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The Free Preschool Year in Ireland: The Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers

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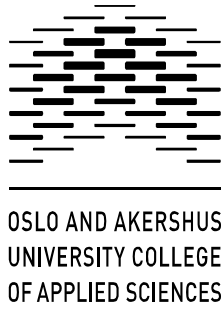
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The Free Preschool Year in Ireland:
The Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus joint degree "Master in Early Childhood Education and Care".

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International Master of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology and University of Malta.

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-fulfillment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate:

…………………………………….

Date

Supervisor: Professor Emeritus Noirin Hayes

Abstract

This thesis explores the introduction of the Free Preschool Year (FPY) in Ireland from the early childhood 'educators' and 'policymakers' perspectives. Under the new FPY initiative introduced in 2010, all children between the ages of 3.2 - 4.7 are offered free preschool hours for a period of one year prior to their entrance into primary school. This research identified the need to study the introduction of FPY as research into this topic to date has been limited. The purpose of this research was to understand the rationale behind this new initiative as well as exploring the issues of 'qualification requirements', 'professionalism' and 'quality' within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 respondents (3 key policymakers and 8 educators) regarding core issues under study. Bearing in mind that FPY was introduced during the period of economic crisis in Ireland I have adopted the theory of 'constructivist institutionalism' as a guide to bring some insight into the issue of policymaking processes during economic crisis (Hay, 2006). Findings suggest that the policy ideas behind the introduction of FPY were driven by economic crisis, which suggests that other presented key objectives: saving childcare infrastructure, keeping people in employment as well as preventing the collapse of ECEC could only have been argued for during the economic crisis. One of the key findings in this research is that with the introduction of FPY and its concomitant qualification requirement/standardisation, the ECEC sector is becoming institutionalised and professionalised as a result of these new policy changes. Findings also suggest that 'early education' may have superseded 'childcare' in ECEC policy thinking. However, this attention towards preschooling may lead to decreased attention to ECEC service to children under 3.2 years. Some of the key challenges highlighted in this research were related to issues of quality, training, professional recognition and age category. Nonetheless, the findings in this research suggested that FPY policy has been highly welcomed by all the stakeholders as an important step towards ensuring equality of access, quality provision, qualification standardisation as well as professionalisation of the ECEC sector and its workforce in Ireland.

Keywords: Free Preschool Year, qualification requirements, quality, constructivist institutionalism, professionalization

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List of acronyms

AISTEAR   Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

CCC   County/City Childcare Committee

DCYA   Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DCSF   Department for Children, Schools and Families (UK)

DES   Department of Education and Science

DIT   Dublin Institute of Technology

DJELR   Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

ECEC   Early Childhood Education and Care

ECS   Early Childcare Supplement

EOCP   Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006

FETAC   Further Education and Training Award Council

FPY   Free Preschool Year

HSE   Health and Safety Executive

NCCA   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCIP   National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2013

NFQ   National Framework of Qualifications

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OMCYA   Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

SIOLTA   National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

UNCRC   United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Early Childhood Educator - this term is preferred in this thesis as an 'educator' is a specialist in the theory and practice of education within educational institution. This

term was also preferred by educators in this research, rather than the widely used term of practitioner.

Policymaker- the term policymaker was used in this research and referred to people from the Childcare Directorate of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Science co-located with the DCYA.

Chapter One

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been a subject for discussion and research nationally and internationally for many years and has become policy priority in many countries. Ample evidence from research recognises the wide reaching benefits of the ECEC predominantly the economic and social benefits (Ben-Galim, 2011). The ECEC is recognised as a fundamental educational stage for lifelong learning which can play salient role in eliminating child poverty as well as combating educational disadvantage and social problems in adulthood (Hayes, 2007a; OECD, 2012). Many Western European countries are now implementing high quality accessible and affordable ECEC as research suggests that high quality ECEC improves children's emotional and social development and also enhances their school readiness as well as social integration and inclusion, and thus would help Europe in meeting its targets (European Commission, 2010; 2011). Literature emphasises that high quality ECEC services must be delivered by highly qualified, trained and experienced personnel, which remain crucial in achieving children's early educational experiences (Hayes, 2007; Early et al. 2006; Early, Maxwell & Burchinal, 2007; Elliott, 2006; Fukkink and Lont, 2007; Howes, James & Ritchie, 2003, Miller & Cable, 2001; Nutbrown, 2012; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj- Blatchford & Taggart, 2004; 2010; OECD, 2012; Penn, 2011).

In line with the European targets and emphasis on quality, equality and equal opportunity agenda, many countries have adopted universal ECEC provision for all children irrespective of their socio-economic background. In 2010, Ireland joined other Western countries in providing some type of universal early education provision by introducing the FPY policy initiative. This new policy has been significant on two counts: firstly, it marks the first ever commitment to universal ECEC provision for all children in Ireland irrespective of their backgrounds; and secondly, it has led to the implementation of the first ever minimum qualification requirements as well as statutory standardised qualification for those working in the Irish ECEC institution.

1.1. Aims and objectives

This thesis aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of early childhood educators as well as the perspectives of policymakers regarding the introduction of 'Free Preschool Year' (FPY) initiative in Ireland. It seeks to understand and analyse these

perspectives within the broader Irish ECEC policy context with particular focus on the implementation of FPY and the new policy changes on qualification requirement/standard and how this relates to issues of quality provision and professionalisation within the ECEC sector in Ireland. The research also has interrelated core objectives: Firstly, to evaluate the implementation process of the FPY policy as well as exploring the rationale behind the FPY initiative. Secondly, to examine the impacts the newly introduced FPY policy has on the perception and qualification upskilling of those working directly with children under the preschool settings participating in the FPY programme. Thirdly, to explore the experiences of early childhood educators about these new policy changes and how these changes are impacting on the quality of services as well as shaping the movement towards professionalism in the ECEC sector in Ireland.

1.2. Rationale and background information

Nationally and internationally there has been an ongoing debate on defining the early childhood sector (Hayes, 2007, 2010; Moss, 2009). In most literatures there appear to be an implicit politicisation of the usage of terms like 'Childcare' and 'Early education' with 'education' preceding 'care' as in ECCE or with 'care' preceding 'education' as in ECEC, as well as using 'Preschool' without the hyphen or 'Pre-school' with the hyphen. In Ireland, Preschool Education or pre-primary education is popularly known as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which refers to institutional services for children between zero to six years of age, with exception of infant primary school classes where most four and five year olds are enrolled to primary school (DES, 2004). Though many of these terms are used interchangeably, this thesis adopts a meticulous conceptual approach in favour of ECEC over ECCE and therefore preferred preschool without the hyphen over pre-school with the hyphen. According to the Thesaurus dictionary Preschool is 'an educational institution for children too young for elementary school' where 'educational institution' is also defined as an 'institution dedicated to education'.

The reason for such preference is simply because by emphasising education it brings ECEC in direct association with other areas of educational institutions such as primary or secondary, but still it recognises the unique focus that ECEC has on young children (Hayes, 2010). This thinking is also in line with the removal of hyphen in preschool suggesting that preschool is viewed in this work as an educational institution for children from zero to six years of age, even though in Ireland most children are already in primary school by the age of five. Preschool in this work is not seen as a preparatory 'class' taken before child enters primary school, rather preschool refers to an institutionalised setting for children under the

umbrella of educational institution, forming the first step on the education ladder. I would like to take the stand as suggested by Feeney (2012) that "those who implement early childhood education support development and help children learn in the context of caring relationship" (p. 14). Thus suggesting that "Care and education are co-essential and should be conceived as a continuum process" (Menchini, 2010, p. 12).

In Ireland, the current provision of services for preschoolers involves full time or part time preschool provisions, which could be either centre based or home based offering parents services with various methods and philosophies such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner and High Scope just to name a few. Some are also run as playgroups without explicitly following any of the well known philosophical traditions. Many have argued that the ECEC sector in Ireland has been developed in an ad hoc manner to tackle the childcare shortage following the advent of economic boom in the 1990s, as both parents tend to engage in employment following Ireland's economic boom (Hayes, 2006). For example, 'childcare' provisions are largely privately owned being part of "equality and work agenda", whereas 'early education' is designed mainly for the educationally disadvantaged and is funded by the government (Hayes, 2010, p. 67). Historically in Ireland there has been clear division between 'childcare' and 'early education' and this has been reflected in the development of the sector mostly on policy level (OECD, 2004, Hayes, 2007; Hayes and Bradley, 2009).

In terms of policy development, in 1990s the first policy Child Care Act 1991(amended in 2011) was published by Department of Health. This was following the signing of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that was ratified in 1992. The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996, Amended in 1997) under the Child Care Act 1991 was one of the first momentous policies published for ECEC sector in Ireland (Hayes, 2006). However, how to ensure high quality early education was not addressed as there were 'no minimum standards prescribed concerning the educational component of services or the training and qualifications of staff' (DES, 1999, p. 22). In other words, ECEC policies were being driven by 'childcare' rather than 'early education' and tended to focus 'primarily on the provision of "spaces" for children whilst their parents work' (Hayes and Bradley, 2009).

In 2000 due to the increased funding from Government and European Union the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006 was developed to address issues of quantity and quality; increase number of provision and introduce integrated approach to delivery of services (DJELR, 2002). Moreover, the argument about the political economy of ECEC has become paramount through the publication of 'Building Ireland's Smart Economy', which highlighted 'pre-school education' as very crucial in achieving this

goal (Government of Ireland, 2008, p. 74). But the challenges still remain on how to develop high quality ECEC sector that tends to guarantee return of investment in human capital as well as social benefits for both individuals and society at large. One way of addressing the issues of quality of provision is to improve training and establish qualification requirements' for those working in the ECEC sector (DES, 1999). In Ireland the first occurrence and debates on the issue of qualifications was in late 1990's, where the Expert Working Group on Childcare in 1999 under the 'Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform' (DJELR) made recommendations that people working in childcare should have at least three years training, combining theory and practice of pedagogy and child development (DJELR, 1999).

Subsequent development in 2002 by DJELR that published a Model framework for education, training and professional development in the ECEC with emphasis on "occupational profiles and core skills of those working in the sector" including the recognition of prior learning, which meant that many people already working in the sector could engage in training based on their previous experience (DJELR, 2002, p. 5). Another important development was the establishment of the National Qualification Authority in 2002 and the subsequent launching of the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) in 2003 to regulate all levels of education and training in Ireland up to date.

In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills published "A Workforce development Plan for the ECEC sector in Ireland" (DES, 2010), where according to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Barry Andrews TD) the development of the ECEC workforce has been identified as a key 'pillar of quality', alongside the publication" of *Siolta: the National Quality Framework for ECEC* (2006), and *Aistear (2009) the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (DES, 2010, p. iii). The Workforce Development Plan for the ECEC sector in Ireland (2010) made several recommendations based on research findings on how to raise the level of qualifications within the sector. These recommendations are similar to those recommended by the Expert Working Childcare group in 1999. This suggest that even though much have improved in the sector through recent governmental involvement, more still need to be done to tackle the issue of up-skilling. Some of the challenges acknowledged by the DES (2009) highlights that opportunities to upgrade qualifications particularly to third level are inadequate and are being provided predominantly in urban areas. Part time training options are limited and not financially funded by the Irish government. Full time courses on the other hand are subsidised, but are not convenient for those already in full time employment (DES, 2009). There is also the issue that preschool educators who gain graduate level qualification often move out of ECEC to other areas of employment, because of better salaries and conditions of employment and social status (Barnett, 2003).

The most recent development of ECEC sector in Ireland to date is the introduction of FPY, which has led to standardisation of qualification and acceptable minimum qualification requirements for those working within the ECEC. Under the terms and conditions of this new initiative every participating ECEC setting must adhere to the principles of Siolta (2006) with the support of Siolta co-ordinators[1] and the City or County Childcare Committees (CCC's). The new FPY initiative was implemented in two phases: the first pilot phase was from January 2010 to January 2012 and the second phase is from 2012 to 2014. It covers children for a maximum of 3 hours per day, 5 days a week for a 38 week in sessional services or 2 hours and 15 minutes per day, 5 days a week for 50 weeks for the children enrolled in full day childcare services (OMCYA, 2009). According to the new policy' any ECEC setting in Ireland participating in the FPY must guarantee that the preschool leader holds FETAC level 5 qualification in Childcare in accordance with the NFQ (see Appendix 3), as well as ensuring that only qualified persons work directly with children during daily practice (DCYA, 2011). It is important to note that the new qualification requirements only apply to those members of staff working with the age defined group under the FPY and thus do not apply to those working with younger children below three years of age. In terms of funding provided directly to the services, a higher capitation fee is paid to services where staff holds bachelor degree qualification related to ECEC and have at least three years of experience, as according to DCYA (2011) "the higher capitation rate is an additional benefit to the service rather than to the parent as it recognises the higher cost base of services with more highly qualified staff".

Regardless of this development the challenges that the ECEC sector faced back in 2000 are still present today. For example, in spite of the present qualification requirements (FETAC level 5) it is suggested that many ECEC providers (40%) have not been able to comply with this new regulation, as "they have not achieved basic level qualifications required for participation"(DES, 2010, p. 7). Due to the fact that FPY is a relatively recent phenomenon, existing research on this subject remains scanty and limited. In 2010 Roscommon County Childcare Committee (RCCC) conducted research investigating the opinions and experiences of preschool providers on the impact of the new FPY (RCCC; ECCE, Report 2010). The RCCC research has been a useful stepping stone for other research in this area, as it gives some understanding into the service providers' experiences of the

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[1] Siolta co-ordinator is an experienced and qualified mentor that provides support to ECEC settings participating in FPY. This support is to ensure that ECEC setting adheres to principles of Siolta: the National Quality Framework for ECEC (2006).
http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/childcare/Terms_and_Conditions_for_ECCE_Scheme.pdf

technical and practical implications of implementing this new initiative. However, the data provided in that study was limited due to poor response rate and methodological issues, and thus remains inconclusive. In addition, the study was carried out at the earliest stage of the implementation and as such the data gathered did not capture meaningful impacts of this new policy on ECEC providers.

