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Anna May Navarrete

*Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood
Educators*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus joint
degree “International Master of Early Childhood Education and Care”

Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences

Dublin Institute of Technology

University of Gothenburg

University of Malta

August 2015



Education and Culture DG

ERASMUS MUNDUS



DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Anna May Lu Navarrete

Signature of candidate:

August 2015

ABSTRACT

Anna May Navarrete

Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood Educators

In recent years there has been growing attention on the importance of assessment in early childhood education, especially in relation to supporting children's learning. The present study aimed to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives and practices regarding assessment in the early years. In particular, the meanings and values which educators ascribe to assessment were explored. Moreover, the study focused on strategies educators employed, along with the associated support and challenges relating to their assessment practice. Adopting a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight educators from different settings, and thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes. Subsequently, information from assessment tools that educators used in practice were collected and analysed. Findings show that educators hold diverse views and have varying approaches to assessment, using different tools and methods. Nevertheless, participants agree that assessment is important for supporting children's learning and development. Data suggests that collaboration plays some role in aiding assessment practice, particularly collaborating with colleagues and parents; however, findings also indicate that children have limited participation in the assessment process. The study also suggests that time, structural factors, qualification and training contribute to the ease in which assessment is carried out. Delving into educators' perspectives and practices on early years' assessment can offer insight on what actually happens in settings and the thoughts and attitudes that direct them, while shedding light on different issues they are faced with. The author hopes that the findings of the study can direct future research investigating issues surrounding assessment practice, greater collaboration with families, and children's agency in assessment.

*International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care
August 2015*

Keywords: early years' assessment, educators' perspectives, assessment practices

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Inherent in young children is the desire to learn and make sense of their immediate world, and the role that adults play is significant in guiding their development (Duffy, 2010; French, 2007). Adults are essential in providing an environment that supports children in the course of their learning (Hattie, 2009; Whitebread, 2008), and in early childhood education (ECE) settings, it is the educators who hold this responsibility.

Assessment, which is an integral part of the curriculum (Dunphy, 2008), can be regarded as a vehicle to facilitate the process of learning and development inside ECE settings. The perception of assessment in ECE has moved beyond that of screening and diagnosis, and now encompasses answering questions about the child or providing information about classrooms and programs (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008). As a result, the information obtained from assessments is not only a manifestation of the child's skills and potentials, but also the adequacy of the settings they are embedded within.

1.2 Context of the research

Provision of ECE services in Ireland is diverse, ranging from centre-based services such as crèches or nurseries, sessional services, and after school programmes, to more informal childcare arrangements such as childminding (Corbett, 2012; Department of Education and Science [DES], 2004). Over the past decades, the momentum in the field of ECE in Ireland has moved forward positively, where shifting views about learning and development in the early years have created a deeper understanding and appreciation of the discipline (Corbett, 2012). Although it was suggested that more consideration be given to adapting the system to young children's learning characteristics, the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland indicated that the aspect of early childhood education within the primary school is well-established and respected (DES, 2004). The Primary School Curriculum, which is relevant for children from four until six years, considers assessment as important for effective and successful teaching and learning (DES, 1999). There has also been an effort to address issues related to access of services through the

ECCE Scheme, granting a free year of preschool to children (Citizens Information Board, 2014). And more recently, Early Years Education-focused Inspections have been introduced to the sector, to emphasize and ensure quality of early education being provided by the ECCE scheme (DES, 2015). In addition, key documents have been created to act as guides for the content and quality of the services provided. *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood*, introduced in 2006, focuses on supporting services in achieving and maintaining quality in settings catering to children from birth to six years (Duignan, 2012). *Aistear*, on the other hand, is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years published in 2009, discussing themes relating to child development and providing strategies to promote it (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). Assessment is a significant feature in this framework, being illustrated as a form of good practice. Together, *Síolta* and *Aistear* are complementary resources aiming to raise the quality of ECE services in Ireland.

1.3 Rationale for the research

The focus of the present study has arisen as a result of a number of factors. From a personal point of view, assessment in the early years emerged as a topic of interest for the researcher from her background in university teaching¹. Handling an undergraduate course in assessment of preschool children while leading a preschool class in a laboratory child centre has allowed the researcher to apply theory in practice and appreciate the value of assessment in the field of ECE. Furthermore, exploring the diverse perspectives on children's learning and development has nurtured the researcher's desire to further engage with the topic and examine critical issues within it.

A number of developments within the policy context contribute to the rationale for the present study. ECE policies that have been developed in recent years have been influenced, in part, by the recognition of the importance of child development, the acknowledgement of young children as citizens in their own right, and socio-economic changes within society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). In illustrating

¹ The researcher was employed as a University Instructor, responsible for teaching undergraduate classes in the department while leading a preschool class in the laboratory child centre.

the contribution of education and care to a national framework for early learning, Hayes (2007) notes that stakeholders are increasingly interested in children's learning characteristics and how others can support this, going beyond a prescriptive role.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses the necessity of a relevant curriculum to the child's life and needs, and one which promotes the development of holistic skills (Hodgkin & Newell, 2007). In the second OECD review of how stakeholders support children's learning and development, teaching and curriculum standards, the pedagogical relationship between children and educators, as well as child-outcome quality were included, among others, in aspects of quality examined in evaluating early childhood systems (OECD, 2006). Assessment plays a key role in constructing meaningful curriculum (National Research Council, 2001) that promotes quality service for children's learning and development.

Researchers have also begun to look into underlying processes that influence the development of young children. The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) project was a large-scale study that investigated the effects of pre-school provision in the UK, and found that good child outcomes were associated with formative feedback to children and regular communication to parents regarding children's progress (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Similarly, during the consultation phase of the development of *Aistear*, the importance of supporting children's learning through observing and listening to them was highlighted, with recommendations of incorporating this finding into the framework (Daly & Forster, 2012). Communication with families, observation, and listening are important aspects of assessment that can support children in their experience in early years' settings (NCCA, 2009).

These key documents and studies underscore the value of educators, and what they do, in ECE settings, and as more centres offer longer hours for their services, there is a need to reflect on children's experiences in these settings and whether the provision they receive is appropriate to their needs (Duffy, 2010). Allowing early childhood educators to share their perspectives and practices on assessment can offer an inside look at what actually happens inside classrooms and the thoughts and attitudes that direct them. Additionally, it can shed

light on the issues and challenges faced by educators surrounding young children's assessment.

1.4 Research aims and objectives

In light of the growing attention to and awareness of the importance of assessment in early childhood education, this study aims to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives regarding assessment in the early years, focusing on children from birth to five years. In particular, the study sets out to explore the meanings and values which early childhood educators ascribe to assessment, their strategies in doing assessment, and the associated support and challenges with regard to assessment in their practice.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What meanings do early childhood educators ascribe to assessment?
2. What value does assessment hold for early childhood educators?
3. What approaches and strategies do early childhood educators use for assessment?
4. What support and challenges do early childhood educators experience in doing assessment within their settings?

1.5 Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in the study, informed by an Interpretivist paradigm. Through purposive sampling, eight early childhood educators working with children from birth to five years were gathered as participants for the research. In-depth interviews, as well as documentary analysis, were utilised as methods for data gathering. The in-depth interviews sought to explore educators' understanding and perspectives on assessment, while giving space for them to provide self-reports of their own assessment practices. Documentary analysis served as a supplement to the data gathered through interviews, examining the different assessment tools and materials educators use in ECE settings.

All information regarding methodology and research design was submitted to the ethics board in the Dublin Institute of Technology for approval. Informed consent was sought from

all stakeholders concerned in the study, and the identity of the participants, as well as the settings they work in, was kept confidential and anonymised throughout the data collection process, beginning with the transcription of data to the final write-up of the results and discussion.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on assessment in relation to children's participation, learning, and typical development, and does not cover assessment as a means for developmental screening or diagnosis. The methodological limitations associated with the study will be further explained in Chapter Three.

1.7 Glossary of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be used throughout to cover a number of concepts:

Early Childhood Education (ECE) – Represents the field that advocates for the well-being of children through care and education. ECE will be used particularly in this study, but will also cover Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Assessment – In this study, assessment will be described as the investigation and documentation of children's perceptions and capacities, seeking to understand how children think and learn, to track their progress, and further facilitate learning (Dunphy, 2008).

Setting/s – Applies to the range of actual service/s provided for young children's care, learning, and development.

Educators – Refers to staff, teachers, pedagogues and practitioners who regularly engage with children in different early years' settings and are responsible for their care, learning, and development.

1.8 Research Overview

The dissertation contains five chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of the research project. The first chapter provides an overview of the research, setting the context and outlining the aims and research questions to be explored. Moreover, the rationale behind the study is described, along with a brief explanation of the research design to be used.

Seminal and contemporary literature relevant to the study is extensively discussed in the second chapter, spanning research, policy, and practice.

In chapter three, the theoretical underpinnings of the research is highlighted, followed by an explanation and justification of the research methodology and design applied. The limitations and ethical considerations concerning the study are also addressed in this section.

Key findings from the data gathered are outlined in chapter four, according to themes that have surfaced in the data analysis. These will be discussed in detail and linked to relevant literature presented beforehand in chapter two.

Finally, chapter five reviews the conclusions yielded from the study, and raises possible implications, as well as recommendations for practice and future research that arise from it.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines a body of literature relevant to the study, spanning theory, policy, and research. The chapter opens with a presentation of dominating perspectives on children and children's learning that influence assessment, followed by a discussion of the links between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Models of early childhood education, in particular the Montessori approach, High/Scope curriculum, and Reggio Emilia philosophy will be reviewed next, examining the extent to which assessment is emphasised in each and how they may be carried out. The focus will then move to the topic of assessment in depth in the succeeding section, expounding on the definitions, purposes, methods and strategies associated with it. A brief overview will be given of assessment as depicted by *Aistear*, the Irish Early Years' Framework, and issues surrounding educators and assessment will also be discussed, bringing to light some factors affecting assessment practice in the early years.

2.2 Perspectives on Children and Children's Learning

Frameworks and guidelines surrounding ECE are underpinned by particular views about young children, their development, and the roles they play in different units of society (Woodhead, 2006). Whether children's learning is supported or inhibited will depend on the strong influence of the views held by educators (Carr, 2011). The following section reviews three perspectives on children and children's learning and their implications for assessment:

2.2.1 Developmental Perspective

Dunphy (2008) describes childhood as the period where development takes place in a much greater capacity than any other period, and that its variable nature creates challenges for assessing early learning and development. A developmental perspective looks at the normative characteristics of children's growth in different domains, and underscores the importance of 'appropriateness' in curriculum and pedagogy (Woodhead, 2006). This perspective also stresses childhood as a formative period, where positive relationships with others are seen as essential, and the potential for negative experiences to have a detrimental

impact on children's development are emphasised (Woodhead, 2006). The developmental characteristics of each child are seen as an important influence on their learning, and their progress in their knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings are considered as essential goals (Katz, 2010). Here, there is a prevailing notion that children undergo sequential, predictable stages (Walsh, 2005), the knowledge of which can be useful in planning for curriculum and assessment (Katz, 2010). Hence, many principles underpinning developmental perspectives would place importance on assessing children's development and measuring it against expected developmental 'norms'.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) proposes a framework for best practice that supports children's learning and development. They put forward the concept of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP), which underscores principles of child development and learning in informing practice to promote children's well-being. Curriculum set on the principles of DAP considers the children's interests and developmental levels, but is mostly educator-framed, in that making judgements and planning for the curriculum is mainly seen as the adult's responsibility (Abu-Jaber, Al Shawareb, & Gheith, 2010; Obidike & Enemu, 2013). Assessment within the context of this perspective provides a critical focus on outcomes, and heavily relies on the adult to determine which of these set benchmarks are met. Nevertheless, Cohen (2008) asserts that the discourse of DAP has progressively been regarded as what Foucault describes as a 'regime of truth', one that "generates an authoritative consensus about what needs to be done in that field and how it should be done (p. 9)" and discounts other perspectives or world views. Adopting labels such as *appropriate* and *inappropriate* leads to a process of normalization, shaping ECE settings as homogenous sites and classifying everything according to these dominating binaries (Cohen, 2008). Fitting practice into binaries may lead to feelings of conflict for educators when faced with instances that do not neatly fall into the categories set (Viruru, 2005). Walsh (2005) echoes the challenging of the apparent over-emphasis of this perspective in the field of ECE, arguing that although it is important to give weight to children's development, it is equally important to expand one's horizons to include multiple perspectives.

2.2.2 Socio-cultural Perspective

In the socio-cultural perspective, children's development is seen in the context of the culture and society that they belong in, highlighting how children gain competencies and identities significant to their culture through their engagement with people and their surroundings (Dunphy, 2012; Woodhead, 2006). While some concepts in this perspective may have developmental roots, there is also a focus on children as partners and co-constructors in the process of their development (Basford & Bath, 2014). Interaction is a vital element in these social constructivist theories, where it mediates learning through active engagement with the child, curriculum, and learning context (Dunphy, 2012; Payler, 2009). Educators' interactions with children are key for building collaboration of knowledge in the assessment process (Dunphy, 2008). Moreover, understanding the interactions and processes that underlie children's learning is essential to knowing how to assess it, and to shaping the assessment process so that it includes and involves children (Dunphy, 2008).

Vygotsky (1978) viewed the role of the adult as integral to children's process of learning, not only as someone who imparts information, but one who supports and extends children's understanding (Whitebread, 2008). Vygotsky identified two levels of development – the 'level of actual development' where children can operate on their own through their established skills, and the 'level of potential development', or what they can achieve with the support of a more experienced adult or peer. Moreover, he describes a space called the 'zone of proximal development (ZPD),' the distance between the two developmental levels, or those functions that are still in the process of maturation (Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2008). It is in this space, Vygotsky asserts, where learning occurs, because it pushes children towards higher developmental levels rather than staying static. This approach is one that effectively integrates teaching and assessment together; through the adult-child collaboration within the ZPD educators can determine the capabilities of children and the kind of assistance that they need, as well as gauging how the assessment impacts children's progress (Dunphy, 2008). Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell (2002) suggest that educators become effective when they develop interventions that consider a child's ZPD. The contributions of both adults and children, their interactions, communications, and collaboration are core elements of this concept (Dunphy, 2008).

Often linked to the concept of ZPD is ‘scaffolding,’ (D. Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) or the process where adults engage with children within their ZPD. Here, adults facilitate aspects of a task so that children initially keep their attention on what they can manage, before slowly leading them to take more responsibility as their proficiency increase (Dunphy, 2012; D. Wood et al., 1976). Rogoff (1998), however, contends that the ZPD and scaffolding are separate concepts, characterising the latter as a “specific technique focusing on what experts provide for novices (p. 699)” and how educators respond to children’s successes or failures. Jordan (2004) points to scaffolding as adults being more in control, and suggests that ‘co-construction’ views the child as having a more powerful role in the interaction process. Co-construction indicates a sense of togetherness of educators and children, and concentrates on building meanings rather than reaching specific outcomes (Jordan, 2004). In assessing children to support their learning, educators must go beyond scaffolding and acknowledge children’s own contribution to the process (Dunphy, 2008).

Within this perspective, outcomes are still considered vital to children’s learning. However, while still predominantly adult-led, assessment strategies consider children’s individual perspectives and invite them to participate in the process through collaboration and co-construction.

