The quiddity of inclusion: An interpretative phenomenological study of early childhood teachers' experiences of the LINC (Leadership for Inclusion in the early years) programme on perceptions and practice of inclusion.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, Sharon Skehill, declare that the work in this thesis is my own and has not been submitted to any other University or Higher Education Institution in support of a different award. Citations of secondary works have been fully referenced.

Signature:

Sharon Skehill

24th March 2022

Abstract

This interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological (IHP) study focuses on the lived experiences of early years educators engaged in the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme, a continuing professional development (CPD) programme aimed at developing knowledge, practices and values relating to inclusive practice. The primary aim of this study was to examine educators' perceptions of inclusion of children and consider the influence of the LINC programme on their pedagogical practice. The research strategy involved initial interviews with fourteen early years educators identifying experiences and understanding of inclusion prior to commencement of the LINC programme. On completion, participants hosted a field visit to their individual preschools and engaged in a second follow-up interview. In addition, conversations with children and observation of pedagogical practice was conducted during these visits to understand the life-world of the educators in practice. Using the philosophical principles of IHP, this study illustrates the value of practitioner research in coming to understand and interpret educators' experiences through an empathic lens.
Research findings validate the quality of content of the LINC programme and the positive influence of this learning on educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion in the early years setting. Engagement with the LINC programme resulted in reported confidence in their work with children and families through development of new strategies in practice to support participation in the early years' environment. There is an evidenced shift in perspective and awareness of children's rights by those who engaged with the module content. However, consideration of the contextual reality of participants illustrates a confluence of factors which mitigate against the learning outcomes of the LINC programme. A salient finding from this study indicates how professional identity and the perception of the role of the educator influences engagement with learning. Furthermore, concern is expressed by learners on the programme about how they will be facilitated and supported to take on additional responsibilities of leading inclusion as the Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) in their setting.
A key recommendation is to expand access to the LINC programme for all early years educators so there is a shared understanding of inclusion to support children's participation as well as supporting the leadership role of the INCO in practice. A framework for learning and development for educators has been designed to support reflection and action within settings to guide inclusive practice. This study also proposes that relational pedagogy, guided by the national quality (Siolta, CECDE, 2006) and curricular frameworks (Aistear, NCCA, 2009), should be embedded in initial professional education programmes as underpinning the implementation of quality and inclusive early childhood education. In telling the stories of educators on the LINC programme using phenomenology, an approach underused in early years scholarship, this study offers insights on how inclusion can be embedded in practice by acknowledgement of different perspectives and providing practical recommendations for creating a shared understanding of quality and inclusive early years education and care.

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Frequently Used Acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
ASD	Autism spectrum difference
CPD	Continuing professional development
DCEDIY	Department of children, equality, disability, integration and youth
DCYA	Department of children and youth affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EASNIE	European agency for special needs and inclusive education
ECCE	Early childhood care and education
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ECI	Early childhood Ireland
ECT	Early childhood teacher
EHO	Environmental health officer
EIT	Early intervention team
ELC	Early learning and care
EYEI	Early years education-focused inspection
EYS	Early years specialist
GoI	Government of Ireland
HSE	Health Service Executive
IHP	Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology
IPA	Interpretive phenomenological analysis
INCO	Inclusion coordinator
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
NCCA	National council for curriculum and assessment
NCSE	National council for special education
OT	Occupational therapist
QRF	Tusla Quality and regulatory framework
SLT	Speech and language therapist
SNA	Special needs assistant
UDG	Universal design guidelines

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Chapter One

"It was a particularly hard year – it was a very rough year for us to be honest and it took a long time to get any support…but then I joined the LINC programme and I started learning…." (Tina)

Introduction

This phenomenological investigation focuses on the experiences of students undertaking the Leadership for INClusion (LINC) programme. As part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) [1] this blended learning, continuing professional development (CPD) programme, introduced to the sector in 2016, was designed to support the inclusion and participation of children in early learning and care (ELC) settings in Ireland through modular content as illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1 Leadership for INClusion (LINC) Programme modules

[1] The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a government initiative which aims to create inclusive early learning and care settings to support the meaningful participation of all children in the preschool with different levels of support available, including continuing professional development for educators as well as funding for resources and assistance.