Given that the FPY has reached the end of its first phase (2010-2012), there is a need for comprehensive analysis on how the new FPY policy was initiated and with what impact and challenges to the sector. There is also a need for the evaluation of FPY in terms of its impact on outcomes for children, for the educators as well as for the professionalization of the sector in general. Some literature suggests that the introduction of FPY has been done without any prior consultations with relevant bodies and organisations despite the fact that many organisations have opted for universal provision for all children for many years without direct response from the government (Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Kiersey & Hayes, 2010). This statement is also supported by Hayes and Bradley (2009) who indicate that the FPY "was introduced without a clear strategic debate on what we as a nation want for our children" (p. 41). Reasons for such lack of public debate and dialogue was analysed in this thesis as having to do with issues of economic crisis and the nature of policymaking during such crisis period according to 'constructivist institutionalism' literature (Hay, 2006). Other works also noted that the changes in policy are only due to Ireland's economic restrictions suggesting that the rationale behind this policy initiative is not clear and therefore needs further monitoring to ensure "success and effectiveness" (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010, p. 8). It is in line with these suggestions and arguments that this research explores the implementation of the FPY to date as well as the rationale behind this policy and its impact on the ECEC sector in Ireland within the current economic climate. This research being exploratory attempts to give only a glimpse into the 2010-2012 phases of FPY, however future research would be necessary as further adjustments to FPY are introduced in the 2012-2014 phase.

1.3. Research questions

The current research is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of key policymakers on the thinking behind the FPY initiative?

    What was the rationale behind the FPY initiative?

    What were the challenges in implementing the FPY policy?

2. What are the perspectives of early childhood educators on the introduction of FPY?

What are the challenges that educators are facing regarding the new qualification requirements?

How does this new initiative (FPY) impacts on quality?

Does the new qualification requirement enhance professional development?

1.4. Method

The primary data of this research was generated through semi-structured interviews with policymakers and educators. This method provided the opportunity to gain in-depth information into the topic under study (Kvale, 2007). The purposefully selected sample in this research included eight educators from private and community settings providing sessional and full day care services within broader Dublin area. Interviews were also conducted with three ECEC key policymakers from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), which has been involved in the introduction and implementation of the FPY. By interviewing those key personnel involved in the ECEC policy development, I hoped that the rationale behind the FPY policy initiative would become more transparent. Thematic analyses were used to draw emerging themes from the generated data and complimented with the documentary analyses of key literatures, extant studies and policy documents related to the research topic.

1.5. Significance of the study

Universal preschool has been acknowledged by research as beneficial for children and the society in general, thus research into the FPY is of utmost importance in order to monitor its success and future development (Ben-Galim, 2011; Kiersey & Hayes, 2010). The current economic climate is also important as it is at the heart of economic crisis that this new FPY initiative was introduced in Ireland. This research contributes unique knowledge into the debate regarding the economistic argument and the timing of strategic interventions and investments within ECEC sector by most state governments. Importantly, most existing ECEC policy researches are usually based on 'institutional path dependence' frameworks, which tend to depict a somewhat progressive, sequential and rational institutional development and policy changes. But given radical policy changes during 'crisis' period such as the current global economic recession, there is an urgent need to adopt a more suitable framework to explore and analyse the recent landmark policy changes within the ECEC sector in a period Ireland is witnessing the most severest and harshest economic crisis and austerity measures since the European wide Great Depression of the 1930s. This research has been designed to address some of these key lacunas by exploring the current introduction of

FPY and the implications of this new initiative within the ECEC sector in Ireland both from the early childhood educators' and the policymakers' perspectives so as to inform effective future policy in this area.

1.6. Delimitation

This thesis has been contextualised within the area of ECEC with strong emphasises on universal provision, issues of qualification, quality and professionalism in the ECEC sector in Ireland. Key literatures and empirical studies were reviewed not only from early childhood education discipline, but also from other disciplines such as social policy, law, sociology, economics and education. This research was limited to the exploring of the recent FPY phenomenon, particularly focusing on the ideas behind its introduction and the policy process (discourse), embedded within the contemporary economic context in Ireland. The tracing of historical policy development of the ECEC sector is beyond the scope of this research; nonetheless, this research acknowledges its importance as background information to the study. It is important to note that this research did not compare data before the implementation of FPY and the impact of qualification standard/requirement on issue of quality provision in ECEC in Ireland. Further research in this area should be considered.

1.7. Limitations

The key limitations in this research were mostly related to small sample population, limited scope and lack of time. Our generated data also lacked evidence from the private providers operating solely on sessional services as well as the community based settings that do not operate under the management of primary schools. However, some comparison was evident between the chosen samples in this research. Another limitation of this research was that prior to conducting the interviews the participants were provided with description of the study as well as a question guide for the interviews. This was done purposefully so that participants can be more familiar with the topic under study. However, the majority of early childhood educators had no time to read the question guide or the description of the research and this may have impacted on the data collected. This however was not the case while conducting interviews with the policymakers, where one policymaker provided written feedback to the interview question suggesting that these will be elaborated upon during the interview. Also, the fact that I am still a developing researcher even though I have conducted interviews in previous academic studies, I was still a novice in interviewing key 'elite' informants in policymaking and this may have impacted on the interview process and the information gained (Dexter, 2006). Therefore, bearing in mind the small sampled size and the

other aforementioned limitations the findings and conclusions stated in this research are merely tentative, suggesting that further research is needed on the possible impact of the FPY with a much larger sample population or preferably adopting quantitative approach that can reflect larger or national population. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that this research was delimited to explore the depth and richness behind the introduction of the FPY as experienced by our key respondents within the ECEC sector in Ireland.

1.8. Thesis outline

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the key aims and objectives, followed by the background information into ECEC in Ireland leading to the issues of policy development and recent introduction of the FPY. In addition, the chapter features the rationale behind this research, research questions and method adopted in generating the data. The significance, delimitation and limitations of this research thesis are also presented in the first chapter.

The second chapter presents the theoretical framework and the reviews on literature around issues of quality, universal ECEC, qualification requirements and professionalism.

The third chapter analyses the key methodological standing and the justification for the method applied to the data collection. The chapter also presents the chosen sample in this research and elaborate on the rationale for its preferred respondents group. It also provided the background information of participants as well as ethical considerations.

The fourth chapter addresses the key findings from the data. These findings are structured into emerging themes and some of the participants' key responses are presented in this chapter.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the findings in the light of the literatures reviewed in this research. The chapter also provides the tentative conclusions as well as recommendations for further research.

<div align="center">**Chapter Two**</div>

<div align="center">## 2. Theoretical-conceptual consideration/framework</div>

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of this research and also includes the analysis of key literatures on universal ECEC; the issues of qualification and quality; and importantly the issue of professionalism in ECEC sector.

2.1. Theoretical framework

This research adopts the theory of 'constructivist institutionalism' predicated on the importance of ideas and discourse in policymaking during crisis period as a lens to analyse the changing trends and dynamics within the institution of Preschool education in Ireland (Hay, 2006; 2011). This framework also guides our analysis of the implication of public policy on the perceptions of early childhood educators and policymakers in Ireland, and how the introduction of FPY policy during economic recession relates to issues of qualification requirements and standardisation, quality provision and professionalisation of the ECEC sector. Constructivist Institutionalism is another separate strand of what Hall and Taylor (1996) defined as 'new institutionalisms' that comprised other three approaches namely; historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and normative/sociological institutionalism. All of these as they have acknowledged, "elucidate the role that institutions play in the determination of social and political outcomes" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 5). Historical institutionalism according to Sanders (2006) takes a note of historical development of institutions looking at the sequences of political, social and economic changes over time. In Rational institutionalism the institutional change is driven by the personal goals and material interest of political actors; on the other hand normative/sociological institutionalism views institutions away from traditional economic views and explores how institutions form the behavior of individual actors. In other words, it explores how individuals' actions are being shaped by the norms and rules of institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

However, key in this research remains the constructivist strand of institutionalism, which arose due to inadequacy of other strands whose approaches to institutional change have been largely based on 'path dependence' perspective (Hay, 2006). Path dependence is a concept that has become more and more popular in exploring institutional change and also in explaining how the present policy decisions are limited by the decisions taken in the past. In his work Ebbinghaus (2005) elaborates on the concept of path dependence and argues that it

"has developed into a common "short hand" indicating that the past shapes or rather explains the future, which is characterized by continuity (p. 5). However, when this continuity is broken through dramatic change such as economic crisis the path dependence theory or the fact that 'history matters' "does not explain anything" (Borchorst, 2009, p. 131). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the earlier three institutionalisms while treating them mostly as providing crucial 'background information' have their own useful in exploring and analysing policymaking processes (Schmidt, 2008).

Hay's (2006) theory of 'constructivist institutionalism' differs markedly from all the other three variants of new institutionalism scholarships as it provides a better opportunity to explore and understand the policymaking processes and complexity behind the introduction of FPY in Ireland during economic crisis, given that his theory is characterised by both 'institutional path dependence' and 'ideational path dependence' perspectives. Constructivist institutionalism "has its origin in attempts to grapple with questions of complex institutional change" where the constructivist institutionalist is driven inter alia "by the desire to capture, describe and interrogate institutional disequilibrium" (Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 57-60), especially disequilibrium resulting due to "crisis" situations (Hay, 2006).

In recent time, the institution of ECEC in Ireland may have witnessed an important 'shifts' (Hay, 2006) as epitomised by the introduction of FPY, which marks the first ever commitment to universal ECEC provision for children and the first ever minimum qualification requirements as well as statutory standardisation of qualifications in the Irish ECEC institution. Nonetheless, the puzzle that has not been addressed by researchers includes: what issues have influenced this new policy shifts in the Irish ECEC sector and what role has the current economic crisis played? Understanding these recent policy changes in the Irish early childhood education system, especially during the current economic recession demands not only 'institutional process tracing', but also an account for 'the emergence of new policy paradigms and attendant institutional logics' (see Hay, 2006, p. 67). The usage of the term 'paradigm shift' by Hay (2006) to analyse policy changes seems to me overly stated and thus becomes a key limitation of constructivist institutionalism theory as the current implementation of the FPY policy in Ireland, even though a landmark policy initiative, does not signify in any way that a major 'paradigm shift' occurred in the ways ECEC policy is being made in Ireland.[2] According to Kuhn (1970) who popularised the

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[2] This particular analysis was influenced by the feedback and suggestions I got from my supervisor (Professor Emeritus Noirin Hayes) who informed me that the current policy changes in Ireland's ECEC does not signify to her that a 'paradigm shift' may has occurred. This critique seems very accurate in the Irish case.

concept of 'paradigm',[3] 'paradigm shift' tends to suggest a 'revolutionary' change or transformation which may occur from time to time to mark abrupt/radical discontinuity a given scientific community's commitment to its conventional disciplinary 'paradigm' (accepted model or pattern) of solving problem or doing things in favour of more efficient/effective paradigm which emerged due to scientific revolution and the inadequacy of the old paradigm to solve problems leading to a radical shift in approach and method of problem-solving.

However, following Hay's (2006) epistemology, this thesis still argues that the current policy change in Ireland has been influenced not only by historical institutional changes, but also by the cuts in family social welfare payments in Ireland due to economic 'crisis'. Adopting constructivist institutionalism approach seems more appropriate since the 'path dependency' approach alone is inadequate for understanding the current institutional changes and the potential for policy changes within the early childhood education sector in Ireland in the period of economic crisis. The fact that the introduction of FPY was as the result of current economic crisis situation lends further support for adopting constructivist institutionalism framework. According to constructivist institutionalism thesis a 'crisis' such as an economic crisis tends to

> unleash short bouts of intense ideational contestation in which agents struggle to provide compelling and convincing diagnoses of the pathologies afflicting the old regime/policy paradigm and the reforms appropriate to the resolution of the crisis.
>
> (Hay, 2006, p. 67)

In his work, Bell (2011) acknowledged that constructivist institutionalism has every right to critique historical institutionalism for its "elements of institutional stickiness and path dependency" (p. 890). However, he suggested that constructivist's aim is to put agency back to institutional change and that by doing so they may lose sight of institutions in this process. He put forward another version of historical institutionalism that is more flexibly "agent-centred" focussing more on "active agency" and at the same time views agents as formed by their institutional settings. Even though he supports Hay (2006) and the importance of constructivist insights and the need for more emphasis on agency, Bell (2011) argues that it is not about the labelling of historical or constructivist institutionalisms, but rather about "the appropriate synthesis of explanatory elements" (p. 906). It is important to stress that in order

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[3] In the Structure of Scientific Revolution thesis, Thomas Kuhn (1970) understands 'paradigms' (i.e., acceptable model or pattern) as 'universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners' p. (viii).

to explore all the elements as suggested by Bell (2011), research of a much bigger scope would be required as my current exploratory research only attempts to explore the policymaking processes behind a particular event (for instance the FPY) at a particular time (economic crisis) and thus may only provide a glimpse into these policymaking processes and its impact on the ECEC sector.

Parallel to Hay's (2006) work on constructivist institutionalism is Schmidt's (2008) work on 'discursive institutionalism'. Discursive institutionalism adds the interactive process in discourse as an important element to explore the ideas behind policymaking processes, suggesting that it is through discourse that ideas are conveyed and scrutinised. Schmidt (2008) argued that 'discursive' institutionalism can bring understanding of political action in way that the other three institutionalisms cannot and that it "puts the agency back into institutional change by explaining the dynamics of change in structures through constructive discourse of ideas" (p. 316). The term 'discourse' in discursive institutionalism "is stripped of postmodernist baggage" and is rather viewed as dialogue that is not only about "ideas or "text" (what is said) but also context (where, when, how, and why it was said)" and also referring to "structure (what is said where and how)" as well as agency (who said what to whom)" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 305).