2.2.3 Child’s Rights Perspective

Children’s “entitlement to quality of life, to respect, and to well being (p. 27)” is a major priority in the child’s rights perspective, as well as the adult’s role in enabling children to realise this in practice (Woodhead, 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 7 (2006) supports the view of children as rights’ holders, and maintain that the early years is critical for the realization of these rights. In this perspective, concepts such as ‘children’s agency’ and participation arise to allow children to have a role in shaping their own childhoods (Woodhead, 2006). Pufall and Unsworth (2004) expound on this, stating:

By voice we refer to that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own. This voice surfaces only when the adult has learned to ask and get out of the way. By agency we refer to the fact that children are much

more self-determining actors than we actually think. They measure issues against their own interests and values, they make up their own minds, they take action as a function of their own wills – that is, if the more powerful class, the adults, allow them to do so. (pp. 8-9)

Children are viewed as social actors, who have their own voices and an active relationship with their society, participating beyond their families and homes (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). What is more, children have their own interests (United Nations, 2006), which may not always correspond with the expectations of adults (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Although some may construe this perspective as challenging the power and control of adults, Smith (2007) maintains that realising children's participation rights is essential to facilitate inclusion, foster resilience, and empower children to enact change. Nevertheless, Pugh (2014) contends that while there may be movement in this 'new social studies of childhood' impacting the field of ECE, there is still the pervading consideration of children and childhoods as "a site upon which existing theory is only applied (p. 76)" instead of one where theories are constructed, overlooking the value of potential fields of knowledge that can be gained from this perspective.

Therefore, if children are to be regarded as capable participants in the learning process, they must be listened to and invited to participate in democratic dialogue and decision-making (Dahlberg et al., 2007), as well as given the opportunity to become self-assessors of their own learning (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). According to Dunphy (2008), regarding children as agents is considered of vital importance in developing their identity and self-esteem, taking into account their active role in the process of assessment. The involvement of children in the assessment of their own learning and encouraging a reflective attitude presents opportunities not only for the children, but for educators as well. Research evidence affirms that children's perceptions of progress may be different from that of adults', and suggests that this mismatch, and the absence of the child's view in the assessment process, may lead to children adopting adults' meaning of progress at the expense of their own (Critchley, 2002). Because children develop differently from each other, Critchley notes that establishing individual goals with them may yield benefits, and that target-setting and reviewing are important aspects of meaningful self-assessment. Similarly, Carr (2011) argues for the significance of children's self-reflection, adding that it is possible for

educators to design strategies to apply this in practice. It can be supposed, then, that assessment leaning towards the child's rights perspective entails decisions made through negotiations between children and adults, where listening to the child's voice is not only considered, but deemed essential.

2.3 Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment

Curriculum is seen at present as something that encompasses much more than a formal structure where subjects are to be taught or information delivered (Duffy, 2010). In the context of early childhood education, curriculum covers everything that children experience in the setting – the policies and practices, interactions, environment, and also assessment – whether planned or unplanned (Duffy, 2010; French, 2007; Obidike & Enemu, 2013). In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (n.d.) endorses the joint use of *Aistear* and *Síolta* to enhance curriculum provision to support children's learning and development. To assist educators in achieving this, the NCCA developed the '*Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*' to promote an "emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (p. 10)" grounded on these two key documents. Here, curriculum is described as:

...more than the daily routine or a list of activities and experiences. It is more than naming a philosophy or approach to early childhood care and education. It is about the totality of children's experiences – the broad goals for their learning and development, the activities and experiences through which they can learn and develop, the approaches and strategies practitioners use to support and enable them to achieve their goals and the environment in which all of this takes place. The curriculum also includes the unintended impact of experiences, routines and practitioners' values and beliefs on children which is often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'. (p. 9)

This is distinguished from pedagogy, which involves the instructional techniques and strategies used to facilitate learning and to "provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context (p. 28)" (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). A study by Lee (2006) revealed that educators share particular beliefs about appropriate pedagogy in the preschool years, having a consensus that pedagogy should promote an atmosphere of fun for children. Many also expressed the need

to support children's social, emotional, and physical development, allowing them to explore and discover while taking into consideration each child's uniqueness and choice.

Assessment features in both curriculum and pedagogy, allowing educators to construct positive experiences for children that facilitate their development and respect them as distinct individuals. *Stolta* (DES, n.d.) describes pedagogy as a holistic approach in interacting with children in order to support their development, as expressed through the curriculum. Gullo and Hughes (2011) argue that an appropriate curriculum for children should go beyond a "one-size-fits-all" model and make provision for children's 'normative' development while at the same time allowing for variation that addresses their individual needs.

There is an inextricable link between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the early years. Having a nurturing pedagogy, where the term 'nurture' represents a more active, engaged quality with regards to adult-child interactions, promotes a shared construction of knowledge, where curriculum and assessment approaches are shaped from interactions with children and reflections on observations (Hayes, 2007). Pedagogical framing denotes informed decision-making in relation to the curriculum, which includes planning, organizing the time and environment, implementation of activities, assessment, documentation, and evaluation (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). In what can be interpreted as an intricate cycle, the National Research Council (2001) also establishes this link, describing how assessment can inform pedagogical and curriculum decisions.

2.4 Models of Early Childhood Education

Models of early childhood education serve as points of reference for everything that happens within ECE settings. Each having developed from different contexts, the models are grounded on particular philosophies relating to children, their learning, and how best to approach it. The particular models outlined below – the Montessori Approach, High/Scope Curriculum, and Reggio Emilia – were chosen for their relevance in the Irish context, as many elements from these models are used in daily practice.

2.4.1 Montessori Approach

In the Montessori approach, children are seen to develop in distinct stages, and preparing the environment to support children at each stage is critical for them to achieve their potential (Isaacs, 2010). Maria Montessori (1870-1952) developed this approach while working with children with special needs, then after with those living in the slums of Rome (C. P. Edwards, 2003). The Montessori environment is constructed with respect for the children, confident in their capacity to make choices and establish their independence (Huxel, 2013). The educator's role is pivotal in ensuring that this is so, and to forge meaningful connections between the environment and the child (Isaacs, 2010). The environment is also where children, particularly those from birth to six, seek “sensory input, regulation of movement, order, and freedom to choose activities and explore them deeply without interruption (C. P. Edwards, 2003, p. 36)”. This approach uses working materials which are designed to be self-correcting, allowing children to engage with them even without the intervention or supervision of adults (Lillard, 2013).

A key element of the Montessori approach is that it is individualised, where children take part in self-directed activities, and through systematic observation educators are able to recognise children's needs and address them accordingly (C. P. Edwards, 2002; Huxel, 2013). Observing and documenting the needs of individual children is an important part of the educator's role in this model of learning. The extent to which educators are able to facilitate and support the learning and development of different children is dependent on their ability to be reflective in the interpretation of children's observed behaviour, which can also be used for record-keeping and assessment, and for planning and reworking the environment (Isaacs, 2010).

2.4.2 High/Scope Curriculum

The High/Scope Curriculum was developed through the leadership of David Weikart as a response to address the needs of at-risk children in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Hohmann, Weikart, & Epstein, 2008). This particular curriculum promotes an approach called ‘active participatory learning’, where there is a partnership between children and educators, and

both are involved in the learning process (Epstein, 2007). In this curriculum, children are encouraged to self-assess through the ‘plan-do-review sequence’, where they “make choices, carry out their ideas, and reflect on what they learned” (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, p. v), which fosters reflection, purposefulness, and independence (Epstein, 2007).

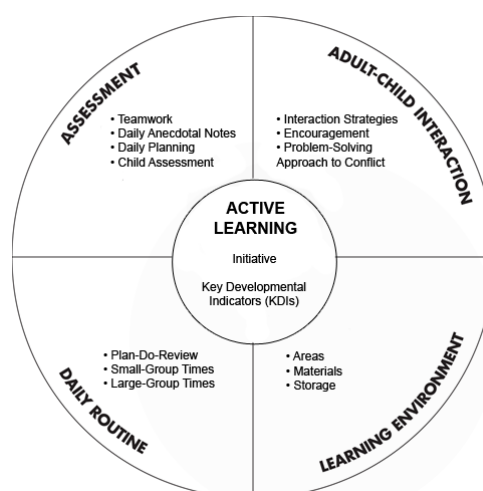


Figure 1. The High/Scope Preschool "Wheel of Learning" (Hohmann et al., 2008, p. 6)

The High/Scope practice is guided by principles illustrated in the High/School Preschool “Wheel of Learning” (Fig. 1), where active participatory learning is used as a means to engage with the curriculum outlined by *key developmental indicators* (KDIs), or behaviours that reflect children’s unfolding abilities across domains (Hohmann et al., 2008). In turn, different elements influence the degree to which these KDIs are achieved, demonstrated by the sections indicated at the periphery of the wheel. Included in this is assessment, where educators undertake daily planning sessions and take regular anecdotal records (Hohmann et al., 2008). In addition, the High/Scope Curriculum uses the *Preschool Child Observation Record* (COR) for each individual child, and the *Preschool Program Quality Assessment* (PQA) to evaluate their curriculum.

2.4.3 Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach flourished from the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), in the region of the same name in Italy. It emerged from a post-World War II vision of reconstructing society through education (C. P. Edwards, 2003). Having reciprocal

relationships is an important aspect of the Reggio philosophy, where educators and children learn together as they take part in different projects (Thornton & Brunton, 2009), and where parents are considered important partners in the organization of the school (Malaguzzi, 1993). Children are respected as competent beings, and the curriculum is not predetermined but rather flows organically from children's first hand experiences and their explanations and theories about their surroundings (Thornton & Brunton, 2009). At the same time, children are supported to confidently express themselves through different 'languages', or the "many modes of symbolically representing ideas, such as drawing, painting, modelling, verbal description, numbers, physical movement, drama, puppets, etc. (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 11)".

Observation, interpretation, and documentation in this approach are woven together, along with the pedagogy of listening, to allow learning to be visible (Rinaldi, 2004). This documenting of the process and product of engaging with children in different projects creates a concrete record that portrays what had happened, serving as a springboard for further learning (C. Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Apart from this, educators can also use documentation as a research tool and for professional reflection, and to engage the larger community (C. Edwards et al., 1998).

2.5 Focusing in on assessment in the Early Years

2.5.1 A broad look at assessment

Assessment in the early years looks at, examines, and documents children's perceptions and capacities, seeking to understand how children think and learn, to track their progress, and further facilitate learning (Dunphy, 2008). It is a medium for social thinking and action, expressed through mutual feedback and dialogue (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). Gullo and Hughes (2011) describe effective assessment as continuous, comprehensive, and integrative, seeing it as "a process, and as such be ongoing, use multiple sources of information, be integrated with teaching and curriculum and provide a means to communicate with others, including families, about children (p. 327)". E. Wood and Attfield (2005) identify six forms of assessment: *formative* (interpreting children's progress and planning accordingly),

ipsative (assessment that is oriented to the child instead of external norms), *diagnostic* (observing specific contexts and planning interventions), *summative* (overview of child's progress during a certain period), *evaluative* (reviewing the effectiveness of curriculum and provision), and *informative* (using assessment information to share with parents and other stakeholders).

Having a holistic picture of the child entails using both formative and summative assessments, where the former is seen as a tool for planning while the latter gives a glimpse of a child's capacities during a given period (Linfield, Warwick, & Parker, 2008). This allows not only for children's achievements to be recognised, but also their learning potential (Nutbrown & Carter, 2010). At the same time, assessment holds an evaluative purpose, which helps educators see how the interventions and support they have prepared impact children (Nutbrown & Carter, 2010; E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). Black (2013) affirms the integral role of both formative and summative assessment practices in teaching and learning, asserting that they must support each other. It can be seen, then, that assessment holds a *knowledge* function and an *auditing* function, both of which are interdependent of each other (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). The knowledge function focuses on understanding children's needs, characteristics, and identities, as well as using assessment to delve deeper into curriculum and pedagogy (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). Meanwhile, the auditing function is more summative in nature, presenting a child's competencies alongside curriculum objectives or goals. What is most important in early years' assessment, Nah (2014) notes, is that it is utilized for the benefit of the children, rather than for the purposes of ranking them.

Standardized assessments, where examiners strictly follow instructions for test administration, pose dangers in restricting the expression of diversity, and undervaluing children's individual needs and learning styles in ECE settings (Gullo, 2006; Wortham, 2003). There are instances that might necessitate this type of assessment, but educators should not depend solely on it and must remain aware of its limitations (Gullo, 2006). To illustrate, depending on children's ability and ease to communicate, examiners could be left with the task to infer answers from their behaviours or to gather information from parent reports (National Research Council, 2001). Also, elicited responses from children may not fully represent their capabilities, as differences may exist in language used in tests and what

children use in their daily lives (Gullo, 2006). There is also the matter of validity and reliability in standardised instruments when considering the rapid development that young children undergo (Wortham, 2003). An emphasis on standardized assessment is also likely to narrow the curriculum, pushing educators to teach according to what skills are being assessed (Casbergue, 2010; Gullo, 2006). Furthermore, standardized assessments may hold biases that disadvantage children from different contexts (Gullo, 2006; National Research Council, 2001).

Bravery (2002) illustrates the implications of policies and practices contained in the social system, particularly what potential impact baseline assessment and standardised testing in the primary school have on different early years' settings. In a survey of educators conducted in Essex, responses indicate that some current assessment practices are mainly used for recording purposes rather than supporting curriculum planning. The author points out that without formative assessment, opportunities for children's learning and development may be overlooked. Nah (2014) has also observed that a systemic implementation of assessment through government intervention allowed for consistent practice with children and across areas of learning, as well as the involvement of families. However, there were also perceived hindrances such as less time for engagement with children, the danger of overwhelming educators with a heavy workload, and the likelihood of generating rankings based on centre or children's achievement.

Nonetheless, there have also been issues raised with regards to formative assessment. Bennett (2011) indicates six of them (definitional, effectiveness, domain-dependency, measurement, professional development, system), encouraging a critical position to the construction and practice of assessment and a careful stance in the assertions and expectations made from it. He notes an ambiguity in the definition of formative assessment, which leads to a variability in its effectiveness. Bennett also suggests that more than pedagogical skills, formative assessment should be grounded within specific domains, and highlights the importance of interpreting evidence and the educator's knowledge as a key to successful implementation. Finally, Bennett positions formative assessment as a piece of a bigger picture – an aspect of a larger educational context – which must be kept coherent if effective education is to take place.

In the Irish context, the notion of assessment is included in the discussion surrounding quality in ECE. In a consultative seminar aiming to gather stakeholders' insights about the ECE sector in Ireland (Duignan & Walsh, 2004), the curriculum and adult-child interactions were found to be significant aspects considered in defining quality in the sector. Additionally, child outcomes were seen to be a means of assessing quality, which includes regular assessment, evaluation, and documentation across the different developmental domains. There was also a consensus about the need to involve children by consulting with and listening to them regarding matters that affect them, and ensure that policies and practice serve children's best interests.