On completion of the programme, the early childhood teacher (ECT) is qualified to carry out the role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) in the service. The aim of this research study is to explore experiences of engagement with the LINC programme on ECTs' perceptions and practices of inclusion within the ELC setting. The objectives of the research study are identified as follows:

(a) Explore ECTs' attitudes and experiences of inclusion of children with additional needs in their settings prior to engagement with the LINC programme.

(b) Understand how professional learning from the LINC programme shapes ECTs' perceptions and practices of inclusion on completion of the programme.

(c) Ascertain the factors that affect ECTs in their role in supporting children to participate in a meaningful way in the early years' programme.

(d) Examine how participants' experiences can inform further policy and practice development.

(e) Reflect on how the learning from the LINC programme can influence other professional learning programmes to ensure that those working with children are sufficiently equipped with skills and knowledge to promote inclusion in early years settings.

The research questions guiding this study ask how the LINC programme:

1) influences ECTs' understanding of inclusion?
2) influences the perceptions of ECTs in relation to the inclusion of children with additional needs?
3) influences how ECTs include all children in ECCE settings?

The final question asks:

4) what factors affect the implementation of the learning from the LINC programme in practice?

This introductory chapter presents the rationale for the study which includes an overview of the interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological (IHP) methodological approach which underpins the entirety of the research process. In line with this approach, the chapter explains the context of the research study to provide a basis for understanding the phenomenon in question. The contextual review considers key policy and practice initiatives and developments as well as presenting an understanding of concepts of quality and inclusion as relevant to the ELC setting.

Rationale for the Study

This phenomenological study sets out to consider how engagement with a CPD programme, namely the LINC programme, influences the perceptions and practices of inclusion in ELC settings. The ELC sector in Ireland has been subject to several policy developments over the past number of years as the State seeks to enhance the quality of provision within what is considered to be a complex system. As discussed in this thesis, the complexity of the ELC system in Ireland is embedded within a diverse system of governance and accountability, involving various Government Departments and external agencies as well as training and qualification requirements, funding and a range of other factors (Moloney 2015, 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021). While the State has been proactive in developing policy, there is a perceived gap between policy and practice within ELC settings. Thus, exploring the LINC programme from the perspectives of those tasked with implementing the learning within settings, provides unique insight into the reality of policy implementation. In the initial stage of the study, the fourteen participants were invited to take part in an interview prior to engagement with the LINC programme in 2017. At the end of the academic year in June 2018, I carried out field visits to each of the fourteen settings, spending a morning with them and their ECCE group. During that time, I engaged in conversations with children, colleagues, as well as having the opportunity to experience the working environment and daily routines. Following this session, a second interview took place to discuss

participants' engagement with the LINC programme and consider if it influenced their work in practice. In consideration of these methods, one can appreciate how the participants are well placed to provide a depth of understanding of their interpretations of inclusion and the pedagogical practices that support this in their roles. Additionally, as evident from the objectives of the study outlined earlier, the study has the potential to determine how participants' insights can shape policy and practice into the future.

From the outset of this thesis, I will present myself as part of the 'complex ELC system' in Ireland, having worked as a managing director and a preschool teacher in my own full-day care service for over fifteen years and continuing to do so. My positionality within the research framework is a key consideration in interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology (IHP), as is the reality of the 'lived experiences' of participants on LINC programme. While Chapter Two focuses on the methodology of the study, the philosophical principles of the approach are discussed here to illustrate the conceptual framework of research study.

Phenomenology

As phenomenology is based on philosophical underpinnings which influence the totality of the research process, it is discussed here at the outset to create a platform for understanding. Phenomenology as a methodology for qualitative research is firmly rooted in "complex philosophical tradition in human science", studying the concept of '*Being*', what it is to exist as a person (Sundler *et al.* 2019, p. 734). It differs from other qualitative research methods insofar as the emphasis of the study is on '*lived experiences'* of the participants and articulation of the findings to capture their '*being*' in the worldly experience. Embree and Moran (2004) see phenomenology as a method of "seeking an unprejudiced, descriptive account of consciousness and whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears" (p. 2). Central to this philosophical understanding is the acknowledgement that the participants' '*realities*' are not directly accessible to the researcher (Willig 2001; Van der Mescht 2004; Shinebourne and Smith 2009;

Frechette *et al.* 2020). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) explain interpretative phenomenology as attempting to understand what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes and consider the role of the researcher in making "meaning comprehensible by translating it" (p. 361). The understanding of the '*phenomenon*' as a '*lived experience'* is about how this '*reality*' is experienced directly by the participants which in this study, focused on the influence of engagement with LINC programme on their perceptions and practices of inclusion.