In her work, Schmidt (2008) proposed two types of discourse, 'coordinative discourse' through which policy actors' present ideas to their fellow policymakers, for instance the review panel or ministerial committee where these ideas are discussed and elaborated upon and further weighing the ideas possible political and economics benefits to the state. This implies that policymaking processes tend to involve first and foremost the conception of an idea or certain ideational goals to be included as part of the key policy priority for the state that could merit budgetary allocation. But before this can take place, such ideas may have been rigorously defended by those proponents pushing for their project to be included into the main programme for government at that point in time. Thus, it is through the policy framing dialogue and discourse, that is, the 'coordinative discourse' phase that ideas are conveyed and presented in such a way that it may become convincing or fail to convince (Schmidt, 2008). In fact, coordinative discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas among policy actors themselves and is also the first phase of considering appropriate programmes for governmental budgetary allocations. This is then followed by what Schmidt (2008) refers to as 'communicative discourse' where the ideas are finally presented to the wider public for their own input and legitimisation.

While the new policy changes occurring within the ECEC sector have been influenced by many years of consultations for the way forward for children growing up in

Ireland, significant radical innovative reforms have occurred during the current economic recession. When most government departments and agencies are being subjected to severe austere measures, the ECEC sector is witnessing crucial policy changes, such as the introduction of FPY in 2010; the institutionalisation of standard qualification and minimum qualification requirements in 2011; as well as the establishment of DCYA in 2011, which 'was part of a longer term vision that this country would be among the best in the world in which to grow up' (DCYA, 2011). It is also important to understand how these current developments together with other earlier developments such as the introduction of Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) as well as children's constitutional legislation bill in 2007 may have contributed to the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the preschool sector in Ireland and the shift towards universal provision for children between three to four years old.

2.2. Universal ECEC

Universal education can literally mean a kind of 'free' entitlement to education for everyone. But the term universal is highly complex as literature suggests that universal does not always mean "universal" as it depends on the way public support is defined (Barnett, Brown and Shore, 2004, p. 11). In Ireland as in other neoliberal states such as the UK, Australia and US public support is defined by market-based approach to development of ECEC (Bradley, 2011; Hayes, 2007; Halfon, Russ, Oberklaid, Bertrand & Eisenstadt, 2009). In these countries, childcare is viewed "as private responsibility of parents and not as a public responsibility" where 'targeted' rather than 'universal' provision is supported by the state (Bennett, 2008, p. 3). Predominantly, these neoliberal countries operate split system between education and care where the responsibility of ECEC services is usually spread among many governmental departments (Bennett, 2008). This approach has been evident in Ireland, where until 2010 the public support was only provided towards targeted provision. As the government

> steer clear of direct investment/subsidization of childcare, instead employing a universal childcare benefits, which they argue can be used by parents to subsidise childcare costs if they so desire.
>
> (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 174).

Clear example of this strategy within the Irish context was the introduction of Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) in 2006 to help parents with children below six years of age to offset their childcare costs. However, there was no guarantee that this payment would actually go towards the costs of childcare. The state support has however changed with the introduction of universal FPY which has brought Ireland in line with other European

countries in providing some type of 'universal' access to ECEC (OECD, 2006).

Literature emphasises the benefits of universal provision as well as targeted. In Ireland until recently government responsibility was solely 'targeted' towards children from disadvantaged areas. O'Donoghue-Hynes and Hayes (2011) in their work addressed the complexity behind the ECEC funding in Ireland, concentrating specifically on the 'universal' vs. the 'targeted' ECEC provisions in Ireland. There is a strong view that universal programmes are designed for all children and thus are most likely to reach all children in need of intervention as well as children with additional needs, thus ensuring equality and inclusion (Barnett et al., 2004; Barnett, 2010; Darragh, 2007). The bigger argument however is that universal ECEC "improve school readiness and achievement" and this is in line with the 'No Child Left Behind' strategy in US as well as being driven by the growing educational demands of knowledge based economy (Barnett et al., 2004, p. 4). Some literature however suggests that the emphasis on school readiness raises concerns about schoolification of ECEC sector (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). Nevertheless, universal ECEC impact positively on early childhood experiences and children social, emotional, cognitive and physical development (Barnett et al, 2004). While the universal ECEC may bring future economic benefits for the society, there are also benefits for the children in the here and now (Penn, 2009; see also Hasan, 2008). These arguments are clearly summarised in Ben-Galim's (2011) report on 'Universal childcare' who argues that

> there is a strong economic and social case for universal early years provision. High quality early years provision delivers a net financial return to Treasury as well as delivering better outcomes for children, families and society.
>
> (p. 13)

The issues of universal provision and public responsibility within policymaking circle remain highly complex as universal provision may be beneficial to all but it also depends on how it is introduced, monitored and evaluated to ensure quality of experiences for children.

2.3. The influence of qualification on quality in ECEC

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing focus on education and knowledge-based economy, with emphasis on lifelong learning (OECD, 1996, World Bank, 1996; Delors Report, 1996; DES, 1995; see also Government of Ireland, 2008). This growth has also emphasised the need for quality of services as Moss and Dahlberg (2008) noted that we live in "an age of quality" where every service and product "must offer quality" as every consumer wants to have it (p. 3). The ECEC sector is not free from these arguments as more and more emphasis is put on the upskilling of the ECEC workforce and improving the quality

of children's early experiences. Critical analysis of these arguments is important to establish what quality means in ECEC as there are many different ways we can define quality depending on the outcomes one want to achieve, but in this work quality is defined as a "search for improvement, a search to provide the best we can" for young children (Penn, 2011, p. 6). Thus putting children at the centre of the attention and improving their experiences and providing them with best start in life. Nonetheless, the political argument and the focus on long-term economic benefits of early education (Ben-Galim, 2011) seem to outweigh the child's rights agenda that recognises children as social actors and focuses on the here and now of children's experiences (Penn, 2009).

Professional qualification requirements for those working with children from birth to six years have also become a policy priority in many countries. The level of qualifications varies and depends on how the settings, the workforce or the workers themselves are viewed and importantly understood within political and social context (Munton, et al., 2002). Many countries have moved to recognising third level graduate qualifications for educators working in the ECEC, thus moving towards improving quality together with "improving wages, decreasing turnover, and professionalizing the workforce" (Early et al., 2007, p. 176). Darling Hammond (2005) for example suggested that by improving teachers' qualifications educators are more prepared to teach diverse learners to high standards, and this as she argued is essential for economic and political advancement. For example, in Nordic countries practitioners who hold third level degree qualifications are recognised as qualified preschool teachers/leaders, other practitioners (or assistant teachers) with no qualifications are working alongside the qualified personnel (Strand, 2006). Recently in England, the benchmark for those working with children from 0 to 6 years of age as leaders is a third level degree qualification (Bachelor degree) related to early childhood (Nutbrown, 2012).

While many countries have established their qualification requirements for those working with children this was not the case in Ireland until very recently (Hayes, 2006). The important changes regarding qualifications of those working in the ECEC sector came in with the introduction of the FPY as under this initiative all personnel managing settings or working directly with children in ECEC sector must hold qualifications in the area of childcare/early childhood education and care (DCYA, 2012). The movement towards upgrading of qualifications and establishing of qualification requirements have been a step in the right direction as ample evidence from research shows that raising qualification standards guarantee higher quality and effectiveness of ECEC provision (Barnett, 2003; Miller & Cable, 2011; Sylva et al., 2004; Whitebook, 2003).

Whitebook (2003) in her study in the United States analysed whether teachers holding third level degree qualification actually provide better quality early preschool experiences for children between three to five years of age and whether these experiences lead to enhanced outcomes of learning for children. She concluded that qualifications have a positive impact on the quality of care for children (Whitebook, 2003). In his work, Barnett (2003) notes that "better qualified preschool teachers with specialized training are more effective" and he recommended that four years specialised degree is required in order to increase effectiveness (p. 1). This however has been questioned by Early et al's (2006) study that analysed whether teachers holding bachelor degree or higher qualification in early childhood education provide better quality and learning outcomes for children than those with no bachelor degree. In their findings, they concluded that holding a BA may be essential condition for attaining quality; however, education and credentials alone are not sufficient. They place more importance on practice and programmes that must ensure that measures are put in place to track quality on daily basis. Early et al. (2006) also concluded that if training provides teachers with an insight into child development and pedagogy then the content rather than length of training is important, this is also supported by Siraj-Blatchford (2011) who proposes that qualifications are especially important when it comes to early childhood educator's knowledge about developmentally appropriate activities that enhances children's social-behavioural and cognitive development.

Even though the importance of qualification is supported by the above, other research takes on the opposite side of the argument and critiques the impacts of teachers' qualifications on the quality of care and development for children (Tout, Zaslow & Berry, 2005; Elliot, 2006). Tout et al. (2005) in their review established that even though there are emphases in the literature on third level qualification for teachers that does not ensure higher quality of care for children; however, this evidence as they acknowledged is not conclusive, (Tout, et al., 2005). Early et al. (2007) reached similar findings, concluding that other factors such as individual teachers' skills, classroom practice, monitoring, mentoring and supervision are vital contributors to quality. This view is also supported by recent OECD (2012a) report that put emphasis on the abilities of qualified staff "to create high quality pedagogic environment" rather than the qualification per se (p. 143). Hence quality for services also depends on quality of training and the abilities and skills of teachers to provide quality early experiences for children. In addition, Early et al. (2006) insist that commitment of early childhood educators towards upskilling and training is a significant factor to ensuring quality. According to their study those that are committed to their profession and are seeking out relevant training in order to upgrade their knowledge are those who will stay in the sector for

longer (Early et al., 2006). Other studies have also highlighted some other factors contributing to quality, suggesting that in striving to improve quality of services policymakers should pay attention to all the factors rather than qualification alone (Howes et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, the focus on qualification is important considering that in its historical development ECEC has been mostly run by unqualified personnel with a general view that care is best done by mothers (Feeney, 2012). For example, Barnett (2003) pointed out that in America teachers who work with five year olds in kindergarten are required to hold four years degree qualifications while those working with younger children are not obliged to have any qualification. He noted that the issue of unqualified personnel is directly linked to poor pay and lack of benefits that makes retaining of qualified staff impossible (Barnett, 2003). This as he pointed out is very much the case in countries where the early childhood system is split between education and care where childcare is seen as a responsibility of women. This situation was also evident within the Irish context as those who in the past graduated with third level qualification tended to move to other sectors, which provided better pay opportunities and higher social status (DES, 2009). For example, in 2008 about one third of graduates of ECEC in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) have followed the root to further study leading them to recognised qualification for junior classes in primary sector. However, this number has decreased in half by 2010 when almost 80per cent of students were in employment related to ECEC suggesting that with the standardisation of qualification, more qualified graduates gain career in the ECEC sector (Mhic Mhathuna & Taylor, 2012).

This direction towards standardising and enhancing quality of services is also welcomed and supported by the current Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Frances Fitzgerald T. D.) in Ireland who acknowledged that, "quality is of the utmost importance" together with the aspect of "top quality training for the staff delivering the service" (Dail debate, 2011). However, the value of this statement is being undermined by the current economic situation as reflected in lack of resources. Thus, the challenge remains the same, such as providing resources towards evaluating the quality of ECEC services as well as linking the theory to practice and acknowledging that quality of ECEC is an aspect that is very difficult to measure and monitor. Evaluation of quality in ECEC requires more than just focus on room sizes, adult/child ratio, but other factors as mentioned above such as adult/child interaction, educators' abilities, skills, attributes and importantly 'motivations' that inspire educators towards providing higher quality services. This analysis does not suggest

that the factors mentioned above are the only contributors to quality, rather it highlights that qualification alone does not guarantee quality.

The concepts of quality and professional standards have been identified as some of the key bases of professionalism in the ECEC sector together with the increasing demand on educators to "act professionally" (Urban, 2008, p. 139). Therefore, the concept of professionalism in ECEC from the national and international research will be elaborated upon in the next section.

2.4. Professionalism in ECEC

The notions of profesionalisation and professionalism in the ECEC sector have been addressed by many commentators in many countries: for Ireland (see Duignan, 2007); England (see Lloyed & Hallet, 2010; McGillivray, 2007; Miller & Cable, 2011; Oberhumer, 2008; Osgood, 2006); New Zealand (see Dalli, 2008; Duhn, 2010) and Australia (see Fenetch, Sumsion & Shepherd, 2010). Most literature elaborates on the expectations of professionals as well as the factors impacting on the notion of professionalism. What makes one a professional is a complex issue and it is beyond the scope of this research to analyse all, nonetheless this section will expand on the factors that contribute to the notion of professionalism in the ECEC. The concept of professionalism is highly situated within socio-historical and economical factors as well as being very much shaped

> by political and ideological consideration and discourses, individual and collective values and beliefs, views of childhood, pedagogy and learning and views of the child and the role of the parents.
>
> (Miller & Cable, 2008, p. 170).

Therefore, in order to understand what professionalism represents one must understand all these underlying factors that influence increasing professionalism in ECEC. These factors are defined in Feeney's (2012) work on professionalism where she summarised some of the key aspects shaping professionalism movement in the ECEC. These are defined as: 'diversity of the field' with consideration that the sector is widely diverse in terms of philosophical approaches to practice as well as in terms of diverse provisions: day care, sessional, after school. Another factor described by Feeney (2012) is the historical influence where past decisions shaped the notion of professionalism in the ECEC, such as the women's' rights movement. The final factor is the societal 'beliefs about children's learning', which in the past was mainly based on the fact that "intelligence is fixed" and that children were not able to learn anything until they reached at least six years of age, thus resulting to the notion that "caring for children required no special knowledge or skill" and that was best done by

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mothers (Feeney, 2012, p. 17). In this view, the public support for the sector was mostly absent and those working in the sector were not recognised. In recent years this has changed significantly due to increasing evidence supporting the benefits of ECEC and thus many countries have moved towards developing a professionalised ECEC workforce. For example, in England Lloyd and Hallet (2010) explored the aspect of professionalising the early childhood workforce, especially the movement towards "creating a graduate early years workforce" following the establishment of the Early Years Professional status introduced in 2007 (p. 75). This status was set up for degree holding educators that are directly working with children between zero to five years of age and was introduced in order to professionalise the sector (Moss, 2006; Nubrown, 2012; Osgood, 2006). The status is supposed to be equal to the status of qualified primary and secondary teachers; however this equality is not reflected in pay. In New Zealand, the historical progress of ECEC sector has been a significant moving away from the division between childcare and education as well as defining those working with children as educators rather than childcare workers in addition to the establishment of qualification standards and in recent years focusing on the "teacher led profession" (Dalli, 2008, p, 173). New Zealand is one of the first countries in the world where ECEC is under the responsibility of Ministry of Education, thus it is evident that the sector is viewed as part of educational institution and this also drives the notion of "ground-up" perspective on professionalism (Dalli, 2008).