2.5.2 *Aistear*, the Irish Early Years Framework

The research paper on formative assessment, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to underpin theory behind the *Aistear* framework, stresses the merit of using formative assessment in early years' settings, stating that educators' own assessments are a powerful influence on making decisions about children's learning and progress (Dunphy, 2008). *Aistear* describes assessment as integral to educators' interactions with children, and defines it as “the ongoing process of **collecting, documenting, reflection on, and using** information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning (p. 72)” (NCCA, 2009). These four elements do not happen exclusive of each other, but are rather used simultaneously depending on the educator's decision.

Aistear describes good assessment practice as one that makes sense for children and benefits them. It involves not only children, but also their families, and employs a variety of methods over time. Finally, good assessment practice is said to celebrate the “breadth and depth of children's learning and development” (p. 73). *Aistear* promotes the use of documentation as a record of children's learning and development, using a wealth of strategies to mark their achievements and plan for further learning. Documentation is also indicated as a useful tool to communicate children's setting experiences with parents, as well as to identify the additional needs which some children have, and in this way facilitate the provision of appropriate interventions. The educator's judgement, guided by their expertise, determines

the content of the documentation, using it to invite educators to reflect and develop their practice. According to the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015), having this documentary evidence serves three purposes:

It demonstrates children's competence and their achievement and progress in terms of dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. It also makes learning visible to practitioners, children, parents and other stakeholders. In doing this, documentation provides important information to help practitioners plan for children's further learning. (p. 2)

The framework (NCCA, 2009) outlines five methods for collecting assessment information, noting the importance of ethics in interacting with children and families. *Aistear* describes *self-assessment* as children reflecting on their own learning and development, and *conversations* as dialogues about adults and children's thoughts and actions. While most conversations happen spontaneously within settings, it is also possible to initiate planned conversations with children. *Observation* entails collecting information by watching and listening to children as a means to enrich their learning and development, while *setting tasks* calls on the educator to plan activities targeting different facets of learning and development. Finally, *testing* is seen to affirm the information gathered about children, often using commercially available sets of criteria. These methods are distributed across the continuum between child-led and adult-led assessment, each having their own strengths and challenges, and using them in combination creates a more meaningful and genuine image of the child.

2.5.3 Partnership in Assessment

Also considered as an integral component for supporting children's learning and development is working together with parents and families. A strong partnership with parents and families is cited as essential to quality service by *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], n.d.), and is seen to facilitate effective and meaningful learning as valuable information about children is used for assessment and planning (NCCA, 2009). This collaboration supports educators in building a more holistic and accurate picture of a child, his or her capabilities and development, as the wealth of information from the home provides context and is taken into account in understanding each child (Chan & Wong, 2010; Gilkerson & Hanson, 2000; NCCA, 2009). Therefore, it is

important for educators to ensure that there are opportunities available, both formally and informally, for regular communication with parents, and both *Síolta* and *Aistear* provide concrete suggestions on how to carry this out in practice (CECDE, n.d.; NCCA, 2009). Pertaining to assessment, some literature point to how educators can view this partnership as the mere gathering of information about children rather than actively inviting parents to be involved in the assessment process (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014). This is in spite of how parents were found to be capable and willing to take part in assessment processes and contribute informed insights about their children. The same research relates how ultimately, participants regarded parents as consumers of assessment, relaying information and output to them such as portfolios at the end of the year. Nevertheless, other authors describe partnership with parents as key to being better teachers, and outline possibilities of actively involving families in assessment (Gilkerson & Hanson, 2000).

2.5.4 Zooming in on documentation

It might be argued that, in spite of the issues associated with formative assessment, it does yield some benefit in the ECE context. Research evidence suggests that formative assessment has a positive impact in providing cognitive challenge and developing a partnership between children and adults to support learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Research also supports the value that documentation adds to formative assessment, and how it may serve as a means to address the challenges linked to traditional, standardised assessments, creating the opportunity for educators to have a richer understanding of children's holistic development (Casbergue, 2010). Focal to assessment is the practice of observation, a process used to inform educators on supporting children's learning and recognising their progress (Linfield et al., 2008). Observation is also a tool for reviewing characteristics of the curriculum – its “strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and inconsistencies (p. 113)” – as well as the provision provided (Nutbrown & Carter, 2010). However, observation is meaningless without reflection. The value of this process is seen when time is taken to contemplate and interpret what has been observed to plan and guide curriculum and practice (Hayes, 2007; Nutbrown & Carter, 2010). Forman and Hall (2005) also make the case for determining children's beliefs, expectations, and assumptions through observation to spark meaningful, high-level quality conversations with them. They contend while observation is

helpful for learning about children's interests, developmental levels, skills, and personalities, it does not actually lead to having more breadth and depth in conversations that support learning. This breadth and depth can only be achieved by looking deeper than just a transcription of what children say and do, and contemplating the meaning behind these (Forman & Hall, 2005). Documentation of these observations and reflections, according to Fleer and Richardson (2004), operates in three ways. First of all, it serves to foster co-construction of knowledge between learners and teachers. Secondly, it guides constructions of competence and competent learners. Lastly, it develops learning pathways to promote further learning.

The notion that documentation only serves to provide evidence of children's progress is challenged by Bath (2012), who instead considers it a pathway to communication and cooperation between children and adults. The author presents documentation as deciding, decentralising, (less) disciplining, didactic, and dialogue – highlighting some issues that arise from practice. Bath describes current practice of documentation in the English context as mostly constraining, primarily carried out by and intended for the use of adults (*deciding*). This leads to documentation that has a more summative characteristic, and she points to the redistribution of responsibility and control to educators, children, and even families as a countermeasure to maintain a formative approach (*decentralising*). It also involves listening to children (*didactic*), and allowing them to participate in the documentation process (*dialogue*). Finally, documentation leads to a critical examination of discourses about children and childhoods prevailing in practice (*(less) disciplining*). The democratic practice of evaluation within the ECE sector indicates a collaboration and co-construction of knowledge and learning that the whole community identifies with (Moss, 2008). The lack of involvement of children in assessment and documentation processes is considered a missed opportunity to allow for children's self-expression (Bath, 2012). Children take an active part in conversations where they have interest and knowledge about the topic, the likelihood of which increases when educators allow for them to communicate and be listened to (Carr, 2011).

A number of studies support the view of children as capable beings and reinforce the value of documentation in the ECE context. Children are found to be skilful communicators

(Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010), and the documentation process makes way for meaningful dialogue to occur between educators and children (Buldu, 2010). Through documentation, children's strengths and capabilities are made known to educators, which serves as an informative tool for planning and self-reflection (Buldu, 2010; Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010). As findings suggest, documentation enhances the process of supporting and scaffolding children's learning (Buldu, 2010; Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010). The movement away from a deficit model emphasises children's self-awareness, and documentation has been shown to encourage self-evaluation and peer assessment which contributes to increasing motivation and an interest in learning (Buldu, 2010). Nevertheless, the challenge of involving children in reflecting on documentation was acknowledged, with particular reference to the time needed to adapt to the changes in the setting dynamic and assessment process (Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010). It should also be noted that Buldu's (2010) study focused on educators developing the documentation panels themselves, which were then shared with children and parents.

Both the *content* and *process* are important in pedagogical documentation, as the *content* offers concrete and visible illustrations of pedagogical work while the *process* provides an avenue for reflective practice (Dahlberg et al., 2007). In addition, documentation, when done well, is said to promote quality in early childhood programs by enhancing children's learning, showing serious consideration for children's ideas and work, being an avenue for planning and evaluation with children, fostering parent appreciation and participation, operating as a kind of educator research, and making children's learning visible (Katz & Chard, 1996). Nevertheless, Dahlberg and her colleagues caution against the portrayal of documentation as an authentic representation of reality in its entirety, but rather depict it as selective, partial and contextual. For example, learning stories, which is a form of documentation used in New Zealand, focuses on providing narrative descriptions depicting children's dispositions to learn in different situations as compared to detailing knowledge or skills (Blaiklock, 2013). Although arguments have been made pointing to learning stories as facilitative of eliciting children's strengths and capabilities, as well as bringing to the surface children's self-image (Karlsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010), other authors debate its effectiveness, stating the ambiguous concept and extremely variable nature of dispositions

(Blaiklock, 2013; Sadler, 2002). Blaiklock (2008) also discusses the lack of objectivity in developing learning stories, as interpretations are made during the narrative writing, which leads to a subjective quality of data. Nevertheless, this is the reason Dahlberg et al. (2007) stress that through pedagogical documentation, what is deemed valuable by educators is revealed, along with their constructions of children as well as themselves as educators (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Visibility as a feature of documentation allows educators to be critical of how children and their learning are seen and represented (Bath, 2012), identifying dominant discourses in practice, and creating opportunities to challenge and reconstruct them, paving the way for new practice and a diversity of perspectives (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

2.5.5 Factors affecting assessment practice

Despite the perceived advantages of carrying out assessment in early childhood settings, there are also challenges encountered by educators in realizing this in practice. For instance, a focus on ensuring a smooth transition from ECE to primary school, as well as demanding parental expectations, bring pressure to educators working in the sector (Kitano, 2011). Research has also revealed tensions arising from the different perspectives on children and children's learning. For instance, Korean educators are challenged with a disconnect between emphasising the traditional value of academic achievement in ECE and adopting the more constructivist approach that has been introduced from the West (Nah, 2014). This is also supported by Basford and Bath (2014), who argue that in the English context, there is a challenge in having children participate as agents in early childhood settings, not least because of frameworks with an inclination towards learning outcomes. They discuss the tensions that exist for practitioners who are influenced by competing assessment paradigms – the positivist, or developmental, and the sociocultural. The authors suggest that issues surface from this in practice, particularly the tension between assessment processes that ensure children's participation, and those that involve a superficial record for the purposes of tracking and reporting development.

Because of the range of perspectives influencing educators, as well as the mounting academic pressure set upon the ECE sector, a myriad of assessment approaches have been observed in early years' settings which may impact children's learning. Differing priorities

in assessment translate to a wide range of practices as educators seek to track children's learning alongside their conceptions of development and academics (DeLuca & Hughes, 2014). For instance, Payler (2009) notes that settings that focused on learning outcomes and used scaffolding to achieve them seemed to reflect a negative perception of children as less able, which may affect their developing identities as learners. This was in contrast to settings seen to be oriented more towards care and socialisation that also promoted co-construction between adults and children. The author also presents an alternative approach observed in the preschool setting, characterised by facilitating predetermined goals in a collaborative environment. Be that as it may, it can also be gathered from research that educators are able to negotiate among the demands and expectations they are faced with, retaining some autonomy and adapting the demands and expectations to their curricular stance and assessment practice (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). While assessment profiles differ from one educator to the next, depending on their curricular priorities and approach, Pyle and DeLuca maintain that each has their strengths, and that there is potential in integrating them.

A further challenge is with regard to the terms educators use when talking about assessment. For instance, seeking the perspectives of early years practitioners concerning baseline assessment in England, Chilvers (2002) noted the reluctance of practitioners to describe their practices as forms of baseline assessment. However, from the survey responses, it appears that most practitioners do conduct some form of baseline assessment through creating profiles and communicating with parents or previous educators.

In addition to this, there are also factors that may hinder the implementation of collaborative and participatory assessment, such as relevant professional training, a needed paradigm shift with regards to measurement and testing, and a reframing of expectations of families and the community (National Research Council, 2001). Both research studies and literature echo the need for competent and knowledgeable educators to be able to implement effective assessment in the early years (Basford & Bath, 2014; Bennett, 2011; Buldu, 2010; Chilvers, 2002; National Research Council, 2001; Payler, 2009). Knowledge is seen as important in manoeuvring through the tensions present in the field (Basford & Bath, 2014), and to decide which among the various guidance strategies and their implications will be best to use in various contexts (Payler, 2009).

Aspects such as teacher structure, adult-child ratio, and group size were found to be associated with quality of early years' service provision, with the co-teacher structure, lower ratio, and smaller group size pointing to greater positive teacher behaviours and higher child care quality (Shim, Hestenes, & Cassidy, 2004). In the same research, the co-teacher structure is thought to be more collaborative and fosters a more constructive atmosphere for learning, creating a positive environment for educators. Apart from this, other structural aspects such as equipment, material, and financial support, especially by the leadership of early childhood settings, are considered to be essential to effectively adopting the practice of documentation (Buldu, 2010).

The demand for time and effort spent on the different aspects of children's assessment were cited as potential roadblocks for its regular use in kindergarten classrooms, despite its perceived usefulness (Buldu, 2010; Nah, 2014). Process-oriented assessment was seen to be labour-intensive, as it involved copious amounts of observation and documentation (Chan & Wong, 2010). Time was also found to be a major determinant in allowing an organic transition from educators employing a traditional individualistic documentation approach to a more sociocultural one (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). Through teacher observations and analysis of diary entries, Fleer and Richardson found that while there was initial discomfort in the process of documenting using a sociocultural approach and an uncertainty in what to record, over time the value of such an approach was acknowledged, with the participants slowly considering the socio-cultural context in the assessment process.

CHAPTER 3: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter reviews the design and methodology adopted in the study, describing the rationale underlying the methods and instruments utilised and the process through which the research was carried out. This includes setting the context for the research sites and an outline of the sampling composition. Procedures guiding data generation and analysis will also be discussed, as well as the ethical considerations and limitations relevant to the study. A section on the author's personal reflections is also included, to bring to light the reflexive nature of the research study.

3.2 Research Aim and Questions

The present study aims to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives regarding assessment in the early years, with a focus on those working with children from birth to five years. In particular, the meaning, value, practice, support and challenges experienced by educators with regards to assessment are explored. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What meanings do early childhood educators ascribe to assessment?
2. What value does assessment hold for early childhood educators?
3. What approaches and strategies do early childhood educators use for assessment?
4. What support and challenges do early childhood educators experience in doing assessment within their settings?

3.3 Methodological Approach

The research is qualitative in nature, and was designed as such because of its suitability to the study. Where the aims and objectives seek to explore participants' meanings and understandings of their social world and elucidate their experiences and perspectives, the qualitative approach is fitting because it accounts for the context and natural settings surrounding the study (Creswell, 2007; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014). By

giving importance to descriptive detail, a contextual understanding of participants' behaviour or perspective is produced (Bryman, 2012). This, precisely, is what the study hopes to achieve – to delve into educators' experiences of assessment and draw their understandings from it. Additionally, its methodological approach is emergent, meaning data generation methods are adaptable, gathering a wealth of complex information, and the interpretation and analysis of data provides liberty in exploring a variety of ideas that are supported by participants' views and insights (Creswell, 2007; Ormston et al., 2014). This flexibility is seen to pave the way for genuinely adopting the perspectives of those taking part in the study (Bryman, 2012). The research is framed within an Interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on how participants make sense of their experiences, and what meanings may be constructed from them (Hughes, 2010; Ormston et al., 2014). Here, the research process is inductive, developing themes and categories by making sense of the data gathered, working back and forth until the analysis is inclusive and exhaustive (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2007).

3.3.1 Reflexivity

In using the qualitative approach, researchers are very much embedded in the social worlds they explore (Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006), and the present study recognises that a wholly detached stance cannot be achieved throughout the research process. As such, researchers must be reflective of the implications of their thought processes and decisions in the knowledge they construct (Bryman, 2012). To acknowledge the role of reflexivity and manage the impact of the researcher's biases or responses, notes were taken regularly to monitor and take note of possible beliefs and behaviours that may have an influence on the study (Ormston et al., 2014). Additionally, a narrative of the author's reflections and insights regarding the research process is included in this chapter.

