | 0                   | 1                 |
| Tough trays                                              | 2                   | 3                 |
| <b>Other</b>                                             |                     |                   |
| Building imagination                                     | 1                   | 0                 |
| Fun                                                      | 0                   | 1                 |
| Building on interests                                    | 0                   | 1                 |
| Getting parents on board                                 | 0                   | 1                 |

### 6.2.1 Language-Related Priorities

One of the predominant self-outlined priorities across the responses of educators and managers alike was development of the children's spoken language and facilitating meaningful interactions. High-quality teacher-child interactions in early learning environments have been regarded as a key contributor to children's early language and cognitive development (Yang, 2021). While language skills and concepts developed through interactions were not elaborated on in depth, most respondents were in agreement on the necessity of prioritising interactions for the purpose of speech and language development. Educator 3 stated that, in their setting:

One of the main priorities is, kind of like, positive interactions with the children, and like meaningful interactions. So, not just like direct speech, more like descriptive and conversational, like that purposeful language. [EDU3]

The value of informal communication and interactions was also highlighted by Educator 7 who explained that in their setting they value "Communication at the table, whenever the kids are having their snack. And so, we would basically have communication going all the time." Similarly, Educator 8 outlined the value of play for language development and how in their setting they embrace opportunities to "reinforce language through playful kinds of experiences." [EDU8]

**6.2.1.1 Vocabulary.** Vocabulary is critical for children to succeed in developing language, literacy, and communication in their early years (Yang *et al.*, 2021) and building a large vocabulary in preschool has been long recommended across longstanding and contemporary research (French, 2013; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2011; Strickland & Riley Ayers, 2006). Across the responses on literacy priorities, vocabulary did feature, but more as something to be included in visual format;

displayed during play experiences or across wall space in the creation of a print-rich environment. This is exemplified in a response from Educator 7, who stated that:

We try to have vocabulary around the room that will be helpful. So, let's say in the farm area, we've got a picture or a sheet with all the animals on there so they are able to see the words as well, or even the [letter] sounds in their water tray. [EDU7]

Vocabulary only featured across one response (educator) in connection to priorities for language and interactions and none for the managers.

**6.2.1.2 Nursery Rhymes.** Nursery rhymes have been consistently shown to have a notably positive impact on children's early literacy development; fostering literacy, rhythm, memory, and vocabulary (Practical Outcomes, 2024) and are a longstanding method recommended in supporting literacy and language development in the early years. Across the responses of educators, Nursery Rhymes were listed just twice as a priority for early literacy and did not feature as a priority at all across the responses of any managers. While Educator 4 stated that "Nursery rhymes would be kind of the main focus for the early literacy", Educator 2 explained that they are a priority but just as something "playing in the background as the children are just free playing on the floor." At no point across the responses were Nursery Rhymes mentioned in connection to the development of children's phonological awareness. Again, indicating particular methods are perhaps included in a role as an activity as opposed to a specific priority for early literacy learning and as a means of developing specific early literacy skills.

### **6.2.2 Print-Related Priorities**

As demonstrated in the literature, developing an awareness of print is recommended in the early years, through a variety of age-appropriate methods such as independent and

exploratory mark making, access to literacy materials during play, shared reading experiences, displaying print in the environment, and exposure to environmental print. Premature introduction to phonics or letter knowledge activities are deemed as unnecessary and overly formal for the preschool years (Rose, 2006; Schickedanz, J. A., & Collins, M. F., 2013). Across the responses, numerous print-related priorities were outlined, some formal, some informal. The majority pertained to displaying vocabulary, signage, inclusion of printed materials in the play space, and the creation of a print-rich learning environment. This was demonstrated in a response from Educator 3 who explained that:

We would do a lot of tough trays and I would always try to have words on my tough trays. So, if we're doing like a tough tray based on a poem or a nursery rhyme, I would have that printed out on the tray, and I would try and hang up like the key phrase on the little whiteboards around. So, if we're doing the Three Bears, I'd have like small, medium, and large. That kind of thing.

Across the educators' responses, some evidence of priorities for letter knowledge and phonics instruction emerged. This was exemplified by Educator 4, who explained that:

There would definitely be things like print-rich environments, and we would be labelling consistently, labelling the rooms and over their coat hangers to get them to start understanding the link between letters and stuff like that and objects.

Educator 9 outlined that their focus on phonics and letter knowledge goes even further, stating that "We do letters as well. A few a week, usually every day." Similar methods were outlined by Educator 5 who explained that across their mixed stage group (Year 1 and Year 2 of ECCE):

We would all do the same, like phonic of the week and the same poem. And we would let them, you know, we'd have the sandpaper tiles out. So, I suppose the year 2 will be more strongly encouraged to try and trace the letters and think of words that start with that sound and stuff more so than the year ones, but not an official difference. [EDU5]

Such points raise the underlying issue of the absence of any set support for a differentiated pedagogy or curricular focus in years one and two of the ECCE scheme. Interestingly, in stark contrast to that of the educators' responses in terms of print-related priorities, none of the Managers interviewed outlined opinions on prioritising letter knowledge or phonics, in fact, quite the contrary. Manager 4 raised valuable points on the expectations of children in literacy learning experiences across year one and year two of ECCE, starting that:

It's ridiculous for small children; to expect a two-and-a-half-year-old and the five-and-a-half-year-old to understand the same thing. And a lot of the children don't have an interest in letters like to specifically sit down and want to write a letter or to recognise it in books and things like that. [Manager 4]

Such musings were echoed by Manager 3 - who agreed that attention to phonics was premature and although it may have been something they previously focused attention on, that now their priority for literacy was more a matter of "bringing literacy and language into the play space." [Manager 3] Similar themes were evident across the responses of the CPD providers who recognised the need for a broader interpretation of early literacy priorities. CPD2 acknowledged that while letter knowledge may have been a recommendation traditionally, their recommendations have changed and developed thanks to increased knowledge and awareness due to contemporary research and findings pertaining to the Science of Reading (Catts, 2022; Dehaene, Hirsch, 2016; Seidenberg, 2017; Shanahan, 2024; Willingham, 2019) surrounding young children's literacy development stating that "through CPD we realised their brains weren't ready for that, but now we know better." [CPD2]

**6.2.2.1 School Transitions and Early Literacy Priorities.** As predicted by the literature, educators outlined the challenges in navigating traditional expectations particularly in terms of parental expectations or "external demands" (Hayes, 2019,

p.3) relating to school transitions and how these can impact preschool literacy priorities. As Manager 5 explained:

Parents' expectations are a big thing; that some parents feel a child should be able to write their name, and you know, recognise words and things by the time they leave preschool so it's kind of about getting parents on board. That's not the goal. It may be and comes about for some children, but it's not the specific goal.

Despite patterns across educator responses indicating that certain literacy practices such as phonics and handwriting were adopted in preparing children for the transition to school, Manager 5 also articulated valuable points about primary teachers' expectations when they explained that:

In the national schools, like that we feed into, the teachers don't particularly want children to have established handwriting skills and letter recognition. They're happy for them to come in on an even keel.

Similar points were flagged by Manager 3 - who maintains that when it comes to best supporting transitions,

It's about putting it out there that literacy is not about sitting down and holding a pencil at a desk and writing and knowing the alphabet when they're two.

Differing opinions were evident across the responses of educators; with some articulating more of an inclination to lean towards more conventional literacy practices (such as letter knowledge, handwriting and name writing) that they feel support the children in transitioning to primary school. Educator 10 explained "In this sector, as the children get older, it's more important to put emphasis on getting them ready for school." Educator 7 outlined their routines for working on letter knowledge with the children in year 2 of ECCE provision:

We would kind of call up the ones that are going to school in September, or be enabling the ones that are senior ones, and maybe ask them about their letters, what a letter would be or what their numbers are.

Similarly, Educator 9 stated that “After Easter, the ones going to school, they’ll start doing a bit more on writing their letters and things that junior infants will be doing.”

### **6.2.3 Book-Related Priorities**

Book use in the early years has long been associated with the development of fundamental early literacy skills such as vocabulary development, narrative discourse, prediction and inference making, critical thinking, print awareness and a wealth of phonological awareness skills (Buckingham *et al.*, 2014; Demir-Lira, 2019; Mol *et al.*, 2009; Puglisi *et al.*, 2017). Across the responses of both educators, managers and CPD providers on early literacy priorities, book-related priorities were common. While again, reference to specific early literacy skills or components developed through book reading and exposure were minimal; book-related priorities appeared to be a staple feature for most respondents. Educator 9 detailed the importance of “reading time” in their setting:

We always have reading time. That would be a big one. We would read stories with kids and also give them time to read stories themselves so that will build on their imaginative stories. [EDU9]

Fostering a love of literature and reading was important to participants. Manager 1 explained that their efforts in sharing books and book-related experiences was a significant priority to them due to the context of their setting.

I love books and my assistant manager also loves books. And I suppose where we are, the children we work with wouldn’t have a lot of books at home, so we would be really into having plenty in their preschool day. [Manager 1]

Some educators provided examples of what their book use entails, with Educator 1 explaining how they encourage child involvement with book-related experiences:

We would get them to read stories by the pictures to get them to kind of help. *Oh, look at this, what is going to happen in the pictures?* And the story bags. Yeah, yeah, we make them, and for different stories and they and enjoy and really interact with it, which I think is good. [EDU1]

Others explained how in their settings books are used as a stimulus for play and increasing reading opportunities through the context of play. For example, Manager 1 outlined that in her setting:

We work really hard on making resource packs for each story and kind of bringing them into the tough tray, and bringing of it was Goldilocks, maybe setting up that kind of thing in the home area.

While book use is evidentially a feature of most participants' practice, once again, it appeared to be a feature of practice for its own sake, as opposed to being included or associated with early literacy provision. Fostering a love of literature and access to books in the learning environment was important to educators and managers alike, indicating an awareness of the values of reading for pleasure and the nurturing role of shared book experiences. However, an obvious disconnect existed across responses between the role of books in young children's early literacy development. Once again, indicating the possibility of an incognisant space in the priorities of managers and educators in appreciating the valuable connections of book use in the early years in supporting early literacy learning and enabling early literacy skill development (Morrow, 2019).

#### ***6.2.4 Play-Related Literacy Priorities***

A few play-related literacy priorities were noted across responses. The minimal reference to play and literacy indicates a possible separation or disconnect between the concept of play and its role as a means of developing early literacy skills. While not particularly statistically significant, the researcher did find it interesting that both sensory play (3 out of 16 participants) and role play (5 out of 16 participants) were noted as being play-related literacy. Contrastingly, small world play was not mentioned by any of the educators or managers in connection with early literacy learning, development or provision – despite being an extremely popular and longstanding form of play associated with the early years.

#### ***6.2.5 Differing Literacy Priorities between Managers and Educators***

Across responses, it was evident that literacy priorities were certainly a common consideration for participants and evidentially a feature of practice in varying forms. However, significant differences and interpretations were evident across what participants felt matters in terms of preschool literacy provision and the motivations behind many of the skills and activities which were outlined as priorities.

Educator 4 explained that:

Our priorities are to look at the simplest ways we can really kind of hone in on early literacy and to make everyone as involved in it for the children and parents.

Particularly notable, were the differences in priorities outlined by setting managers and setting educators. CPD Providers provided an alternative lens to reflections on literacy priorities, with CPD1 making a valuable point about differing priorities between educators and managers across settings when they explained “sometimes interest might come from management and the staff feel they have to do it. Or sometimes the staff might be interested but the managers aren’t.” Managers themselves articulated similar points and their difficulties

in “delegating and letting the staff take ownership” [Manager 1] when it comes to early literacy learning experiences in their preschool. Manager 1, a Masters graduate with over 11 years’ experience in their setting, recognised their difficulties in letting staff lead but acknowledged their efforts in adapting their approach:

I’ve started to delegate a little bit more, I would have had lots of ideas and led all, but now we’re trying to coach the girls more.

Some expressed their frustration and acknowledged challenges in fulfilling priorities for literacy provision. Manager 5, a manager of three large rural preschool settings with over 26 years’ experience in the sector, explained that:

This is an honest to God answer, I find my educators struggle to include literacy as often and as seamlessly as I would like it to happen. I think I’ve got wonderful educators, and they’ve been with me a long time, but I would say this is their weakest area and I hate admitting that.

Educators also acknowledged such challenges. Educator 3 raised valuable points around the connection between preschool literacy learning experiences and the individual educator. They stated that:

All the literacy experiences really depend on the educator and whether they value it, if they understand it, and even if they’ve covered it with their qualification. That really impacts them. The literacy experiences that the children receive in that room will depend on the educator. The knowledge is not across the board or always the same standard. I suppose our guidelines specific to literacy are a challenge. So, if those could improve, that could have a huge effect on the children and the early literacy experiences that they receive and across the board rather than like it just being dependent on certain settings being interested in literacy, you know? Less of, ‘Oh, that that setting does it really well. This setting doesn’t.’ There’s a huge, a huge variety and scope, I suppose, and that all affects the children’s experiences. [EDU3]

Such views correspond with patterns across the literature review and findings from phase 1 of data collection where a broad variety in qualifications and literacy training experiences exist. As demonstrated in the literature and both phase one and phase two of data collection, the varieties in qualifications and varying degrees of literacy training within qualification have been recurring threads.

#### **6.2.6 *Preschool Literacy Resources***

When exploring the variety in responses to priorities and acknowledging the differences in priorities between educators and managers, early literacy resources must be considered. Worth noting, is that, to date, in Ireland, there is no set, prescribed or mandatory programme or resource required of educators to engage with to support or guide preschool literacy practices. As previously stated, there is currently no differentiated pedagogy or curricular focus for the two ECCE years. Educators are afforded a significant level of autonomy in choosing resources to suit their own provision. Across responses, it is evident that while this lack of prescription and regimentation in practice requirements is appreciated, the challenge, for educators in particular, can be in knowing which resources are best suited to early literacy provision in Irish preschool contexts. Some educators expressed their desire for a set resource or guide to support their early literacy provision. Educator 5 explained that they would value greater support and direction to support preschool literacy provision through guidelines or bespoke programmes.

I would love there to be like a general guidelines for literacy that preschool should follow this phonic programme, or you know, like, when I was in school, we did like Letterland, like all my friends and all different skills. With Letterland, they [the children] learned their letters and you knew what to do. I would love to know if there was just something that we were told to do; do this, do A to Z, or do your sounds, just follow this programme. I would love that. I would just love there to be a maybe a

[literacy] document we could follow, and maybe there is? I haven't come across one..

Educator 4 explained efforts in their settings to navigate the lack of resources and materials to support and guide early literacy provision and making use of collective knowledge and experience within settings. Literacy resources bespoke to their large, urban setting have been designed to support literacy practice.

It's just about, I suppose bringing everybody's knowledge together as much as possible, and we try and get and kind of guidebooks that are reference books that we can put together. So, if anybody has something that they've done, they'll send it to me, and then, I put it in. And this means we create another community practice booklet maybe for anybody to refer to if they wish to. [EDU4]

The lack of set resources or recommended programmes designed for the Irish preschool context means that many educators and managers are seeking support and guidance from a variety of sources. For the most part, participants indicated a wide variety of additional programmes, resources, and materials that they draw upon to support their existing early literacy provision. Examples of these additional sources are outlined in Table 29, below.

**Table 23***Self-Selected Programmes, Resources and Materials Used to Support Preschool Literacy Practices*

| Programmes, resources and materials used to support preschool literacy practices               |                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                                                                                                | Educators & Managers<br>(N=16) |
| <b><u>Programmes</u></b>                                                                       |                                |
| Hanen                                                                                          | 4                              |
| Lámh                                                                                           | 1                              |
| <b><u>Resources received from additional training opportunities</u></b>                        |                                |
| LINC Training                                                                                  | 2                              |
| Masters Modules                                                                                | 2                              |
| Storytime Project (Marino Institute of Education)                                              | 2                              |
| Training days from educational institutions (Marino Institute of Ed. & Dublin City University) | 2                              |
| 'Tough Tray' training days                                                                     | 2                              |
| LAB Training                                                                                   | 1                              |
| <b><u>Other</u></b>                                                                            |                                |
| Self-informed / educator experience                                                            | 6                              |
| Instagram                                                                                      | 5                              |
| Online searches                                                                                | 5                              |
| Social media                                                                                   | 4                              |
| Facebook groups                                                                                | 3                              |
| Dipping 'in and out' of a variety of resources                                                 | 3                              |
| Child interests                                                                                | 3                              |
| Twinkl                                                                                         | 2                              |
| Pinterest                                                                                      | 2                              |
| Early Childhood Ireland                                                                        | 1                              |
| Ideas gained from student educators                                                            | 1                              |
| Nothing                                                                                        | 1                              |
| Mosaic                                                                                         | 1                              |
| Community Practice booklets                                                                    | 1                              |

**6.2.6.1 Preschool Literacy Programmes.** Contrary to the findings in Phase 1, interview participants cited less commercial literacy programmes. Two educators listed jolly Phonics (a phonics programme designed for primary education) as a programme they currently use to guide their literacy practice. This does not necessarily indicate that the programme is being followed verbatim; for example,

Educator 2, who has been practicing in preschools for over 20 years, explained that they “always have Jolly Phonics on in the background and it’s gas how much some of them pick up.” They outlined that in terms of guiding their early literacy practice “Jolly Phonics would be the only thing like, I just started using Jolly Phonics years ago because I became familiar with it when my niece started school.”

The only other dominant programme featuring across the responses was the Hanen Programme.

**Table 24**

*Number of References to the Hanen Programme throughout Interviews*

|                 | <b>Educators</b> | <b>Managers</b> | <b>CPD Providers</b> |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
|                 | (N=10)           | (N=6)           | (N=4)                |
| Hanen Programme | 3                | 1               | 2                    |

Strategies and methods from the Hanen Programme were evident across responses. For example, Educator 3 explained “I did the Hanen training and a lot of it was like, you know, the OWL approach, observe, wait and listen. So, we take a lot of those kind of strategies to inform our activities and interactions with the children.”

**6.2.6.2 Preschool literacy support services.** A willingness to engage with support services and develop practice was evident across responses from participants. Several participants detailed their engagement with external ECE support services to support and develop their existing preschool literacy practices. Services included Better Start (2), Preparing for Life (3), County Childcare Committees (2) and the Department of Education Inspectorate (1). Reference to external support services came from all six preschool managers, with just one example cited across the educators’ responses.

Educator 7 explained that:

We had someone in from Better Start to make sure that everything is okay in terms of what we do with communication. How you get down to their level

and talk to them then and all that. So maybe like we would kind of maybe went from her, about what she talked about, and then we kind of brought the recommendations out and worked with how we felt that would work in our setting.

**6.2.6.3 Social Media.** Educators voiced their opinions on the usefulness of social media as a source which aids in supporting their early literacy practices.

Educator 3, explained that for her literacy practices:

most of them would be self-informed, and then, I mean, you know, we'd look on Pinterest, that's good for ideas, or like Instagram, for like certain activities, and then just kind of adapt it based on our children or our resources.

Similarly, Educator 9 explained that they“would be in a lot of groups online, like on Facebook or what not with other practitioners. And I would look in to see if they can recommend anything or ask for recommendations. Social media helps.” Educator 9 also shared an interesting remark on the uncertainty associated with planning preschool literacy practices:

We can feel like we have no one sometimes. I don't really know where I would officially go to look for something. I just kind of look on those groups. There's nothing really I can go straight to for early literacy. It's a lot of searching because it's not really taught or clear.

### **6.2.7 Summary Response**

In summary, the findings across the data collected on preschool literacy priorities indicate patterns of difference and variability across participants. Priorities for language development and interactions were dominant, yet details on specifics skills were vague.

Responses from participants, particularly educators and managers, indicated a focus on literacy activities more broadly as opposed to a specific focus on fundamental early literacy skill development. Priorities for print-related literacy skill development were particularly noticeable across the responses and experiences of educators, which contrasted to those of managers who articulated the need for less attention or focus on print related literacy skills such as phonics and name writing. Books certainly featured heavily across responses but again under a lens of activity as opposed to being cited or included in provision for literacy purposes.

Overall, despite differing priorities, for the most part, participants indicated an evident willingness to engage in early literacy provision through their efforts to engage with external services and supports, their independent sourcing of programmes and resources and overall efforts to develop literacy practice despite specific guidance or mandatory priorities for the sector.

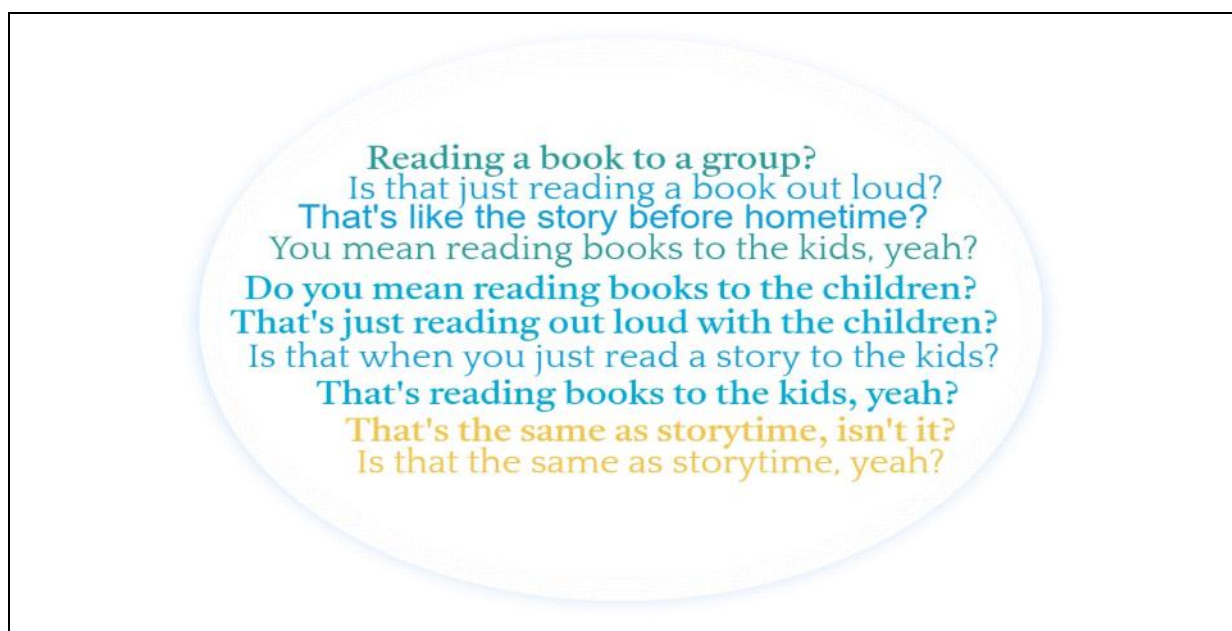
### **6.3 The Read Aloud in Preschool Literacy Provision**

As demonstrated across the literature review, the read aloud, as a method, deserves a prominent place in preschool literacy provision (Tjaru, 2023). Effective read alouds' can enhance young children's reading comprehension, encourage a love of books (Fox 2013), expose young children to literature well beyond their independent reading level, serve as models of fluency and prosody, encourage independent reading (Fiorentini & Magennis, 2022; Moran, 2015; Cunningham and Zibulsky, 2011). In an effort to address the motivations behind Research Question 2, '*Are 'read alouds' accommodated or valued in Irish preschool settings?*', participants were invited to share their insights into and experiences of read alouds' in their preschool provision. Worth establishing from the outset, is that the term 'read aloud' itself was not a term used across responses prior to engaging with this stage of the

interviews. When read aloud was used in the question, ‘*Can you share your thoughts on the read aloud method and whether it is a method you value?*’, the term needed clarification on several instances. A read aloud is an instructional practice where educators read texts aloud to children incorporating variations in pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; McCormick, 1977; Morrison & Wheeler, 2024; Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009; Sipe, 2000). Insights into the educators and managers’ varying perceptions of the read aloud can be drawn from the word cloud below.

