

“A study examining Parents’ Perspectives of
the Free Pre-School Year”.

By

Ciara Brady

At

Institute of Technology, Sligo

Supervised by

Dr Jacqueline O’Toole

Submitted to the Institute of Technology, Sligo for the

Award of Masters of Arts

August 2017

Declaration

This thesis being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts. This is my own work except where otherwise stated and acknowledged by references.

Candidate: _____

Date: _____

Supervisor: _____

Date: _____

“A study examining Parents’ perspectives of the Free Pre-School Year”

Submitted by
Ciara Brady

Abstract

Over the last few years, Ireland has put measures in place to support educational opportunities for all members of society including children through the provision of early educational opportunities. This has led to the free preschool year or early childhood care and education (ECCE) scheme. While participation in the scheme is voluntary, Pobal (2016:1) state that in the 2015/2016 programme there were 73,964 children participating at a cost of €178m. With the scheme recently extended to a two year term, this study raises the question of parents’ perceptions of the free preschool year. Specifically, this research is targeted at parents of preschool children in order to show how the scheme is utilised.

The guiding hypothesis sets the contextual framework in which the research was conducted. In this study, the two main hypothesis focused on the fact that parents are guided by family circumstances and also, paid or free, they value preschool. Data was collected using surveys and interviews. The data was analysed through SPSS and thematic analysis. Data analysis revealed that when asked, 85.7% of parents would pay for the preschool scheme if it was not free. Also, 88.2% of parents felt that both aspects of care and education combined was vital for preschool children. Parents also felt that the free preschool year was an extension of support to the family and held many benefits for the child such as preparing them for school and developing social interaction. In conclusion, this research sheds new light on parent’s perspectives on the scheme as research is limited in this area to date.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have supported me on this journey. To all the parents who participated in this research, thank you for your time in making this study possible.

Sincere thanks must go to Dr John Bartlett and all staff at the Department of Research/Social Science, Institute of Technology Sligo, for allowing me the opportunity to complete my studies. A special thanks to Mary McLoughlin and Padraig McGourty for their help and support.

Particular thanks to my supervisor, Dr Jacqueline O'Toole, for your continuous commitment, guidance, advice, expertise and friendship. Your help is *much* appreciated.

Thanks must also go to Sorcha Ni Dhonnacha, Vanessa Griffin-Heslin and everyone at Longford College of Further Education and Templemichael College, Longford who helped me in more ways that you realise.

Lastly, I would like to express my love and thanks to my other half, Jamie, parents, Brian and Mary, family (Elaine, Eugene and Enda) and my many friends for their continued patience, support and understanding through my many years of college. Thank you for everything.

Table of Contents

DECLARATION.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	V
LIST OF TABLES	VII
LIST OF FIGURES	VIII
CHAPTER 1.....	1
AN OVERVIEW	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION.....	1
1.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS	2
CHAPTER 2.....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
2.1 INTRODUCTION	4
2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION.....	5
2.3 HISTORY OF THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR IN IRELAND	7
2.4 THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR.....	10
2.5 THE IMPACT OF THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR.....	12
2.6 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT.....	13
2.7 BENEFITS TO THE CHILD AND FAMILY.....	19
2.8 ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR SOCIETY	21
2.9 PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON PRESCHOOL.....	22
2.10 CONCLUSION	27
CHAPTER 3.....	30
METHODOLOGY.....	30
3.1 INTRODUCTION	30
3.2 AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTION.....	30
3.3 GUIDING HYPOTHESES.....	31
3.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	31
3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN	32

3.6 SAMPLING STRATEGY	35
3.7 DATA COLLECTION	40
3.8 QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY.....	40
3.8.1 <i>Survey Questionnaires</i>	41
3.9 QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY	42
3.9.1 <i>Qualitative Research; Semi Structured Interviews</i>	43
3.10 PILOT STUDY.....	44
3.11 DATA ANALYSIS.....	45
3.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	47
3.13 CONCLUSION	47
CHAPTER 4.....	49
PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS	49
4.1 INTRODUCTION	49
4.2 PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS	49
4.2.1 <i>Demographic profile</i>	49
4.2.2 <i>Setting Location</i>	51
4.2.3 <i>Age Profile</i>	52
4.2.4 <i>Education Level</i>	53
4.2.5 <i>Employment</i>	53
4.2.6 <i>Community or Private Setting</i>	55
4.2.7 <i>Nationality</i>	57
4.2.8 <i>Previously Funded Preschool</i>	57
4.3 PURPOSE OF THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR.....	59
4.4 BENEFITS OF THE ECCE SCHEME	61
4.4.1 <i>Benefits for Children</i>	61
4.4.2 <i>Preschool Interactions</i>	61
4.4.3 <i>School Readiness</i>	62
4.5 BENEFITS OF THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR FOR PARENTS.....	64
4.6 PRESCHOOL SELECTION PROCESS	67
4.6.1 <i>Quality Services</i>	67
4.6.2 <i>Reasons for Selecting the Service</i>	67
4.7 COST IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS.	71
4.8 ROLE OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT	74
4.9 CONCLUSION	76
CHAPTER 5.....	77
DISCUSSION.....	77

5.1 INTRODUCTION	77
5.2 PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS	78
5.3 PURPOSE OF THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR.....	79
5.4 BENEFITS OF THE FREE PRESCHOOL YEAR.....	81
5.4.1 <i>Benefits for Children</i>	81
5.4.2 <i>Benefits for Parents</i>	83
5.5 PRESCHOOL SELECTION PROCESS	84
5.6 COST AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT.....	86
5.7 CONCLUSION	89
CHAPTER 6.....	90
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	90
6.1 INTRODUCTION	90
6.2 RESEARCH QUESTION	90
6.3 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS.....	90
6.4 FINAL THOUGHTS	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY	94
APPENDIX A-QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS.....	108
APPENDIX B-PILOT STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE	113
APPENDIX C-INFORMATION LETTER FOR PARENTS.....	118
APPENDIX D-INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM	119
APPENDIX E-INFORMATION LETTER FOR GATEKEEPER (PROVIDER).....	120
APPENDIX F CODING GUIDE FOR QUANTITATIVE DATA	121
APPENDIX G-QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS	126

List of Tables

Table 2.1: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory	16
Table 3.1 Target Population-Breakdown of Settings per County	37
Table 3.2 Demographic Information of interview participants	39
Table 3.3 Emerging themes from quantitative influencing interview questions.	44
Table 4.1 Frequencies in which the Counties were represented.	50
Table 4.2 Community/Private Setting Per County	56

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Summary of Key Developments	8
Figure 3.1 Data Analysis.....	34
Figure 3.2 Sampling Strategy Process	35
Figure 3.3 Summary of Sample Selection	36
Figure 3.4 Methods of Collecting Data.....	40
Figure 3.5 Data analysis process	45
Figure 4.1 County Profile	50
Figure 4.2 Urban/Rural Location.....	51
Figure 4.3 Urban/Rural and County	52
Figure 4.4 Gender	52
Figure 4.5 Age Profile	53
Figure 4.6 Educational Achievements	53
Figure 4.7 Currently Employed	54
Figure 4.8 Full/Part time Employment.....	54
Figure 4.9 Other means of Care (Full/Part Time Employment).....	55
Figure 4.10 Community or Private setting.....	56
Figure 4.11 Nationality.....	57
Figure 4.12 Have you previously funded preschool for older children?	58
Figure 4.13 Previously Funded Preschool Compared to Family Income ..	58
Figure 4.14 The Role of the Scheme.....	59
Figure 4.15 Parents Education Status and Role of the ECCE Scheme	60
Figure 4.16 Benefits Regarding Childcare Needs.....	65
Figure 4.17 Additional Care Arrangements.....	66
Figure 4.18 Factors that Influenced Choice of Setting.....	68
Figure 4.19 Are you Aware of a Pedagogical Approach in the Setting	69
Figure 4.20 Accessing Information	70
Figure 4.21 Source of Information	70
Figure 4.22 Implications of Cost	71
Figure 4.23 Reflection on Household Income and Cost of Preschool.....	72
Figure 4.24 Parents Education Attainment\Preschool choice	73
Figure 4.25 Reflection on Government Support	74
Figure 4.26 Preference taking into Account Household Income	75
Figure 6.1 Summary of Key Findings.....	91

Abbreviations

CACHE Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education

CECDE Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

CSO Central Statistics Office

DCYA Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DoHC Department of Health and Children

EC European Commission

ECCE Early Childhood Care and Education

ECI Early childhood Ireland

EU European Union

FETAC Further Education and Training Award

HETAC Higher Education and Training Award

HSE Health Service Executive

NCCA National Council for Curriculum & Assessment

NHS National Health Service

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

OMCYA Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

QQI Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

ZPD Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1

An Overview

1.1 Introduction

Research in Ireland and internationally is increasingly pointing to the returns that can accrue from investing in the early years – from supporting children’s early cognitive, social and emotional development, to enhancing school readiness and to generating longer term returns to the State and society (DCYA,2104)

Early education can be a life changing experience for children. Whilst figures are high in relation to the uptake of the ECCE scheme also known as or free preschool year, there is limited research into what parent’s perspectives are of the initiative. This research aims to address this as its principal focus is on parents’ perspectives of the free preschool year. The free preschool year is a universal preschool initiative introduced in 2010 and recently extended to run over a two year term. In this study, the scheme will be referred to as the free preschool year. Parents involved in this study had direct experience with the free preschool year implemented in both community and privately funded preschool services. The childcare sector has seen many changes over the last few year with an update in legislation, policy and regulations influencing the childcare sector. This will be explored in detail in the next chapter when milestones in the developing childcare sector can be identified.

This research was funded by the IT Sligo President Bursary Award. It grew out of an Irish government initiative to take a positive step in early education by introducing the free preschool year. This commitment has grown and recently the scheme was extended for a second year. Research in this area is limited therefore it is timely that research in this area is carried out to explore parent’s perspectives.

1.2 Personal motivation

Over the last number of years, I have studied Early Childhood Care and Education in great detail. I completed a total of 3 years full time study in Cavan College of Further Studies, where I was awarded the FETAC/QQI Level 5 and CACHE Diploma in Childhood Care and Education. In order to

complete both these courses I underwent a range of work placements in the local area in a range of early years services.

After another 3 years in college, in 2010, I graduated with a 2.1 B.A Honours Degree in Childhood Care and Education from IT Sligo. After previously completing work placements locally, I was interested in childcare on an international level. With the help of my lecturers, I organised and secured work placement for 4 months in Antwerp, Belgium in a community based preschool which was state subsidised. To me, this placement proved valuable, as the experience with working with children and parents from different cultures, the Dutch language and professionals in many different areas gave me a great insight to childcare in Europe. On returning to Ireland, I worked in the early year's sector for 3 years where I had the opportunity to gain hands on experience with the free preschool year. Currently, I am a childcare tutor with Longford/Westmeath ETB and my passion for knowledge in this sector has continued to grow. Comparing my experience in Ireland and Belgium regarding state subsidised childcare, my interests turned to parents' perspectives which is the principal focus in this research.

1.3 Outline of Chapters

The free preschool year or ECCE scheme was introduced in 2010 and to date has a high participation rate amongst children across Ireland. The government has recently extended its provision to extend over a two years period for the eligible child.

The purpose of this research is to investigate parent's perceptions of the ECCE scheme. It is a highly recognised stage of a child's life but little is known about the parent's views on the scheme. The following chapter, Chapter 2, Literature Review, will review current literature in this area both nationally and internationally. Historical changes witnessed by the childcare sector, policies, regulations and legislation introduced will be explored in order to gain an overall picture of the emerging sector. It will set the foundation in which this research will build upon and gather key

findings which may impact the study. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology used to investigate parent's perspectives and includes information on how the sample size was selected, research methods implemented and how they were analysis. In chapter 4, the presentations of findings are collated under sub headings where similarities and differences can be easily identified. The findings are presented using both quantitative and qualitative research methods and then analysed using the mixed method approach. Chapter 5 will analyse the data. In doing so, an in-depth examination of parents' perspectives is explored. Chapter 6 will sum up the main findings emerging from this investigation and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Early childhood education and care has been slow to gain recognition in Ireland as a key educational provision for young children that is critical to their early learning, health and wellbeing (Hayes, 2013:16). This chapter aims to investigate literature under key themes in terms of education and care in the preschool. The themes explored in this chapter include a brief overview of the sector, theoretical perspectives on child development, funding, the ECCE scheme and its impact. After this, the long term benefits, economic benefits and literature on parents' perspectives on preschool the scheme will also be examined. The overall aim of this chapter is to explore how parents use the preschool services with an emphasis on whether or not it is perceived as an educational opportunity, childcare opportunity or both. Although the research in Ireland is limited to date, international research lends weight to this review.

Early childhood care and education is a provision in a child's life before they start formal education or primary school. It is more commonly known as preschool. In Ireland, it is formulated by two main frameworks; Síolta, which focuses on quality standards and Aistear, the National Curriculum for children aged 0-6 years.

Aistear, the national Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, was reported as being implemented by 81% of all early years services, with the Síolta standards used in over two thirds (68%) of services nationally (Pobal 2016:34).

While curriculum frameworks and quality standards all play a vital role in preschool, the social integration that children benefit from the child attending preschool cannot be underestimated. In preschool, the child may be given the opportunity to learn how to effectively communicate and become aware of social values and norms. Salmon (2008:457) states that the social environment plays an important role in nurturing a culture of thinking in children as they construct their understanding about the world. In Ireland services implementing the free preschool both private or

community managed, are obliged to implement the preschool curriculum Aistear and quality standards Síolta which can be used with any pedagogical approach for example Montessori, High scope and Steiner. Arguably, the two frameworks complement each other and work to ensure the holistic development of each individual child. The child's interests, strengths, culture needs and learning styles are placed at the centre of planning for his/her learning and development (French, 2007:12). Historically, the development of ECCE in Ireland has been very piecemeal, largely responding to the needs of parent's employment patterns rather than focusing on children's needs (Barnodos 2010). The preschool and childcare services have stretched rapidly over the last few decades becoming a diverse mixed market. As Pobal (2016:1) explain:

The number of children who availed of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) free preschool year in the 2015/2016 programme period¹ was 73,964, at a cost of €178m. This represents an almost 13% increase in the number of registrations on ECCE between the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 academic years and an increase in cost of 28% (up from €139m).

Over the last few years the area of preschool education has expanded due to the increase in demand stemming directly from the free preschool year. This is an initiative that the Irish government are committed to providing substantial funding for this initiative. *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures- The National Policy Framework for Children and Young people 2014-2020* recognised that the investment in children is in our collective social and economic interest:

Our vision is to make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled. Where their voices are heard and where they are supposed to realise their maximum potential now and in the future (DCYA, 2014:3).

2.2 An Overview of Early Childhood Care and Education.

There are many terms that can describe early childhood care and education. These include preschool, pre-primary or childcare. In Ireland, the sector is officially known by the term "Early Childhood Care and

Education” (Mc Keown et al. 2015:3). Developing this further, the universal preschool initiative introduced in 2010 and recently extended to two years, is formally known as the ECCE scheme or more commonly the Free Preschool year. In this study it will be referred to as the free preschool year. As mentioned earlier, data collected in 2016 by Pobal suggest that 73,964 are enrolled at a cost of €178m. It is estimated 127,000 children will benefit from free preschool in a given year (Early Childhood Ireland Budget Briefing, Oct 2015). These figures would suggest that the introduction of the scheme has been generally welcomed as the participation rate is high. The free year in Ireland is implemented for three hours over five days a week for 38 weeks per year. The participating child can enrol at three points throughout the year –September, January and April. Depending on the date of birth of the child, he/she must be between three years old and can remain in the scheme until they reach primary school before the age of five years six months. The setting receives a capital grant per child, restored to €64.50 per week, while those who meet the requirements for the higher capitation, obtaining a level 7 degree or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) will receive €75 euro per week per child from the government (Early Childhood Ireland, Budget Briefing Oct 2015).

The scheme has encouraged families to use preschool services. Kayili (2011:2104) emphasises the influence that preschool may have on a child before they start formal education, where he concludes education in this period affects the life of child in the future. This leads us to believe that pre-school in the early years can affect future educational outcomes. In the past, Hayes (2013:4) states that there was minimum attention to or support for the development of an early year’s sector. Also, in terms of preschool, there was limited support from the Irish government to aid families. The introduction of the universal free preschool year highlights the benefits for children in terms of education. All families can afford the opportunity for their child to attend the scheme.

2.3 History of the Early Years Sector in Ireland

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant and sustained period of investment in the provision of early childhood care and education services for children (OECD 2011:15). According to Fuller and Liang (1996:31), one of the reasons for this may stem from women's rising workforce participation. Previously, employment status and wages for women resulted in many staying in the home to rear the children instead of joining the workforce. The 'marriage bar' introduced in the 1930s stated that women in public services jobs had to terminate employment after they got married. This was completely lifted in 1973 (Flood and Hardy, 2013:3). From the 1990s onwards the demand for childcare increased as employment soared. Hayes (2013:4) explains:

In response to the increasing demands for provision arising from changing family structures and work patterns, there has been unprecedented investment in the expansion of places and the infrastructure to manage such developments.

Ireland has seen many changes to the family structure in modern society. According to McDonald (2009:89), the traditional functions of the family have been transferred to other social institutions for example crèches, nurseries and preschools. Using these services has become socially acceptable and the norm for a number of families.

A paper from Barnardo in August 2010, states the developments of ECCE in Ireland has been very piecemeal, largely responding to the needs of parent's employment patterns rather than focusing on children's needs (Barnardos 2010). This is a view also maintained by Greenberg (2011:1049) concluding that the percentage of children in early childhood education and care programmes has risen steadily over the past decades.

As the demand for childcare and education increased, policies, regulations and legislation were also introduced in this area. The following is a summary of some of the key developments which have accorded over the years in relation to the childcare sector.

Figure 2.1: Summary of Key Developments

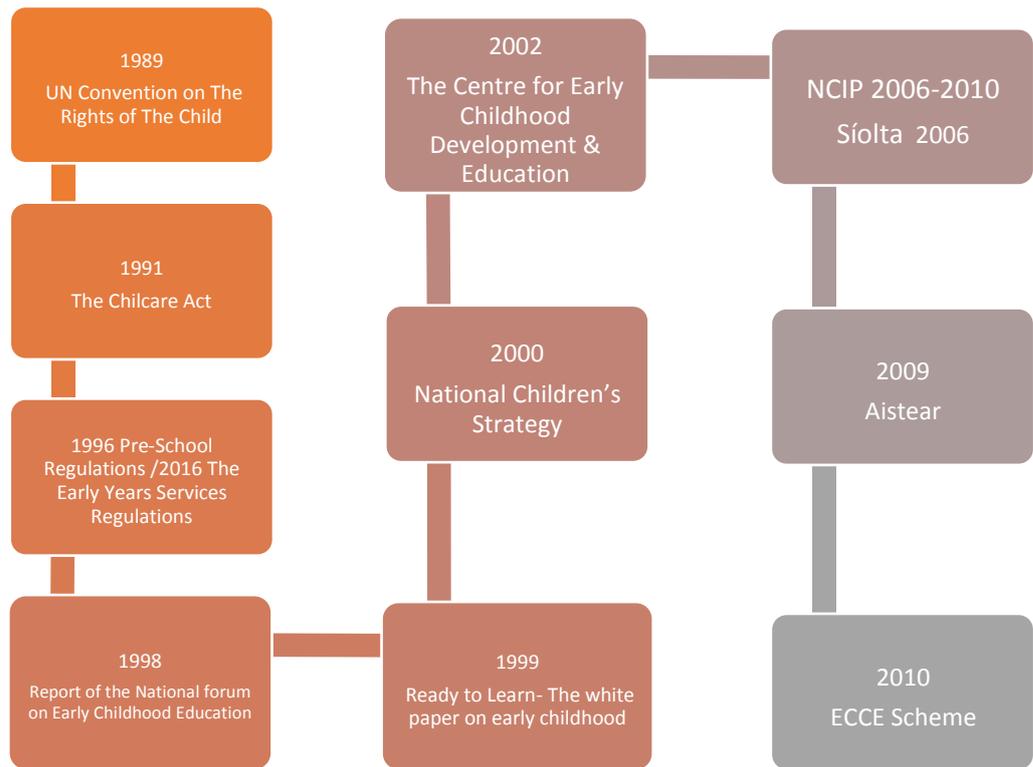


Figure 2.1 highlights developments in legislation and policies. The development of these was driven by childcare requirements rather than early education and tended to focus primarily on the provision of spaces for children whilst their parents worked (Bradley and Hayes 2009). Ratified in 1992 in Ireland, the 1989 UN Convention on The Rights of The Child, focuses on recognising and supporting children’s rights. According to a publication titled “*Research Digest*” published by the CECDE (2006:2), Articles 3 and 12 have particular relevance for early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision: Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children, and Article 12 outlines how the child’s views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting her/him (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). This then cleared the way for the Childcare Act 1991. This in turn led the way for the implementation of the Pre-School Regulations 1996, recently updated in 2016 to the *Early Years Services Regulations*. The childcare sector was becoming distinguishable as more legislation and policies followed on to include *Strengthen Families for Life 1996*, *Report to the National Forum on Early Childhood Education*

1998 and *The Ready to Learn – The White Paper on Early Childhood Education 1999*” (Donohoe and Gaynor 2011:11).

2006 was a significant year for the early year’s sector. *The Diversity and Equality Guidelines* were launched, *National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010* provided grants of approximately 185 million euro creating about 25,000 childcare places (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor 2012:76). Ireland’s first quality framework *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Education* was published by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education CECDE (Hayes 2010:216). This document sets 16 standards in relation to quality across the early year’s sector. For example, Síolta - Standard 1 focuses on the Rights of the Child. It specifically states that ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning (CECDE 2006:13).

The National Council Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) published *Aistear- The Curriculum Framework* (Hayes 2013:59) was the first national framework for the early year’s services catering for children from birth to six years. Hayes (2013:3/4) suggests that children are influenced by policies that support and assist families in raising children. Theoretical frameworks in terms of child development is also an important factor here as it is closely linked and will be explored later in the chapter. The idea of merging quality care, child development and education began to take prominence. Menchini (2010:12) noted that care and education should be conceived as running parallel with each other. In 2010, the Irish government introduced the Free Preschool Year for children aged between three and four years (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor 2012:75). Details of the scheme will be explored in the next section.

2.4 The Free Preschool Year

The announcement of the free preschool year was a welcome initiative. It was a new phase of development to strengthen Ireland's early childhood care and education sector. According to Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor (2012:295) in a time of recession, the free preschool year represented a positive step forward recognising the benefits of early education for young children. Up to this point, most parents paid for preschool privately. Some parents may have paid for the service in conjunction with various schemes if eligible. With the introduction of the free preschool year, funding was allocated directly to the service provider in a sum of money known as a capitation fee depending on staff qualifications. This meant that there was no financial barrier for parents to enrol the child in preschool services which in turn brought equality in terms of preschool opportunity for all children. Thus:

This was a surprising change in policy direction in that it is a universal provision and funding is given directly to the providers. Before this policy tended to be targeted and funds allocated to parents through schemes such as the Child Benefit and the Early years Supplement, which was reduced following the announcement of the scheme (Hayes, 2010:18).

Funding originally available to parents such as the Child Benefit and Early Years supplement were reduced. The early childcare supplement (ESC) was introduced in 2006 as a universal non-means tested benefit. According to Citizen's Information (2009), funding under this scheme was halved prior to the introduction of the scheme. Child benefit was also reduced by €16 per month which is approx. €3.69 per week (Citizens Information 2010). In general, it resulted in a reduction of the total amount paid to parents of children under 5 years (DCYA 2009).

The free preschool year was made available for all children irrespective of their background. It was rolled out and implemented in 2010 and allows privately or community based services to implement the initiative. The scheme is operated on a local level and parents are required to seek a placement for their child. In total, it caters for children aged 3 years until the child reaches no more than five years six months with a view to starting school before six years of age (DCYA 2017:12). Research from

other European Union countries implement a similar scheme over a two year process. Thus:

In Europe, the concept of universal access of 3-6 year olds is generally accepted. Most countries in this region provide all children with at least two years of free, publicly-funded provision before they begin primary provision (Spotlight 2012:10).

As mentioned above, the ECCE scheme is an initiative available for all children within a certain age bracket. Universal approaches have the advantages of ensuring nearly all children get the same standard of service, however some children may require more resources and attention (Spotlight 2012:8). This indicates that the government may generalise decision, and they do not necessarily represent the needs of each individual family. For instance, the scheme may not take the needs of all children and families into account. Also, the needs of every child may not be satisfied by the scheme alone and may need additional help. According to Paull (2014:22):

Government decisions...are unlikely to be finely tuned to individual family needs and maybe poorer choices for some or many families.