3.4 Participants

3.4.1 Research Sites

The research sites chosen for the study represent the range of services available for young children in Ireland – publicly-funded, private, and community-based. Purposive sampling

was used to identify eight early years' settings as potential research sites for the study, with the help of the researcher's supervisor. This was deemed suitable as participants needed to fit the aims and objectives set for the research, as well as for variability within the sample to be maximised (Bryman, 2012; Daniel, 2012). Purposive sampling was done to ensure that all who partake in the study have relevant knowledge of the subject matter being studied, and at the same time keeping in mind the aim of exploring the diverse perspectives of individuals (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2014). Gatekeepers were contacted through email or phone, before meeting them in person to disseminate the information kit.

3.4.2 Participant Composition

From each of the settings who consented to take part in the research, one educator was invited to participate in an in-depth interview about their experiences and perspectives on assessment. In total, the researcher interviewed eight early childhood educators from separate settings. This sample size was determined, in part, because of the limited time available for completing the research. Moreover, since qualitative research tends to involve rigorous, labour-intensive processes and produce a considerable amount of data, small sample sizes make certain that analysis can be inclusive and the study stays manageable (Ritchie et al., 2014). In total, the research included educators from private and community crèches, both agency and publicly-funded, as well as Early Start units. Each participant has almost a decade or more of involvement in the ECE sector, with their length of experience ranging from four to twenty-nine years. The respondents also have varied qualifications, however all have educational backgrounds related to the field. All of the educators who took part in the study work with children between the ages of birth to five, and serve different capacities in their centres, with some directly handling groups of children and others taking on a more supervisory role. The participants also adopt an assortment of curriculum models in their practice, with *Aistear* being the primary framework used by the majority, along with elements of High/Scope or Montessori. For a more detailed breakdown of the participant composition, please refer to Table 1.

	R01	R02	R03	R04	R05	R06	R07	R08
Setting Type	Community crèche (Publicly-funded)	Private crèche	Early Start	Early Start	Community crèche (Agency-funded)	Community crèche (Publicly-funded)	Community crèche (Agency-funded)	Private crèche
Years of ECE experience	16 years	20 years	11 years	4 years	29 years	10 years	29 years	22 years
Qualifications	FETAC 6	NEEB Certificate (FETAC Level 5) BA Early Childhood Education	PGCE	Primary School Education Degree	Diploma in Early Childhood Education	BA Early Childhood Education	Montessori qualification	FETAC 5 FETAC 6 (Montessori)
Current position	Key worker	Assistant manager	Primary school teacher	Primary school teacher	Manager	Preschool and playschool teacher	Manager	Preschool teacher
Age group currently with	Waddlers (1-2 years)	N/A (Supervising role)	3-4 years	3-4 years	N/A (Supervising role)	Preschool (3-5 years) Playschool (2 and above)	N/A (Supervising role)	3-5 years
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Aistear</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Aistear</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early Start <i>Aistear</i> elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early Start <i>Aistear</i> elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Aistear</i> High/Scope elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Aistear</i> elements Montessori elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play-based curriculum <i>Aistear</i> elements Elements of High/Scope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Aistear</i>

Table 1. Participant Composition

3.5 Data Generation

3.5.1 Research Instruments

In-depth interview

Interviews, characterized by one-to-one interactions between the researcher and participant, devote much focus on the individual, allowing for a comprehensive account of their perspective and the context surrounding it (Lewis & McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). This instrument is most suited for the purposes of the study, due to its interactive nature that looks into a description and understanding of one's social world (Miller & Glassner, 2004). In in-depth interviews, there is a structure set for particular themes and topics to be discussed, but also space to dig deeper into answers given and for the participants to influence the direction of the interview (Yeo et al., 2014). The semi-structured characteristic of the interview allows researchers to bring to the surface what participants consider important in expounding their beliefs and opinions (Bryman, 2012). This probing gives way to richer information, and may lead to new knowledge or awareness (Yeo et al., 2014).

An interview schedule was developed based on the aims and objectives of the study (Appendix 3). First, the participants were asked to share some background information about themselves to establish rapport and provide context. Then, the interview proper consisted of various questions aiming to “achieve both *breadth* of coverage across key issues, and *depth* of content within each” (Yeo et al., 2014, p. 190). This included enquiring about their perspectives and practices on assessment in the early years, as well as the support and challenges they encounter in implementing this in practice. Suggestions and recommendations to enhance assessment practices were also sought by the researcher. Certain considerations were taken into account to do this. The researcher strove to use clear, open questions, and prepared prompts and additional probes that can be used when necessary. Open questions do not limit, but rather provide an opportunity for the researcher to collect a range of responses from the participant (Wilson & Sapsford, 2006).

Documentary analysis

For this study, documentary sources pertain to specific assessment tools and materials used by educators in their daily practice, including, but not limited to, checklists, kits, communication diaries, narrative reports, and portfolios. In analysing documentary sources, it is important to bear in mind that they are the product of human effort, with particular contexts surrounding them as well (Finnegan, 2006). Therefore, documents must not only be consulted, but also interpreted, probing into “how they came into being: by whom, under what circumstances and constraints, with what motives and assumptions, and how selected” (Finnegan, 2006, p. 146). A documentary analysis guide was constructed to aid the researcher in obtaining comparable data, taking account of the purpose, development, content, and implementation of the assessment document (See Appendix 4). This instrument was chosen to substantiate interview responses and explore actual materials used to assess young children in early years’ settings.

3.5.2 Research Procedure

Pilot Testing

The person invited for the pilot testing was a Montessori educator in a private crèche in Dublin, working with children from three to six years. The pilot interview lasted approximately 35 minutes, and was held in the educator’s classroom. The interview schedule was pilot tested to ensure that the instrument developed was sound, being mindful of the adequacy of language used, the order of the questions, and the prompts and additional probes that emerged throughout the process. Reflecting on this, minor revisions were made to improve the tool, specifically changing the sequence of particular items and including further clarifying questions. No information contained in the pilot test was included in the research analysis. The documentary analysis guide, consecutively, was pilot tested on selected assessment tools in use at the same crèche. As the researcher was employed as a part-time staff at the centre, she observed and made queries regarding the tools used based on the guide developed. Likewise, minor revisions were made, particularly modifying questions to draw

out more meaningful and relevant information that fits with the potential data to be gathered from the interviews.

Data Generation

Data generation commenced once pilot testing and revision of tools had concluded, through contact with gatekeepers for access to participants and assessment tools used in the settings. As soon as consent had been given and an educator had been identified as willing to participate, contact with the potential participants was established. Information packs were provided for both gatekeepers and participants, which included an information sheet detailing features of the study and a consent form to be filled out (See Appendices 1 and 2). Any questions on the part of the participants were addressed by the researcher before arranging the interview. The interview was conducted in the educator's workplace during an agreed upon date and time, using a digital device to record the session. The interviews conducted lasted from 35 minutes to an hour, and were transcribed verbatim within two weeks and stored securely for data analysis. During the interviews, the flow of the questions arose organically depending on the response of the participants. One interview was conducted with an educator who spoke English as a second language, and in this instance modifications were made to the phrasing of the questions to better facilitate the interview. Subsequently, the researcher viewed samples of specific assessment tools and materials that educators use in their practice, which were documented through notes or photos. Some centres voluntarily provided the researcher with template or blank copies of their assessment forms, and these were carefully marked with a code and stored securely.

3.6 Data Analysis

Once all interviews were transcribed and documentation on assessment tools was compiled, a thematic analysis was applied to the data gathered, guided by the process of data management, abstraction and interpretation set by Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, and Barnard (2014). To start with, much time was spent repeatedly perusing the data, noting emerging topics and issues that arise from them, followed by identifying the initial categories to be included in the thematic framework (Spencer et al., 2014). These were used to mark

and code units of data, and through revisiting them further refine the themes and subthemes that have been developed (Spencer et al., 2014). Themes were extracted by noting recurring topics, distinctive terminologies used, metaphors or analogies given, similarities and differences that came out, and causal connections expressed (Ryan & Bernard, as cited in Bryman, 2012). Links were then made among the extracted data, which informed descriptions and explanations that elaborate the analysis (Spencer et al., 2014).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The entire research process was underpinned by the DIT Research Ethics Guidelines, and the researcher endeavoured to address comprehensively any ethical issues pertinent to the study. The design and methodology of the study was presented to the DIT Research Ethics Committee for review, and once approval had been given, only then was data gathering carried out. It was made clear that sufficient information was given to potential research sites and participants, providing information packs and being available for any questions. Consent forms emphasised the participants' rights, and made clear the voluntary nature of the study.

Data protection was a key priority for the researcher, and all information gathered was kept securely in a separate memory drive solely used for the study, which will then be deleted once the dissertation has been evaluated. Confidentiality was also a significant consideration in storing and transcribing data, and much effort was given to keeping the identity of participants and settings anonymous by removing or, when necessary, changing their names in any and all written accounts. Furthermore, any identifiable logos or images with regards to assessment tools and materials were blurred or censored during storage, and only an aggregate version was included in the final report.

Reflections

Perhaps what was most enlightening for me throughout the research process was my engagement with the different perspectives on children and childhood. Writing up the dissertation, I was confronted with my own philosophies and perceptions on early childhood education and assessment. This allowed me to become critical of how I conducted the interviews as well as how I interpreted the data gathered. Revisiting the interview recordings

on the day of conducting them while taking notes, and transcribing them the week after allowed me to process information more efficiently, as I am able to let my thoughts build and develop. I also found myself becoming more sensitive to how I presented ideas and put my thoughts into words.

Because of this, constructing the Findings and Discussion chapters proved to be challenging and thought-provoking, as I had to engage with data while acknowledging how my own views could influence the output. Nevertheless, it was a very worthwhile experience, and as a result of this process, my own views on the discipline and the sector have evolved as well.

3.8 Limitations

The study focuses primarily on early childhood assessment in the Irish context, and so generalizability for other contexts cannot be guaranteed. The purposive nature of the sampling method, as well as the small sample size, may also mean that the participants may not necessarily be representative of the diverse practitioner backgrounds and perspectives that exist in Ireland. This may affect the validity of generalizations made beyond the characteristics of the study sample (Daniel, 2012). Finally, the actual conducting of assessment by participants was not observed, and any data regarding their assessment practices was gathered only through self-reporting. Additionally, the assessment tools and materials to be discussed and analysed were only based on those disclosed by the participating settings and educators.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings aiming to shed light on early childhood educators' perspectives regarding assessment in the early years. These were gathered from the eight in-depth interviews conducted with early childhood educators, as well as the documentary analysis carried out with reference to the assessment tools adopted across settings. In the sections outlined below, key themes surrounding the research problem are identified and examined, supported by the educators' perspectives and evidence of practice through the assessment tools they use.

4.2 Educators' Understanding of Assessment

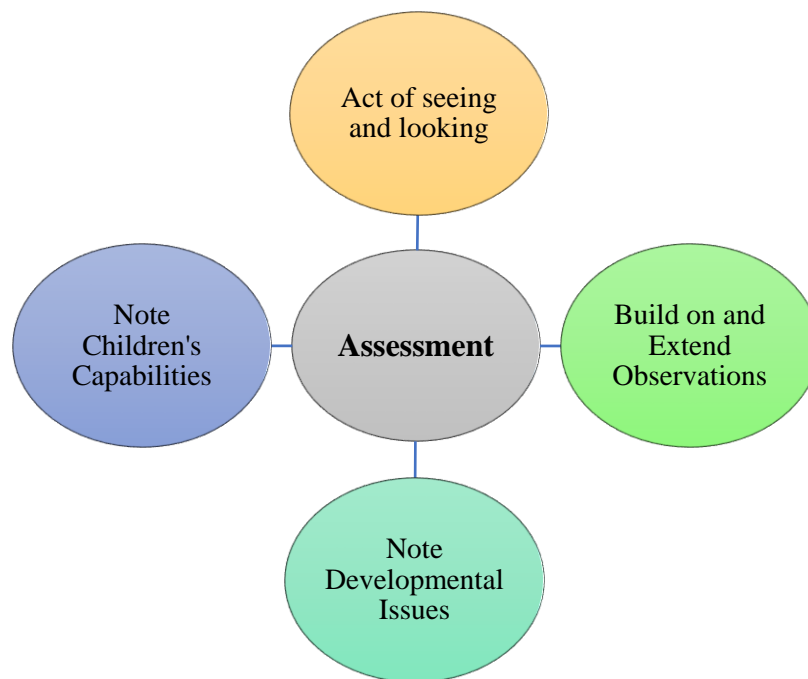


Figure 2. Educators' Understanding of Assessment

Notions regarding the meaning of assessment appear to be consistent across the educators interviewed, the summary of which is illustrated in Figure 2. First and foremost, assessment is interpreted as an act of seeing and looking at children. Many stated the attention they give

to 'where the child is at,' particularly taking into consideration children's capabilities, needs, and interests, and using observation as the main tool for gathering this information:

I suppose it's to look at the child, to see where the child is at, to see what the child can do, and to see what they need assistance with or what they cannot manage or what they cannot do.

Educators, however, pointed out that beyond just seeing, assessment builds on and extends 'where the child is at', using this knowledge as a basis for their planning and decision-making, and adapting practice to the information they have gathered. For the most part, assessment was described as something implemented to individual children rather than to the group as a collective.

Assessment is finding out where the child is at and then tailoring what you do in the following week with that child to what they actually need...So therefore assessment kind of informs me what I need to know about each individual child so that I can tailor my teaching, my teaching the next week to what they actually need to learn.

However, there were some respondents who made reference to assessing children as a group:

It will be kind of...to look at the children that you have. So, you do the child as an individual and the children as a group. And you could use that assessment to, it could provide the basis of your curriculum, basically. So kind of seeing what the emergent interests of the children are and using that assessment too, will help you kind of, expand that emergent curriculum. And kind of make sure that your curriculum is catering [for] the needs of the children.

What also emerged from the interviews is the educators' growing focus on and preference for looking at what children can do as opposed to what they cannot. Moreover, throughout interviews emphasis was placed on expressing children's capacity in an optimistic way, and so approaching assessment with a positive perspective:

We use the assessment tools as kind of a positive, in a positive light. We don't kind of use it to pick out the negatives about children or different things that they do, we kind of use it as a positive building strategy to kind of help the children grow, help their learning grow, help their knowledge grow, so on.

Nevertheless, the concern about children's development is still an important priority for the educators, especially with regards to issues such as significant lapses in achieving milestones

or expected skills. While this is so, educators still strive to construct these competency concerns in a positive light rather than stressing their deficiencies:

Well, I think we try to look at what they can do most of the time, trying to keep it as a positive thing rather than what they can't do. Obviously, we have to assess what they can't do as well. But even the way it's written, it's like, "He's still developing." It doesn't say like, "He can't," because they're going to get it eventually. Hopefully, that's the plan. But we try to make it as positive as possible.

In addition to this, assessment is also viewed as a screening tool to identify children who may need further assistance, and allow settings to link with other professionals who are able to address their specific needs:

As well as that, just trying to see, okay, obviously they're not gonna be able to do it, seeing if there's any issues with their development. And if there is, spotting that and being able to know where to go with that... it's our duty to report that and to kind of get them the help they need like speech therapy, psychologists, all that.