As phenomenological studies have been criticised for a lack of clarity of the philosophical underpinnings of the research process (Norlyk and Harder 2010; Sundler *et al.* 2019), it is important from the outset to outline the guiding methodological principles of this study. There are two primary tenets of phenomenology, namely descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is most influential in the former tenet of descriptive forms (1930/1980). He focused on how one needs to isolate, describe and understand the essence of human experience, while simultaneously 'bracketing' one's own assumptions of this experience, a term he referred to as '*epoche'*. E*poché* involves the "dismembering" of the researcher's assumptions and preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen *et al* 2007, p.23), while bracketing is perceived as the act of entering into "the individual's lifeworld" and coming to understand their perspective on experience (Crabtree and Miller 1992, p. 44). In 'bracketing' presuppositions and assumptions, the researcher would then "become fully aware of what is actually before us", (Willig 2001, p. 51) and allow the "true essence" of participants' experiences to be revealed (Wimpenny and Gass 2000, p. 35).

However, Husserl's student, Heidegger challenged his descriptive phenomenological approach arguing that phenomenology should not rest with this description of experience, but instead to interpret and find meaning within these lived experiences. It is this hermeneutical approach, influenced by Heidegger (1929), that forms the basis for the methodological approach of this study. Hermeneutics is the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation and the

primacy of understanding. Frechette *et al.* (2020) assert that interpretative phenomenology represents a unique and insightful research method in the social sciences, which is reflected in the growth of popularity of a similar method, that of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as an approach to qualitative inquiry in recent years as a means of examining how people make sense of different life experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009). The methodological approach of this research study, (as discussed in detail in Chapter Two), incorporates the principles of interpretative IHP, taking influence from Heidegger and his student, Gadamer (1979; 2004), while simultaneously acknowledging IPA as a model for research practice under similar guidelines as clarified in the following sections.

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Interpretive Phenomenology

The lack of practical guidelines for phenomenological research has been discussed by academic writers as a starting point for the rationale of their methodological approaches (e.g. Van der Mescht 2004; Spiers and Riley 2018; Crowther and Thomson 2020). It is my intention here to clearly outline the ontological and epistemological foundations of this study as well as explaining the methodological principles that underpin the research process, and in doing so, provide a concrete argument for this approach for research in education. Ontology may be described as the philosophical study of concepts such as one's existence and being, focusing on the object of enquiry in research. Epistemology then is the study of the nature of knowledge regarding how we come to know, understand and experience such concepts. Recognising that the phenomenon in focus here is the influence of the LINC programme on participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion, the IHP approach will provide a basis for understanding these experiences from their perspectives.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study illustrating how the lifeworld of the participants is that which forms the ontological and epistemological foundations for understanding the influence of the LINC programme on their practice. Lee and Kau (2013) explain Heidegger's ontological stance of the need to engage in life experiences to gain knowledge and understanding of the world,

rather than having a conscious awareness of it. The epistemology of IHP is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about social realities which can only be communicated through the researchers' interpretations of the life experiences of participants (Bush *et al.* 2019). Horrigan-Kelly *et al.* (2016) present Heidegger's tenets as the guiding philosophy in research as a challenging, yet powerful tool in phenomenological research. As researcher in the process, my interpretations are informed by my pre-understandings and knowledge of the ELC sector in Ireland, which are then enveloped in contemporary literature to provide further understanding of the phenomenon of engagement with the LINC programme and its influence on practice. This framework acts as an analytical tool in guiding the research process and identifies key concepts underpinning the study. It illustrates the epistemological stance of phenomenology in the inductive generation of theory (Creswell 2007; Horrigan-Kelly 2021). These concepts are clarified in turn to provide a clear understanding of the research process and rationale.