There is some evidence that suggest long hours in childcare can increase acting out problems-behaviour (aggression and disobedience) in children aged 3 to 5 as well as younger children (OECD 2000:114 cited in Spotlight 2012:6). A study carried out by Pianta et al (2009:58) found that if parents enrol children with higher levels of behaviour problems in childcare centres rather than keep them at home or with relatives, the centres would appear to have negative effects when in fact this may not be the case. While there is evidence that suggests children in childcare may display more unwanted or negative conduct it is important to keep in mind that many factors influence children's behaviours.

A significant advantage of the preschool year available is that it is financially free for parents to avail of. Most OECD and many middle income countries have turned to universal pre-primary education in order to give children a better start to their schooling life (Berlinski et al. 2008:219). There is no additional cost for parents to send their children as it is government funded but they will need to consider all aspects such as

transport to and from the service and their child's lunch. Paull (2014:26) concluded that the use of the free entitlement may discourage work because of the complications of needing extra hours of care or the reduced need for income to pay for the childcare. It may be difficult for parents to find childcare but the financial burden may also be an issue. Preschool is only available for a certain number of hours daily therefore after the scheme ends, parents may be under pressure to seek or extended care to concur with their employment pattern. Further studies by Raty (cited in Barnett 2008:8) take a different perspective:

Children might benefit from long-term increases in family income due to increases in maternal employment, though work could lead mothers to reduce time with their young children, perhaps partially offsetting income benefits.

Research shows that family life is clearly the major influence on young children (Spotlight 2012:2). If children are spending time outside the family home in childcare facilities it is important to take note of the consequence of this. Such an examination by Barnett (2008:68) concludes that there is some evidence that negative effects increase with the numbers of years in childcare. It could be argued that the changing culture of the family and cultural capital may also be in jeopardy as values along with family traditions may be lost in the absence of the parents. Preschools transmit a cultural system with a particular hierarchy of values and standards of behaviour and these may not coincide with those that their parent's desire (Bedmar and Palma, 2011:2273). The impact of the ECCE scheme will be explored in the next section.

2.5 The impact of the Free Preschool Year

This section will highlight the impact the scheme has on the child. One of the main benefits prominent from the ECCE scheme is that the child is school ready-allowing children to have a "head start" before entering into the school system. Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor (2012:295) state that the free preschool year represents a positive step forward. An important objective of pre-school education is that it prepares the child for the transition from preschool to primary school. This is acknowledged by Guler (2001) who believes that readiness for primary education means that the

child is ready to meet physical, mental and social requirements of primary education (cited in Kayili 2011:2104) . Preschool can soften the transition of this move and the child can develop a sense of independence in a safe and secure environment. Ball (1992) and Maguzzi (1993) state children who are encouraged to think for themselves are more likely to act independently (cited in French 2007:46). As the preschool environment encourages children to do as much as they can for themselves, it is vital the child's independence is encouraged to build of confidence and self-esteem during their preschool era. Studies reflect significant effects of preschool education such as improving communication, skills, confidence level and awareness of surroundings (Hussain and Sultan, 2010:625). The development of these skills will lend support to the child in the transition from preschool to primary school. Aspects of child development must also be acknowledged and this will be explored in the following section.

2.6 Theoretical perspectives on Children's development

Children grow and develop within society and that they are therefore impacted by many factors-some more directly than others. The direct influences are those located close to children's experiences; the home, and the variety of early year's settings they may attend at different times. Recognising this is one thing, but understanding how it actually influences child development and what implications it has for early childhood practice is more difficult (Hayes, 2013:17).

There are many theories available that examine how children learn. Learning at any age or stage of life is generally considered to be a complex process not easily explained by a single theory or perspective (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor, 2012; 203). According to Dunphy (2008:14) ecological and socio-cultural theories of learning have largely dominated explanations of development and learning in early childhood in recent years. French (2007:5) states that:

Socio cultural theories are a family of theories that have arisen from the work of Vygotsky and which have in common their emphasis on the role that social and cultural factors play in children's development.

Understandably, one thesis cannot fully explore each theoretical perspective in detail. In this thesis, my perspective on how children learn is informed by the influential work of Vygotsky, Rogoff and Bronfenbrenner.

These theorists emphasised the social aspects of children's learning and development. In preschool, children interact with adults and predominantly children who are usually of the same age group. Therefore, the theorist's views of these social context of these interactions must be acknowledged.

Vygotsky's theory of learning has been highly influential in helping to explain the process of learning in early childhood (French 2007:16). His work focused on the social aspects with regard to learning and development. His main theory was underpinned by how the adult can support the child to expand their knowledge, therefore gradually constructing a new skill. When the child has mastered the skill, the indication is to then withdraw adult support once the child has mastered the desired skill. He called this the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Winsler et al (1997:60) state that it can be described as a zone of interpersonal function in which children collaborate on tasks with more expert members of their culture. Taylor (2015:162) shares this view and states that it is an awareness of what children can do without help and what they can do with the support of someone who is more experienced and knowledgeable. However, according to Berk (2005:25) Vygotsky placed less emphasis on children's ability to influence the form of their own development. It may appear that the role of the adult centred on overlooking the learning process.

Rogoff also researched this area building on the foundations of Vygotsky's theory. Rogoff's theory highlights human behaviour in various social groups depending on the specific contexts the child may be placed in.

Rogoff building on the work of Vygotsky emphasised the social nature of cognitive development, from a socio cultural perspective then the ways in which children operate in social contents is clearly important for their learning and development (French 2007: 24).

Children may have many influences in their lives which can impact their experiences. McDonald (2009:14) states that for the first few years of life, children are totally dependent on their parents. Parents are believed to be the primary educators but beyond this other aspects may also be influential. With child development, children improve not only in their ability to solve problems but also in their ability to structure their own

environment, to relate new challenges for themselves and to regulate their own learning (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1994 cited in Winsler et al.1997:60). Yamamoto and Lin (2011:306) state that:

Parental views of preschool are a complex area of research because they are subject to the influence of parent's cultural backgrounds, access to socioeconomic resources and specific contexts in which parents engage their children in schooling.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) worked as a developmental psychologist who is acknowledged for his work regarding the ecological system theory of child development. Hayes et al (2017:3) suggests that Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner are not in opposition, but rather highlights their differencing emphases. Bronfenbrenner's theory mainly focused on the development and the experiences of the child in their social environment as he felt that limited attention was paid to environmental influences on human development. His concept allowed these two aspects to be interlinked depending on the social experiences of the child. Table 2.1 is an illustration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner looks at interactions children experience and in turn the impact these may have on their development, stating that such interactions:

Range from the microsystem, which refers to the relationship between a developing person and the immediate environment, such as school and family to the macrosystem, which refers to institutional patterns of culture such as the economy, customs and bodies of knowledge (Bronfenbrenner 1994:37).

According to Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor (2012:22) Bronfenbrenner's theory is not concerned with development per se, but with the context in which individual differences in child development emerge.

Table 2.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological System	Definitions	Example
Microsystem	Part of the environment that young children are directly in contact with	Children's relationship with mother, father, siblings, grandparents, peers and early year's professionals.
Mesosystem	Links between microsystems	Parent's relationship with early years professionals; early years professionals' links to home, school and community groups
Exosystems	Systems in which young children do not directly participate, but which nevertheless exert an indirect influence on their development	Mothers or fathers work conditions; Síolta and Aistear framework; Regulations, policies and law.
Macrosystems	Overarching structures of the particular culture that influence young children's development	Parental belief systems, customs and lifestyles

Source: Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998 (cited in Hayes 2013:18).

Applying Bronfenbrenner ecological system to the early years, the microsystem refers to children's bonds with those closest forming primary relationships. These relationships may change during the mesosystem, as children may be influenced by outside influences such as preschool. According to Hayes (2017:7) in early education, this would include the relationship between family members and early year's practitioners.

The macrosystem can dominate the child's experiences and influences as this stems from the distinct factors such as family customs, culture and lifestyle. Although not mentioned in Table 2.1, following these stages was the chronosystem. Hayes (2017:7) states:

This takes account of time from the individual perspectives but also takes into account historical time; it is of relevance to early years practitioners when, for instance, considering issues of transitions.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory allows us to view the dynamics of relationships or social systems in which children find themselves. An understanding of interactions across the systems are

important to recognise in terms of influences on child development. Darling (2007:204) states that Ecological systems theory is seen as interrelated and our knowledge of development is bounded by context, culture, and history.

Vander Ven uses the framework to identify the skills required at each level of practice. For example, at the microsystem level, which is the child's most immediate environment, practitioners need to be highly skilled in direct caregiving (Vander Ven, 2006:244). However, while Bronfenbrenner's theory is widely identifiable, Darling 2017:204 states that:

Different environments will have different affordances and will be responded to in different ways by different individuals, experienced and objectively defined environments will not be randomly distributed with regard to the developmental processes.

While Bronfenbrenner's theory is based on different theories of interactions regarding the child, I argue that this is a holistic view to the child's circumstances rather than focusing on the individual child. Also, the system may prove hard to implement as how do you know if too much at a particular stage is too much or not enough? Lerner 2005 cited in (Derksen 2010:330) also felt Bronfenbrenner's concept was "too far out of context" stating that his original ecological framework and science at the time, did not adequately examine the development of the individual.

Bronfenbrenner himself questioned his findings in subsequent years and Lerner (2005) points out that Bronfenbrenner recognized his theory would be incomplete until he included in it the levels of individual structure and function (Derksen, 2010:331). In 1979's, Bronfenbrenner integrated his previous findings with this new information and created the Bioecological Model of Human Development. This model:

Emphasizes the evolving nature of the bioecological paradigm for the study of human development and within this newly formulated model defines development as "the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings both as individuals and groups" (Derksen, 2010:331).

This new system acknowledges the individual child, their unique develop over time as well as the social experiences and circumstance.

Bronfenbrenner also welcomed the introduction of professionals observing children in more natural circumstances as he was uncomfortable observing children in abnormal places like a laboratory setting. Brendtro (2006:163) states that before Bronfenbrenner, psychologists, sociologists, educators, anthropologists, and other specialists all studied narrow aspects of the child's world. Although Bronfenbrenner is often credited as the creator of this perspective, he acknowledges the influence of many theorists such as Kurt Lewin, Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, and others suggesting the significance of his contribution is the manner in which he conceptualized these ideas in a systemic form (Derksen, 2010:329). Child development theory draws on knowledge from many disciplines, efforts were made to take account of literature only specific to Rogoff, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner whilst acknowledging there are many more influential theorist in this sector.

While the free preschool is a supported initiative and has seen an increase in participation, it appears that formal education in preschool should not be the sole concern for preschool children. Indeed, Chard and Katz (1994) consider that introducing formal academic or direct instruction in the early years may jeopardise the development of desirable dispositions (cited in Hayes 2013:52).

When the child enters pre-school, the support of the family is reduced and the child develops as an individual in society. Brennan (1998) explains this, stating that preschool can encourage independence and sociability amongst young children (cited in Ball and Vincent 2001:636). Children begin to assess and conduct themselves in different social situations that they might find themselves in. They must adhere to boundaries outside of their comfort zone and mix with children from different backgrounds. Children coming from preschool may have more inclination to learn and interact with their peers and this has been confirmed by research affirming that children who attended preschool had more readiness for school/committee to school and were socially and intellectually

conscientious (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor 2012). The next section explores the benefits of preschool in relation to the child and family.

2.7 Benefits to the child and family

Ireland cannot afford to leave anyone behind in the drive to improve the skills and competencies...required to service a smart economy. This effort starts with pre-school education, which has been demonstrated as a very effective intervention with proven and social benefit (Building Irelands Smart Economy, 2008).

Pre-school can be a critical period in a child's life. As they are still young entering pre-school, the main focus of preschool in terms of care or education must be discussed. Also, all children and young people in Ireland have the right to education. This is underpinned by the Education Act 1998, which places an obligation on the state to ensure that the educational needs of everyone is met (Children's Rights 2017). This is explained within the Irish context as research concluded that early childhood education and care is an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability (CECDE, 2003:5). If positive learning experiences are encountered in preschool, the child may be more encouraged to remain in education and achieve more from a stimulated environment, interactions and professional role models (French, 2007). Developing this further, it was noted that experiences at this early stage should be enjoyable as to encourage children to attend and develop a love for learning (CECDE, 2003:3). Barnett agrees with this point and states that the influence of preschool education is significant at this stage as increased duration of preschool education is associated with higher achievement (Barnett, 2008:14).

There is evidence that suggests once a child falls behind they are likely to remain behind and so, to some extent, the basis for future learning and social and emotional development is set before children start school (Spotlight 2012:3). The free preschool year aims to address this as every child, regardless of family circumstances, will have the opportunity to avail of the scheme. According to Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor (2012:76), the free preschool year is a step in the right direction when it comes to promoting

social justice in the context of developing the capabilities and positive freedoms of all children. Consequently, children from disadvantaged or deprived backgrounds may stand to achieve more in the long run.

Our diverse backgrounds imply we are far from equal in society. However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds predominantly may achieve better educational achievements by attending preschool. According to McDonald (2009:109) educational attainment is strongly linked to social class. The free preschool year is likely to be of greater benefit to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sylvia et al cited in Paull 2014:29). This puts an obligation on not only the child and their family but a bearing on the state to improve preschool opportunities. A preschool child may reap the advantages of being exposed to social interaction and also a preschool curriculum like Aistear. However, there may also be drawbacks that are associated with the preschool system and beginning early childhood education. Consequently, it can have an effect on academic capabilities and this has been highlighted as one of the main reservations of starting formal education too early. Developing this further, a potential disadvantage that may arise is the effect on a child's reading ability later in life. This is an anxiety emphasised by Katz who argues that learning to read too early can dent children's confidence and put them off for life (Curtis cited in Spotlight 2012:6). Research by Raty (2002) also suggests that parents with negative school experience view their children's school experiences more negatively (Anderson and Minke 2007:320). If school is talked about negatively in the family home, it may have an impact of the perception school for the child. Thus:

Low levels of parental education and economic constraints on family investment in young children...that result in suboptimal investments in young children that can be addressed by public programs (Haveman et al. cited in Barnett and Nores 2009:280).

While education in itself is often considered key, there are other aspects to preschool. It impacts on all aspects of the child's developmental areas. A number of studies reflect this including research from the United States of America in particular the Perry Preschool Project. The Perry Pre-School project was conducted to research two groups, one who attended pre-

school service and the other group did not have the opportunity to do so. The project focused on children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Michigan and who were considered at risk of school failure (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor 2012:128). The results of this longitudinal study which stretched over a forty year period presented interesting findings. Those who attended the preschool had more readiness for school/committee to school and were socially and intellectually conscientious. The findings from this programme highlighted how disadvantaged children may benefit more from preschool as it may lead the child to continue their educational journey to a higher level opportunities (CECDE 2003:9). A longitudinal study conducted in Britain titled “The Effective Provision of Preschool Education” (EPPE) focused on 3,000 children aged 3-7 between 1997 and 2004. It is important to note an objective of this study was to ensure a fair comparison between individual settings and types of provision. When children that attended preschool were compared with children who did not attend were analysed, the findings indicated that:

Children with no preschool experience had poorer cognitive attainment, sociability and concentration when they started primary school (Sure Start 2004:3).

Bronfenbrenner highlighted the importance of government intervention for early childhood programmes. He proposed increased government investment in social programmes offering support to families, such as providing childcare and seen this as an investment for the future Hayes et al (2017:4). As research suggests, there are many aspects of early childhood education that can assist children in terms of academic achievements. Free preschool also holds many economic benefits which will be researched in the following section.

2.8 Economic Benefits for society

Early childhood education and care has emerged as an important economic issue (Spotlight 2012:3). The economic return to early intervention is high. The economic return to later intervention is lower (Heckman 2006). This may indicate that it is better to invest in early years

services for young children as early as possible for them to gain the most from them, rather than when the child is older. In terms of money saving measures, Schweintart et al. (1993) carried out a comprehensive cost benefit analysis of the Highscope programme and found that there is a substantial ground for saving money by investing in ECCE. These calculations were based on the financial cost to society of crime, remedial education, income support and joblessness-set against the cost of an excellent pre-school programme (Sylva 2000:125).

Similarly, early childhood education and care provides a good return on investment-with an Irish estimate putting the return at up to seven euro for every one euro spent (Spotlight 2012:1). According to this statement by spotlight, for every one euro spent on early years services there is a seven euro return on it. Better education-less crime, more jobs-less relying on social welfare payments can all save money for the government. This is a substantial figure in terms of value to society if the opportunities arise at preschool age.

Investing early allows us to shape the future, investing later chains us to fixing the missed opportunities of the past (Heckman, 2011:47).

Families can benefit more if the preschool is in the locality of the family as it is easily accessible. If the family has more access to the preschool it could make the transition from pre-school to primary school more adaptable. Paull states that the need for proximity in childcare provisions i.e. the provider must be located physically close to the family it serves (Paull, 2014:27). Parental perspectives in terms of early childhood education will be explored in the next section.

2.9 Parents' Perspectives on Preschool

The benefits from attending preschool can not only change the life of the child in terms of more opportunities and learning experiences but also those of future generations. Research conducted by Ahiakpor and Swaray (2015:138) revealed that parents may invest in their children's education because they consider it as part of their parental responsibility. Looking at parental responsibilities from another perspective, a study by Foltz and Gajigo (2012 cited in Ahiakpor and Swaray 2015:137), concludes that

education is considered as an investment and parents invest in children's education if the benefits exceed the cost. Commenting on similar study, Yamamoto (2011:306) concluded that parent's personal views about preschool greatly matter since parents make various important decisions related to their children's enrolment in preschool. Similarly, Huntsinger and Jose (2009:398) found that greater parental involvement has found to be related to higher child achievement.

There are many factors that may influence parents when enrolling children in preschool. These factors include the parents own economic security, education level and approach to parenting all having a potentially significant impact (DCYA 2015:92). As the first educators, a parent will have huge influences on their child's experiences in life. Research by the CECDE states that:

Parents are the key people in a child's life, and it is entirely reasonable to recognise that a parent's life experience will have effects on her or his child's experience (CECDE 2003:4).

Reflecting back on Bronfenbrenner's' Ecological system discussed earlier, parents of young children reflect their different traditions in the ways they involve themselves in their child's academic life. A study carried out by Domina (2005) found that parents who are involved in their child's education, send a message to their children that education is important, and these children are more likely to value education themselves (cited in Kao and Turney, 2009:258). Parental involvement at school is certainly important to children's academic progress (Kao and Turney, 2009:269). This may be influenced by the parents own understandings of child development and their own experiences as a child. They may or may not "pass on" their learning culture to the next generation through their children. This can be termed as cultural capital. Cultural capital is defined by Lamont and Lareau (cited in Shih and Yi, 2014:58) as the widely shared, legitimate culture made up of a high status cultural signals used in direct or indirect social and cultural exclusion. Public investment in young children is one of the most cost effective means of increasing a country's human capital (ICPN, 2009:1). Bourdieu, a French sociologist, examined

social aspects of the environment that may impact the child, his theory is known as cultural capital. Culture refers to:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour. (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 3)

Parents have different views on child rearing which may stem back to their own personal experience of being a child. It is seldom that parents share exactly the same views on parenting but often have common ideas.

However, Bourdieu takes this a step further as he relates culture to cultural capital within the field of education, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital (cited in 2004:X). If the parent is educated, they may be more inclined to ensure their child has a good educational status also. However, if they were not afforded education, they may not place any value on it. If parent's education prospects were high throughout their childhood, they may pass the same opportunities to that of their children.

Studies indicate that cultural capital influences individual skills during early childhood (Driessen and Smith cited in Shih and Yi 2014:58). Parents may be influenced by their own rearing experiences and pass these principles on to their children. Bourdieu (cited in Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2004:109) considers the employment occupations of children parents as a guide to their level of success within the school environment. Parents may be more encouraged to ensure their children avail of early opportunities which they may not have had the opportunity to partake in, such as preschool. Another interesting point was highlighted in a study from Hussain and Sultan (2010:628) which focused on the education levels of parents. The study revealed that literacy levels of parents (both mother and father) play a crucial role in the education of their children. In order for this to happen, education provisions must be accessible to meet the individual needs of the child. I argue that this can be achieved with the free preschool scheme. Likewise the OECD maintains the same view by concluding that there is no doubt that many of the barriers to the educational progress of children and young people are caused by issues

outside of the educational system. These barriers can be financial, family and health related, social/communal, cultural and geographic or a combination of any of these (OECD 2011:56). In Ireland, *The Action Plan on School Age Childcare* (2017: 38) released by the DCYA highlighted some key findings in this area. They found that 59% of parents felt they did not need to be away from their child/children or that they would rather look after their child/children at home (over 59%). Another 23% of these parents cited affordability or other cost factors. Lack of suitable quality care or inability to find childcare was cited by almost 3% of respondents. These are aspects that may prevent the parent from using an early years' service.

Society's class structure is reproduced by the educational system (Kim, 2009:82). The free pre-school year is accessible for all eligible children to partake although responsibility for children's care is essentially seen as a private matter for parents to fund and make choices for their children (Paull 2014:14). The free preschool year gives children the prospect of a head start through early education. All children, regardless of social status have the same opportunity. For this reason, the parent can avail of the scheme if they choose to do so. If their child is eligible for the scheme, they might be more inclined to take up a place as otherwise they lose out on the preschool opportunity.

According to the OECD, they want the needs of the learner and a culture of high expectations to be at the centre of all our actions (OECD 2011:56). Start Strong state that those who benefit from quality early care and education may in turn provide a more supportive environment for their own children (Start Strong 2014:2). Aspects of parenting may carry down through generations. Informed choices by parents regarding preschool may encourage the next generation to be aware of its significance. Rodgers 1999 (cited in Hayes and Kernan, 2008:125), argues that while biological endowment gives us the capacity to experience the environment, it is through culture that these capacities are extended. Although it is impossible to determine the value parents place on

preschool, this research shows it could be a variety of factors from the perception of parental duties to their own cultural belief.

Bourdieu's theory, as mentioned earlier, agrees that parental culture capital could have major consequences for the child. He considers the employment professions of children's parents as a guide to their own individual level of achievement within the school environment. Donohoe and Gaynor (2003:71) express similar views as they state that the social class of children is derived from the occupation of their parents. These views are reflected in recent years as paid employment thrived, so too did the childcare sector.

From researching this area in depth, I felt there are two issues highlighted when parents avail of childcare services. One is the personal experience, be it positive or negative and the second relates to the financial impact on the family. As discussed previously, childcare in Ireland is an emerging sector and is not a service that every family availed of previously.

Examining the consequences of children being cared for outside the home, Uttal (1996) identifies a relationship between mother and carer which she calls "co-ordinated care" in which mothers view themselves as sharing motherhood with their childcare provider-seeing childcare as an extension of home and vice versa (cited in Vincent and Ball 2001:647).

Brannen and Moss (1991:253) develop this point further by analysing at what cost "out of home" arrangements impacts the family as a unit.

Commenting on this, they feel "contradictions and conflicts" existed for the women who were in paid employment as they negotiated the tension between their guilt and anxiety at leaving their children and the perception that there were benefits for themselves (e.g. mixing with other adults, pursuing a career) and the children. According to Hayes (2017:4)

Bronfenbrenner voiced similar concerns since World War II:

Responsibility of the upbringing of children had shifted to other settings, such as schools, which may not see this as their role. While he made it clear that this was no reflection on the affection or concern parents have for their children, he argued that it does decrease the "power of the family in the lives of children".

In terms of mixing with other children, gaining independence is vital as well as partaking in a wide variety of activities and so on in their continuing work (Ball and Vincent 2001:646). The Action Plan on School Age Childcare released by the DCYA (2017:38) also highlights some key points in relation to parents seeking childcare services. Issues arising for parents include if there is lack of availability or quality services in the area. Thus:

When asked what they would need to take up paid work or study and manage their parental responsibilities, most often cited was after-school care (49%), with a high percentage identifying before and after-school care (29%) and school holidays (33%) (DCYA, 2017:38).

While financial barriers may be an issue for some families when seeking childcare, there are other aspects that may influence parents' choice. Lack of quality services in general, unsuitable location and times were all mentioned by parents.

2.10 Conclusion

When the scheme was first introduced, data collected in September 2010 reports 63,000 or 95% of eligible children have enrolled in the ECCE scheme (OECD 2011:16). These figures suggest that the free pre-school year has had a positive effect in encouraging families and children to participate in the scheme. Recent data states that currently around 73,964 children participate in this scheme (Pobal 2016:1). But why are parents enrolling their children in the scheme? What are parents' perspectives' on the scheme? How are parents using the scheme? This study aims to answer these questions.

From this literature review, is it clear that there are many aspects of preschool that can benefit not only the child but also their parents and the wider society. In exploring this issue, it appears that the ECCE scheme has a dual purpose for families. It gives the opportunity for the child to prepare for school, increasing social interactions and independence but also allows for the parents needs to be met in terms of free time for the stay at home parent or cost saving measure for parents in employment.