4.3 Values Educators Ascribe to Assessment

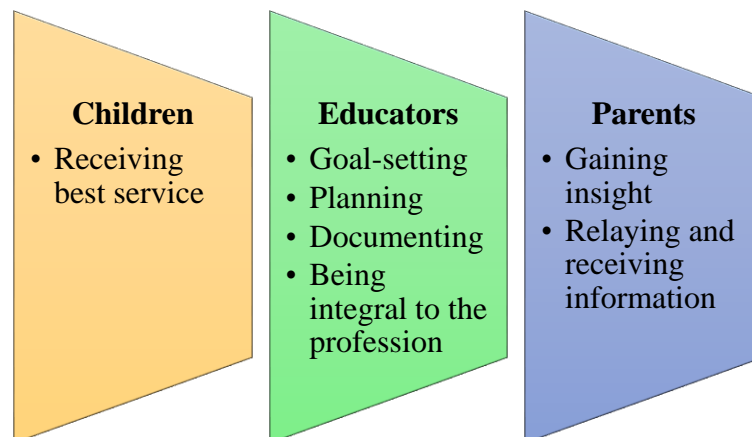


Figure 3. Value of Assessment According to Participants

Throughout the interviews, assessment is shown to benefit three notable stakeholders – children, educators, and parents (a concise outline of responses can be seen in Figure 3). All the educators interviewed clearly articulated that assessment's focal point should be the children, and that they are the ones to ultimately benefit from it, in that information gathered may be used by educators to provide what is best for them:

Of course it's for the child first to see what the child needs. Basically, where the child is at and what the child needs. But a lot of time I think it might be as well for, it gives, if we have an assessment done on a child, it can inform how we do our practice. It informs what way we approach the child, it informs us on how best to approach a child, how best to get them to integrate with the group, or how best to bring them to that next step...

Responses also revealed a view of assessment as important for children in an indirect way, having value for them by benefitting educators and parents. For instance, assessment is viewed as helpful for educators, mainly for setting goals and objectives that are adapted to children's needs and interests, and for planning and modifying activities based on them:

So I think that the teachers, we know where to plan to, then... So we obviously just need to get a different, come up with a different way of doing it. So I think assessment is handy that way, that we know what, where to aim to...

Furthermore, the value of assessment was also reported in its role in serving as evidence of information about children. In one sense, it provides a visible account of the children's journey throughout their time in the early years' setting, to confirm or challenge educators' assumptions.

I think it's the best way of identifying needs of children. You know, without that, you're going by, on what you think. And what you're assuming. Whereas, when you have it on paper and you're looking at it and you're like, "Right, well, you know, they can do this, this, and this, but they can't do this, this, and this." You have a more, in your face, clear. So you're like, right, well this is where I need to work at. Instead of just going with, you know, a thought that goes in your head.

From another perspective, assessment in the early years is seen as a useful means for their succeeding educators or other professionals for looking back when significant issues arise, which is illustrated below:

These assessments are kind of useful like I say, later on, if a real problem does become apparent. If the problem's ongoing... it has been monitored, it's ongoing, then these are kind of evidence, then, that okay, this was an issue from Early Start, we really need to do something about it. You know, maybe for like an educational psychologist, some, I'd say agency coming in to help, these are good pieces of evidence for them to know what they need to work on.

A significant and interesting finding to emerge from the data was that assessment is considered as an integral characteristic of being an educator, and in fact, a characteristic which sets educators apart in terms of their profession. For some of the educators interviewed, assessment facilitates an attitude of intentionality to facilitate and support children's learning and development:

It's extremely relevant. I mean, like if we aren't assessing them, we're just minding them really. We're not doing much else, d'you know what I mean? Like, I think if you're not observing and assessing and developing their... if you're not helping then develop then you're doing anything at all, really.

But sometimes there are many places like it's for me like they only look after children for safe and if you don't have a plan. If you don't know what you want to do with children, it means that you don't really like to be a teacher, you don't really like to work with teacher.

In the same vein, parents are given insight, through the assessment information, of how and what their children are doing in the ECE settings. Moreover, through collaboration, parents and educators mutually gain from each other information to aid in supporting children's learning and development:

And [assessment is] also for the parents because it gives them an insight to what the children are currently doing and how they can get involved and help.

Educators particularly drew attention to the two-way process of relaying and receiving information with parents, pointing to the importance of linking home and early childhood settings for children. This building of partnership was seen as beneficial in forging a connected practice between educators and parents:

And it is also working in collaboration with the parents so that we can plan for the children if the parents are concerned, if we are concerned and how we can work together. So, things that we might be doing here in the centre, that maybe the parents can bring home, or that the parents are doing something at home that maybe is working that we can bring with us.

4.4 Educators' Approaches to Assessment

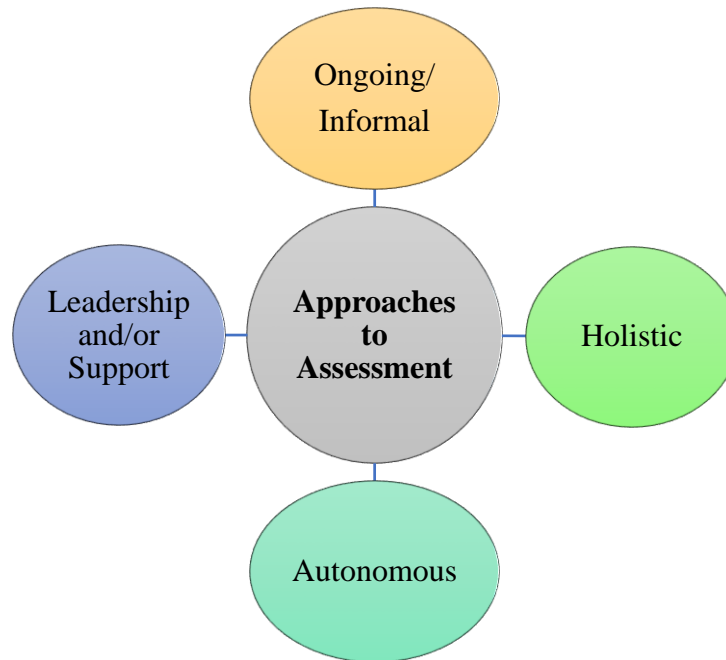


Figure 4. Educators' Approaches to Assessment

Key terms were used by the educators interviewed to describe their approaches to assessment, which are summarised in Figure 4. Primarily, approaches are considered as ongoing and informal. The importance of adopting holistic strategies of assessment, of maintaining some autonomy in assessment and in combining both leadership and support for children were all highlighted across the educators' narratives.

Activities, planned and spontaneous, are used to get different kinds of information about the children. This suggests a view of assessment that is integrated with the daily routines of the early years' setting:

So a lot of what we would do in Early Start here would be informal, on a day to day basis. Myself and the child care worker would say at the end of the group, oh well, he was able to do it, we'll have to do it again with her tomorrow, she'll need extra, or we need to attack in a different way that some of them still aren't getting it... I would think assessment is important but a lot of it we would do here is informal, we wouldn't be doing the formal tests, or such.

...because we assess all the time. And we assess daily to set goals. We assess everything, we assess the building every day, you know... So assessment, I

suppose it's ongoing, every day. Ongoing. Unconsciously we are assessing constantly.

The importance of approaching assessment in a holistic manner was emphasized by many educators. More specifically, the importance of looking at not only children's developmental domains and interests, but also at the contexts surrounding them was a central focus. Educators working with disadvantaged communities were especially concerned with taking the family's needs into account when doing assessment:

...by assessing them, we would see not only the developmental stage but sort of assessing the whole picture of the family as well. So if there's any particular need that might arise out of that, as I said because we're here to sort of cater for the basic needs of the child and the family as well, and I suppose because the area we're working in is a disadvantaged area and some of the family we will be working with are of high levels of need. Sort of socially as well and so it is assessing the whole situation within the family and the child.

A further sub-theme to emerge from analysis of these interviews was the benefits of combining the role of both *leader* and *supporter* when carrying out assessments with children in the early years. While some educators identified more with being the leader and others being the supporter, a number of responses also suggest that these roles are not exclusive to each other; educators assume both of them at one point or another throughout the research narratives. The leadership role involves gathering the assessment information and making purposeful decisions with them. The supporter role, on the other hand, focuses on facilitating children's learning and development without interfering or disrupting the children's natural behaviour:

I suppose, as an educator in early years setting, or, you know, overall, it's facilitating things. So I suppose it's setting, if I need to assess something, maybe I'll deliberately set-up a certain activity, to then show me, 'Well, yeah, they can sort that, or they can, you know, hold their pencil correctly,' whatever it is... My role would just be to facilitate it, and to plan from it. But not interfere in it. You know, not direct the child in any way.

At the same time, educators also described approaching assessment with some autonomy. Responses indicate that although they have required documents that need to be filled out, it is mostly the educators' prerogative as to how to get them done. This involves the educators

themselves being selective and tailoring the assessment tools to the needs of the individual children that they are working with:

...our principal would really be, kind of use what is going to be valuable to you as a teacher. You know, there's no point in having a load of paperwork, and, and be totally irrelevant, and take up a lot of your time when it could be better spent planning activities.

I mean, in our centre we've a couple of different methods. Some of the rooms find certain methods a bit easier than others... So [the educators] kind of judge the activities with the age groups that they have.

4.5 Educators' Methods for Assessment

4.5.1 Strategies for Assessment

Educators' strategies for assessment refer to actions they perform and plans they execute when doing assessment. From the interviews, two main strategies emerged – collaborating with the different actors involved and reporting or relaying information resulting from assessments. Educators' narratives indicate that collaboration in assessment occurs with children, parents, and colleagues (refer to Figure 5), while reporting is carried out predominantly with parents, and occasionally with administration or inspectors.

Collaboration in Assessment

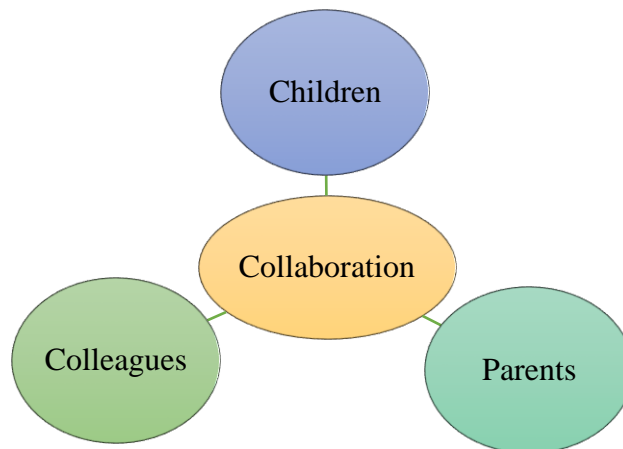


Figure 5. Collaboration in Assessment

Collaboration with children: Children's agency in assessment

On collaborating with children, the educators expressed different views concerning the extent and nature of children's participation in the assessment process. For some, assessment is a process that children are unaware of, and so their contribution is demonstrated through their unconscious provision of information about their development, needs, and interests. One of the rationales given by an educator was that children being conscious of assessment may put undue pressure on the child:

I don't think... and I think if the facilitator's role or the assessor is doing their role properly, the child wouldn't even know they were being assessed. Shouldn't know they're being assessed, and shouldn't know they're being asked, asked, asked, asked questions.

I think children sense that you're testing and stuff, and if you have someone sitting beside you with a pen and a piece of paper and they're writing down or ticking off what you can do, what you can't do, it's off-putting. And that makes children feel like they're on the spot and that they're on show. And I don't think that you're gonna get a true reflection of what they actually know. So, the informal, catching them doing something, making a quick, subtle note about it.

Other educators expressed the challenge of involving children, citing constraints such as children's language, age, and other contextual factors that come into play:

But I think with this age, and especially in this area, language is such a big issue, that language is so poor that it's very hard to get them to help you with the assessment. D'you know? A lot of it has to be the tick boxes, or, yeah.

Particularly with regard to children's age, educators conveyed a lack of confidence in assessing younger children and were disinclined to view them as agentic beings. Educators working with those below three years of age especially articulated this view:

Like, I do love the playgroup. But I find it difficult to set them goals because it's easier for a preschool group. Obviously, they're just goals. But they're kind of baby steps obviously because that's the age they are. It's the same process. But personally, I find it a bit more difficult.

...especially with my room, you know, with the waddlers [1-2 years], I don't think they're aware because, you know... Yes they see us ticking in boxes, they see us filling in sheets and all but they don't know what they're actually for?

Nevertheless, one educator spoke of actively involving children in the research process, emphasising their competence and describing how children are given some say in, for instance, creating some assessment tools like documentation:

Definitely, definitely. They're so capable. And they are so more capable than people think they are... Well what we do, when we create photographs we might stick them on an A4 page at that day, like the children bring the cameras home with them. The children use the cameras here themselves. So the kids know that photos happen. So say you're doing something and we would say, oh wow, look what you're doing, or what d'you think, and they'd say to you sometimes, can I take a picture of it? And they take a picture of it.

Collaboration with children: Children and self-assessment

Educators also had divided opinions with regards to children and self-assessment, and its use in the early years' setting. For some, self-assessment is something that occurs implicitly and organically within a child, illustrated as the ability of children to ascertain their capabilities and decide how to act accordingly:

So they're kind of, they're self- assessing their own abilities, what they need to kind of move forward and looking at ways to do that. So it's not kind of always coming back to the adult and saying, the adult taking over and saying 'Oh look, you can't do that.' They need to assess themselves to see if they're able to do that.

One educator shared their view that self-assessment is not innate in children, and educators have the role of cultivating this aptitude in them:

I think they need guidance in this. But I think if you help them through it, I think it's a skill that they need to learn. I don't think self-assessment is innate in us. I think it's some skill that you have to learn. And I think that's our role in helping them. But they can actually. It's possible.

For some educators, there was a sense of ambivalence when it comes to the issue of children's self-assessment, especially with making it more explicit and structured in the early years' setting:

I mean there's always again, in a very informal way, talking about, like, oh, 'Look what you can do now,' and, you know 'Show me that you can do this,' or if there's something brilliant, 'Show this to [redacted],' or, you know, things like that. But

I would be very wary of involving them too much at that young age because I wouldn't want them feeling the pressure, and I wouldn't want them feeling any element of being compared to any other child, or feeling like they failed at anything.

Part of the wariness towards self-assessment was also associated with the risk of putting stress on children and taking away the sense of enjoyment in their playful activities:

I think that there's a big push at the moment on kids assessing themselves. Now I don't know do I agree with that so much, 'cause then I think you're, from the start they're under pressure to think, does this...like I have to do everything right, I have to be good at things, and I think they're putting extra pressure on... They want you assessing everything that the kids are setting themselves and everything. Whereas there's no sense of just, do it for fun, or do it to do it. It's all, I have to do it and then, review it then, did I do it well or did I not?

