

Athlone Institute of Technology

Relationship Building with Children in the Early Years Setting:
The Perspective of Early Years Practitioners

By

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Declaration of Non-Plagiarism

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Abstract

The bond between a child and adult who is special to them is central to a child's well-being and development (Bowlby, 1980/2000). This thesis examines and outlines the findings from a research study carried out to explore the importance of relationship-building with children. The aim of the study is to explore the childcare practitioners view on their role in relationship-building with children in their practice. The objectives were as follows: To explore the potential benefits of the Key Person Approach in a childcare setting in terms of building relationships with children. This objective also reviewed the benefits when forming relationships with children. Second objective was to identify the obstacles on a day to day basis around implementing relationships into the childcare practitioners practice. Lastly, to explore how childcare practitioners facilitate transitions from home to childcare for children and parents.

There was one stage to data collection in this study, two focus groups in two different childcare services, which collected qualitative data. The practitioners were considered to have a vast amount of knowledge and experience in the subject around relationship building. The study revealed a variety of views representing important strategies practitioners use on a daily basis relating to the topic - relationship building. In general practitioners felt building relationships with children from a early age benefited them for their future development. It was emphasised that relationships for children will benefit them in many ways for example: confidence in exploration, mental health, risk taking, self-regulation, social ability improves and many more. More importantly the practitioners opinion on the Key Person Approach was identified both childcare facilities had different views on the strategy.

Moreover, smooth transitions are vital for children when forming relationships. The practitioners that were questioned linked the importance of practitioners, children and parents working together to aid the child through the transition. However, it was evident that practitioners face barriers when forming relationships with children in the childcare setting. For example practitioners mentioned disability and administration was the main concern. However, as the practitioners recommended implementing new interventions are essential when building relationships with children. Secondly

another recommendation was training. This training will ensure all practitioners bring the highest amount of their knowledge and their supports to the children.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction – Relationship Building in the Early Years

‘A child’s well-being is an essential foundation for early learning, and all subsequent learning. It is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others and their emotional well-being is directly related to the quality of early attachments’ (NCCA, 2004; p. 24).

This section provides an in-depth evaluation of the literature in relation to childcare practitioner’s view on their role in building relationships in the early years setting. A broad range of research is included in the review and it aims to explore the importance of relationship building in a childcare setting and the impact it has on the child. It will then focus on the transition from home to childcare for both a child and parents experience and how to promote a loving environment. Following on from this, the barriers childcare practitioners face when building relationships with children. Furthermore, the significance of overcoming the barrier’s to maintain a happy relationship. The following headings open the discussion around the importance of relationship building in the early stages of childhood.

1.2 What is Relationship-Building?

The process of relationship building is in early childhood it is when children begin developing their social and emotional skills, which influence children’s mental health and wellbeing, now and in the future. Children learn these skills through their important relationships including families, peers and early childhood staff (Morgan, Brugha, Fryers& Stewart-Brown, 2012). Similarly, according to Joseph & Strain (2010), *“Building a positive relationship with young children is an essential task and a foundational component of good teaching. Children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, and responsive interactions”* (Joseph & Strain, 2010; pg. 5). Thomas & Chess (1977) state that from birth, babies have been found to be dissimilar from each other in nine ways: activity level, adaptability, approach/withdrawal to novelty, attention span, distractibility, intensity of reaction, mood, regularity, and sensitivity threshold. These

traits are formed or reinforced by the child's relationships and experiences. Children with challenging temperaments may find it hard to deal with life's stresses (Thomas & Chess, 1977). Reassuring and responsive adults in a compliant environment can lessen this potential difficulty (Fish, Stifter & Belsky, 1991). In these environments relationships develop, learning and development improves (Fish, 1991).

Development by early years' practitioners supports children to have an easy loving childhood. Sylva et al. (2004) found that children who attend preschool, experience benefits in their development compared to those who did not attend, and that the quality of the interactive relationships with staff had an impact on outcomes.

Moreover, Burchinal et al. (2000), followed 89 children which were in a long childcare for 6 to 36 months. Observational data was collected to regulate childcare quality, and were correlated with scores on assessments of cognitive, language and communication skills. The results suggested that higher-quality care resulted in better outcomes for communication and language as well as cognitive development.

1.3 Importance of Relationship Building

Attachment is the process through which young children form close relationships with a small number of well-known adults. According to Bowlby (1969/1982), the study of a child's first relationship is most often the focus on the child – mother bond, as the mother generally is the child's primary caregiver. The development of this primary relationship is perceived in attachment theory as the outcome of repeated interactions and experiences between infant and primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Oliver, 2010; McLeod, 2010; Dickson et al, 2010; Morgan, 2011; Munro, 2011; Ryan, 2012 & Care Inquiry, 2013). This type of relationship begins when the child is born and builds on socialisation and other expected relationships in their lives (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, when considering the reasons why young children may be at risk for later difficulties and how to provide the best support and implement strategies to promote these risk factors, investigating the quality of children's early relationships with caregivers is of paramount importance (National Scientific Council on the Child, 2008/2012).

In the early months of a child's life, sensitive, warm and responsive care is essential (Fahlberg, 1994; Ryan, 2012 & Care Inquiry, 2013). It is important to know that

relationship impacts form not only from the parents of infants/toddlers or close family member(s), but may be formed by early years' practitioners in childcare settings. This statement has proof, according to Harrison, (2003); Honig, (2002); Howes, Rodning, Galuzzo, & Myers, (1988); Schaffer & Emerson, (1964) & Sullivan, (1999) they state that it has been proven that children are capable of forming a relationship with more than one person at a time. In addition, according to Beek & Schofield (2014), children can form early attachments to other people because they form a positive 'Internal Working Model' this model is a cognitive framework involving mental representations for understanding the world, self and others. A person's interaction with others is guided by memories and expectations from their internal model which influence and help evaluate their contact with others (Bretherton, & Munholland, 1999). Furthermore, due to the high percentage of early years' practitioners being female in the workforce as part of the global social and economic trend (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Van Krieken, 2005), it is also convincing to propose that early years' practitioners can play a main role in the hierarchy of attachment figures of children.

Childcare practitioners need to be competent to recognise and understand their infants' communicative emotions and react in ways that meet their infants' needs (Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007). These early relationships have substantial impacts on children's later developmental outcomes. In addition, Bowlby (1980) & Raver & Knitzer (2002), propose a similar argument that a child's early attachment experiences serve not only as templates for a person's holistic development, but are also the hub around which a person's life turns – from an infant and toddler throughout youth and the years of adulthood and into old age (Bowlby, 1980/2000; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Children develop and succeed in the context of close and reliable relationships that offer love and nurturance, security, and responsive interactions. A positive caregiver - child relationship built on trust, understanding, and loving will gain a child's cooperation and incentive and increase their positive outcomes in childcare (Webster-Stratton, 1999). *"Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – 'who I am', 'how I belong' and 'what is my influence?'"* (Deewer, 2009; p.20). More importantly, Qualification and Curriculum Strategy (2009) state that a child that builds positive identities through caring relationships will take more risk, develop resilience, and develop 'can-do' attitudes.

Furthermore, Gunnar & Donzella, (2002), Luthar & Brown, (2007), Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, (2009) highlight the vital role that early relationships play a huge part in children's lives. Supportive and sensitive relationships between children and adults may serve as a barrier against the hyperactivity of areas of the brain involved in the stress response system and can protect the developing brain from the potentially harmful effects of toxic stress (Gunnar & Donzella, 2002; Luthar & Brown, 2007; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Two researchers have demonstrated that in the face of stressful situations, children in a secure relationship with a parent do not demonstrate elevated levels of cortisol, a stress hormone (Main & Solomon, 2006). However, children who are not in secure relationships have difficulty in using their parents' presence to prevent cortisol increases in similar situations (Main & Solomon, 2006).