Parent's ideologies regarding the ECCE scheme may stem from their own personal experiences of education and the value they place on this experience, which is a key finding in this research. The parenting style of a particular mother or father is in turn developed through a complex interaction of factors including culture, personal experiences of parenting and life stresses (Hayes et al. 2017:66). Taking into account Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we learn the ways of the world firstly through our primary socialisation from family and close carers and then from secondary sources such as environment and peers. This indicates that parents are not the only influence in a child's education journey. Other influences such as peers and teachers may also have an impact on their educational experience. Trevarthen (cited in Woodhead et al 1998:87) states that children have to live and learn in culture, as fish swim in the sea and birds fly in the air. This point is also relevant to their social class and parental influences. The class into which we are born influences where we live, how we spend our leisure time, the papers we read, our educational prospects and our earning potential (McDonald 2009:110). It is also worth mentioning that according to Chard and Katz (1994 cited in Hayes 2013:52), they argue that there is no compelling evidence that early introduction to academic work guarantees success in school in the long term. Although it may seem an inadequate way of mapping someone's path in life, pre-school education may have a big part to play in the ability to change social status. O'Toole et al. (2014, cited in Hayes et al. 2017:62) states that transition can bring many academic and social opportunities for children, and positive experiences of transition tend to position children well for ongoing positivity of educational outcomes. Throughout the free pre-school year, the child has the opportunity to prepare for the transition to primary school easing the child into this next academic journey.

To summarise, although the free preschool year primarily holds more benefits for the child in terms of learning experiences and an early academic start, it can also allow parents to return or enter the workforce or education which in turn can help the growth of the Irish economy. As

mentioned earlier, there are also proven results from early childhood education which benefits the society in terms of money saving measures for the future.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The demand for preschool services has soared in recent years. This demand is mainly due to the introduction of the free scheme, introduced in 2010, which seen figures rise to a 95% uptake (DCYA 2013). This chapter will outline the research methodology deployed to explore parents' perspectives of the ECCE scheme. Methodology, according to Sarantakos (2005:30) provides guidelines that show how research is conducted. All aspects of the research process will be discussed and outlined in the following sections. Research was conducted with parents of pre-school children. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data were implemented in the form of survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The data was then analysed using the mixed methods approach. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003 cited in Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009:7):

mixed methods has been defined as a type of research design in which qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in types of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures and or inferences.

The next section will outline the framework and then the research design used to include how the mixed methods approach was applied. Discussed further in the chapter is the sampling strategy, pilot study and ethical considerations.

3.2 Aims and Research Question

From reviewing national and international literature, the research question emerged. This developed from the discussion in the previous chapter from reviewing both theoretical and empirical literature on child development theories and the role of the early education in the sector. Work by Bronfenbrenner on the Ecological System discussed in the previous chapter, indicates that while parents are important partners in a child's pre-school experience, an emphasis must also be placed on the role of society. The impact of the social surroundings of the parent or indeed the

child, has an impact on their experiences. The research question specifically stems from the literature. It became apparent that there is limited research around parents' perspectives regarding the free preschool year to date. The main research question in this study is to address this gap regarding our lack knowledge of parent's views, therefore the principal aim of this study is to gather in-depth understanding of parents' perspectives of the free preschool year.

3.3 Guiding Hypotheses

This study focuses on parent's perspectives on the free preschool year which evolved through the literature review. The formulation of this research emerged as it became apparent this area has limited research to date. Further investigation is needed to identify why parents, who share this common preschool experience, engage with the scheme. Overall, the guiding hypotheses is the common structure of the research which guides the study. Considering many aspects that could lend weight to this study, I argue that there are two main guiding hypotheses. Firstly, parents are influenced in their choice of pre-school by their family circumstances. These could include, employment, income, relationship status, family size, and culture. Secondly, regardless of whether it is paid or free, parents value preschool. The uptake of the scheme is high and has recently been extended over a second year indicating that parents are participating in the initiative. Data will be collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods and analyses accordingly.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

From reviewing current literature, many aspects of interest emerged with regards to parents' perspectives on the free pre-school year. There has been limited research done to date in this area. This may be due to the fact that the scheme was only introduced in 2010. The NCCA (2007:4) states:

Until recently there has been very limited research attention to the early educational experiences of children in Ireland (Walsh, 2003) and much of what does exist has focused on intervention programmes for children considered at risk of future school failure (Hayes, 1995; Kellaghan, Weir,

O'hUallacháin and Morgan, 1995; Ryan, O'hUallacháin and Hogan, 1998).

A background report carried out by the OECD focused on a thematic review of Early Childhood Education and Care. It discovered that:

Much of the gap in pre-school education and childcare provision was met by extended family members and local child-minders (OECD 2002:14).

Since the scheme's commencement, the increase for pre-school services has risen considerably (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor 2012:76). While participation is voluntary, 68,000 or 95% of eligible children enrolled in this programme for the 2011/12 school year (DCYA 2013). However, preschools existed before 2010 and many were operating at an additional cost to parents. For this reason, this study is both timely and relevant.

According to Punch (2005:27) a paradigm is a set of assumptions about the social world embedded in particular schools of thought. In order to gather parents' perspectives on the free pre-school year, this study is framed by both realist and interpretive paradigms. Through adopting a realist paradigm I employed quantitative methods of data collection; survey questionnaires. Following the analysis of the quantitative data, I devised an interview schedule. An interpretive paradigm was used to analyse the qualitative interviews. This allowed for more in-depth research that cannot be achieved by questionnaires alone. This interpretive paradigm enabled analysis of the views of the parents whose children previously participated in the preschool year. Questions asked during the interview process were informed by results of the data collected through the questionnaires and also from literature review.

3.5 Research Design

Research design is the process of how research was implemented from the beginning, right through to the finished piece. Research design, according to Bryman (2016:695), refers to a framework or structure in which the collection and analysis of data takes place. Taking a closer look, Sarantakos (2005:105) indicates that it includes two major stages: planning and execution. In this study, the data was collected using a mixed methods approach underpinned by a realist and interpretive

paradigm. Firstly, the realist paradigm facilitated the quantitative data which was gathered using survey questionnaires. Questions included were informed by the literature review and covered areas as the purpose, benefits and cost of preschool. Following on from this, an interpretive paradigm was deployed to allow for more in-depth exploration of parents' perspectives. Quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This step took into account the various demographic and socioeconomic factors that may affect how parents view the scheme. Interviews were thematically analysed. Findings from the data were merged together under sub headings to include the profile of participants, purpose of scheme, benefits to children and parents, the preschool selection process and cost which are discussed individually later in the study.

3.5.1 Mixed Methods

Careful consideration must be given when choosing the research method.

Garner et al. (2009:68) state that:

Each method, including those that employ numeric producers and those that employ qualitative procedures, is a lens that can bring into focus particular aspects of human being...choice of method for a particular project depends on which is the most useful for addressing the research question (Polkinghorne 1992, 233).

For this study, mixed methods was applied to integrate findings from both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies. By doing this, it would take into account various demographic and socioeconomic factors and also gain access to a more personal experience through interviews. Creswell and Tashakkori (2007 cited in Plowright 2012:189) describe mixed methods as:

Research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of enquiry.

Both methodologies were combined to strengthen the findings that emerged from the data. Bryman (2016:635) sums up mixed methods as combining quantitative and qualitative research within a single project. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:33) suggest that mixed methods research provides better (stronger) inferences. Taking this view into account, I

argue that connections can be made in the data from the two research strategies. In terms of quantitative data, connections can be made across variables highlighted such as if the parent is in full/part time employment or rural /urban location. This can be followed up by an opportunity to uncover individual experiences using qualitative research to get an overall view on parent's perspectives'. Bryman (2016:640) sums up this process and he states:

The explanatory sequential design entails the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in order to elaborate or explain the quantitative data. The need for such an approach can arise when the researcher feels that the broad patterns of relationships uncovered through quantitative research requires an explanation which the quantitative data on their own are unable to supply or when further insight into the quantitative findings is required.

In this study, I argue that mixed methods is most suitable as it allows the merging of both qualitative and quantitative data. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:240) the combination of using questionnaires and interviews is a common method when collecting data. The following figure explains the process involved.

Figure 3.1 Data Analysis



In order to be able to confidently carry out this method, I had to explore both quantitative and qualitative research strategies as an understanding was required to carry out mixed methods research. The next step was to ensure that those participating were suitable to the study and the sample used will be discussed in the following section.

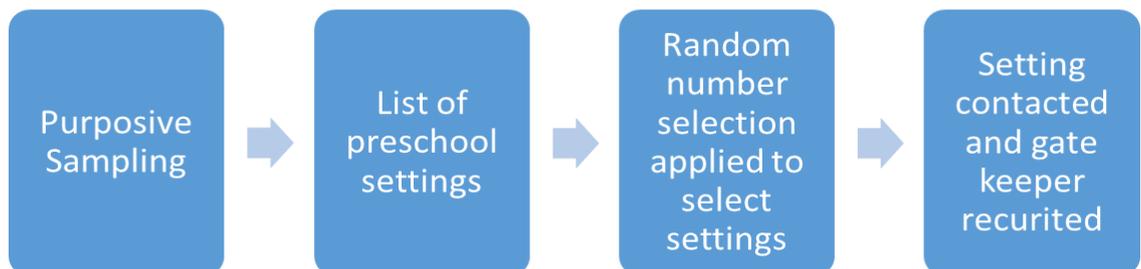
3.6 Sampling Strategy

An important part of the research process that needs to be carefully thought out and clearly described is the sample strategy. Mason (2000:84) suggests that this part of the research is concerned with sampling experiences rather than people. According to Burns and Grove (2005:343):

With this knowledge, you can make intelligent judgements about sampling when you are critically appraising studies or developing a sample plan for your own study.

It was important that a suitable sampling strategy for this research was in place in order to gain as much as possible from the study. The key question to decide beforehand was the number of people and characteristics of those who were asked to take part. The participants in the study become known as the target population. Figure 3.3 is a summary of how the sampling strategy evolved and will be discussed in the following section.

Figure 3.2 Sampling Strategy Process



According to Parahoo (2006:257) the target population becomes the population of interest from whom the data can potentially be collected. As this study is focused on parents' perspectives, parents became the target population. It is impossible to include every parent who has had experience of using preschool services therefore a sample was selected.

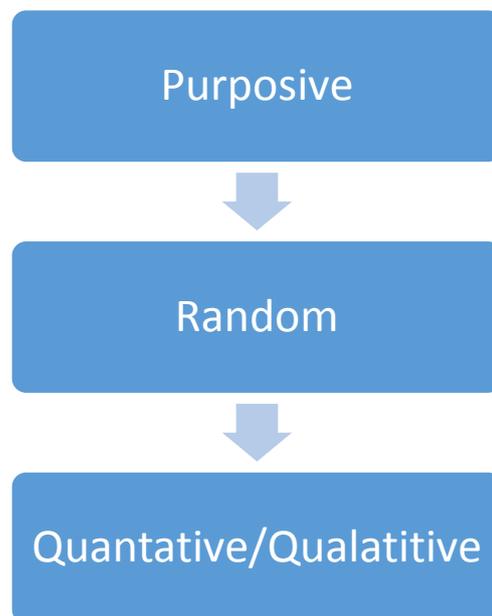
In this study, participants were selected using a combination of purposive and quota sampling. Purposive sampling as Plowright (2011:43) suggests is when there is a purpose to the selecting a sample from the target population. Developing this further, purposive sampling requires that those chosen to participate are relevant to the topic (Saranstakos 1998).

Purposive sampling was used in this study to gain access to the experiences of parents who had children in preschool. Parents were purposively selected as they are the most valuable source to share their knowledge and experiences in this area. Bryman (2016) suggests that those sampled are relevant to the research question being posed. This is a view also acknowledged by Maxwell (1997 cited in Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009:170) who defined purposive sampling as:

A type of sampling in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices.

In order to draw a sample from the target population a series of steps were taken. There were lots of variables to take into account such as geographic boundaries, employment/educational attainment in the area and preschool provisions available. All available sources of information were taken consideration when selecting the sample size which focused on the Republic of Ireland. Figure 3.4 illustrates a summary of the sample selection.

Figure 3.3 Summary of Sample Selection



The first step involved compiling a full list of preschool settings per county. These were sourced through Tusla and were divided into public and private settings. In total, at the time of the data collection, there were 4,456

preschool settings in Ireland. The following table breaks down these figures:

Table 3.1 Target Population-Breakdown of Settings per County

	County	Total number of Community setting	Sample number selected from list	Total number of Private setting	Sample number selected from list
1.	Carlow	13	12	34	33
2.	Cavan	26	08	40	28
3.	Clare	40	17	99	18
4.	Cork	142	107	323	273
5.	Donegal	81	23	71	17
6.	Dublin	222	165	953	773
7.	Galway	85	5	188	138
8.	Kerry	53	31	75	6
9.	Kildare	16	4	201	146
10.	Kilkenny	24	21	77	50
11.	Laois	16	14	71	32
12.	Leitrim	22	11	10	9
13.	Limerick	44	1	136	128
14.	Longford	13	8	23	22
15.	Louth	16	7	108	97
16.	Mayo	55	42	67	57
17.	Meath	23	17	196	44
18.	Monaghan	31	28	26	03
19.	Offaly	15	6	55	29
20.	Roscommon	24	12	31	04
21.	Sligo	30	16	42	15
22.	Tipperary	43	14	109	103
23.	Waterford	38	25	57	23
24.	Westmeath	18	2	67	55
25.	Wexford	45	5	92	83
26.	Wicklow	25	23	145	95
Total:		Community setting: 1,160		Private setting: 3,296	
	Total settings registered in Ireland: 4,456				

Source: Tusla (2015).

Settings to be included in the research were picked from this list using a random number selection. This is a process where random numbers are selected using a computer programme. According to Sarantakos (2005:157) in using this method, we instruct the computer to give us a set of numbers. Tashakkori and Teddlies (2009: 172) describes random sample selection, stating that it:

May be accomplished in several ways including drawing names or numbers out of a box, selecting numbers from a random number table in a statistic text, or using a computer program to generate the sample.

Using the data compiled, one community and one private preschool setting was selected through random number selection. Each selected preschool was initially contacted by phone where the manager/supervisor was requested. During this call, information about the study was shared and then they were invited to participate in the study. When the supervisor/manager was happy to proceed, they then became gatekeepers. According to Gray (2013:73) gatekeepers are those involved in the process to allow or deny another access to someone or something.

Gatekeepers appointed included preschool providers, managers and supervisors of settings who participate in the free preschool year as they have direct access to parents or guardians of the children using the service. If, for whatever reason, the setting selected decided not to participate in the research, the next setting was contacted instead until the quota was reached. For example, one setting that was previously contacted was in the process of moving their service to another building while another had previously engaged in research and felt it may be too overwhelming for parents. One main benefit of using childcare providers as gatekeepers meant that the data collected came from parents who had first-hand experience of using the free pre-school scheme. However, the administration work in running the ECCE service is enormous so it was important that the organising of this data collection was easy to implement for them.

When the gatekeepers were contacted and willing to engage in the study, the questionnaires (see appendix A) and information letters were then sent out by post (see appendix E). The gatekeeper distributed them to the parents and returned them to the researcher. A total of 52 settings participated. 572 questionnaires were sent out to parents through the gatekeepers and 119 were sent back. The last section on the survey invited respondents to participate in a follow up interview. The interviewees were then selected from this data only if the respondent provided their contact details and consent for this purpose. Table 3.2 below outlines details of participants who agreed to take part.

Table 3.2 Demographic Information of interview participants

Participants Name	Age group	Marital Status	Location	Currently in employment	Education Level Obtained
Cathy	31-40	Married	Rural	No	Degree
Lisa	31-40	Married	Urban	Yes	Degree
Jane	31-40	Married	Rural	Yes	Degree
Suzy	31-40	Married	Rural	Yes	Masters
Anne	31-40	Married	Rural	No	Degree
Amy	25-30	Single	Rural	Yes	QQI Level 4/6
Mary	31-40	Married	Rural	Yes	Degree
Mike	31-40	Married	Rural	Yes	Degree

*Pseudonym names were used for confidentially reasons.

From these, 8 interviews were secured and some interesting facts emerge. The majority of the interview sample are in the 31-40 age bracket and are also married. This data is comparable to research carried out by the HSE cited in the *Perinatal Statistics Report (2013:vii)* as findings which emerge from this report indicate that 20% of first births in 2013 were to women aged 35 years or older compared to 13% in 2004. Another report by the Department of Education and Skills titled "*Education at a Glance*" showed that attainment at higher education level (whether university or other higher education) was particularly high among 25-34 year olds in Ireland (2015:5). From reviewing the table above, the majority of the respondents had a degree or higher.

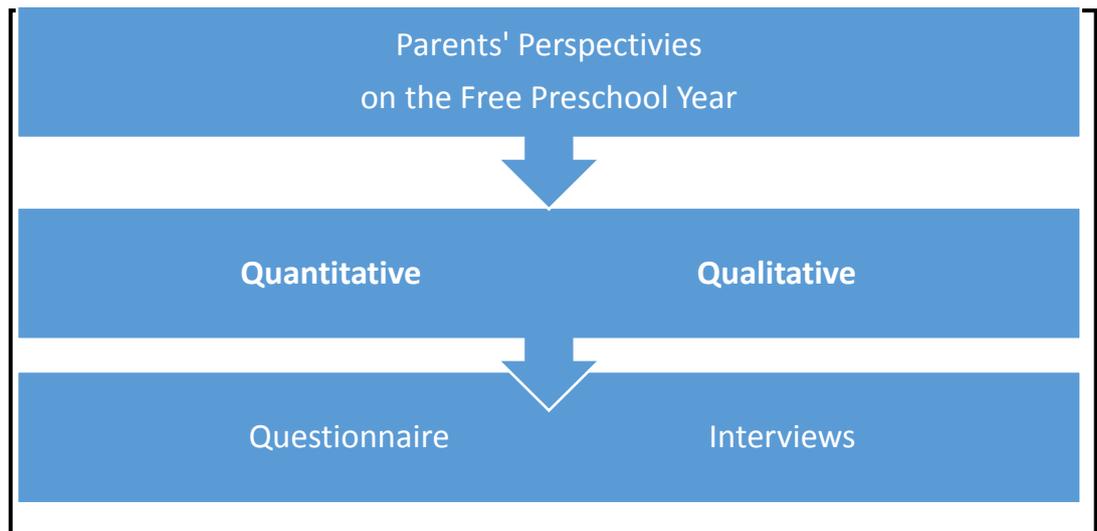
To conclude, the rationale for choosing the target population and sample was that these parents would have experience of their children using preschool. The sample was drawn over a large demographic area to include areas of urban/rural employment status and settings available. As noted earlier, the sample strategy is vital to the outcome of the research

so a good sampling strategy has to be of worth. The following is a review of the data collection.

3.7 Data Collection

Figure 3.4 identifies the 2 methods of data used in the study.

Figure 3.4 Methods of Collecting Data



3.8 Quantitative Methodology

Quantitative research is a technique associated with gathering, analysis, interpretation and presentation of numerical information. Roberts (2002) sums up the process of quantitative research as the study of larger population samples as a prerequisite for valid, reliable and easy generalised findings (cited in Garner et al. 2009:62). This method was selected in order to give a general overview of the parents' experiences regarding the free preschool year and also to see if there were any common trends. The purpose, according to Sarantakos (2005:50) is to:

Measure variables and to produce figures which will allow judgements as to the status of the variables in question, which will in turn allow further processing and comparison and permit reliability.

Parahoo (2006:49/50) suggests that the main purpose of this is to measure concepts or variables objectively but also to examine, by numerical and statistical procedures, the relationship between them. Variables in this study refer to the demographic area, employment and educational attainment in the area. Data was gathered using survey questionnaires and this is one of

the most common methods in quantitative research according to (Sarantakos 2005). Burns and Grove (2005:244) state that:

A survey is used to describe a data collection technique in which the researcher uses questionnaires or personal interviews to gather data about an identified population. Surveys can be an extremely important source of data.

The following section will outline how the survey questionnaires were implemented.

3.8.1 Survey Questionnaires.

The quantitative method of data collection was the first stage of collecting data. It was achieved by implementing survey questionnaires. Questions at this stage were asked in order to find out their family circumstances. For example, questions included age, employment status, educational level and preschool related questions to name a few. There are many advantages to using this method. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:232):

When questionnaires are used in a study, the researcher is employing a strategy in which participants use self-report to express their attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards a topic of interest.

Sarantako (2005:433) sums up this method as employing a systematic and structural verbal or written questioning. Survey questionnaires can be a useful resource when gathering data but can also have limitations. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:232) indicate that questionnaires require a level of reading ability that might not be present in the population under study. Respondents may have no one present to help assist if they have difficulty with completing the questionnaire, if literacy levels are limited or English is not their first language. These barriers may prevent respondents from successfully completing the questionnaire. Also, too many questions or unclear questions can be off putting for respondents. Sarantakos (2005) indicates that if respondents find the questionnaire too complex, they may be unwilling to respond. Dillman et al cited in Bryman (2016:226) suggest that the layout of the questionnaire must be easy on the eye. This in turn will assist the answering of all questions. For these reasons, the questionnaire will be well presented and easy to follow.

The survey questionnaires in this case, were administrated by post (see appendix A). As this study covers a large demographic area, post was the best option to ensure inclusion across the country. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:232) indicate that a major advantage of using questionnaires is that research can be mailed to respondents. In this case, all questionnaires were mailed to the gatekeeper who distributed them. Parents could complete the questionnaire in their own time and return it to the gatekeeper. The design of the questionnaire was a mix of both closed and open ended questions. An optional section was also provided to allow participants to fill in their contact details if they wished to be contacted for an interview as part of the qualitative research. As qualitative methodologies were also conducted in this research, this will be discussed in the following section.

3.9 Qualitative Methodology

A major characteristic of qualitative research, reflected in its designs, is that it is naturalistic, preferring to study people, things and events in their natural setting (Punch 2005:141).

This section was the second stage of collecting the data. It looks at how qualitative data that was gathered. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009:6) indicate that qualitative research involves gathering, interpretations, and presentation of narrative information. Bryman (2016) agrees suggesting that it usually emphasis words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. According to Garner et al. (2009:63):

The qualitative researcher works at greater depth with a relatively small number of participants in order to enhance the quality of responses.

As this research is concerned with parents' perspectives, it allowed parents to express their views on the free preschool year. This method was suitable in this study as it gave parents the opportunity to share their experiences. Sarantakos (2005:52) indicates that qualitative methodology adapts a subjective perception of reality. Semi structured interviews were carried out with participants to gain an insight into the ECCE scheme. The implementation of these interviews will be discussed in the following section.

3.9.1 Qualitative Research; Semi Structured Interviews

There are many forms of interviews techniques. These may include group, semi structured or structured interviews. Hek and Moule (2011:115) suggest that interviews are among the most frequently used data collection technique. Summarising the process, Tashkkori and Teddlie (2009:229) state that:

An interview is a research strategy that involves one person (the interviewer) asking questions of another person (the interviewee).

In this study, interviews were face to face and were semi structured. Sarantakos (2005) indicates that the most common type of interviews are semi structured. This approach gave the flexibility to the respondent to share as much or as little regarding their experiences. According to Bryman (2016:201):

Semi structured typically refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions.

Similarly, Sarantakos (2005) describes semi structured interviews as resting somewhere between structured and unstructured types. However as information is exchanged on such a personal level it is hard to predict what may arise. As is suggested by Bryman (2016:472) be prepared for some of the unexpected contingencies that can arise in the course of an interview. On the last section of the questionnaire, the parents were provided with the opportunity to leave their contact details in order to follow up with an interview at a later stage. The interviews were carried out face to face in a conversational style. Questions were a mix of semi structured and structural to allow the parent to share information comfortably. The content of the questionnaires also informed the development of the interviews therefore questions within these interviews were grouped similarly to that of the questionnaires.

Table 3.3 Emerging themes from quantitative influencing interview questions.

Themes within literature review	Emerging themes within research data
Pre-school back ground	Understanding of purpose of pre school
Preschool and Evolving Service	In your opinion, what is a pre-school? Do you use it for educational or childcare purposes? Is there too much emphasis placed on preschool compared with previous generations
Preschool as an economic service	Do you feel you need multiple childcare arrangements? What barriers/issues surround the free pre-school?
Positive experiences	Are children supported Approach to education School ready
Parent's usage of preschool services	Are the children and parents supported in this scheme? Enough choice? Convenient?
Demographic location	Do they feel they rely on extra childcare services e.g. full day care Transport/access (limited public transport especially rural areas)
Location/variables	Child rearing/family values Issues around the scheme Is the process of enrolling difficult? (Language barrier confusing, difficult to understand, Lack of information on service)

From these emerging themes the interview question schedule was drawn up. From investigating the research methodologies, I was confident that they were appropriate to the data required in order to answer the research question. A pilot study was implemented with a limited number to identify any issues before beginning.

3.10 Pilot Study

Tashakkori and Teddlies (2009:203) define a pilot study as:

A pilot study is a stage of your project in which you collect a small amount of data to test drive your procedures identify possible problems in your data collection protocols and set the stage for your actual study.