Collaborating with parents

The educators interviewed related both formal and informal ways in which they collaborate with parents. Some educators have a form of induction with the parents, or a meeting at the beginning where they gather information about the children and how they are at home. However, other educators indicated that they did not have regular formal meetings with parents, unless significant issues came up. Nevertheless, these educators explained that they maintain frequent communication with the parents in an informal manner, giving them updates and speaking with them in their daily interactions:

...from the beginning of the year, once the children start with us in September, the staff would sit down individually with each parent and fill out a family information form. So that gives background information on the child and the family. So the parent might identify their particular needs that a child has, maybe the speech and language, you know, mightn't be great. Or they might have particular needs around toileting or eating or whatever. So we would be made aware at that stage.

...well like I said we do have informal kind of meetings with parents practically every day, where we'd be kind of asking questions, 'do you think he's okay with...', especially if we have any concerns.

One educator expressed the view that formal meetings run the risk of intimidating parents, which is the reason they prefer informal interactions with them, only setting up meetings when a need arises:

We used to have like a parent-teacher meeting. We kind of knocked on that now and trying to do more informally because I think the parents that we work with, they're quite vulnerable parents. And it gets a bit too intimidating for them so we do this ourselves. And if there's an issue, we talk about it then. But if everything is going fine, just tell them all the positive things.

Collaborating with colleagues

Collaboration with colleagues with regards to assessment was manifested through informal interactions as well. Most responses focused on educators exchanging ideas and helping each other overcome difficulties, but a few shared having regular meetings where assessment may be discussed, usually if there were issues arising:

...we have child care staff meetings every two weeks, and we also have team meetings once a month. So there are two formal times that we would come together. As I said just the child care staff one, and then the whole team as another. And we would discuss any of the children's concerns or needs that needs to be shared with everybody. Then there's informal basis in lunch time that the staff will be together and have a chat, and then I would have supervision with the staff, ideally on a monthly basis.

Systematic changes surrounding assessment were also carried out in collaboration in some settings, such as modifying or introducing new tools or policies to the practice:

I think we kind of work collaboratively. You know what I'm trying to say. [The policies] would be brought from management, talked about. Then we decide on what's best.

For one educator working in a private crèche setting, collaboration with colleagues also means having a shared responsibility for the assessment of children, particularly completing the information about the children from the tools being used in the setting:

...the reason for that is because they might see something I mightn't. Or, they might be in – they might be good in, say, communications, and I'm good in well-being. You know, so, you bounce off each other in that way so that's why it's good for all of them to fill [the checklist] out.

Reporting and Relaying Assessment Information

According to all the educators interviewed, reporting of assessment information mainly takes place with parents, both through informal daily interactions and formal meetings, as mentioned above. Concerning formal meetings, some educators referred first to mid-year appointments where parents are kept informed of their children's activities and development, and then to end-of-the year meetings where children's development throughout the term is discussed. As previously stated, induction meetings are also done when children are first brought in the settings. These formal meetings seem to be more prevalent in settings that follow a scholastic calendar:

So we do it in February, and we'd call the parents in for a one to one meeting with them and say, 'Look, this is where your child is at.' Now, we'd explain that they still have four months until June, not to panic if it's bad, but like, just to give them an idea of what they could work on if the child doesn't make eye contact, we'd say, well, maybe you should work on that at home or whatever. And then we do it again with them in June, call the parents in again for a one to one meeting in June. And go through it all again. And we'd fill in if there's extra, like particular areas need to work on. Then the parents sign it, I sign it, and the junior school get it then wherever they're going to.

Assessment information is kept in a secure location, with most settings having individual files for each child. However, this information is freely available to be viewed by key staff workers and the management. Parents are also authorized to view their child's assessment information if they wish to:

So every child has a file. And all their information is on that file. Like any assessments, any observations, any reports. Anything that comes with documents, it's on that file. And we have it locked in a locked cabinet. Now if parents want to see it, absolutely, they're allowed to look at anything. It's just locked just for confidentiality.

On a less regular basis, reporting was also said to occur with the management and inspectors for monitoring purposes:

I suppose the educators would come in the room report to the management as well about different activities that they've seen or any concerns that they might have.

...the inspectors can ask for [the assessment information] if they come in, they can ask to see it. We send the Cuntas Míosúil [monthly record] report or the monthly work over to the principal. So he is entitled to look at that and ask questions if he wants. But generally he doesn't tend to.

4.5.2 Tools for Assessment

With regard to the tools used by educators for assessing young children, the findings reported below are based on the interviews conducted and supplemented with findings that emerged from the documentary analysis of the assessment tools presented by the participants in the study. As a preamble, educators consistently indicated the use of *Aistear* as a framework to guide their assessment practice. There was a recognition of the emergence of *Aistear*, as well as *Siolta*, as being a critical feature of early childhood education in Ireland:

...because Aistear was really becoming the forefront... Aistear and Siolta were becoming the forefront of everything. So kind of, we used their tools as a guideline to make [an assessment tool] that kind of works for us.

In this regard, *Aistear* could be seen as the overall tool that influences all aspects of practice in the field of early childhood education, including assessment:

...when Aistear came out then it was just really easy for us. It gave us a tool to use that made what we're doing concrete. And we could explain to parents easier how play helped with well-being. How play helped with exploring and thinking, how play helped the kids communicate. And that everything, their identity and belonging, that everything, all their play, is vital for some reason.

Detailed below are the specific tools educators use for the assessment of young children, how they are utilized, and the perspectives of the participants concerning them.

Checklists

Checklists, or tick lists, as termed by the educators, were used across all the settings that participated in the study. Probing into the documents presented by the participants, two alternatives were observed with regards to accomplishing the tool. One alternative uses categories indicating the extent to which a certain skill or characteristic has been exhibited by the child, while the other involves marking a straightforward list of items being

demonstrated by the child. Some of these forms provide an area for comments to supplement the information shown on the checklist.

This tool covers a broad spectrum of content, but the majority used by educators can be considered to focus on developmental issues primarily. Skills are classified in different domains, principally consisting of cognition, language, physical, socio-emotional, self-help, and general well-being. Another form of checklist being used by one educator is a type of activity record, to track which of the planned materials and activities each child has completed.

It is worth noting that there were a range of responses in terms of the educators' views and opinions with regards to checklists. On the one hand, some find its convenience and simplicity a strength:

You know, just say the child can do this, the child can do that. You know, so it's easier for them as well for in the room that when you're in there then, that you're able to get time to go over, you see the child has done it and then you just tick it. It's nothing like there to write loads of notes on. You know, because like that it's very hard with time. When you're working with the kids.

However, other educators adopt a more wary position in relying on checklists as an assessment tool, conversely describing its simplicity as a point of weakness, giving an incomplete account of children's development which may elicit feelings of anxiety with parents:

I was just ticking. It didn't really mean anything whenever it came to the parent-teacher meetings. I needed to, I would find it better trying to remember how I knew that the child achieved that, you know. How did I know that the child achieved counting one to ten, when I only had a tick on a page.

Because a lot of the parents might just look at it and just concentrate on what the child is not doing, what they haven't developed, the skill that they haven't developed that needs encouragement in.

Transition Forms

Transition forms - a variation of the checklist used by some educators working with older children - serve as a tool to inform the parents and future primary school teacher of the

child's development and characteristics at the time of leaving their early years setting. Sometimes called 'snapshots,' or 'ready for preschool', the forms presented by the educators who used them were similar to each other, being described as a tool "to record the achievements and abilities of children making the transition from preschool to primary school." The forms are divided into different domains, according to the different skills and milestones being assessed. Educators indicate which items the child has already developed, and which are still in the process of developing. Finally, a section is included for educators to expound on the child's development for each domain.

Educators who used this tool have emphasized its usefulness for junior infant teachers, especially when corroborating present observations with previous ones:

And then that's passed on to the junior infant teacher. So the junior infant teachers have said that it's brilliant, that they know what, well, if a child has been speaking clearly and confidently in the preschool, and they're not in the junior infants, they know there's something wrong, they just haven't transitioned. Whereas if they never spoke clearly and confidently, they'll know, 'well that's just where they're at.'

Documentation

Different forms of documentation were also reported to be used by the educators interviewed. By examining samples of documentation presented by the participants, two general categories emerged – the narrative and mixed-media documentation. Narrative documentation entails having written information such as anecdotes or vignettes, which may include significant developmental achievements, or just interesting snippets from the child's day in the setting. Some settings present narrative documentation as a catalogue of information about the children, like the High/Scope Curriculum's Core Observation Record. Here, the narratives are divided into general domains and areas of interest. Other settings offer supplementary information such as links to *Aistear* and details relating to goal-setting and planning based on the noted observations.

So we would have a layout that we have... we currently use the Aistear themes as kind of our main focus... Depending on what the children are... or what the staff observes, they might have seen something and they just happen to have a camera there so they take a picture. And then they would link it then to all of the

four themes of Aistear.... So they'll see kind of what they observed and they link the growing and learning that the children have through that.

Mixed-media documentation came in many forms, but the most common ones used according to the interviews were scrapbooks or portfolios, learning stories, and documentation panels. This kind of documentation uses a combination of photographs, work samples and written descriptions to complete the tool. Photographs were highlighted as an invaluable assessment tool, particularly because they provide a clearer illustration of events that have occurred involving the children:

...it explains to parents, when you're trying to explain things to parents you can see, especially how children interact with each other. Photographs just says it. It just tells it all... We could've never explained to parents, yeah we would explain to them, but the photograph absolutely captured the joy on the kids' faces, interacting together, with the snails and with each other. So photographs are a huge, huge tool for showing, and for explaining, and for, what we do, but what we can achieve...

It is also in the mixed-media documentation where children have some participation in contributing to the tool. The extent of this participation varies for each educator. Some children are able to choose whether or not to put their works in their scrapbooks or portfolios, and which ones to include. In other instances educators welcome children's input by gathering and transcribing children's thoughts and insights about certain subjects or activities:

...the children have a say in, perhaps, maybe kind of what art they would like to put into it, like that... within kind of maybe if the rooms have their own little portfolios the children have hundred percent say in what they want to put in that.

So we'd write up what they're saying. Do you know what I mean? This is like our hospital story. I said, "Okay. Tell me what happened." This is all their story. It's just me writing exactly what they have said. I don't know if it's assessment. But when they're telling me what's happening or what they learned, then it is assessment then, isn't it?

A noteworthy insight that emerged from the interviews, where some educators have diverging observations, was the interest garnered by such tools for children. Some responses relate to how children enjoy perusing their scrapbooks from time to time, and how it was a useful resource for self-assessment and noting children's progress:

Some of the folders are out on display on the shelves so the kids love coming over to look at their own pictures and be thinking about, 'Oh, that's when I learned how to walk on the rope or that's when I was a bit sad because I was, you know,' so they're recalling as well and that's part of their self- assessment as well, so kind of, them remembering back to when maybe, they couldn't do something but now they can and what they did in between to help them to get to where they are now.

However, others described how the children's reaction did not seem to be what they would have expected, and indicated that children are not as inclined to be enthusiastic about the tool as adults would anticipate, setting it aside to do other activities:

They don't tend to [regularly go back to their scrapbooks]. We hoped that they would, we tried to build up the excitement about them, but they don't tend to. It seems to be very much we're living in the moment. The kids do what they do now, they're not even that interested in what they did yesterday. Yeah, so, we don't. But, like, when the people were explaining about it as part of the Aistear program that the junior schools are doing, it would be encouraged that, yes they would. But our children just don't seem that interested in going back...

Also an interesting point that emerged is one educator's remark about mixed-media documentation, and how it could be overlooked as a tool for assessment:

You kinda forget, you kinda think assessment as all the ticked boxes, but we actually do as well a folder or scrapbook of the child.

Most of the forms of mixed-media documentation used by the participants were employed for the purposes of displaying activities and children's works, also serving as an available resource for reviewing and recollecting. Educators see this form of documentation as one that highlights children's strengths and capabilities:

...the scrapbook, the work samples, and the photographs and stuff will be, 'cause it will be like a celebration like, what they can do rather than what they can't do... whereas the scrapbook is, it is actually showing their progression from the year, but it's like a happy kind of a thing.

4.6 Factors Affecting Assessment

In this section, key issues highlighted by educators with regard to the factors affecting the practice of assessment in the early years, such as support and challenges experienced, are discussed.

4.6.1 Challenges to Assessment

In the present study, challenges to assessment in the early years tended to revolve around two key issues – the constraints of time and contextual factors. For many educators, the focus on doing assessment runs the risk of taking time away from other responsibilities such as planning and even actually engaging with the children. Also related to this point is the volume of paperwork that educators are being asked to fill out. In addition to the number of documents they need to complete, participants explained that procedures such as transferring information from the raw notes to the proper tool itself take up some time as well:

I find it time consuming. And I would rather spend my time planning. I know I need some assessment to plan things, but I don't want my whole day to be taken up assessing. I don't want my after school time being taken up transferring information that I know onto a profile and things like that. I just, I don't know how to get a balance with it, yet.

...and the argument is can you not wait and do it at the end of the day. You won't remember what the individual child was able to do or wasn't able to do. So I'd had to try and write it out there, but then when you're focused doing that it's taking away from the teaching time. So it's kind of your argument, teaching versus paperwork.

Some educators also described how lack of staff resources limits their practice of assessment because the time to process assessment information and fill out tools is dependent on cover staff who would take over being with the children while they do their work:

That's the main challenge. It's time. You know, because you don't always have time to do it. You don't have staff to cover you to do it. Sometimes staff can ring in sick and so...really, that's the hardest, is the time to get to do them.

Contextual factors were also cited by educators as something that could pose as a challenge for doing assessment. For instance, participants agreed that it could be difficult when parents

are uninvolved, and that there is apprehension when sharing sensitive assessment information, as parents may be unaccepting or indifferent to them:

...some of your challenges as well could be I suppose around the parents kind of getting them involved. Some of them probably don't like getting involved too much, or, I mean, if you find something perhaps, a developmental delay with children. You might face a barrier where kind of maybe the parents is not ready to accept what you found, things like that.

In addition, class dynamics such as frequent absences or disruptive behaviour were also mentioned as factors that hinder assessment in settings:

...there will be gaps also I think because of some of the children that we would have attending, the gaps can be why, you mightn't be able to do assessment because of their attendance. They might have very poor attendance so you might have very few observations in the COR books done on them... Also if you have a particularly difficult child in your group, it might be a case of them taking a good bit of the time also. You mightn't get around to doing as many assessments as you might like to.

4.6.2 Support in Assessment

Three factors became apparent as sources of support for educators' practice of assessment in early years' settings during the interviews: having a good system in place, collaboration with colleagues, and qualification and training. An assessment system that makes use of simple, easy-to-use tools, as well as templates for documents was said to make assessment more manageable for educators. One educator also noted that having set objectives facilitated assessment in a smoother manner. Furthermore, structural aspects such as routines and a good adult-child ratio were also noted to aid in assessment practices:

I suppose the templates and the way the day is laid out, like the table top time, the set times that we try to get as much assessment done there as we can. Play, when they are playing, because there's two adults to fifteen kids we'd often have one adult would focus in on a particular child or a particular setting, area where they're playing at and keeping eye or observe what they're doing there and maybe write it up if needs be. And the other can just watch the general health and safety then... I suppose the smaller numbers helps.

I suppose it's good that we have it kind of have it laid out the way we do. With like, monthly objectives. Because in that way, you know that you're actually

getting through. You know, you know that you're actively looking at each objective that you need to be looking at.