**Figure 25**

*Word Cloud Depicting Educators’ Uncertainty Surrounding the Term ‘Read Aloud’.*



Across their responses, educators leaned towards terms such as storytime, book time and reading time whilst, read aloud was a term common to the CPD Providers, particularly across the responses of the two participants with a Speech & Language Therapy (SLT) background.

### **6.3.1 Participants' Perceptions of the Preschool Read Aloud**

Perceptions of the preschool read aloud experience were varied. While all recognised it as a method of value, some participants chose to express their positive associations with reading aloud; deeming it as “really important” (EDU2) while others voiced concerns and frustrations surrounding inclusion of the method in their practice. Manager 3 stipulated the value of the read aloud as an opportunity to connect and relax with the children whilst still teaching:

“ love reading aloud. I love it being about those little moments that you’re sitting reading a book, and you’re having those chuckles with children and it's a go-to relax and bring peace to everything and yet teaching so much at the same time.

Educator 4 explained that it was a method of value in their setting for many reasons:

Yeah, it's definitely something that I would value, and I feel the benefits for a child listening to a story like that. Definitely having the read aloud method when it's done right, can be a fantastic opportunity to bring children who may not necessarily be the children who want to engage in things, that they can be drawn in. And again, that depends on the person who's delivering it, but when [the reader] they're attuned to what the [children's] interests are, or being very kind of dramatic with their voice, or doing different voices, or that kind of thing, or even using props and getting the children involved in the story, you know?

Others voiced concerns about simply appropriately locating the read aloud within the preschool day. Manager 5, manager of three settings appreciates the benefits of the read aloud but articulated the struggles of trying to find a space for read alouds' in a transition free, predominantly outdoor learning environment; stating:

I wonder about the value of it because I know that in order to do it, you have to stop everything else. It won't work in that traditional way. I know that. And I'm not sure how to adapt it to that.

As a result, Manager 5 admits that the read aloud is something that is included but that it is an ongoing source of contention in their setting as “It’s not happening as organically as I would like it to happen. We’re forcing [a] read aloud in the 5 minutes before we go home.”

CPD providers were particularly vocal in their concerns around the place of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision exemplified by CPD1 who articulated that:

Sometimes I find that one of my biggest frustrations is something like the read aloud isn’t happening because it’s not mandatory for it to be happening.

However, on exploring the responses of educators and managers, absences or lack of read alouds’ in many preschool settings may not solely be attributed to a lack of awareness or disregard for the method but a variety of factors such as timetabling constraints, educator knowledge, educator confidence and individual setting priorities. Educators and Managers cited a variety of additional issues impacting read aloud provision, including the varying priorities and value of the read aloud between educators within settings. Educator 3 articulated their love and appreciation for the read aloud method and its connected experiences but voiced concerns about differing priorities across their colleagues.

I love the read alouds and choosing stories, I’d really value that. But maybe the other teacher that I work with – she wouldn’t be as comfortable reading the story aloud. So, if the children don’t ask, she wouldn’t go out of her way to read for them or offer them a story really.

Such concerns were echoed by Manager 5 - who discussed colleagues’ reservations regarding being heard reading aloud or being expected to read to a large group of children. They stated that they find that “some [preschool] teachers don’t mind reading to 2 or 3 children but if another teacher was to come close, they kind of go ‘*okay, I don’t want you to hear me!*’ and wrap it up.” Educator 5 also raised valuable points about the challenges of facilitating read aloud experiences for children who they feel are experiencing increasingly less read alouds and shared reading experiences in the home.

I sometimes feel that children, not all them, but some children, come into me that would have never had a book read to them, or would have never opened a book, so they don't really even understand that the words have a meaning. Maybe it is from Covid? Maybe parents are just busy? But the last few years we've noticed that. So that's been a challenging one.

Similar points were echoed by Educator 10 - who outlined concerns about lack of read aloud experiences in the home and the role preschools can play in counteracting this:

I suppose most of us think that the children when they are at home, they're getting read stories all the time. I don't think that's the case in all families because parents are working. Especially in the evening, it's busy enough to just get them to bed. I think in the early childhood settings, that's kind of your opportunity to get in there with the read alouds' and push that further. I just don't think it's done a lot across the sector.

Educator 3 explained the challenges in navigating the allocation of hours for ECCE provision and the constraints this can hold for including read alouds in preschool provision that lasts for just three hours per day (DCEDIY, 2019).

Time. Like we're preschool only. So, our ECCE, we only have 3 hours with them, and even when some of the days feel long it can still be hard to try and fit in everything that you want to cover in that time.

### ***6.3.2 Literacy Skill Development through the Preschool Read Aloud***

Participants were asked to outline what literacy skills they felt were developed through the read aloud and answers were diverse reflecting a variety of language-related, print-related, meaning-related and book-related literacy skills. Manager 3 explained that

It's not just about once upon a time, it's more about the exploration they can have in it. And that's what's going to bring the literacy skills out.

All respondents agreed that literacy skills are developed during the read aloud, however, many participants, particularly the educators, struggled to list specific literacy skills, with

language-related literacy skills dominating the responses demonstrating potential challenges with disciplinary content knowledge regarding literacy constructs (Piasta *et al.*, 2020).

Responses were collated and organised by category in Table 33, below.

**Table 25**

*Educators' and Managers' Self-Outlined Literacy Skills Developed through Preschool Read Alouds'*

| Literacy skill development through preschool read alouds' | Educators & managers |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
|                                                           | (N=16)               |
| <b>Language-related</b>                                   |                      |
| Vocabulary                                                | 8                    |
| Listening skills                                          | 7                    |
| Expressive language                                       | 6                    |
| Rhyming                                                   | 4                    |
| Conversation skills                                       | 3                    |
| Questioning                                               | 3                    |
| Receptive language                                        | 2                    |
| Repetition                                                | 2                    |
| Sound (Phonemic) awareness                                | 1                    |
| <b>Print-related literacy skills</b>                      |                      |
| Concepts of print                                         | 3                    |
| Print awareness                                           | 2                    |
| Word recognition                                          | 1                    |
| Phonics knowledge                                         | 1                    |
| Mark making                                               | 1                    |
| <b>Book-related</b>                                       |                      |
| Love of books                                             | 2                    |
| Book handling skills                                      | 1                    |
| Enjoyment of books                                        | 1                    |
| Love of books                                             | 2                    |
| <b>Meaning-related skills</b>                             |                      |
| Knowledge development                                     | 2                    |
| Prediction                                                | 2                    |
| Recount skills                                            | 2                    |
| <b>Other</b>                                              |                      |
| Developing imagination                                    | 3                    |
| Attention development                                     | 3                    |
| Group work                                                | 2                    |
| Regulation                                                | 2                    |
| Concentration skills                                      | 2                    |
| Social skills                                             | 2                    |
| Gross-motor skills                                        | 2                    |
| Cognitive skills                                          | 1                    |
| Turn-taking                                               | 1                    |
| Relationship building                                     | 1                    |
| Confidence building                                       | 1                    |

### **6.3.3 Read Aloud Text Choices**

Researchers argue for the need for educators and those working with young children to possess an extensive knowledge of children's literature in order to provide rich read aloud experiences and make skillful, informed, and suitable text choices to support their learners (Cremin, 2019; Cremin *et al.*, 2014; Cremin *et al.*, 2009). Worth noting is that when asked about the texts they enjoying reading aloud, 19 out of the 20 interview participants either listed a title by children's author Julia Donaldson or cited this author as being their favourite. Julia Donaldson was the only children's author listed. Texts listed by participants are outlined in Table 34 below and demonstrate examples of preferences for longstanding, classic picturebooks of contemporary children's literature. All texts cited were fiction texts with no examples of different genres provided. Patterns across the responses echo findings with relevant contemporary literature pertaining to text choices and educator knowledge of children's literature. Familiarity with a narrow repertoire or limited selection of children's literature can lead to stagnant or tired text choices (Fiorentini, 2021; Cremin, 2019; Cremin, 2014).

**Table 26***Texts and Authors of Preference*

| <b>Texts Listed by Interview Participants</b>               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson (1999)                      |
| The Highway Rat by Julia Donaldson (2011)                   |
| The Smartest Giant in Town by Julia Donaldson (2002)        |
| The Snail and the Whale by Julia Donaldson (2003)           |
| The Wonky Donkey by Craig Smith (2009)                      |
| Harry and the Dinosaurs series by Ian Whybrow (2003 - 2019) |
| Guess how much I love you? By Sam Mc Bratney (1994)         |
| We're going on a bear hunt by Michael Rosen (1989)          |
| Owl Babies by Martin Waddell (1992)                         |
| That's not my... series by Fiona Watt (1999 - 2022)         |
| <b>Children's Authors Listed by Interview Participants</b>  |
| Julia Donaldson                                             |

### **6.3.4 Access to Books**

When discussing read alouds across the interviews, participants frequently brought the focus back to books themselves as opposed to literacy skills. The value of books was highlighted consistently. Manager 1 stipulated “Books are the back-bone in society.” CPD1 expressed that “Books are a gateway into chat and play.” Manager 3 expressed that in their setting “We want to make sure books become part of their culture.”

While the sentiment surrounding books was extremely positive, challenges in sourcing books were raised frequently. Manager 2 expressed that the costs associated with sourcing texts are challenging.

We need money for books. There's no money for books. We've paid for them all ourselves.

Such concerns were echoed by Educator 10 and raised a query on initiatives supplying preschools with books.

If there was anything for preschool settings, new like free books, or something like that, wouldn't that be a great idea for preschools? Or give free books to borrow, take them back and exchange them between preschool settings? Such an opportunity for getting to know and collaborate with other settings too?

Manager 4 raised concerns about the challenges in sourcing diverse texts and the need to provide literature that children see themselves in (Bolling, 2021):

I shop online a lot as it's very difficult to find diverse characters and specifically stories of children. I'm not so big into stories of animals because I don't feel children can see themselves in an animal story as they can with a child in a book. It's not the same.

### **6.3.5 Summary Response**

In summary, perceptions on the value of the preschool read aloud were predominantly positive. Educators, managers, and CPD providers were in agreement that it is a method of value and necessity. Worth noting, is that read aloud was not a term common to all participants, with many participants seeking clarification when asked about their thoughts on the read aloud as a method. Participants outlined challenges associated with reading aloud in preschool; from limited timing to navigating low educator confidence. Again, whilst participants recognised that read alouds are associated with benefits and literacy skill development, details on such skills were vague. Vocabulary, listening skills and expressive language dominated responses. Notably, participants had similar responses on the types of texts they enjoy reading aloud. Classic, fiction texts dominated the list of texts educators,

managers and CPD providers enjoyed reading aloud, with all but one participant favouring the works of Julia Donaldson as being their favourite literature to read aloud demonstrating a relatively narrow diet of well-known texts and limited exposure to varying genres.

## **6.4 Informing Preschool Literacy Practices**

Reflecting the current context in Irish preschool literacy practices, a wide range of factors appear to inform and influence current literacy practices in Irish preschools. In an effort to address the motivations behind Research Question 3, ‘*What informs current Irish preschool literacy practices?*’, participants were invited to share insights into what may currently inform existing literacy practices in their settings. It is well depicted across long-standing literacy evidence and contemporary research that those involved in supporting young children’s early literacy development should possess a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practice (Morrow and Gambrell, 2011) and relevant national frameworks. Similar to findings in phase 1, responses were varied depicting a range of frameworks, programmes, external supports, and additional sources loosely informing their current preschool literacy practices. Most notable was that for most educators and managers, existing literacy practices seem to lack a set informed source or motivation.

### **6.4.1 Frameworks and Curricula Informing Preschool Literacy Practices**

“What do you call it? The Aistear-Síolta book?” [EDU7]

Reflecting on the responses of the educators and managers, the predominant frameworks and curricula cited were *Aistear* and *Montessori*. Some managers identified that they align their literacy practice to Aistear alongside additional frameworks such as Steiner or

Highscope which is common in Irish early years' practice. Aistear works alongside and is compatible with existing curricula (e.g. Montessori, Highscope) but it can also be used to give structure to and increase the effectiveness of less formal, play-based, early years practice (Murphy, 2015). The specific figures on the frameworks and curricula cited by educators and managers are presented in Table 32.

**Table 27**

*Frameworks and Curricula Cited by Educators and Managers as Informing Early Literacy Provision*

| <u>Frameworks / Curricula</u> | <u>Managers</u><br>(N=6) | <u>Educators</u><br>(N=10) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Aistear                       | 2                        | 5                          |
| Montessori                    | 1*                       | 0                          |
| Steiner                       | 1                        | 0                          |
| High Scope                    | 2*                       | 0                          |

*\*Asterisk indicates frameworks cited alongside another framework e.g. Aistear & Highscope.*

However, it was evident that in practice, such frameworks and curricula are not necessarily what participating educators and managers are actually using to meaningfully inform their literacy provision. In fact, it appeared that there was a confusion or even detachment from the idea that literacy practice should or could be informed by a particular model, framework, guideline or even established resource. While some frameworks were cited, this was not necessarily in a way that linked them directly to preschool literacy provision.

Manager 1, stated:

We've grappled and we've griped, and we've changed, and we've done training and feelings have changed. And so, we'd kind of just align ourselves in an Aistear

approach now. But really, we would try and take everything as possible from the children's interests.

Such an opinion was echoed by Manager 2, who explained that “over the years I would have changed from a Montessori-based approach to more play-based. So, a lot of our literacy would be introduced through play.” Educator 3 stated that in terms of planning for literacy: “we follow the Aistear Framework and Síolta as well, and then the Aistear-Síolta practice guide.” Yet when elaborating on what informs their literacy practices, the details pertained to materials as opposed to practice and using the pillars and guides from the support materials as a basis for isolated practices such as reviewing the “quality of books that we had in the library”. Educator 6 outlined that Aistear did inform their practice to an extent “but you can see, like, we don't really need it anymore.”

When asked about whether any frameworks, guidelines or programmes inform their literacy practice, Manager 5 stated:

No, we don't. And again, I think that's a loss. I think that's something that we need to brush up on, but that, brushing up on it, sounds like we already have it. We don't. Across the responses, five educators and three managers (50%) indicated that their literacy practices are not informed by Aistear or any other framework or curriculum, exemplified by Educator 7 who responded: “No, not really in our room. It's more self-informed.”

For some participants, it was apparent that even considering frameworks and aligning literacy provision to frameworks or curricula was a duty more relevant to the setting manager. Across the responses, it was apparent that Managers were more vocal and descriptive in providing details on framework use or even lack thereof. When asked the same question, Educator 10 suggested that “the manager would know more on that.” This was echoed by Educator 1 who stated that “We would obviously go by, like, the way, the curriculum ways that the managers want us to do.”

Four literacy CPD providers were interviewed and asked a similar question on whether any frameworks, curricula or guidelines inform the work they do in supporting the language and literacy practices of educators in Irish preschool settings. Aistear did not feature across the four responses. CPD1 and CPD4 indicated that their work is informed, in part, by the Hanen Programme and their own independent research. CPD3 asserted that their work is instead informed by “online research and CPD”, while CPD2 stated that in terms of what informs their provision for literacy support, they simply “don’t know.”

#### **6.4.1.1 Participants’ Perspectives of The Aistear Framework and its Role in**

**Preschool Literacy Provision.** Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years in Ireland (NCCA, 2009; 2024). While Aistear is not compulsory, all pre-schools in the state-funded ECCE scheme are expected to operate in accordance with it, as well as with the Síolta quality framework (Murphy, 2015). When asked to explain which frameworks, programmes or guidelines inform their literacy practices, answers were extremely varied, with over 50% of educators and managers citing that their literacy practices are not informed by Aistear.

Perspectives and perceptions of the framework featured heavily across the responses with many participants citing a desire for greater acknowledgement of early literacy across the framework. CPD providers were in agreement that the broad and open-ended nature of the framework can be challenging for educators to navigate, particularly in terms of applying the framework to everyday literacy practices. CPD1 stated that “Aistear’s issue is that it was so broad. I think it maybe needs to be more specific. For educators, it should be.”

Similar points were made by educators. Educator 3 stated that working with the framework is “quite hard” and explained that “It can be a heavy document and really it’s light on the practical stuff that educators need for everyday.”

Educators agreed that the framework is challenging and lacks clarity on recommendations and expectations for early literacy learning. Educator 2 explained that in their setting:

We all find it really repetitive, like, you know, you might take one box like this is linked to this area for them to be like maybe 6 or 7 [learning goals] that are the same or like, why is this like so many when you have to tick one box? Why is there so many of those goals that are overlapping in a lot of the descriptions. I find it all very dense and not at all practical.

Educator 8 explained that in their setting they strive to apply the framework to the best of their abilities in terms of early literacy but that it presents a significant challenge in terms of recognising the everyday practicalities of connecting their early literacy practices to the framework.

Yeah, it's hard to follow. I'd like more real supports. I suppose more CPD opportunities, you know, like little courses and stuff like that, I suppose. And helpful ideas. Yeah, I think, you know as much as you try to go by the guidelines as well it's not enough, I'd love if it [Aistear] could be presented more like a textbook, because practically it's not helpful. It's definitely not perfect.

Managers were vocal on the struggles that educators have in dealing with the framework due to its open nature and agency afforded to the educator. An agentic educator makes professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs (NCCA, 2023). Navigating such a role agency appeared to be a challenge, something which managers alluded to across their responses.

Manager 1 explained that:

With it being a framework, I suppose, it's kind of very open. Maybe to make more reference to early literacy and actually what it might look like? Maybe to

have some exemplars? The little case studies, maybe to have ideas about how we could do a story?

Manager 1 elaborated further citing their interest in early literacy learning as a key support in interpreting the framework:

So, I am close to literacy, because you know, I read the framework, I'd say, oh yeah, sure, I'll be doing books for that, or I've pulled stories for that and you make the connection to practice; whereas, someone else mightn't be seeing that because Aistear's not very explicit.

Such points were echoed by Manager 5 who stipulated the challenges for educators in interpreting the framework and locating the relevant guidance to support early literacy practice.

The practitioner coming in being expected to unpack that document? If it's [literacy] not in black and white, it's not a priority then. [Manager 5]

Manager 1 raised similar concerns surrounding the challenges in locating the practical guidelines and recognising what the framework means in terms of everyday, early literacy practice:

The practical – we still need time and support to process the practical or what that actually looks like. We have to realise that there's some people working in the sector, and understanding those early literacy skills? They find that hard! And coming in with a level 5, they still find it difficult to work with the framework and see the practical. [Manager 1]

Manager 5 elaborated on such points even further and argued that early childhood educators deserve a framework which is clearer with greater signposting to early literacy, suggesting that educators would benefit from something more similar to that

of the outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) for primary school teachers:

It's not user-friendly enough. Like the primary teachers' curriculum? It's black and white! It's very obvious what you have to do. There's no kind of opportunity for losing things between the lines. The learning outcomes are so clear. I would argue that in Aistear the lines are really blurry. They're very blurry. Aistear is much more vague and we're expecting a lot of Level 5's and 6's, you know? To be able to decipher a curriculum framework that's more difficult than what primary school teachers are being asked to do. It's much more difficult, you know? And they're struggling with it and my teachers say, *X, we're not even reading the new Aistear Framework, you read it and you tell us what we need to know.*

Worth noting is that when it came to the publication of the revised Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) it was accompanied by the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019) which describe aspects of the Learning outcomes in greater detail and support teachers in "building rich pictures of children's language learning" (p. 1). For Aistear, such additional, explicit detail does not exist.

Similar points were echoed again by Manager 1 who expressed that

For some people to make connections to the framework, it's much easier than others. I just read and fly through it; and I'll know it and talk about it. Whereas other people might have to read and read it again. Look things up. So, I think, because the sector isn't degree led, realistically we have to take on board everyone's differences in knowledge and understanding and even their education level.

A key point articulating a common crux in the discussions pertaining to early childhood education in Ireland was again highlighted by Manager 5 who argued that

regardless of documentation, guidelines or frameworks, it all goes back to funding of the sector. They argued that:

They [early childhood educators] are not being paid enough for this, so it needs to be user friendly and so easy for them that they can do it without taking any more energy out of them than they're already giving. Like, you know, I mean it's ok to expect a primary teacher to do a bit extra<sup>7</sup>, isn't it? But it's not acceptable to expect our early years' educators to do a bit extra when they're already doing way too much for far, far, too little.

Such points were echoed by Manager 2 who agreed that funding is ultimately impacting early literacy practice: "It's under resourced, the whole thing. We need more money." Concerns about funding are in line with consistent, longstanding patterns within the ECE sector. Walsh (2016, p.89) stressed the need for a new focus on investment, asserting, "much of the investment to date in the ECE sector has been targeted at the physical infrastructure. It is now time to invest in the professionals who work in the ECE sector from whom so much is expected, the people who deliver the service and who are fundamental to the quality of experiences and outcomes experienced by the child." Points that ring true and are still requiring continued attention and action almost a decade on.

#### ***6.4.2 Interpretations of Early Literacy***

A recurring pattern across the responses of all participants was the variety in interpretations of early literacy. Fellowes and Oakley (2020) stress that preschool educators' perceptions of the term literacy underpins classroom practices. In this study, the data demonstrates that interpretations of early literacy were dominated by a focus on isolated

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<sup>7</sup> In Ireland the working hours, conditions and payscale between primary school teachers and early years teachers continue to be dramatically different. Primary teachers also receive incentivised access to continuous professional development annually, for example, with up to five extra personal vacation days (EPV) available for teachers who complete Department of Education approved summer courses in their own time.

activities as opposed to a focus on specific literacy skill development. Such interpretations ultimately impacted responses across all major topics addressed in interviews as detail on literacy skills pertaining to priorities, read alouds' and practice were vague and lacking depth. For CPD educators, a concern was the under-appreciation of the links between children's early language development and their eventual literacy development. CPD1 insisted that

People [educators] don't know how strong the link is between language development and literacy development is. And I think that's a huge problem.

Interpretations of early literacy impact the early literacy experiences provided by preschool settings, and as explored, the differing priorities across educators, managers and settings were broad across responses. Educator 3 articulated the fact that literacy provision is setting dependent and that this is a result of a variety of factors.

I just think it's kind of up to each setting how much literacy they do, or if they do any or what their take is; it's very broad. There's no kind of specific thing that we have to follow, or you know what you have to definitely cover. Do you know? How do I know if I'm interpreting the framework the right way as well? Such variety in qualifications and things as well.

Manager 5 explained that it is not unreasonable to expect such varying interpretations on literacy stating that "they [educators] are not reading books on this." They also stressed that the varying interpretations lead to a necessity for them, as manager, to use their interpretations of literacy to lead and direct literacy practice in their setting.

I find it's driven a lot by me. And it makes me wonder, is there a huge gap there with my educators because they didn't come across it in their formal academic training?

#### ***6.4.3 Educator Literacy Knowledge and Training***

The minimum qualification for staff participating in the ECCE Scheme is a Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (Murphy, 2015). As demonstrated across the data collected in phase 1 and phase 2 and mirroring the current ECCE context in Ireland,

qualifications are extremely varied. Across the interview participants, qualification levels ranged from Level 5 to Level 9. Varying priorities and interpretations of early literacy across responses were linked back to educator knowledge and educator literacy training experiences. Matters pertaining to training and knowledge development on early literacy, were raised across the responses of all participants. CPD providers were in agreement in querying the level of literacy input received in qualification journeys, demonstrated by CPD 1 who stated:

I don't know how much, literacy support they get in their training. I feel they certainly don't get much about language or maybe even literacy.

Participants were invited to share insights into their literacy training as part of their qualifications and responses indicated a broad variety in experiences. While most participants had some form of input on early literacy across their qualification journeys, most were in agreement that what they received was insufficient. Educator 1 explained that they did not think "there was enough on it [literacy]. Yeah, I kind of had to read up on it myself."