Ebbeck & Bonnie Yim (2007), state *"the fostering of positive relationships between infants/toddlers and their caregivers in child-care centres continues to be an area of current interest to many professionals focussing on the education, health and overall welfare of this age group"* (Ebbeck & Bonnie Yim, 2007; p. 2). The reason being is care givers help children feel secure, which frees them to explore, play and learn (Crowell & Waters, 1994). Furthermore, the importance of a strong attachment relationship between a child and their carer is well recognised and has been researched since attachment theory was first proposed by John Bowlby in 1958. Forming a secure attachment is one of the ways that caregivers in child-care centres foster positive relationships with infants/toddlers. Similarly, according to, Goldberg, (2000); Baker & Manfredi-Petitt (2004); Arend, Gove & Sroufe, (1979) suggest practitioners play an important role in attachment relationships. Building on Bowlby's theory, researchers began to enrich and refine the definitions of attachment. Harrison (2003) for instance, identified that attachment is *'our unique human ability to form lasting relationships with others and to sustain these relationships over time and distance'* (Harrison, 2003; p.1). Researchers have also discovered the important effect of attachment on one's subsequent developmental issues, for example a child's sense of self (Howes, 1999; van IJzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermon, 1992), confidence in exploration (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Gowrie Training, Ebbeck, H.Y.B. Yim & Resource Centre, 2001), mental health (Honig, 1984/1993; Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978), self-regulation (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Power, & Wang, 2001;

Shore, 1997; Sroufe, 1979), verbal fluency (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), personality (Honig, 2002; Karen, 1994) and social ability (Ainsworth & Bell, 1974; Arend, Gove, & Sroufe, 1979; Erickson, Korfmacher, & Egeland, 1992; Sroufe, 1995; Troy & Sroufe, 1987; Turner, 1991).

Moreover, another development of research is by Hohmann & Weikart (1995), building on the work of Erikson, identified five building blocks of human relationships which are: trust, autonomy, empathy, initiative and self-confidence. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005) believe that these five building blocks provide the foundation for socialisation as children grow and learn in their environment that supports the development of positive relationships. These blocks are essentially linked to the Framework for Early Learning's themes of identity and belonging, well-being, exploring and thinking and communication. Trevarthen (1998) argues that the motivation and outcome of learning is inter-subjectivity which is a process of meaning making; the construction and reconstruction of joint purposes between a child as essential companion and co-participant. Relationships are therefore vital for a sense of identity, as children learn to communicate and also to interact in conflict which is an essential problem solving method (Evans, 2002; Corsaro, 1997)

1.4 Facilitating Transitions from Home to Childcare for Children and Parents through the importance of relationship building

'Transitions should be seen as a process not an event, and should be planned for and discussed with children and parents. Settings should communicate information which will secure continuity of experience for the child between settings' (Practitioner Guidance for the EYFS, 2007). Four researchers emphasise the significance of helping children transition to the new environment from their home (Kim & Kim, 2008; Shin & Cho, 2012). Researchers suggest that the initial sudden separation from a primary caregiver and the transition to a new environment can make children feel isolated, unstable, and scared (Balaban, 2006; Gu, 2004). Bove (2001), Elliot (2003) & Kim and Kim (2008) found strategies to support transitions, for example, early years' practitioners expressing warmth and welcoming attitudes toward children, showing children ways of interacting with their parents, and making an effort to connect between the home and the child care centre by allowing the child to

bring their toys from home or by creating home-like environments. In such strategies young children's emotional stability is taken into concern and the goal is to try to divert the child from their separation anxiety using interesting toys or activities (Elliot, 2003). Furthermore, McGettigan & Grey (2012) revealed that greater involvement by parents in their children's childcare will lead to successful transitions, more importantly this will lead to more sharing of information between parents and practitioners and parents will be viewed as valuable resources bringing added value to the setting.

Children flourish when they feel relaxed with the people who are compassionate and educating them Brostrom, (2004). Brostrom (2004) also adds that children will also need to feel that their parents and other adults around them are comfortable with each other. Creating the emotional backdrop is as important as any curriculum, play opportunity or theory of development (O'Hara, 2008). It requires an understanding of how best to promote positive relationships and more importantly, the criteria for assessing a childcare room readiness for supporting smooth transitions for children with diverse cultural, social, emotional, and language experiences reflect the complexity of designing the childcare setting environments that offer access to learning opportunities for all children that must not only be available, they must be accessible' (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Another method to facilitate successful transitions from home to childcare is implementing a Key Person approach which is a term commonly used to describe secure attachments that are developed in early childhood settings. It links each child to one educator who assumes primary responsibility for their care (Lally, 1998). A Key Person Approach is ideal way to form relationships. Elfer, Goldschmeid & Selleck (2006) describe a Key Person approach as 'a way of working in childcare in which the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling and supporting close attachments between individual children and individual early years' staff' (Elfer, Goldschmeid & Selleck, 2006; p.18). Elfer (2003) explains that 'A Key Worker, whose task is generally administrative and organisational, is not the same as a Key Person, who's role embodies 'an emotional relationship as well as an organisational strategy' (Elfer, 2003; p.19). The practitioners are appointed to a number of children in the same room and they meet the children's physical needs, for example,

changing nappies, feeding and so on, and in this way it begins to build a secure relationship with the children. Furthermore, early years' practitioners need to be attentive that they are the secure base from which the child can explore the environment and gain independence. Furthermore, Colmer (2008) states that '*A Key Person approach is not 'exclusive' relationship, and promotes a secure relationship, and not a 'clingy' relationships, with parents and children*' (Colmer 2008; p. 108). McDormatt states that a Key Person can be linked to Siolta Standards, Play and the curriculum. Moreover, Bowlby (1982) claims that children that have gained a secure attachment with their Key Person will find it easier to become familiar with other staff and the environment. The process recognises that when the Key Person cannot be there, it allows a child to cope in their absence because they have established a sense of safety within the broader environment (Sellock, 2001) However, Sellock (2001), does not believe a Key Person is essential for older children as they are more independent and also she states that practitioners in a childcare facility may not think it is fair for the child who is attached to their Key Person as they may be absent for a few days. This will end in an upset child.

Goldschmeid (2003), cannot recommend enough that the early years' practitioner must think of 'the importance of a triangle of relationships between the child, the parents and the Key Person (Elfer, Goldschmeid & Selleck, 2003; p.19). Parents have been known by many researchers as being the main carers and primary educators of their children and therefore are entitled to be involved in a meaningful transition way in both the care and education process in the early childhood setting (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Whitebread & Coltman, 2015). Bruce (2004) also emphasises the importance of giving children and parents the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the childcare environment so they can start building relationships with the key members of staff. Practitioners must share records with parents, in addition to the statutory minimum requirements under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006). For example, a crèche must retain a daily notebook/l-pad recording the child's physical care (bottles, meals, nappies) and achievements such as smiles, new words, friendships, and so on. It is important that practitioners are honest with parents and let them know about problems and issues of concern, as well as progress and achievements, as early as possible (NCCA).

1.5 Barriers when implementing Relationship Building

'Attachment is the deep connection established between a child and caregiver that profoundly affect the child's development and ability to express emotions and develop relationships' (Winter, 2015, p18). Research has found that professionals find it hard to build and maintain high quality relationships with children and vice versa (Winter, 2015). There are several reasons for this. Furthermore, Winters (2015) gave two examples, the child's attachment may have being disrupted or practitioners having pressure completing observations. Furthermore, Boivin et al.(1995); Gazelle & Ladd (2003) purpose that social withdrawal is not a clinically defined behavioural, social, or emotional disorder in childhood. Indeed, some children are seen to be content when he/she spends most of their hours and days removed from others for example, children who spend time alone playing and working. Conversely, there are those individuals who, while in social company or who actively choose lives of solitude to escape the initiation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Boivin et al. 1995, Gazelle & Ladd 2003). Finally, there are those individuals who have no other choice to be in solitude because of rejection (Boivin et al. 1995, Gazelle & Ladd 2003). However, McCollum & Hemmeter (1996) found that an intervention consisting of interactions with parents of children with developmental disabilities and they found that there was clear proof that such programs changed parents' interactions with their children. There is also evidence that the degree of parental sensitivity, responsiveness and emotional availability are predictive of outcomes in children with intellectual and developmental disabilities which is an advantage for childcares (Goleman, 2006).

1.5.1 Barriers Practitioners Face

Childcare practitioners have added pressure of paperwork that they are required to complete every day (Tickell, 2014). For example, they must complete observations while using activity sheets that the child has being participating in to ensure they are reaching their developmental milestones. This type of administration is preventing practitioners from spending quality time they require with each child. Research has found that there is roughly twenty two hours of paperwork involved for each child attending a facility (Moore, 2013). Some research findings show the effects of workload on ECCE (The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme that provides

early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age) quality, indicating that practitioners with a heavy workload perform less well than colleagues with lighter schedules (De Schipper et al., 2006). Meaning they have very little interest in the children and feel they need to get the paper work done, relationships are being ignored by the practitioner.