In Ireland, the issue of professionalism is loaded with the same complexity as other countries. There are two reasons that are interconnected: the general view about preschool as well as the societal and political views on children that primarily focus on childcare rather than education, which connect with the war of words between the use of ECEC or ECCE in policy documents. This ongoing debate also emphasises the lack of governmental support resulting to diverse settings in the sector and associated poor status, where question of professional identity remains complex. However, recent developments in the Irish ECEC sector such as the introduction of Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) in the last decade have contributed to the rise of "practical professionalism, which transcends traditional professional boundaries and identities" (Duignan, 2007, p. 75). In order for the ECEC sector to establish professional identity more unified policy is needed to standardise the sector. This, one can argue, has been achieved by the introduction of qualification requirements under the FPY initiative.

Chapter Three

3. Methodology

This research aimed to analyse the perspectives and perceptions of early childhood 'educators' and 'policymakers' regarding the introduction of FPY initiative in Ireland. Particularly, it aimed to explore the experiences of preschool educators regarding the introduction of FPY scheme. It also hoped to shed light on how this idea came about and became a policy priority within the programme for government in 2010 by specifically examining the perspectives of the key policymakers. The thesis investigated why decisions were taken to introduce FPY in Ireland during the period of economic crisis and how the policy was finally implemented and with what results. This research remains an exploratory study given that the FPY initiative is so new and there has been little research in this area. According to Stebbins (2001) researcher adopts exploratory study when there is "little or no scientific knowledge" regarding a particular phenomenon (p. 6). In this research qualitative research paradigm was chosen rather than quantitative, as qualitative approach provided the opportunity to gain more in-depth and coherent data from the participant experiences and perceptions. In their work, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) noted that qualitative methods are methods that "require direct engagement with members of the settings being studied and that gather information about their experiences in their own words" (p. 603). Thus, qualitative research paradigm was identified as more suitable for the nature of this exploratory study.

More generally this research was guided by 'interpretivist' epistemology rather than positivism, since interpretivism places the researcher into the world of research subjects, thus understanding the world from their point of view or as Bryman (2012) suggested it is the researcher's opportunity to "grasp the subjective meaning of social actions" (p. 30). The research was also guided by 'constructionist' ontological positioning as opposed to objectivism. This positioning implies that the researcher views the social world as social constructions, where "meaning is constructed in and through interaction" with others (Bryman, 2012, p. 34). The theoretical framework of 'constructivist institutionalism' was adopted in this research as being more appropriate to explore how significant policy ideas or 'ideation' are shaped during the period of 'disequilibrium' such as the current economic 'crisis' (Hay, 2006). My intention was to understand the development of the FPY policy within the current economic climate in Ireland and to analyse the current policy changes within the

institution of ECEC in Ireland, which were defined in this research as consciously established educational settings for children between zero to six years of age.

3.1. Qualitative interviewing

In order to achieve the aims of this research, qualitative design was adopted to explore the introduction of FPY and its impact on the ECEC sector within the Irish context. While quantitative method may be valuable at times, I did not think that it was suitable for the scope of this research considering its exploratory nature and delimitation. Therefore, qualitative design particularly semi-structured interview method was preferred as more appropriate to gain richer data from the participants on the topic under study (Mason, 2002). Kvale (2007) defined semi-structured interviews as interviews "with purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 8). Qualitative semi-structured interviews gave me the opportunity "to unpick how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insights" (Kvale, 2007, p. x). Through this method I was also able to control the environment and correct any misunderstanding arising as well as make clarifications to the participants where necessary and in addition I was able to probe into participants' responses (Patton, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005).

By conducting interviews with educators and policymakers this research gained multiple perspectives about the key issues of concern, thus triangulating the data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The data was collected over a period of seven weeks, giving time for possible absences or cancellations. Each interview lasted from 25 to 55 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Every research method including qualitative interviewing has its limitations. Transcribing and making meaning out of a large qualitative data set can be very time consuming and this can be seen as a limitation of qualitative design (Patton, 2002). However, in order to gain in-depth knowledge about the topic under study qualitative interviewing with its limited sample population was considered the most suitable method for data collection.

3.2. Data analysis technique

In this research I have adopted ' thematic analyses' technique to analyse the data generated from the semi-structured interviews. This method is widely used within qualitative research and was most suited to the exploratory nature of this research. For the 'theme' analysis I applied Brown and Clarke (2006) step-by step guide to analysing data. The

analysing process began by transcribing the interviews, this gave me the chance to become familiar with the data, and this, as Brown and Clarke (2006) noted is the first phase of thematic analysis. Following this is the process of coding involving close examination of the text and using colour coding strategy to highlight similar themes arising. It also involved stepping away from the data as well as constantly re-thinking and re-doing and reviewing of the arising themes before finalising and making a report of the key themes emerging from the data (Brown & Clarke, 2006). This process involved more than just step-by-step route as it meant moving back and forth between the identified stages of data. Thus the data was thoroughly scrutinised looking for similarities and differences in policymakers' and educators' responses to the introduction of FPY in Ireland.

3.3. Access and Sampling population

3.3.1. Sampling method

Considering the explorative nature of this research I have adopted non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling method to select suitable participants (Sarantakos, 2005). This meant that research subjects were purposefully selected based on their expertise, knowledge and experiences of the topic under study. The selection of the sample however depended on who was available and importantly willing to participate in the research (Sarantakos, 2005). In gaining access to potential participants, I have used "interpersonal contacts, referrals and snowballing" recruitment technique to solicit for assistance from people I already know including the educators and other professionals in the ECEC field with whom I have long established meaningful rapport (McLean & Campbell, 2003). During the sampling stage it became quite challenging to secure interviews from private ECEC settings. Fifteen settings were contacted through email and later followed by phone calls, but only two settings were interested and willing to participate. During the sampling process one of the private settings was dropped because it was not participating in the FPY scheme as the scheme was deemed as not financially viable to their investment.

Purposive sampling was also adapted to select policymakers for semi-structured interviews. Names of possible respondents have been gained through key informants in the area of ECEC, particularly my supervisor as well as other members of the academic staff in DIT and some advanced PhD students. With this information I made contact with the DCYA and contacted the possible participants through emails, phone calls and informal visits to the key departmental offices. Once I had secured one interview I was then introduced to a good

number of other possible participants. Thus, through the referrals and snowballing technique I was able to gain access to three policymakers who have the knowledge and the experiences about the phenomenon under study (Sarantakos, 2005).

3.3.2. Sample

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group that Bradley (2011) defined as 'core policy makers'. Others defined this group as an 'elite' group within policymaking sphere (Reisman, 1993, Dexter, 2006). Riesman (1993) described this elite group as people that are in an important position and require "VIP interviewing treatment" (p. 528). However, as Reisman (1993) and Dexter (2006) acknowledged this term is loaded with "connotations of power". Following these analysis and being eager to find the right term for my choice of participants, I acknowledge the limitation with the term policymakers considering that the scope of this study did not allow me to interview all 'core policy makers' who could have been involved in the process of policymaking that led to the FPY. The sampling population was comprised of two groups: early childhood educators and ECEC policymakers. All the participants were female. This was not done purposefully as during the selection process I did not come across any possible male participants involved in the ECEC sector, and thus male perceptions and experiences were not captured.

Three policymakers from the Childcare Directorate and Early Years Education Policy Unit co-located with the DCYA were interviewed. They have been involved in the area of early childhood education for many years and were all present when the FPY came to place, with two policymakers having a direct role in the design of this new policy.
Eight interviews were conducted with early childhood educators. This number is broken down to four participants from two private 'full day' ECEC settings and equal numbers were also selected from community 'sessional' services in broader Dublin area. In each setting the manager and other educators working directly with the children participating in FPY were interviewed. I have chosen equal numbers from both the 'sessional' and 'full day care' settings to achieve a small comparison between the perceptions and experiences of the educators. Also one group interview of three was conducted due to the unforeseen circumstances arising within private sector providers (hired replacement to cover for staff to conduct interviews). Two managers and two early childhood educators in the community based sessional services were interviewed. Both managers have achieved Level 8 Hon. Degree in Early Childhood Education and Care (see Appendix seven). Two early childhood educators hold FETAC level 5 qualifications in Childcare and also qualification in special needs education (see Appendix seven). Two managers with FETAC Level 6 in Childcare and also one holding a nursery

nurse Diploma from England were interviewed in the private settings. All participants have been working in the ECEC sector between six to twenty-three years. From these private settings two educators with Level 5 qualification in Childcare were also interviewed.

3.3.3. Rationale for target population

The rationale behind focusing on policymakers from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs was based on the fact that the department has been responsible for the introduction of the FPY and its implementation in Ireland. The rationale was to identify those personnel who were present during the time of the introduction of FPY scheme in order to gain understanding about the rationale, ideas and the policy priorities behind this new initiative. Hence, the policymakers from the Childcare Directorate and Early Years Education policy Unit established by the Department of Education and Science under the DCYA were the most probable key informants in this research. The rationale behind selecting educators was also clearly based on the fact that they were the people who had firsthand experience of this new policy change; and hence, by involving them in this research it will give an insight into the impact on the ECEC sector. By selecting educators they were given the opportunity to express their views as well as experiences related to the FPY so far and the way this new scheme and concomitant policy (e.g., standard qualification requirement) may have impacted on their practice and services within the ECEC sector in Ireland.

3.4. Ethical issues

In every research there are ethical issues the researcher has to acknowledge and take into consideration. This research complied with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) code of ethics. In order to ensure that all participation will be voluntary and that all participants will be well informed about the research under study I have taken the following steps (Sarantakos, 2005). The letters to the management were sent to gain a formal access to possible respondents (see Appendix 1). All participants were provided with detailed description of the study, its purpose and procedures (see Appendix 2), as well as the main interview questions guide prior to the interviews (see Appendix 5 and 6). Informed consents were also gained from all the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality was assured to the participants, their names were not used in the research and in the participants' responses presented in the findings chapter. Crucially, anonymity was meticulously implemented for the policymakers considering that policymakers represent a small elite sample population that

is easily identifiable. Thus the background information about policymakers has not been defined more closely to avoid breach of ethics and to ensure anonymity (Bradley, 2011).

The issue of power relationship between the researcher and the respondent is one that I was strongly aware of, as Kvale (2007) recommended that in interviews both parties are not equal and that every interview "entails asymmetrical power relation", but this power relationship changes (p. 14). For example, while I was interviewing the educators I was viewed as a fellow expert in the field. However, this sort of colleague power dynamics changed dramatically when interviewing the policymakers. Another issue that is highlighted by Marshall and Rossman (1995) is researchers own biases and how they may impact on the research process and results and such consideration meant that I remained self-reflexive throughout the whole research process.

Chapter four

4. Findings

A total of 11 participants were interviewed in this research with the aim of capturing their perspectives around the introduction of FPY policy. This chapter presents the data that have emerged from the semi-structured interviews, which I have presented and organised under four key themes to help my analysis of data. Thematic analyses were adopted to highlight and organise key responses that can give weight to my key findings and help in more systematic discussions. The views of respondents (policymakers and educators) have been summarised under key themes with various sub-headings together with some of the direct quotes from the interviews to show the depth and richness of qualitative data. These are presented in italics and some words in [] are added to make the meaning more clear to the reader.

4.1. Policy priority

4.1.1. Rationale behind the FPY policy

When asked about the FPY initiative and how it came about the policymakers described that the policy priority '*was to cut money to cut the budget*. They described how economic crisis impacted on the policy development.

The recession hit the childcare industry almost overnight within a month or so, services were going down to 50 percent capacity...the services would not survive until the end of the year

Economic recession, it has proved is going to affect families, they are going to withdraw from childcare, they are going to make decisions that are cheaper, they are going to keep the children home

If we waited nobody would get anything, my experience with politics is you have to grab it when you get it, you know there is no point in saying well we should wait until it is perfect, because nothing will ever happen

Is not something that came out of the blue, it has been lobbied for a long time people have been asking for it for a long time maybe not in a such a specific term, but they have been lobbying for the state to become more involved in paying for services to fund service delivery as opposed to paying for capital grants to build buildings or create spaces

They noted that as the economic recession hit Ireland, immediate cuts were required and each Department was asked to reduce costs. They mentioned that several cuts were made and one of them was the abolishment of the ECS payment previously provided to parents. They also noted that prior to economic crisis *'there was half a billion Euro invested in creation of childcare places from 2000 to 2008 and if there was no funding to sustain those infrastructures it was going to be a wasted investment',* they noted that it was important to maintain this infrastructure until the economic situation improves as one policy maker described '*sustaining investment and preserving it when the economy begin to pick up again that was another argument'.* Policymakers noted that in a time of economic difficulties those employed in the ECEC sector will lose their jobs and '*last thing that the state wants is to have massive unemployment in another sector'* as the policymakers referred to already collapsed construction industry. One policymaker summarised the key arguments as follows:

> *If we do this [FPY] at the back of the cut... we keep people employed, we protect investment of quite significant magnitude and you know we've made parents a little bit aggrieved because we have taken their money, which is always a good thing too as we may now finally have the opportunity to do something directly for children, so that was the way it kind of worked*

4.1.2. Consultation process leading to FPY

Policymakers described that consultations have taken place prior to the introduction of the FPY and that these consultations were done with representatives from other countries especially England and Northern Ireland that have similar system already in place. Consultations were also necessary with other policymakers within DCYA as well as other Departments to ensure that the FPY will be widely accepted.