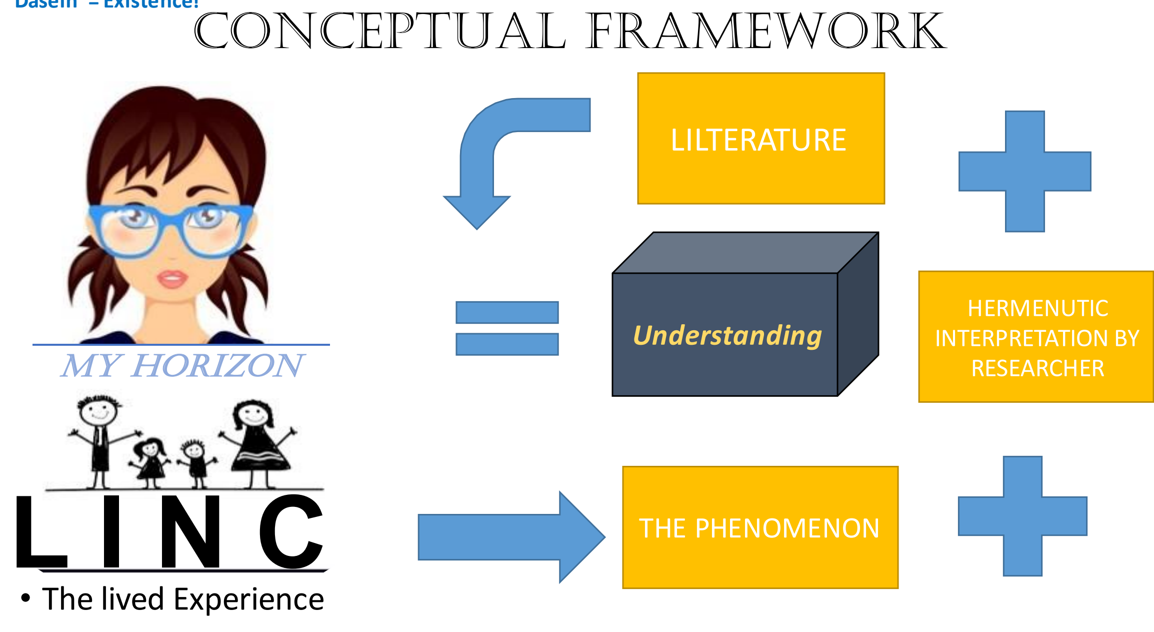

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework

Imenda (2014) explains the purpose of a conceptual framework in supporting the researcher and the reader in identifying the variables in a given study. In the present study, Figure 2 presents the variables of the LINC programme as the participants' 'lived experience' and contextual reality of engagement with the programme. Other variables relate to the researcher's hermeneutic interpretation of the participants' experiences and the literature which informs the findings from the data analysis. In itself, the conceptual framework embraces Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein* in the primacy of the participants' lived experiences and the role of the researcher in one's "ability to control a temptation to a priori impose conceptual categories" (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014, p. 13).

The Concept of '*Dasein*' in Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Heidegger (1929) asserts that a phenomenon can only be unveiled ontologically through '*Dasein',* a philosophical term meaning '*being'* or '*to exist'*. *Dasein* is related to individual humans and the distinct situations they find themselves in. There is a pronounced emphasis on the social dimensions of *Dasein* and how one perceives oneself within society, and how in turn, this perception of the self has an impact on the phenomenon. Heidegger also considers the importance of moods in our existence and the potential of our emotions to influence and alter the rest of our life experiences. Our moods play a significant role in how one experiences a phenomenon and interprets realities and experiences. Finally, Heidegger considers how the 'big' question of life and death, and one's willingness to face one's certain eventuality, influences how one approaches different experiences / phenomena in life.