Furthermore, research has found that childcare settings are dominated by women (Callender, 2000), enduring low status (Forth & Millward 2001) poor pay (Forth & Millward, 2001) variable working hours and informal working arrangements along with restricted training opportunities and an indistinct career structure. Callender (2000) suggested that high turnover of staff and a lack of trained staff are major threats to sustainability and also building secure relationships with children. In the absence of a secure attachment relationship, some children can find it difficult to trust adults in the face of meeting to many different practitioners and may become confused (Forth & Millward, 2001). Research points out that the ability of staff to attend to the needs of children is influenced not only by their level of education and training but also by external factors, such as their work environment, salary and work benefits (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000).

1.5.2 Barriers Children Face

There are some children that find it hard to form relationships. This may include disability, autism, and absence of a secure attachment and so on. Whilst they may have particular needs, it does not mean they cannot form relationships with caregivers or childcare practitioners as it may just need time (Luthar, 2003). However, people around them need to give more consideration to help them build relationships, there are many positive interventions that aid children with disabilities and it is up to the childcare facility to implement them and get the help the child needs.

The effects of marked and prolonged separation of young children from their parents, described as 'maternal deprivation' by Bowlby (1951). More recently, research has also come to understand the vital importance of the quality of care before and during separations from parental figures (Rutter, 1979). In the absence of a secure attachment relationship, some children can find it difficult to trust adults in the face of

previously negative and abusive encounters (Forth & Millward, 2001). These feelings of mistrust can be intensified by the constant turnover in childcare and the lack of time to form relationships (Rutter, 1979).

As children grow and develop their language builds, but unfortunately for some children they may have language barriers. Along with abstaining from interaction with peers, speech restraint is central to most operational definitions of shyness, social withdrawal and building relationships (Rutter, 1979). This may result in rejection by peers, and peer rejection is known to predict poor school performance even in the earliest school years (Lansdown, 2005). Furthermore, children with autism have it difficult to communicate with others and this in turn effects how they make sense of the world around them.

1.6 How can practitioners and children challenge these barriers?

Promoting a relationship-building model, proper sequencing of adult behaviour is essential. Dolby (2007) claims that the earliest relationships depends on the educator's ability to be emotionally available, consistent, sensitive and responsive to a child's needs. The main focus for childcare practitioners develop relationships by spending one to one time together (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004) Research has found that practitioners who spend a significant amount of time with a child/children throughout the day is better able to settle into the environment setting (Dolby, 2003).

Harris & Pressley (2009) propose that early years' practitioners must get to know the child through understanding their own preferences, views, background and culture..According to Harris & Pressley (2009), *'the social dimension of the environment is structured and adapted to promote engagement, interaction, communication, and learning by providing peer models, peer proximity, responsive adults, and imitative adults; and by expanding children's play and behaviour'* (Butterfield, Martin, & Prairie, 2004; p. 34).

As a childcare practitioner, communication is 'key' when interacting with children of all ages. By having a positive personal approach for any given situation is important to challenge any barrier that prevents relationships from happening. Two important examples of good communication are: always listen attentively to what the child has

to say and look interested in what the child has to say at all time(Gail & Philip, 2010). This will give each child a sense of security in the relationship and will encourage the child seek you out to discuss issues and concerns, as well as positive experiences(Gail & Philip, 2010). It will also help the childcare practitioners to be aware of any developmental delays and direct problems within the setting.

1.7 Summary

The aim of this research project is to explore the Childcare Practitioners view on their role in relationship-building in their practice. The objectives above aim to explore how childcare practitioners facilitate the transition from home to childcare for children and parents. The second objective will identify the obstacles on a day to day basis around implementing relationships into the childcare workers practice. Finally, aim three will explore potential benefits of a 'key worker approach' in a childcare setting in terms of building relationships with young children. This research project was supported by research highlighted throughout the literature review by gathering data from practitioners in child care facilities. The researcher chose to undertake the research project in order to obtain a greater understanding of what barriers existed in the early years that hinder relationship building for children and practitioners and what solutions could be put in place to avoid the barriers. To conclude, from reading this literature review, it is clear that relationship building is essential in the early years' environment and has many benefits for children, practitioners and parents.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview of the research method that was exercised and will provide the rationale for selecting the particular method. It will also describe the research design, sampling and participation selection, procedure and the ethical consideration that was useful to the research topic. This section will finish with a discussion of the limitations that were encountered in this research study.

2.2 Research Question

The aim of this research was to explore the early year's practitioner's view on their role in relationship-building with children in their practice. The objectives of the study are:

- To explore how childcare practitioners facilitate the transition from home to childcare for children and parents
- To identify the obstacles on a day to day basis around implementing relationships into the childcare workers practice
- To explore potential benefits of a 'Key Person approach' in a childcare setting in terms of building relationships with young children

2.3 Research Design

One important factor that needs to be considered before partaking in research is to identify which framework is appropriate for the study. There are two models to collecting data that can be considered by the researcher, quantitative and qualitative research. Punch (2002), states that '*quantitative research collects facts and studies the relationship of one set of facts against another*' (Punch, 2000; p. 103). It focuses on larger samples. This uses a technique that quantifies and if possible generalises the results (Bell, 1993). Qualitative research focuses on smaller samples than quantitative research. The sampling group chosen generally have some

characteristic of interest to the researcher and the research project (Punch, 2000). According to Hogan et al. (2009) qualitative research is concerned with '*collecting and analysing information in many forms, chiefly non-numeric*' (Hogan et al. 2009; p. 26).

In order to attain the main aims for this study the researcher and her supervisor felt for this research project qualitative research was more appropriate to use to obtain data. The specific method of research that was used in this study was by the means of structured focus groups with a small number of childcare practitioners and managers in two early year settings. A qualitative research method was chosen as it develops in-depth information around the subject of building relationships, through the childcare practitioner's perspectives. Furthermore, it would help gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations from the early year's practitioners and a vast amount of detailed information needed to be gathered for the study. Quantitative methods can be valuable in certain research studies, however the researcher did not believe that it would be relevant to this particular study. The reason was being quantitative research does not study things in a natural setting or discuss the meaning things have for different people as qualitative research does. Through a qualitative method the author is able to probe the participants for detailed and valuable answers. However, qualitative method is time consuming and the researcher must transcribe the data and then work with the material that has being shared. Seidman (1998), highlights, '*that any method of research will take time and energy*' (Seidman, 1998; P. 98).

2.4 Participants

For the purpose of this study the focus groups were carried out with early years' practitioners and managers in the childcare setting. It was decided that two focus groups would be conducted with three or four childcare practitioners from each setting. The reason for the two different childcare facilities was to reduce the similarities of the answers obtained.

The starting point that were chosen for the study consisted of six early years' practitioner's, working with different age children. For confidentiality reasons, they will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. The practitioners were all female

within the age bracket of 22-50 years of age. Among the participants was the youngest (P1). She teaches children in Montessori ranging from 3-6 years. She has a level 8 which she finished this year and has one year experience. She works alongside the following two practitioners I am going to mention.

P2 has a level 8 she is a room leader and is in the same room as P1. She has four years childcare experience and two years in the setting. She works with 3-6 year olds.

The third participant (P3) is the manager of the childcare facility. She has 21 years childcare experience and has own the crèche for 19 years and she has a Level 7 and wants to further her studies by completing her level 8.

P4 is from a different childcare facility with the following two practitioners. She works in the baby room and is the room leader. She has a FETAC Level 5 qualification has seven years childcare experience.

P5 is with the pre-school children 4-6 years and has a Level 8 Degree. She has eight years childcare experience and three was in Australia. She has worked in the setting for the last four years.

And, the last participant (P6) she is the manager of the facility. She has a FETAC Level 5 degree in Childcare and a Level 8 Degree in Management. She spends most her days managing the crèche, but if they need help or short staffed she will step in. Also, she has eighteen years childcare experience managing facilities and she has owned this crèche for the last 8 years.

2.5 Research Materials

The materials used during the process of completing this research study included, firstly, a draft of questions (See Appendix 1) was completed to ensure questions were clear, relevant to the topic and to certify that the aims and objectives were addressed. Secondly, a pilot interview was conducted with two participants in same course, to help discard any faults or misperception and also to see if the questions are open for discussion. Following this, the final questions (See appendix 2) were completed. The author then started to seek for a childcare facility by handing in a Information Sheet (See Appendix 3), it included contact details of the researcher,

which indorsed the participants the opportunity to contact me with any questions relating to the research being conducted. After this, they accepted to participate within the focus group by signing a Consent Form (See Appendix 4) and agreeing to allow the author to use a recorder during the completion of the focus group that assured to protect the participant's information, identification and confidentiality. The consent forms were collected on the day of the focus group completion.