> *I put the package to my boss and said look we have to protect the sector it is going to go down the tubes and there is a lot of jobs involved and we have this money still in our boat, but it might be gone by the end of the year. This is a one off opportunity to get this*

They also mentioned that during the consultation *'there was luckily some number of TDs (*parliamentarians*)'* who had knowledge and interest in children.

> *We had the Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan who was formerly Minister for Children, so he had intimate knowledge of the sector as well…so when this cut was coming down the line…he was very open to that [FPY]*

Following the debates and consultations, the FPY was approved *'at the eleventh hour'* and the policymakers described that '*as soon as we had the decision we consulted with the representative groups and over the core of the next few months…the sector kind of vented its*

opinions to the representative groups' as a result of these consultations several variations of the FPY were brought in to cater for the very diverse sector.

4.1.3. Childcare vs. education

The policymakers noted that *'the research evidence around the benefits for children kind of only came in the last minute…it wasn't the priority'*. They described that childcare rather than education was the priority of the government at that time.

> *the very practical focus that was taken was childcare, but we were working on the quality agenda as well, and as I said education wasn't a priority, they had no interest in this area, so in a way we were kind of blocked getting into it*

However they described that from their *'point of view it is all about the children'*. They noted that in next phase starting September 2012 there will be only 38 week model of the FPY as they noted *'if you have everybody on the playschool model that has policy school year it is easier for us to monitor...and it just gets people into the idea that this is education it is not childcare'*.

4.2. Educators impressions of the FPY policy

4.2.1. First impressions

When asked about their first impressions on the FPY, the educators described that it was about time that something was done for children. They acknowledged the overall benefits of this new initiative for children and parents.

> *I think it was great that [*parents*] didn't have to pay... preschool is expensive so I thought it would be good for parents*

> *It is great that every child can get preschool for one year before they start school that is brilliant*

> *Seriously it is good for the kids because some children will never have the opportunity to go to preschool before*

> *They [*children*] get a chance to mix with others before they start primary school*

The educators described that they first heard about the initiative from the budget announcement. They felt that the initiative was introduced '*over night'* or as one educator pointed out, *'it was all very rushed at the start'.* No educator felt she was informed on time and they all noted that there was very little time between the initial announcement and the actual implementation of the FPY.

when the FPY came in I think we only heard about it maybe...in September or summer and then it started in January

It started at the weird time of the year January instead of starting in September it was a mid academic year

They described that the information provided were not clear from the beginning saying that the government were not sure of what they were doing. As one of the respondents stated, '*unfortunately this is kind of like an experiment; they are just going to see what works*' and another suggesting '*I felt that the Department was only finding their feet*'. On top of that they described that parents were poorly informed about the eligibility criteria as they sought details directly from the ECEC settings.

The educators especially those coming from private settings felt that the introduction of FPY will put their businesses in danger. They felt that the capitation fee was low in comparison with charges during economic boom. They noted that many small businesses were pushed out of business as a result of that. They expressed that there were many questions and uncertainties at the beginning stage of the FPY and that settings had no choice but to participate as parents '*will go for the free option*'. However, all educators interviewed said that since the FPY they always have enough children.

4.2.2. Mixed massages

One of the most identified issues mentioned by educators was the mixed massages around qualification requirements.

That was a joke at the start, because it was [FETAC] level 5 and then [FETAC] level 6 and then it depends on whom you listened to

Some felt that they upgraded to level 6 qualifications only to discover afterwards that the requirements was FETAC level 5

Have I just wasted six months and countless nights of not sleeping doing level 6 and did not actually need it

Indirectly to educators views the policymakers described that at the introduction stage some people from the ECEC sector wanted the level of required qualification to be higher capped at FETAC level 6; however, the policymakers soon realised that level 6 would be very ambitious as most of the workforce was not qualified up to that level. This resulted to confusion as one policymaker noted

there might have been, I think, some dumb document which had level 6 as a requirement and this was circulated at the very beginning and then it was withdrawn; but some people didn't withdraw from it, and there was a number of reasons for that as some people deliberately wanted higher qualification cap… the providers…people who were involved in training courses

4.3. Implementation phase

4.3.1. Administration and attendance

The policymakers noted that administration during the implementation stage was very challenging. They described that the administration of the FPY was done manually and included policing of more than 4,500 applications together with evaluating qualifications, ensuring services compliance with HSE regulations and securing bank details of services. This issue was however resolved as they designed a database to keep all the records. They noted that today they have records of 95 percent of children before their starting of primary education. The issue of administration was also highlighted by educators who complained about the increased amount of '*paper work*' especially at the beginning of the FPY where all the participating providers had to fill in the applications and provide all the relevant documentations such as qualifications, tax clearance certificates, and bank details. In addition some felt that at the start of the FPY it was difficult to gain information from the parents such as children's Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).

In one private setting, children attendance was an issue. The educators in this setting felt that because the FPY is free parents '*don't bother*'. They noted that this would have not happened before as '*parents will make sure they get their money worth*'. They felt that sometimes things as little as a bit of rain has stopped parents from bringing their children to preschool and at times children miss out many days. This issue was not raised in the other participating services.

4.3.2. Organisational issues

Some respondents also expressed that it could be sometimes challenging getting the group of new children at the start of the year as previously children would be starting anytime during the year depending on parents. However, this also meant that all children settled in at the same time. The full day care services also had to make extra room for the children taking part in FPY even though they would have provided sessional services before. One setting opened a second room specifically for children in FPY to balance the cost of running private service. Private services also noted that a lot of planning went to FPY children room to oblige by Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) requirements, but also to fit in the three hours session. The sessional services noted that the FPY hours fitted perfectly with the High scope design that they applied to their practice before. Thus they did not feel any difference in terms of practice. Another challenge that educators highlighted was the changes into the FPY, which are being introduced in September 2012 (DCYA, 2012), such as reduced capitation fee and

the increased adult/child ratio. They felt that these changes will put pressure on the quality of services and may force some private preschools out of business.

4.3.3. Age limit

The educators noted that not every child have had access to FPY due to the age defined category and they felt that the Department was not flexible regarding this matter as no exemptions were made.

> *Some children might not fit in into the age bracket by a few days and then in the school [primary]everyone starts school when they are four years old so if somebody misses the FPY by few days…that means that they are never going to get it*

> *Every year around 10 children misses out of having any FPY even though they are entitled to it… I have to tell the parents sorry I can't give you place because you might be one day out*

> *It is a little bit unfair to the children that they will not get [FPY] but they will all get to go to primary school the following year*

This issues was also highlighted by policymakers as they described that they sustained enormous pressure from the parents of *'July and August babies'*, as children in those two months did not fall into the defined fifteen months age bracket and therefore did not qualify for the FPY until the following year. The policymakers mentioned that the reason was that

> *The department of finance was afraid that if it was eighteen months range it would be harder to know the numbers of children that might come in, you might be flooded one year with a lot of children. I don't think that would really have happened but that is why we had to go with fifteen months*

But also it was an opportunity to incentivise parents about sending their children to school when they are older. The policymakers described that the FPY

> *has opened peoples' minds to the idea that children learn before they go to school and I think it has paved a way for us to say that play is learning*

> *We knew from the teachers that children were coming to school and were already educationally disadvantaged and they were falling behind from day one so the obvious good was to bring equality of opportunity for all children*

The educators from community setting noted that the higher age limit was very good as previously parents put their children in the primary school once they turn 4 years of age. They felt that as a result of FPY children were starting school later and were going to primary school a little bit more mature and this as they said was also appreciated by the primary school teachers. A number of educators felt the FPY should be provided for all children not

depending on any age bracket, some also suggested that it should become compulsory for every child. Others noted that FPY should be extended

> *we have children who may not be of age to get the FPY the first year around, but are still in preschool and they spend two years with us and it will be great if they can get two years of free preschool*

Policymakers noted that as a result of FPY some children who may have additional needs were diagnosed much earlier at the age of three to four years, rather than when they start primary school.

4.4. Recognition of qualification

4.4.1. Support towards upskilling

Policymakers noted that resources and support have been provided to ensure that there are available and reasonable training options for educators to upgrade to the required qualification (level 5) by September 2012.

> *Two of the childcare organisations ...are already giving training which is online therefore it suited those who are working full time. If the course providers were doing it at a very reasonable cost that we would subsidise. We want them to put courses that are specifically for people who didn't have the full level 5 so as to bring them up to the full level 5required so that we could say to the sector look we are doing everything we can to help you*

Interviews with policymakers also revealed that interim stage was introduced for awarding of FPY contract to ECEC settings where the staffs were not fully qualified or fully compliant with the qualification requirement. This was done on the basis that once the educators could demonstrate that they have covered some of the core knowledge areas from the Model Framework (2002) and ensure that they will upgrade their qualification to full level 5 by next FPY phase starting in 2012. This was designed to give all ECEC settings the equal opportunity to participate. As one policymaker noted

> *Again, it goes back to trying to fit with what was there and not to be hard on people in the system*

On the topic of meeting the qualification requirements, the private sector educators described their continued efforts towards upskilling done mostly during free time in evenings and weekends and at times giving up holidays. The full time education was not an option for them due to full time working hours and high cost of training. Part time option as they described was very scarce especially for upgrading to higher qualification. They noted that they would like to upgrade their qualification however, the opportunity, resources and support is not available or inadequate. This was not reflected in the 'community settings'

involved in this research whose educators were qualified to Level 6, 7 and 8. Contrary to the private settings, they described that due to their sector being under the primary school system and their working hours in accordance with the primary school hours and holidays, there was enough time to include some hours of training every year.

> *They should bring in an idea like this so that everybody has to do some sort of hours of professional development every year even if it is 20 hours a year, I thought 60 hours was a fair amount because it was one Saturday a month*

4.4.2. Recognition of qualification and experience

Educators are delighted with the changes in qualification requirement mostly those holding higher qualification (Level 7). They felt that their qualifications are recognised by providing a higher capitation fee for the service as well as stressing the importance of training.

> *I think it was a really good move...in the right direction in terms of qualification standardising*

> *It is important to have training because before you could have half of staff who would have training and half of staff would have none*

Educators holding Level 8 qualification felt that by recognising higher qualifications they were being recognised as professionals

> *I was delighted because I felt it was a step forward for our sector...our qualifications are kind of being noticed and...rewarded so instead of just being another childcare service or babysitter you are a recognised professional on the job...that is great*

> *you get higher capitation rate if you had your degree and your staff had FETAC level 5 so I thought that kind of give confidence to your staff and myself because it means we are entitled to higher wages because we have done our degree before hand*

Those with lower level qualifications felt that they were not recognised.

> *I only have level 5 and we have always been minding the children the same way or teaching them the same things as those with higher qualifications and so on. But then they[*government*]say that you need degrees…to be able to get higher funding. I thought it was a bit degrading on the level 5 people… I feel that we are looked down on*

Some educators felt that their work is not being recognised and that working in 'childcare' is not seen as a profession rather is all about '*nappy changing and finger painting'.*

> *We are childcare you don't get anything in childcare we are not a real sector not like primary school teachers*

This however was not the view by all as other educators who felt that if they wanted to be viewed as professionals they must act like professionals, which involved going to seminars,

attending conferences, attending training and upgrading qualifications. They felt that they must prove that they deserve such position and that they deserve the recognition and same salary as those in primary sector. They suggested that there should be set-in-stone requirements that they would need to fulfil in order to be recognised as professionals. Importantly, they felt that the introduction of FPY made them aware of the need and importance of upgrading their qualification, acknowledging it as something needed in order to work in the ECEC sector.

All educators noted that practical experience together with qualification should be recognised for people who worked in the ECEC for many years without qualification. Some felt that the government were making it very difficult for people who had qualification from other countries, and that they were questioning the thinking behind that '*why do they want somebody with a qualification, what does it represent'*. These were the words of one manager who noted that in her years of experience the people with qualification were not always the best people for the job. It was the combination of theory and practice that educators saw as important rather than qualification alone.

4.4.3. Capitation fee

Following the introduction of the FPY the policymakers thought that *'people might complain that the quality wasn't strong enough, but really money became the issue'* as all policymakers described that the capitation fee was very low for private businesses, so maintaining this fee and ensuring that FPY will remain free was a challenge. They described that they faced resistance mostly from the private sector providers that was protesting over the proposed capitation fee.

> *A lot of them were in unfortunate position where they made a business decision to go into the area and make money out of preschool because there was a lot of money around*

Policymakers noted that private services did not realise how the economic situation was going to impact on their businesses as one noted '*they didn't know what was coming down the track',* but '*most of them by the end of the year said it is great that it has come [FPY]if it wasn't there we would be out of business'.* They noted that despite the protests *'the idea was to give everybody the same condition, it must be free, ok they can have additional extras, but they must be optional and there must be alternatives and in that way we get the same standards, parent have an equal access and they can't be denied access or discriminated against due to costs.* As one policymaker noted '*equal access to preschool means equal access to the education system'.* The policymakers also noted some achievements:

We had 93 percent participation rate that was really good and that was helped by the fact that we did a mail shot to all parents…that was trying to get the kind of hard to reach parents who might not think about it or plan ahead

As policymakers addressed the issue of capitation fee, I further probed the reason behind the higher capitation fee for settings with highly qualified staff. In response to that policymakers described that there was lobbying from the Montessori group to raise the capitation fee. According to policymakers the Montessori group argued that *'they were better qualified than the general staff'* and that their costs were higher and that the policymakers *'were going to destroy them',* because the capitation fee was very low compared to what they used to charge. One policymaker noted that

Traditionally, Montessori in Ireland has been seen or been understood as a little bit more up market than say playgroups, they have always marketed themselves differently as they would see themselves as better qualified or of higher quality

However the policymakers noted that this rule did not apply only to Montessori group as one policymaker noted

Anybody that is operating with the relevant degree is fine, we are not just pro-Montessori and anti-everything else what we wanted to keep out were people with nursing qualifications or secondary school teachers we didn't want those degrees we wanted to have early years

During the interviews educators' noted that while recruiting new staff they look for people with degree qualification and three years experience in the ECEC sector, as it will ensure the higher capitation fee.