This is an initial survey conducted on a limited number of people but not included in the final sample. The researcher contacted a local community based preschool setting in Cavan town and explained the research process to the manager. The manager was delighted to be a part of this process and acted as gatekeeper. Twenty-two questionnaires were sent out to the setting and the gatekeeper circulated them to parents who

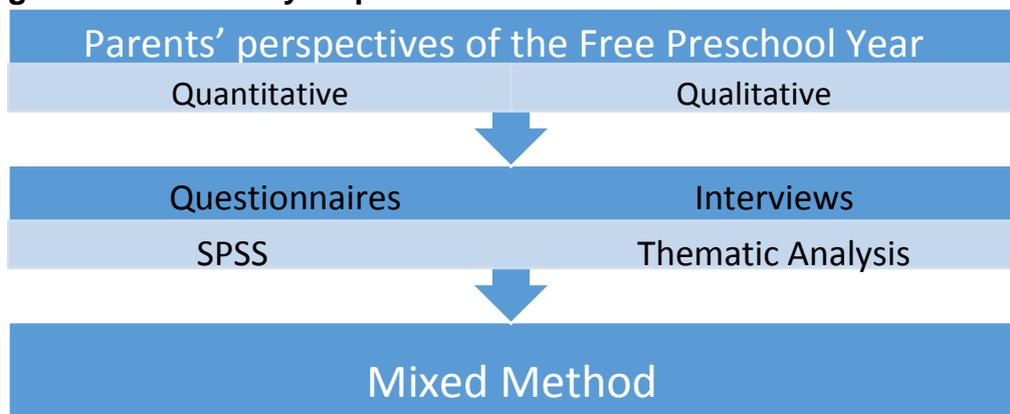
returned them when completed. The gatekeeper then posted them back to the researcher and the data was analysed. Plowright (2011:88) suggests that the pilot study should inform the approach to the main research. Taking this into account and from reviewing the completed questionnaires from the pilot study, it became apparent that a few minor adjustments had to be made on the questionnaires to give parents more scope when completing them. For example, some questions were over lapping and not relevant to the research question. Please see appendix B for original and see appendix A for amended questionnaire.

On reflection, I argue that the gatekeeper used in the study was suitable. There are many strengths to using this type of gatekeeper, including having access to parents who have first-hand experience of their children participating in the free pre-school scheme. The gatekeepers also have an understanding of the value of the research in terms of promoting education and care the early year's sector. It is important to bear in mind that the gatekeepers had other duties and responsibilities in the day-to-day running of the setting. They were generous in granting permission for their setting to be part of the research. However, a follow up call or gentle reminder was required to ensure a high number of questionnaires are returned.

3.11 Data Analysis

The following is a summary of the data analysis process implemented in this research.

Figure 3.5 Data analysis process



After the data was collected, the next stage involved a careful process of data analysis. Bryman (2016:12) refers to this as the management, analysis and interpretation of data. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out. However they were analysed separately. Plowright (2012:146) indicates that data can be analysed mathematically or narratively.

Firstly, the quantitative data was analysed using a computer programme called statistical package for the social science (SPSS). Bryman (2016:696) indicated that it is a widely used computer programme that allows quantitative data to be managed and analysed. The survey data was coded to accompany each question for example male=1, female = 2 and so on. The coding guide can be found in the appendix F. This data was manually coded into an excel database sheet. An expert in this field was then contacted and assisted with the process. It was well organised to ensure accuracy. The data was then analysed and in turn then developed into charts and graphs where emerging themes were identified. Cross tabulations were used when data containing more than one variable was investigated. Following this, thematic analysis allowed concepts and ideas to easily emerge out of the data through transcribing and then coding data from the semi structured interviews where respondents gave their views on the free pre-school scheme. The data was inspected and scrutinised using coding in order to find similarities or differences relevant to the research question. Significant findings were merged under sub headings where similarities and differences were identified.

Thematic analysis is a term used in connection with the analysis of qualitative data to refer to the extraction of key themes in one's data. It is a rather defused approach with few generally agreed principles for defining core themes in data (Bryman 2016:697). Both quantitative and qualitative data were amalgamated to strengthen data and to adhere to the mixed method approach.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

A straightforward explanation of ethics is that it is concerned with respecting research participants throughout each project partly by using agreed standards (Alderson and Marrow 2004:11 cited in Plowright 2011:149/150)

This section relates to ethical issues concerned with carrying out research. As noted above, the participants must be respected at all times. Bryman (2016:145) indicates the main areas of concern relate to: potential harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy and deception. In keeping with the Sociological Association of Ireland's (SAI) Ethical Guideline (2014), considerations were given to factors such as data protection, confidentiality, informed consent and objectivity. In terms of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect the respondent's identity. All those participating were informed about the aims of the research, the process involved and their right to withdraw at any stage if they wished to do so. Sarantakos (2005:26) states that adherence to ethical standards is expected in all forms of research, all relevant information regarding the study should be explained to each respondent. In this research, information letters (see appendix C) and consent forms (see appendix D) were provided and respondents were asked to sign them. Bryman (2016:131) concludes that the advantages of such forms is that they give respondents the opportunity to be fully informed. Permission sought included the recording and storing of data. Protecting the rights of the participant is essential. As noted earlier, ethical approval was sought by the college prior to beginning this research and all aspects of ethical considerations were honoured throughout the research.

3.13 Conclusion

The aim of this research is to explore parents' perspectives of the Free Preschool Year. In this chapter, I discussed the methods applied to achieve this. Relevant data was collected using qualitative and quantitative research strategies and then the mixed methods approach was applied. According to Parahoo (2006:99) the richness of data comes from diversity. In this study, I argue that the richness of data comes from combining research methodologies as a mixed method strategy. The

process of how the research was conducted was the main focus of this chapter. The next chapter will explore the findings from the data collection.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

A total of 119 survey questionnaires and 8 semi structured interviews were conducted with participants in order to explore parents' perspectives regarding the free preschool year. This chapter presents the findings. From the analyses of this data, the findings are drawn together under key themes which highlighted the main findings. Theme one provides the participants profile followed by the perceived benefits of the scheme for children and parents alike. Following this, the purpose of the scheme, quality services and reasons for selecting a preschool are explored. The role of the government is investigated later in the chapter. The mixed methods approach to data analysis was adopted to tease out these key themes which emerged from both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings are presented using charts from the questionnaires and also responses from the interviews. Interviewees can be identified through pseudonym for confidentially reasons. The next section provides a general overview of those who participated in the study.

4.2 Profile of Participants

The Republic of Ireland was the focus of the research. Participants took part in this survey over a large geographical area including areas of socio economic disadvantage, areas of employment/unemployment, rural and urban areas.

4.2.1 Demographic profile

In order to assess the areas in which the data was collected, the data was investigated according to counties represented.

Figure 4.1 County Profile

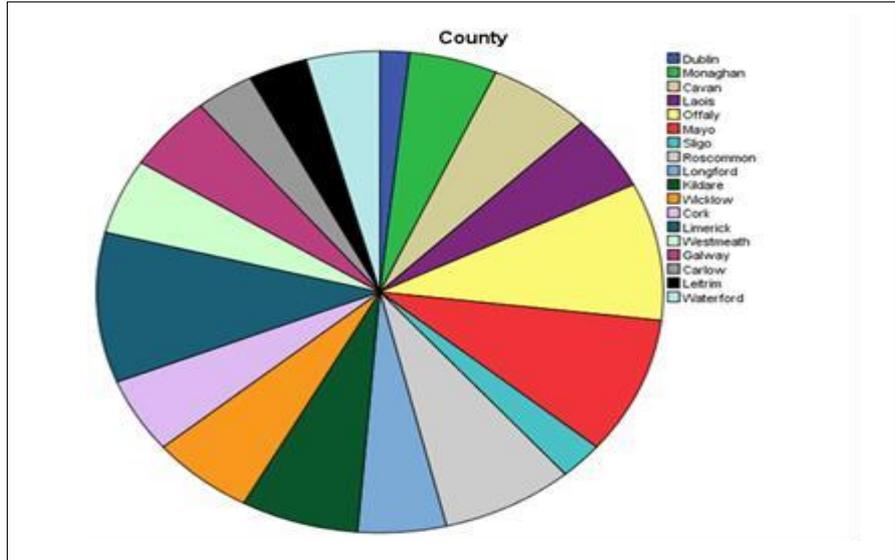


Table 4.1 Frequencies in which the Counties were represented.

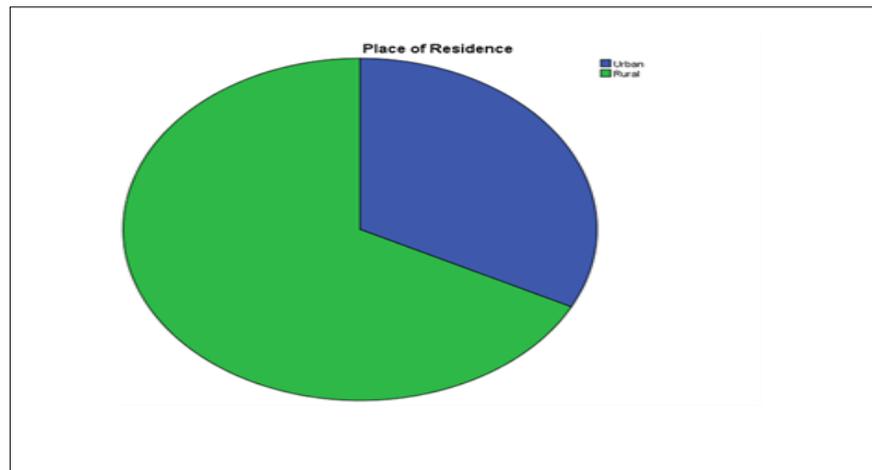
		County			Cumulative Percent
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	Dublin	2	1.7	1.7	1.7
	Monaghan	6	5.0	5.0	6.7
	Cavan	7	5.9	5.9	12.6
	Laois	6	5.0	5.0	17.6
	Offaly	11	9.2	9.2	26.9
	Mayo	11	9.2	9.2	36.1
	Sligo	3	2.5	2.5	38.7
	Roscommon	9	7.6	7.6	46.2
	Longford	6	5.0	5.0	51.3
	Kildare	8	6.7	6.7	58.0
	Wicklow	7	5.9	5.9	63.9
	Cork	6	5.0	5.0	68.9
	Limerick	12	10.1	10.1	79.0
	Westmeath	6	5.0	5.0	84.0
	Galway	6	5.0	5.0	89.1
	Carlow	4	3.4	3.4	92.4
	Leitrim	4	3.4	3.4	95.8
	Waterford	5	4.2	4.2	100.0
Total		119	100.0	100.0	

As Table 4.1 illustrates, eighteen counties were represented from the 119 surveys collected.

4.2.2 Setting Location

The location of the settings varied between urban and rural parts of the country. Figure 4.2 breaks this data down further. The majority of the participants that responded considered themselves to be from a rural area at 66.4% (n=79) and the rest from an urban area at 31.4% (n=38) while 1.7% (n=2) unknown.

Figure 4.2 Urban/Rural Location



This was a significant find as many rural areas may have limited services compared to urban areas. Jane described accessing the preschool from a rural location.

I live in the country so it's difficult to get someone to drive and drop or collect...I think setting should be like a crèche, Montessori and after school. Everything under the one roof, it's much handier for working parents (Jane).

Jane explained the convenience of having everything under the one roof. As a working parent (in full time employment) it is a service that she can rely on for full time care.

Crosstabs, which are tables that contain more than one variable, was used for this data analysing to compare the results of the exact geographical location in terms of county and also, urban or rural areas. An overwhelming majority of respondents from a rural location included

counties such as Cavan, Mayo, Sligo, Longford, Galway, Carlow, Leitrim and Waterford as shown in figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Urban/Rural and County

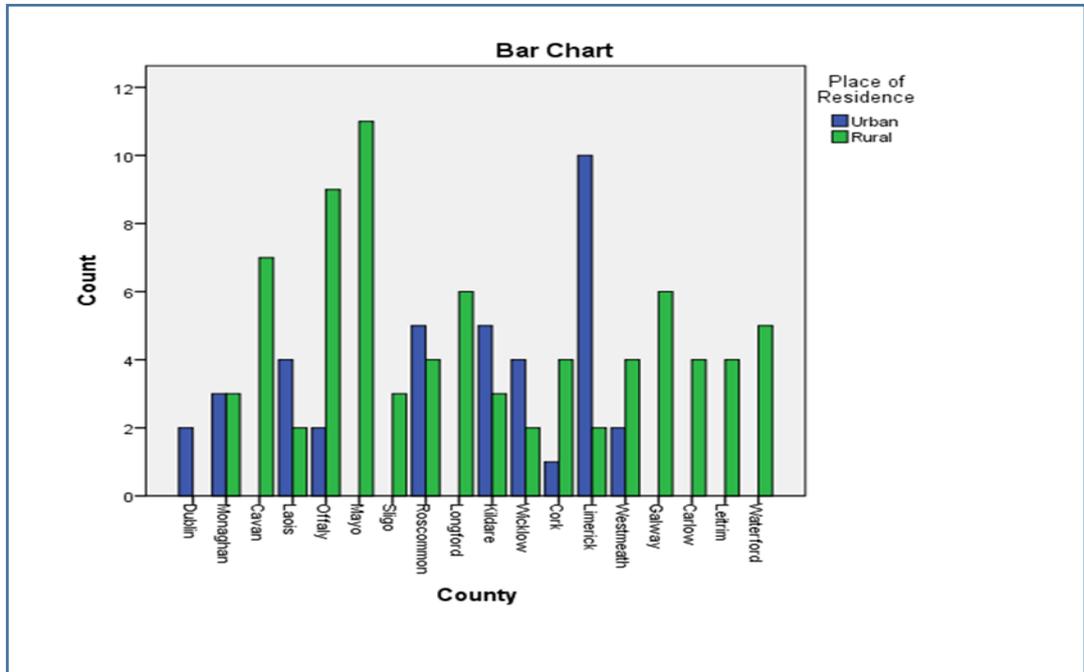
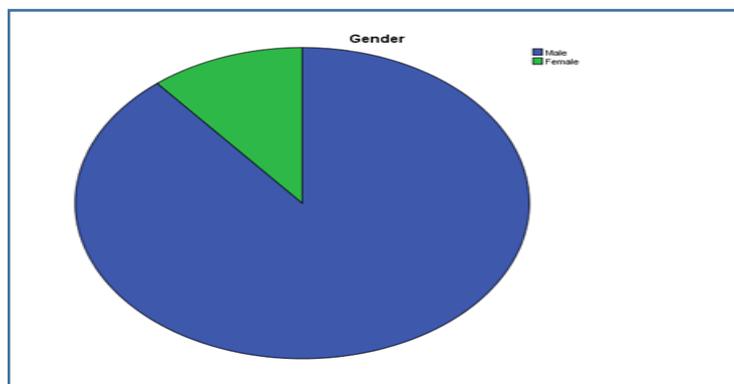


Figure 4.4 Gender

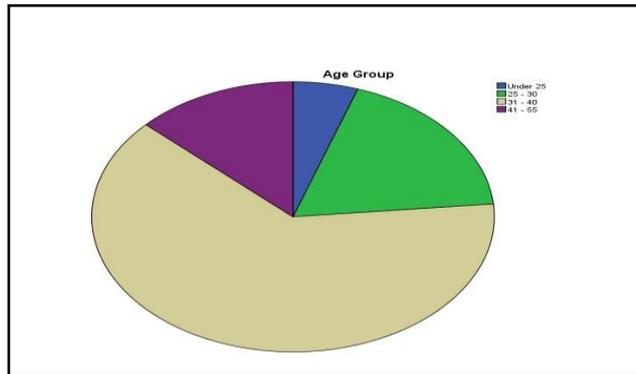


It is interesting to note that 88.2% (n=105) of those who completed the questionnaire were male compared to 10.9% (n=13) females. There may be many different reasons for the high majority of males including availability of time or employment status.

4.2.3 Age Profile

Respondents were asked which age category they fell into.

Figure 4.5 Age Profile

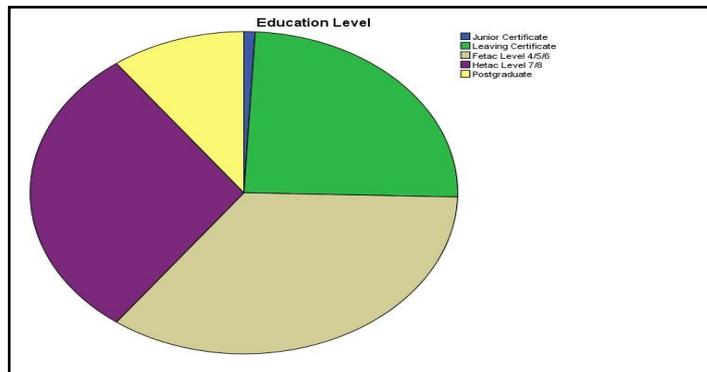


61.3% of parents surveyed (n=73) fell into the 31-40 years old group and 17.6% (n=21) were aged between 25-30 years old. 12.6% (n=15) parents were aged between 41-55 years, the remained 5% (n=6) were under 25 years and 3.4 % (n=4) missing.

4.2.4 Education Level

Parents were asked about their educational level on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

Figure 4.6 Educational Achievements



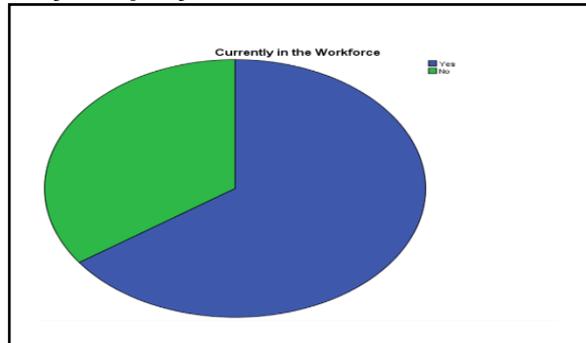
The responses varied amongst those questioned but the majority of those, 34.5% (n=41) held a FETAC/QQI level 4/5/6. Next in line was HETAC Level 7/8 at 29.4% (n=35). Following this was the Leaving Certificate which accounted for 24.4% (n=29), Post graduates 10.1% (n=12) and missing 0.8% (n=1).

4.2.5 Employment

As the majority of parents obtained a good standard of education, the researcher was curious to know if they were successful in getting jobs.

The question was asked to find out if many of the parents were currently employed.

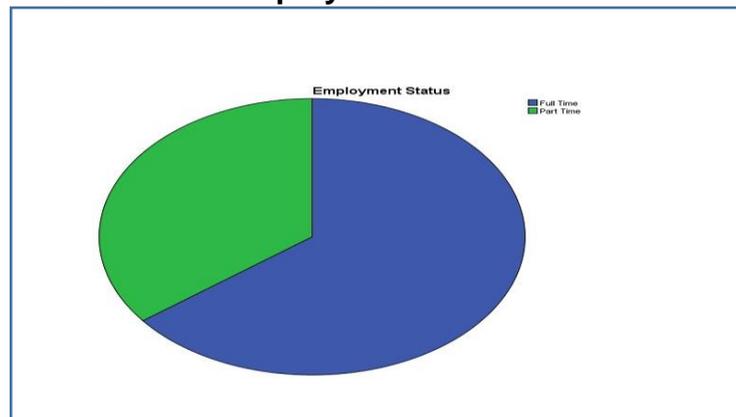
Figure 4.7 Currently Employed



From the above figure, we can see that the majority of parents are currently employed 64.7% (n=77) compared to 34.5% (n=41) missing 0.8% (n=1).

To investigate this further, the question was asked if the employment was on a full or part time basis. Taking the employment status a step further, 64.6% (n=42) of those asked worked full time while 35% (n=23) worked part time.

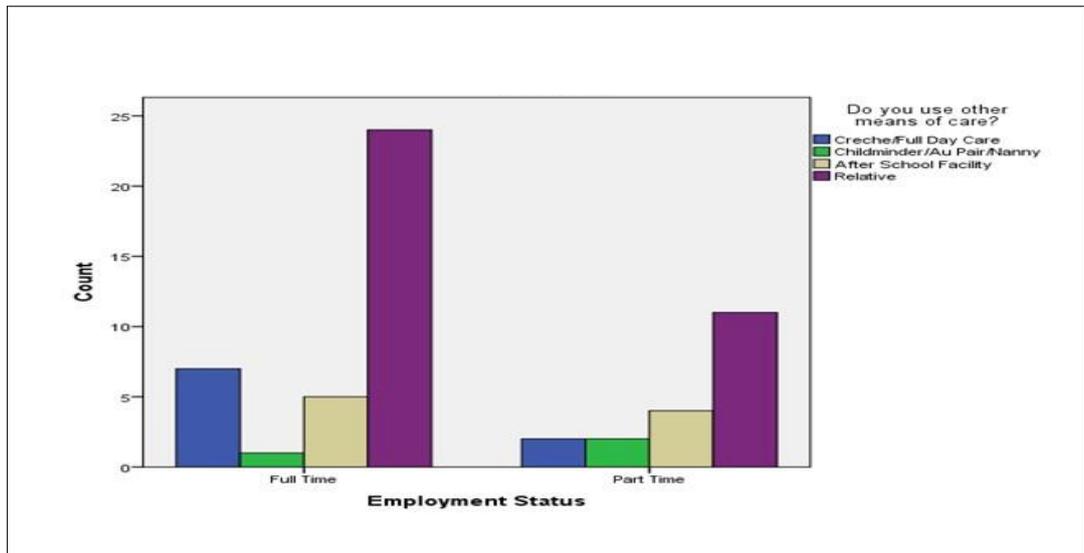
Figure 4.8 Full/Part time Employment



The researcher wanted to investigate if there were any significant differences between, firstly, the means of other care used and secondly, to establish whether differences existed between parents full or part time employment status. On this occasion, a Chi-square test was applied to two variables, other means of care and employment status.

Parents selected to carry out this research appeared to be from a range of diverse occupations including the areas of nursing, teaching, administration work, Gardaí, shop work, sales reps and carers. There may be difficulties in accessing the free preschool year depending on their employment patterns.

Figure 4.9 Other means of Care (Full/Part Time Employment)

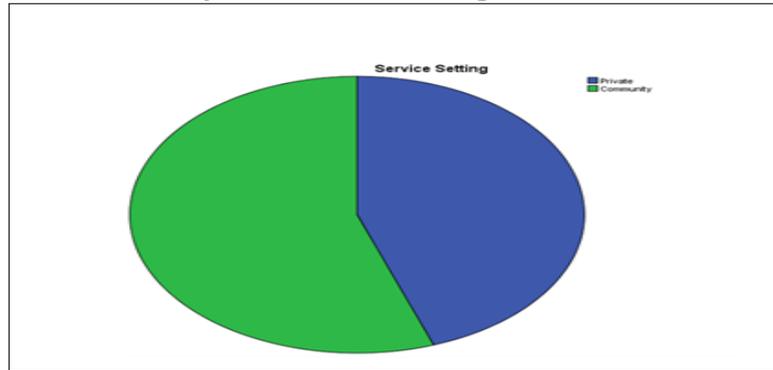


Those working part time partially relied on a relative or afterschool facility for other means of care compared to those in full time employment who heavily relied on a relative. Again, this may be due to employment patterns as services may not be available for parents when they require care for their children therefore turning to relatives for assistance.

4.2.6 Community or Private Setting

In order to establish if there was a preference to the type of service used the respondents were asked if their child was enrolled in a community or private run service.

Figure 4.10 Community or Private setting



Preschool settings randomly selected to participate in this study included both private and not for profit community settings. Both community and private settings were represented in the survey with slightly more responses from parents attending community settings at 55.5% (n=66) compared to the private sector at 44.5% (n=53). In order to establish the community and private settings per county, a cross tabulation was implemented.

Table 4.2 Community/Private Setting Per County

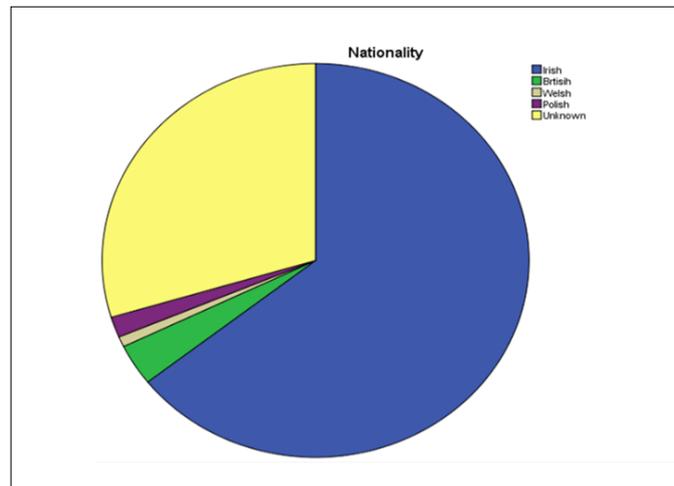
	Service Setting		Total
	Private	Community	
County Dublin	2	0	2
Monaghan	0	6	6
Cavan	0	7	7
Laois	6	0	6
Offaly	7	4	11
Mayo	7	4	11
Sligo	0	3	3
Roscommon	0	9	9
Longford	0	6	6
Kildare	0	8	8
Wicklow	7	0	7
Cork	6	0	6
Limerick	3	9	12
Westmeath	6	0	6
Galway	0	6	6
Carlow	4	0	4
Leitrim	0	4	4
Waterford	5	0	5
Total	53	66	119

Figures in table 4.2 show that community settings were represented slightly above the private settings.