Similarly, Educator 5 stated that "I actually don't think we ever did much on it at all. We did a couple of hours on story facts, but I don't think anything to do with literacy, across my level 6 or 7."

Educator 8 explained that while literacy was a small feature within their level 8 qualification, in the qualifications prior to that, it was not.

We would have done some literacy in the Level 8, not the courses before. I don't think that I recall much of what we did. We did some work on working with children with English as a second language. So that's probably what we would have touched on in that regards to literacy. It wasn't a stand-out part of the degree.

Low precedence of literacy modules and literacy content was a common feature across responses. Educator 10 explained that in their training, “there wasn't really that much talk of literacy. There was more emphasis on other things than that. Like care and so on?” [EDU10] For some, literacy training across qualifications was non-existent. Manager 5 explained that literacy was not a feature across their Level 5, Level 6 or Level 8 qualifications.

The honest answer is no, in my level 5 and 6. And then in my degree, I don't remember any module specifically on literacy. I can honestly say no, there was no literacy module unfortunately, it's a loss, but I think it's pretty common.

Similar sentiments were shared by Manager 4 who explained that in their training,

The only actual literacy I would have learned about along the way was through stories, some paper letters and things like that. But in the degree? It wasn't there. There was no module in regard to literacy.

For others, literacy was an optional module, and as students, participants had the option to choose whether to complete a literacy module or not. Educator 1 explained that this was the case for them, but on reflection, recognised that in hindsight it may have not been the best choice.

I actually got the option to choose if I wanted to choose literacy, and at the time I didn't. So yeah, I didn't have to pick it and that probably wasn't my best decision.

Educator 1 elaborated further on their decision not to opt for a literacy module, citing future work prospects and career progression as being their priority at that time.

I was choosing what suited in that moment, the modules I thought I needed like being a supervisor or leader, but literacy was on the list, but it didn't mean much to me then? And I kind of regret not picking it now.

Educator 2 echoed this sentiment and explained that they “chose numeracy but that’s important too. It’s a pity we had to pick between the two.”

#### **6.4.4 Summary Response**

Findings indicate a wide variety of factors informing and influencing preschool literacy practices. Responses demonstrate that most preschool literacy practices of interview participants are not meaningfully informed or aligned with a particular framework or curriculum. Perspectives on the role of Aistear in preschool literacy practices demonstrated frustrations with the existing document and a variety of concerns educators, managers and CPD providers have in relation to the breadth and open-endedness of the framework and its value to educators in early literacy provision. Across the responses, interpretations of literacy were extremely varied, indicating that this may be one of the most influential factors in informing current preschool literacy practices. Responses on interpretations of literacy direct attention to an underlying theme across the data collected, the individual early literacy knowledge and competency of educators and the quality of literacy provision (or lack thereof) in their training and qualification experiences.

### **6.5 Challenges in Preschool Literacy Provision**

“Preschool educators have a lot on their plates.” [CPD3]

Across responses, it was evident that there are significant challenges for educators, managers and CPD literacy providers in delivering and supporting preschool literacy provision ranging from factors such as knowledge, staffing, guidance and resourcing. Educators and managers were confident in their overall preschool provision but were happy

to acknowledge that literacy provision can be a struggle. This was demonstrated by Manager 5, who outlined that:

Literacy is something I struggle to include. I find my educators do too. To include literacy as often and as seamlessly as I would like it to happen. I know my quality is really good but I'm quite happy to say that this is one of the areas that I feel we need to improve on.

Educators provided deeper insights into everyday practice and expressed concerns regarding challenges such as navigating ratios and meeting the needs of all. Educator 3 explained that:

It can be hard to try and meet everyone's needs, especially with the ratio, I suppose, like one adult to 11 children. It depends on the needs that those children have. Maybe the ratio, like if it was a lower ratio we could have much higher quality early literacy experiences for the children.

#### ***6.5.1 Challenges in Sourcing Preschool Literacy Resources and Materials***

Concerns surrounding resources and materials were common; particularly across the responses of educators, with the narrative returning again to matters of funding and financing. Educator 7 expressed that:

Sometimes getting the resources that you would like, you have to source yourself and that's an expense. Everything can be quite expensive to buy yourself. And you can't afford it. Definitely not. So, like, you try your best to get what you can, or you try to get a cheaper version of it to tide you over.

Similar concerns were outlined by Educator 8 who stated that greater funding is needed

So you wouldn't have to pay for so much yourself, to be honest, it's a pressure. You know one year, there was an initiative where we got books and we were so grateful. That kind of stuff. That's what we need. Funding for resources. That would be a big thing that would be helpful, I suppose. It's hard.

### **6.7.2 Sector-Wide Issues In Preschool Literacy Provision**

Many of the challenges pertaining to preschool literacy addressed across the interviews are reflective of challenges across the entire preschool sector in Ireland. Managers were particularly vocal on the challenges of “Having the right staff and keeping the right staff.” [Manager 3] Maintaining staff and navigating a high staff turnover has been a longstanding challenge right across the early childhood sector due to limited funding, disparities in pay and working conditions. Although progress has been made in the areas of professionalisation and qualifications of the sector, turnover continues with many educators moving on and taking their knowledge, experience and qualifications with them. CPD providers were in agreement that staff turnover brings significant challenges to progress, as time spent training educators can be undermined when following training, educators move on or choose positions with better hours, contracts and pay. CPD3 explained that, in their role, staff turnover is one of their biggest challenges to navigate when providing early literacy support and training to preschools.

I think the trickiest thing is the staff changes. We put effort into training and then they're gone. Staff shortages then cause it to be really tricky for staff to be in a position to take on anything new.

Manager 3 expressed concerns about such turnover and the need to retain staff with expertise, qualifications and knowledge of early literacy development and learning.

My biggest fear is losing the very good staff, the highly trained staff that get the importance of early literacy. They're training up and moving into the primary teaching profession.

They elaborated further and outlined the implications of losing qualified staff to other sectors and prospects.

Trying to keep the knowledge in the sector is really important. And if we fail at this age, then we're setting them up to fail in early years and Junior and Senior Infants.

And if we get it right, well then, wow!.

Such points are reflective of the literature and patterns across the sector in general with a common trend in highly qualified graduates not finding careers in preschool provision financially sustainable and opt for alternative career paths (Murphy, 2015).

### ***6.5.3 Access to Literacy-Related Professional Learning Opportunities***

The evidence from the pilot Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2013) and from the Aistear in Action Initiative (NCCA, 2013; Daly, Grogan-Ryan, Corbett & Connolly, 2014) shows the importance of ongoing professional development and mentoring across the early years sector (Murphy, 2015). Access to professional learning opportunities in early literacy was an issue raised frequently by interview participants.

Participants were invited to share their experiences of engaging with early literacy professional learning opportunities garnering a very mixed array of responses, similar to that of Phase 1. Most participants (educators and managers) were insistent that professional learning opportunities to support early literacy provision can be hard to locate and access.

I've done the Hanen training. And it was kind of all about language. And then I've done a webinar with Geraldine French. It was supporting language development in early years. And so I've done a couple of those kind of webinars when they're available. Literacy things can be hard to find. [EDU3]

Such sentiments were echoed by Educator 8 who maintained that it is not a matter of interest but down to availability of courses and webinars in this area:

I would try to look out for them but there's not a lot about literacy. [EDU8]

Educators and managers were in agreement that opportunities for engagement with professional learning to support early literacy practice was necessary as outlined by Educator 9 who stated that:

Well, I suppose we need training. So, that we actually know what we're doing, what we need to do, and somewhere to go if we are stuck or unsure?

This was mirrored by Educator 1 who redirected attention to the gap in practical preschool literacy supports and explanations for educators.

I think it [literacy-related professional learning opportunities] would be very beneficial. Because, like even the impact that reading has on kids from at that age to even when they go on to primary school, I think it would be great if there was more on that for us. We know it's very beneficial but why and knowing what to do is hard. Similar points were raised by Manager 5 who expressed the need for literacy professional learning supports designed specifically for early childhood educators.

I do feel training is required. I would love to see something specifically tailored at early years educators to help them understand what literacy is, understand that they are already doing it, that maybe they don't recognise it, or have the vocabulary to recognise it!

However, valid concerns were also raised on the realities of engaging with professional learning that is not accessible or local to educators.

People are busy, you know? They can't just go to Dublin, and it just doesn't work especially not when you're working 'til 6 o'clock with full daycare – you know?  
[Manager 5]

Manager 1 suggested that there is a need for asynchronous professional learning opportunities to counteract the challenges of access, affordability and working hours.

Videos of people in action would be excellent. Just to give people ideas.

Others were blatantly honest in explaining that they don't or have not engaged with any professional learning opportunities to early literacy as such expectations are not mandatory, exemplified by Educator 10, who has not engaged with such opportunities:

No, I haven't. Personally, I know there's ongoing different short courses online. But it's off your own yourself to do them.

Once again, this reinforces the ongoing concerns associated with appropriate investment in the professional ECE workforce over that afforded to physical infrastructure. As Walsh (2016, p.89) states, investment is necessary to facilitate the “provision for ongoing CPD” of ECE professionals.

#### ***6.5.4 Findings Phase 2 Summary Response***

The interview process shed light on the significant variety of challenges educators, managers and CPD providers face in preschool literacy provision. Challenges were numerous and evidentially bear a significant impact on literacy provision. Participants raised concerns surrounding the challenges in sourcing of literacy resources and materials and the financial burdens attributed to such challenges. Many of the challenges raised can be categorised as sector-wide challenges and are particularly reflective of current trends across early childhood education in Ireland. Access to and availability of specific literacy-related professional learning opportunities was an issue for many with a variety of challenges impacting uptake and engagement across the board.

### **6.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the data analysis and findings for Phase 2 of the study were presented and discussed. Firstly, priorities for preschool literacy practices were explored which included reference to a broad range of language-related, print-related, and book-related priorities. This section also offered findings on differences in literacy priorities between preschool educators and preschool managers and preschool literacy resources. This was

followed by an exploration of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision which included perceptions of the preschool read aloud, literacy development through the preschool read aloud, read aloud text choices, and access to books. Following this, findings were shared on what participants cited as informing their preschool literacy practices. This included reference to frameworks and curricula, interpretations of early literacy and educator knowledge and training. Lastly, challenges in preschool literacy provision were analysed which led to insights on sourcing literacy resources and materials, sector-wide issues affecting staff turnover and its impact on preschool literacy provision, and access to literacy-related professional learning. Chapter 7 will further consolidate and locate the findings of the study within the relevant literature and will be structured in response to the underpinning research questions.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Discussion**

This chapter will consolidate the findings from both phases 1 and 2 of data collection in order to facilitate a discussion of the findings of the study. The findings will be located within the relevant literature and will also be considered in relation to the overarching bioecological framework of the study. The discussion chapter will be structured in response to the study's underpinning research questions:

1. What are the existing priorities of preschool educators, preschool managers and preschool literacy CPD providers for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?
2. How are 'read alouds' currently utilised in Irish preschool settings?
3. What informs current preschool literacy provision in Ireland?
4. What are the challenges associated with preschool literacy provision in Ireland?

Section 7.1 will address the first research question by discussing the current study's findings in relation to the existing preschool literacy practices and priorities across Irish preschool settings. Section 7.2 will address the second research question by reporting on the findings pertaining to the role of the 'read aloud' in existing Irish preschool literacy provision and the participants' perceptions and awareness of the read aloud as a fundamental early literacy method in preschool settings. The discourse and practices which currently inform preschool literacy practices will be explored in section 7.3. Section 7.4 will unpack the challenges currently impacting existing preschool literacy provision in Irish preschools. Section 7.5 will provide a conclusion to the chapter highlighting the key points addressed and questioned across the discussion.

## **7.1 Research Question 1: Existing Priorities for Preschool Literacy Practices in Ireland**

This section will address the first research question of the study:

### ***What are the existing priorities for preschool literacy practices in Ireland?***

Initially, this question is contextualised in section 7.1.1 by discussing the perceptions of early literacy demonstrated across the responses of survey respondents and interview participants. In section 7.2.2, time is spent exploring the evident focus on literacy activities as opposed to a more intentional and specific focus on literacy skill development. Following this, section 7.2.3 provides an opportunity to consider the intentionality of literacy learning experiences in Irish preschools with specific attention placed on existing priorities for phonics and phonological awareness. Section 7.2.4 provides a summary response to the discussion of Research Question 1.

#### ***7.1.1 Perceptions of Early Literacy***

Explaining and understanding early literacy development is critical if we are to improve children's opportunities for success. (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p.12)

Findings across the data collected in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study revealed significant ambiguity surrounding literacy pedagogy and perceptions of early literacy across educators, managers, and literacy CPD providers. This is evidenced across most of the content analysed, but particularly notable in sections 5.2.1, 5.4.1 and 6.1 where educators' knowledge and perceptions of preschool literacy learning are recurrent. Educators' assumptions about teaching and learning will have what Giles and Tunks (2014) refer to as "a critical impact on pedagogical practices" (p.2). As outlined in chapter two, the preschool microsystem offers a unique and permeable space for early literacy learning and development. Both theory and consistent research articulates that young children benefit from

extensive opportunities to develop their oral language and emergent literacy skills in the preschool learning environment; and as a result, early literacy skills deserve significant attention in these formative years (Pelatti *et al.*, 2014; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The variety in perceptions of literacy warrants attention both in terms of the Irish ECCE context but also in terms of the developing child's early literacy learning experiences and opportunities across the preschool years.

While variety is to be expected, it must be recognised that such variety in perceptions, interpretations and understandings of early literacy will impact and sway priorities for preschool literacy practices, from setting to setting and from educator to educator. Early literacy development is recognised as the stage when young children are acquiring knowledge about reading, writing, language and communication before conventionally learning to read or write (NAEYC, 1998; ILA 1998; Reading Rockets, 2024). French (2013) attests that literacy learning occurs during meaningful interactions, experiences with a broad range of materials, texts, digital technologies and events - many of which can be experienced within the microsystem of the preschool learning environment. Across findings within both Phase 1 and 2 of data collection, it was apparent that the variety in perceptions and interpretations of early literacy learning, and early literacy development were significant. When considering findings concerning preschool early literacy skills, (particularly across sections 5.1, 5.4 and 6.4.3), responses across the questionnaire and interviews demonstrated an evident focus on standalone early literacy activities and routines (such as mark making, interactions, creating a print-rich environment, story reading, circle time, letter formation activities, phonics, name writing, song singing). Absent was a focus on specific early literacy skill development (such as phonological awareness, vocabulary development, narrative discourse, knowledge development and concepts of print). As demonstrated across sections 5.1, 5.4 and 6.4.3, early literacy is certainly something that survey respondents' and interview participants collectively

acknowledged as important. However, what becomes rapidly apparent across the responses, is that preschool literacy provision currently appears to be dominated by a common and narrow focus on isolated literacy-related ‘activities’ as opposed to meaningful reasons for using such activities to foster fundamental early literacy skills - such as vocabulary development, rapid automatised naming, language comprehension, print awareness, phonological awareness, and narrative discourse. The variety in perceptions and provision calls to question the quality and potential of literacy-related proximal processes and educator influence on the literacy ecology of the preschool years. Ultimately, the quality of the early literacy provision will be significantly influenced by the perceptions of early literacy possessed by individual preschool educators. As Pelatti *et al.*, (2014, p. 447) stipulate, “there is considerable between-classroom variability in the language- and literacy-learning opportunities offered” in early childhood learning environments. The potential of the preschool microsystem as a space for consistent, influential, literacy-related proximal processes is, for the most part, educator dependent and the findings within this study demonstrates that if priorities are so varied, a crucial opportunity exists to investigate and collectively reflect on what exactly preschool early literacy priorities should be within the Irish preschool context.

### ***7.1.2 Literacy Activities over Literacy Skills***

There’s lots happening but it’s hard to label. [Educator 8]

It must be acknowledged that preschool educators are faced with a significant and weighty task of targeting multiple areas of young children’s development simultaneously (Pelatti *et al.*, 2014) including early literacy. Children’s early literacy development and early

literacy provision has received increased global attention across the past three decades. This is partly due to the now long-proven actualities that children who have experienced literacy-rich preschool environments show increased gains in language and literacy domains - compared to those who have not (Barnett *et al.*, 2012; Burchinal *et al.*, 2011; Bodrova, Leong & Shore, 2004; Guo *et al.*, 2012; Mol & Bus, 2011; NELP, 2008; Pelatti *et al.*, 2014). A continuously growing body of research (Kim, 2011; McMahon *et al.*, 1998; McLachlan-Smith & St. George, 2000; Miller and Paige-Smith, 2004; Schachter, Matthews & Piasta, 2018) identifies that educators' knowledge and beliefs about children's early literacy learning has a critical impact on pedagogical practices. It is evident across the findings of this study that participants recognise literacy as something that matters, but the specifics on the practices and provision, which meaningfully influence early literacy development, are lacking. This points towards questions surrounding the physical literacy environment and the psychological literacy environment within the preschool microsystem. Research suggests that many preschool contexts today offer inadequately developed psychological literacy environments (Guo *et al.*, 2012; Justice *et al.*, 2008; LoCasale-Crouch *et al.*, 2007) which correlates with Bronfenbrenner's concerns on an over-focus of context without development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

As demonstrated across the findings, it is apparent that much of Irish preschool literacy provision currently revolves around a perception of literacy as an activity rather than perceiving literacy as a continuum of learning and proficiency across a broad set of fundamental, interconnected skills (UNESCO, 2024). A focus on isolated activities undermines the potential for such skills to be integrated through meaningful experiences. Research demonstrates the interdependency of early literacy skills and their influence on children's early and long-term literacy development (Neuman, 2014). This raises questions surrounding the intentionality of such literacy learning experiences in Irish preschool settings.

A mix of activities are certainly happening, but a deeper understanding or appreciation as to why they are happening or facilitated was unclear across the responses of participants, as demonstrated in the presentations of findings on priorities for practice, matters informing practice and challenges in provision across sections 6.1 to 6.5. The findings of this study allude to preschool educators, managers and even literacy CPD providers possessing predominantly surface level interpretations of early literacy with a narrow focus on decontextualised activities as opposed to a bespoke focus on facilitating particular activities for the purpose of contextualising specific early literacy skill development. As evidenced across the survey and in interview responses, there were evident difficulties in naming or labelling specific early literacy skills. This was particularly evident in the interviews, where respondents leaned towards descriptions of decontextualised activities as opposed to linking or aligning them to literacy skills or components. This mirrors findings from the work of Stephen (2010) who found that early years' educators are often willing to talk about what they plan for children and what they do with them but are less likely to discuss why they do things – what she coined pedagogical perspective. This once again highlights the opportunity for recognising all preschool educators as early literacy educators with a capacity for nurturing the “spiral dynamic” (Hayes, 2017, p.27) of positive and appropriate early literacy influence within the preschool microsystem and its psychological literacy environment. It can be argued that a shallow, fixated focus on isolated activities over meaningful skill development demonstrates an example of the features of early childhood environments that interfere with, as opposed to fostering, the development of proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

**7.1.2.1 ‘Tuff Trays’ as an Early Literacy Learning Experience.** As mentioned, a perceived focus on literacy activities as opposed to skills was continuously demonstrated across responses of interview participants. For example, a recurrent

activity listed across the interview responses, was ‘Tuff Trays’. Wright (2018) suggests that ‘Tuff Trays’ are now a staple resource in early years settings. Tuff Trays are a common feature in many Irish preschool settings, affording a space for children to play in groups with a variety of exploratory, open-ended, small world or sensory play experiences. The Tuff Tray itself is a resource and not something that can be described or defined as an early literacy resource. When asked to describe or explain literacy routines and practices already in place in their settings, Tuff Trays were the most common feature in play-related literacy priorities, cited by 9 interview participants (6 educators, 3 managers). However, despite being cited as a literacy experience, in descriptions of their use, the focus remained again on the facilitation of the routine of the Tuff Tray as opposed to providing detail on specific literacy skill development; once again pointing to an imbalance in physical literacy environment versus psychological literacy environment. It was encouraging to hear recognition of Tuff Tray play experience cited as a valuable space for vocabulary and language development however it should be noted that Tuff Trays have drawn criticism in recent years for becoming what Vaziri (2023, p.1) refers to as “large scale worksheets”. This is evidenced by responses of educators who cited adding letters to the tough tray to create phonics-based play experiences.

And then, as the children are getting a little bit older. I might do a tuff tray with and letters in it, for them to try and match them, or that kind of thing. [Educator 4]

While it must be acknowledged that elements of early language and literacy learning indeed happens naturally during such play experiences, the intentionality of the literacy skill development often depends on the teachable moments from knowledgeable, responsive, observant, and sensitive adults (Epstein, 2007; French,

2013). Once again, this reiterates the necessary intentionality in maximising the possibilities of meaningful and reciprocal interactions and transactions offered through enduring literacy-related proximal processes within the preschool microsystem. Such intentionality on behalf of the preschool educator, will enable the “ecological transitions” (Jaeger, 2016) possible within preschool early literacy learning and support educators in their accommodations for the psychological literacy environment.

### ***7.1.3 Intentionality of Early Literacy Learning Experiences in Irish Preschools***

Understanding educators’ intentions and thinking is critical when considering mechanisms for improving literacy provision in the early years (Schachter, Matthes & Piasta, 2021). Understanding intentionality behind specific literacy practices provides insights into why particular practices and patterns in practice exist. The findings of the study pertaining to intentionality of literacy learning experiences raise questions surrounding the existence of opportunities for educators to engage in reflections or self-evaluation of their early literacy practices. Research demonstrates that intentional educators have a purpose for their actions and decision making in the early years’ learning environment and that ongoing evaluation of knowledge and practice is essential (NAEYC, 2021). Self-evaluation enables reflection on practice and enhancement of the quality of care and education provided to young learners (Parenta, 2024). It was acknowledged by participants that isolated literacy activities happen, but detail on why they may happen or be provided was vague across the collective interview responses as a whole. Activities are evidentially designed and provided more so for the sake of routine rather than as a consideration of the learning of the children. As evidenced across the data collected, some early literacy learning experiences are indeed facilitated across Irish preschool settings. What remains unclear is whether these are planned intentionally for the purpose of meaningfully developing preschoolers’ early literacy skills, or whether they are

merely decontextualised activities planned more so ‘for the sake of it’ as a means of fulfilling daily routines and timetables. As Manager 1 outlined, perceptions of early literacy learning can be narrow, affecting the activity-oriented approach to early literacy learning.

“I think probably it is perception. Many educators only think that the literacy experience is the actual reading of a book.” [Manager 1]

This study illustrates, from the contributions of early childhood educators, managers and CPD providers who volunteered to participate in this research, that a variety of literacy activities are facilitated with the aim of including literacy learning experiences in their provision. However, what can be recognised is that many of the activities and learning experiences provided, demonstrate examples of premature formality in terms of literacy learning, and that whether intentional or “unintentional” (Boardman, 2017, p.162), many of the activities outlined across the questionnaire and interviews are more suited to that of primary school literacy provision. This echoes existing literature and examples of preschool practice which Boardman stipulates are “grounded in tradition, hierarchy and a misunderstanding of early reading, structured by neoliberal policy agendas of school readiness and phonics” (2019, p12). Gaps in relevant professional knowledge pertaining about a preschool educator’s role in early literacy learning leads to the risk of early literacy learning in preschool “being subject to a pushdown curriculum from schooling” (Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023). While there was agreement across participants that formal literacy instruction belongs in primary school, examples of schoolified practices still existed across the activities and provision outlined by educators (Moss, 2017). The dominant example of over-formalised practice across the data collection was phonics, which involves systematic instruction of mapping speech sounds to print in order to support the decoding of unfamiliar words (Reading Rockets, 2024). French (2013, p.43), stipulates that when it comes to early literacy learning, early childhood educators “have a unique opportunity to get it right from

the start”. However, as demonstrated through this study, interpretations of what getting it right in early literacy continue to vary, which stands in direct contrast to what has been proven by evidence and what is recommended across the relevant literature cited across section 3.4. This again, highlights the need for national considerations of the macrosystem in a collective effort to strengthen societal value of preschool literacy learning and early literacy development. Additionally, the exosystem offers a valuable space for closer examination and specific intervention on details and guidance on early literacy provision and practice in national preschool policy and guidance; and whether it currently meaningfully supports, serves and represents preschool literacy learning. As it stands, the study demonstrates that meaningful appreciation for these systems is lacking, and a true systems-based focus has yet to be adopted.