2.6 Procedure

Firstly, the researcher visited two childcare facilities, giving detailed information about the research study to the manager. The researcher ascertained whether the managers felt that their staff may be interested in participating in the research. The researcher left consent forms (see Appendix 4) and information sheets (see Appendix 3) for the manager to consult with practitioners about participating in the focus group. The forms gave detailed information stating what the research would contain and the researchers contact details. The information sheet made it clear that the participation is voluntary.

The researcher gave a time frame to the managers and practitioners to decide whether or not to take part in the study. The researcher believed by giving them time it would give them an opportunity to think about the focus group and discuss it with fellow peers and managers. The researcher contacted the two childcare facilities by phone call to set the focus group date and time that is convenient for the practitioners who are interested in participating in the research study. The researcher made sure that each participant understood the confidentiality of the recorded focus group. More importantly, the researcher informed the participants that the questions will be only on the topic of relationship-building. No payment or incentive for each participant was given. The participants arranged that the focus group was to be conducted in a quiet room on the childcare facility grounds. This was important as participants would be at ease within the environment they work in and have confidentially during the focus groups. The researcher arrived early to access the childcare facilities, in order to arrange chairs and to finalise any queries the practitioners have. Each focus group lasted 40 minutes each and was audio recorded with the permission of participants (see Appendix 4). It was communicated

to each participant that the tapes would be destroyed after the findings had being written, presented and no longer required for examination purposes.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are slowly becoming an important area in social research, particularly when concerning vulnerable groups or people where English is not their first language. Ethical issues are important elements in assessing the impact of validity (Charleton, 2014). Ethical considerations for the focus group were applied during this research.

Firstly, the researcher submitted a proposal form to the ethics committee in Athlone Institute of Technology. After submission to the Ethics Committee a few days later permission was approved to conduct the research. Secondly, all the participants were fully aware of the purpose of the study. The researcher made sure to safeguard against anything that could cause harm to the participants taking part. If at any point where researcher felt that the participant is a danger to themselves or others the researcher made sure that the participant was referred to the appropriate counsellors to receive the help they need (See Appendix 5).

The researcher is to safeguard the records and ensure they are coded and secure on password protected computer, certifying that the participant's identity is not exposed. Consent will be required to use quotations for the research project and caution will be used as to not expose the identity of the person or business. It was outlined that participants can withdraw from the study at any time without any questions asked. Participants were also informed that they didn't have to be audio recorded if they felt uncomfortable by it. The researcher will ensure that they provide a non-judgmental and trusting environment (Charleton, 2014)

2.8 Delimitations

According to Thomas, Silverman & Nelson (2015) every study has limitations. They define limitations as being shortcomings that cannot be either controlled or are the results of the restrictions imposed by the researcher. The use of focus groups can be a disadvantage because they tend to become influenced by one or two dominant

people during the session thus making the output very biased. The researcher must intervene in handling the situation.

As it is also a qualitative piece of research Marshall & Rossman (2016) continue to explain how it can be biased. As it is only the researcher who is conducting the research and writing it up so they may overlook some aspects because they are looking for something else. By acknowledging the limitations of this study it opens up opportunities to further the research again and expand on the literature which is already currently available.

Lastly, it was essential for the researcher to avoid a position where the participants think that they are friends as this could affect the information that was being conveyed (Charleton, 2014).

3. Results

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will identify the key findings from the study. The information was gathered from the two focus groups conducted with six early years practitioners from two different childcare facilities. The aim of the study was to explore the early years practitioners view on their role in relationship-building with children in their practice. The findings are broken down into headings and correspond to the aims and objectives of the study. The themes are: the importance of relationship building with children, the transitions from home to childcare, the barriers preventing relationship building, the key worker approach and the recommendations the practitioners suggested that would build better relationships.

3.2 Method of Analysis

The method the researcher has chosen to analyse the data was by means of thematic analysis. 'Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic' (Boyatzis, 1998; p. 6). As the researcher has stated in the methodology section, the practitioners will be known as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. In this section the results were categorised into five themes and are discussed in the following sections.

1. Importance and benefits of relationship building with children
2. Supporting transitions from home to childcare for children and parents
3. The practitioners perceptions on the Key Person Approach
4. Barriers preventing practitioners and children from building relationships
5. Recommendations given by the practitioners to maintain relationship building in the early years setting

3.3 Importance & Benefits of Relationship Building with Children

Practitioners must build one to one relationships which is vital for each child in a childcare environment. Examples of the significance of relationship-building with children include: the positive impact on the child's development, successful transitions and continuity. Seeking the child's likes and dislikes is important and also valuing parents' ideas is an important aspect in relationship building. When the researcher asked the practitioners about their opinions on the benefits of relationship building, there is a unanimous agreement in the two focus groups, declaring that *"that all children will feel comfortable, safe and happy on a day to day basis in our crèche"* (P6). This is illustrated in the following statements:

P1:

"Early relationships impact the child's later development"

P2&P3 explain how important it is to be responsive at all times for the children and to show love and security. P3 states: *"This means that the more that a child experiences contingent responses, the more they will be armed with the skills to be independent and won't need us often"*

P4:

"We need to make them feel important in every way we can, so by building relationships we are letting them know that we do have an interest in each of them and we are attentive in everything they say, also communication is a big thing, especially as I am in the baby room. All the children are non-verbal so I need to build a relationship with the child in order to understand their needs and wants"

P5&P6 state that forming relationships with both the child and parents are essential to the child. It shows from the child's perspective that they are getting on and everything is ok. **P6** says *"Children express themselves more when they are in a relaxed environment and to see their parent and practitioner get on with each other will help"*.

The benefits of relationship-building with children varied somewhat, but the principle belief that practitioners felt relationship building is the key importance because it will support wellbeing and their future mental health. All six Practitioners outlined the benefits as to why relationship-building is essential for children.

P1&P2 emphasise the many benefits relationship building has for children, they both feel children will feel comfortable in the childcare environment because they feel secure so they will play, explore and get the courage to take risks. **P1** gave a good example: *“Children will take risks in a secure environment they will go that little bit further knowing that we are here, also children will learn to negotiate with their own needs/wants and trying to respect other people’s needs/wants, and they learn through conflict that there is also someone that is going to come away with nothing. But they have to learn that it is ok”*

P3:

“After a few weeks into the ECCE (The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme that provides early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age) when all the children are settled into the crèche they begin to gain trust and come to one of us if they are upset or hurt, this shows that relationships are forming. When the children have good relationships with the practitioners they begin to feel confident and hopefully this will keep blossoming in primary school”

P4&P5 express their opinion that a positive relationship will benefit a child’s co-operation and motivation and increase their positive outcomes in childcare and when they leave. **P6** explains how relationships change children from the ‘shy’ child to the courageous child. And their self-regulation and communication improves because of supportive relationships by the practitioners.

3.4 Supporting transitions from home to childcare for children and parents

The practitioners were asked about transitions from home to childcare and how to support both child and parents during that time. The six practitioners all mentioned that transitions do not happen overnight there is a process and some children may take more time to adjust than others. The practitioners mentioned there is a lot of work involved in forming positive transitions for the children and they are the primary

importance. The general consensus was that both the parents and children are supported during the transitions:

3.4.1 Transitions for Children

The Practitioners identified a number of ways for children to transition into the childcare environment from the home environment. Furthermore, there are a lot of strategies to support children's transitions. The following quotations from the practitioners' illustrate this. The Practitioners' expressed their ideas and supporting strategies that they use on a regular basis to support children.

P1:

"We do encourage a comfort toy for all the children to settle in and usually after the first week we see no comfort toys, maybe one or two children may have it. It is a great idea as they have something that reminds them off home and it is a success for older children anyway". P2 implements another strategy to be applied is to bring in a photo of the family (siblings included) so it can be placed on the family wall. This also reminds them of home.

P3:

"When it is time to go home we will always say goodbye at the door and we are looking forward to seeing them tomorrow. This will show them that we can't wait to have more fun and play tomorrow"

P4:

"Too let the child come in to visit the environment for an hour every second day before they begin their full week, this will help the child to get used to the new environment and not throw them into the deep end. That would not be fair on them"

P5 adds that the Key Person Approach is essential and the amount of empathy and responsiveness you show is vital for the child to be able to cope in the new environment.

P6& P3 adds that even the smallest gestures like greeting the children at the door will help children settle.

3.4.2 Transitions for Parents

Parents are children's primary caregiver. It is important in a childcare environment that giving parents and practitioners opportunities to voice their opinion around the concept of transitions. All practitioners' shared positive strategies that they feel work for parents while leaving their children in childcare as it can be upsetting.