4.2.7 Nationality

To confirm cultural variation in the responses from parents, the question regarding their nationality was asked. The next figure, 4.11, indicates the different nationalities using services in Ireland.

Figure 4.11 Nationality



The findings highlight that the majority of parents who completed the survey identified as Irish; 63.9% (n=76). However, parents from other nationalities included British 3.4% (n=4), Welsh 3.4% (n=1) Polish 1.7% (n=2) while 30.2% (n=36) were missing. Suzy, originally from England describes about her experience of preschool growing up in England:

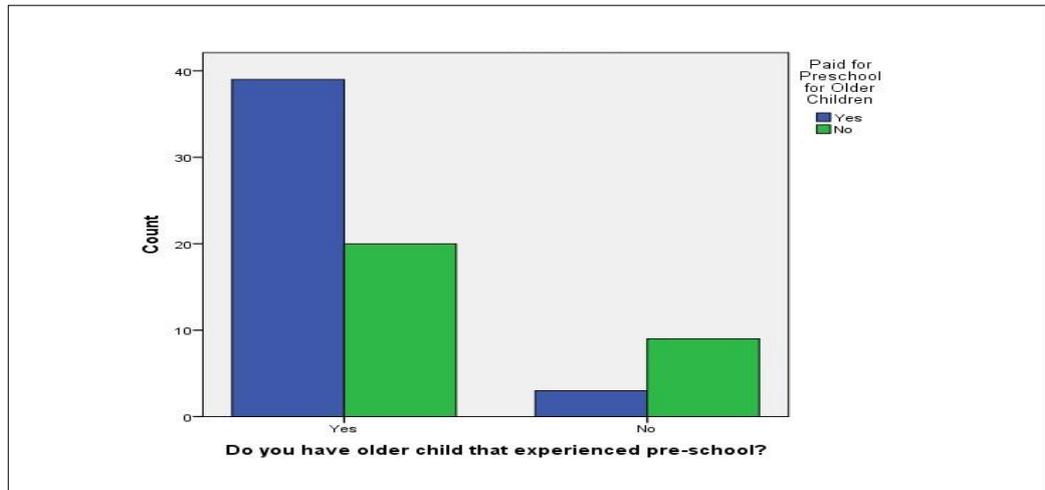
I did go when I was young but they call in nursery in England and they are attached to the primary school that I was going to go to. You just go the year before you were going to go to school and it was just a natural process, you just went to nursery for a morning or afternoon before you went to primary school (Suzy).

For Suzy, it was a natural transition from preschool to primary and the services were in the same location.

4.2.8 Previously Funded Preschool

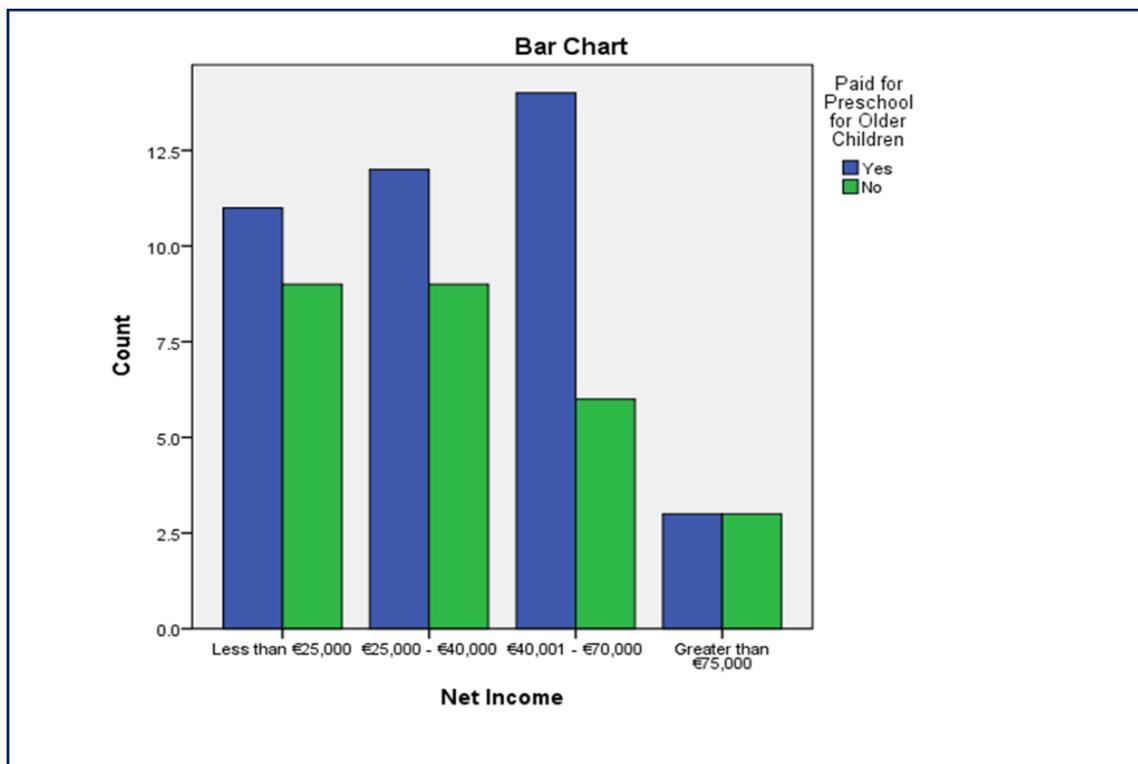
Associations were made between older siblings in the family and if there was a payment involved when they attended pre-school before the free pre-school year was introduced in 2010.

Figure 4.12 Have you previously funded preschool for older children?



The majority of those questioned sent the older siblings and paid for them to attend preschool at 35.3% (n=42) compared to 24.4% (n=29). Missing 40.3% (n=48). This was further investigated by comparing figures to the families' income.

Figure 4.13 Previously Funded Preschool Compared to Family Income



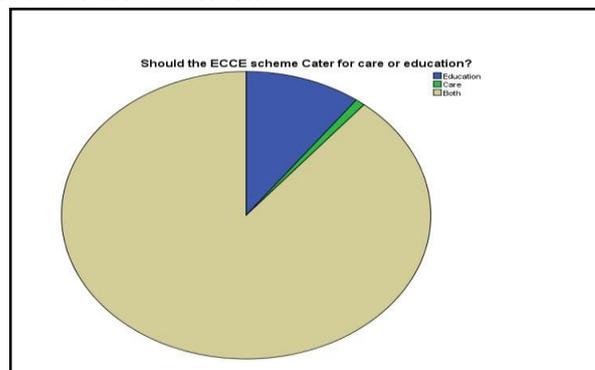
Analysis of this figures suggest that regardless of income, parents were adamant in sending their child to preschool. As seen in figure 4.13 participants earing between €40,000 and €70,000 felt strongly about preschool and paid for the service for older children before the scheme was introduced. Remembering that funding for the scheme was only introduced in 2010, this suggests that regardless of funding the majority of parents paid for preschool prior to funding becoming available.

The demographic profile gives us a snap shot into many different variables including education, location, age, employment status and family circumstances which may impact the findings in the study. The following focuses on the purpose of the scheme.

4.3 Purpose of the Free Preschool Year

In this section, the aim was to find out the parents' views on the importance of preschool in the contexts of education or care. This was to help determine how parents utilise the scheme and the value they place on it.

Figure 4.14 The Role of the Scheme



The researcher refers to education as to the process of learning in a certain environment and care, in terms of the child's over all well-being and health. 88.2% (n=105) of parents who took part in the survey felt that care and education combined was vital to the role of the free preschool year.

Only 0.8% (n=1) surveyed felt ECCE should cater for care alone while 10.1% (n=12) felt education was the sole purpose of the scheme. Looking

at this from another point of view by focusing on the educational attainment of the parents the researcher investigated their perspectives on the role of the sector.

Figure 4.15 Parents Education Status and Role of the ECCE Scheme

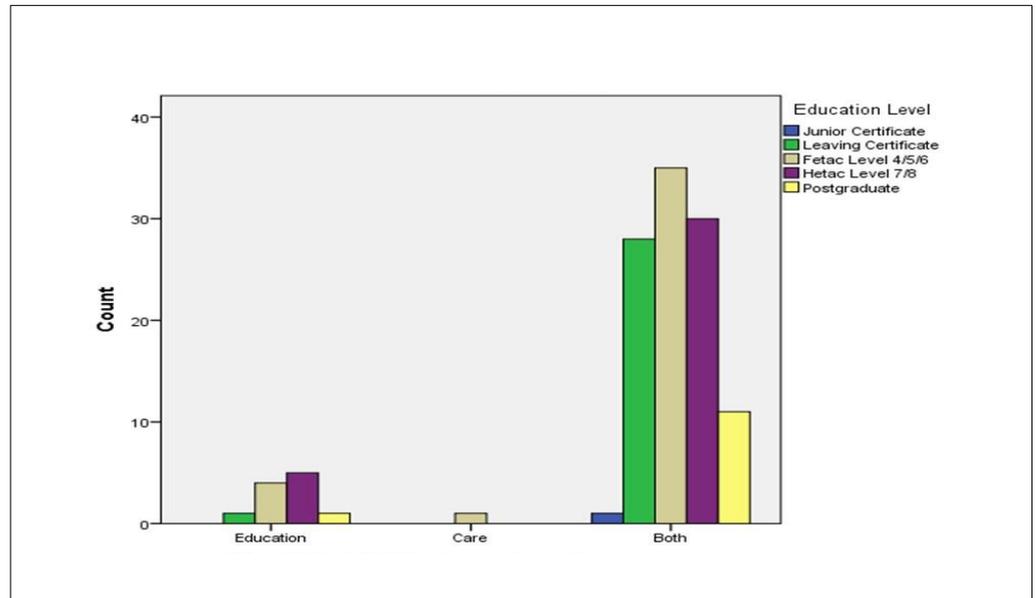


Figure 4.15 indicates the data collected when participants were asked if the ECCE should cater for care or education and compared it to their own educational status. While care was poorly rated at 1.7% (n=2), education seemed a popular choice at 10.1% (n=12). We can see the majority of parents' felt that it should cater for both education and care at 88.2% (n=105).

Responses from the qualitative data were mixed. Two parents, Jane and Amy, felt education was an important aspect while others placed an emphasis on care. A number of parents felt both aspects of education and care were important in the free preschool year. For example, Jane and Amy felt pre-school was centred on education purposes. Jane stated *"I would say education...they benefit more...they are in a learning environment"*. Amy had similar feeling and stated that *"preschool caters for more the education"*. Another parent, Mary felt strongly about the learning environment and stated *"it's a structured environment"*, she then went on to say I prefer my *"son to go to a child-minder after the scheme as it is more relaxed there and I prefer that to a crèche"*.

On the same question, remaining participants concluded that preschool had a dual purpose in that it could cater for both care and education. Thus:

I think there has to be an element of care in it because they are very small and they need to be looked after and minded as well but I think the education side of it, it's important to get them ready for school. (Suzy).

Lisa also suggested:

me yea I suppose for me it was because it was a child care option as much as a development one...you'd want both though anyway I think well suppose for me educational was not as important (Lisa).

These findings indicate that parental focus may not be solely on education but an element of both care and education.

Just play I think it's a year for fun and they enjoy it, I wouldn't like it to be work work, work, I think it's a year for fun and they enjoy it! (Anne).

Anne felt that a positive experience at this stage was important

4.4 Benefits of the ECCE Scheme

In the literature review, it was highlighted that there can be many benefits to the free preschool year. This section aims to explore these perceived benefits in relation to children and parents. Although not a direct question, these comments emerged from the data.

4.4.1 Benefits for Children

Participants were asked the significance of the ECCE scheme in relation to their children in an attempt to see if they considered it valuable in terms of meeting their children's individual needs. Every child is unique and although the majority follow the same sequence, there will always be variations in their development. A number of thematic codes evolved from the answers but when combined a dominant factor was the importance of social development as opposed to educational development. This coincides with earlier findings as the majority of parents placed the emphasis of both care and education equally and did not view them as separate elements.

4.4.2 Preschool Interactions

All those interviewed seemed to be of the same opinion that social development was an important aspect of the free preschool year. Lisa stated that "*socially its good... gives great confidence*". Suzy stated "*I think*

the social part of it...having to stand her ground and having to get on with things". Anne also agreed that *"the social element was a great advantage they learn to share"*. On the same aspect, Jane stated *"they need the social interaction as well as playing with the other children"*. Amy felt the same as she stated *"Socializing independent skills, figure out things on their own"*. And Cathy's response was *"Oh yes it is very good socially, it's about social interactions their own age and that's really important I think"*.

Mary stated that the scheme:

Gets them from the toddler stage to an independent 4/5 year old. My son is far more independent and he's the first child so he wouldn't be used to sharing or getting things for himself so they tell him to take out his lunch box and unwrap things put it back then (Mary).

On the same question, Mike stated:

My son was so much more confident and he was so much more outgoing and he's ability to mix with kids and everything was really enhanced from the preschool socially and mentally. Also from a social point of view, it's really good for them ... (Mike)

Two participants interviewed felt that emotional development was also an important aspect of pre-school. Lisa stated that her daughter is *"quite a shy little girl in ways you know, so emotional would be an issue"*. Also, Suzy stated *"emotionally ...it just prepares them for the playground really"*.

From the above comments, it would appear that parents rely on the scheme for the children to interact and build social skills. There seems to be an emphasis placed on interpersonal engagement and communication with other children similar in age as opposed to exclusively educational benefits as mentioned earlier. These perceived benefits include independence, confidence, social interactions and emotional regulation.

4.4.3 School Readiness

Another important aspect which emerged from the analysis of the data, were phrases such as *"get them ready for school"*, *"in preparation for school"* and *"before big school"* were prevalent. As mentioned above, the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills may influence if the child is "ready" or not. The theme *"school ready"* best describes the discussion emerging. For example, when participants were asked the

value of preschool they all agreed it had a major influence on school readiness. Thus:

It prepares them for school...I mean they do they prepare them well for school they do homework and everything towards the end of the year (Suzy).

When questioned, Anne also felt that it prepares the child for the transition to primary school stating:

I wanted her to make friends for when she went to national school-it definitely prepared her (for school) and plus it gets them into a routine because well, her sisters going to big school and they are going nowhere so at least if they're going to play school there are getting into a routine you know getting up in the morning and getting ready brushing their teeth getting ready to go somewhere instead of just hanging around the house all day (Anne).

Mary stated:

To get him set up for school-its preparing him for a real school-there is other kids there that will be going to the same national school as him. He is making friends and he is meeting people that he will be going to go into junior infants with so is a great advantage and it is brilliant because now he has friends for school so it is great (Mary).

However, another parent, Amy felt it did not get them ready for primary school, she felt that it is key in getting them ready for interaction that occurs within the school stating:

It's a big change, I do not think it gets them ready for school no. I think it helps them interact with kids but no it does not get them ready for the likes of homework and all that stuff no I wouldn't think it does (Amy).

Although not a direct question, ratios were mentioned by more than one participant. The terms ratios refers to the proportional relationship between the childcare workers and the children. The ratios required for the free preschool year are 1:11 according to the Early Years Services Regulations 2016 (DCYA 2017).

Jane states *"I sometimes think of the ratios...primary school its one to 1/30 sometimes"*. Lisa also feels that the transition into national school ratios is enormous stating *"shock when they go to school and a teacher has 25/30 children in one class maybe...!"*

This may mean that parents are conscious to ensure continuity in the routine and to maintain consistency. Smooth transition emphasises the importance of this and getting children used to a busy environment.

4.5 Benefits of the Free Preschool Year for Parents.

When exploring how parents perceived the ECCE scheme, it became apparent that parents recognised different values that the scheme may offer parents. Comments included *“free time, extended childcare options, costs and benefits”*. Three out of the eight interviewed referred to the term *“free time”*. Cathy, for example, discussed the value she placed on the scheme as a parent stating *“a bit of free time ... not be bogged down with childcare myself”*.

Amy's views were similar and simply stated; *free time*. Mike also agrees as he stated:

Well, I suppose I think it's of great benefit for the parent it frees up a little bit of time during the day so you can get bits of jobs done which you might not get to you know when the kids are all at home it may be more tricky to get all the jobs done so I suppose from a parents point of view it gives you a chance to get bits and pieces done (Mike).

Amy felt that the service would be more beneficial to both the child and parent if the hours were extended:

It's convenient to a certain extent...once half 12 comes it's kind of not convenient ... if they do the extra hour it would be better not just for the parent but for the child as well (Mike).

For these parents, the free preschool scheme may release childcare duties for a short time and they have access to *“free time”*. The free preschool does not seem to make any difference to the next two parents as the children are in full time care anyway, regardless if they attend preschool or not. Lisa's child attends full day care as herself and her husband works full time. She implies that *“the preschool does not make a difference to her as her children are in child care anyway”*. Jane also uses full time childcare in the setting and felt it was very convenient and suited her lifestyle. She stated:

I use full day care which is a god sent... everything under the one roof it's much handier for working parents (Jane).

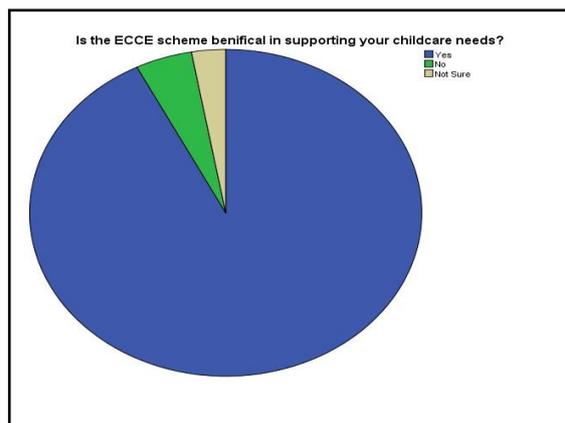
Suzy however sees preschool from another perspective as she knows children who have participated before. She believes it has benefits:

I would see the benefits that my nieces and nephews would have got from play school when they were younger (Suzy).

In terms of value for the parent, the free preschool has made an impression. Parents can rely on the service and it is dependable. It can allow “*free time*” for the parent, it is convenient for some and overall they seem happy with the service it provides.

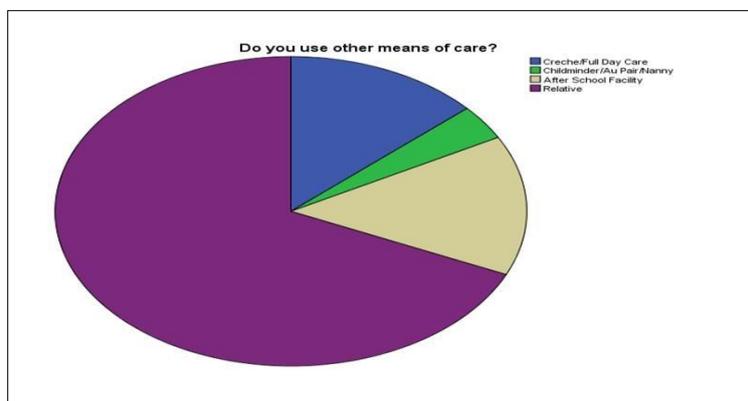
After establishing that the majority of those surveyed are currently in employment and working on a full time basis, the following question was asked: can the ECCE scheme support your childcare needs? Figure 4.16 captures their responses.

Figure 4.16 Benefits Regarding Childcare Needs



The results seemed positive. An overwhelming 83.2% (n=99) of parents surveyed felt that the scheme was beneficial. Only 4.2% (n=5) of the 119 asked felt it was not and 2.5% (n=3) were not sure. Unknown 12 (n=10.1). The researcher was interested to discover if other care arrangements were needed in other to meet their childcare needs, the results of which are captured in figure 4.17.

Figure 4.17 Additional Care Arrangements



A staggering 47.1% (n=56) of participants rely on a relative to help with childcare needs. Childcare services are easily accessible but interestingly parents still rely on relatives. According to the CSO (published 6th July 2017) the most commonly used type of non-parental childcare for primary school children nationally is an unpaid relative or family friend (16%).

After this, parents rely on an after school facility 10.1% (n=12). Next in line is the crèche 9.2% (n=3). Unknown 31.1% (n=37).

Amy states that she needs extra help with childcare arrangements and pays extra once the scheme is finished stating:

If you are working, you still have to pay for a babysitter once half 12 comes it's kind of not convenient..!

The availability of extended care after the preschool was a significant factor for two respondents; Jane and Lisa. For employment opportunities (as mentioned previously) Lisa states that's her children are "*in child care anyway*". Also Jane felt it was manageable and practical to have full day care while herself and her husband worked. The choice of full time care seemed to have an invaluable impact on her ability to work. She stated:

It's more convenient... but it is just literally the fact that childcare and the play school all in one place...everything under the one roof! It's much handier for working parents (Jane).

On a similar note, Mary stated:

That's a private arrangement and I'm paying extra for that and its quite expensive because you're paying for him to be collected as well. I drop him off to school in the mornings which is brilliant because I get the opportunity to do that and to see him off in the mornings and someone else picks him up and he goes back to the childminders (Mary).

Parents using the service must have the capacity to manage time, stress and daily demands while ensuring that their own personal needs are met in coordination with the children. A key aspect of additional care needed by parents seems to stem from employment status of parents.

4.6 Preschool Selection Process

This section focuses on the selection process when choosing preschools. It highlights what parents look for and find important when placing their children in their service.

4.6.1 Quality Services

Quality assurance measures were highlighted by parents. They appeared to have their own ways of measuring what was important in terms of quality. An example of this is when Anne used a personal relationship as a quality assurance strategy as she knew one of the staff members previously stating:

I knew one of the girls... I just choose that one as I felt comfortable sending them.... (Anne).

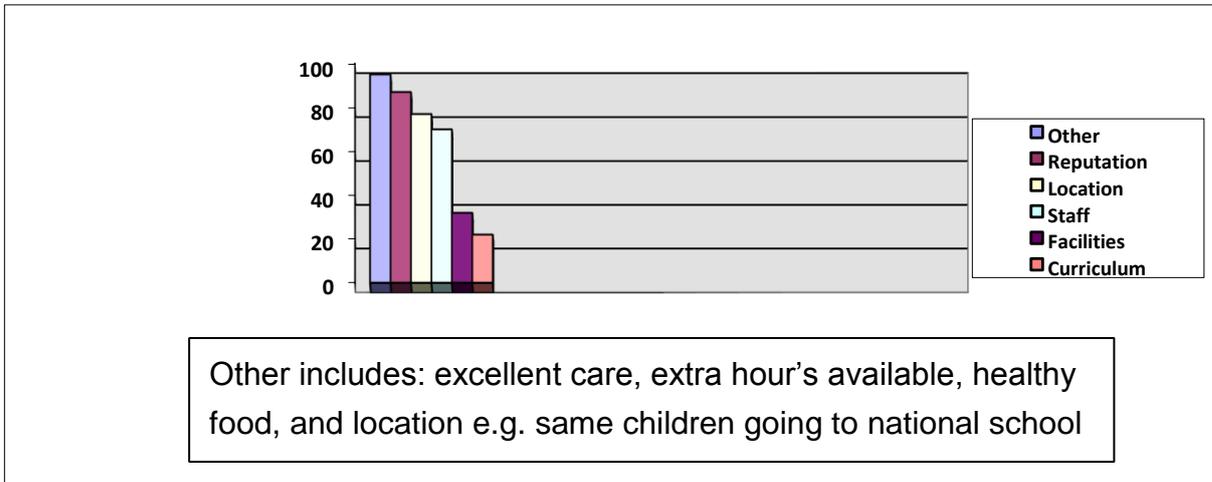
Lisa felt the location of the setting was important for her. She stated *"location and meeting the child care workers"*. Cathy also felt that the childcare workers at the setting were a major factor as she stated *"I knew people (staff) I was comfortable sending my child"*. Amy felt that *"the staff (in the setting) were fantastic"*. Another theme that emerged in the data was feeling comfortable. Parents were *"feeling comfortable"* leaving their child as staff working in the settings.

4.6.2 Reasons for Selecting the Service

A number of key terms emerged when parents were asked about their choice of preschool. Although parents had an individual decision to make which was convenient for their family, some common threads emerged.

Parents were asked why they choose the particular preschool service for the ECCE scheme.

Figure 4.18 Factors that Influenced Choice of Setting



Different approaches emerged as to what factors dominated the choice of preschool. The main codes and categories that emerged included staff, full day care, feeling “*at ease*” with the service and reputation of the setting. However the quantity of references to location was noteworthy at 76.5% (n=91). This led to the name “*factors for choice*” to describe the decision and selection process of settings for parents. Another factor when deciding the ECCE setting was “*location*”. All of those interviewed mentioned location or what services were available near them.