4.5. Challenges of improving quality

4.5.1. Disparity within the ECEC sector

Enormous disparity in educators' qualifications was identified by policymakers as a challenge during the implementation stage.

We have a problem with the least qualified people there is a tradition in Ireland that if you are nice girl but not very bright that minding children is a good job for you

lot of people would have done courses that were not nationally accredited

Policymakers also mentioned that people working in the ECEC sector would have gone to colleges in the past, such as *'private colleges here and in UK which were offering what they thought was fully accredited courses but it wasn't'.* They noted that as a result of this

disparity within the ECEC sector ensuring quality was difficult. As one policymaker summarised it:

> *The crèches providers are all different, they come from different background, you have people who perhaps were public health nurses or teachers or mothers at home who just decided…the range of qualifications varies…their range of understanding of a child development also varies…so getting the quality right is still a big challenge*

4.5.2. Lack of resources

On the issue of improving quality of services the educators thought that the introduction of FPY would impact on resources towards evaluating quality of services as one educator mentioned:

> *It came in bits and pieces, at the start they [*government*] said you are going to have to meet all the criteria…we are going to have Siolta-coordinator for every service in the country but that has all changed and been abandoned*

The educators '*were thinking that when the FPY came in'* they will be allocated Siolta co-ordinator to improve the quality of their settings. However, they soon realised that this was not going to happen due to economic crisis and lack of resources. One educator noted that she has applied for Siolta co-ordinator in recent months as she felt that if the application is successful the quality of the setting will improve. However she noted that places were limited *'we didn't get it, the applications had to go through lotto, because so many people applied'*. Some educators felt that a huge amount of work went into planning without anyone evaluating the quality of the work. Most of the educators argued that quality was improving as a result of their *determination* and *motivation* and not as a result of the FPY. Nonetheless, they believed that with time and more resources the situation would improve. Policymakers acknowledged that once they ensured that every eligible child has a place under the FPY the *'next question we would have is what we are going to do so that children experiences are positive and they are of high quality'*. So in order to address the issue of quality the policymakers introduced in the contract that every setting must adhere to Siolta (2006) *'and that was really, really limited because we couldn't police it and we had very limited resources to support services and unfortunately we are still in that position we have very few resources to police or support what is happening in services'*.

Chapter five

5. Discussion

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the findings that have emerged from this research as have been presented in chapter four, which must be read together with this chapter 5 as many things which have not been fully discussed here can be read from the findings chapter 4. The reading of these two chapters together is meant to provide the reader with a well rounded analysis of data. It is important to remind the reader that this research attempted to shed some light into the rationale behind the introduction of FPY as well as giving a glimpse into the implementation process and the possible impact this new initiative has had on the ECEC sector. Findings are limited to the respondents in this research thus should be interpreted in the context of the limitations in this research. This final chapter will conclude by revisiting the key objectives of this research and make recommendations for further research and policy improvement.

5.1. Rationales for the introduction of FPY in Ireland

Our findings show that the policy rationales for introducing FPY in Ireland were driven largely by the economic crisis. This was why other presented arguments or key objectives for introducing FPY in Ireland such as: '*saving the childcare infrastructure, keeping people in employment as well as preventing the collapse of ECEC sector'* could only have been argued for during the economic crisis. This explains why the idea of FPY was convincing as a more meaningful alternative investment for the Irish government who was struggling to prevent its national economy from total collapse. However, this policy even though 'economically' driven marks a shift from "parental to public subsidies" as this is the first time ever that direct support is provided to ECEC services (Hayes, 2010, p. 76). The ECEC policymakers narrated how they seized the opportunity of the abolishment of the ECS payment in 2009 to make a case to the government to channel some part of the money to fund the FPY scheme, which not only saves the already established childcare infrastructures and keeping the sector's jobs but very importantly that the cost for running the FPY initiative at 166m was by far lesser than the ECS payment that had cost the government over 480m per annum. This finding is also in line with some of the earlier literatures suggesting that FPY was introduced as a consequence of economic crisis with radical/significant cuts to government expenditure (Hayes, 2010).

Our findings also suggest that some of the key ECEC policymakers have been involved in the policy of providing 'childcare' places, which they felt the onus was on them to safeguard the childcare infrastructures they have helped to build over the years during the Celtic Tiger boom. They reasoned that *'something'* could be done quickly with the money being cut from the ECS scheme for the ECEC sector before such money would be redirected to other capital projects in other departments. The ECEC policymakers were of the opinion that as the ECS payment was being cut that it would be fine to quickly *'replace it with something, since this tends to be politically what often happens with government when it is taking something away from people, it is also considering how best to alleviate sufferings due to severe cuts'* . Thus one of the key policymakers decided that the best thing that could make sense was to advocate for universal FPY for all children irrespective. While FPY has been praised as a 'landmark' initiative within the Irish ECEC, it has also been argued that the introduction of FPY was hurriedly implemented without proper consultation with all stakeholders and had not been driven by empirical research on children (Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

However, the introduction of the FPY policy in Ireland has marked a significant shift towards achieving the 'equality of access' and 'participation rights' agendas for all children at the preschool level, as well as influencing the implementation of other crucial policy regulations such as qualification standard and minimum qualification requirement within the ECEC sector in Ireland. In light of the benefits of universal provision the policymakers noted that by ensuring equal access to ECEC children who may have additional needs are identified earlier at the age of three or four rather than when they begin primary education at the age of four or five. Consequently, according to the policymakers, the universal FPY has created an opportunity to ensure early diagnosis and support for those children with additional needs and their families. This is also supported by the proponents of universal design of ECEC who acknowledges the importance of equity and inclusion, but also stresses the importance of high quality educational experiences for all children including those with additional needs (Darragh, 2007).

As our subsequent discussion will show, the key objectives of the ECEC policymakers for implementing FPY during the economic crisis may have been met. Though the FPY may have come as a surprise and with many critical challenges, our data strongly suggests that this initiative has become an important landmark achievement within the ECEC sector in Ireland and remains indeed a highly welcomed and commended initiative by all the stakeholders.

5.2. Qualification, professionalism and quality

One of the key findings in this research is that with the introduction of FPY it was possible for government to introduce new policies on the minimum qualification requirement (NQF Level 5) and acceptable qualification standard (ECEC qualifications) for those working as preschool leaders in the ECEC sector. Policymakers noted that they wanted to highlight 'education' rather than 'childcare' because they know the benefits. Thus, strong empirical evidences are clearly showing that with the introduction of FPY it is 'childcare' that has now become subordinated to 'early education' policy construction rather than the other way around in this 21st century Ireland. Within this notion of education, regulation of qualification requirements and standard as well as increasing emphasis on quality provision through the implementation of Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) and other children-centred and children-led innovations in Ireland are all strong evidences pointing to a clear movement towards 'education' in Irish ECEC policy. All these are also as a result of increasing understanding and recognition within the ECEC literature and research findings that children need to be prepared before embarking on formal schooling (EC, 2010; 2011; Barnett et al., 2004).

Our data also suggests that due to the recent policy changes within the Irish ECEC, the sector has increasingly become more institutionalised, professionalised and now posed to ensure quality ECEC provisions. According to policymakers the FPY contracts are being renewed every two years; however at the time of this research the new contract and conditions for the second phase of FPY starting 2012 to 2014 have not yet been published. It is presumed that the new contracts would include the adherence to the National Curriculum Framework: Aistear alongside previously required Siolta.

This explanation supports earlier research findings that government direct investment and involvement through effective regulations remains a key indicator driving standardisation, professionalisation and quality provisions within the ECEC and also ensuring that children's learning and developmental needs are being met effectively (Hayes, 2007; OECD, 2004). Educators narratives about how awkward it was to introduce FPY in mid-academic year showed how they (educators) view the ECEC sector in terms of formal academic institution or perhaps has to do with their professional development as many of the educators engage in part-time courses and in-service training.

One plausible explanation why the Irish government was able to implement such crucial preschool regulations in Ireland was because it funds the FPY, provides subsides for training/upskilling of the workforce and tends to pay higher capitation fee to settings with

higher qualified staff with NQF Level 7 & above. Our data also shows that as a result of this capitation fee incentivisation and the recognition of higher qualifications, most preschool settings in Ireland now prefer to hire higher qualified educators than was previously the case This supports existing findings that higher qualifications standards are "improving wages, decreasing turnover, and professionalizing the workforce" with the ECEC (Early et al., 2007, p. 176). Thus as the ECEC workforce become more and more qualified and professionalised quality provisions and return of investments tend to be assured and guaranteed (Barnett, 2003; Miller & Cable, 2011; Sylva et al., 2004; Whitebook, 2003).

We also found that educators with higher qualifications tended to feel more professional that the educators with lower qualification. However, all the educators felt that as a result of the recently established qualification requirements and standardisation, the ECEC sector was becoming more professionalised and recognised. Educator's responses were suggesting that under the FPY initiative higher qualification is being rewarded with higher capitation fee for the participating ECEC setting. This explains why educators with higher qualification felt more recognised by the government. However, this finding also highlights the mixed reactions regarding issues of professionalisation and professionalism as have been expressed by those holding lower levels of qualifications, who have been disappointed that government has not recognised their professional training achievements by providing higher capitation fee to settings with highly qualified staff. These educators also noted that despite the different qualification levels they all engaged in the same work with the same children.

Some educators also mentioned that their work is not recognised as the sector is still perceived as childcare rather than as a professional sector. They compared this to the higher support and recognition provided by government to primary school teachers. Nevertheless, this was not the perception by all educators as some expressed that in order to achieve professional recognition they ought to engage in extra training as well as attending conferences and seminars on issues related to the ECEC practice. They described that to achieve professional status they must act like professionals thus striving to improve the quality of their practice as well as engage in regular upskilling. The finding in this research indicates that only the educators with higher qualification felt more recognised and positive about professionalism in the ECEC sector. This finding supports most earlier research findings that higher qualification and training tend to foster effective 'professional identity' (Duignan, 2007).

The data also suggested that educators acknowledged the importance of 'qualification' only in combination with 'practical' experience. Educators noted that many people working in the sector may not have qualification, but their experience is equally valuable. This finding is

also reflected in the literature suggesting that qualification alone is not sufficient in achieving quality and that other factors are equally important (Early et. al., 2006).

Another important finding from our data is that providers of ECEC teacher training courses have been very instrumental in driving the agenda for higher qualification of the ECEC workforce in Ireland. There were mixed reactions from the policymakers and educators regarding the level of qualification requirement according to the new policy. Our data shows that initially it was capped at NQF level 6 but was later dropped to level 5 as the policymakers thought that level 6 seems a little bit 'ambitious' to implement and that level 5 seemed more ideal. However, training providers did not inform their student trainees who were anxious to fulfil the level of training as demanded of all preschool leaders. The reason for this withholding of such change in the qualification level requirement was that the training providers were getting more money as students have to pass the level 5 before doing the level 6 course. From our data there was no strong empirical evidence to suggest that training providers may have lobbied policymakers to implement a compulsory minimum requirement and recognised qualification standard. However, international literature tends to suggest that in most countries where governments have become actively involved in funding and regulating the ECEC sectors, compulsory qualification requirement and standardisation are becoming increasingly the norms as emphasis tends to focus on ensuring quality and return of investments in terms of value for money spent and human capital development for both the society and the children in their later adult years (Ben-Galim, 2011).

Importantly, the findings in this research indicated that the introduction of FPY and its related qualification requirements impacted positively on future workforce recruitment, as ECEC settings prefer recruiting staff with higher qualification to ensure that higher capitation fee is maintained in their settings. This finding indicates that graduates with degrees in ECEC are most likely to be recruited and retained in the ECEC sector. This replicates earlier research findings suggesting that through adequate compensation, in this case, higher capitation fee for ECEC setting the retention of highly qualified staff is guaranteed and the high educational quality of the sittings will also be achieved and sustained (Barnett, 2003). This finding can be supported also by the DIT career centre statistics suggesting that since the introduction of FPY more graduates are taking on employment in the ECEC sector (Mhic Mhathuna & Taylor, 2012).

Maintaining the capitation fee payment by the government also meant that FPY remains free, which ensured equality of access to early education for all children in the age defined category. (EC, 2010; 2011). The policymakers also highlighted that governmental subsidies have been introduced to ensure that all participating services will meet the

necessary qualification standards by 2012. This data indicates that by the next phase starting in September 2012 all participating settings must meet the standard qualification requirements at NFQ Level 5.

The FPY marks a significant step in establishing qualification requirements for those working in the sector. This movement has direct impact on training and upskilling of the ECEC workforce as government must ensure that the sector is able to comply with these new regulations. From the literature it was evident that 40 percent of the ECEC services were not able to meet the required qualification (DES, 2010). The data in this research revealed that policymakers made a number of exceptions for ECEC services. For instance, services were allowed to participate in the FPY despite the fact they did not fully or meet the qualification requirements. They were allowed to take register for the FPY as far as they showed evidence that they have completed training in some of the core areas of the 'Model Framework' for education and training (DJELR, 2002). However, our findings highlighted that educators participating in this research have achieved at least the minimum required qualification (NQF Level 5) and in most cases have achieved qualifications of higher levels (NQF Level 6, 7 & 8).