P2:

"We as Practitioners' must have a non-judgemental attitude towards parents and adhere to the 'open door' policy by listening to any issues or information the parent would like to share either to myself, other staff or the manager. We take everything on board" **P1** adds: *'open door policy is important'*

Both **P2&P3** spoke about the importance of their new enrolment forms which they have found to be **P3** *"such a great help"*. It is sent home with parents after the opening night and parents fill out the questions asked on the form, discussing and providing important information about the child's interests, abilities and allergies and their family. **P2** gives an example of questions in the form, "Questions range from their siblings names, to do they have any pets". **P3** states that the form *"it is so helpful. Let's say if a child is feeling sad on a particular day, you can get the form out and relate to a certain topic, for example 'I here you like walking your dog Roxy' this is trying to distract the child while building relationships"*

P4:

"I work in the baby room so supporting parents is different, parents mainly worry about the child's sleep and feeding patterns, we always get them to write it down in a diary so we look at that every day when they come in. It is a great way to know the routine of the child and implement to the best of our ability in the Crèche"

P5:

“As I am working with the ECCE children (The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme that provides early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age). I see the children for three hours every day. After the three hours we meet the parents and we always tell the parents what ‘we’ did today so parents can prompt them in the car going home about their day in Crèche. This is a brilliant way to keep the parent informed in what they are doing and also to see if the child is enjoying their three hours in crèche. Feedback is given to and from the parent on a daily basis”

P6:

“In the last three years we have implemented a new method of technology to contact parents while they are in work or elsewhere, we call it ‘Crèche Com’. We tell the parents through this app what the child eats, how much of it the child eats, what time the child goes to sleep and how long, there are so many things we put up on the app for the parents to see. This gives them a chance to relax and show them everything is okay. We also have parent teacher meetings for the ECEC children. We always are there to listen to the parents and give our opinions that may help them by putting them at ease”

3.5 The practitioners’ perception on the Key Person Approach

It was noted by one of the Practitioners in the focus group that a ‘Key Person’ approach is essential in one childcare; however the other childcare did not think so and does not use it as a teaching strategy for the children. There are advantages and disadvantages to this type of approach. Practitioners have shared their own opinions of the Key Person Approach. The key findings in this area were: that the Key Person Approach works for all ages within their crèche and the other crèche feels that the children need to be independent. The findings were as follows:

P1:

“No, we don’t use it in theoretical form, we feel children are more independent age 3-6 years, maybe if the kids were aged 0-3 it would be good, but not in this Crèche we don’t use it. We don’t feel the need to use it we are there for each child. All the children in the Crèche anyway has their favourite Practitioner that they go too if they

need to ask a question or need help with something". P2 feels that there are advantages in not using a Key Person Approach, for example, children become more independent.

P3:

"We do one to one with a child if they need it of course. Yes if they want us we do intervene, develop and work on the child's problem. I feel as a manager there is no need to have this type of approach, we try our hardest to build independence for the children, because they are leaving us for primary school and all the primary school teachers will not be able to sit down and talk one-one with each child. ECEC is about preparing them for school and the future, so if they learn little things here they will grow"

"Also, for example, if I wasn't here tomorrow and a child depended on me as I am their Key Person and they are attached to me and me only, what will happen to that child, he/she will become very upset and may not settle in the childcare environment on that particular day"

P4:

"Yes we do have the Key Person approach in every room including my room (babies room). We feel it is a great strategy and it works for us, it may not work for every Crèche. This is a big Crèche and we do have a lot of children so trying to get to know all the children on a one-one interaction would be challenging"

P5:

"Yeah it is a brilliant way to form relationships, as P4 said we do have a lot of children and for us to speak to parents without the key worker approach would be challenging, there could be mixed words going from one practitioner to the next. So by having this approach for example: say in my room there is 22 children so I have 11 children and another practitioner has 11 children. However, if there was a day that a child from the other group wants to join with me we will let the child join and visa-versa, we are not strict by that"

P6:

“I can see it works in all rooms and there are many advantages to this type of approach as the girls stated.

3.6 Barriers preventing practitioners and children from building relationships

In this section of the focus group the researcher examined the practitioner's perceptions of the barriers they face on a daily basis that affect relationship-building with children. The key findings in this section were, firstly, that barriers do exist in the childcare settings. Here it was highlighted that this can arise from the volume of administration tasks and activity planning on a day-to-day basis. Secondly, children having disabilities may need help in building relationships. All six practitioners mentioned that there is a lot of work done to prevent these from being barriers and they do try their best to overcome these barriers to a point. The following findings are the barriers practitioners face and also recommendations to overcome them.

P1:

“Yes there are barriers but we try our hardest not to let them get in the way when forming relationships with the children. For example, we have a child with autism he has no-verbal communication. It is challenging, but we have gone to play therapy courses to try to implement play through building a relationship with him. It is difficult to know does he like the childcare, but there is no issue on him running in the door everyday”. P2 also states that disability is a barrier and also the amount of paper work they must complete. P3 also agrees and gives this statement: “Oh yes, paperwork is a huge barrier for example, observations, learning reviews, weekly plans etc... I would love to say we should put aside all that paper work but it is important, and a lot of workers won't complete it at home they will do it during working hours. I believe that some sort of a system should be in place to help practitioners overcome the vast amount of paper work. I know I am 23 years in childcare and I should be able to juggle it, but the paperwork is getting bigger and bigger every year, and it is also stressful because it has to be done in case of an inspection”

P4 expressed there was an overload of paper work in the baby room but she never seen that a child found it hard to form a relationship nor came in contact with a child that had a disability but she did share information to overcome any barriers.

P4&P5 feel that behaviour and language/communication is a huge barrier in forming relationships. **P4**: *“Especially the children in the ECEC room there are many different nationalities. It is challenging communicating with them and they usually stay by themselves until they learn some English words”*

P5 says that: *“We usually ask the parents to write down some words for example; Hello, how are you, what would you like to play etc.... to help the practitioners and also me as a manager to build a relationship with them and for them to be able to settle into the environment and what P4 says the paperwork is an issue, it is a huge barrier for us even for me as a manager, I struggle to get out of the office and help in a room some days, but as P4 states we need to get on top of the work and if we have to bring the work home we will”*

P6:

“Also with parents their attitude/behaviour towards us. It is like they don’t care, they leave there kids and that’s that. It is annoying really, like they make no effort to build any form of a relationship with us. It is rare but I have come across it. That is a huge barrier and a hard one to prevent because we do try to communicate”

Overall, the two focus groups are stating the two main barriers are paperwork and the child either with a disability or he/she speaks a different language. The practitioners also gave many recommendations to help prevent the barriers that are mentioned above which is a very good starting point. It showed that they are consistent in their work and they are willing to form close relationships with all the children no matter what stands in the way. Their recommendations to form and build relationships were helpful.

3.7 Recommendations given by the practitioners to maintain relationship building in the early years setting

The final theme addresses last question that asked the practitioners’ do they have any recommendations on how practitioners and the childcare can maintain good

relationships. They gave a wide variety of interesting but simple answers that may make a huge change to the process of relationship building. More importantly they are working to bond with every child and to make sure they are happy in the environment in the childcare. The following statements represent several recommendations from the practitioners' on what they could be focusing on in their future practice in a childcare setting.

3.7.1 Changes practitioners should make in order to build supportive relationships

Practitioners need to constantly up-dating their knowledge by courses for their practice. This will have a significant impact on children and parents in relationship building. The following statements the practitioners give their opinions:

P2:

“Updating their course, we all went to play therapy course a few weeks back and now I am more confident interacting with the children and understanding their play, especially the boy with autism, it has made such a difference. I would usually stand back from him and let him do his own thing, but now I am more involved and willing to interact with him as much as I can. So having confidence and believing in yourself is a huge part in relationship-building”. P1 said: “must know the Siolta and Aistear curriculum”

P3:

“As a manager I have found that the practitioners' with level 7 or 8 qualification is worth hiring and being involved in my Crèche. I know sometimes people say 'oh is it not about the experience' but it isn't I believe it is about the knowledge and understanding of the child. The practitioners with the level 7/8 they do stand out and they have amazing and new strategies that bring a good change to any Crèche environment. Yes we do have a practitioner with a level 5 and she fits right in with the way we work and we are very lucky to have her, however I do think having a good qualification is extremely important”

P4&P5&P6 all agreed in having a good relationship between all the workers is vital. For the children and parents knowing that there is a happy atmosphere all the time

and they are open to speak to parents at any time of the day. More importantly, they emphasized having up to date courses completed.