Lisa indicated that she felt location was a priority as she stated

“*Location...definitely location because it's close to us*”. Amy felt the same and wanted something close to home stating “*the locality*”! Mike stated:

“*proximity and reputation it's right on our doorstep so it's convenient*”.

Suzy, of the same opinion, felt location was a major factor and stated “*the setting was literally 5 minutes down the road*”.

Those who participated in the research made reference to the proficiency and expertise of staff 58.8% (n=70). Cathy felt grateful to the staff at the service as she spoke about her child:

Well he's been diagnosed with Asperger's that was actually picked up by staff at the preschool I didn't have any clue. I think is great about play school that if there is a problem it can be identified early (Cathy).

Amy also felt the childcare workers to be of high importance as they helped her son through his difficulties:

It's great the fact that they (the staff) are working with me the fact that he has a speech problem they are helping him come along better (Amy).

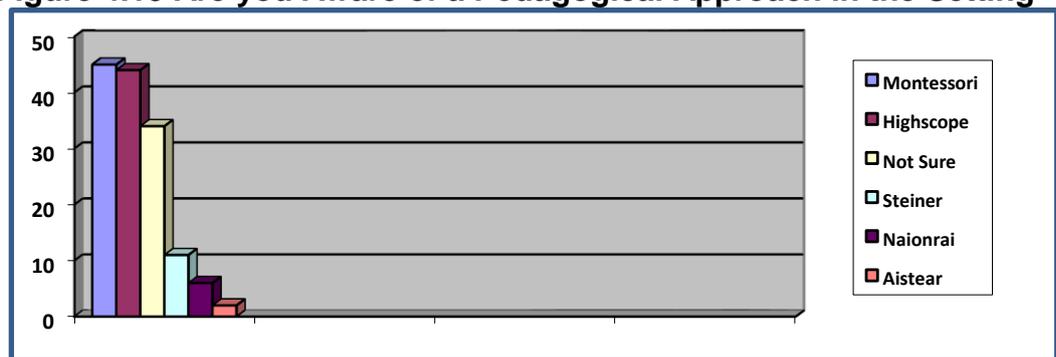
For Mary, a number of things were an important aspect of the setting.

These included the location, recognition of awards previously won by the setting and the reputation. She stated:

They have a good reputation and they won awards I know she is at the top of her game and great reputation, it's on my way to work so that would be a big factor as well, it's in the area (Mary).

The majority of parents surveyed obtained a good level of education. The question of an educational approach in the preschool was asked to see if there was a common thread based on education status of parents.

Figure 4.19 Are you Aware of a Pedagogical Approach in the Setting



The majority of those asked were confident that their children was enrolled in a setting that implements the Montessori or Highscope pedagogical approach. Other approaches include Aistear, Naionrai and Steiner. Anne, a mother of 3 boys, reflected on her experience in this section as she stated:

It gives me confident that there is a structure or you know, development for the kids and that is I suppose...it's good. I feel then the child care is being assessed and monitored. The setting, they had the Montessori room as they called it or whatever it was. I suppose I don't know how much of that is actually happening in the child care or is in his child care day (Anne).

A significant number had limited knowledge regarding the educational pedagogical implemented in the setting, interesting considering their own level of education attainment. However, while the level of education was high amongst parents, it is important to note that not every qualification

includes having an insight the early years' sector. The researcher then turned the focus to how parents access information regarding the preschool settings and in particular the scheme. Every child in Ireland is eligible to partake in the ECCE scheme but are parents aware of the scheme? If so, where is the information available for them to find out about the scheme?

Figure 4.20 Accessing Information

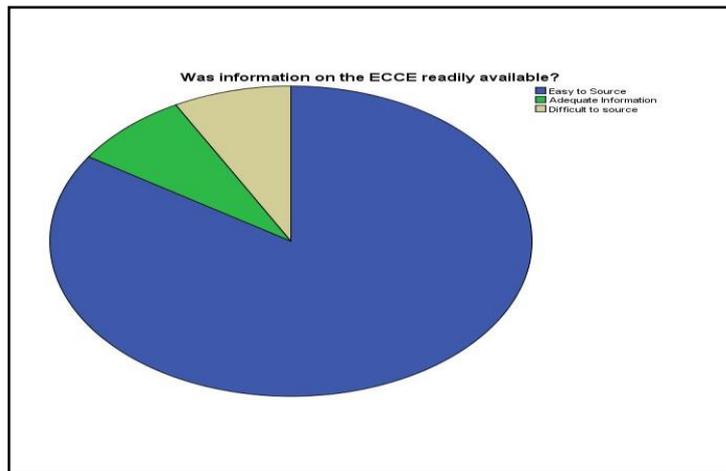
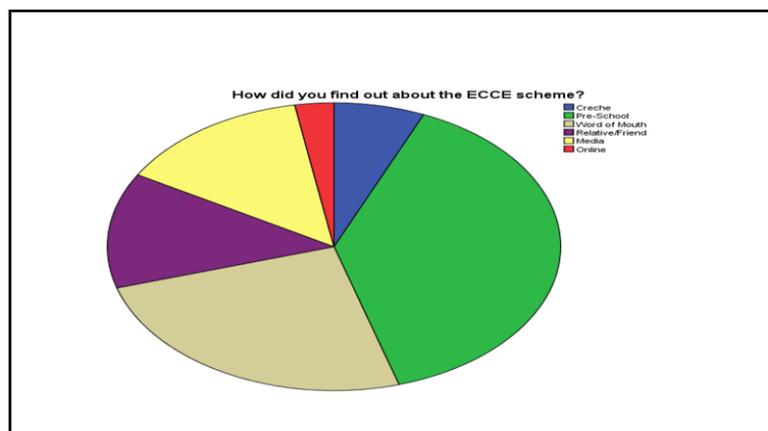


Figure 4.20 shows that 6.7% (n=8) of parents surveyed felt they had adequate information on the scheme while 6.7% (n=8) found it difficult to access information. However the majority, 71% (n=85), readily found information on the scheme and the following figure illustrates where this information was found.

Figure 4.21 Source of Information

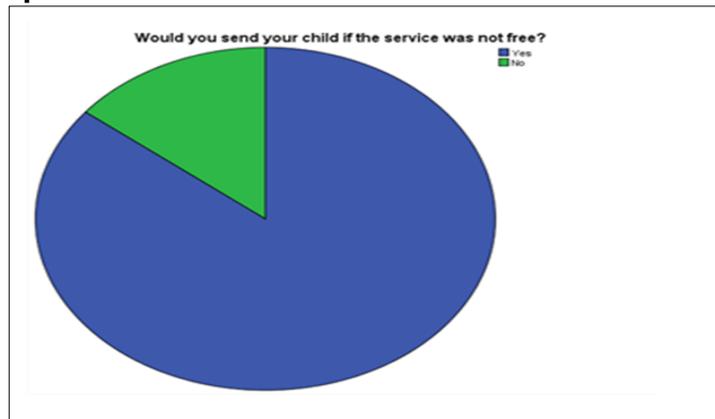


Parents found details of the scheme from the media 12.6% (n=15) and online sources 2.5% (n=3). 9.2% (n=11) were unknown.

4.7 Cost Implications for Parents.

The question of cost and its impact on the use of the ECCE scheme was discussed. This question was asked to explore parent's attitudes towards the scheme if they had to pay for it.

Figure 4.22 Implications of Cost



In these findings, we can see that 85.7% (n=96) of participants would send their child even if they had to pay. 14.3% (n=16) of participants felt that they would not send their child if they had to pay for the service. 5.9% (n=7) were unknown. The majority of those interviewed seemed certain that regardless of a charge or not, they would be determined that their child would attend.

Cathy stated *"Yes I have paid for it (for older child) but I'm happy to do that"*. Amy agreed stating she also paid for preschool before the ECCE scheme was introduced Stating *"I paid for it with the oldest lad"*. Mike also stated that he *"Couldn't imagine them not going, it brought them on so much-I would pay if I had to"*.

Following on from this, Anne described her experience:

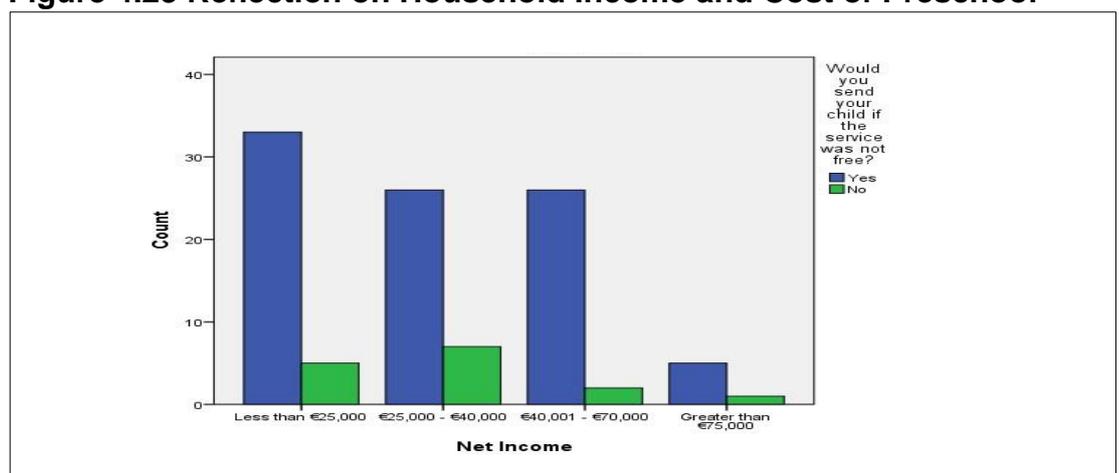
I wouldn't have sent (child) last year I wouldn't of bothered sending her...if it was not free I wouldn't of bothered sending her definitely not...some days I didn't send her all the time anyway. I kept her at home for the whole month, it could of been the whole month of February, because she was sick at the start of the month, she was in hospital so I didn't feel there was any point in sending her maybe to catch infections,

it's not ideal for the like of that sure it's not? That's something that the pre-school does not consider its not flexible that way...you'd never think of it like I would of never of thought of that but had it not been free, I definitely would not of bothered sending I would of just kept her at home with me for the extra year and sent her to national school then. So no I wouldn't have bothered if it was not free definitely not (Anne).

This is an interesting point raised by Anne. She describes her experiences using the scheme but felt her daughter missed out due to illness. If the child for whatever reason, cannot participate in the scheme she misses out on the ECCE scheme opportunity. This question raised different aspects to the free preschool year and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Findings in this section suggest that the majority of parents were sure they would pay for preschool. As discussed earlier, the majority of parents use preschool for their children's social development and not for educational purposes. If parents are only using preschool so their children can develop social skills and interact with children their own age this raises the question of whether cheaper ways of organising these experiences for children are available. Figure 25 explores the household income in an attempt to explore if parents could afford to send their children if it was not free.

Figure 4.23 Reflection on Household Income and Cost of Preschool

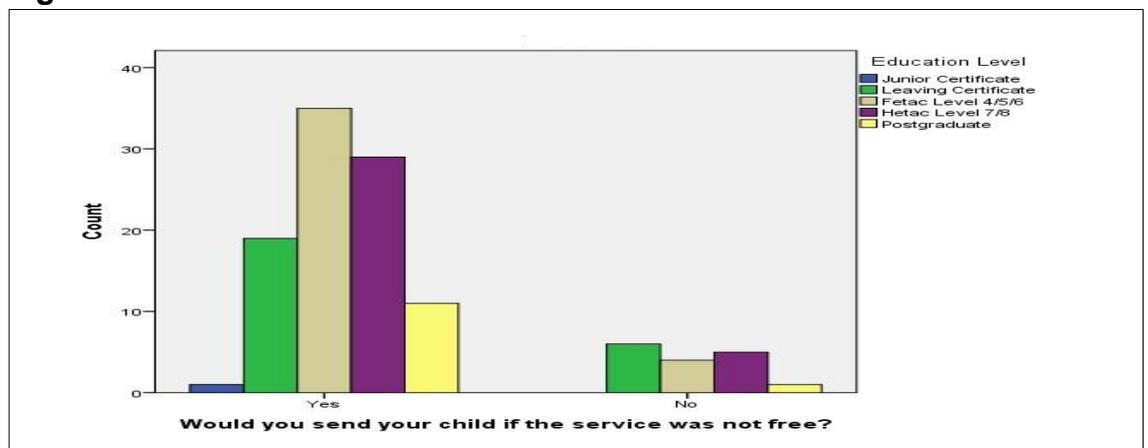


Comparisons were crosschecked between family net incomes and if the participants would send their child to preschool if it was not free. Regardless

of income, the majority stated yes at 88.2% (n=105). The majority of the participants earning €25,000 or less felt strongly about sending their child to preschool. Interestingly, those with a slighter higher household income (€26,000- €40,000 wage category) felt that they would not send their child. Staying on the aspect of free preschool, findings are crosschecked with the parents own education level.

When comparing the education level of those surveyed in accordance to their own education levels the results were interesting.

Figure 4.24 Parents Education Attainment\Preschool choice



The findings indicate that participants who obtained a basic level of education felt certain that they would send their children to preschool even if they had to pay for it. This indicates that they hold preschool education as substantial educational start for their children. When analysing the qualitative data, it became evident that two parents felt the role of preschool in their child's life was a naturally occurring event as they themselves had attended as children.

Cathy, who is originally from England, stated *"I did go but they call in nursery in England...you just go the year before you go to school...you just went to nursery for a morning or afternoon before you went to primary school"*. Suzy also had that opportunity when she was younger as she stated *"I went to Montessori school when I was small, I was brought up with the fact that they go to play school even it is it only for a day or two"*.

For Cathy and Suzy, it seems to be a natural expectation that their children would attend as they had “*the opportunity to attend a preschool*” themselves. However, interesting information came to light as Anne expressed a different view on the scheme. Anne made reference to her generation and preschool but she shared her ideas by stating:

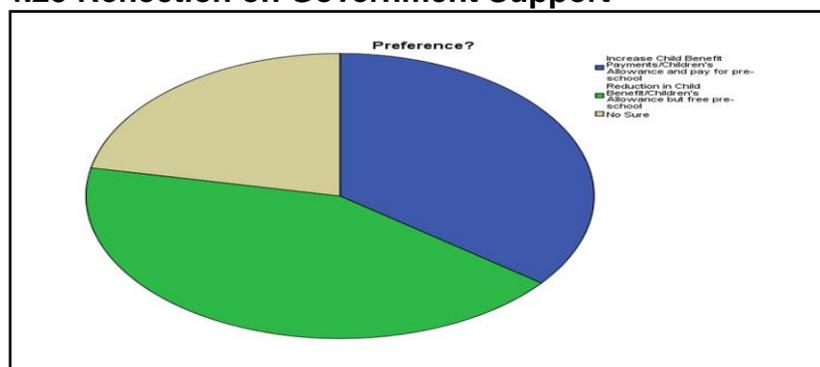
I didn't go to play school so it's a new thing so no I wouldn't of bothered (with it) if it was not free definitely not”. “If it was not free, I wouldn't have bothered sending her, definitely not. She was in hospital, it's not ideal for the like of that sure it's not? That's something that the preschool does not consider it's not flexible that way (Anne).

Anne's circumstances were different as her child missed a lot of the ECCE scheme due to ill health and therefore missed out on a large proportion of her preschool opportunity. The funding of the scheme emerged as a factor for parents when considering if they felt the scheme was valuable or not. Parents were also asked to consider what changes they would like to see introduced. Amongst their responses another preschool year was suggested (which has been recently implemented), funding for languages or learning support, management of behavioural issues, longer hours per day with the option of an earlier start.

4.8 Role of Government support

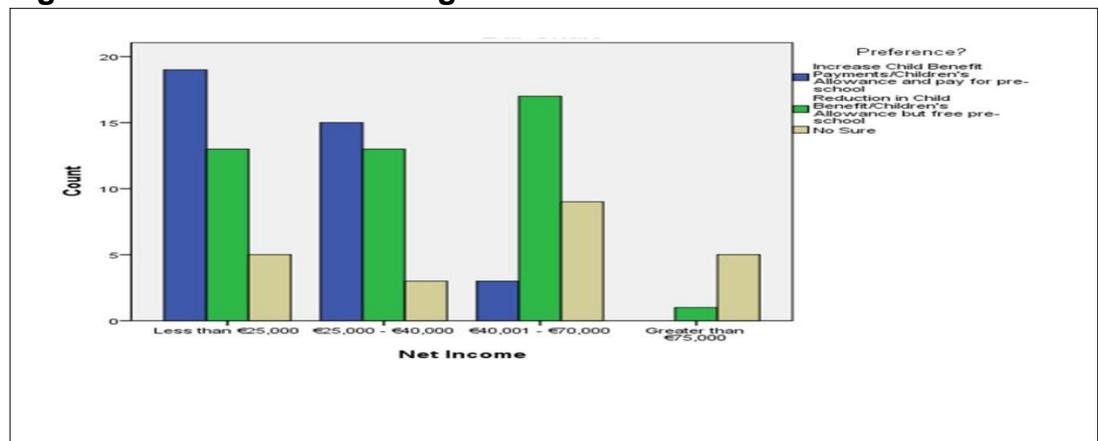
Parents were asked their preference regarding the funding of the scheme. Interesting results emerged here. Previously, the data suggests that if the scheme was not free, the majority of parents, 85.7% (n=96), would foot the bill for the service themselves. If this is the case, why are the Irish government paying for preschool?

Figure 4.25 Reflection on Government Support



As discussed in the literature review, in 2010 there was a change in government support provided to families. Developing this further, the researcher asked if parents would prefer a reduction in child benefit and free preschool or an increase in child benefit but pay for preschool. In terms of a reduction in child benefit but free preschool, the majority was 39.5% (n=47) in favour of this option. 32.8% (n=39) of parents surveyed would prefer an increase in child benefit and pay for preschool. Figure 4.26 outlines if the parents would be willing to pay for preschool regardless of the household income.

Figure 4.26 Preference taking into Account Household Income



From these results, we can see that the majority of participants earning less than €25,000 euro would prefer an increase in child benefit and pay for preschool themselves, while the majority earning between €40-70,000 would prefer the opposite, a reduction in child benefit but free pre-school. This will be explored in chapter 5.

Parents were asked to reflect on this during their interviews: Decrease in child benefit and free preschool and Increase in child benefit but no preschool. The responses varied amongst those asked. Amy stated that *“I prefer if payment goes to the school”*. Suzy also agreed and stated *“I’d prefer payment going to the preschool service to be honest”*.

Others felt happy with the free preschool as it is and made reference that if the parents get the money, they may not spend it on the children. Jane stated *“No I think it should go if its free preschool year then that's it, it should go to the preschool ...people won't use it for what it should be used”*

for” (Jane). Cathy agreed with Jane, saying: “I prefer getting it free...if the money came to me it might not get spent on what it should get spent on” (Cathy).

The majority of respondents felt the payment of the scheme appears to be working well and prefers payment to go directly to the preschool. Mike stated:

Well at this stage because my youngest is nearly finished the preschool I would now prefer an increase in benefit as I am not going to benefit from it but that’s the situation I’m in now I’d say other parents whose children still have to go to preschool would prefer it the way it is (Mike).

Anne had a different view and felt the parents had little choice, she states:

Definitely people should have a choice. I do not think the government should decide where the money goes, it’s up to you if you want to send your child or not... like me, if you’ve got a sick child, you’re better off with the money (Anne).

Overall it is important to note that while the majority of parents are willing to pay for preschool, the majority of those interviewed felt if they received extra money it may not go towards the intended purpose. At least when the scheme is free, their child along with *all* children can benefit regardless of their financial situation.

4.9 Conclusion

This aim of this chapter was to present the findings from both qualitative and quantitative data. The themes identified were grouped together under headings. Data presented under these themes include the participant’s profile. Following on for that the employment status, perceived benefit of education /care and then benefits of ECCE scheme regarding parents were outlined. The next chapter will discuss these emerging themes in detail.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The research question outlined in chapter 3 specifically asks what parent's perspectives are on the free preschool year. According to Harkness and Super 1992 (cited in Yamamoto and Lin, 2011:307):

All parents, regardless of their backgrounds, have ideals about what preschool should be and how their children benefit from such schooling experience.

Huntsinger and Jose (2009:398) claim that greater parental involvement has been found to relate to higher child achievement. Developing this further, Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994 (cited in Huntsinger and Jose 2009:408) state the influence of parental participation on children's achievement is not due to skill building, but rather to its impact on attitudes and motivation.

In line with the findings presented in chapter 4, the structure of this chapter will discuss the findings under the same sub headings, as these areas have emerged as being significant. These sub headings are profile of participants, purpose of scheme, benefits regarding children and parents, the preschool selection process, and lastly cost and the role of government support. These headings compliment findings in the literature to analysis parents' perspectives of the free preschool. As the second preschool year has recently been extended over a two-year term, this research is timely as limited research has been conducted to date from the perspectives of parents' in an Irish context. As discussed in previous chapters, currently around 73,964 children participate in this scheme (Pobal 2016:1).

In designing this study, the researcher explicitly focuses on parents' perspectives. This study makes an important contribution to the emerging debate on the free preschool year in Ireland. In the remaining sections, I will tease out the findings in greater depth.

5.2 Profile of Participants

An important aspect of this research was to acknowledge the profile of parents who participated in the research. This was achieved by combining economic and demographic aspects. This was a nationwide study as the ECCE scheme is available to every child eligible to enrol. While the study aimed to represent as many parents as possible from various backgrounds, a sample of the population was selected. This sample was selected using purposive sampling and was therefore relevant to the topic. The sample was drawn from both community and private settings as well as rural and urban areas. A document, titled *Early Years Sector Profile* released by Pobal found that 61% of services were located in urban areas and 39% in rural areas (2016:30). In the present study, the majority of parents considered themselves to be from rural areas. The consequence of this suggests that they have access to limited resources or services compared to urban areas. Developing this further, Early Childhood Ireland conducted research into this area. Its document, *Doing the Sums: The Real Cost of Providing Childcare* (2016:5) found many difference in urban and rural settings. Urban settings tend to be larger buildings, costing more to run and this is reflected in a higher cost to parents.

The research highlighted that the majority of the parents, 61.3% (n=73), fell into the 31-40 age bracket. This concurs with current research as research highlighted in HSE's Perinatal Statistic Report (2013:13) which states that the average age for first time mothers of 30.3 years. Also, an important aspect of this section of the research highlighted that the majority of parents were educated to QQI level 4-6 standard in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The educational level, socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds of parents have been studied as factors having an impact on children's development and learning. (Mine Göl Güven 2014;22).

This is a view also shared by the DCYA in its document *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* states that the economic security, education level and approach to parenting from all parents have a significant impact on a child's development (2015:9). In this case, economic security may refer to the ability to support the family home. The study shows that 64.7% (n=77)

were parents who participated currently in employment at the time. The significance of the impact of these factors is revisited later in the chapter.

5.3 Purpose of the Free Preschool Year

This heading best describes parents' perspectives regarding the purpose of the scheme. Three interesting descriptions sum up the data collected; care, education and the combination of care and education suggesting the scheme has a dual purpose. To reiterate from chapter 4, the researcher refers to education as the process of learning in a certain environment and care in terms of the child's overall health and wellbeing.

In terms of education, the free preschool allows children an early start to education. In the research, Jane felt that the scheme provided for education more than care. Amy had similar feeling and stated that "preschool caters for more the education". The scheme appears to offer a great opportunity to all children irrespective of their background. Heckman (2011:35) argues that educational equality is often seen as a social movement to bring equal education opportunities. Early childhood education or childcare choice can lay the foundations for academic progression. This is an important aspect researched by Adams and Rohacek (2002) cited in (Jinseok Kim Maryah Stella Fram 2009:77):

Child care choice is also increasingly important from a developmental perspective, as parents and policy-makers alike look to early childhood programs as a starting point for children's longer term educational success.

Starting education at an early age can promote confidence and self-esteem for young children. With suitable age appropriate experiences they build and develop their knowledge. UNICEF (2012:17) sums up this process by stating that academic achievement is based on building on existing skills and mastering new ones.

The term "care" was also highlighted by parents when asked their views on the purpose of the ECCE scheme. Uttal 1996 (cited in Vincent and Ball 2016:647) identifies: a relationship between mother and carer which she calls coordinated care, in which mothers view themselves as sharing

mothering with their childcare provider. This aspect also coincides with research discovered in this study. When interviewing Suzy, she felt passionate that children of this age still needed an element of care. She stated “I think there has to be an element of care in it because they are very small and they need to be looked after and minded”. As mentioned by previously Bronfenbrenner, the role of the family has an impact on the child’s life experiences. Hart and Risley (2003; 6/7) suggest that the role of the family in preparing children for social experiences is significant.

Before children can take charge of their own experiences and begin to spent time with peers in social groups outside the home, almost everything they learn comes from their families, to whom society has assigned the task of socializing children

The research highlighted that a significant percentage of parents felt that education and care combined best described their perspectives on the purpose of the scheme. 88.2% felt that both aspects combined was vital. This concurs with other research from Liu 2002; Ng et al. 2007, Stevenson and Stigler 1992, which states that parents view teachers as leaders and masters, who not only guide children’s academic development but also their moral growth (cited in Yamamoto and Lin 2011:313). A government publication released by the DYCA agrees by stating that early childhood education and care is important for individual educational and social progress (spotlight 2012:2). Developing this further, Paull (2014:15) describes the advantages of both care and education in preschool.