The findings in this research indicate that FPY was introduced as a consequence of economic crisis in Ireland. This finding is supported by policymakers' statements acknowledging that as a result of economic crisis Irish government sought to reduce spending across all departments and that DCYA was not exempt to these measures. The policymakers highlighted that the key saving that led to the introduction of FPY was the abolishment of the ECS payment in 2009. This finding is also in line with some of the earlier literature suggesting that FPY was introduced as a consequence of economic crisis that sough significant cuts to government expenditure (Hayes, 2010).

The findings in this research drew attention to several arguments presented by policymakers in support of the FPY initiative. One of the key arguments was that as a result of the country's economic downfall, unemployment rate will increase and parents will lose their jobs and take their children out of childcare places. This will directly affect the ECEC sector as well as its workforce as policymakers noted the ECEC workforce will lose their job and the 'childcare' infrastructure would collapse. They compared this possible situation to the collapse of construction industry in Ireland. From the literature it was evident that during Ireland' economic prosperity a number of significant developments have been directed towards establishment of 'childcare' infrastructure. The European Social Fund, the EOCP (2000 to 2006) and the NCIP (2006-2013) mostly supported these developments. The policymakers described that if policy action was not taken the entire established ECEC

infrastructure would collapse and in 5 years time when Ireland will recover from the economic crisis those infrastructures might be long gone. The policymakers identified direct governmental support as necessary measure in order to address the possible impact of economic crisis on the ECEC sector. One of the key findings in this research is that FPY was not a new idea as many organisation and academics interested in the development of ECEC sector in Ireland have been lobbying for direct investment to provide services rather than indirect support provided to parents and/or towards building 'childcare' places (see Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

5.3. The FPY policymaking process and implementation phase

The policymakers emphasised that communication was fundamental during the decision-making process and the finalisation of the FPY policy protocol. However, this consultation was carried out away from the public but involved only the Irish government legislatures especially those from the Ministry of Finance. However, earlier consultations took place prior to the introduction of FPY with representatives from other countries with similar policy initiative for instance England and Northern Ireland. Dialogue and consultation also took place between the experts in the Childcare Directorate and key policy actors from other Departments, suggesting that the key ideas for the FPY have been scrutinized and well argued for and against during these consultation processes. Our data clearly shows that some crucial consultations were carried out between the policy actors from relevant departments away from the general eye of the public, supporting the literature stating that FPY was introduced without any formal consultation with the wider public and stakeholders (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010). However, according to the literature on policymaking processes, two kinds of consultation in form of dialogue tend to occur simultaneously and that it is through such 'dialogue' that proposed 'ideas' are being conveyed and defended within the policymaking circle (Schmidt, 2008). Our findings suggest that the ECEC policymakers conveyed their ideas of FPY proposal firstly by way of 'coordinative discourse' in which they put these ideas across to the legislators and other core policy actors from other departments like the departments of Finance, Social Welfare and so on for thorough scrutiny, evaluation and assessment (Schmidt, 2008). Through this interactive process the ideas, context, structure and agency play crucial parts in the outcome of the policymaking process.

Our data suggests that the policymakers were quite aware of the different stages and issues involved in the policymaking processes. For example, how ideas and dialogues are intricately intertwined with the discussions about the wider societal issues such as available

resources, the benefits of a particular policy initiative could have to society and whether the public will even legitimate and welcome such initiative if implemented.

Even though the government did not engage in formal consultation or dialogue with the sector's stakeholders prior to the introduction of the FPY policy, some of the key ECEC policymakers made every effort to ensure that many of the ECEC stakeholders were given the opportunity to voice their concerns to the representative groups following the announcement of the FPY. This later consultation is referred to in the literature as the second phase of dialogue (known as 'communicative discourse' phase), which tend to involve the policymakers with certain members of the wider public (Schmidt, 2008). According to policymakers, as a result of these consultations, some adaptations were incorporated to meet the needs of the ECEC sector such as providing subsidies towards upgrading of qualification to full level 5.

In terms of children participation rate, our findings suggest an impressive uptake in the first year of about 95 per cent of qualifying children taking part. All participants (policymakers and educators) in this research expressed that the FPY is a great opportunity for children as it guarantees equal access to ECEC and also creates the opportunity for children to build their social skills before starting primary school. The participants noted that previously many children would not have attended the ECEC settings due to its high cost. A plausible explanation for this current high uptake has been that parents now have a choice to send their children to preschool for free without incurring extra financial burden on their families. The findings are also in line with literature that supports universal provision and its positive impact on children's early years experiences, learning and development needs as well as economic benefits (Barnett et al, 2004; Ben-Galim, 2011).

However, this finding also highlights the push towards school readiness as policymakers noted that they were aware that children were coming to school disadvantaged, thus they felt as a public good it provides equal opportunity for children. However, critical studies are suggesting that increasing emphasis on preparation for school has raised the concern about the increasing tendency on the schoolification of the ECEC sector (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). This research does not suggest that the introduction of FPY is leading to schoolification of the sector rather it makes suggestions for further research on this new policy as this issue remains debatable and controversial depending on one's research agenda and philosophical position.

A key finding in this research is that government did not engage in the 'communicative discourse' with the ECEC educators. Overall, educators felt that government was not sure what they were doing and that the introduction of FPY was some kind of trial to see whether

it will be successful or not. This is supported by educators' statements highlighting that they were not clear why government introduced this new policy. Literature suggests that when the communicative discourse does not take place and the policy change is imposed on the public, this may pose challenges for the implementation and also for the general public to remain supportive of such policy change (Schmidt, 2008).

The educators' impressions on the FPY were mixed as they described that it was about time something was done for children, but at the same time they noted that they were not sure why the initiative was introduced especially why government rushed the introduction of this new policy. This however, may be as a result of lack of communication between ECEC sector and the government during the designing stage, as findings already indicated that there was no consultation with the ECEC sector prior to the introduction of FPY.

5.4. Issues and challenges

Evidence from our data suggests that there was no consultation between the government and the ECEC sector prior the introduction of the FPY suggesting that the ECEC sector was only informed about the new policy following its public announcement in April 2009. From educators statements it was clearly evident that information provided by the DCYA needed more clarity as the educators found some information misleading, especially around the issues of qualification requirements. Some educators were confused whether the required qualification was level 5 or 6 and some went to upgrade to level 6 qualifications only to find out that it was not needed.

The findings also indicated that educators have given up their free time, weekends and holidays to upgrade their qualification and subsequently improve quality of their setting but still failed to be recognised as highly qualified given that government through higher capitation fee policy has tended to relegate people with lower qualifications.

One of the key issues that emerged from the collected data was that Montessori Group in Ireland protested over the capitation fee for the FPY. The data shows that Montessori Group argued that their services were delivered by highly qualified staff and thus were of higher quality than other services. This view was also supported by policymakers in this research as they noted that historically Montessori would have been recognised as more appealing. However, the key argument of the Montessori group according to policymakers was that their services were generally more expensive. Therefore, the lower capitation fee would not be sufficient for maintenance of their businesses. This data may explain why the higher capitation fee was introduced. DCYA (2011) supports this finding with statement that

higher capitation fee recognises the higher cost of services. But such official biased position tend to suggest a clear lack of understanding about the key processes of effective early years practice where Montessori is just one model of provision, which is prone to poor practices as any other, and has in no way been proven empirically in comparison to other versions to be any more effective in relation to longer term outcomes for children. Perhaps, a research into how the practices of different versions of preschool providers (Montessori, Froebel, etc) ensure quality and outcomes is urgently needed. Such research is highly welcomed especially in Ireland where some providers tend to claim they are delivering higher quality and outcomes than others and as such are being paid higher capitation fee.

Although our data suggests that government is subsidising training for those who need to upgrade, however, it also highlights that support was not provided towards upgrading to higher level of qualifications (third level 7 & 8) or even level 6 as subsidy was limited to only level 5. These findings are in line with the Workforce Development Plan which highlighted the limitations of resources as hindering upgrading of qualifications especially to higher levels and that most training providers are located in the urban areas (DES, 2009). They noted however that lack of resources towards upskilling made their progress difficult especially for the educators in private settings and probably for those in the rural areas.

Substantial amount of research highlights the crucial role of highly qualified personnel and its impact on higher quality of services (Sylva, et al 2004; Whitebook, 2003). From the governments statement it is evident that research into this area was not taken into consideration. Having said that the findings in this research suggest otherwise as policymakers made several references to the fact that they were pushing for higher quality of services despite the limited resources and that they were implicitly promoting early education rather than childcare. Hence, this research suggests that even though the introduction of higher capitation fee was economically driven, the policymakers in this research were implicitly pushing towards higher quality of ECEC services, standardisation and professionalisation of the workforce and the sector in general.

One interesting finding that emerged from the interviews was that some children were not able to access the FPY as they were born outside of the age qualifying category. Some educators noted that every year, ten children miss out on FPY as a result of this rule and these children would not avail of this initiative as in the next academic year they are most likely to commence primary education. From the findings it was evident that policymakers also elaborated on this matter as they defined this group as the *'July and August babies'* and described that parents of these children put enormous pressure on the department to extend the qualifying category to eighteen months rather than the currently established fifteen

months period. However, the policymakers maintained this rule because the department of finance has argued that extending the qualifying period would pose pressure on finances as in some years there could be many qualifying children than others. Policymakers also described that through maintaining the fifteen month age category it gave them a golden opportunity to entice parents to send their children to formal schooling when they are a little bit older. Educators and policymakers noted that as a result of this age definition the children were starting primary school more matured. This kind of assumption requires further research. Once again these findings must be interpreted with caution because the issue of age category has been economically driven and defined as such by the Department of Finance whose role at the time was to cut spending radically. Nonetheless, this age defined category was maintained by policymakers as they believed also it was important to culture parents about more appropriate school starting age.

Based on the collected data, bringing about quality in ECEC sector has been a huge challenge. Disparity within ECEC sector was reflected in qualification backgrounds of the ECEC workforce ranging anywhere between unqualified, partially qualified or qualified in areas not directly related to early childhood education.

The findings in this research highlighted that there was a lack of resources towards supporting quality in the ECEC sector. Once the policymakers have established a place for every child eligible under FPY, the focus then shifted to ensuring quality, hence adherence to Siolta (2006) was included in the FPY contract. This finding is recently supported by the DCYA (2012) statement that the maintenance of FPY and the improvement in quality depends only on the available resources. This is supported by educators' statements that they were not provided with Siolta coordinators as well as policymakers' statements that resources towards improving quality are still limited.

Regulating quality especially implementing Siolta can be difficult as staffs have to be qualified before being monitored for quality provision. However, one can argue that with the new policy of ensuring that all preschool leaders meets the minimum qualification requirement and professional standard suggests that quality can be improved through the training of educators. It also shifts emphases to training providers and this is clearly supported by literature that the highly trained educators provides better quality provision (Sylva et al., 2004). Perhaps, the setting of minimum qualification requirements of FETAC level 5 for all preschool leaders could also be an interim monitoring of quality for the time being until a Siolta coordinators may be appointed when resources permit. From our findings, policymakers gave reasons why Siolta coordinators have not been appointed due to lack of resources to do that. Educators expressed disappointment that such an important initiative as

appointment of Siolta coordinators was not implemented to monitor quality and adherence to Siolta standards by all settings. In conclusion the findings suggest that with the establishment of qualification requirements and standards together with monetary recognition of higher qualification the career in ECEC has moved towards being more respected and possibly financially viable.

5.5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the introduction of Free Preschool Year for children between three to four years of age in Ireland. The main purpose was to document the perspectives of policymakers and early childhood educators on this new policy initiative. The key concern identified at the start of this research was that the introduction of FPY is relatively a recent phenomenon and studies in this area have been limited and scarce, thus exploratory study into this topic was identified as important and relevant. The research design was delimited to relational dimensions of universal ECEC, qualification requirement, quality and professionalism. These dimensions were elaborated through literature in areas of social policy, law, economics, history, sociology and education. This empirically drive research sought to explore the policy rationale behind the FPY and the challenges related to its implementation. It also attempted to give an insight into the impact of this new policy on the ECEC sector. In order to explore the key issues under study and be able to accomplish the objectives of this research, qualitative interviewing and documentary analysis were adopted to generate data. The theoretical framework of constructive institutionalism was adopted to provide some insights into policymaking processes during economic crisis (Hay, 2006).

The first core objective of this research was to explore the rationale behind the introduction of the FPY and to evaluate its implementation process. The findings uncovered tend to suggest that the FPY in Ireland was introduced as a consequence of economic crisis especially following the abolishment of the ECS payment in 2009. Following this cut several arguments and policy objectives were presented by policymakers in favour of introducing the FPY policy initiative. These arguments were highlighted as follows: the ECEC sector would have collapsed as a result of economic downfall; the significant investments provided into building childcare infrastructure during the economic boom will be lost and those working in ECEC will be unemployed and would pose extra burden to the welfare state. All these arguments were relevant only in the current economic crisis context in Ireland. It is however important to note that even though the rationale for FPY was driven purely by economic crisis; it was also driven by few policymakers who had knowledge and professional interest in the area of ECEC in Ireland.

The recent development within the ECEC also suggests that 'childcare' is now subordinating 'education' in terms of driving policy within the ECEC sector in Ireland. This innovation also signifies a conscious shift from private responsibility to public good (Hayes, 2010, p. 76). Given the attention that is now being directed to preschoolers with a focus on school readiness for children between 3 to 4 years, care should also be taken not to overlook service provisions and investment for children below 3.2 years within the ECEC. After all, lifelong learning is believed to occur throughout life starting from the cradle to the grave (DES, 1999; OECD; 1996; Delors, 1998); therefore, investment into the ECEC must always be inclusive of 0 to 6 years and not just for a specific age limit.

Both policymakers and educators were confronted with several challenges throughout the implementation process of FPY. One of the challenges that made the administration process extremely complicated was the qualification disparity within the ECEC sector. This was evident in terms of levels of qualifications and qualification backgrounds ranging anywhere from unqualified to qualified in other ECEC unrelated areas such as nursing or primary school teaching.