#### **7.1.3.1 Phonics in Preschool Literacy Provision.**

“In some of our settings, particularly in the second year of ECCE, we’re finding they’re focusing on phonics when they really don’t need to be focusing on phonics. It’s worrying because they’re not doing read alouds and that kind of thing.”

The prevalence of phonics across the data is of note and arguably demonstrates that increased communications on the relevant early literacy skills and stronger professional understandings about language and literacy pedagogies relevant to the preschool years is warranted (Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023). In Ireland, phonics instruction remains the responsibility of primary schools. The Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019, p. 26) outlines that:

Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:

- Recognise, name and sound all lower- and upper-case letters and common letter patterns, displaying some word-identification strategies when reading instructional and independent-level texts.
- Use phonics knowledge and a range of word identification strategies with flexibility and confidence when reading instructional and independent-level texts.

As iterated in section 3.4, there are no expectations or requirements for children transitioning from preschool to primary to join school with any level of alphabetic knowledge or previous related experience with phonics. In Ireland, it is not a prerequisite for preschool aged children to form, recognise, or read letters or begin school having already mastered skills such as name writing and letter recognition. Yet an evident “preoccupation with the written word” (Cregan, 2011, p.54) still prevails. As demonstrated across the findings of phase one and two in this study, for many preschool educators, phonics is still considered as something necessary in supporting young children in their transition from preschool to primary school. Examples of preschool phonics instruction were noted by all interviewed CPD providers who voiced concerns about the ongoing attention to phonics in preschool settings. Such patterns in practice echo literature on school transitions from the Irish context (such as that of Ring *et al.*, 2016) which demonstrates that there is still a tendency for such academic skills to be valued by early childhood educators, contradicting what is known and recommended for preschool literacy provision. As outlined by the OECD (2019), approaches to education in early years has been understood differently from traditional approaches used in primary school: it involves lower child-teacher ratios, smaller group sizes, more child-centered interactions, greater attention to play-based learning and less emphasis on teacher-led, over-formalised pedagogies; particularly

those connected to early literacy and numeracy learning. Existing practices within many Irish preschool settings of survey and interview participants continue to contradict this, particularly in terms of early literacy learning. Within the survey, respondents were invited to outline their existing literacy practices. While answers demonstrated a broad variety of experiences, ranging across oral language-, reading-, and writing- related priorities, responses continued to allude to priorities pertaining to formal and more academic literacy learning experiences and activities. Table 33 provides an overview of such priorities.

**Table 28**

*Examples of Formal / Conventional Literacy Learning Experiences Facilitated in Preschools by Survey Participants*

| <b>Formal / Conventional Literacy Learning Experiences</b> | <b>n. 161</b> | <b>%</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Letter formation activities                                | 40            | 25%      |
| Phonics activities                                         | 26            | 16%      |
| Reading flashcards                                         | 38            | 24%      |
| Tracing worksheets                                         | 39            | 24.2%    |
| Handwriting practice                                       | 26            | 16%      |
| Name writing                                               | 48            | 30%      |

Similar patterns were noted across the interview responses with educators, in particular, detailing their efforts in prioritising phonics-based activities for the children in year two ECCE. Such practice demonstrates a narrow interpretation of literacy pedagogy as structured approaches to conventional literacy skills (Colliver *et al.*, 2021; Scull *et al.*, 2012; Williamson Hedges & Jesson, 2023).

We have a mixed stage group, so we would all do the same, like phonic of the week and same poem. We'd have the sandpaper tiles out. The year 2 will be more strongly encouraged to try and trace the letters and think of words that start with that sound and stuff. (Educator 5)

I would say, after Easter? The ones going into school? They'll start doing a bit more. Writing their letters more things that the junior infants will be doing.  
(Educator 9)

Once again, the lack of specific guidance for either year of the ECCE programme manifests itself and the opportunity for meaningful pedagogical provision for educators in support of refining and ensuring relevant pedagogical early literacy experiences for the preschool early literacy learner exists.

The narrative of supporting school transitions was close to responses and detail of phonics and other formal literacy skills, which echoes longstanding debates pertaining to school transitions and perceptions of school readiness nationally and internationally. Such practice echoes international findings on how aspects of children's early literacy learning have been rendered invisible and often unexplored or under-prioritised by educators because they sit beyond the obvious tangible aspects (reading and writing) and longstanding traditions in preparation for school readiness (Gregory *et al.*, 2004; Sisson, 2023). In 2013, Einarsdottir flagged concerns about the creation of an unnecessary and unrealistic expectation that on the point of starting school, ECCE settings "must deliver children who are ready" (p.76). Participants, (managers in particular) noted that often the challenges and pressures to lean into more formal literacy practices are the result of parental expectations or what Hayes (2019, p.3) refers to as "external demands".

I think parents' expectations is a big thing; that some parents feel a child should be able to write their name and you know, recognise words and things by the time they leave [preschool]. (Manager 4)

It is apparent that a continued expectation from parents exists surrounding the need for phonics instruction in the preschool years, demonstrating an apparent information gap for parents. A valuable space exists for shared guidance on essentials in early language and literacy development to counteract such challenges for preschool educators. Unrealistic or outdated expectations for children and early childhood educators in terms of early literacy learning continue to contribute to the ‘schoolification’ of preschool, through the downward seepage of pedagogical approaches to literacy with the perceived aim of preparing children for the requirements of primary school (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). Increased attention to school transitions in Ireland, for example through projects such as *Tús Maith*<sup>8</sup>: The Northwest Preschool to Primary Transitions Project (Fiorentini, Furlong, Giblin, & O’Sullivan, 2023) have brought welcome developments in practice, pedagogy and dialogue but it is evident that there is still significant room for improvement, particularly in terms of spreading awareness on and developing preschool literacy practices. In Ireland, there continues to exist, a valuable opportunity in the continuation of early literacy practices from preschool to primary in “enabling better transitions for children by bridging the discontinuities in pedagogy” between preschool and primary education (OECD, 2019, p.16) and to counteract the premature introduction of literacy components such as phonics and handwriting in the preschool years.

**7.1.3.2 Phonological Awareness in Preschool Literacy Provision.** Phonological awareness, a multilevel, oral language skill, has a critical role in early literacy and

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<sup>8</sup> *Tús Maith: The Northwest Preschool to Primary Transitions Project* (2022 – 2025) is a year-long partnership school transitions project between Preschools and feeder Primary Schools across Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo and Mayo facilitated by Dr Lisha O’Sullivan, Clara Fiorentini, Fiona Giblin and Maria Furlon in collaboration with Donegal, Carrick-On-Shannon, Sligo and Mayo Education Centres and Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Mayo County Childcare Committees.

language development (ILA, 2019; Lonigan, Schatschneider & Westberg, 2008; Pelatti *et al.*, 2014) and attention to its development deserves a prominent place in preschool literacy provision. When citing existing practices, 42 out of 161 survey respondents (26%) selected phonological awareness as an existing practice from the list of practices provided. When citing preschool literacy priorities, 6 out of 76 survey respondents (13%) identified phonological awareness as a priority. Conversely, when interview participants were invited to share their early literacy priorities and existing early literacy practices, phonological awareness was not explicitly mentioned across any of the educator, manager or CPD provider responses. Nursery rhymes have long been recommended as a method of developing children's early language and literacy skills; ranging from vocabulary development, recount skills and in particular, most skills across the continuum of phonological awareness (word awareness, alliteration, rhyming, onset and rime, syllable awareness, phonemic awareness). Research reveals that there is a link between nursery rhyme knowledge of preschool children and their future success in reading, writing, and spelling (Harper, 2011). Across the past three decades, continuous studies (such as those of Bryant *et al.*, 1989; Harper, 2011; MacLean *et al.*, 1987; Torgesen, 2002; Vloedgraven and Verhoven, 2007) provide systematic evidence that knowledge of nursery rhymes plays a role in children's phonological development. Reciting nursery rhymes were cited by 95 out of 161 survey respondents (59%) as an existing early literacy practice, with the majority of such practice listed by educators with 10+ years; experience (51 / 95 – 54%). Across the interviews, when citing self-outlined early literacy priorities, nursery rhymes featured in just two educator responses and none for managers or CPD providers. This again demonstrates a possible disconnect between the value or underpinning purpose of including nursery rhymes as a valuable method of developing phonological

awareness; as opposed to a traditional practice or activity included for the sake of predictability in routine. Increased attention is being paid to the development of phonological awareness in the early weeks and months of primary education, thanks to teachers and schools embracing a slower pedagogy and increased awareness of the fundamental role of phonemic awareness in reading success (Ashby *et al.*, 2023; Ehri, 2022; Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; O'Toole, 2023). A lasting feature of the COVID19 Pandemic was the Department of Education and National Educational Psychological Service's (NEPS) combined efforts to promote a "slow down to catch up" approach to learning which provided opportunity for reflection on the fundamental skills required prior to moving to formalised practices, particularly in stages 1 and 2 of primary (DE & NEPS, 2020, p.10). Phonological awareness plays a fundamental role in the development of early decoding and spelling abilities, both being precursors to later reading and spelling achievement (French, 2013). Greater awareness, appreciation of and time afforded to phonological awareness in the preschool years would only further support children in their journey towards eventual reading and writing success (Carroll *et al.*, 2003). Once again, this raises the significance of the environmental factors and the learning architecture of the preschool environment with educators who are "fine-tuned" to responsive practice (Duncan *et al.*, 2008; Jaeger, 2016, p.177).

#### **7.1.4 Differing Priorities**

This study draws attention to exploring implications for preschool literacy provision connected to educator priorities. Most evident across the findings of Phase 1 and Phase 2 were the differences in the early literacy priorities across educators, managers and CPD providers. Such patterns of difference and variability were most notable across priorities for language-, print-, and book-related activities. It is only to be expected that such variability in priorities will exist when educators from setting to setting are relying on a variety of self-

chosen programmes, resources and materials to support preschool literacy practice. Another contributing factor is undoubtedly the varying journeys of professional formation, which will be addressed in greater detail across section 7.4.3. With a lack in specific early literacy guidance or mandatory priorities for the sector, early literacy learning experiences and skill development, will be setting-, educator-, and manager-dependent - thus creating an imbalance in early literacy equity, experience and potential across preschool microsystems and mesosystems. Such imbalance correlates with Pelatti *et al.*'s (2014) concerns about the considerable between- and within-classroom variability of children's preschool literacy learning experiences. As evidenced by the findings in sections 6.4 and 6.5, engagement with external supports for early literacy provision is again, setting dependent and naturally early literacy priorities will be influenced (or not) depending on what support has or has not been engaged with. Additional to the relevant educator knowledge and competence required, discussion is merited on the up-take of profession learning in early literacy and how this can be encouraged (Pianta *et al.*, 2012; Markussen-Brown *et al.*, 2017; Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023). It can be easy to lay criticism to efforts that may be perceived as inappropriate, overly formal or premature for preschool, but educators, in particular, are filling the gaps with self-informed decisions or inspiration and influence from the likes of social media and websites (often designed for different contexts or jurisdictions) targeting early years' provision. As Educator 9 highlighted:

We can feel we have no one sometimes. I don't really know where I would officially go to look for something. I just kind of look on those [Facebook] groups. There's nothing really I can go straight to for early literacy.

Differences in pedagogical views of educators and managers in preschool settings can impact continuity for children during the preschool years, particularly in the provision of high-quality and relevant early literacy learning experiences. Historically, there have been

divisions and tensions between the early childhood education sector and primary school, as well as divisions within the early childhood education sector itself (OECD, 2019). Numerous factors can be attributed to this however the longstanding ‘care’ association with early childhood education has dominated discourse and priorities in preschool provision, possibly at the expense of delaying what can be considered a gradual “shift towards explicitly recognising the educational dimensions of ECEC” (OECD, 2019, p.1). Developments in prioritising education as a central concern may be slow but demonstrate acknowledgement and appreciation for a contemporary and ever-increasing body of research in psychology, neuroscience and economics which collectively highlight the benefits associated with high-quality ECEC programmes (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Howes *et al.*, 2008; OECD, 2019; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Williamson, Hughes and Jesson (2023, p. 21) argue that the educator’s knowledge base must be “strengthened with content knowledge of language and literacy” to enable the necessary play, responsive, relational and reciprocal interactions across transactional proximal processes within the preschool microsystem. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) stated that while most educators and policy makers generally agree that a strong start in early literacy is critical, there is less agreement about how this is best accomplished. Such patterns continue to exist, demonstrated by the contributions of participants in the data collection; acknowledgement of literacy is evident, but agreement and specifics in priorities is lacking which ultimately pushes attention on the developing person, the child as an early literacy learner, further from view.

### **7.1.5 Research Question 1: Summary Response**

This section sought to consolidate relevant findings and discuss what the existing priorities are for preschool literacy provision in Ireland. The findings suggested that priorities revolve around a narrow focus on literacy activities as opposed to facilitating such activities for the broader purpose of developing specific early literacy skills. This points towards an

evident disconnect between practical activities and a broader awareness of early literacy skill development and a preoccupation with the tangible physical literacy environment and connected activities more so that the psychological literacy environment and the nurture of appropriate foundational early literacy skills. The findings also continue to point towards a preoccupation with conventional literacy skills, such as phonics, which continue to be closely linked to and associated with a perceived urgency or need to prepare preschool-aged children for the transition to primary school and the external expectations and external demands of parents. Despite the challenges, a genuine willingness to engage in early literacy provision was evident and a hunger for improved guidance around optimal practice in progressing developmentally appropriate early literacy skills in the preschool years. The findings correlating to Research Question 1 demonstrated opportunities for greater consideration of the Bioecological systems model to refine and enhance pedagogical practice and architecture to best support the early literacy learning, early literacy architecture and early literacy practice within the Irish preschool context.

## **7.2 Research Question 2: The Read Aloud in Preschool Literacy Provision**

This section will address the second research question of the study:

***Are ‘read alouds’ used as an early literacy method in Irish preschool settings?***

Initially, this research question is contextualised in section 7.2.1 by discussing perceptions of the read aloud across the responses of survey respondents and interview participants. Section 7.2.2 provides an exploration on the facilitation of read aloud experiences in Irish preschools and the factors currently impacting the preschool read aloud. This leads on to a discussion of an evident disconnect between the preschool read aloud and early literacy learning in section 7.2.3. Following that, 7.2.4 examines the patterns in text-choices influencing preschool read aloud experiences and the impact this holds on the educators’ choice of genre. A summary response to Research Question 2 is provided in section 7.2.5.

### **7.2.1 Perceptions of the Preschool Read Aloud**

One of the underpinning motivations behind this study was to explore and highlight the fundamental role of the read aloud as a critical methodology and proximal process necessary in fostering children's early literacy development during the preschool years. Frequent exposure to books through read alouds offers an array of early literacy skill development which are likely to enhance language development and early reading skills (Asraf & Halim, 2024; Flynn, 2011; Mol *et al.*, 2009; McGee & Schikendanz, 2007; Pelatti *et al.*, 2014). During analysis of data it became increasingly apparent that perceptions and interpretations of reading aloud were varied, and at times conflicting. A recurring pattern across the findings was the varying opinions on the value of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision. An additional finding was the fact that interpretations of the read aloud itself were diverse. This was most evident in the interviews as prior to sharing their thoughts on the value of the read aloud, 17 (out of 20) participants required clarification on the exact meaning of term itself 'read aloud'.

“Is that just reading a book out loud?” (Educator 7)

“That's reading books to the kids, yeah?” (Manager 6)

“That's just reading out loud with the children?” (CPD 2)

While it can be a natural reaction to clarify a question or the meaning of a term before responding, this was the only question (out of 23 questions) that required any form of clarification or explanation across all interviews with educators, managers and CPD providers. This may be attributed to the fact that the term 'read aloud' is not commonly used across Irish early childhood settings; with terms like 'storytime', 'book reading' or 'shared reading' being more prevalent. Literacy-related proximal processes, such as the read aloud, are influenced by the personal characteristics and pedagogical motivations of the educator

facilitating and are dependent on rich, bidirectional interactions. Uncertainties and varying perceptions of read aloud value, will only naturally limit the potential and mere existence of the complex reciprocal activity afforded through engaging and effective preschool read alouds. The findings of the study indicate that there exists a case to promote increased awareness on the significance of embedding language and literacy interactions across preschool read aloud experiences within the knowledge base of preschool educators, managers and relevant ECCE stakeholders.

### ***7.2.2 Facilitation of the Read Aloud in Irish Preschools***

Research has demonstrated that the most effective read alouds are those which are interactive, in which children are actively involved, and those which are facilitated early in the day (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson *et al.*, 2014; Hindman *et al.*, 2008; Lepola *et al.*, 2023; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Williamson, Hughes & Jesson, 2024). Literacy learning occurs during meaningful interactions (French, 2013), through a broad range of experiences including reading aloud or ‘read alouds’. Numerous studies (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; McGee & Schickendanz, 2007; Meyer, Wardrop, Stahl & Linn, 1994; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst *et al.*, 1999), have long suggested that merely reading books aloud is insufficient for accelerating children’s early literacy skills; instead, it is the way in which books are shared with children that matters and can impact early literacy development for the better. This also correlates with Bronfenbrenner’s vision of interactions and their influence in development. Concurrently, research has also demonstrated that many preschool educators offer limited time for reading aloud at the expense of language and literacy development and undermining the instructional potential of the read aloud (Asraf & Hamil, 2024; Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017). Notably, across the interview responses on the read aloud, there was a common association with storytime and the read aloud being used as a mere settling activity; most likely to be performed at the end of

the preschool day - before home time – often as means of facilitating the necessary calm and time for children getting coats and bags on a one-to-one basis in preparation for the handover to parents and guardians.

We're forcing [a] read aloud in the five minutes before we go home. [Manager 5]

“They kind of get themselves ready for going home, and then we read a little story to them, and then they go home. So, the story, and then after that they go home.”

[Educator 8]

Such practice, results in no meaningful time for the children to engage actively whilst discussing, processing or reflecting on the story; or even responding to what has just been read aloud. Research continuously demonstrates the need for young children to be provided with time to reflect and talk about texts following a read aloud (Grabmeler, 2019). Extra-textual dialogue reinforces vocabulary, builds background knowledge and fosters comprehension skills and increases the likelihood that the children will connect with the text (Logan, Justice, Yumus & Chaparro-Moreno, 2019). Others outlined how the read aloud is utilised as a transition activity. Such examples were demonstrated in points raised by Educator 6 who explain that in their setting:

Reading [aloud] is good sometimes for like a transition, let's say maybe after food time, where one of us are trying to tidy up, and one of us are entertaining the children.

It's better than nothing for that five minutes time when you're changing over.

Once again, this demonstrates an evident under-appreciation of the potential pedagogical value of reading aloud. This echoes the findings of Hoffman, Roser and Battle (1993, p.499) who over 30 years ago were warning that when read alouds “are left to chance or delegated to a time-filler slot, the potential of reading aloud may never be fully realised.” It is promising to recognise that read alouds are being facilitated in some form - though the contributions

across data collected demonstrate very significant room for development of what is currently offered. It is evident that in many preschools, the read aloud has fallen into a space of being nothing more than either a time-filler between transitions across the day or the concluding story at home time which echoes Hamlin's (2022) points on the read aloud slowly losing its place in the early childhood settings which is a significant concern. Gurdon (2019) stipulates that such a loss of place is a result of the sacrificing of time for something else in the daily routine. Many factors appear to be limiting the potential of and opportunity for read aloud facilitation across Irish preschool settings. Those cited across the surveys and interviews include educator confidence, challenges with management of the learning environment, limited staff, rigidity or timetabling, child-led learning environments, transition-free learning environments and time constraints.

Another vital consideration when considering the preschool read aloud, is to reflect on where read alouds are currently taking place in the preschool learning environment. Traditional interpretations of reading aloud with young children would associate such reading experiences as something that must happen in a reading-related space, or library space, for example. This was mirrored across the responses of educators interviewed, for whom it was common that the read aloud was limited to the 'reading corner' or 'book space' in the learning environment or within a circle-time format when contending with large groups.

If the children asked for a story, I'd read the story in the library. So we have a small library area in the room, and that's where the story would take place. But then, if we were doing it as a big group with an exercise, it'd kind of be in the middle of the floor. One of the main differences probably, is that when it's done like with smaller group of children say, the morning, we'd be sitting on the floor in the library. It's a little bit more cosier and intimate. [Educator 3]

We do short circle times every day. So, we would do 5 stories a week at circle time... So, we do prioritise books at circle time. [Educator 5]

We don't force [the read aloud] but do encourage them all to stay for the story as part of circle time. We'd ring a little bell so it's nice and quiet. So, if you want to listen along, you can properly listen. And yeah, we'd sit in the circle with them. The book goes up high, and we just encourage them all to look and listen as we're going through. [Manager 6]

Across the responses, there were limited examples of reading aloud being facilitated for small groups of children, but rather for most, it was detailed as an experience facilitated in a large group with the expectation on everyone joining in. Managers expressed their concern and confusion on how the read aloud can even be facilitated without interrupting the children's freedom or even fit within an outdoor learning environment.

Our library and our books tend to be inside. And I'm going to be honest with you. The children are outside. And how do we do that? You know? How do we make it real in an environment that's no longer classroom based anymore? [Manager 5]

Such points were echoed by others who cited the outdoor learning environment as a reason for limiting read aloud opportunities.

If we're not outside, then they will get one [a read aloud] before it's lunchtime but in a standard session they wouldn't really get the opportunities [for read alouds]. But if they're inside, they would do. [Educator 6]

This rigid interpretation of the place of books and read alouds being restricted to indoors or envisaged as an indoor 'activity' raises concerns and once again questions surrounding interpretations of the read aloud. The read aloud is a multifaceted, multifunctional and flexible method which offers significant opportunities for playful and meaningful language and literacy development when books and reading materials are brought outdoors. The opportunity to listen to books read aloud outdoors offers a wealth of benefits, from cognitive

development to mental and physical well-being (Robertson, 2022). In Ireland, it is increasingly heartening to recognise that child-led learning environments are becoming steadily popular and encouraged, yet it begs the question as to whether the ‘child-led’ experience should be adhered to so rigidly that experiences, such as read alouds, should be avoided or not facilitated for fear of detracting from the child-led system? The Department of Education’s Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (2024) stipulates that early childhood educators must consider how babies and children can “make choices around their engagement with environments, resources and activities” but encourages educators to “ensure that children learn in a variety of contexts throughout the day.” The guidelines acknowledge that play must be “the central medium through which babies and young children learn” (p. 41) however, notably, it includes a signpost for practice encouraging inspectors to “consider the extent to which children are provided with regular opportunities to listen to and explore stories in the company of an affectionate and attuned early years educator” (p.42). Contradiction of such guidelines can be evidenced across some responses, exemplified in the points raised below:

Since we've moved outside, it's just not happening, it's [the read aloud] just gotten lost. I'm not sure that we have been outside long enough, or that the research has been done, or that we have any way to solve that yet. [Manager 5]

How do we adapt it to be as valuable in the kinds of child-led, outdoor services that we are promoting? Now, which is, I mean, for want of a better word, the kids do what they want. So, do we stop them and interfere with play? Which we don't want to do to do a read aloud? Or how can we? How do we get it in there without stopping everything; like the dreaded stopping everything for a circle time. Oh, God! I don't want to do that. [Manager 5]

While caution, such as the above, against schoolified or over-formalised practices is important, a broader appreciation and interpretation of child-led pedagogy and

developmentally appropriate early literacy practices and routines is essential in creating optimal preschool literacy learning environments. Global literature highlights the importance of including a range of early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years. In line with this, an appreciation of preschool-aged children as active learners is crucial; in fact, it is imperative to the bioecological model that the child is an active agent in the learning environment. That said, the Bioecological model recognises that even as an active agent, the child exists in a state of both being the influencer and being the influenced (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny, 2023). While a child-led approach matters, encouraging experimental, relational and collaborative child-centered activities (such as read alouds) in small groups is also a vital element of any ECEC curricula (OECD, 2019).