An important feature of childcare is that it can have a dual purpose. On one hand, it allows parents, usually mothers, to undertake formal paid employment. On the other it can provide developmental or educational benefits to the child which may not be available from parental care.

The findings in this study highlight that the free preschool can have a number of benefits for children who participate. During the qualitative interviews, Cathy and Suzy drew on their own personal experience of preschool as they attended themselves. They implied that it was a natural progression for children. Cathy, who is originally from England, suggested that this was a common progression route when she was younger, starting in preschool and then moving to primary which was on the same campus.

Suzy also had that opportunity when she was younger as she stated “I went to Montessori school when I was small, I was brought up with the fact

that they go to play school even it is only for a day or two". However, Anne did not agree and stated preschool is a "new thing" and would not send her child if she had to pay for it. It is important to place this in the correct context as Anne's child missed a lot due to illness and felt that preschool wasn't flexible for her child's needs. If the child was absent, she missed out on the preschool experience. Taking this into account, the question was asked regarding benefits for parents. The next section explores parent's perspectives of the benefits of the scheme.

5.4 Benefits of the Free Preschool Year

This section address parents' perspectives regarding the benefits of the free preschool year. It is divided into two section, the first section focuses on perceived benefits for the children and the second section explores the benefits of the scheme for the parents involved.

5.4.1 Benefits for Children

Parents involved in this study had similar perspectives regarding the benefits of the ECCE scheme for their children. An important finding that emerged from this section was being "ready" for primary school. This aspect was mentioned by all parents interviewed. Research shows that extensive research has been carried out in this area and there are many advantages in children who are school ready. UNICEF (2012:6) describes school readiness as the interaction between the child and the environmental or cultural experiences that increases the development outcomes for children.

The ECCE scheme can help the children deal with this transition from preschool to primary school. According to Spotlight (2012), the acquisition of school readiness is a key component of early childhood care and education. Evidence from the data concurs with this as most participants' agreed that the ECCE scheme had a major influence on their children being ready for school. A Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development 2008 suggest that children who enter school ready to learn are more likely to succeed. If parents are mainly of the same opinion, the

question must be asked; is being ready for school important? UNICEF (2012:16) states:

At the individual level, evidence from multiple perspectives (developmental, economic, social constructivist) implicates school readiness as an important factor in education achievement; children's development and learning; school completion including primary school; and ultimate success in adulthood.

Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2008 cited in Lasser and Fite 2011:171) believe that the role of preschools in preparing children for readiness in mainstream education is becoming increasingly important. Generally, research reviewed highlights school readiness as an important aspect of preschool. This concurs with the findings of this study as many parents also consider this to be a major benefit of preschool. According to UNICEF (2012:24) overall, the data across developed and developing countries demonstrate that children who are prepared by pre-primary or preschool programmes do better in school.

From the findings, parents also recognise the development of social interactions as an advantage to the ECCE scheme. Parents interviewed hoped that preschool would help their child develop, build and improve their social interactions with other children similar in age. Lisa stated that "socially its good... gives great confidence" and Cathy response was "Oh yes it is very good socially, it's about social interactions their own age and that's really important I think". This is an aspect researched by Zigler et al. (2006 cited in Lasser and Fite 2011:170) who argues that preschool not only provides the opportunity for school readiness but also the social and emotional regulation that makes learning possible.

Developing this point further, the school environment should offer a safe and secure learning environment for a child. The environment has to be suitable to cater for educational needs as well as social and emotional requirements. Regardless of age, the child has to be mature in order to thrive and learn in this environment. This point was mentioned by various parents during the interviews. Jane stated "they are in a learning environment". Another parent, Mary highlighted the setting stating "it's a structured environment". According to Lasser and Fite (2011:170):

Ultimately, school readiness comes not from an emphasis on academic preparedness in a conventional sense, but in preparing the hearts and minds of young children for participating in a community of learners

Overall, parents felt that there were many aspects of preschool that were beneficial for their children. The perception from parents is that the ECCE scheme is a suitable learning environment for their children with access to appropriate experiences which encourage social interactions and prepares them for the transition to school. School readiness, social interactions and the learning environment were important features highlighted in terms of the ECCE scheme. This coincides with research by Johansen et al. (1996 cited in Peyton et al 2001:204):

Parents begin to associate quality in child care with educational factors at about age 3; thus, parents of children just reaching their third birthday may be identifying as high quality care settings that are likely to provide social and educational benefits to children.

Although children appear to be the sole beneficiaries from the scheme, there are other beneficiaries, including parents. The following reviews the advantages of the free preschool year to the parents.

5.4.2 Benefits for Parents

This section focuses on the perceived benefits from the parent's point of view. From the interviews, a significant number of parents felt that the scheme released them of childcare duties, allowing for "free time". For example, Cathy discussed the benefits of the scheme as a parent stating "a bit of free time... not be bogged down with childcare myself". Mike, who is a father of 3 boys, felt it gives you a chance to get bits and pieces done. These findings actually concur with a study carried out by Paull (2014:31) as he states childcare may be used to allow child free time for parents to undertake domestic chores or for leisure. It is interesting that this opinion was commonly shared by parents. This indicates that scheme may be viewed as a family support and an extension of childcare for the parent. Although, as highlighted by Paull (2014) is it the government's responsibility to ensure parents get "free time" from their children? Although not the intended purpose of the scheme, the findings suggest parents are seizing the opportunity. Other expressions used by parents to describe their perceptions of the free preschool included the words

“convenience, free childcare and dependable”. Also, when asked if the free preschool was beneficial in supporting childcare needs the results seemed positive. 83.5% felt scheme beneficial in supporting their childcare needs but 47.1% still rely on relatives as other means of care (bearing in mind the majority of parents considered themselves from a rural area as previously noted and the supply of services may be limited).

Developing this point further, the demands of parenting are stressful.

According to Heckman (2011:33):

Parents need help and their children will suffer if they don't get it. Many factors in the family home may cause anxiety for parents such as personal issues, struggling to pay mortgages, poor employment opportunities or long commutes.

In a recent report published by early childhood Ireland, titled 'Doing the

Sums: The Real Cost of Providing Childcare' it also identifies parent's positions (2016:2). For many, juggling a work life balance is financially difficult especially with the high cost of childcare. The sector needs more funding which in turn can reduce the cost to the parent.

A few hours of relief from their childcare duties may be sufficient to have a lasting impact for parents or even allow them to return to the work force.

Jane, who works full time send her child to a full day setting childcare setting. Here, the child participates in the scheme and she felt it was handy as everything was under the one roof. This was a suggestion made by Paull (2014:21) who felt that some features of care arrangement will be beneficial to facilitate employment. In order to cater for parent's needs, it was essential to understand what aspects of preschool was important for them and how they selected preschools. This aspect is discussed in the following section.

5.5 Preschool Selection Process

According to research, parents want choice and flexibility (DCYA 2015:8).

This was evident in the data collected as responses under this section included location, quality, service available (preschool/full day care), qualifications and staffing. Paull (2014:23) argues that parent's choices are based on their employment and focus on staff experiences (as well as

qualifications) trustworthiness, reputation, reliability, accessibility, proximity to home and work, convenience, availability and cost.

Other research from Jinseok Kim, Maryah Stella Fram (2009:77) express similar views that child care decision-making is a process of balancing sets of priorities with the realities of what is available and accessible. The majority of parents when asked, made reference to the location of the setting (76.5% (n=91), and this appeared to be an important aspect when deciding on the suitable preschool. For example, Lisa indicated that she felt location was a priority stating because it's close to us. Amy felt the same and wanted something in the locality. Suzy also felt location was a major factor and stated the setting was literally 5 minutes down the road. It is interesting to note that location is such a dominant factor when deciding on preschool services.

Another aspect of choosing preschool was the reputation of the setting heard by word of mouth from friend, relatives or experiences of others. Ball and Vincent (2016:580) state that for some parents, personal recommendations are perceived to be more trustworthy than apparently objective data. In the current research, 58.8% (n=70) influenced their choice of setting based on the staff employed at the service. Cathy felt grateful to the staff at the service as she spoke about her child:

Well he's been diagnosed with Asperger's that was actually picked up by staff at the preschool I didn't have any clue. I think is great about play school that if there is a problem it can be identified early (Cathy).

Cathy also stated as she knew the staff and she felt comfortable. Amy also felt the childcare workers were of high importance as they helped her son through his difficulties stating that the staff are helping her son along with his speech difficulties.

Anne used a personal experience as she knew a staff member in the setting when deciding on a preschool for her child. As mentioned earlier, parents avail of the scheme to free up their time but it is clear this only happens if the parents are comfortable leaving the child in the service.

This is a view cited in Peyton et al (2001:192) indicating that:

Parents rate quality characteristics (e.g., provider relationship with child, educational emphasis, physical environment, equipment, and staff training) as being more important than practical ones (e.g., location, hours of operation, availability, cost) (Britner & Phillips, 1995; Fuqua & Labensohn, 1986; Rassin et al., 1991).

Engaging with parents is an important part of quality reassurance within a setting. Early childhood workers in partnership with parents should show consistence when dealing with children both bringing different experiences to situations. A good working partnership acknowledges quality principles in both the preschool environment and home life and endeavour to achieve the best outcome for the child.

Mine Göl Güven (2014:39) state that the importance of parental involvement in early childhood education is widely accepted. Research by Darling (2007:205) make links between Bronfenbrenner and parents by stating that parenting practices had changed over time with the influential work of child development experts but that the adaptation of expert advice was not widely accepted by everyone in society.

This research concurs with the findings as while staff was highlighted by parents, it was not a high significance. In addition, the current study found that 71% of parents easily found information on accessing the scheme however a significant number had limited knowledge regarding pedagogical approach implemented bearing in mind majority asked where educated to a QQI Level 4-6 or higher. During the interview, Anne a mother of 3 children, stated that they had the Montessori room as they called it or whatever it was. She continued by saying “I suppose I don't know how much of that is actually happening in the child care or is in his child care day (Anne)”.

This may highlight the lack of knowledge regarding the structure in the preschool. However, the majority of those asked were confident that their children was enrolled in a Montessori setting and according to Pobal (2016:41) the Montessori curriculum is used by almost half of all services (46%).

5.6 Cost and the Role of Government Support

Early education serves at least two primary interest; those of parents seeking opportunities for development enhancement for their children or childcare to support their own employment and those of society at large in relation to the development of human capital (Pianta et al 2009:51).

This section analyses parents' views on the financial cost of the ECCE scheme. According to the DCYA (2015:8) affordability of childcare is a barrier to employment and is resulting in restricted working hours, turning

down or leaving work, or being prevented from looking for work. Research by Indecon (2013) shows that the cost of childcare in Ireland averages between €730 and €1,100 per month for young children which is the second most expensive in the OECD and may impact on labour-market participation. It would appear that a lot of money is spent by parents using childcare in order to hold down employment. However, findings emerging from this study may contradict this as 85.7% (n=96) of participants would send their child even if they had to pay. It's important to keep in mind the study covered preschool hours and not full time care but if parents are willing to pay, is it necessary for the Irish government to continue to fund this scheme. Research also indicated that 35.3% of parents had children attend preschool services before the scheme was introduced and financially funded this themselves. McKeown (2015:16) argues that improving child outcomes and narrowing socially generated gaps in children's skills cannot be the sole responsibility of the early year's system or even the school system.

In the study, Mike felt that the free preschool year helped with their development and Cathy, who used preschool services before with previous children saying "Yes I have paid for it (for older child) but I'm happy to do that". Barnett (2008:2) states that increasing public investment in effective preschool education programs for all children can provide substantial education, social and economic benefits.

Kirp (2009) also shares this view and believes that:

Universal preschool is the answer to any number of social ills and in several instances cites exceedingly optimistic calculations by advocates on the potential future societal savings attributable to universal preschool.

Therefore, it is in the interest of economic growth and society in general to look after the next generation. According to UNICEF (2012:25), the return on investment for early childhood and pre-primary programmes is higher than for any other human capital development programme. This suggests that overall the scheme sees a higher return for the money invested indicating that the investment is worth it. Lasser and Fite (2011; 172) suggests that the opportunity of universal public preschool presents an opportunity to welcome new learners to public education. This presents children that may not have the opportunity to attend otherwise. Developing

this point further, Spotlight (2012:2) states that most other European countries have statutory access to preschool provision for two years for each child from aged 3. Ireland is in line with these recommendations but only just as changes were recently introduced in the 2016 budget which seen the expansion in the scheme to allow access for 2 years for each child within the eligibility age bracket.

Commenting on the work of Bronfenbrenner, Hayes et al. (2017;2) states he recognised and valued the importance role that state supported early childhood education and care could play.

Also highlighted in the current study is the fact that 39.5% of parents would prefer a reduction in child benefit but free preschool compared to 32.8% who would pay for the preschool service themselves. Developing this questioning further, those earning less than 25,000 would prefer an increase but pay for preschool themselves. Those interviewed, including Jane and Cathy, suggested they might spend money elsewhere and not on preschool services so for that reason would prefer the money to go directly to the service. Anne, whose daughter experienced illness during her ECCE year, strongly disagreed with the above. She felt that people should have a choice stating “I do not think the government should decide where the money goes, it’s up to you if you want to send your child or not”.

It appears to be a good investment from the government’s point of view to offer to the children of Ireland. The intentions of universal preschool for all children is clear:

To avoid having early childhood education only for households who can pay for private options or bestowing funds only to families who have been labelled with a specific need. Rather, their governments view early education as a right of all young children and as a complementary support of all families engaged in the task of child rearing (Swiniarski 2006:202).

Lasser and Fite agree that the universal scheme can be beneficial for young children. They indicate that promoting universal preschool as a means to improving academic and developmental outcomes for all children makes sense in both academic and economic contexts (2011:170). The advantages of cost implications appears to be researched

in detail. Across the research, findings seem to indicate that the ECCE scheme is a worthy investment for young children and their families.

5.7 Conclusion

Most countries are now beginning to realise that not only do ECEC services fulfil parents and children's needs, but also that they serve families and society as a whole (Mine Göl Güven, 2014:20).

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the findings from the research conducted with parents in order to explore their perspectives of the ECCE scheme. In order to achieve this, findings were merged under sub headings and discussed individually. The profiling of parents was the first section which appreciated the various backgrounds and family status of those involved. Parents were asked their views on the purpose of the scheme and the strongest findings here to emerge was that parents view the scheme as having a dual purpose equally valuing care and education at this stage of their children's preschool experience. Benefits of the scheme recorded by parents include preparing the children for school and to provide opportunities for social interactions with peers similar in age. The scheme can help with the cost of childcare allowing parents to have "free time" or employment. When selecting preschools, parents view the locality of the setting and prior knowledge of the staff important. The last section focused on the cost implications and the role of the government.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

As the ECCE sector is still growing in Ireland there is limited data collected in this area to date especially taking into account parent's perspectives. This chapter outlines the main conclusions and recommendations on the data found and acknowledges parents' perspectives on the ECCE scheme. As noted by Pobal (2016:1), €139m was spent in 2014/2015 and this figure has grown by 28% to €178m in 2015/2016. This is a substantial amount of funding invested by the government who recently introduced a second year. Behind the facts and figures, these numbers represent children and their families across the country. Drawing from the findings of this study, we gain an insight into parent's perspectives of the scheme.

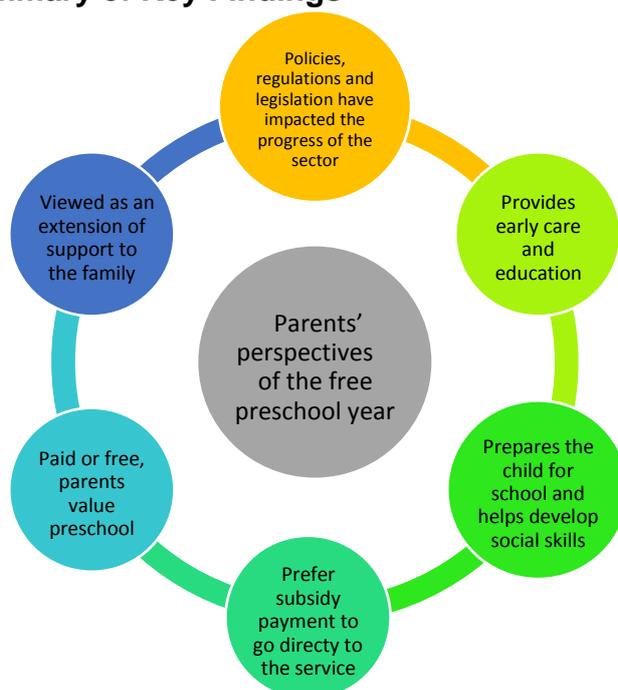
6.2 Research Question

The guiding hypothesis sets the contextual framework in which the research was conducted. In this study, the two main hypothesis focused on the fact that parents are guided by family circumstances and also, paid or free, they value preschool. Family circumstances are unique and change from family to family depending on various conditions such as income, culture, employment, family size and so on. From reviewing literature in this area, it became apparent that there was limited research conducted from parent's perspectives. Many aspects may influence parent's views on the scheme so this research applied mixed methods implementing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to gain an in-depth understanding of parents' perspectives. Key findings that developed from this research is explored in the next section.

6.3 Summary of Key Findings

Figure 6.1 outlines the key findings emerging from the current research and will be discussed in the following section.

Figure 6.1 Summary of Key Findings



From reviewing the key achievements of the childcare sector in Ireland from chapter 2, it lends an insight into the growth and progress achieved over the last few years. From researching Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory to considering the legislation, policies and regulations the sector has witnessed enormous change. There is no doubt that our culture is changing, the most common example of this can be clearly seen by reflecting back on an era where free preschool (or childcare services) were not a common aspect of family life. Today, there are many forms of childcare provisions used by parents. This may be for a number of reasons, to support parents in general or a necessity to help parents hold down employment. In addition to this, recent frameworks, such as Aistear or Síolta ensure a suitable curriculum framework and quality service for young children. As mentioned earlier, every child has a right to education, which is underpinned in Ireland by The Education Act 1998 and more specifically, in Síolta standard 1, which focuses on the rights of the child. It is apparent that there is an increasing awareness that Children's Rights must be actively promoted.

In addition to cultural change, we are also experiencing a systems change in society. Public investment is welcomed in the ECCE scheme and by

making it available to every child will enhance the future of children, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Acknowledging the various backgrounds in which participants represent, profiling the parents allowed an understanding of the family circumstances. The study takes into account variable factors such as the type of setting, location, employment status and educational attainment.

In terms of parents' perspectives on the purpose of the scheme, a number of key terms emerged. Care was highlighted as important but it was equally the case in terms of education. This research established that both of these terms combined best describe parents' perspectives on the purpose of the scheme. The ECCE scheme has a dual purpose to cater for both care and education.

Parents viewed preschool to have many benefits for children who participate. The majority of those questioned felt strongly that preschool helps prepare the child for the transition from preschool to primary school. The structure of the learning environment along with the routine and Aistear/Síolta Frameworks ensures the child is prepared for this journey. From working in the sector, I also feel the ECCE scheme can benefit children in a variety of ways but the clear advantage of the scheme is grounded role it plays in the holistic development of the child. Both Aistear and Síolta provide clear frameworks to realise this potential.

It was evident that parents who participated in the study believed that the free pre-school year gives children important social and academic opportunities. At the same time, parents felt that they also shared the benefits of pre-school. This included freeing up time in their day, releasing them of childcare duties and an extension of support for the family. The free preschool year also resulted in assisting some parents to hold down employment encouraging them into the labour market. It is a dependable scheme that parents can rely on and the free preschool enhances affordability to all children to participate regardless of their families' financial situation.

Drawing from the findings in this research, it was encouraging to see that 85.7% of parents would pay for preschool if it was not free and 35.3% of those questioned had previously paid for older children before the scheme was introduced. Also, the majority parents prefer the payment to go directly to the setting as if they got it as extra child benefit allowance, it may not go to the planned intention.

6.4 Final Thoughts

Moving forward, it would appear that parents hold the ECCE in high regard. There are many aspects to the scheme that were highlighted throughout the study. While there has been various studies carried out in this sector the key aim of this research placed the focus on the parent's perspectives of the scheme. A recommendation moving forward would be to conduct a longitude study over an extended period, following parent's perspectives before, during and after their children participate in the scheme. This would provide a more in-depth view of parent's perceptions throughout the entire process. To conclude, this research provides an opportunity for parents' perspectives to be incorporated into future plans in the early childhood care and education sector.

Bibliography

- Ahiakpor, F. & Swaray, R. (2015) "Parental expectations and school enrolment decisions: Evidence from rural Ghana", *Review of Development Economics*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 132-142.
- Anderson, K.J. & Minke, K.M. (2007) "Parent Involvement in Education: Toward an Understanding of Parents' Decision Making" *The Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 100, no. 5, pp. 311-323.
- Ball, S.J. & Vincent, C. (1998), "'I Heard It on the Grapevine': 'hot' knowledge and school choice", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 377-400.
- Barnardos (2010) available at <http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/campaigns/disadvantages/Early%20Childhood%20Education%20and%20Care%20-%20Aug%202010.pdf> [accessed on 09/02/16]
- Barnett, W. S. (2008) "Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications" Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Centre & Education
- Bedmar, V. L.; Palma, V. C.-D (2011) "The Family and Preschool Education in the European Union; Reconciling Education and Work". *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences* 15, 2271-2277.
- Berk, L. (2005) "Infants, children and adolescents". Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Berlinski, S; Galiani S.; Gertler, P., "The effect of pre-primary education on primary school performance". *Journal of Public Economics* 2009, 93 (1), 219-234.
- Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.G. & Williams, J.M. (2008) "The craft of research" 3rd edn, The University of Chicago, Chicago; London.
- Brannen, J. & Moss, P. (1991) "Managing Mothers: dual earner households after maternity leave" (London, Unwin Hyman).
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (1998) "The ecology of developmental processes. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Theoretical*

models of human development” (5 ed., pp. 993-1028). (Handbook of Child Psychology; Vol. 1). New York: Wiley.

- Bronfenbrenner, U (1994) “Ecological models of human development”. In international Encyclopedia of Education Vol. 3 2nd Ed. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Bryman, A. (2016) “Social research methods” 5th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford;New York;.
- Building Irelands Smart Economy (2008) available at http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/BuildingIrelandsSmartEconomy.pdf [accessed on 09/02/16]
- Burns N. & Grove S.K. (2005) “The Practice of Nursing Research : Conduct, Critique & Utilization”. Elsevier Saunders, St Louis
- Central Statistics Office (2000) Population and Migration Estimates. Available at www.cso.ie [accessed on 01/02/2016]
- Central Statistics Office (2017) Available at: www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-chi/qnhschildcarequarter32016/ [accessed on 18/10/2017]
- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2003): “An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2003”. Dublin:
- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2005). “Early childhood in Ireland – Evidence and perspectives”. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
- Children’s Rights available at: [http://childrensrights.ie/content/know-your-rights-my-right-education#Early childhood care and education](http://childrensrights.ie/content/know-your-rights-my-right-education#Early%20childhood%20care%20and%20education) [accessed on 18/10/2017]
- Citizens Information (2010) available at: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/money_and_tax/budget_2010.html [accessed on 20/11/2016]
- Communication from the Commission (2011) available at: <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0066:FIN:EN:PDF> [accessed on 20/11/16]

- Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (2008) "Funding the Future: Strategies for early childhood investment, costing and financing" Coordinators' Notebook, no. 30, CGECCD, Toronto.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013), "Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches" 3rd edn, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles.
- Cryer, D., Tietze, W. & Wessels, H. (2002), "Parents' perceptions of their children's child care: a cross-national comparison", Early Childhood Research Quarterly, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 259-277.
- Darling, Nancy. (2007) "Ecological Systems Theory: The Person in the Center of the Circles" Research in Human Development. Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241730257_Ecological_Systems_Theory_The_Person_in_the_Center_of_the_Circles
[accessed on 09/03/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013) "Right From the start Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy" Available at:
<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/policy/RightFromTheStart.pdf>
[accessed on 04/05/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2016) "Childcare in Budget" Available at:
<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/childcare/20151103BudgetDayQandA.PDF> [accessed on 09/03/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017) "Action Plan on School Age" Childcare. Available at:
<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/20170306SchoolAgeChildrenActionPlan.pdf> [accessed on 09/03/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2009) available at:
https://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/Statement_03_February_2009__Minister_outlines_changes_to_Ear/1017.htm [accessed on 09/03/16]

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) “Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020”.
- Government Publications Office, Dublin. Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) “Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland”. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Available at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20150722IDGReportonEarlyYrsInvestmentReport.pdf> [accessed on 09/03/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015a) “Future Investment in Early Years and School age Care and Education: Report on Open Policy Debate” Tuesday, 31st March 2015. Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) “Future Investment in Early Years and School age Care and Education: Report on Public and Parent Online Consultation Processes” April/May 2015.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) “Education at a Glance” available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/International-Statistical-Reports/Education-at-a-Glance-OECD-Indicators-2015-Briefing-Note.pdf> [accessed on 01/04/16]
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017) “Rules for DCYA Childcare Funding Programmes”. Available at: <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20170724RulesForDCYAChildcareFundingProgrammes20172018.PDF> [accessed on 15/08/17]
- Department of Education and Science (1999a) “Ready to Learn - A White Paper on Early Childhood Education”. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform (2005) “Developing School Age Childcare: Report of a Working Group of the National Childcare Co-Ordinating Committee” Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality. Available at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/JELR/ChildcareFullRpt.pdf/Files/ChildcareFullRpt.pdf> [accessed on 09/03/16]

- Derksen, Teri (2010). “In influence of ecological theory in child and youth care: A review of the literature”. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* 1(3/4), 326–339.
- Donohoe Josephine Gaynor Frances (2003) “Education and care in the early years : an Irish perspective” 2nd edn Dublin : Gill and Macmillan
- Donohoe Josephine Gaynor Frances (2011) “ Education and care in the early years : an Irish perspective” 4th ed Dublin : Gill and Macmillan
- Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) “Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission”. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf [accessed on 20/05/17]
- Early Childhood Ireland (March 2017) “Doing the Sums – The Real Cost of Providing childcare”. Available at <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ECI-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf> [accessed on 20/05/17]
- Early Childhood Ireland Budget Briefing, (2015) Available at <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Childcare-in-Budget-2016-Briefing-ECI-Oct-20152.pdf> [accessed on 20/05/17]
- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2003) “Educational disadvantage; context and understanding”. Available at http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/01_insights_on_quality.pdf [accessed on 01/04/16]
- CECDE (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006) “Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education” Dublin CECDE.