3.7.2 Practitioners views on how to build relationships for their future practice with children and parents

P1&P2 both agree on this statement:

“I think age-appropriate language for the children and constant communication with the parents”

P3:

“I cannot specify the significance of showing the child how important they are in the childcare environment. The child cannot be forgotten for example at the Christmas concerts we emphasize to the parents that all siblings and grandparents must come, this will show that the child is the main importance on the night. This will build their confidence”

P4, P5&P6: They all agreed on having a good honest relationship with parents, inform every one of new changes within the crèche, continuous appraisal for the children and making sure staff work from the same page. **P6** says *“making sure all the practitioners work of the same level and they understand what they need to do on a daily basis, it is very important”*

3.8 Overall Summary of Results

This section described the results of the qualitative research study which explored the early years practitioners views on building relationships with children. It exhibits the findings based on the research questions, objectives and themes. Although the answers differ slightly from the two focus groups, the main consensus is that relationship-building is vital in a childcare environment between parents, children and parents. The six practitioners emphasised that there are many benefits for both the child and practitioner when building-relationships such as, better future relationships, helps a child be independent, safe in the environment, happy, take risks and trust the practitioners that they will be there for them. However, many barriers were evident, which contribute to difficulties in forming relationships with children these were: practitioners have a vast amount of administration to complete on a day to day basis,

practitioners are not supported enough when it comes to the concept of relationship building with children who have disabilities, also practitioners having trouble in understanding children with different nationalities.

Transitions from home to childcare can be overwhelming for both children and parents. The results from the two focus groups showed great similarities amongst the practitioners and highlighted the importance of putting time and effort into the transition from home to childcare. The six practitioners feel that implementing strategies and building communication with the child and parent will help the transition run smoothly, which in turn will have a positive outcome as relationships will form easily.

The practitioners within the two focus groups gave many important recommendations, by including approaches to introduce with practitioners, children and parents when maintaining and forming a strong relationship. Following on from this, the practitioners gave examples, the lack of updating courses as practitioners', one practitioner mentioned the importance of education and the difference she sees with level 7 or 8 qualifications (P3). Finally, it was noted that practitioners need to build an honest relationship with parents and that makes a happy child in a safe childcare environment.

4. Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This section examines the findings of the research study that have been recorded by the means of structured focus groups. The central aim of this study was to assess the childcare practitioners' perceptions of relationship-building with children. The data collected in this study represents a variety of perceptions from two different childcare services. The discussion is divided into five main themes based on the areas on which the data was collected; the sections are discussed in the next heading. It will then be compared and related to the findings of other research.

1. Importance and Benefits of relationship building with children
2. Supporting transitions from home to childcare for children and parents
3. The practitioners perceptions on the Key Person Approach
4. Barriers preventing practitioners and children from building relationships
5. Recommendations given by the practitioners to maintain relationship building in the early years setting.

4.2 Brief Summary of Findings from the Results Section

Overall the results in section 3 were conclusive that childcare practitioners believe that they do have a significant role in building relationships with children. However, it was evident that barriers do get in the way when it comes to forming relationships with the children and parents. More importantly, they can combat the barriers when forming relationships with children and use their recommendations they suggested to develop and build on the relationships in the childcare environment. Secondly, information found by the researcher contends, smooth transitions are vital and must be maintained in order to build a strong relationship with both child and parent. It is apparent that these transitions must be supported by practitioners in order to have a happy child and parent. Also, the two different views on the area around using the Key Person Approach within the two childcare facilities was interesting. Finally, they proposed many benefits for themselves, children and parents when building close relationships with one another.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

This study found common findings among the participants even though the researcher completed a focus group with two different childcare facilities. The first question that needed to be explored was the importance of relationship-building in an early years childcare setting. As there can be multiple of different views and ideas as to what it can be, every childcare practitioner can view it differently. This was recognised in the research study when the participants were asked by the researcher as to why is building relationships so important with children, however each answer was still very similar and related with research done by three researchers Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, (2007). Moreover, Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, (2007) stated that a child's early relationships and separation behaviours impact on their later development outcomes. The qualitative research displayed that the childcare practitioners also had multiple opinions of the importance of relationships. Each practitioner gave their view on the question given, one practitioner in particular spoke about the importance of not only building a relationship with the child, it is also important to build it with parents. For example P6, *"Children express themselves more when they are in a relaxed environment and to see their parent and practitioner get on with each other will help"*. That particular practitioner was thinking outside the environment to the child's 'key' caregiver which is significant. Research was found from Bowlby (1980), Raver & Knitzer (2002), state that the importance of the quality of a child's learning and their development of resilience may depend on the quality of their relationships both with their Key Person and their primary carers.

The practitioners' similarly believed the importance of building relationships with children was the concept of good communication and learning to communicate with each child. For example, *"We need to make them feel important in every way we can, so by building relationships we are letting them know that we do have an interest in each of them and we are attentive in everything they say, also communication is a big thing, especially as I am in the baby room"* (P4). *All the children are non-verbal so I need to build a relationship with the child in order to understand their needs and wants"*. This was supported by Albers et al., (2007),

states that practitioners need to be sensitive to the child's communication and to do this they need to recognise early communication development and develop a relationship with the child in order to understand their signals and aid their communication development. This approach will aid a child's development in speech and language while building a trusting relationship with the practitioners. More importantly this is the predominant theme that corresponds across all the feedback from the practitioners' that were involved in the focus group. The participants kept referring back to the significance of building relationships with each child in the childcare environment.

Following on from this question the benefits of relationship building with children was analysed. Both theory and research in this study show that relationship building has many benefits for children in the early years' environment. It was documented throughout the focus group research that there are vast amounts of benefits for children, parents and practitioners when it comes to relationships. All practitioners stated the children are happy, safe, feel comfortable and impacts child. As suggested by Gunnar & Donzella, (2002) Luthar & Brown, (2007) Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, (2009) they all found that, research in brain development has proven that the quality of interactions between an infant and practitioner in the first three years of life significantly affects the development of the brain and future physical, emotional and mental health. Furthermore, securely attached children have been shown to be more successful in peer relationship development, '*engage in more complex and creative play*', and show positive outcomes on a range of mental health indicators (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Ebbeck & Yim, 2001 & Honig, 1984/1993; Matas, Arend & Sroufe, 1978). Moreover, it was suggested by two childcare practitioners that benefits of building a supportive relationship is, when a child does not feel left out and is comfortable in the childcare environment they will explore and play (P1 & P2). This can be supported by Bowlby's theory that children explore when they feel safe and secure within their environment. He believed that children will risk take when secure relationships (practitioners) are near by watching them. This is further backed up by Qualification and Curriculum Strategy (2009) which state that young children build positive identities through caring relationships with other people, by handling and taking risks, 'having a go', feeling of success, developing resilience, and developing 'can-do' attitudes.

Moreover, Deewer, (2009) also state, that respectful and good-quality interactions are the basis of emotional security and cognitive development supports learning. This research is further strengthened by research conducted by Burchinal et al. (2000), results suggested that higher-quality care resulted in better outcomes for communication and language as well as cognitive development.

One practitioner made an interesting point, *“.....also children will learn to negotiate with their own needs/wants and trying to respect other people’s needs/wants, and they learn through conflict that there is also someone that is going to come away with nothing. But they have to learn and learn that it is ok(P1)”*. This shows that the practitioners are teaching each child that everyone has feelings and by letting them solve conflicts on their own is vital for their relationships and communication. Furthermore, Corsaro (1997) noted that developmental psychologists have underlined the significance of conflict and challenges for creating new cognitive structures and skills. More importantly, Evans (2002) states that when practitioners facilitate problem solving children learn to collaborate, discuss details of problems and discover there are many possible solutions to their problems.

Research evidence has shown one theme that the two qualitative studies did not agree on, the theme was the Key Person Approach. The definition for this type of approach is introduced in an early years childcare setting, each large group of children within a room can be divided up between educators, with each adult being responsible for one small group of children (Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck, 2000). There was mixed opinions to this approach, for example, the childcare that does not use the Key Person Approach they felt that their approach was more useful and find it works better with older children. Their approach was letting the children interact with all the practitioners in the childcare. *“We find there are advantages in not having a Key Person approach for example all the children will get to know each of us (Practitioners) and they may take risks further than usual without us being beside them(P2)”*. The other facility uses the key person approach and finds it works best; a practitioner articulates *“Yes we do have the Key Person approach in every room including my room (babies room). We feel it is a great strategy and it works for us, it may not work for every Crèche. This is a big Crèche and we do have a lot of children so trying to get to know all the children on a one-one interaction would be*

challenging(P3)". When the researcher reviews these findings in relation to literature, there are also mixed reviews about implementing a key person approach. Selleck (2001), states that as children get older, sustained individual attention is more challenging but also becomes unnecessary for most children. Furthermore, Selleck (2001) adds that the main thing is that children are able to begin and end their session with support from the practitioners when needed. Practitioners can use any strategy once it works for themselves and the children but more importantly, once the strategy builds relationships.