### ***7.2.3 Preschool Read Alouds and a Disconnect from Early Literacy***

Research clearly demonstrates the benefits of read alouds for preschool-aged children with regard to a wealth of components of early literacy development, including: social development and learning through interactions (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Barton, 2007; Neuman, 1996; Street, 1984); the development of early literacy and language and meta-cognitive abilities (Beck and McKeown, 2001); comprehension skills (Beck and McKeown, 2001; Dooley and Matthews, 2009); vocabulary growth (Beck and McKeown, 2001, 2007; Hindman *et al.*, 2012); print referencing (Justice *et al.*, 2009); and sensitivity to the sounds and letters in words (Dickinson and Caswell, 2007; Wasik *et al.*, 2006). Careful, intentional planning and continuous implementation of read alouds are vital features in optimising early literacy provision (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Shedd and Duke, 2008), particularly in the preschool years. Again, indicative of patterns across the findings in general on early literacy provision, for participants across the surveys and interviews, the read aloud was envisaged as an isolated 'activity' that you facilitate as part of a daily routine as opposed to a planned experience linked to early literacy skill development or something connected to early literacy

development in general. This echoes international perspectives wherein preschool read alouds are generally not seen as an early literacy practice by educators but instead are viewed as an ‘activity’ mostly for entertainment purposes and/or disciplinary purposes in the preschool classroom (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damberg, 2015; Dickinson, 2001; Eskebaek *et al.*, 2008; Scheiner & Gorsetman, 2009; Shedd & Duke, 2008; Thomas *et al.*, 2011). As described in section 7.3.2, activity-based or entertainment read aloud experiences were consistent across the responses of interview participants, with examples of read aloud experiences being combined with circle time or even utilised as a time-filler. The literature continuously demonstrates that preschool education needs to be proactive in its orientation towards early literacy development to reduce the number of children who fail to achieve fluent literacy skills in the early years of primary school (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Snow *et al.*, 2005). Such orientation requires that preschool educators use scientifically validated approaches, such as the read aloud, effectively, in the provision of early literacy learning experiences in their respective preschool learning environments (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Brostrom, 2006; Dickinson and Caswell, 2007; Hall, 2003). Narrow interpretations of the preschool read aloud (as a transition, a pre-home time routine, an entertaining activity, or time-filler) will mean that the early literacy skills that may be unintentionally developed or fostered through such read aloud experiences are merely incidental by-products of the experience, as opposed to carefully planned, intentional opportunities for early literacy and language learning. Once again, this highlights that ongoing reflection by the early childhood educator, as an early literacy educator, on the value of chosen early literacy and language learning activities particularly in terms of considering how the activities are (or are not) supporting the learners’ needs. As with previous points, it highlights the crucial role of the educator knowledge, particularly knowledge of pedagogy appropriate to the preschool context and early literacy development (Williamson, Hughes & Jesson, 2024). Reflections

provide valuable data and evidence of individual pedagogy and professional development and thus should be an imperative consideration of preschool educators, which echoes Boud's (2001) points on reflective practice as necessity for educators in turning their own daily practice experiences into learning. Once again, this points to exosystemic questions surrounding appropriate guidance and support for educators on the preschool read aloud in early literacy provision, an evidentially vapid space in the Irish ECEC policy and framework area.

#### **7.2.4 Read Aloud Text Choice**

Findings pertaining to the type of texts that educators choose to read aloud in preschools were of particular interest to the researcher as part of this study. There has been limited research and literature published investigating book choice for read alouds in preschools, yet the value of careful book choice has been long articulated through studies pertaining to early years' literacy practices (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Damber, 2015; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; McGee & Schickendannz, 2007; Schwarz *et al.*, 2015; Van Kleeck, 2003, 2008, 2014, 2015). Patterns across the responses of interview participants were consistent. All texts, bar one, listed as favourites by educators, managers and CPD providers were narrative fiction texts, with a narrow bracket of classic texts and familiar authors dominating the responses.

Yeah, I would have my favorites I would try to do every year. So, the ones that they all kind of get involved [in] like *Owl Babies* or *The Gruffalo's Child*, the Julia Donaldson kind of ones that have repetitions so they can get involved in the story.  
[Educator 5]

Such limited variety in the fiction texts provided, mirror patterns in the work of Teresa Cremin (2008) and colleagues whose findings demonstrate that the “relatively narrow range

of authors, poets and picture fiction creators, is a matter of considerable concern” (p. 18). Research demonstrates that unless educators possess a wide and deep knowledge of children’s literature, they are not well positioned to foster both a love of reading and use literature to influence and develop literacy skills through authentic and meaningful reading experiences (Cremin *et al.*, 2009; 2014; Kurikova & Cremin, 2014; Sullivan & Brown, 2015; Tavsancil, Yilidirim & Demir, 2019). Once again, this highlights the valuable role of the preschool educator in using their knowledge and responsiveness to influence interactions (Hayes, 2007) – increased knowledge of children’s literature will only positively influence the potential and breadth of read aloud experiences for both educator and child alike.

**7.2.4.1 The Dominance of Julia Donaldson.** Cremin (2021, p.1) cautions on the reliance of educators across educational sectors on a “narrow canon of celebrity authors” such as Roald Dahl, Michael Morpurgo, J.K. Rowling and Julia Donaldson (Cremin, 2009; Clark and Teravainen, 2015). Such patterns in narrow repertoires of educators, managers and literacy CPD providers are evident across the data collected as part of this study. Within the interviews, participants were invited to share the titles of the texts that they enjoy reading aloud in preschools. 19 out of 20 participants listed either the author Julia Donaldson, or a text authored by Julia Donaldson. Across the 10 educators alone, Julia Donaldson or a text of hers, featured in all responses. Across educator responses, Julia Donaldson’s name was mentioned seven times and her text, *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson, J. & Sheffler, A., 1999; Macmillan, UK), featured in 6 educator descriptions of preferred texts to read aloud. *The Gruffalo* was the most commonly cited text across all interviews, with *A Squash and a Squeeze* (Donaldson & Sheffler, 1993), *The Snail and the Whale* (Donaldson & Sheffler, 2003), *The Highway Rat* (Donaldson & Sheffler, 2011) and *The Gruffalo’s Child* (Donaldson & Sheffler, 2004) also cited at least once. The only other texts listed were:

- *Harry and The Bucketful of Dinosaurs* (Whybrow, I. & Reynolds, A. 1999; Penguin Random House, UK.)
- *Owl Babies* (Wadell, M. & Benson, P., 1992; Walker Books, UK.)
- *The Wonky Donkey* (Smith, C. & Cowley, K., 2009; Scholastic, USA.)
- *We're going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen, M. & Oxenbury, H., 1989; Walker Books, UK.)
- *Giraffe's Can't Dance* (Andreae, G. & Parker-Rees, G., 1999; Orchard Books, UK)
- *Oi! Frog!* (Gray, K. & Field, J., 2014; Hodder Children's Books, UK.)

The only non-fiction text cited was the Usborne '*That's not my...*' series (Watt, F. & Wells, R., 1999-; Usborne Publishing, UK.) which would usually be considered a series of first texts for babies and toddlers as opposed to preschool-aged children. Only one interview participant (a manager) criticised the overuse of Julia Donaldson texts in Irish preschool settings arguing that children deserve a richer variety of diverse texts and citing that such stories are the stories children are already exposed to in the home. Yet, no other examples of texts or authors were offered.

I like to research different books and different authors and things. Julia Donaldson is so overused. They hear those at home....

It's very difficult to find diverse characters and specifically stories of children. I'm not so big into stories of animals because I don't feel children can see themselves in an animal story as they can with a child in a book, it's not the same. Like Julia Donaldson's books again? So, I try to avoid those. I try to avoid animal books and look for children, which are difficult to find.

[Manager 4]

This manager raises valid and timely points relating to the need for an increase in diverse literature read to young children; a recommendations which has been well

documented in contemporary research on children's literature and reading experiences in the early years and the need for "sophisticated reflections of realities" in our text choices (CLPE, 2023, p.29). This again highlights the importance of educator knowledge of texts and the valuable role played by educators who can "skillfully book-match" to support their practice and broaden the reading experiences of young children (Cremin, 2019, p.5). Research, such as that of Cremin (2008; 2014; 2019), has long cautioned against the limitations of reading a narrow range of texts. Such research indicates that the minimal use of global literature only further contributes to the marginalisation of cultural or linguistic minority groups but also limits opportunities to develop children's knowledge through dialogic and interactive read aloud experiences (Cremin, 2008, 2014, 2019; Neuman, 2011; Stanovich, 2000). The patterns across the findings within this study continue to demonstrate that there is significant room for the development of relevant supports in promoting and scaffolding the development in Irish preschool educators, managers and literacy CPD providers own knowledge of children's literature, to encourage a wider range of reading repertoires for young children in an effort to enable more responsive proximal processes across the preschool read aloud. Once again, this merits discussion on the kinds of professional knowledge preschool educators require (Williamson, Hughes & Jesson, 2024).

**7.2.4.2 Text Genres and Early Literacy Skill Development.** With limited text choices comes limited exposure to text genres. With limited exposure to text genres, comes limited opportunities for early literacy skill development through read aloud experiences. Susan Neuman stipulates that "it is the opportunity to learn, not the children's natural ability, that has often stymied their progress in early literacy" (2017, p.38). Reading non-fiction texts enables educators to foster a wealth of early

literacy skills by facilitating meaningful opportunities to build academic vocabulary, connect children to real-world questions and content, assist in cross-curricular learning, foster multiple modes of thinking, nurture self-efficacy, encourage information seeking and higher-level questioning (Joy, 2023; Flowers & Flowers, 2009; Duke, Bennett, Armistead, & Roberts, 2002). According to (Schnazer, 2023) we are living in the golden age of non-fiction children's literature. This may be the case, yet the use of non-fiction texts is still far surpassed by narrative fiction, particularly across early childhood education (Hadjioannou *et al.*, 2023). As demonstrated across the interview findings, narrative fiction dominates responses on preferred texts to read aloud, mirroring patterns across contemporary research on text choices for read alouds (Duke, 2000; Neuman, 2011; Yenika-Agbaw *et al.*, 2018). Research indicates however, that young children often prefer non-fiction to fiction books, though traditions in practice demonstrate that educators often neglect non-fiction books during reads alouds due to factors such as length and expository structure (Shimek, 2023; Conradi Smith *et al.*, 2022; Duke, 2000). In an information-based society, Joy (2016, p.3), recommends that children, from a young age, must be “conversant with many forms of print materials, including narrative stories, reports, blogs, magazine articles, online posts, technical reports, and numerous other modes of communication” to support our broader, contemporary interpretations of literacy and the revised definition of literacy in the National Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (DE, 2024). An overreliance on fiction, which can be seen across the patterns in findings within this study, creates what Doiron (1994) warns is a barrier to understanding other forms of print media. Once again, this points to educator knowledge and appreciation for the read aloud and read aloud texts and their

transactional role in early literacy development and the literacy ecology within the preschool microsystem.

### **7.2.5 Research Question 2: Summary Response**

This section sought to explore the place and value of the read aloud within Irish preschool literacy provision. The findings suggested that while examples of reading aloud were being facilitated in preschools, the read aloud itself was associated with a level of uncertainty and even under-appreciation in its significance. Perceptions of the read aloud were dominated by its role as an activity or entertaining, time-filling experiences as opposed to something which is more directly connected to early literacy skill development and preschool literacy provision. This points towards an evident disconnect between the read aloud and the potential it provides for literacy development in the preschool years. The findings also demonstrated an alignment to patterns in contemporary research pertaining to text choice and text genres, indicating that for many, preschool read aloud experiences are dominated by narrative fiction and a narrow diet of classic texts and well-known trade books. There is an evident need for robust guidance for preschool educators and managers as to the importance of the read aloud across a broader range of genres.

### **7.3 Research Question 3: Informing Preschool Literacy Practices in Ireland**

This section will address the third research question of the study:

#### ***What informs current Irish preschool literacy practices?***

Initially, section 7.3.1 presents a discussion on how preschool literacy practices in Ireland are, or are not, aligned to existing early childhood curricula, models or curriculum frameworks. Section 7.3.1.1 follows with a discussion of *Aistear*: The Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland and the implications it poses towards preschool literacy provision due to factors such as educator agency, breadth of the framework

and challenges associated with the practical application of the framework. Section 7.3.2 discusses the role of educator knowledge and training pertaining to early literacy learning and development and the role these currently play in informing preschool literacy practices. Section 7.3.3 provides a summary response to Research Question 3.

### ***7.3.1 Aligning Preschool Literacy Practice to Existing Curricula, Models and Frameworks***

Across data collection, findings demonstrated that most preschool literacy practices of participants are currently not meaningfully informed by or aligned with any particular curriculum framework or early childhood curriculum. As documented across section 6.4 (Informing Preschool Literacy Practices), 50% of educators and managers interviewed cited that their literacy practices are self-informed and not informed by any specific framework or curriculum. While curricula and frameworks such as *Aistear*, *Montessori*, *Steiner* and *High-Scope* were listed, an evident disconnect was clear between drawing connections to such frameworks or curricula to existing early literacy provision in their settings. Responsibility and consideration of such matters were also deemed a matter for setting managers by some educators, particularly those who were unable to cite frameworks, models or curricula that their literacy practice might be informed by or connected to. This points towards mesosystemic questions pertaining to consistency in thoughtful and informed decision making pertaining to the preschool early literacy learning experiences of the developing child and the shared vision for early literacy learning and provision within the individual preschool environment. According to Bertrand (2007) there is a growing consensus on the importance and the necessity for an explicit curriculum with clear purpose, goals and approaches for zero-to-school-aged children with most OECD countries utilising a curriculum in early years' services, especially in the preschool years (OECD, 2019). The relevance of adopting an explicit curriculum framework for the preschool years is increasingly accepted (Bertrand, 2007) although there is still strong debate about what constitutes appropriate curricula and

pedagogy for younger children (Chazan-Cohen *et al.*, 2017; OECD, 2019; Sylva *et al.*, 2016).

**7.3.1.1 The Aistear ABC – Agency, Breadth and Challenge.** A curriculum framework is an over-arching document that articulates the broad vision of curricula within the broader context of the education system. Curriculum frameworks often provide principles to help staff organise their pedagogical work and to address developmental goals or learning standards (OECD, 2018). Siraj Blatchford (2004) articulates that a curriculum framework should provide guidelines for practice to clarify pedagogical aims for educators on the most important areas of early childhood development; for example, early literacy. *Aistear* is the existing early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years in Ireland (NCCA, 2009; 2024). Under Area 2 of the Guidelines for Early Years Inspection in Ireland (2019), one of the outcomes for practice is to consider how provision is informed by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009; 2024) and to ensure that this is being documented and used to support children’s learning and development in early childhood settings. A common curriculum framework helps ensure “an even level of quality across different forms of provision and for different groups of children” (p.9, OECD 2013). However, it is evident through the findings of this study that not all preschool children in the settings of educators’ contributing to this study are having their early learning and care experiences informed by or even connected to *Aistear*. A broad variety of reasons have been cited for this across the contributions of survey and interview participants. Common examples provided across responses included the lack of clarity and specifics on practical examples and routines within the framework, the framework’s broad, open nature and educators’ difficulties in applying the framework to everyday practice. *Aistear* certainly deserves recognition for significant

development and progress across the early years and the early years of primary across the past two decades. A notable feature of the curriculum framework is that it affords significant agency to educators, which aligns with international, contemporary research and recommendations for early childhood practice. Yet, it must be recognised, that agency can be a complex concept for many to enact and embrace. Educator agency is a category that has been recognized as an important quality and influential factor for educational improvement across educational sectors (Biesta *et al.*, 2015; CongLem, 2021; Datnow, 2020). For agency to be enacted, educators, managers and relevant stakeholders must fully understand and appreciate the contents and intricacies of the framework itself and components of early learning, such as early literacy development. As stated by Shuey *et al.* (2019) in the OECD Working Paper (No. 193) on Curriculum Alignment and Progression between ECEC and Primary School “Not all curricula or curriculum frameworks present a clear theoretical foundation of a particular pedagogical approach. Rather, some are broad and can embrace varied pedagogical practices. (p.11)”

Interview participants cited the difficulties in interpretation of the Aistear framework; while its open-nature and breadth may be in line with research and contemporary recommendations, this does not always suit the educator on the ground. As cited by CPD1:

It’s a framework so it’s not supposed to be specific. But I think for educators, it should be. I’d love if there was a little bit more guidance on how a day should be structured, how that three hour block should be structured. 20 or 30 minutes or whatever for book corners, storytime, small group reading, reading aloud to the big groups. Something that says you have to be doing this kind of thing without it sounding too preachy.”

Participants were invited to share their thoughts on what they would hope to see in the updated version of the curriculum framework (2024). Patterns were similar across the responses with further clarity and practical guidance topping the requests.

Yeah, it's hard to follow. I'd like more real supports. [Educator 8]

Well training would be a start. More training in even understanding Aistear. [Educator 9]

Researchers such as Murphy (2015) and Daly *et al.* (2014) identified the need for services to receive support and mentoring in implementing Aistear. The responses of educators in this study demonstrate that a need for such supports still exists, despite the design of courses, online and paper support materials for settings by organisations such as the NCCA (2014) and Early Childhood Ireland (2013). An opportunity exists for consistent, meaningful practical support for educators and settings to support effective preschool literacy provision. This echoes international research which acknowledges that despite a plethora of mandates and recommended practices for literacy in preschool classrooms today, as Crawford *et al.* (2013) noted, there are not many practical tools that early childhood professionals can use, particularly to guide preschool literacy provision (Beecher, *et al.*, 2017). While *Aistear* acknowledges and recognises early literacy development in various ways across the framework and provides some examples of guidance and recommendations for early literacy and language development across the *Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide* (2016), participants explained that they feel the framework and their practice could benefit from greater specificity pertaining to early literacy provision in the preschool years.

I would like to see something more specific to Literacy, and that we could use in the planning and the everyday running of the preschool, I suppose, and just something to refer back to, something that we have to follow. Do you know? Almost like the regulations, we have to follow them, and or even the diversity and equality guidelines, like they have to be enforced. So, if the literacy ones

are kind of similar, wouldn't that make sense if early literacy is supposed to be so important? [Educator 3]

Points such as those of Educator 4 demonstrate the value of providing videos and photographs of real-life, literacy learning in the preschool years to support educators' need to 'see' good practice as opposed to reading about it through text heavy documents or pamphlets. Despite a range of materials that are currently available through the NCCA to support educators, it is evident that what exists for language and literacy is insufficient and not fully responsive to the needs of educators on the ground.

I would love there to be more guidance for us on what to do [for early literacy]. Like I feel we do ok. And I actually have a degree in English which I got before I came to early years so I feel I would do it [early literacy]. But I would just love there to be maybe a document we could follow, and maybe there is? I haven't come across. But something that says 'this is what you should be doing'. We'd love you to, you know, work on this in the in the ECCE two year. Do this. A handbook? [Educator 5]

While progress and development has been notable since the introduction of Aistear in 2009 and the publication of the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide in 2016, the updating of the curriculum framework left room for greater acknowledgement of early literacy provision in line with the most recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive research on early literacy development (such as the Science of Reading<sup>9</sup>) while keeping content relevant and specific to the everyday practical application of the framework to practice. Such acknowledgement has failed to materialise. While Aistear may not be completely compulsory, "all pre-schools in the state funded ECCE

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<sup>9</sup> The Science of Reading constitutes of a significant body of evidence-based research compiled over several decades on how children actually learn to read, encompassing multiple disciplines including education, psychology, cognitive science and linguistics.

scheme, are expected to operate in accordance with it” (Murphy, 2015, p.293). If this is to continue to be the case for ECCE settings, the findings of this study demonstrate that a dynamic, contemporary curriculum framework that supports and empowers rather than challenges educators in their efforts towards early literacy provision in the preschool years is necessary in contending with the many other challenges faced in Irish preschool literacy provision. It is imperative that a responsive and empowering updated framework will support preschool educators, managers and the relevant preschool stakeholders in contesting the various mesosystemic challenges arising from the initial iteration of the curriculum framework. It is well recognised internationally that Aistear has been received positively and that in tandem with *Síolta*, it provides a valuable “blueprint for high quality education and care” across the early years in Ireland (Murphy, 2015; p294), yet as demonstrated challenges exist in connection with everyday practice. With the current redevelopment and updating of the framework, valuable opportunities exist to create increased supports for educators, including video and photographic exemplars of best early literacy practices and greater acknowledgement of the role of early literacy within the preschool years and the role of the early childhood educator as an early literacy educator. Such efforts will be necessary to ensure that the updated Aistear Framework and accompanying support materials do not result in a mesosystemic failure for preschool early literacy provision.

### ***7.3.2 Educator Literacy Knowledge and Training***

One of the most obvious patterns across the findings of this study is the consistent acknowledgment of, and signposting towards, the sheer variety in educator knowledge and training connected to early literacy development and early literacy learning. A highly qualified early childhood educator is at the centre of a high-quality early literacy learning

experiences (NAEYC, 2015). As demonstrated in the documentary analysis on early childhood education training and degree programmes outlined across section 5.5, variety in experiences and modules is significant, with early literacy often not featuring in the training experiences of educators at all. Efforts to achieve a graduate-led ECE workforce are still ongoing in Ireland, however, it merits consistent discussion that a high proportion of existing, longstanding preschool educators continue to work in ECCE without or at least with very limited training in early literacy development. As a result, and as demonstrated across the earlier sections in this chapter, it is only to be expected that practices, interpretations, perceptions of and knowledge of early literacy are going to be diverse and at some points contradictory across educators, managers and even early literacy CPD providers. This echoes much international research (Hawken *et al.*, 2005; Hindman and Wasik, 2008; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Wasik and Hindman, 2014) which indicates that many preschool educators are lacking a comprehensive awareness of and competency in early literacy provision. The research of Butera *et al.* (2013), demonstrates that a self-informed approach to preschool provision continues to dominate practice; whereby educators value the practical and personal knowledge they have about the children they work with and use this to inform their practice in lieu of knowledge they may have (or have not) acquired through professional development of undergraduate training (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021). While it is welcome to recognise the national efforts in aiming for a graduate-led workforce by the year 2028, the current study, while small-scale, demonstrates the necessary benefits in national examination of existing early literacy modules, or lack thereof, facilitated across third level institutions offering undergraduate degree programmes in early childhood education. Although the ECCE Scheme offers an incentive for settings to employ more highly qualified educators, it will remain necessary for early literacy to be provided as a feature of pre-service training across NFQ

Level 7, 6 and 5 courses too. As stated in the EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care:

Not only is training critical, but the content of it, the way it takes place, and the methods used are very important. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in the Early Years sector helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024)

This includes consideration of early literacy training in terms of educator knowledge and competence. As demonstrated across the interview responses, for educators and managers to value and prioritise early literacy provision, early literacy must be a core and obvious feature of their training and qualification experiences so as those pursuing such courses leave with qualifications, competence and knowledge “appropriate to the level of care and development of the preschool child” (Murphy, 2015, p.294). Additionally, similar to the primary education sector, ongoing professional learning opportunities to develop early literacy practices are essential and should be provided to all educators in service. Professional learning opportunities for early literacy learning will be explored in greater detail in section 7.4.3.