Figure 3 Key Principles of Heidegger's (1929) Concept of *Dasein*

This application of understanding of *Dasein* is universal and is argued here as particularly relevant to the study of ECTs' experiences in the contextual reality of their professional role. Frechette *et al.* (2020) summarise the objective of interpretative phenomenology in this regard as attempting "to uncover or disclose a phenomenon by pulling away layers of forgetfulness or hiddenness that are present in our everyday existence" (p. 2). The epistemology of this research is anchored in this understanding of *Dasein* and how engagement with the phenomenon and the subsequent conversations around that experience, uncovers the realities for participants that they may have hidden or forgotten in the routines

of professional and personal lives. McManus-Holroyd (2007) recognises the opportunity for hermeneutic understanding when individuals undergo experiences that disrupt the ordinary patterns of life or "taken for granted aspects of existence" (p. 2). Engagement with the LINC programme is presented here as a new experience that is designed to challenge and inform students' understandings and knowledge of inclusion, and thence an opportunity for creating this hermeneutic understanding.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of the Researcher

A related key concept in interpretative phenomenological research recognises that this understanding can only be communicated through the researcher's explanation and interpretation of the participants' experiences. Bush *et al.* (2019) argue that this interpretation of experiences necessitates incorporation of the researcher's bias, knowledge and background. Heidegger (1929) did not develop a framework as a basis for ontological investigations and instead implied that researchers need to ask questions to gain understanding, which Crowther and Thomson (2020) see as an opportunity to move beyond descriptions to uncover meaning. Exploring *Dasein* as the ultimate ontological basis for understanding our life-world, those social, perceptual and practical experiences, can only occur through interactions between participants, researchers and texts. Heidegger's IHP denies the totality of Husserl's concept of 'bracketing' (1913) and instead sees the co-construction of the phenomenon by both participant and the researcher.

Gadamer (2004), a student of Heidegger, recognises that researcher assumptions and personal beliefs are a key part of the understanding and interpretation of participants' lived experiences. In explaining Gadamer's concept of 'pre-understanding', Sundler *et al.* (2019) associate it with having "a reflective attitude" (p. 735), which can guide the interpretative process throughout the research investigation. Similarly, McManus-Holroyd (2007) explains that any interpretation from a hermeneutical perspective must begin with the researcher reflecting on their own pre-understandings or fore-projections. For me, as a preschool teacher

and a tutor on the LINC programme at the time of data collection and analysis, this necessitated that I reflect on my story, my culture and histories within this social context. It required that I acknowledge that I am situated in a life-world not dissimilar to that of the participants; that I am simultaneously passionate about my work in the early years while frustrated at the lack of support, recognition and security within the sector. As a tutor on the LINC programme, my pre-understanding meant that I knew the content of the modules and had benefitted from new learning on a personal and professional level, however, hermeneutic understanding guided me to reflect on "the way in which our blind attachment to certain classifications and categorisations limit how we understand and come to know the world" (McManus-Holroyd 2007, p. 3). It is essential therefore, as a researcher, that I address these personal assumptions and distractions that may blur the existence of the phenomenon and place false realities on participants' experiences (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004).

Reflexivity and Reflection in Interpretive Phenomenology

The methodological principle of reflexivity and reflection forms the hermeneutic circle which represents the ongoing circular process of pre-understanding, gathering information and interpreting findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) describe reflexivity as a "process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" and recognising how the research processes are potentially "shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives" (p.143). It might also be viewed as an examination of the self and how one's motives and life history can influence, and indeed be part of, the research process (Oleson 2005; Musgrave 2019; Braun and Clarke 2021b). While this reflexive stance is a key consideration in qualitative research in general, Frechette *et al.* (2020) note the centrality of this process to interpretative phenomenology when one considers the role of hermeneutic principles that guide the research study. Interpretative phenomenology searches for meaning within and between the parts and the whole of the phenomenon (Thomson 2008; Suddick *et al.* 2020). The incorporation of Gadamer's circle of understanding (2004) included this reflexivity in addressing assumptions and

personal biases at all stages of the research process, as I moved within and between the data set, endeavouring to interpret the influence of the phenomenon on the participants' perceptions and practices. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflective journal, which Frechette *et al.* (2020) view as an "essential tool" to guide reflexivity in IHP research. The reflective journal supported ethical reflexivity in this study, enhancing my awareness of my role in ensuring the ethical practice was "clean" throughout the process (Hodgkin and Beauchamp 2019, p. 25). This hermeneutic cycle of reflection is not about developing a specific procedure for understanding, but rather that it can support clarification for the interpretation of the lived experience (Gadamer 2004; McManus-Holroyd 2007; Van Manen 2014).