- CECDE (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006) “Siolta: Research Digest” Dublin CECDE.
Available at: <http://siolta.ie/media/pdfs/Research%20Digest%20-%20Rights%20of%20the%20child.pdf> accessed on 18/10/2017]
- El Nokali, N.E., Bachman, H.J. and Votruba-Drzal, E. (2010), “Parent involvement and children’s academic and social development in elementary school”, *Child Development*, Vol. 81 No. 3, pp. 988-1005.
- Elizabeth Dunphy (2008) “Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment A research paper” NCCA Aistear.
- Flood E & Hardy, C (2013) “Early Care & Education Practice” Gill and Macmillian, Dublin.
- French, G. (2007), “Children’s Early Learning and Development, Background Paper to the Framework for Early Learning” Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
ncca.ie/backgroundpapers
- Fuller, B., & Liang, X. (1996). “Market Failure? Estimating Inequality in Preschool Availability. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*” 18(1), 31-49. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1164229> [accessed on 01/04/16]
- Garner, M Wagner, C., Kawulich, B (2009) “Teaching Research Methods in the Social Science” Ashgate Publishing Limited England.
- Gray D. (2013) “Doing research in the real world” 3rd edn. London: Sage Publications.
- Greenberg, J.P. (2011) "The impact of maternal education on children's enrolment in early childhood education and care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 33, no. 7, pp. 1049-1057.
- Hart, B and Risely, T. R. (1995) “Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children”. Baltimore. Brookes.

- Hayes, N. & Kernan, M. (2008), "Engaging young children: a nurturing pedagogy". Gill & Macmillan, Dublin
- Hayes, N. (2013) "Early years practice: getting it right from the start" Gill & Macmillan, Dublin.
- Hayes, N. and S. Bradley (2009) "Right by Children: Rights-Based Approaches to Policy".
- Hayes, N.(2010) "Early Childhood: an Introductory Text" 4th edn, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin.
- Hayes, N. O'Toole, L. Halpenny A. (2017) "Introducing Bronfenbrenner;A Guide for Practitioners and Students in Early Years Education" Oxon Routledge.
- Heckman, J (2006) "The Economics of Investment in Children" Dublin: UCD Geary Institute, Policy Briefing NO.1.
- Heckman, J. (2011), "The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education", American Educator, Vol., 35, No. 1, pp 31-35. www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2011/index.cfm
- Hirsto, L. (2010), "Strategies in Home and School Collaboration among Early Education Teachers", Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 99-108.
- Huntsinger, C. S.; JOSE, P. E., (2009) "Parental involvement in children's schooling: different meanings in different cultures". Early Childhood Research Quarterly 24 (4), 398-410.
- Hussain, I. & Sultan, S. (2010), "Parent's literacy and pre-school education: a study of practices and problems of early childhood education in Pakistan", Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 624-628.
- ICPN (2009) Available at: https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/ICPN_April_2009_Post-Budget_Analysis.pdf [accessed on 09-03-16]
- Indecon (2013) Report on Support for Childcare for Working Families and Implications for Employment "Supporting working families – Releasing a brake on economic growth" Report for

Donegal County Childcare Committee. Available at:
<http://www.donegalchildcare.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Supporting-Working-Families.pdf>
[accessed on 20/11/16]

- Jesson, J., Matheson, L. & Lacey, F.M. (2011) "Doing your literature review: traditional and systematic techniques" SAGE, Los Angeles, Calif; London.
- Jostein Gripsrud, Jan Fredrik Hovden, Hallvard Moe (2011) "Changing relations: Class, education and cultural capital" *Poetics*, Volume 39, Issue 6, Pages 507-529 Available at: <http://0-dx.doi.org.library.itsligo.ie/10.1016/j.poetic.2011.09.007> [accessed on 06/10/16]
- Kayili, G. & Ari, R. (2011), "Examination of the Effects of the Montessori Method on Preschool Children's Readiness to Primary Education", *Kuram ve Uygulamada Egitim Bilimleri*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 2104.
- Kieran McKeown, Trutz Haase & Jonathan Pratschke (2015) "Determinants of child outcomes in a cohort of children in the Free Pre-School Year in Ireland" 2012/2013 available at: <http://kieranmckeown.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/81.-Outcomes-of-Free-Pre-School-Year-in-Ireland.pdf> [accessed on 02/03/16]
- Kim, Jinseok, and Maryah Stella Fram (2009). "Profiles of Choice: Parents' Patterns of Priority in Child Care Decision-Making". Available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ830317> [accessed on 20/11/2016]
- Kim, Y., (2009) "Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Moving the focus away from deficiencies of parents". *EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH REVIEW*, 4 (2), 80-102.
- Lasser, J., & Fite, K. (2011). "Universal preschool's promise: Success in early childhood and beyond". *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39, 169–173.

- McDonald, B (2009) "An Introduction to Sociology in Ireland" 2nd edn Gill and Macmillian, Dublin.
- Menchini, L. (2010) 'The ongoing transition of child care in the economically advanced countries', Proceedings of the Child on Europe Seminar; European Network of National Observatories on Childhood.
- Mhic Mhathuna, M. & Taylor, M. (2012) "Early childhood education and care: an introduction for students in Ireland" Gill & Macmillan, Dublin.
- Mine Göl Güven (2014) "Back to Basics: What Do Parents and Teachers Expect of Early Childhood Education and Care?" BOĞAZIÇI ÜNİVERSİTESİ EĞİTİM DERGİSİ Volume 31 Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275465320_Back_to_Basics_What_Do_Parents_and_Teachers_Expect_of_Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care [accessed on 20/11/2016]
- Morgan, D. L. (1998) "Planning focus groups" (book 2) focus group kit. Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Moule, Pam. Hek, Gill (2011) "Making sense of Research: an introduction for health and social care practitioners" 4th edn Los Angeles : Sage.
- NIVALA, V. (1999). Païivaïkodin Johtajuus "Leadership in a Child Care Center; in Finnish". Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis 25. Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.
- Nores, M. & Barnett, W.S. (2010), "Benefits of early childhood interventions across the world: (Under) Investing in the very young" Economics of Education Review, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 271-282.
- O. John-Akinola, Y. & Nic Gabhainn, S. (2014), "Parental participation in primary schools; the views of parents and children" Health Education, vol. 114, no. 5, pp. 378-397.
- O'Neill, E (1999) "Early Childhood Education: The disadvantaged child: How early is early"? Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies 2 (1 ARTICLE 2).

- OECD (2002) “The OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care: Background report for the United Kingdom” Available at; <http://www.oecd.org/ireland/34431749.pdf> [accessed on 09/03/2016]
- OECD (2004) “Directorate for Education, ECEC Policy, Country Note for Ireland”. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/ireland/34425332.pdf> [accessed on 01/04/16]
- OECD (2007) “Babies and Bosses - Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries”. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/babiesandbosses-reconcilingworkandfamilylifeasynthesisoffindingsforoecdcountries.htm> [accessed on 04/03/16]
- Office of the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs (2009) Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Barry Andrews “Welcomes Free Preschool Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)” press release 7 April.
- OECD (2011) “Encouraging quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) – Minimum standards matter” OECD, Paris
- OECD (2011). “PROJECT OVERCOMING SCHOOL FAILURES: POLICIES THAT WORK” SKILLS, E. A., ED. EDUCATION AND SKILLS: DUBLIN.
- OECD (2012) “Education: quality standards essential to boost child learning and development” OECD. (Press release).
- OECD (2015) “Education at a Glance” Available at:<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/International-Statistical-Reports/Education-at-a-Glance-OECD-Indicators-2015-Briefing-Note.pdf> [accessed on 09/02/16]
- Parahoo, Kader (2006) “Nursing Research : principles, process, and issues” 2nd edn Basingstoke, Hampshire, [England] ; New York : Palgrave Macmillan.
- PAULL, G., (2014) “CAN GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN CHILDCARE BE JUSTIFIED?” ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, 34 (3), 408-410.

- Perinatal Statistics Report (2013) Available at:
http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/Perinatal_Statistics_Report_2013.pdf [accessed on 23-02-2017]
- Peyton, V., Jacobs, A., O'Brien, M. and Roy, C. (2001) "Reasons for choosing child care: associations with family factors, quality, and satisfaction" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 16, pp. 191-208.
- Pianta, R.C., Barnett, W.S., Burchinal, M. & Thornburg, K.R. (2009), "The Effects of Preschool Education: What We Know, How Public Policy Is or Is Not Aligned With the Evidence Base, and What We Need to Know", *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 49-88.
- Plowright, David. (2011) "Using mixed methods : frameworks for an integrated methodology" Los Angeles : SAGE
- Pobal "Early years sector profile" (2015-2016) Available at:
<https://www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Latest%20Early%20Years%20Sector%20Profile%20Published.pdf> [accessed on 20/04/17]
- Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) "Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission". Available at;
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategicframework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf [accessed on 04/03/17]
- Punch, K. (1998) "Introduction to social research: quantitative and qualitative approaches", 2nd edn, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, Calif;London;.
- Punch, K (2005) "Introduction to Social Research–Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches". London: Sage.
- Punch, K. (2006) *Developing effective research proposals*, 2nd edn, SAGE, Thousand Oaks;London;. Link

- SALMON, A. K., (2008) "PROMOTING A CULTURE OF THINKING IN THE YOUNG CHILD" EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION JOURNAL 35 (5), 457.
- Sarantakos, S. (2005) "Social Research" 3rd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, New York;Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire;.
- Scarbrough, G., Cullen, J., Corcoran, M.P., Share, P., Dr & Institute of Public Administration (Ireland) (2008) "Belongings: shaping identity in modern Ireland" Institute of Public Administration, Dublin.
- Schweinhart, L., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Baarntee, W., Belfield, C., & Nores, M. (2005) "Lifetime effects: The high/scope Perry preschool study through age 40" Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press.
- Sheldon, S.B. and Van Voo rhis, F.L. (2004), "Partnership programs in US schools: their development and relationship to family involvement outcomes", School Effectiveness and School Improvement, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 125-148.
- SHIH, Y.-P.; YI, C.-C., (2014) "CULTIVATING THE DIFFERENCE: SOCIAL CLASS, PARENTAL VALUES, CULTURAL CAPITAL AND CHILDREN'S AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES IN TAIWAN. JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE FAMILY STUDIES", 45 (1), 55. Social and Educational Research. Dublin, Dublin Institute of Technology.
- SOLAS (2016) National Skills Bulletin 2016 available at: <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/NationalSkillsBulletin2016.pdf> [accessed on 09/03/16]
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008) "Culturally Speaking. Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory" 2nd edn. London: Continuum
- Spotlight (2012) Available at: <http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/housesoftheoireachtas/libraryresearch/spotlights/spotEarlyEd180412.pdf> [accessed on 01/02/16]

- Start strong (2014) “Foundation of Growth” Available at:
http://www.startstrong.ie/files/StartStrong_FoundationsOfGrowth.pdf [accessed on 01/04/16].
- Start Strong (2013) “CHILDCARE BUSINESS OR PROFESSION”? START STRONG: DUBLIN. Available at:
http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Childcare_Business_or_Profession_Full_Report_Web_Version.pdf [accessed on 09/05/16].
- Surestart (2004) ”The effective provision of preschool education (EPPE) Project” DFES PUBLICATIONS: NOTTINGHAM.
- Sylva. K. (2000) “Early Childhood Education to Ensure a ‘Fair Start’ for All”. Pp. 121 – 135 in Combating Educational Disadvantage; Meeting the needs of vulnerable children. Theo Cox. [Ed.] London. Falmer Press.
- Tashakkori, A. & Teddlie, C. (2008) “Foundations of mixed methods research: integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques in the social and behavioral sciences” SAGE, London.
- TULSA Available at:<http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/list-of-pre-school-services-by-county>) [Accessed on 19/11/2015]
- Turney, K. & Kao, G. (2009) “Barriers to School Involvement: Are Immigrant Parents Disadvantaged?” The Journal of Educational Research, vol. 102, no. 4, pp. 257-271.
- United Nations General Assembly (1989). United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- UNICEF (2012) “School Readiness-A Conceptual Framework” Available at
[https://www.unicef.org/education/files/Chil2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/education/files/Chil2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL(1).pdf) [accessed on 20/11/16].
- Vander Ven, K. D. (2006) “Patterns of career development in child and youth care” Child and Youth Services, 28(1/2), 231-257.

- Vincent, C. and Ball, S. J. (2001) "A Market in Love? Choosing Pre-school Childcare" *British Educational Research Journal*, 27: 633–651. doi:10.1080/01411920120095799
- Webb, J., Schirato, T. and Danaher, G.,(2002) "Understanding Bourdieu" Sage:London
- Winsler,A Rafael M. Diaz, Ignacio Montero (1997) "The role of private speech in the transition from collaborative to independent task performance in young children" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Volume 12, Issue 1, Pages 59-79 Available at: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(97\)90043-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(97)90043-0) [accessed on 28-11-16]
- Woodhead, M. Faulkner, D. Littleton, K. (1998) "Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood" London Routledge
- Yamamoto, Y.; LI, J., (2012) "What makes a high quality preschool? Similarities and differences between Chinese immigrant and European American parents' views" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 27 (2), 306-315.

Appendix A-Questionnaire for Parents

Are you? Male { } Female { }

What is your nationality?

What age group do you best fit into?

Under 25yrs { } 25-30yrs { } 31-40yrs { } 41-55yrs { }
56+yrs { }

Are you?

Single { } Divorced { }

Married { } Widowed { }

Separated { }

Would you consider your place of residence as?

Urban { } Rural { }

What is your household's total net income per year?

Under 25,000 euro { }

25,000-40,000 euro { }

40,000-70,000 euro { }

70,000 euro + { }

What is the highest level of education you have

Junior Certificate { }

Leaving Certificate { }

QQI Level 4/5/6 { }

Hetac Level 7/8 { }

Masters/Doctoral { }

Are you employed?

Yes { }

No { }

Full Time { }

Part Time { }

If employed, what is your occupation?

Do you have older children who experienced preschool?

Yes { }

No { }

If yes, did you have to pay for it?

How did you find out about the ECCE scheme or free pre-school year?

What factors affect your choice of pre-school?

Location { }

Curriculum { }

Reputation { }

Facilities { }

Staff { }

Other { }

Please comment

How readily available was information on the ECCE Scheme (Free preschool year)

Does the setting have an educational programme?

Yes { }

No { }

If yes, what approach to education is used in the setting?

Naíonraí { }

Aistear { }

Montessori { }

Steiner { }

Highscope { }

Not sure { }

What are the most important developments in general you would like to see introduced to the pre-school programme over the next few years?

What other means of care, if any, do you use for your child?

Crèche/Full day Care { }

Childminder/Au pair/Nanny { }

After-school facility { } Relative { }

Would you send your child to pre-school if you had to pay for the service?

Yes { } No { }

Comment:

Do you think free pre-school is beneficial in supporting your childcare needs?

Should pre-school cater for?

Education { } Care { } Both { }

Which would you prefer?

Increases in Child Benefit Payments/Children's Allowance and pay for preschool? { }

Reduction in Child Benefit Payments/Children's Allowance but free pre-school? { }

Explain:

Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

Returning the questionnaire:

You are asked to return the questionnaire to the pre-school at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and the information you provide.

At a later stage, there may be a follow up interview for more in-depth interview. If you would like to take part in this research please provide your contact details below so the researcher can contact you. Contact details will only be used to contact you in relation to research and will not be disclosed to any other parties.

I agree to participate in further research.

Participant Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Contact details: _____

If you have other questions concerning your contribution in this research, please contact me at:

Name: Ciara Brady

Telephone number: 0863990921

Email address: s00083055@mail.itsligo.ie

Thank you kindly.

Appendix B-Pilot Study Questionnaire

Are you? Male { } Female { }

What is your nationality?

What age group do you best fit into?

Under 25yrs { } 25-30yrs { } 31-40yrs { } 41-55yrs { }
56+yrs { }

Are you?

Single { } Divorced { }

Married { } Widowed { }

Separated { }

Would you consider your place of residence as?

Urban { } Rural { }

What is your household's total net income per year?

Under 25,000 euro { }

25,000-40,000 euro { }

40,000-70,000 euro { }

70,000 euro + { }

What is the highest level of education you have

Junior Certificate { }

Leaving Certificate { }

QQI Level 4/5/6 { }

Hetac Level 7/8 { }

Masters/Doctoral { }

Are you employed?

Yes { }

No { }

Full Time { }

Part Time { }

If employed, what is your occupation?

Do you have older children who experienced preschool?

Yes { }

No { }

If yes, did you have to pay for it?

How did you find out about the ECCE scheme or free pre-school year?

What factors affect your choice of pre-school?

Location { } Curriculum { }

Reputation { } Facilities { }

Staff { } Other { }

Please comment

How readily available was information on the ECCE Scheme (Free preschool year)

Are there benefits for your child in this service?

Does the setting have an educational programme?

Yes { } No { }

If yes, what approach to education is used in the setting?

Naíonraí { } Aistear { }

Montessori { } Steiner { }

Highscope { } Not sure { }

What are the most important developments you would like to see in preschool programme?

What other means of care, if any, do you use for your child?

Crèche/Full day Care { } Childminder/Au pair/Nanny
{ }

After-school facility { } Relative
{ }

Would you send your child to pre-school if you had to pay for the service?

Yes { } No { }

Comment:

Do you think free pre-school is beneficial in supporting your childcare needs?

Should pre-school cater for?

Education { } Care { } Both { }

Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

Returning the questionnaire:

You are asked to return the questionnaire to the pre-school at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and the information you provide.

At a later stage, there may be a follow up interview for more in-depth interview. If you would like to take part in this research please provide your contact details below so the researcher can contact you. Contact details will only be used to contact you in relation to research and will not be disclosed to any other parties.

I agree to participate in further research.

Participant Signature: _____

Print Name: _____

Contact details: _____

If you have other questions concerning your contribution in this research, please contact me at:

Name: Ciara Brady

Telephone number: 0863990921

Email address: s00083055@mail.itsligo.ie

Thank you kindly.

Appendix C-Information letter for parents

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Ciara Brady and I am currently undertaking research which focuses on parents' perspectives of the ECCE Scheme.

To help me with this process I would like to invite you to take part in this questionnaire. All responses are completely anonymous.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore your experiences of using the scheme in the pre-school service.

Returning the questionnaire:

You are asked to return the questionnaire to the pre-school at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your time and the information you provide.

Kind Regards,

Ciara Brady

Appendix D-Interview Consent Form

To whom it may concern,

My name is Ciara Brady and I am a student in Institute of Technology, Sligo.

As part of my studies, I am currently researching parent's perspectives of the free preschool year/ECCE scheme.

I would like to interview you to gain knowledge and understanding of your child's participation of the free preschool year.

I will give you a copy of the questions to look over and if there are any that you feel you would be uncomfortable with and would prefer not to answer, please let me know and I will exclude them from the interview.

I will be recording the interview using a Dictaphone and this will remain confidential.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary.

Please sign below if you agree to participate:

Participants Name: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E-Information letter for Gatekeeper (Provider)

Dear Provider

My name is Ciara Brady and I am currently undertaking research in parent's perspectives in the Free Preschool Year or ECCE Scheme. The main aim of my research is to explore parent's experiences of using preschool for their children.

I have randomly selected 2 settings from each county from CSO 2011 data (one community based and one private owned services) to partake in this study.

To help me with this process I would appreciate if you could act as gatekeeper and distribute questionnaires (enclosed) to the parents of the children in your service. When they are filled out, I would appreciate if you could collect them and post them back to me in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

All responses are completely anonymous. I have included my contact details below if you require any further information on the research.

Thank you for your time,

Kind Regards,

Ciara Brady

Research Office
School of Business and Social Science
IT Sligo
Ash Lane
Co. Sligo
086 3990921
S00083055@mail.itsligo.ie

Appendix F Coding Guide for Quantitative Data

COUNTIES

DUBLIN	1
MONAGHAN	2
CAVAN	3
LAOIS	4
OFFALY	5
MAYO	6
SLIGO	7
ROSCOMMON	8
LONGFORD	9
KILDARE	10
WICKLOW	11
CORK	12
LIMERICK	13
WESTMEATH	14
GALWAY	15
CARLOW	16
LEITRIM	17
WATERFORD	18

PRIVATE SETTING	1
COMMUNITY SETTING	2

GENDER

Female 1

Male 2

What is your nationality?

- Irish 1
- British 2
- Welsh 3
- Polish 4

What age group do you best fit into?

- Under 25yrs 1
- 25-30yrs 2
- 31-40yrs 3
- 41-55yrs 4

Are you?

- Single 1
- Married 2
- Separated 3
- Divorced 4
- Co-habiting 5

Would you consider your place of residence as?

- Urban 1
- Rural 2

What is your household's total net income per year?

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|----------|---------------------------|
| Under 25,000 euro | 1 | 25,000-40,000 euro | 2 | 40,000-70,000 euro |
| 3 | 70,000 euro+ | 4 | | |

What is the highest level of education you have

- Junior Certificate 1
- Leaving Certificate 2

Fetac Level 4/5/6 3

Hetac Level 7/8 4 Masters/Doctoral

5

Are you employed?

Yes 1

No 2

Full/Part time

Full Time 1

Part Time 2

If employed, what is your occupation?

Do you have older children who experienced preschool?

Yes 1 No

2

If yes, did you have to pay for it?

Yes 1

No 2

How did you find out about the ECCE scheme or free pre-school year?

Crèche 1

Pre-school 2

Word of mouth 3

Relative/friend 4

Media 5

Online 6

What factors affect your choice of pre-school?

Location	{ }	Curriculum	{ }
Reputation	{ }	Facilities	{ }
Staff	{ }	Other	{ }

How readily available was information on the ECCE Scheme (Free pre-school year)

Easy to source	1
Adequate information	2
Difficult to source	3

Does the setting have an educational programme?

Yes	1
No	2
Don't know	3

If yes, what approach to education is used in the setting?

Naíonraí	{ }	Aistear	{ }
Montessori	{ }	Steiner	{ }
Highscope	{ }	Not sure	{ }

What are the most important developments in general you would like to see introduced to the pre-school programme over the next few years?

What other means of care, if any, do you use for your child?

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Crèche/Full day Care | 1 |
| Childminder/Au pair/Nanny | 2 |
| After-school facility | 3 |
| Relative | 4 |

Would you send your child to pre-school if you had to pay for the service?

Yes 1 No 2

Comment:

Do you think free pre-school is beneficial in supporting your childcare needs?

- | | |
|----------|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |
| Not sure | 3 |

Should pre-school cater for?

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Education | 1 |
| Care | 2 |
| Both | 3 |

Which would you prefer?

Increases in Child Benefit Payments/Children's Allowance and pay for Pre-school? 1

Reduction in Child Benefit Payments/Children's Allowance but free pre-school? 2

Not sure 3

Appendix G-Questions for Interviews

1. What is your understanding of a free preschool year?
2. As a parent, what value does it have for you?
3. What value does it have for your child?
4. What are your childcare arrangements for after the service?
5. Why/How did you choose preschool? (Factors influenced you)
6. Do you have to pay extra for the service at the moment?
7. Would you pay if it was not free?
8. Would you prefer payment to go directly to the service or get preschool free or to the parent as child benefit
9. If you could amend the preschool service what changes would you like to make?
10. Any further comments