### ***7.3.3 Research Question 3: Summary Response***

This section sought to highlight the current factors informing preschool literacy provision. The findings suggested that while examples of preschool literacy provision exist, what informs such practices was extremely varied or in some circumstances, solely self-informed. Despite longstanding models, curricula and curriculum frameworks to support preschool provision, it was apparent that a disconnect exists between early literacy provision and the underpinning framework or curricula of preschool settings. All preschool settings involved in the interviews are part of the existing ECCE scheme and therefore their early literacy practice should be informed by Aistear; yet findings demonstrate that this was not the case. Perceptions of the existing model of the Framework were varied, with many citing

challenges and uncertainty around applying the Framework to everyday practice, particularly when it comes to early literacy provision. When considering what informs preschool early literacy provision, educator training and knowledge will continue to have the most significant impact, and it is evident from this study that this is what the findings will continue to circle back to. Investment in educators' preservice and ongoing professional learning to support early literacy development is critical and merits national discussion.

#### **7.4 Research Question 4: Challenges in Preschool Literacy Provision**

This section will address the fourth and final research question of the study:

***What are the challenges faced by those involved in preschool literacy provision in Ireland?***

Initially, this question is contextualised in section 7.4.1 by consolidating the findings, and discussing the range of literacy programmes, resources and materials (or lack thereof) currently available and utilised by preschool educators and their influence on existing preschool literacy provision. Section 7.4.2 discusses a variety of longstanding sector-wide issues currently posing challenges to literacy practice in Irish preschools. This is followed by a discussion on the role of professional learning in support of preschool literacy learning and the challenges associated with availing of professional learning opportunities pertaining to early literacy learning and development for preschool educators in Ireland. Section 7.4.4 considers literacy leadership in Irish preschools and the role of pedagogical leadership in improving existing preschool literacy provision. This section also offers an examination of the position of the preschool child as a literacy learner and the unique role of the preschool educator as an early literacy educator. Section 7.4.5 provides a summary response to Research Question 4. The conclusion of the chapter is outlined in section 7.5.

##### ***7.4.1 Preschool Literacy Programmes, Resources, and Materials***

A challenge identified across the study was the blatant lack of early literacy resources and materials suited to and available to the Irish preschool context. A variety of literacy programmes were listed, with *Early Talk Boost* being the only preschool-specific programme detailed. The majority of resources and programmes mentioned by participants were designed for different educational contexts (e.g. USA, UK, Canada) and even different educational stages (e.g. primary school). Worth noting is that four separate phonics programmes were cited (Jolly Phonics, Sound Around, Just Phonics, Alpha to Omega) across responses, none of which are designed for preschool literacy provision. This study provides evidence of how a lack of suitable preschool literacy programmes, resources and materials can contribute to the premature use of commercially produced, pre-packaged literacy programmes such as *Jolly Phonics*, which are based on highly structured, teacher-directed approaches which rely on drill, practice and memorisation. Such practices are questionable in terms of pedagogical appropriateness for preschool aged children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Little research currently exists on the motivations of preschool educators in choosing preschool literacy resources despite longstanding patterns of tendencies to adopt prematurely formal literacy practices. Campbell, Torr and Cologan (2014) articulate the importance of investigating such motivations of educators given the large body of evidence on effective pedagogies for supporting children's early literacy development, and the didactic, teacher-led format of such commercial programmes. A potential draw to such programmes, is that fact that they generally provide a set script to follow which can be appealing in the absence of bespoke knowledge on components of literacy instruction such as phonics. This warrants, once again, opportunities to promote stronger professional understandings of literacy pedagogies appropriate to the preschool context.

#### **7.4.2 Sector-Wide Issues Affecting Preschool Literacy Provision**

It is well recognised that the early childhood sector in Ireland continues to face longstanding, historical challenges and issues impacting quality of provision across the country (Curristan *et al.*, 2023). While significant progress has been made across the past two decades, consistent issues in funding, staffing and policy remain. The benefits of attending early years' settings have been long reported. High-quality early learning and care experiences improve equity (Early Childhood Ireland, 2022) yet as Pondiscio articulates, “any discussion about “equity” in education that is not first and foremost a discussion about literacy is unserious (Pondiscio, 2021).

**7.4.2.1 Funding.** Childcare costs in Ireland continue to be amongst the highest in Europe, yet despite capitation grants, setting managers continue to lament the lack of government investment and sufficient financial supports to pay stay and afford quality resources. It is natural that such funding issues will affect early literacy provision across preschool settings in many ways. As demonstrated across the findings, lack of funding impacts the availability or purchase of relevant, high-quality early literacy resources, the access to and incentive for educators to upskill, and ultimately continues to impact the retention of high-quality staff across the sector. Challenges in affording resources such as books were recurrent across the contributions of interview participants. Manager 2 outlined that sourcing books was dependent on their own financing, from their own pockets stating:

“We need money for books. There's no money for books. We've paid for them all ourselves.”

A recurrent debate in Ireland is the low salaries of early childhood educators and how they undermine the significance and value of the pivotal work ongoing across the early years. Despite proposed pay increases, and the instated 5% pay increase in late 2024 (applicable to only 53% of those working in the sector) (DCDI, 2024), early

childhood educators will continue to earn less than the Irish living wage (McKenna, 2014). As articulated sadly and bluntly by Manager 5, their educators “are not paid to think about early literacy”. Disparities in pay continue to be a dominant factor impacting a plethora of issues across the preschool sector, in particular. The discrepancy in salaries between Irish primary infant teachers and Irish preschool educators are incomparable. Across the findings, managers articulated how funding for salaries continues to be a tense topic and impacts expectations for, and of, preschool educators.

I mean it's ok to ask a primary school teacher to do a bit extra isn't it? But it's not acceptable to expect our early years educators to do a bit extra when they're already doing way too much for far, far, far too little. [Manager 5]

Ultimately, discrepancies in salary result in a high turnover of staff meaning a career in ECCE in Ireland is “not a viable long-term option for many” (Murphy, 2014, p.297). A decade on, little has changed on this issue. High turnover of staff holds negative consequences for quality (Murphy, 2014). The OECD report *Improving Early Equity: From Evidence to Action* (2022) highlights the risk factors associated with not developing emergent literacy skills in the early years, yet under-investment will undoubtedly continue to impact the quality of provision. Equitable experiences of early literacy in the preschool years cannot be left to the chance of educator funding and individual setting priorities. As Murphy (2014) states, “the development of a highly skilled and adequately remunerated early years workforce is perhaps the biggest contribution that could be made to improving ECCE in Ireland” (p.297). Such points are echoed by Walsh (2016, p.89) who called for “ensuring payment for non-contact hours for professional purposes and the introduction of appropriate salary structures and scales” for ECE professionals.

**7.4.2.2 Staff Turnover.** Staff turnover was a recurring thread across findings mirroring ongoing patterns across Irish early years' provision. Across early to mid-2023, 56% of early years services in Ireland were reporting recruitment challenges. At this time, 31% of services reported having at least one vacancy among staff (Early Childhood Ireland, 2023). As outlined in section 7.5.2.1, low salaries continue to influence a high level of staff turnover across preschool settings. While this also mirrors patterns across Europe, staff turnover offers significant concern for those involved in preschool provision in Ireland. Managers interviewed confirmed such turnover and expressed their acute concerns about losing staff members to better-paid roles and positions that offer more security in the long term. Similar sentiments were echoed by the CPD providers who remarked on the monetary factors contributing to high staff turnover in Irish preschools.

If the staff are really into it [early years provision], they tend to move on, so they tend to go into Better Start, or they tend to become SNAs. They go into the SNA work for lots of reasons. You know, because of the money. So, the lack of pay, the poor pay? That causes a lot of the staff turnover. [CPD2]

As echoed across the contributions of interview participants, a significant proportion of preschool educators are continuing to leave the sector and return to colleges of education to complete the Professional Masters in Primary Education (PME) as a route out of preschool and into primary teaching, and ultimately into a better paid role. As Manager 6 explained:

We're losing our best and most qualified to primary. They're going back to do the PME. And to be fair, who would blame them?

Such points were consistent with those of other managers, such as Manager 3 who articulated that:

My biggest fear is losing the very good staff, the highly trained staff, the staff that get the importance of this [early literacy]. They're training up and moving into the teaching profession.

CPD providers described the challenges of delivering early literacy support to preschool settings with constant staff turnover. CPD1 articulated their frustration at spending time and resources training and supporting preschool educators with the development and delivery of high-quality early literacy provision only to return to settings soon afterwards to find that educators have moved on or left.

Staffing, I feel, is the biggest challenge, and I just think that they're just not appreciated it, and they know that. And they just move on, and it breaks my heart every year when the good staff move on. It's like firefighting, you know? [CPD1]

Such consistent turnover in staff can only continue to contribute to fragmented provision of early literacy learning experiences, if those trained in the techniques and methods acquired through upskilling and CPD experiences, continue to move away from the preschool learning environment. An opportunity exists for investigation of the attrition of skilled early years' educators to primary education and its cost to the early literacy development of young children in the ECCE programme.

### **7.4.3 Professional Learning**

Continuing professional development for Irish preschool educators is a key factor in enabling a high quality of preschool literacy provision. Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (2024, p.39) outlines that for early childhood educators, "it is essential to provide robust support and continuous professional learning to enhance their skills, knowledge, and pedagogical approaches". Current CPD requirements in Ireland are set at a service level, and not prescribed for individual educators (European Commission, 2024). French (2013) argues for the consistent need for early childhood educators to engage with

professional learning to “best serve our young literacy learners and to ensure the most up-to-date methods and approaches are utilised and employed in daily preschool literacy provision” (p.43). As demonstrated across data collection, the early literacy learning experiences of participants in their initial educator degree programmes were varied; or in some cases, non-existent. Regardless, research suggests that initial educator preparation alone does not reliably ensure that new preschool educators have the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary to enhance young children’s early literacy development (Siraj, Kingston & Nielson-Hewett, 2019). Evidence-based professional learning in such cases can provide valuable opportunities for educators to develop preschool literacy practices and ensure the provision in place best serves the children without prematurely focusing attention on overly formalised literacy practice. Patterns across data collection (particularly in questionnaire responses and responses of managers interviewed) demonstrated that newer understandings of less formalised approaches to preschool literacy provision may be a problem for those in situ for longer periods of time without access to, or interest in engaging with literacy professional development opportunities. As Siraj, Kingston & Nielson-Hewitt articulate, well-designed and well-delivered professional development “fills the gaps in knowledge and skills” and “keeps educators up-to-date with research into best practice” (2019, p.53). Such professional learning can play a valuable role in preschool settings where variety in educator qualifications is likely. Across both the questionnaire responses and interviews it was repeatedly articulated that professional development opportunities in literacy are lacking and as a result educators are choosing alternative areas to upskill in. As noted in section 7.5.2.2, high staff turnover is a longstanding trend in Irish preschool provision. Many educators see professional learning as an ‘exit ticket’ or a path to move upwards in their role towards managerial level rather than envisioning professional learning as an opportunity to develop practice in the learning environment. Quite simply, incentives are lacking to choose literacy

as an area to upskill in, as evidentially professional development providers are prioritising areas which encourage educators to upskill as a means of leaving the learning environment as opposed to incentivizing long-term commitment to the learning environment and in turn improving early literacy learning experiences for the children. Echoing French (2013, p. 43), a need continues to exist for Irish preschool educators who are both “willing and able to engage in continuing professional development regarding early literacy [and numeracy] to keep abreast of current professional practice and latest developments.” Almost a decade on, Ireland’s Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 outlines much needed intentions for the development of high-quality professional learning for early years educators and ELC setting leaders. Professional learning opportunities are marked to be prioritised over the next decade. How this develops remains to be seen.

#### **7.4.4 Literacy Leadership**

Within Irish preschools, there lies a valuable space for the development of literacy leadership roles and practices. Research demonstrates the valuable role attending preschool holds on young children’s early literacy development (Barnett & Esposito Lamy, 2006; French, 2013). As a result, the leadership practices adopted in early childhood settings can influence the quality and effectiveness of literacy instruction provided to young learners (Cordova Jr. *et al.*, 2024). Teale *et al.*, (2020, p.209) highlight the value of leaders who “create the conditions necessary” for the success and development of effective preschool literacy provision. A narrow interpretation of preschool leadership can restrict the development of preschool practice; hence reinterpreting leadership as something broader, beyond administration, to include instructional leadership that directly impacts teaching and learning processes is essential (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Broader interpretations of leadership were demonstrated by Manager 1 who was a reflective practitioner and explained

that in order to improve their literacy practice, they sought help from external agencies and self-referred for inspections:

I self-referred us. The girls looked at me like I was mad but it was what I wanted to do to bring our practice on. And they [the external agency] were like, ‘ok, we’ll, send people in’. And we had our own advisor and stuff? And basically, I was kind of like to her, ‘What do you think we need to do [for literacy]?’. It’s not enough to be good. We want to be the best. We want to serve and support the children as best we can.

Such idealised influence of managers cultivates responsive and relational early literacy learning environments, promotes a love for literacy among young learners and supports their staff with such individualised efforts to positively influence and develop their literacy practice (Bass & Alvolio, 1994; Kilag, *et al.*, 2023; Cordova Jr., *et al.*, 2024). The influence of leadership on literacy practice cannot be underestimated, educators will often take lead from management on what should be done or practised within the learning environment. This was evident in the contributions from Manager 5 who explained that their educators lack confidence in engaging with resources or documentation pertaining to literacy practices without guidance from leadership.

I just know my teachers are going to say ‘[Manager’s Name]’, ‘We’re not even reading it. You read it and you tell us what you need us to know’.

Such responsibility cannot rest with managers alone. French (2013, p.43) cautions that when it comes to early literacy “a whole-setting approach” is necessary. Similarly, Ireland’s LNDL Strategy (2024, p.41) recognises need to continue to empower early childhood settings through literacy leadership by developing the necessary skills and knowledge to facilitate positive change and innovation in literacy within their settings.

**7.4.4.1 The Preschool Educator as an Early Literacy Educator.** Literature and contemporary studies indicate that the role of preschool educators in supporting and

nurturing early literacy development cannot be underestimated (Cabell, Puranik & Tortorelli, 2014; French, 2013; Neuman, 2015). What is apparent across the data collected and suggested patterns in Irish preschool practices, is that the role of the preschool educator as an early literacy educator is neither something that is widely recognised nor widely valued. It could be considered that one of the most significant contributing factors to this is, once again, the diversity in early literacy training experiences across QQI degree programmes and QAR levels. As explored in Phase 2, the documentary analysis of training courses indicated a significant mix in the likelihood that educators are even likely to experience modules or content related to early literacy across their training. Such concerns were voiced by Managers who recognised that knowledge and competence in early literacy development and instruction can vary significantly from educator to educator. Manager 5 reflected on such matters:

I wonder is there a huge gap with my educators because they didn't come across early literacy in their training?

In order to positively impact and expand a child's early literacy knowledge, educators must themselves be knowledgeable too (Crim, *et al.*, 2008). When studying pedagogical effectiveness, Moyles, Adams, and Musgrove (2002) noted that early year educators found it difficult to articulate or describe in any detail the specifics of their practice or the values, beliefs and principles underpinning their practice. Such depictions are similar to experiences reported from participants interviewed in this study. Manager 5 explained that the term literacy and discussions around literacy provision can be an intimidating and even uncertain topic for educators in their setting.

They're struggling even with the word literacy. I've no doubt that my teachers are introducing literacy all the time but maybe they're not recognising that.

A strong subject knowledge base - in this case, in literacy - is essential in facilitating meaningful, relevant, relational and responsive early literacy learning experiences at preschool level. The findings within this study echo existing global patterns in preschool literacy provision demonstrating that there is valuable room for development in supporting Irish preschool educators in recognising and affirming their role as early literacy educators. Such concerns align with Ireland's LNDL Strategy (2024) which stresses the critical need to provide comprehensive support and guidance for early childhood educators with the aim of enhancing and empowering their early literacy practice.

**7.4.4.2. The Preschool Child as an Early Literacy Learner.** A notable absence across the entire data collected was reference to the preschool child when participants were considering preschool early literacy provision. While it must be acknowledged that this could be considered a limitation due to the phrasing and choice of questions, the researcher still finds it worth noting that reference to the preschool child was lacking across the contributions of all educators, managers and literacy CPD providers across the surveys and interviews. When considering the development of early literacy practice, it is of the utmost importance that educators, managers, professional support services, and parents alike, appreciate the child's developing identity as an early literacy learner (Johnston & Rogers, 2001). Ultimately, the literacy provision in preschools is for the benefit of the child's emotional and cognitive development (Pietropoli & Gracia, 2022; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Across the findings, the narrative dominating the discourse pertains to that of educator and manager concerns surrounding their capabilities and competence in early literacy provision and issues

concerning policy, resourcing and qualifications, rather than the provision itself and its influence on the child. As Hayes and Filipovic (2018, p.220) explain, “quality models of early education are characterised by underpinning principles which present a view of the child as an active partner” in the dimensions of learning and development. Once again, this demonstrates that as a framework for early literacy learning, Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model highlights a crucial space for visualising the influences of proximal processes across the microsystems and mesosystems on the preschool child’s early literacy development. Worth recognising is that such influence will be bi-directional across the dyad, with the potential for the child to influence the educator’s early literacy practice when the educator recognises the child as an early literacy learner and is attuned and responsive to the literacy learning experiences at hand. The findings of this study demonstrate the significant opportunity which exists for educators to plan for, prepare, recognise, and reflect on organic early literacy learning experiences with the view of the child as an early literacy learner as opposed to a blinkered fixation on the provision of activity-based early literacy learning experiences for the sake of routine and daily procedure.

#### **7.4.5 Summary Response**

This section explored a range of challenges faced by those involved in existing preschool literacy provision. The findings demonstrated that a lack of bespoke and relevant preschool literacy resources, programmes and materials exist for Irish preschool settings, with evidence of programmes designed for different contexts and educational levels being utilised. A variety of sector-wide issues continued to dominate discourse pertaining to preschool provision, with concerns relating to funding and high staff-turnover continuing to impact early literacy practices. Despite progress in the availability of professional development opportunities for preschool educators and management in recent years, an

absence of suitable ongoing professional learning pertaining to early literacy is noted, as well as gaps in support and resourcing. The concept of literacy leadership was explored as a means of enhancing whole-setting early literacy practices. Through this consideration was given to the valuable role preschool educators can play by recognising their position as an early literacy educator. In line with this, the need for the preschool child to be viewed more widely as an early literacy learner is highlighted.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter sought to discuss the findings of the study with reference to the four overarching research questions. To begin, through research question one, the existing priorities for Irish preschool literacy practice were explored. The discussion demonstrated varying perceptions of early literacy and the perceived preoccupation with literacy activities over a focus on early literacy skills development. This raised opportunities to consider the intentionality behind literacy learning experiences in preschool and how these are potentially influenced through the differing priorities between educators, managers and external influences.

Through research question two, the read aloud as a preschool early literacy method was discussed. The study highlighted perceptions and facilitation of preschool read alouds, identifying a potential disconnect between this method and preschool early literacy learning. The selection of texts and children's literature for read aloud experiences was examined in consideration of its impact on preschool literacy skill development.

Research question three facilitated a discussion on what currently informs Irish preschool literacy provision. Key factors included curricula and frameworks, and educator knowledge and training were considered. These elements were examined to understand their role in shaping existing preschool literacy provision.

Lastly, research question four examined contemporary challenges in preschool literacy provision. Issues such as literacy programmes, resources, funding and staff turnover were highlighted. This section also emphasised the importance of professional learning and the need for continuous professional development for preschool educators to enhance preschool literacy provision. Additionally, the necessity of literacy leadership with preschools was raised, further emphasising the role of preschool educators as early literacy educators and recognising preschool children as early literacy learners

Building on the findings and discussion of the study, the concluding chapter proposes recommendations for practice, research and policy concerning preschool literacy provision in Ireland. These recommendations aim to address identified challenges with the goal of enhancing overall literacy learning and literacy provision across the ECCE years.

## **Chapter 8:**

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

This chapter presents the conclusion to the thesis beginning with a summary of the thesis across section 8.1. Section 8.2 focuses on the key findings of the study followed by contributions of the study to the field. Recommendations for preschool literacy practice, policy, and research are presented in Section 8.4, with suggestions for moving forward in Section 8.5. This is followed by the chapter conclusion in Section 8.6.

#### **8.1 Thesis Summary**

This study sought to address the concern that currently the opportunities for preschool literacy provision are limited or even lacking in many Irish preschool settings. Additionally, this current study sought to examine how Bronfenbrenner's nested systems offer an applicable framework for exploring the influence of the preschool experience on early literacy development and preschool educators' literacy practices. To this end, preschool educators', managers' and literacy CPD providers' experiences and knowledge of existing preschool literacy provision and training experiences of early literacy learning and development were explored.

Chapter 2 presented an overview of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework and interrogated the selection of this model as the theoretical framework of this study. The chapter explored how the Bioecological model can provide a robust framework for understanding the components necessary to support educators in preschool literacy provision and preschool literacy learning in Ireland. The contextual systems were examined and unpacked in terms of the influences of the varying degrees of interactions across the systems on early literacy development and literacy ecology. The nested systems at the core of the bioecological

framework provide a model useful for pinpointing the dynamic network of interactions within the preschool environment and how interactions across each system can influence and support the cultivation of optimal preschool literacy practices, of which quality proximal processes are crucial (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Hayes *et al.*, 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge, 2008). This chapter also introduced the concepts of the child as an early literacy learner and the preschool educator as an early literacy educator, roles which were explored in greater depth and revisited across the study. Proximal processes were examined with particular attention afforded to the preschool read aloud as a proximal process influential on children's early literacy learning and development.

Chapter 3 provided a review of the literature. Definitions of literacy were explored with specific attention paid to traditional and contemporary interpretations of literacy. National guidance through the Irish policy and curricula context pertaining to existing early childhood education in Ireland was explored to share insights into perceived confusions and inconsistencies across language and expectations for educators pertaining to early literacy provision. The concept of emergent literacy was examined providing an overview of emergent literacy skills with particular exploration of constrained and unconstrained literacy skills. The Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model was explored as a means of highlighting the interactive nature of early literacy development as opposed to isolated skill development. Priorities for preschool literacy development were explored in depth with specific reference to the pertinent role of the preschool educator in children's early literacy development. Insights were shared into the read aloud as an exemplary and fundamental proximal process in the development of key emergent literacy skills prior to conventional and formal literacy learning.

Chapter 4 explored the philosophical roots of the project in relation to the research methodology and described the processes involved in identifying Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design as the chosen methodology. The essential research methodology elements such as researcher positionality, research context, ethics, research tools employed, data analysis approach and the structure of the study were presented and outlined in detail.

Chapter 5 presented an analysis and findings from data collected across Phase 1 of the study. Phase 1 of data collected provided an opportunity to delve beyond the literature underpinning the research questions and provide the researcher with an opportunity to explore the thoughts and perceptions of practicing early childhood educators surrounding current literacy practices in Irish preschool settings, whilst ascertaining an insight into the patterns of existing priorities for preschool literacy practices. Phase 1 also provided an opportunity for the researcher to learn about existing accommodations for, and value of, the read aloud as an early literacy priority in the preschool years. An element of documentary analysis and the relevant findings offered insights into early literacy training experiences in undergraduate early childhood education degree programmes in Ireland.

Chapter 6 outlines and analyses the findings from data collected across Phase 2 of the study. In line with Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design, Phase 2 facilitated qualitative data collection and reflexive thematic analysis to assist in further explaining, exploring and refining the results from Phase 1's questionnaire. The findings of Phase 2 are explored under priorities of preschool literacy provision, the read aloud in preschool literacy provision, informing preschool literacy provision and challenges in preschool literacy provision.

Chapter 7 responded to the data analysis results and both contextualized the findings of the two phased approach to data collection. Within this chapter the findings are discussed in the context of relevant literature. The chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to (i) priorities for preschool literacy provision (ii) the read aloud as an early literacy method (iii) what informs preschool literacy provision (iv) challenges associated with preschool literacy provision and (v) literacy leadership within preschool settings.