Gadamer's concept of horizons is also a relevant consideration in the context of this hermeneutic circle of understanding (2004). He explains how some individuals may have a limited horizon, meaning that their point of view may not enable them to 'see' far enough, leading to an over-emphasis on what is nearest to them. The same is true of one who may stand on a high vantage point and forget to 'see' things that are close and familiar. When one incorporates this concept of horizon with that of *Dasein*, and how all of the associated factors, from the perspective of the participant and of the researcher, might impact the understanding of the phenomenon, then one can see the value of the reflexive hermeneutic circle of understanding to make sense of this process. This interpretive process forms a strong rationale for selecting IHP for this research study whereby my own life-world and pre-understandings from my horizon, places me in a position whereby I can interpret meaning to support a broader understanding of the phenomenon and factors influencing participants' experiences. Engaging with journaling of the research journey guided the reflexive processes as I challenged my own assumptions and understandings in order to be transparent about my horizon of significance throughout. Dewey (1920/2004) argued that this reflexive scepticism about our own thought processes is central to the reasoning and understanding of life experiences. A similar approach, IPA, communicates this interpretative process as the participants trying to make sense of their experiences through language and reflection; while the researcher attempts to make sense of the participants trying to

make sense of their experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009). It is, as Larkin *et al.* (2006) note, a process whereby the researcher is facilitating the revelation of the subject matter on "its own terms and not according to the imposition of any preconceived set of assumptions and expectations" (p.108).

Situating the Literature Review in the Research Process

Concurring with Groenewald (2004), who argues that the inductive nature of phenomenological research is enhanced by not engaging with literature at an early stage of data analysis, in this investigation the Literature Review was delayed until after the data collection. This is a necessary element of phenomenological investigation which ensures that the data collection process and the subsequent analysis are not skewed by assumptions based on the additional reading at a primary stage in the research process (Ryan *et al.* 2007). The Literature Review in this study is considered in two stages: firstly, in this chapter by presenting the context of the societal backdrop of the study and secondly on completion of the data analysis. The initial review provided an overview of the policy and regulatory processes governing the ELC sector in Ireland and is considered a necessary component of this context (Figure 4), as well as being informed by my own knowledge of sectoral issues and challenges as relevant to the study.

Figure 4 Topics Discussed in the Contextual Review to Set the Scene for the Study

This contextual review is central to the concept of '*Dasein'* in recognising the societal role of participants and the relevance of their experiences to an understanding of key ideas such as 'inclusion', 'quality' and 'leadership' in the ELC setting as illustrated in Figure 4 and will be discussed in turn in this chapter. Omission of this important information at the initial stage of the data collection would limit the understanding of the phenomenon. Fry *et al.* (2017) discuss this debate regarding engagement with literature and the importance of presenting a backdrop to the investigation to promote an understanding of experience. My role as LINC tutor and as an ECT contributed to a knowledge base that would inform the research process from the outset in relation to the research questions. The extensive reading that followed the data collection therefore focused on the themes developed through the data analysis.

In line with the qualitative and reflexive nature of the study, phenomenologists work on the basis that the researcher cannot be detached from one's own knowledge base and experiences, which must be acknowledged in the research process (Groenewald 2004). Moreover, Wimpenny and Gass (2000, p. 34) suggest that phenomenological research should be a "joint authored" co-creation between

the researcher and participants. Recent studies in education and the social sciences have been drawn to interpretative phenomenology as it provides a way to reveal understandings of human experiences and to explore the behaviours, perceptions and emotions attached to these experiences (e.g. Van der Mescht 2004; Laletas *et al.* 2017; Crowther and Thomson 2020; Foran *et al.* 2020; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2021). According to Van Manen (1990 p. 2), one's interpretation of "a lived experience" is just that: "a" lived experience amongst many others. Furthermore, advocates of IPA (Smith *et al.* 2009; Kirillova 2019) suggest that interpreting these experiences is seen as a craft rather than a scientific method. The realities of this lack of specific guidance on phenomenological research may be perceived as a challenge, or potentially an opportunity to embrace the creative possibilities of interpretive phenomenology. The interpretive hermeneutic approach used in studies of education illustrates the potential of this method in provoking new insights, as well as "compassion, critical reflection and socio-political engagement" (Thomson 2008 p. 34). In adopting this approach for the present study, I am mindful of following the guidance of those who have paved the way in phenomenological research, and to ensure that the entire process from data collection, analysis and discussions are guided by the principles outlined by Sundler *et al.* (2019), in emphasising openness, questioning my pre-understanding and adopting a reflexive attitude throughout.