Collaboration with colleagues, which was already discussed earlier, was also denoted as a support for educators, especially since they are able to exchange valuable ideas and information with each other for the benefit of their assessment practice. Moreover, management support was pointed as another aid for educators, where those in the management positions mentor and supervise how assessment is done in settings:

And I suppose the support of having ourselves as a team to have a chat about things, our formal staff meetings and our formal childcare staff meetings, and the team meetings and then the informal support that we get, just the general chatting and lunch breaks, and once the children had gone home, and the formal supervision then with myself [the manager].

Finally, educators highlighted how their qualification and training has helped them in doing assessment. They shared that having the understanding and know-how has equipped them to confidently practice assessment as part of their role in facilitating children's learning and development:

I think my degree has helped me a lot. Because I think it's given me a good basis, good understanding, and ongoing training as well.

4.7 Recommendations for Enhancing Practice

The main recommendations suggested by the educators interviewed to enhance assessment practice are systematic in nature; they refer to more structural changes rather than modifications in practice. For instance, participants stressed the need for intensive training and good qualifications for those working in the field of ECE, as this is perceived to reflect good practice across the board:

I would like some further training on it. Just to make sure that everybody was on the same page and everybody knew exactly what we're supposed to be doing. And that we knew definitely what was expected from us.

The need for the allocation of more time, and also the provision of additional support staff was also expressed as a recommendation to allow key workers to have more focus on assessment:

It's a hard one because, you know, you can't help someone from being out sick. You know, and that's the only thing that would be the negative in it is time... And the only way of fixing that is by getting more staff, and I don't think you can do that, you know.

Finally, an educator suggested that developing a simplified, consolidated system can help streamline the assessment process:

I think for all the things that we do, I would like it to be compressed a little bit. It seems a bit here, there, and everywhere. If it was just conjoined, I think – we're hoping that Aistear is going to do that for us.

4.8 Summary

This chapter provided an account of the diverse perspectives and positions educators take with regards to assessment. The participants' views on various issues on assessment, supported by documentary analysis, were discussed comprehensively by including vignettes that reflect the wealth of insight educators have relating to it.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter consolidates the findings presented in the previous chapter, discussing key themes that emerged and reflecting on them against the framework of themes from the literature outlined in Chapter Two. The findings were analysed in view of the key aim of the study, which was to investigate the meanings and values which early childhood educators ascribe to assessment, their strategies in doing assessment, and the associated support and challenges with regard to assessment in their practice. Through reflection and deliberation, the discussion that follows highlights educators' view of assessment as a process and a product, the diverse delivery of assessment practice, assessment as shared practice, and the factors affecting assessment practice in the early years. Finally, limitations that were encountered during the research process are outlined below.

5.2 Assessment as Process and Product

A significant theme that is apparent in the findings is how educators view assessment as both a process and a product. It is seen as a cyclical process of observation, interpretation, and planning to facilitate children's learning and development, but at the same time, it is also viewed as a means of documenting and compiling information about children, in keeping with literature (Dunphy, 2008). Findings suggest that information about children gathered through continuous assessment influences pedagogical framing and in turn shapes curriculum, reaffirming seminal text (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.; E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). In the present study educators clearly highlighted that achieving outcomes was an important aspect of assessment, but also strongly emphasised the value of children's participation and collaboration. Still, the extent of this is based on adults' definitions and parameters, where educators decide how children participate and how much involvement they have in assessment.

The early years were regarded by educators as an important, foundational chapter in children's lives, where milestones are achieved and learning goals are determined, consistent with the premise of the Developmental Perspective (Katz, 2010; Woodhead, 2006). This was

clearly illustrated in educators' use of assessment tools that note children's developmental achievements and milestones, undertaking the responsibility of bringing children to 'the next step' of development, and their concern for children who manifest a serious gap with their expected skills. At the same time, educators also took into account each child's distinctive characteristics, building assessment practice from 'where the child is at,' his or her capabilities and current understanding (Dunphy, 2008), which is in line with the Socio-cultural Perspective. Although the exact terms 'zone of proximal development' and 'scaffolding' were mentioned by only one participant, the findings nevertheless suggest that the practice of individual documentation and planning grounded on children's observed interests and abilities are examples in which the Socio-cultural Perspective is applied. However, it was also evident that this collaborative approach is more adult-oriented, with the educators carrying the bulk of decision-making when it comes to assessment, suggesting that more scaffolding than co-construction occurs in early years' settings according to the present study findings (Jordan, 2004; Rogoff, 1998). Predominantly, educators decide when to assess, what is to be assessed, and how to assess, and then invite children to take part in the assessment.

Related to this apparent lack of promoting child agency in collaborative activities, there also seems to be an ambivalence towards aspects of the Child's Rights Perspective, particularly in relation to having democratic dialogue and involving children in decision-making processes (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Participants had mixed opinions about children as agentic beings having a voice (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). Mostly, assessment practices displayed limited opportunities for children to express their agency and voice, usually by having prearranged choices or collaborating by providing the information educators need. Although there was value given to having children participate and take part in the assessment process, as well as belief in their capabilities, predominantly still, from the findings, children were to a great extent largely portrayed as unaware, passive partners in the assessment process, being observed and regarded from a distance. Self-assessment is relegated to something that fits into an informal setting, because there is the fear that raising it to a more overt practice will stifle children. Hence, children are not yet viewed as fully integrated social actors capable of contributing their own voices in society (Dahlberg et al., 2007). This perception

challenges literature that illuminates the value of self-assessment (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Dunphy, 2008; Fler & Richardson, 2004), and seems to discount the expression of what and how children think, therefore solely relying on adults' knowledge and interpretations when making decisions (Critchley, 2002). These findings suggest that though the principles of the 'new social studies of childhood' (Pugh, 2014) pushes for a paradigm shift in viewing children and childhoods, it has yet to gain traction with educators who took part in this study.

It can be surmised, then, that with regards to children's learning, educators adopt not just one perspective exclusively, but an amalgamation of various ones. Interestingly, there was no apparent difficulty or struggle in espousing these various views and finding a way to connect them, which is a divergence from some literature that point to the disconnect between perspectives as a challenge for educators (Basford & Bath, 2014; Nah, 2014). In fact, it seems as though educators are able to negotiate their assessment practice among these different perspectives and what is expected of them (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013), actively finding a balance between focusing on goals and objectives and having an unstructured approach with children (Payler, 2009). Clearly, the present study findings emphasise that assessment is influenced by how educators view children and children's learning. Moreover, it is also strongly linked with planning, as educators see assessment as an important step to create plans and curriculum that is tailored to the children they provide service for. The relationship of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Hayes, 2007; National Research Council, 2001) is echoed in the findings, where pedagogy is interconnected with assessment practices, and the information gathered from its application influences decisions relating to the curriculum.

5.3 A Diverse Delivery of Assessment Practice

The diverse nature of the delivery of assessment practices in the early years was also a significant finding that emerged from the present study. Despite a wide range of strategies educators used, it was clear that a holistic approach was employed for assessing young children (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Linfield et al., 2008). Additionally, assessment practice was found to be embedded within a nurturing pedagogy, where information is founded on observations and interactions with children (Hayes, 2007).

Formative and *summative* forms of assessment played key roles in the early years' settings, gathering knowledge about children and documenting their development in accordance with goals or milestones, as literature would suggest (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). Furthermore, assessment practices also took on an *ipsative* form, where observations and activities are laid out according to each child's individual characteristics and progress, continuing to support literature (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005). Findings from this study did not reveal a conflict between the recording function of assessment and its role in aiding planning, as some investigations indicate (Bravery, 2002). Still, from the forms of assessment cited in literature (E. Wood & Attfield, 2005), findings show that educators do not tend to use assessment information to evaluate curriculum or practice (*evaluative*), although it is used to provide information and initiate discussion among stakeholders involved with children (*informative*). What is also significant was the absence of standardised assessment in educators' practice, and whether or not this is because educators are aware of the limitations of this form of assessment, or if there is another rationale cannot be inferred from the findings. Nevertheless, while standardised assessment was implied with regards to diagnostic assessment that particular children undergo, it is striking that there was no specific mention of using this form of assessment in educators' daily practice.

Instead, the principal use of ongoing, continuous assessment was evident in the findings, which is said to be the characteristic of effective assessment (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). It was embedded in daily routines and activities, enabling the gathering of information about children to guide learning, and to be able to present meaningful information to stakeholders involved with them (Dodge, Heroman, Charles, & Maiorca, 2004).

Across different assessment practices, there was also a clear aim to highlight the strengths and capabilities of children as opposed to focusing on skills or milestones children have not yet achieved. As such, there was less emphasis on where the child is against normative characteristics, challenging the view of the Developmental Perspective (Woodhead, 2006). Through this 'credit-based assessment', educators foster an atmosphere where children are eager to learn and discover what they can do (Carr, 2001). In addition, educators placed prime importance on practices that do not hinder children's fun and enjoyment, their

perspectives aligning with those of others regarding appropriate pedagogy in the early years (Lee, 2006).

Findings also reflect children having a more active role in the construction of documentation as an assessment tool (Fleer & Richardson, 2004), allowing the process to be *decentralized* (Bath, 2012). While settings have many ways in using this assessment tool, children have consistently contributed in one way or another through transcripts of children's narratives or work samples, creating a *didactic* approach and utilizing *dialogue* with children, aspects of documentation regarded as significant by literature (Bath, 2012). However, yet another interesting finding was that apparently documentation practice has not yet reached the point where adults and children have developed a partnership, and where the tool is approached with a critical eye, examining and challenging discourses on children and childhoods as advocated in literature (Bath, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). This is illustrated by the present study finding that documentation is still mainly prepared and used by adults, and there is more mention of how documentation illustrates pedagogical work over the value of the process for reflective practice, (Dahlberg et al., 2007). This presents documentation as more *deciding* rather than *less disciplining*, reinforcing issues presented in literature (Bath, 2012).

5.3.1 Aistear as the Unifying Thread

Elements of various models of early childhood education were also present in the curriculum frameworks used by early years' settings, particularly the Montessori and High/Scope Curriculum (C. P. Edwards, 2002; Epstein, 2007; Hohmann et al., 2008; Huxel, 2013). Aspects of Reggio Emilia, specifically developing learning stories and documenting children's experiences, also emerged in educators' practice (C. Edwards et al., 1998). Nevertheless, even with the application of different models, it can be seen that *Aistear* provides a unifying framework for educators' assessment practice.

Across the settings that participated, tools and procedures reflect the notions of *Aistear*. The recording of observations, and the interpretation of this information is linked to the framework's principles and themes (NCCA, 2009). However, findings reveal the more

dominant use of adult-oriented assessment such as *observation* and *setting tasks* in comparison to child-led ones such as *self-assessment*. As settings adopt *Aistear* in their daily practice, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment become integrated with its philosophy and notions. Although the consolidating role of *Aistear* in the diverse ECE landscape of Ireland has not yet been extensively explored in literature, from the findings of the present study it is clear this influence can be identified.

5.4 Assessment as a Shared Practice

The findings also point to collaboration with colleagues and parents as a strategy to enhance assessment practice, making the assessment process more valuable for educators. Data gathered from the interviews illustrates that working within a team facilitates dialogue and discussion among colleagues and supports reviewing children and assessment information together, and this exchange of ideas make planning manageable to carry out (Dodge et al., 2004).

While the relationship of teacher structure and assessment perspectives and practices were not particularly explored in this study, the collaborative approach of educators suggest the positive influence this has in their practice, as substantiated by literature (Shim et al., 2004). There is less burden on educators in that they are able to share and consult with their colleagues about any concerns relating to assessment, whether formally through meetings, or informally through routine interactions. Plausibly, this creates an encouraging atmosphere for educators to carry out assessment.

Educators, through parents and families, also have access to a wealth of information about children in their homes to better understand them and build a more complete picture of each child (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014; Chan & Wong, 2010; Gilkerson & Hanson, 2000). Findings indicate that educators maintain positive relationships with parents, and endeavour to communicate and partner with them to support children's learning and development, as is suggested by key documents (CECDE, n.d.; NCCA. 2009).

Nevertheless, these interactions are mostly informal, where information is exchanged as children are being dropped off or collected. Apart from this, findings point to parents as

recipients of assessment information, and are only collaborated with during the start of term or when concerns arise, supporting the conclusion of some literature (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014). Generally, however, parents are not invited to participate in assessment practice of their children, as some literature would recommend (Gilkerson & Hanson, 2000).

5.5 Factors Affecting Assessment Practice in the Early Years

Consistent with relevant literature (Buldu, 2010; Flear & Richardson, 2004; Nah, 2014), lack of time was considered a major obstacle in conducting assessment by educators. Indeed, time seems to be the greatest challenge for educators when doing assessment. Findings suggest that there is a concern surrounding the appropriation of too much time on assessment that engagement with children is reduced. At the same time, the limitation of structural support available such as cover staff impedes on opportunities for carrying out assessment demands and responsibilities. This is especially exhibited with tools that require reflection, interpretation, and preparation, like documentation, where write-ups need to be made or photographs organised.

On the other hand, guidance from the management is shown to be a significant source of support in being able to perform and fulfil educators' assessment responsibilities, aligning with literature (Buldu, 2010). Also seen to facilitate more efficient assessment is smaller group sizes and adult-child ratios, echoing authors that describe how these structural aspects are related to positive teaching behaviour (Shim et al., 2004). Smaller numbers and ratio allow educators to have more focus and time on each child, thereby making tasks and responsibilities more manageable.

More significantly, the knowledge and educational background relating to early childhood education is seen to greatly contribute to the ease of which assessment is understood and conducted, supporting what has been found in many other studies (Basford & Bath, 2014; Bennett, 2011; Buldu, 2010; Chilvers, 2002; National Research Council, 2001; Payler, 2009). Educators give prime importance to training and education, considering it invaluable in providing knowledge and equipping them with skills to fulfil their role with ease.

Moreover, findings also convey both time and good training as major recommendations given for enhancing assessment practice, further reiterating the value of these factors to educators. Having enough time to fulfil assessment tasks, and being equipped with the proper knowledge to do so are seen as important by educators in facilitating good and effective assessment in the early years.

5.6 Limitations

Finally, it is important to draw attention to some of the limitations that have emerged during the research process. Firstly, due to the fact that this was a small scale study carried out within a very limited timeframe, it was not always possible to achieve the depth of exploration of some issues emerging in the data gathering process. Nevertheless, this uncovers possibilities for examination and research to further illuminate the state of early years' assessment in Ireland.

In addition, due to time constraints, observation of actual assessment practice was not incorporated in the study. While the documentary analysis of assessment tools provided a glimpse of how assessment was implemented, findings may still be restricted as there may be discrepancies between educators' perspectives on assessment and the manner in which they conduct it in their daily practice.

The findings are also unlikely to encompass and be representative of the actuality of assessment practice across the sector because of the focused participant composition. Educators that took part in the study have years of experience in ECE, and hold adequate educational qualifications. Along with this, while settings where data gathering transpired differed in their type of ECE approach, all of them are affiliated with the Dublin Institute of Technology. So while educational philosophies and approaches may contribute to a variability in responses, the association with a higher education institution points to a certain standard of practice. Because of this, generalizability cannot be assumed for the findings illustrated in this study.