Finally, the thesis concludes with this chapter, Chapter 8. Having summarised the thesis trajectory to date, this chapter moves forward to outline the contributions of this study, present recommendations based on the findings of this study in the areas of practice, policy and research, and identifies future work in this field both for the educators, managers, researchers and the wider policy context.

## **8.2 Key Findings**

The findings of this study are grouped under four main categories reflecting the research questions and aims of the study. The findings connected to each research question are outlined below.

### ***8.2.1. What are the Existing Priorities for Preschool Literacy Practices in Ireland?***

This study confirms the work of researchers who have raised concerns about gaps in educator knowledge and insights about early literacy development and appropriate preschool literacy provision (Crim *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich & Stanovich, 2004; Moats & 2003; McCutchen, Harry, Cox, Sidman & Covill, 2002; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Piasta *et al.*, 2020; Seefeldt, 2005; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006; Weadman, Serry & Snow, 2023). The findings of this study indicate that, **in many instances, priorities for**

**preschool early literacy are dominated by the provision of disconnected, isolated activities simply broadly labelled as literacy.** While it was evident across the contributions of participants throughout interviews and the questionnaire that early literacy development is something that is collectively recognised as important in the preschool years, there was **an evident uncertainty pertaining to what exactly preschool literacy provision should consist of.** As demonstrated across chapters 5, 6 and 7, significant variety outlined across priorities, practices and provision.

Most notable, in terms of priorities, was the dominance of **the adult focus on the perceived necessity of provision of literacy activity, as opposed to obvious priorities connected to a more meaningful, developmental focus on the early literacy development of the preschool child.** It seemed a recurrent theme that educators and managers, when considering preschool literacy, were preoccupied with the place of early literacy activities for the sake of routine (such as name writing, letter formation, phonics routines and setting up Tuff Tray activities, for example) as opposed to early literacy skill development. Interestingly, across responses **emphasis, focus, recognition, or mention of the preschool child in the preschool literacy experience, or acknowledgement of their position as the early literacy learner was for the most part extremely lacking,** with the duties and challenges facing educators in preschool literacy provision dominating discourse.

**An evident preoccupation with the written word and constrained literacy skills appears to dominate preschool literacy priorities** for many across the data – indicating examples of a continued pushdown of primary curriculum and patterns of schoolification of the preschool early literacy experience. The emphasis on these conventional and constrained literacy skills demonstrate efforts to prove existence of examples of preschool literacy experiences and an acknowledgement of literacy as being important; however, it may also point to **a lack of awareness among educators of the benefits of prioritising engaging,**

**relevant and appropriate early literacy methods** such as interactive and dialogic read alouds in preschool.

A recurrent theme across interview responses was **the association with preschool literacy experiences and preparations for the transition to primary school**. The emphasis on phonics and preparing children for the transition to school through preparatory activities such as name writing and phonics activities was evident despite consistent acknowledgement that formal literacy learning and instruction belongs in primary school. Ultimately, **the shallow activity-focused perception of preschool literacy and relevant priorities demonstrate very narrow interpretations of early literacy pedagogy and early literacy development** exemplified through a notable preoccupation with structured approaches to reading and writing across the data. The emphasis on conventional literacy skills such as reading and writing demonstrate **a premature urgency to prepare children for primary school, which could be considered as being at the expense of foundational components of emergent literacy** - such as oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and shared book-reading experiences (Coach, 2021). Such **patterns may also demonstrate continued pressures to meet “external demands” (Hayes, 2019, p.3) and expectations of parents and caregivers for their child’s preschool early literacy learning**. Echoing findings of numerous studies (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009; Dale *et al.*, 2018; Hume, Allan & Lonigan, 2016; Sroka *et al.*, 2015; Wood & Terrell, 1998), this research confirms that **many preschool educators continue to lack knowledge about emergent literacy development**.

The findings of this study demonstrate that there are significant uncertainties across Irish preschool settings in what exactly should be part of preschool literacy provision. The notable variety in priorities demonstrated across chapters 5 and 6 raises issues **concerning disparities in preschool literacy provision** and raise concerns regarding the **absence of**

**pedagogical and theoretical motivations underpinning chosen methods across provision.**

Challenges with the Aistear Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education (2009; 2024) and a lack of relevant supports and resources for preschool provision were consistently outlined across the data collected, pointing to not just gaps in knowledge and practice but **gaps in suitable supports, guidance and recommendations for preschool literacy provision** in the Irish ECCE context.

In explaining the gap in knowledge related to outlining priorities for preschool literacy provision, findings demonstrated **notable differences in educators' preservice training and qualification experiences connected to preschool early literacy learning and children's early literacy development.** For many, early literacy was a minor or even absent feature of their training journeys. If early literacy is not positioned as a priority across preservice training, it seems contradictory to the findings and recommendations of contemporary and longstanding evidence on best practice in early childhood education. The findings in this study have implications for the role of high quality, evidence-informed preservice training experiences for educators in supporting their early literacy practice but as also a means of supporting educators in recognising their responsibility and influential roles as early literacy educators. Frankly, the findings demonstrate that **many preschool educators and managers alike are unsure of what exactly they are supposed to be doing** in terms of meaningful, appropriate and necessary preschool literacy provision across the two ECCE years.

### ***8.2.2 How are 'Read Alouds' Currently Utilised in Irish Preschool Settings?***

Firstly, the findings indicated that while examples of storybook reading and shared reading experiences were present across the data, for the most part, **the read aloud is not considered as a specific early literacy method in many Irish preschool settings.** This raises issues regarding the quality and quantity of read aloud experiences across the ECCE

years in addition to **questions pertaining to educator knowledge and competence in the provision of literacy-rich preschool read aloud experiences**. While participants across phase 1 and phase 2 of the study were in agreement that indeed literacy skills develop through read aloud experiences, the skills listed were predominantly connected to language, vocabulary and listening skills. Findings also demonstrate **that read alouds are not associated with significant planning or intentionality** which raises issues concerning missed potential in preschool read alouds and the absence of planned, predetermined interactions in support of early literacy skill development (Brooks, 2022; Christ & Cho, 2021; Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004; Lennox, 2013).

Findings from both phase 1 and phase 2 of the study demonstrate **narrow interpretations of the preschool read aloud, with a dominant perception that a read aloud equates to story time**, contradictory to what is known from research on the educational value of the intentional read aloud (Collins, 2004; Dickinson, 2001; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Hoppe, 2023; McGee & Schickendanz, 2007). The term itself, **read aloud**, **appeared to be a term unfamiliar to interview participants**, with clarification required for most, demonstrating that it still is not a term frequently utilised in many preschool settings. **The dominant perception of the read aloud is that it is an isolated ‘time-filler’ method** with many participants outlining that its place in the preschool day is during the busy, transitional moments before home time or break periods across the day. The findings of the study indicate that although educators place value on reading with children, patterns across the interview data in particular demonstrate **challenges with quality and quantity of read aloud experiences** in the preschool years.

The findings of the study indicate **that gaps exists within the knowledge base of preschool educators and managers concerning the value of the preschool read aloud** demonstrating a case to promote increased awareness on the significance of embedding

language and literacy interactions and the practice required to do so across preschool read aloud experiences. In explaining the gap in both knowledge and practice in this area, the pertinent findings of the study suggest that **relevant supports and guidance for educators on the read aloud method are lacking**. Findings in chapter 6 demonstrate a limited range of text types and authors, further reinforcing questions on educator knowledge pertaining to reading aloud. Limited text knowledge limits ability to skilfully book match and plan engaging and meaningful read aloud experiences while exposing children to a rich diet of text types and genres (Cremin, 2008; 2014; 2016).

### ***8.2.3. What Informs Current Preschool Literacy Provision in Ireland?***

Findings from the study indicate that when it comes to preschool early literacy provision, **there exists an evident disconnect from theory, curriculum, policy, and the realities of preschool early literacy practice**. Findings from both phase 1 and 2 demonstrate that **most preschool literacy practices of participants are self-informed and are not intentionally informed or aligned with a particular early literacy programme, curriculum framework, or early years' curriculum**. Across the data, it is evident that no set framework or programme collectively informs preschool literacy provision across ECCE. What informs **preschool early literacy provision appears to be educator-, manager-, or setting-dependent**.

Data from the interviews in particular portrayed **evident frustrations and tensions in making connections with and applying the Aistear: Curriculum Framework to everyday early literacy practice** with only 50% of participants interviewed citing that their preschool literacy practice is aligned to the Aistear Framework. Educators, managers and CPD providers consistently commented on the breadth and open-endedness of Aistear and which raises questions concerning the curriculum framework's true value to educators in supporting and informing preschool early literacy provision.

One significant conclusion drawn from data across phase 1 and 2 is that **the varying perceptions held by educators and managers of preschool early literacy and early literacy development clearly influence their preschool literacy provision**. Such findings provide an interesting backdrop when investigating what informs preschool literacy provision in Ireland. Studies have consistently demonstrated the links between educator knowledge and their early literacy practice (Cirino *et al.*, 2007; Gersten *et al.*, 2010; Hindman & Wasik, 2011; Newman & Cunningham, 2009; Piasta *et al.*, 2018; Piasta, Justice & Logan, 2016; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018). Similar to patterns in existing research (e.g. Hindman & Wasik, 2011; Piasta *et al.*, 2018), in explaining the variety in perceptions, data, once again, returns to **educator training and professional learning experiences** indicating that this **may be one of the most influential factors in informing current preschool literacy provision in Ireland**. A consistent theme across the study has been **the individual early literacy pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge and competency of educators and the quality of literacy provision in their training and qualification experiences**. Such results align with a growing global literature suggesting that educator knowledge as a result of high quality training experiences and continued professional learning are key to high-quality, evidence-informed preschool literacy provision (Piasta *et al.*, 2009; 2018). Ultimately, the notable pattern across data on informing preschool provision is **the evident uncertainty on the practical specifics for preschool literacy provision and what should inform such provision across each of the ECCE years in Ireland**. Such uncertainty feeds the risk of pushdown pedagogies (Dampney *et al.*, 2018; Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023) and a pandering to external demands (Hayes, 2019) and traditional expectations for conventional literacy progress at the expense of early literacy development (NAEYC, 1998).

#### ***8.2.4. What are the Challenges Associated with Preschool Literacy Provision in Ireland?***

The study illustrates ongoing challenges affecting preschool literacy provision in Ireland. Findings indicate that **there is a resounding lack of specific early literacy programmes, resources, and materials designed to support preschool literacy learning experiences and provision reflective of the Irish ECCE context**. Resources listed have either been designed for primary school or preschool in different countries and contexts (e.g. UK / USA / Canada).

Findings across the study circle around longstanding, system-wide issues affecting practice and provision including challenges in funding and high staff turnover. While some participants commented on the **challenges associated with the costs of early literacy materials and storybooks**, managers and CPD providers highlighted the **challenges associated with high staff turnover and staff retention rates**. True to many existing patterns within the Irish ECE sector, **funding continues to pose significant challenges for preschool literacy provision** weaving across the connections within the preschool chronosystem, macrosystem and exosystem.

In explaining some of the challenges in this area, questionnaire and interview participants consistently commented on the lack of opportunities for professional development in early literacy learning and provision. **Although an evident interest and desire to develop literacy practice exists, the opportunities, accessibility and incentives to upskill in early literacy provision, do not**. French (2013) articulates the fundamental need for early childhood educators who are willing to engage with professional learning to support and refine their professional early literacy practice however this study demonstrates that such **professional learning experiences to support early literacy provision are in short supply and those that do exist are inaccessible to many**. The need for professional and continuous learning about early literacy learning and provision has been a recurrent

theme across this study and runs in tandem with much research on preschool literacy development and provision (e.g. Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Colliver *et al.*, 2021; Teale *et al.*, 2020; Williamson, Hedges & Jesson, 2023). Such professional learning will equip and enable educators to resist the pushdown curriculum and offer the most up-to-date, evidence informed preschool literacy provision (Kagan & Cohen, 1997; NAEYC, 1998). **Limited opportunities for professional learning continue to undermine the importance and the place of intentional early literacy learning experiences and the preschool child's early literacy development across the preschool years.**

The findings in the study concerning **challenges affecting preschool literacy provision have implications for the overall perception and place of literacy within the ECCE years** and demonstrate that **existing challenges continue to undermine the potential of the preschool educator's highly influential and significant role as early literacy educator.**

### **8.3 Contributions of this Study**

This current study makes a range of contributions to the Irish early childhood education sector, particularly the preschool context. In summary, the study specifically informs early literacy provision at preschool level. The study has highlighted how a theoretical framework of bioecological systems may strengthen and enhance the planning and provision for early literacy learning and development in Irish preschool settings. The various strands of the project are briefly reviewed in terms of their contribution. The study seeks to engage stakeholders in ECCE provision in reflecting on and developing early literacy practice in preschool contexts. This was enacted firstly by conducting a broad survey to discover more about existing preschool literacy practices and educator experiences of preschool literacy provision in the Irish preschool context.

The examination of preschool literacy practices and educator knowledge and competence pertaining to preschool literacy provision and early literacy learning are central to the study's objectives. The data collection materials can be reviewed and refined in the future for use in reaching an even wider range of preschool educators and preschool settings in order to support revaluation and reflection on existing literacy provision and shared reading practices in the preschool setting.

The study provides an in-depth mixed method analysis of the educator, manager and CPD provider experiences and their roles and knowledge of early literacy learning and provision in preschool settings. Specifically, educators and managers share their experiences of existing provision and opportunities for development. The experiences demonstrate disparities in understandings, priorities and practices across preschool literacy provision, which offers opportunities for bespoke guidance in this area to ensure consistency and continuity of high-quality early literacy provision across preschool settings.

Notably, the study provides insights into the variety of training opportunities whereby both educators and managers reflected on their own engagement and their experiences with (or lack thereof) early literacy learning and development across their respective early childhood education training journeys. This provides insights into the literacy knowledge and qualifications of educators at preschool level and the opportunities that exist in developing a shared vision for preschool literacy provision in ECCE years.

While the current study was of a small-scale and only had the capacity to reach a specific and limited pool of participants across the Irish preschool context, the underpinning theories are certainly transferrable. At a pivotal time for the development of practice in Irish early childhood education, this current study can inform policy in order to implement significant efforts to develop practice and meaningfully support educators and relevant stakeholders across all preschool settings in Ireland.

The underpinning themes and motivations for this study are relevant to the global early childhood education context and the study certainly provides insights into how gaps between theory and practice could be bridged within both preschool practice and policy levels. Through the contribution of literature reviewed, data collated, and quantity of analysis to the existing national and global bodies of preschool early literacy research, this study offers significant potential to support the development of more effective, appropriate, and evidence-informed preschool literacy practice and policy, both nationally and internationally.

#### **8.4 Recommendations for Irish Preschool Literacy Practice, Research and Policy**

This section will present recommendations for Irish preschool literacy practice, research, and policy. The examination of preschool literacy practices and educator knowledge and competence pertaining to preschool literacy provision and early literacy learning are central to the study's objectives. The data collection materials can be reviewed and refined in the future for use in reaching an even wider range of preschool educators and preschool settings in order to support revaluation and reflection on existing literacy provision and book use in the preschool setting, and relevant policy based on the findings of this study.

##### ***8.4.1 Recommendations for Irish Preschool Literacy Practice***

- In Ireland, the ECCE years undoubtedly offer an invaluable space to foster early literacy learning and development of young children in appropriate and meaningful ways. In order to provide meaningful, effective and appropriate early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years, educators need a well-developed and explicit knowledge of the nature of early literacy development, emergent literacy and relevant practices. Educators need to be the experts in their settings about what early literacy is

and what quality early literacy provision resembles (Girolametto *et al.*, 2006; Justice *et al.*, 2003; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Wasik *et al.*, 2006). Before practice can be truly and meaningfully enhanced, **early literacy deserves and requires a more prominent space in the training experiences of all pre-service early childhood educators.** As the study demonstrates, the training experiences of educators are extremely varied. In many instances, early literacy, children's literature, and language acquisition modules are often either optional modules, shared modules with another topic or subject area, or modules which pre-service educators experience for a semester or two at the very most. For the most part, it appears that preservice training in early literacy learning and development is insufficient and is contributing to self-acknowledged knowledge gaps influencing preschool literacy practices and priorities.

- We simply cannot expect changes in the practices of educators in preschool learning environments without changing our practices as teacher educators also. **Pre-service early literacy training must be reflective of contemporary research on what is known about children's early literacy development and offer adequate training in evidence-informed, appropriate early literacy methods such as the read aloud.**

There lie examples to be learned from different contexts globally, where preservice student education has been transformed to include greater attention to the development of educator knowledge, competence and confidence and an increased focus on practical, evidence-informed content reflecting contemporary developments in literacy research and cognitive neuroscience.

- As demonstrated through the study, preschool educators, managers and early years' literacy CPD providers seek greater clarity in aligning literacy development and their early literacy practice with the Aistear framework. Both the original and newly revised iterations of Aistear emphasise holistic development, highlighting

communication as one of its four key themes. However, as exemplified across the data collected, educators continue to experience significant challenges in translating broad themes and corresponding principles into concrete early literacy practices in the preschool learning environment. **Clearer guidelines and more specific examples of appropriate literacy activities that align with Aistear's themes and principles are required. Specific support materials to reflect the updated Aistear framework (2024) and contemporary cognitive and neuroscientific findings in relation to early literacy learning and development are required.** This should include detailed strategies and exemplars of practice demonstrating the fostering early literacy skills in playful, responsive and developmentally appropriate ways. Such material could be supported further by including video recordings and examples of such practice specific to the Irish context. Providing preschool educators with more precise and bespoke tools and resources, would enable the likelihood that they will be better equipped to nurture young children's literacy skills effectively while still respecting and adhering to the framework's holistic approach. At primary level, for example, a progression continuum offers greater specifics of literacy and language learning and development to support primary teachers in organising their literacy learning experiences and recognising children's development and progress. As explained in chapter 7, the 'Progression Continua' provides "practical support to teachers in building rich pictures of children's language learning and in using these pictures to support children's progression" across English and Irish (NCCA, 2019, p.1). **A similar, practical resource, reflective of early literacy and language learning and development in the preschool years is recommended in support of educators making informed decisions about their preschool early literacy provision.**

- As it stands, support materials for early childhood education are available via open access on the AistearSíolta website. Here, a range of publications, resources, practice videos and print versions of the frameworks are housed. Although readily available, through the data collected, it must be appreciated that for many, these existing supports are still not seen as a ‘go to’ or something that many educators appeared to be familiar with. Furthermore, it cannot be taken for granted that support materials housed in online portals are accessed, reviewed and utilised by educators across all settings. As demonstrated across the findings of phase two’s data collection, challenges are associated with finding time, incentive and motivation to meaningfully engage with or commit to such tasks. **Time to engage with high-quality, practical professional learning should be provided within the working year for all educators and at no additional cost to them.** Professional learning is addressed in further detail in section 8.8.3, Recommendations for Irish Preschool Literacy Policy.
- Findings across the study highlighted the range and variety of early literacy programmes and resources early childhood educators are using to support their early literacy provision. Many of which are not specifically designed for preschool or even preschool in the Irish context. **The need exists for bespoke early literacy materials, specifically designed to support educators working in the Irish preschool context, reflective of contemporary developments in literacy learning and development, our cultural demographics, the age ranges of the children in question and embracing the rich range of research and expertise available in Ireland.** Such materials would be beneficial in enhancing early literacy provision but also equipping educators with resources, routines and knowledge to support in the resist of prematurely formalised literacy practices in the preschool years.

- **The study demonstrates a need to examine the selection of texts provided and used in preschool setting in Ireland and to encourage use of a wider text selection.** As the study demonstrates, a limited number of authors and text types were recorded across the responses in the survey and interviews, highlighting the provision of a rather narrow pool of texts and genres. Additionally, such a review could promote the integration of diverse, culturally relevant texts, helping to cultivate more inclusive and knowledge-rich preschool learning environments that reflecting Ireland's evolving demographic landscape and awareness of the necessity of fostering children's background and content knowledge as part of their unconstrained early literacy skill development. Furthermore, opportunities exist for highlighting and facilitating increased access to and awareness of contemporary Irish children's literature in Irish preschools.
- **Parents require communication on their child's early literacy learning and development in the ECCE years.** Greater opportunities to work more closely with parents, as key stakeholders in children's early literacy (and overall development) would be greatly beneficial in challenging the longstanding, existing "external demands" which continue to impact and influence literacy learning provision in preschool context (Hayes, 2019, p. 3). A valuable window exists in the settling-in period of the updated Aistear framework to include parents in communication relating to early literacy learning and development in support of spreading awareness and understanding of contemporary knowledge and appropriate expectations for preschool-aged children's literacy learning and development. An opportunity exists for reflection on the role of the NCCA here and the potential for designing literacy supports for parents in supporting young learners in the home and beyond the learning environment.
- **Communication between preschool educators and primary school teachers is necessary in supporting children's early literacy development in the transition**

**from preschool to primary school.** As demonstrated across the study, opportunities exist for closer liaison between preschool educators and primary school teachers in establishing collective understandings of the skills and dispositions necessary in navigating the transition process. Through transition bridging initiatives (such as Tús Maith) between schools and feeder preschools, collective goals and expectations can be established, and opportunities can be laid for meaningful continuation of practices across the sectors in support of young children's emergent and early literacy skills. Opportunities exist for the mainstreaming of such projects in support of increased collaboration between sectors and meaningful realisation of continuation of practice as envisaged by the Aistear and Primary Curriculum Frameworks.

- **Intentional early literacy learning experiences are required across the ECCE years.** Ultimately, the study demonstrates a genuine interest on behalf of educators in providing early literacy learning experiences in preschool however, an evident urgency for increased intentionality in early literacy learning experiences in the preschool years is required and guidance on the practices required. **Practices, such as the read aloud, must be intentional to truly support children's early literacy development (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002).** While participants reported reading to the children daily, this practice was viewed as a filler or transitional activity more so than being recognised as an early literacy learning experience. **To this end, the quality of the learning experience must be recognised and prioritised over mere presence or routine.** The study raises valid questions over how well educators are supporting preschoolers' emergent literacy skill development in daily practice.

#### **8.4.2 Recommendations for Irish Preschool Literacy Research**

- Recommendations for research are closely related to developing and exploring practice further in relation preschool literacy provision in Irish preschool education across the ECCE years. Investigation of quality early literacy provision is urgently required. **A deeper examination of the current state of preschool literacy provision and the pedagogical approaches used for literacy learning experiences Irish preschools, assessing their effectiveness and alignment with international best practices is necessary** and would be most useful in establishing next steps in developing early literacy practice across the sector.
- The need for a review of preschool literacy practices in Ireland is becoming increasingly evident as educators and policymakers strive to enhance early childhood education. Globally, growing bodies of research have continuously highlighted the critical role of early literacy in children's long-term academic success and overall development (Cordova *et al.*, 2024; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). Preschool educators demonstrated a strong willingness and motivation to support preschoolers' early literacy development and emergent literacy skills, yet self-reported knowledge gaps and uncertainties pertaining to provision and priorities may have implications for practice. Additionally, current practices in some Irish preschools may not fully align with the latest pedagogical insights and technological advancements. The same applies to resources, frameworks, policies and guiding materials designed for preschool educators. **A comprehensive review of preschool literacy provision would identify further gaps in existing frameworks, policies, pre-service training and resources for educators, ensuring that preschool literacy provision is firstly in existence in all ECCE contexts, and that what provided is appropriate, engaging, responsive and effective in fostering the relevant foundational literacy skills.**

- This study concentrated on exploring existing preschool literacy provision, and particularly the use of the read aloud as an early literacy method. While the researcher interviewed educators, managers and literacy CPD providers to inform the data collected, read aloud practice was not formally observed or analysed in relation to potential literacy skill development. **A further extension of the study would include or prioritise educator observations of read aloud practice in order to track the literacy learning opportunities and quality of interactions and discourse across the preschool read aloud experiences.**
- Research **examining the place of the read aloud in preschool literacy provision would benefit from study and analysis of the thoughts and experiences of the preschool child over the course of the two ECCE years.** This would further inform the findings on the role of the educator and the role of the read aloud in children's early literacy learning and development in the Irish context.
- O'Toole (2016) recommends that measures of quality at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro- levels should focus on process rather than context. Bronfenbrenner's model provides a highly valuable framework for the examination of proximal processes and interactions within preschool literacy provision. **The bioecological model would also provide a useful frame for an examination of preschool literacy provision in Ireland on a longitudinal scale.**

#### ***8.4.3 Recommendations for Irish Preschool Literacy Policy***

Building on the recommendations for practice and research, recommendations for policy will now be suggested.