Terminology

The terminology used in this study reflects the complexity of the ELC sector nationally and internationally and is purposely referenced in the variety of terms throughout this thesis to illustrate this reality. The term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) are internationally recognised terms used in policy and legislation (i.e. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United National International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), World Health Organisation (WHO). However, in Ireland, the term "early learning and care" (ELC) was adopted in 2018 with the publication of *First 5, a Whole of Government Strategy for babies, Young Children and their*

Families (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018). Within the literature, interpretations of terminology may denote a division within the sector insofar as 'childcare' refers to the care of babies and toddlers in facilitating parental participation in the labour market, whereas ECCE is generally associated with 'preparing' children for primary school (Hayes 2007; French 2018;2019). Although not an exhaustive list, settings in this study may be labelled as an early childhood education and care (ECCE) setting, an ELC setting, crèche, full-day care service, nursery, kindergarten, playschool, preschool, Montessori or an early years' setting. While this study refers primarily to the 'ELC setting' as indicated in the LINC programme, these other terms are also included as referenced in the literature and the data.

The role of the adult working in the ELC setting is similarly complex and has been afforded a multitude of titles (Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Urban *et al.* 2017; Nutbrown 2021). The LINC programme refers to the adult working with the child as an 'early childhood teacher' (ECT). Therefore, for the purpose of the present study, the term early childhood teacher is predominantly used. However, the use of the professional title of 'teacher' has been disputed in terms of the varied qualifications, from a basic Level 5 to a Level 8 honours Degree on the National Framework of Qualifications, of the staff team working in the sector. Other terms associated with the role of the adult are also referred to in the literature (Moloney 2015; Urban *et al.*2017; Nutbrown 2021) and the findings, including preschool teacher, childcare worker, crèche worker, preschool assistant, early years' educator, early years' practitioner and kindergarten teachers.

The terminology used to describe children with 'additional needs' is equally complex and therefore central to this discussion regarding how inclusion is perceived in practice. Within this study, the policy, literature and findings guide the use of language which predominantly refers to the child with 'additional needs'. However, the term 'disability' and that of 'special needs' are also referenced as they arise in policy, literature and findings.

Defining Quality in the Early Learning and Care Setting

In defining quality for the purpose of the contextual backdrop to this research study, this section provides an overview of the policies relevant to the ELC sector which create expectations of quality provision within the setting. In line with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, consideration of the pre-understanding of the participants, as well as the horizon of the researcher, must be considered in discussing the expectations of quality within the sector. The OECD (2019) considers 'quality' in ECCE as evidenced in the settings' ability to promote children's learning, development and well-being. There is an emphasis on a high-quality workforce with the skills and knowledge to plan and implement a quality and inclusive early years curriculum thus giving a "strong start to all children" (OECD 2019, p. 31). From an Irish perspective, the Department of Health and Children (DoH 2000, p. 61) define quality in the ELC sector as that which provides "lasting cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children". Hayes (2008) asserts that the adult's knowledge of curriculum and child development, as well as the quality of interactions with the child are central to achieving quality as set out by the DoH. Likewise, the recently published *Nurturing Skills: Workforce Development Plan for the ELC sector in Ireland* (Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) 2021) establishes a direct link between quality provision and qualified educators. In this respect, the DCEDIY concur with Melhuish's (2004, p. 5) assertion that "the adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available" is central to a quality experience. This point is particularly relevant and goes beyond the formality of qualifications in consideration of the critical importance of relationships in the early years, as supported through the practice frameworks: *Siolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) 2006) and *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009) both of which are discussed later in this chapter. The European Commission (2014) incorporated such findings in the development of indicators for the creation of a quality framework for early childhood education and care (ECEC) under three broad headings relating to structural quality, process quality and outcome quality.