In addition, with the practitioners that use the Key Person Approach, they feel it works best in their childcare facility and also adds that many facilities may not find the approach helpful. Mc Dormatt (2016), state that a key person is essential in the early years and also articulates that it is important for a child's wellbeing that they have a person with whom they feel connected with within the childcare environment. Moreover, Mc Dormatt also states that *"the principles of the key person approach can be linked to the Síolta Standards on Rights of the Child, Interactions, Play, Curriculum, Health and Welfare, Transitions, Identity and Belonging, and all four of the Aistear themes of Well-being, Exploring and Thinking, Communication, and "Identity and Belonging"* (Mc Dormatt, 2016, pg 4). This illustrates that the key person approach has a lot to do with policies and procedures in the early years setting (Evans, 2002). Furthermore, the Key Person or any practitioner must understand each child's temperament and adjust their responses to match the needs of each child. (Olds, Sadler & Kitzman, 2007) For this reason practitioners are encouraged to keep up to date with training or have a strong awareness on the topic inclusion and to ensure there is a good non-verbal or verbal communication with children and parents at all time.

Furthermore, there can be numerous challenges that can arise when implementing a Key Person Approach into a childcare facility. P3 articulates an advantage they have because the childcare facility does not use the key person approach, she says *"..... if I wasn't here tomorrow and a child depended on me as I am their key person and they are attached to me and me only, what will happen to that child, he/she will become very upset and may not settle in the childcare room on that particular day"*(P3). Sellock (2001) also states that some childcare practitioners may feel that it

is not fair for children to become so attached to one member of staff and that they will feel bereft when the adult takes holidays or leaves the service. Furthermore, a child may feel mistrust by the practitioner and will have to develop a coping mechanism (Reimer, 2010).

It is evident here that there is a main focus on the children within the two childcare facilities and implementing a strategy that works best for their children. Moreover, the strategies are different but they both support the children which is essential. Meaning the practitioners are equally there for the children at all times and building their encouragement in their learning and exploring within the childcare facility. It is imperative that practitioners understand the important role which they have to contribute.

4.4 Barriers to Building Relationships with Children

It was noted by the practitioners and relevant literature that many barriers occur in the early years setting that could prevent children or practitioners from forming a relationship. The first of these barriers mentioned was *“disability would be a huge barrier but you have to work around it”*(P1). Many childcare facilities have a lot of children with disabilities, for example, autism, speech and language, to severe disabilities. However as the practitioner mentioned you have to work around it and prevent it from getting in the way to a certain point. For this reason, researcher Luthar (1993) states, initiating and maintaining a warm, responsive interaction style with a child with autism or any of a number of other developmental disorders can be highly challenging even for a childcare practitioner with the very best of intentions. However, implementing an intervention in the childcare that was completed on children and parents would be significant. For example, McCollum & Hemmeter (1996) reviewed an intervention consisting of interactions with parents of children with developmental disabilities and they found that there was clear proof that such programs changed parents’ interactions with their children. There is also evidence that the degree of parental sensitivity, responsiveness and emotional availability are predictive of outcomes in children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Goleman, 2006). In childcare services in Ireland in the year 2017, there is a new intervention being implemented into childcare facilities for children with disabilities in

pre-school, it is the new inclusion program. It will contain range of supports for staff, grants for equipment and alterations to buildings and therapeutic interventions. This is a huge advantage for childcare facilities and practitioners they will finally be able to have one to one interactions with all the children with disabilities and be supported and trained to form relationships with the children.

Another major barrier that prevents building strong relationships is the vast amount of administration which also corresponds to the literature review. As noted, Moore (2005), early years' inspectors spend ninety percent of their time in the office of the facility observing administration and only ten percent observing the children and the childcare practitioners. This is a worrying trend as it takes the focus off the quality of care children receive in the early years' services, as practitioners aim to ensure that their paperwork is in order. Practitioners say that there is at least two hours of observations and paper work for each child, which is overwhelming and stressful for any practitioner. It was suggested by one particular practitioner saying "*I believe that some sort of a system should be in place to help practitioners overcome the vast amount of paper work*" (P3). Childcare is more than teaching children and unfortunately it inquires a lot of administrative tasks and the work is piling up which is probably frustrating for childcare practitioners. Sooner there must be intervention in place to help managers and practitioners deal with the vast amount of administration or you could see a lot of practitioners leaving the job as it may become too stressful. There may be a lot of consequences because of these two main barriers that were identified above for both children and parents. Furthermore, De Schipper et al., (2007) states practitioners may have little interest in the children as they feel they may need to get their work done and ignore building important relationships. Keane (2013) states that attachment is essential between a child and caregiver and if that attachment is broken it will affect the child's development and expressing emotions.

4.5 Transitions from home to childcare

It has been noted by practitioners and throughout the literature that transitions do not form overnight; Practitioner Guidance for the EYFS, (2007) specifies that transitions should be seen as a process not an event. Firstly, the consensus from all six practitioners was that both the children and parents are supported throughout the

process of transitions and the main topic they spoke about was the strategies they use to form successful transitions. Furthermore, practitioners stated many strategies they use that work in the childcare facility for children, one example is from P1 she suggests *"We encourage a comfort toy for all the children to settle...."*. Which is similar to Bove (2001), Elliot (2003) and Kim and Kim (2008), they found many strategies the practitioners use, for instance, by allowing the child to bring their toys from home or by creating home-like environments and expressing warmth and welcoming attitudes toward children. As well as the Key Person Approach, P5 mentioned this also *"I think the Key Person approach is ideal for all children during a transition, especially in a room of 20 kids...."*. Without childcare practitioners implementing these strategies there may be challenges that children may face, for example, stressed, anxiety, scared and lonely. Moreover, children may fail to have vital skills such as building relationships, exploring their new environment, social skills and resiliency and miss out on many other skills. Another reason they may children may not be able to express their skills is the reason P4 recommends to *"... let the child come into visit the environment for a hour every second day before they officially begin their full week...."*. This is further backed up from literature used by Balaban, (2006) & Gu, (2004) stating that initial sudden separation into a new environment can make children feel isolated, unstable, and scared.

Another important person apart from children are parents and supporting them during transitions, especially for first time parents, as it can be daunting leaving your child with a stranger and especially in a new environment. Also mentioned by Bruce, (2004), parents play a key role in supporting children transition into a new environment. It was noted by practitioners that there are many strategies that they feel work for parents when leaving their child in their facility. However, an interesting strategy P2 and P3 use and they find useful is the childcare facilities new enrolment forms, the form is sent home to parents and they complete it by answering the questions given. Furthermore, P3 states *"it provides the child's interests, abilities and allergies and their family"*.

Moreover, under the childcare regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006) practitioners must share important information from what time a child sleeps to what activities the child completed that day. This statement is further strengthened

by Donohue & Gaynor, (2011), Rockwell, Andre, & Hawley, (2009) and Wheeler & Joyce, (2009), they state that parents being the child's primary caregivers that therefore they are entitled to be involved in a meaningful way in both the care and education process in the early childhood setting. The practitioners interviewed also seem to share this view, with one suggesting that they have implemented a new method of technology to contact parents while they are at work or elsewhere by just using a app on their phone. P6 mentions *"we tell the parents what the child eats, how much the child eats, what time the child goes to sleep and how long, there are so many things we put up on the app for the parents to see...."*. The researcher believes that implementing something simple like new technology will gain relationships' and trust in a childcare setting and always having a 'open door' policy that parents can come in any time to ask questions.

Furthermore, relationship building with children involves an intensive effort on behalf of all staff members and parents where opinions and views must be articulated, explored and most of all heeded to. This is where communication comes into play in the Early Years setting. It was interesting to note that all six practitioners from the two focus groups all believed that communication was essential when it came to transitions from home to childcare. One of the key characteristics according to MhicMhathúna & Taylor (2012) and National early years Network (1997), is keeping open communication between all bodies at all times, highlighting the child's parents are viewed as the most valuable resources. Findings from the two focus groups reinforce the idea of having the line of communication open at all times when you are dealing with a child's development and progression in the childcare facility. Moreover, how they are getting on during their day in the childcare environment. In the focus group P5 *"..... Feedback is given to and from the parent on a daily basis"*. The practitioners may have not mentioned the word communication but all of their strategies when implementing a smooth transition forms around the concept of communication. Based on the researchers critical analysis of the importance of communication between parents and practitioners within the childcare facility, this allows for greater understanding of the child's, likes, dislikes, personality, and so on, and, moreover puts the parents at ease when they know their child is happy and thriving within the facility.