- Firstly, the consideration of appropriate terminology relating to preschool literacy learning and provision in the Irish context is required. **A shared language in**

**definitions of literacy, emergent literacy, preschool literacy learning and shared reading practices is necessary.** Policy documents, frameworks and circulars, published by the relevant early years' stakeholders pertaining to the preschool years in Ireland require a collective effort in utilising consistent language and terminology. Such terminology should be consistent across communication by relevant stakeholders. **Given the significant space of early literacy development within the preschool years, greater acknowledgement to the term literacy itself would be beneficial in signposting the opportunities and explicitly labelling examples of positive practice across frameworks and support materials.** The findings of the study demonstrate uncertainties surrounding language and confidence with literacy-related terminology. When considering development of practice in early literacy provision, a whole-setting approach is crucial and a shared language in definitions and terminology is essential in ensuring collective understandings, efforts and consistency. Weadman, Serry and Snow (2021, p. 165) warn against the use of loose and broad definitions as “a problematic lack of clarity emerges.” Ultimately, preschool educators' perceptions and interpretations of the literacy and its relevant terminology will influence and underpin classroom practices (Fellowes & Oakley, 2020).

- This study demonstrates that a gap exists in opportunities for relevant and high-quality examples of professional development opportunities supporting preschool literacy practice and preschool literacy leadership. **Similar to the CPD models and in-service days at primary level in Ireland, preschool educators and management require time to plan, review, learn, and upskill.** At primary level, a longstanding model of summer course provision exists for teachers who complete courses and receive extra personal vacation (EPV) days. While association of upskilling in

exchange for leave days is often considered problematic and contradictory of the nature of professional learning, it continues to be a functioning model, which is availed of by the majority of Irish primary school teachers every summer. 20 hours of learning is required across all courses (face to face, online or blended) and teachers have the autonomy to enroll in courses of their choice. All courses are approved in advance by the Department of Education and are monitored by the Department of Education's primary Inspectorate, ensuring that each course adheres to the principles and content of the primary curriculum. **A similar professional development model would be of significant benefit to the preschool sector, providing an accessible model of professional learning with content relevant to practice within our own Irish context.** This would provide a valuable space for targeted courses offering high quality, relevant and contemporary content in support of preschool early literacy learning and provision. **Investment in incentivised, accessible, regulated professional learning opportunities is required urgently.** As French (2013, p. 43) recommends, "we need early childhood educators willing and able to engage in continuing professional development to keep abreast of current professional practice and latest developments."

- This study demonstrates how educator voice can be channeled for the benefit of self-evaluation of preschool early literacy practice and provision. Since 2012, the Irish primary and post-primary school sectors have engaged in school self-evaluation (SSE); a similar model could prove significant and extremely beneficial for the ECCE programme. As it stands, **school self-evaluation (SSE) is an important process influencing the quality of the education provided for children and young people in primary, special and post-primary schools and has been continuously developed to reflect contemporary society** in the post-COVID19 pandemic era (DE, 2022). SSE

promotes leadership of learning in the school system. **Such a model could be refined and adapted to support the development of practice across the ECCE programme, particularly for areas such as early literacy provision.** An inclusive, participatory, rights respecting process such as SSE, acknowledges the role of all stakeholders and actively facilitates their participation in the process, something which could be of worthy, valuable and meaningful replication in support of preschool educators, managers, children, parents and relevant CPD providers.

- Archer and Merrick (2020) remind us that ensuring quality of provision is just as important as increasing access to early years' provision and the route to this is through a well-qualified and well-resourced workforce. A valuable space exists in preschool policy for developing elements of pedagogical leadership, particularly in terms of literacy leadership. NFER (2012) states that change requires leadership, and this is no different for early literacy provision. **Preschools require pedagogical leadership from educators with a strong knowledge base and a vision for appropriate and empowering early literacy provision.** Paths to progression are recognised as reasons for continued staff turnover with 56% of ECEC services reporting recruitment challenges in 2020 (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Leadership training opportunities are readily available, yet such training means that many of the highly trained educators leave the learning environment for more administrative roles in the sector and thus take their skillset with them. Highly skilled, highly trained, highly knowledgeable educators are required to provide appropriately engaging, stimulating and relevant early literacy learning experiences and valuable opportunities exist for the development of literacy leadership roles within preschool to highlight, centralise and develop early literacy provision. **Urgent investment in training opportunities for literacy leaders in the preschool context is required.**

- Ultimately, for highly skilled and highly trained preschool educators to provide high quality provision, set guidance for early literacy learning and development in the ECCE years is urgently required. Preschool educators are well positioned to play a vital role in ensuring preschool children receive high-quality preschool literacy learning experiences (Weadman, Serry & Snow, 2021). Therefore, **preschool educators require accurate, explicit, practical early literacy guidance on the most crucial components of early literacy and how they are nurtured through enduring proximal processes within appropriately engaging and relevant early literacy learning experiences.** That said, we must acknowledge that schoolification of early childhood education presents an “enhanced risk” to the preschool period if the focus of experiences becomes about shallow preparation for school and future skills (UNESCO, 2010, p.119) and ensure that guidance reflects the Irish context, that it reflects an emergent, right-based approach to early learning. It is imperative that in Ireland we avoid the pitfalls associated with assessment models adopted in the United Kingdom, for example, where children are expected to “display literacy” and early literacy has become a matter of measurable achievement and “technical performance” (Department for Education, 2014, p. 24). Loose or lacking guidance creates a void that can be filled with inappropriate or prematurely formalised practice. Care and consideration is required in designing suitable guidance materials that are explicit in what is required, and what is not, and can suitably support educators in resisting the seepage of formalised, scripted practices and programmes into the preschool years through the informed provision of rich, engaging and appropriate early literacy experiences.
- Early childhood educators do not always sufficiently recognise their own importance (Ringsmose & Kragh-Muller, 2013) and the crucial nature of their efforts in

influencing children's early literacy development. **Urgent efforts are required nationally in recognising, celebrating and rewarding the early childhood educator in their professional and pedagogical capacities.** This includes a recommendation for broader communication nationally.

- Finally, gaps in knowledge on early literacy learning and relevant early literacy practice for preschool raise important questions about the robustness of the preparation preschool educators receive in their preservice training. **Urgent policy revision and redevelopment is required to examine and strengthen existing provision for early literacy at preservice initial education preparation.** At a most basic level, the system must support early childhood educators in realizing the significant opportunities within their roles to develop and support emergent literacy skills, equipping educators with the pedagogical skills and subject-knowledge competence to plan, prepare, and provide the necessary early literacy learning experiences across early childhood education. Those who lack the requisite knowledge to support children's early literacy development "may be less likely to provide evidence-based and robust instruction" in the preschool learning environment (Weadman, Serry & Snow, p. 157). As demonstrated across the study, training experiences were varied. If language and emergent literacy skills are foundational areas for successful literacy learning (Snow, 2021; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) then such content within early childhood education degree programmes is essential. **Modules on early literacy learning and development are required in all undergraduate ECE programmes so educators are appropriately prepared for the demands of nurturing such fundamental skills across the years of early childhood education.**

## 8.5 Conclusion

The contributions of this research have been summarised in relation to early literacy provision, educator voice, self-evaluation of practice, mixed methods research, educator training, and relevant theory. Building on the research within this study, recommendations for practice, research and policy were outlined. While the current study was implemented on a small-scale in a particular context, the underpinning theories are transferrable. Despite the limitations associated with small-scale mixed methods research, this study offers much across the fields of early childhood education and early literacy research. The issues raised in this study are important to the ongoing development of the early childhood education and care sector in Ireland and to the professional role and responsibility of the preschool educator.

The nature of early literacy and early literacy research is that what we mean by it and what we know about its development will continue to evolve and change with time and for that, how literacy is practised in preschool will require constant attention and consideration by well-trained, well-informed educators. The children will be the ultimate beneficiaries - we owe it to future generations of Irish preschool children that they should experience intentional, literacy-rich preschool provision. Regardless, collective efforts in prioritising evidence-informed rich learning experiences remain constant, for ‘getting it right from the start’ matters immensely (Hayes, 2013; 2024).



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## Appendices

### APPENDIX 1: Data Collection Phase 1: Questionnaire



Dear Participant,

My name is Clara Maria Fiorentini, I am a PhD researcher at Trinity College Dublin. The focus of my ongoing doctoral research is Preschool Literacy Practices. The purpose of this research project is to learn about current preschool literacy practices in the existing Irish Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE).

The study has been approved by TCD Ethics in Research Committee.

**Preschool literacy practices are routines and activities planned and facilitated to support the development of young children's emerging early literacy skills and behaviours prior to engaging with formal literacy instruction.**

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. The procedure involves completing an anonymous online survey that will take approximately 5 minutes.

Your **responses will be confidential**. No identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address will be collected.

The survey questions are about early literacy and preschool literacy practices. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes **only**. If you have any questions about the research study, please feel free to contact the researcher via email: [fiorentc@tcd.ie](mailto:fiorentc@tcd.ie)

Your responses and participation are greatly appreciated, thank you!

Kind regards,

Clara Fiorentini

#### **ELECTRONIC CONSENT:**

Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "yes" button below indicates that:

- you have read the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are at least 18 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "no" button. YES (1) NO (2)

1. Qualifications

What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education which you have fully achieved to date?

- ☐ QQI Level 5 (1)
- ☐ QQI Level 6 (2)
- ☐ QQI Level 7 (3)
- ☐ QQI Level 8 (4)
- ☐ QQI Level 9 (5)
- ☐ QQI Level 10 (6)
- ☐ I am currently an ECE student (7)

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2. Experience How many years experience do you have working in preschool settings?

- ☐ One year or less (1)
- ☐ 2 - 5 years (2)
- ☐ 6 - 10 years (3)
- ☐ 10 years + (4)

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3. Training *Early literacy is what children know about reading and writing before they actually learn to read and write. In the Early Years children move through many important stages which help foster the foundational skills required for eventual success in reading, writing and communicating.* Was Early Literacy covered as a topic or module during your early childhood studies?

- ☐ Yes - as one full module (1)
- ☐ Yes - as two (or more) full modules (2)
- ☐ Yes, as a topic within another module (3)
- ☐ No (4)
- ☐ I don't remember (5)

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4. CPD: Have you ever engaged in continuing professional development (CPD) to support your early literacy practices?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

☐ If yes, please briefly describe the type of CPD on early literacy practices which you have engaged with. For example: short course, webinar, downloadable resources etc. (4) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Knowledge How would you rate your current level of knowledge on children's Early Literacy Development in the early years? *1 being a poor level of knowledge and 5 being high level of knowledge*

1 (1)



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6. Importance How important do you think the provision of early literacy learning experiences is for children in the ECCE years?

- ☐ Not at all important (1)
- ☐ Slightly important (2)
- ☐ Moderately important (3)
- ☐ Very important (4)
- ☐ Extremely important (5)

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8. Early Literacy What (if any) do you believe should be the priorities for early literacy learning in preschool settings?

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## 9.Existing Practices

Do you **regularly** make use of any of the following literacy practices or routines in your setting?

*Please tick as many as are applicable to you.*

- ☐ Reciting Nursery Rhymes (1)
- ☐ Storybook reading (Read-alouds) (2)
- ☐ Circle time (3)
- ☐ Playing oral language games (4)
- ☐ Phonological Awareness Activities (5)
- ☐ Phonics Activities (6)
- ☐ Letter formation activities (7)
- ☐ Reading flashcards of vocabulary / high frequency words (8)
- ☐ Written worksheet tasks (tracing / colouring / matching) (9)
- ☐ Board games / dice games (10)
- ☐ Name writing (11)
- ☐ Daily news - discussed orally (12)
- ☐ Daily news - written with and displayed for the children (13)
- ☐ Listening games (14)
- ☐ Song singing (15)
- ☐ Learning and reciting poetry (16)
- ☐ Learning and reciting tongue twisters (17)
- ☐ Audio books / listening stations (18)
- ☐ Handwriting practice (19)

☐ Free play with access to reading / mark making materials (20)

☐ Discussions before / after free play sessions (21)

☐ Learning Journeys (22)

☐ Educational Apps on electronic devices (e.g. Ipad / Tablet): Please name / list apps used: (23)

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☐ Other practices - please list: (24) \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

## 10. Materials

Do you **regularly** use of any of the following literacy materials or resources in your practice? *Please tick as many as are applicable to you.*

- ☐ Alphabet frieze (wall chart) (1)
- ☐ Word walls (displaying high frequency words or key vocabulary) (2)
- ☐ Magnetic letters (3)
- ☐ Mirrors (4)
- ☐ Writing Table (5)
- ☐ Jigsaws (6)
- ☐ Workbooks / Copybooks (7)
- ☐ Vertical writing spaces (e.g. easels, chalk boards, whiteboards, doodle / graffiti walls) (8)
- ☐ Visual timetable (9)
- ☐ Outdoor mark making materials (e.g. chalk) (10)
- ☐ Class Mascot & diary (11)
- ☐ Letter moulds or stampers (for playdough / sand / printing) (12)
- ☐ Story Sacks (13)
- ☐ Tactile letters (14)
- ☐ Examples of environmental print (signs / labels / packaging displayed for emergent reading purposes) (15)
- ☐ Other - please list / explain: (16) \_\_\_\_\_

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11. Practice Do you believe early childhood educators have a duty in preparing young children for any of the following literacy skills:

|                                                                             | Yes (1)                  | No (2)                   | Unsure (3)               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Listening skills (1)                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Vocabulary development (2)                                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Identifying syllable sounds in words aurally (3)                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Identifying rhyming words aurally (4)                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Pencil grip (5)                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reciting the alphabet (6)                                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Letter formation (7)                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Writing their name (8)                                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Writing short sentences (9)                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Phonics knowledge (recognising letters and their corresponding sounds) (10) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reading high frequency words (11)                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Page Break

12. Programmes:

Are there particular early literacy programmes or resources you use to support the planning and preparation for early literacy learning experiences in your setting? *If so, please name / list:*

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### 13. ECCE Provision

Please indicate where you feel the following literacy practices should be allocated across the provision years of the ECCE Scheme

|                                                                                                                      | Important in both<br>years of ECCE (1) | Year one ECCE<br>only (2) | Year two ECCE<br>only (3) | Unsure (4)            | Not applicable to<br>ECCE (5) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Learning and<br>reciting Nursery<br>Rhymes (1)                                                                       | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Circle time (2)                                                                                                      | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Reading aloud (3)                                                                                                    | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Mark making<br>activities (drawing /<br>colouring /<br>painting) (4)                                                 | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Independent book<br>handling (5)                                                                                     | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Fine motor skill<br>development (6)                                                                                  | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Gross motor skill<br>development (7)                                                                                 | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Name writing (8)                                                                                                     | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Pencil control (9)                                                                                                   | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Tracing letters (10)                                                                                                 | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |
| Phonics lessons<br>(teaching children<br>about letters of the<br>alphabet and their<br>corresponding<br>sounds) (11) | <input type="radio"/>                  | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/>     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>         |

Page Break

#### 14. Transitions

Are there particular early literacy practices you use / have used to support children in ECCE in preparation for their transition to primary school?

☐ Yes - please list examples of these practices. (1) \_\_\_\_\_

☐ No (2)

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Page Break

#### 15. Environment

Is there a library or book space for children to access in your preschool learning environment?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

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Page Break

#### 16. Environment

Are the children free to access the library or book space independently throughout the day?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

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Page Break

#### 17. Reading Aloud

Do you believe reading aloud to children in preschool is important?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

☐ I'm not sure (3)

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Page Break

18. Reading Aloud

How often do you read books or stories aloud to the children in your setting?

- ☐ At least once per day (1)
- ☐ More than once per day (2)
- ☐ At least once per week (3)
- ☐ More than once per week (4)
- ☐ I do not read aloud in my preschool classroom (5)

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Page Break

19. Reading aloud

Do the children in your setting have a **choice** in the stories or books read-aloud to them?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Sometimes (3)

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Page Break

20. Reading aloud

As an educator, do **you** enjoy reading aloud to young children?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

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Page Break

21. Reading aloud

Briefly explain your reasons for enjoying **or** not enjoying reading aloud to young children:

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22. Reading aloud *During effective read-alouds, adults read and interact with children before, during, and after reading. Children are active participants as the text is read. The adult asks children questions and draws the children's attention to what is happening in the illustrations; how they might be feeling about events in the story; and their thoughts during the reading experience.* How often do you engage in read-alouds, as described above, in your classroom?

- ☐ At least once per day (1)
- ☐ Multiple times per day (2)
- ☐ Once per week (3)
- ☐ Not every day but a few times per week (4)
- ☐ Rarely (5)
- ☐ Never (6)
- 

Page Break

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23. Materials:

Where do you source the books that you read aloud to children in your preschool setting? *Please tick as many as applicable:*

- ☐ I use the texts already in the classroom (1)
- ☐ Local library (2)
- ☐ My own collection (3)
- ☐ The children bring books from home (4)
- ☐ Other - please specify: (5) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Page Break

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25. Reading aloud

Do you believe that children's early literacy skills are being developed during read-alouds?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

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Page Break

26. Reading aloud

Do you believe that educators should prepare and plan in advance for read-aloud experiences?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Sometimes (3)
- ☐ Unsure (4)

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Page Break

27. Reading aloud

Do you believe that children should be allowed to interrupt to comment or question during the read-aloud of a story book?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ I'm not sure (3)

28. Reading aloud

Do you believe that children should be asked questions about the story or their emerging thoughts during the read-aloud of a story book?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ I'm not sure (3)

29. Reading aloud

Do you regularly use any of the following resources or props to support learning experiences when reading aloud to young children? *Please tick as many as are applicable to you.*

- ☐ Puppets (1)
- ☐ Flashcards (2)
- ☐ Visual images (picture of characters / unfamiliar objects / visuals to support new vocabulary) (3)
- ☐ Small world toys / figurines (4)
- ☐ Multiple copies of the book (5)
- ☐ Speaking object (6)
- ☐ Fidget resources (7)
- ☐ Teddy / soft toy of main character (8)
- ☐ Whiteboard / flipchart (9)
- ☐ Pointer (10)
- ☐ Reading corner / book nook (11)
- ☐ Cushions / sit spots (12)
- ☐ Big book (13)
- ☐ 'Post-its' (14)
- ☐ Wall display of visuals / connected activities relating to the text (15)

- ☐ Connected song (16)
- ☐ Connected rhyme or poem (17)
- ☐ Recordings of the story in another language (18)
- ☐ Other; please specify: (19) \_\_\_\_\_

### 30. Reading aloud

How would you rate the following challenges for early childhood educators when reading aloud with young children? *Scroll to the right to select the relevant response.*

|                                                  | Not a challenge                                                                      | Moderately challenging | Extremely challenging |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Class size ()                                    |    |                        |                       |
| Children's disinterest ()                        |  |                        |                       |
| Language barrier ()                              |  |                        |                       |
| Lack of high quality children's literature ()    |  |                        |                       |
| Educator confidence in reading aloud ()          |  |                        |                       |
| Time constraints ()                              |  |                        |                       |
| Classroom management / behavioural challenges () |  |                        |                       |
| Lack of staff ()                                 |  |                        |                       |

## APPENDIX 3: Interview Questions



### Interview Questions Preschool Educators

Data collection

Round 2

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#### Educators: Part 1 : Experience

1. Can you share a brief overview of your experience in ECE to date?
  - a. How many years have been working in ECE and what ages / stages you have worked with to-date?
2. As part of your qualifications, do you recall any specific input or modules on Early Literacy?
  - a. Can you recall any of the content or what the main priorities were in this / these module(s)?



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#### Educators: Part 2 - Early Literacy Practices

1. Are there specific priorities or methods which you prioritise for early literacy practices in your preschool setting?
2. What informs your current early literacy practices? (frameworks / guidelines / programmes)
  - a. Where would you usually source practical ideas or guidance?
3. What are the challenges, if any, in providing early literacy learning experiences in your preschool setting?
4. Have you availed of any CPD opportunities to support early literacy practices? Format?
5. In your setting, is there a difference in early literacy provision for year one and two of ECCE?
  - a. In your setting are there set or differing priorities for year one and two of ECCE?
6. What additional early literacy supports, if any, would you like to see provided for preschool educators?
7. As Aistear undergoes redevelopment, are there changes to the framework you would like to see in terms of early literacy learning?

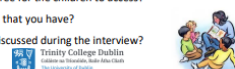
Clara Maria Fiorentini  
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#### Educator: Part 3

1. Can you briefly share your thoughts on the read-aloud method? Is it a method you value?
  - a. Are there particular texts you enjoy reading aloud?
  - b. Do you ever reread books for the children? / Do they have an option to hear 'repeated reads' of books?
2. Do you feel that there are any particular early literacy skills being developed during read-alouds with young children?
3. Are there particular practices or procedures in your setting for reading aloud? (Spaces / resources / routines etc.)
  - a. Are read-alouds in your setting usually planned or spontaneous?
  - b. Do all educators in your setting read-aloud to the children or is there a set 'read-aloud' educator?
4. Is there a designated library space in your setting? Is it free for the children to access?
  - a. How would you rate the supply or range of books that you have?
5. Would you like to add any final points about anything discussed during the interview?

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### Interview Questions Preschool Managers

Data collection

Round 2

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#### Managers: Part 1 - Experience

1. Can you share a brief overview of your experience in ECE to date?
  - a. How many years have been working in ECE and what ages / stages you have worked with to-date?
  - b. For how long have you held a management role?
2. As part of your qualifications, do you recall any specific input or modules on Early Literacy?
  - a. Can you recall any of the content or what the main priorities were in this / these module(s)?



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#### Managers: Part 2 - Early Literacy Practices

1. Are there specific priorities or methods which are prioritised for early literacy practices in your preschool setting?
2. What informs your current early literacy practices in your setting? (frameworks / guidelines / programmes)
  - a. Where would staff usually source practical ideas or guidance?
3. What do you believe the challenges are, educators in planning for and facilitating early literacy learning experiences in your preschool setting?
4. Are you aware of any CPD opportunities for ECE settings in supporting early literacy practices?
  - a. Have you or members of your setting engaged in any? Format?
5. In your setting, do you know if there is a difference in early literacy provision for year one and two of ECCE?
  - a. In your setting are there set or differing priorities for year one and two of ECCE?
6. What additional early literacy supports, if any, would you like to see provided for preschool educators?
7. As Aistear undergoes redevelopment, are there changes to the framework you would like to see in terms of early literacy learning?

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#### Managers: Part 3 - Read-aloud

1. Can you briefly share your thoughts on the read-aloud method? Is it a method you value?
  - a. Is it a method used in your preschool setting?
2. Do you feel that there are any particular early literacy skills being developed during read-alouds with young children?
3. Are there particular practices or procedures in your setting for reading aloud? (Spaces / resources / routines etc.)
  - a. Are read-alouds in your setting usually planned or spontaneous?
  - b. Do all educators in your setting read-aloud to the children or is there a set 'read-aloud' educator?
4. Is there a designated library space in your setting?
  - a. How would you rate the supply or range of books that you have?
  - b. How are books currently sourced for your setting?
5. Would you like to add any final points about anything discussed during the interview?

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