The second key objective in this research aimed to gain understanding of the impact of the new policy on qualification requirements for those working with children participating in the FPY in the ECEC. Findings suggested that educators supported the need for standardising qualification in the ECEC sector. However, the findings are mixed, demonstrating mixed feelings about the differences in the capitation fee provided to setting with staff qualified to NFQ Level 7 and above. The findings also highlighted that opportunities to upgrade to higher qualification are limited, not subsidised and are only available in specific locations that are not suitable for those in full time employment. Importantly, the findings also showed that as a result of the FPY, the ECEC settings in Ireland are confidently recruiting people with higher qualifications to ensure the higher capitation fee. Thus, suggesting that graduate level students of ECEC are most likely to be recruited to work in the field of ECEC. The findings also suggest that training providers can be very influential in driving the agenda for higher qualification requirement and standardisation within the ECEC sector as many governments and societal thinking increasingly recognises the importance of ECEC investment and improvement. Evidence from our Irish data supports this tentative conclusion.

The third objective was to explore the experiences of early childhood educators about the new policy changes and how these changes may have impacted on the quality of services as well as possibly shaping the movement towards professionalisation of the ECEC sector in Ireland. The findings suggest that educators holding higher qualification felt that their academic achievements were now recognised which consequently led to feelings of increased

professional identity. However, as the finding indicates this was not the case for educators with lower levels of qualification as they felt unrecognised by government decision to award only the settings with highly qualified staff with higher capitation fee. From the findings, it was clear that the introduction of FPY did not directly impact on the quality of services in the eyes of all participants including policymakers, which was largely due to lack of financial resources. However, the findings indicated that quality was more likely to be assured through the introduction of qualification requirement and standardisation for those working with children under the FPY.

In conclusion, this research has illustrated that the Early Childhood Education and Care sector has developed dramatically over the years. However, the most recent landmark development has been the introduction of the Free Preschool Year in 2010, through which all children between three to four years of age for the first time in the Irish history were offered universal preschool hours prior to starting primary school. This research concludes that FPY signifies a landmark development in the area of ECEC in Ireland and that with its implementation as well as inter alia concomitant policies on qualifications, assuring quality and curriculum standard that 'education' rather than 'childcare' now drives ECEC policy agendas and innovations. Moreover, despite its economically driven rationale, this new FPY initiative has marked a significant movement towards more unified sector. There is also an opportunity for government to develop and support this initiative, to ensure quality early childhood education experiences within caring environment that is delivered by qualified and experienced educators.

Based on the crucial findings that have been uncovered and discussed in this research, it is plausible to say that Ireland's ECEC is now firmly in the road to effective regulation and monitoring and that FPY introduction help to create the much needed platform to move towards higher qualified staff and professionalism. The research therefore draws a tentative conclusion that with the recent introduction of FPY and concomitant qualification policies are representative of affirmative actions towards ensuring equality of access and participation rights of all children to preschool as well as addressing issues of quality provision through regulating qualification requirement and standardisation and adherence to Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) through highly qualified and trained workforce. These latest development are in line with the European commission on Europe 2020 targets and may suggest that with introduction of universal provision as well as the proposed Referendum on children's rights in the Autumn and attendant constitutional amendments will influence future policy thinking within the ECEC in Ireland.

5.6. Recommendation for future research

This section will highlight a number of key recommendations towards issues of training for ECEC educators, issues of quality improvement for ECEC sector and issues of equality of access and participation rights agendas for all children between 3 to 4 years in Ireland. Findings from this research suggest that as a result of qualification requirements under the FPY policy initiative graduates from ECEC training programmes are being recruited to work in the sector. This has direct implication on the training providers as the responsibility is on them to design programmes that would support and enhance improvement of quality especially as the findings in this research have highlighted lack of resources towards improving quality. It is suggested that this issue could be addressed by training providers as research established that one way of improving quality is through training. Therefore, quality of the ECEC provision can be enhanced through the incorporation of the Quality Framework Siolta (2006) as well as National Curriculum Aistear (2009) into training programmes.

This also implies that support should be provided to training colleges so that they will be able to equip graduates with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills based on these two important documents and this in turn may have an impact on providers ability to self-assess the quality level of their provision consequently enhancing the quality of services and early children's experiences.

Further research is also needed at this critical time to ascertain the level of quality, practice and outcomes associated with different versions of preschool providers whose methods and philosophical approaches of providing services to children tend to differ. This has become an issue now in Ireland with some group like the Montessori claiming to be delivering better quality than all the others and as such have been paid higher capitation fee. This is an important issue given that the introduction of Siolta and Aistear one would expect should be able to address disparity of practice, quality and outcomes across board.

Very importantly, there is an urgent need to carry out a national evaluation of the FPY initiative so far in Ireland, in order to determine whether this initiative and associated policies impact positively on children's early experiences and whether 'learning and developmental' outcomes are achieved. This would help to convince government of the benefits of the project to help in making it a permanent national project rather than something contingent and dependent on the rhetoric of having availability of resources. There should also be a consideration to align the FPY project with the education system, which will also boost quality monitoring and professional status within the ECEC. However, caution is also required to ensure that preschool services do not become schoolified, especially if the FPY

should be merged under the formal primary school system. This can be achieved by strong adherence to Aistear, which remains an important and authoritative National Curriculum Framework for age appropriate ECEC preschool services.

Another issue worth pointing out to policymakers is the issue of age category. Policymakers should try to ensure that children are not denied their inalienable right to education as a public good by indirectly denying certain children access to universal preschool because of what certain adults think or believe to be age appropriate for starting school. Such children could be given the opportunity to avail of the FPY by a few more or fewer months rather than nothing at all.

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Appendices

Appendix one

Letter to the management in the Early Childhood Education and Care Settings

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am in my final year of International MA in Early Childhood Education and Care at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). As a part of my studies I am required to conduct a piece of research for which I have chosen to look at the recent introduction of the Free Preschool Year (FPY) in Ireland. In 2010 the Irish government introduced the FPY initiative for children between three to four years of age. I have identified a need for research into this important scheme under the topic: **The Free Preschool Year in Ireland: The Perceptions of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers.**

I would like to ask if it is possible to recruit participants for my research from your early childhood education setting. I have attached description of the research and what is involved in it for the potential participants. The information gained from the interviews will remain confidential and your name and setting anonymous. I hope that you find my attached description interesting and worthy enough to inspire you to participate. It will be interesting to hear your valuable experience on the issue of FPY and the invaluable contribution of your participation in this research. Please feel free to contact me, should you require any further information.

Many thanks for taking time to read this and I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours faithfully,

Martina Ozonyia   mhirschmannova@yahoo.com

Appendix two

Description of the research

Dear Sir/Madam,

The research titled: The Free Preschool Year in Ireland: The perspectives of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers aim to explore the perspectives of early childhood educators and policymakers regarding the introduction of 'Free Preschool Year' (FPY) initiative. It seeks to understand and analyse these perceptions within the broader Irish ECEC policy context with particular focus on the implementation of FPY and the new qualification requirements, and how these relate to issues of quality provision and professionalisation in the ECEC sector in Ireland. The research also has interrelated core objectives: Firstly, to evaluate the implementation of the FPY initiative so far. Secondly, to understanding the impact of the new policy for those working with children between 0-6 years of age in the Irish ECEC sector.

In order to fulfil the key objectives of the research I have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators to gain an insight into their perceptions and experiences on the Free Preschool Year initiative. These semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants holding qualifications in Early Childhood Education and Care. These participants are selected from four early childhood settings in broader Dublin area. In each setting the manager and one early childhood educator working directly with children involved in the FPY will be interviewed. The semi-structured interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Importantly all information gained from the semi-structured interviews would remain confidential and your name and setting made anonymous.

Appendix three

Consent form

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am currently in my final stage of International MA in Early Childhood Education and Care Programme in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). As part of my studies, I am conducting a research: The Free Preschool Year in Ireland: The Perceptions of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers.

I have scheduled semi-structured interview for ....

I have enclosed the questions for the semi-structured interview, giving you the opportunity to point out anything that you may not feel comfortable discussing.

I would like to inform you that all information gained in the interview would remain confidential and your name and setting made anonymous and that you have right to withdraw from the research process at any time.

If you agree to participate in the interview please sign below.

_____

Please feel free to contact, if you have any queries 0863527392.

Thank you.

Martina Ozonyia

Date   _____

Appendix four

Letters to Policymakers

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Martina Ozonyia and I am currently completing International MA in Early Childhood Education in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This programme is delivered by Oslo University College, University of Malta and Dublin Institute of Technology. I have been awarded Erasmus Mundus Scholarship for two years to pursue my studies. As a part of my studies I am required to conduct a piece of research for which I have chosen to look at the recent introduction of the Free Preschool Year (FPY) in Ireland. In 2010 the Irish government introduced the FPY initiative for children between three to four years of age. I have identified a need for research into this important scheme under the topic: **The Free Preschool Year in Ireland: The Perceptions of Early Childhood Educators and Policymakers.**

The research aims to explore the perceptions of early childhood educators and policymakers regarding the introduction of 'Free Preschool Year' (FPY) initiative. It seeks to understand and analyse these perceptions within the broader Irish ECEC policy context with particular focus on the implementation of FPY and the new qualification requirements, and how these relate to issues of quality provision and professionalisation in the ECEC sector in Ireland. The research also has interrelated core objectives: Firstly, to evaluate the implementation of the FPY initiative so far. Secondly, to understanding the impact of the new policy for those working with children between 0-6 years of age in the Irish ECEC sector.

In order to fulfil the key objectives of the research I will conduct semi-structured interviews with policy makers. I would like to ask if you would be interested in taking part in my research and participate in semi-structured interviews. All information gained in the interviews would remain confidential and your name anonymous.

I hope that you find the above research topic of interest and will be interested in working with me on it. Please feel free to contact me, should you require any further information.

Many thanks for taking time to read this and I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely.

Martina Ozonyia   mhirschmannova@yahoo.com
0863527392

Appendix five

Guide for semi-structured interviews with policymakers

Participant background information

- What was your position during the introduction of FPY?

- Did you a have role in the introduction of FPY and if yes, what was your role?

The introduction of Free Preschool Year (FPY) initiative

- Can you tell me how did the FPY come about?

- How was the initiative introduced to ECEC sector?

- How was it introduced to parents?

- What was the initial reaction from ECEC sector?

- What was the initial reaction from parents?

- What was the overall intake in the first year?

- What were the key challenges in implementing the FPY?

- Were there any challenges for ECEC services to comply with qualification requirements?

- How was quality of ECEC services ensured and monitored under the FPY?

Concluding question

- Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix six

Question guide for semi-structured interviews

Questions guidelines

1. Can you tell me how long have you been working in the sector?

2. What is your qualification background?

3. How did you first hear about the FPY initiative?

4. When you first heard about the FPY what were your first impressions?

5. What were your first impressions on the related qualification requirements?

6. In what way is your daily practice different because of your settings involvements in the FPY?

7. Has this initiative impacted on the quality of the service?

8. Have you experienced any challenges due to your settings' involvement in this initiative and its related qualification requirements?

9. Do you think that the changes in qualification requirements enhance professional development of early childhood educators?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to mention, that we have not yet talked about?

Appendix seven

National Qualification Framework (NQF)
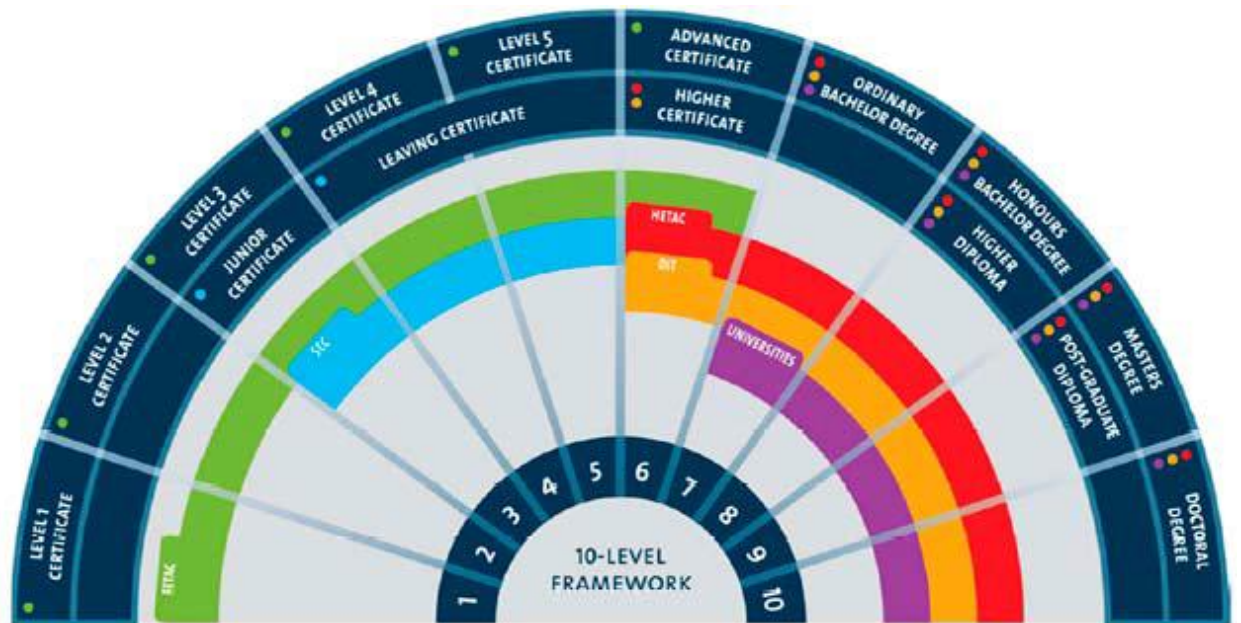
Accessed from National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/provider.html