These limitations could be seen as gaps in the current research that may serve as foci of future research. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

The research project was conducted in six early childhood settings in Ireland, with the aim of investigating educators' perspectives and practices on assessment in the early years through in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. Taking a deeper look at how assessment is viewed and implemented by educators may shed light on the kind of experiences children have, as well as the nature of provision given by different settings.

The research was grounded on three different perspectives on children and children's learning. Through the lens of the Developmental, Socio-cultural, and Child's Rights Perspectives, the study endeavoured to illuminate how educators position themselves within these perspectives in relation to early years' assessment, thereby influencing their judgments and practices and whether children are fully supported in their learning (Carr, 2011). Using an Interpretivist paradigm, the author sought to draw meaning from educators' narratives and work samples with regards to assessment.

The study found that educators hold diverse views on assessment, and apply these in different ways. Nevertheless, there was an agreement that the early years are foundational for children's learning and development, and assessment is something that serves as a means to facilitate this. Assessment is largely considered to have a dual nature, as a process of facilitating children's learning and development and a tool for the production of information about children. Collaboration is seen as an aid to assessment, and educators partner with colleagues and parents to exchange information and contribute to the assessment process.

Findings also indicate that children have limited participation in the assessment process, and that educators have tentative views about children's agency and self-assessment. Although collaboration with children does happen, this is mostly in the form of children providing assessment information needed by educators through answering questions or performing tasks. The study also found that time is a major obstacle educators have in doing assessment in their daily practice, and that structural factors such as staff organization and the extent of management assistance can impede or support the ease of implementing assessment. Finally,

the research describes how educators put a prime value on sufficient training and gaining adequate educational qualification to be able to conduct effective assessment in the early years.

From the findings, implications on practice and policy arise. As *Aistear* emerges to be at the forefront of ECE practice in Ireland and is deemed advantageous for good practice, it may be worthwhile to ensure that educators across the country are well-informed of its philosophy, and perhaps even trained with its implementation. Moreover, as children's agency seems to continue to be an ambivalent topic for educators, further training and guidance may be beneficial to not only advance the movement of the 'new social studies of childhood' (Pugh, 2014) and have a greater understanding of children's active participation, but to also have its principles actually applied in practice. The findings also suggest that taking measures to expand educators' knowledge and expertise on the theories and practicalities of assessment may aid the ease and confidence in which they conduct assessment in practice.

6.2 Recommendations

While the limited scope of the research has implications for the findings' generalizability, it nevertheless offers an insight for future research. First, the observation and investigation of educators' actual assessment practice alongside their perspectives may illustrate a different outlook, and offer a new wealth of information about early years' assessment. As beliefs may not always align with practice (Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011), it is critical to also consider educators' perspectives in light of how they actually apply this in early years' settings. Moreover, with systematic implementation of assessment linked to consistent practice (Nah, 2014), studying the influence *Aistear* or *Síolta* has on assessment practice, and perhaps even on curricular practice in general, could provide a demonstration on the impact key documents like these have on the ECE sector.

Another area of investigation to consider is involving educators themselves in actively taking part in the whole research process. Through action research, the issues that educators face in terms of early years' assessment, as well as the journey to addressing them, can be actualised.

In this way, concrete measures to respond to critical concerns relating to assessment can be explored. For instance, further research could be done to study how parents and families could play a more active part in assessment beyond being providers and receivers of information. As literature point to the willingness and capability of parents to carry out assessment of their own (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014; Gilkerson & Hanson, 2000), valuable insight may be gained from exploring the greater role parents can play in early years' assessment.

Additionally, child rights' issues are particularly ripe for research, and significant data could be gathered from delving into the expression of children's agency and voice in the assessment of their own learning. Shedding light into issues of children's involvement and participation in assessment could serve to contribute to a paradigm shift towards a stronger and more genuine partnership with children in the ECE sector.

Through the findings from the research, recommendations for practice can also be identified. Guidance and mentoring may allow educators to be more reflective on their assessment practice, and approach the process more critically and meaningfully. Assisting educators in applying theory to practice, such as interpreting observations, planning in accordance to observations and engagement with children, and promoting children's active participation, may help them carry out assessment with more ease. Finally, providing administrative support for educators in that they are able to manage their time well may also take some pressure off them in accomplishing their tasks and responsibilities. The provision of these structural supports have respective implications for policy, but may be necessary to ensure efficient practice in the ECE sector.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION KIT FOR GATEKEEPERS

INFORMATION SHEET FOR GATEKEEPERS
<p>Dear Centre Manager,</p> <p>I am Anna May Navarrete, a postgraduate student taking an International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology. To fulfil the requirements of the programme, I am required to complete a research study in the field. I am writing to you for permission to conduct data gathering in your centre, specifically interviewing an early childhood educator working with children aged from birth to five years.</p>
<p>What is the research about?</p> <p>I would like to explore early childhood educators' perspectives and practices on assessment, particularly the meanings and values which they ascribe to it, and the associated support and challenges with regard to assessment in their practice. Please rest assured that measures will be taken to address ethical issues such as informed consent and confidentiality. Also, any data in relation to your centre's identity will be removed and if necessary, anonymised in the final report.</p>
<p>What does the research involve?</p> <p>The study will involve two components. First, I would like to interview early childhood educators about their perception on early years' assessment. This includes, when permitted, getting an audio recording of the interview, which will last approximately thirty to forty minutes. Then, I would like to learn about the assessment tools and materials that the educators use. This will be done through documentation such as note-taking and photographs.</p>
<p>Why is the research important?</p> <p>Research evidence shows that what teachers do inside early years' settings have an impact on children's learning and development. Allowing early childhood educators to share their perspectives and practices on assessment can offer an inside look at what actually happens inside settings and the thoughts and attitudes that direct them. Additionally, it can shed light on the issues and challenges faced by educators surrounding young children's assessment.</p>
<p>What will happen to the findings?</p> <p>The final report will be read by my supervisor and two external examiners. It will also be made available online as well as at the DIT library. If you wish to receive a copy of the findings, you may contact me to do so.</p>

Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions relating to the study, I would be happy to provide any further information. You are welcome to contact me at:

Mobile: 0831801929

Email: d13123319@mydit.ie

In accordance with the general regulations regarding access to ECE centres, I have Garda clearance and will present the document upon your request. I would greatly appreciate the participation of your centre in this research study. Please find enclosed a copy of the topic areas for the interview and gatekeeper consent form. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Anna May Navarrete

International Masters Student in Early Childhood Education and Care
School of Languages, Law, and Social Sciences
Dublin Institute of Technology

Supervisor:

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School of Languages, Law, and Social Sciences
Dublin Institute of Technology
Tel: 01-4024255
Email: Annmarie.Halpenny@dit.ie

GATEKEEPER CONSENT FORM		
Researcher's Name: Anna May Navarrete		
Institution: Dublin Institute of Technology School of Languages, Law, and Social Sciences International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care		
Title of Study: Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood Educators		
Please circle your response:		
YES	NO	1. I have read and understood the information sheet provided about the research study.
YES	NO	2. I have been given satisfactory information regarding the study and the participation of centre staff.
YES	NO	3. I understand that any information collected from the participants and in relation to the centre will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only.
YES	NO	4. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time, without any explanation, and without affecting my future relationship with the Institute.
YES	NO	5. I understand that, as part of the study, the participants may be asked to show examples of assessment tools and/or materials used in the centre.
6. I consent / do not consent to this centre's staff being invited to participate in this research study.		
7. I consent / do not consent to access to the centre's assessment tools and/or materials.		
SIGNED:		Date:
Name in block letters:		
Name and signature of researcher:		Date:
INTERVIEW TOPIC AREAS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background of the participant • Understanding of early years' assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meaning of early years' assessment for educator ○ Purpose/Value of early years' assessment for educator • Role of educator in early years' assessment • Examples of assessment in daily practice • Support in and challenges to early years' assessment • Recommendations to enhance assessment practices 		

APPENDIX 2: INFORMATION KIT FOR PARTICIPANTS

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS
<p>Dear Participant,</p> <p>I am Anna May Navarrete, a postgraduate student taking an International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology. To fulfil the requirements of the programme, I am required to complete a research study in the field. I would then like to invite you to participate in the study.</p>
<p>What is the research about?</p> <p>I would like to explore early childhood educators' perspectives and practices on assessment, particularly the meanings and values which they ascribe to it, and the associated support and challenges with regard to assessment in their practice.</p>
<p>What does the research involve?</p> <p>The study will involve two parts. First, I would like to interview early childhood educators such as yourself about your perception on early years' assessment. This includes, when permitted, getting an audio recording of the interview, which will last approximately forty minutes. Then, I would like to learn about the assessment tools and materials that the educators use. This will be done through documentation such as note-taking and photographs.</p>
<p>Why is the research important?</p> <p>Research evidence shows that what teachers do inside early years' settings have an impact on children's learning and development. Allowing early childhood educators to share their perspectives and practices on assessment can offer an inside look at what actually happens inside settings and the thoughts and attitudes that direct them. Additionally, it can shed light on the issues and challenges faced by educators surrounding young children's assessment.</p>
<p>What will happen to the findings?</p> <p>The final report will be read by my supervisor and two external examiners. It will also be made available online as well as at the DIT library. If you wish to receive a copy of the findings, you may contact me to do so.</p>
<p>What are my rights as a participant?</p> <p>If you decide to take part in the research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You may decline to answer any particular question and withdraw your participation at any time without further explanation, choosing whether or not to retain your data in the study;• Your name and any data in relation to you and your centre's identity will be removed and if necessary, changed to ensure anonymity;

- All data gathered during the interview and observation will be protected and treated with utmost confidentiality, and will be deleted following the conferment of the Master's degree.

Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions relating to the study, I would be happy to provide any further information. You are welcome to contact me at:

Mobile: 0831801929

Email: d13123319@mydit.ie

I would be very grateful for your participation in this endeavour, as your input and experience will be a significant contribution to developing knowledge and awareness in this field. Please find enclosed copy of the topic areas for the interview and participant consent form. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Anna May Navarrete

International Masters Student in Early Childhood Education and Care
School of Languages, Law, and Social Sciences
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PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM		
Researcher's Name: Anna May Navarrete		
Institution: Dublin Institute of Technology School of Languages, Law, and Social Sciences International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care		
Title of Study: Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood Educators		
Please circle your response:		
YES	NO	1. I have read and understood the information sheet provided about the research study.
YES	NO	2. I have been given satisfactory information regarding the study and my participation in it.
YES	NO	3. I understand that any information shared during the data gathering process will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only.
YES	NO	4. I understand that, as part of the study, I may be asked to show examples of assessment tools and/or materials used in the centre.
YES	NO	5. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time, without any explanation, and without affecting my future relationship with the Institute.
YES	NO	6. I understand that the results may be published and be made available online and at the DIT Library.
YES	NO	7. I agree to have the interview recorded on a digital device. I understand that the audio files and transcription of the interview will be deleted following the conferment of the Master's degree.
8. I consent / do not consent to participate in this research study.		
SIGNED:		Date:
Name in block letters:		
Name and signature of researcher:		Date:
INTERVIEW TOPIC AREAS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background of the participant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relevant training/instruction in early childhood education and care ○ Relevant training/instruction in assessment of young children • Understanding of early years' assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meaning of early years' assessment for educator ○ Purpose/Value of early years' assessment for educator • Role of educator in early years' assessment • Examples of assessment in daily practice • Support in and challenges to early years' assessment • Recommendations to enhance assessment practice 		

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Researcher's Name: Anna May Navarrete
Title of Study: Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood Educators
Introduction
Prior to the interview proper, the researcher presents a brief introduction, then reviews the participant's rights and highlights that questions may be asked throughout the interview process.
Background Information
<p>1. Could you please tell me a little about your background in the field of early childhood education, such as your education, qualifications, and professional experience?</p> <p><i>Supplementary questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you received relevant training to work in the field? When and how? At what FETAC Level? Degree Level? • How many years have you been working in the field? • In what capacities have you worked in the field? • What age groups have you worked with? • What age group are you currently working with? • Do you follow a particular early childhood curriculum? Could you tell me which?
Perspectives on Early Years Assessment
<p>2. What does 'assessment' in early childhood education mean for you?</p> <p><i>Supplementary questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you define assessment in this context? • What is assessment for in the context of ECE? • Who is assessment for in the context of ECE? <p>3. Did you receive any instruction or training in relation to assessment of young children? In what context? If not, how did you become aware of assessment?</p> <p><i>Supplementary questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What topics or areas regarding assessment were covered during your instruction or training? • How satisfied are you with the provided instruction or training? <p>4. How relevant in your view is assessment in early childhood education? Could you elaborate on why you think this?</p> <p><i>Supplementary questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the value of doing assessment in early childhood education? <p>5. Tell me a little about what you feel is the role of the educator in the assessment process?</p> <p>6. What is the role of the child in the assessment process?</p> <p><i>Supplementary questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about children and self-assessment? Have you had any experience relating to this? • Would you say that children are capable of actively taking part in the assessment process?

Practices of Early Years Assessment

7. Can you tell me about the policies and guidelines in place regarding early years' assessment in your setting?

Supplementary questions:

- Who developed the present policies being followed in your setting?
- Are there any challenges to implementing the present policies?

8. Would you say that assessment is an important part of the curriculum you are following?

9. Can you talk about the assessment practices that you personally carry out?

Supplementary questions:

- What are the things you look for when doing assessment in the early years?
- How do you plan for assessment with young children?
- How often do you carry out assessment?
- Is there a particular time when you do assessment?
- Are there particular forms that you have to fill out or assessment practices that you have to implement?
- Have there been instances where you implemented assessment spontaneously? Can you give some examples of this?
- How do you record and store assessment information?
- Can you describe if and how reporting takes place with regards to assessment information?
 - To whom do you report assessment information?
 - How do you report assessment information?

Support and Challenges in Doing Early Assessment, Suggestions and Recommendations

10. What factors do you feel support you in your assessment practice with young children?

Supplementary questions:

- Would you say that the curriculum you are adopting promotes assessment?
- In what ways is the management supportive of assessment practices?

11. Can you describe the challenges you face with regards to doing assessment in the early years?

Supplementary questions:

- Can you recall instances where you were not able to implement assessment as you had intended? Why?
- Do you feel that you have enough materials and resources to regularly practice assessment?

12. How do you think these challenges could be addressed?

Supplementary questions:

- What recommendations would you make to enhance assessment practices in early childhood settings?

Conclusion

13. Is there anything else you would like to add, or are there any other issues you would like to discuss?

This concludes our interview. As part of the study, I would like to view the assessment tools and materials that we have discussed during the interview. Again, thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this endeavour. I would like to restate the confidentiality of the information you have shared with me. If you wish to receive a copy of the findings once the final report has been submitted and evaluated, you are welcome to contact me to do so.

APPENDIX 4: DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS GUIDE

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS GUIDE
Researcher's Name: Anna May Navarrete
Title of Study: Assessment in the Early Years: The Perspectives and Practices of Early Childhood Educators
Things to Note
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who developed the assessment tool/material?• How was the assessment tool/material developed?• Is the assessment tool/material standardized or open-ended?• In what ways does the tool document children's learning?• What is the content of the assessment tool/material?• What is the role of the adult in using the assessment tool/material?• What is the role of the child in using the assessment tool/material?• Is there a specific purpose for using the assessment tool/material?