4.6 Evaluation of method and suggestions for future research

The method of research conducted for this research project allowed the researcher to obtain good quality information from participants who are working in the childcare area and that is of interest to the researcher. This enabled the researcher to undergo and complete the research project in the time frame. The overall aim of the study was to obtain childcare practitioners' perceptions of relationship building with children. I was successful in achieving this along with the specified objectives that have been outlined in the research study. One of the pitfalls the researcher encountered was that there was no male perspective. The researcher is aware that the childcare sector has a very high representation of females and low representation of male workers, which is unfortunate. Moreover, it would be very interesting to research a male's perspective of relationship building and is it challenging to form relationships with children in a childcare environment.

One main weakness of the focus group is that there was one main speaker within the two focus groups and it was challenging to get the quiet practitioners to open up about their own experience and perceptions. Furthermore, another weakness was completing only two focus groups with a three practitioners from each childcare as it was a very small number of people participating in the research. Moreover, the researcher was successful in achieving her desired outcomes from the early years practitioners.

For further research it would be interesting to use a wider scale of childcare practitioners to get a variety of recommendations and perceptions. Furthermore, observations on children and practitioners in the room would be essential to view their relationships within their environment.

4.7 Conclusion

A main theme that emerged throughout was the importance of the practitioner's role in building relationships with children. This was found throughout the literature and from the six participants. The practitioner's essential role is to support and attend the child's needs and wants. There were a number of benefits that were associated with relationship building with children. These included: mental health, less stressed, aid the children's communication, a child will have creative play, feel safe within the

childcare environment and develop risk taking attitudes. However a number of barriers were noted. These carriers prevented practitioners forming relationships with children, for example, children with disabilities, autism, speech and language to the vast amount of administration practitioners need to complete on a daily basis in the childcare facility this is causing practitioners to spend less time with children. Finally, the transitions from home to childcare are essential for a happy child and parent. It was noted that practitioners must support children and use appropriate strategies to make each child happy in the environment. Overall understanding and using communication is essential when it comes to relationship building with children.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that practitioners feel that relationship building with children is essential in a childcare setting, between parents, children and practitioners. More importantly, practitioners are clear on their role, tasks and what strategies to implement when forming a close relationship with both children and parents in the early years environment. Similarly, the six practitioners use strategies to build strong relationships, one childcare use the key worker approach and the other childcare lets practitioners form relationships with each child in the room. More importantly, each childcare facility felt that the type of strategy they use works best for everyone, including the parents. The second last element of discussion was the importance of transitions for children and parents from home to childcare. It is evident that transitions are a 'key element' when forming relationships, and the literature review has backed up what the practitioners have said. The final section enabled the researcher to suggest areas for further research and included strengths and weaknesses the researcher faced throughout the research project.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations

Two main recommendations that were mentioned by the practitioners was the importance of having qualified staff (Level 7 & 8) and being provided with the opportunity to attend new courses in relation to relationship building with both children and parents. Ireland has progressed in the qualification policy for childcare facilities; however they do have a long way to go. Management should encourage practitioners to complete a higher level of qualification and to upskill.

Secondly, it is evident there are many barriers that prevent relationship building in a childcare environment for both a practitioner and child. It is recommended to use interventions, communicate with parents and use other strategies to complete paperwork. Furthermore, management and staff should do everything they can to remove these barriers as it affects relationship building.

7. Reference List

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Draft Questions

- 1.** Let them introduce themselves:
 - a. Name
 - b. What age group are you working with?
 - c. How long have you worked here?
 - d. What is your qualification? Level & Experience
- 2.** Do you think building relationships with children is important and why?
- 3.** Do you think it is one of the most important aspects? Is building a good relationship with children?
- 4.** How do you facilitate transitions within the childcare setting? Does it work?
How does it work?
- 5.** What about the parents leaving the child in the setting? How do you support the separation?
- 6.** How is relationship building supported in the facility?
- 7.** Is there any interventions used in the facility, to build and promote a secure relationship?
- 8.** Do you find obstacles when building relationships with children? if so what are those obstacles?
- 9.** Have you ever had any difficulty when building a relationship with a child/children? if yes, can you explain?
- 10.** Or the other way around! If a child is having difficulty to a build relationship with a practitioner, what would you as a practitioner suggest to do?
- 11.** Is there a key person approach in the facility?
 - a. If so does it work?
 - b. Is it a good method to build relationships
 - c. In your opinion what are the main advantages to this approach?
 - d. Is there any disadvantages

Appendix 2 – Final Questions

1. Let them introduce themselves:
 - a. Name
 - b. What group of children are you working with?
 - c. How long have you worked here?
 - d. What is your qualification? Level & Experience
2. Why do you think building relationships with children is important?
3. In your opinion and your experience working with children, what are the benefits in building a strong relationship with all the children?
4. How do you facilitate transitions within the crèche? for example – home to crèche
Does it work? How does it work?
5. How do you support the parents with this transition? Do you speak with parents on a regular basis?
6. In what way does the crèche support the transition?
7. How is attachment supported in the crèche between child and practitioner?
8. Is there any interventions used in the facility, to build and promote a secure relationship – between practitioners and child?
9. Are there any challenges that get in the way of building better relationships in children? If so what are they?
10. Have you ever had any difficulty when building a relationship with a child/children?
If yes can you give me some examples?
11. Or the other way around! If a child finds it difficult to build a relationship with the practitioner, what would you the practitioner suggest to do? And why?
12. Is there a key worker approach in the crèche? (The staff member is assigned to a small number of children so that they can pay close attention to the child's development and it is this person's responsibility to make a connection with the child's family. The key worker will help the child manage their day transitioning from one activity to another and build on their relationship ensuring the child feels cared for.)
 - a. If so does it work?
 - b. Is it a good method in relationship building?
13. Do you think a key worker approach is a good idea? Why?
14. In your opinion what are the main advantages of having a key worker?
Are there any disadvantages?
15. If the crèche does not have a key worker approach, how do you and your co-worker build relationships with all the children in the room?
Do you find that works?

16. Overall are there any recommendations you would make on how child care facilities generally can maintain good relationships with children?

Appendix 3 – Information Sheet



Building Attachment in the Early Years Setting

Dear Childcare Practitioner

My name is Niamh Kennedy and I am a postgraduate student at Athlone Institute of Technology. I am currently carrying out a Masters in Child and Youth Studies. The study will focus on practitioner's view on their role in building attachment in their practice.

I would be grateful if you take the time to participate in a focus group which is completely voluntary. The information that you provide will have total anonymity and confidentiality and no names will appear on the final dissertation. The focus group should be approximately 40-50 minutes to complete. The focus group will be audio recorded. The recordings will be deleted after the transcripts are completed on the 30th of September 2017 however, if you wish for a tape recorder not to be used I can take notes instead. If you decide to take part and become uncomfortable about answering the questions you can stop the interview at any time or if it's just a particular question or questions you may not want to answer we can move on to the next question.

Thank you for taking the time and if you have any question please do not hesitate to ask me. If you like to take part in the research, please sign the consent form attached.

Contact me on 0863556854 and my email is A00198280@student.ait.ie.

Yours Sincerely

Niamh Kennedy

Appendix 4 – Consent Form



Building Attachment in the Early Years Setting

Consent Form

I confirm that I willingly agree to participate in the research project of Niamh Kennedy. I am aware that audio tapes will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2017. I understand that my name will not appear in the report and the information that I will give will only be used for the study.

Signed _____ Date _____

Audio Recording

I consent to being recorded in the focus group for the dissertation by Niamh Kennedy. I am aware that the information will be attained through an audio tape however will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2017.

It is OK with you to have the session audio recorded? YES _____ NO _____

Signed _____ Date _____

Appendix 5 – Counselling

1. Aquarius Health Clinic
Harbour Road,
Ballinasloe,
Co. Galway
(087) 773 0401
2. Maeve Maloney
Loughrea,
Co. Galway
(086) 312 4389
3. Cara Counselling
Dunkellin Street,
Loughrea,
Co. Galway
(083) 186 5983