Structural quality in the ELC setting therefore, focuses upon the organisation of the service with key indicators linked to staff qualifications, adherence to health and safety regulations and adult-child ratios (Melhuish *et al.* 2006; Early *et al.* 2007; Roberts *et al.* 2010; Karemaker *et al.* 2011; Slot *et al.* 2015; Túsla 2018). More recent studies (e.g. Barnes and Melhuish 2016; Melhuish and Gardiner 2019; OECD 2019) reiterate the link between structural quality and highly qualified staff. Process quality is defined by pedagogical practices within the ELC setting and emphasises the importance of play, interactions and relationships with and between children and adults (Melhuish *et al.* 2006; European Commission (EC) 2014; Slot *et al*. 2015; European Union 2021). The EC (2014) also places an emphasis on the "outcome quality" associated with children's emotional, moral, mental and physical health as well as "school readiness" (p.8). The commission outlines the benefits of quality ECCE for children, families, communities and wider society supporting research which identifies how access to quality ECCE increases potential for future education and earnings, reduces participation in crime as well as improving health and well-being (Heckman and Karapakula 2019; Garcia *et al.* 2021). Assessing quality in the ELC setting in Ireland is guided by *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE 2006), which will be outlined in further detail below. An understanding of quality forms the horizon of significance of participants in this research study, which is influenced by other elements of their life experiences. The considered expectations and the ECTs' subsequent understandings of how they achieve quality practice in the ELC setting, all play a role in determining the influence of the LINC programme on their perceptions and practices in the ECCE service.

Inclusion in the Early Learning and Care Setting

In terms of the present study, a contextual understanding of inclusion necessitates an overview of the policy and guiding principles that underpin ECCE practice. The IHP approach recognises that each participants' horizon and preunderstanding is dependent on their own life experiences and one's concept of inclusion may be dependent on a number of factors that impacted the participants' reality of *Dasein.*

The contextual depiction of definitions of inclusion are based on the policies that govern and guide ELC settings to illustrate expectations of practice of all those working with young children (birth to six years). The horizon of understanding of the participants working in the ELC setting is informed by expectations of quality as determined by the relevant inspection agencies (i.e. Tusla and Department of Education and Skills (DES), as well as best practice guidance within the sector. *The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Charter and Guidelines* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016a) was developed to support those working with young children to understand and develop pedagogical practices that embrace diversity and equality, acting as a foundation for an inclusive culture in the early years (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Principles of an Inclusive Culture (Adapted from DCYA 2016a)

Representatives from all ELC services nationally were invited to complete training workshops around the *DEI* guidelines (DCYA 2016a) with the aim of promoting respect for all children and to empower and enable them to meaningfully participate in all areas of the early years' programme. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2017) illustrates the interconnectivity of quality ECCE and inclusive practice by asserting that "the most important outcome of quality provision is to enable all children to actively

participate in inclusive early childhood education (IECE)" (p.7). In practice, this is evidenced in the way "all children – including those vulnerable to exclusion – are equally valued, supported and enabled to progress along with their peers" (ibid).

Ideally, inclusion in the ELC setting should be reflected in the curriculum and the environment whereby every child is welcomed and included on equal terms and are supported to reach their full potential in all areas of development (Department of Health and Children (DoHC) 2000; DCYA 2016a). Clough and Clough (2013) see inclusion as part of the progression of 'special needs education' from segregation, to integration and to the ideal of inclusion, which involves challenging the preconceptions of inclusive pedagogy and practice. Prior to the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) ((DCYA 2016b) in 2016, there was limited support for participation of children with an additional need in the ELC setting, with parents reliant on local agencies to provide supports to enable the child to attend a preschool service (Moloney and McCarthy 2010). Based on a national study which explored the inclusion of children with special needs in ELC settings, Moloney and McCarthy (2010) concluded that meaningful participation for children was so much more than allocating of a place in a setting and that a national inclusion policy was a requisite in the Irish context.

Similarly, Clough and Clough (2013) assert that inclusion "must only be known by its outcomes, not by its rhetoric", recognising that "it is the effects of successful inclusive practices and attitudes that really make a difference" (p. 4). In common with Moloney and McCarthy (2010; 2018), Alexander *et al.* (2016) note that it is the attitude of teachers which determine the success of inclusive education.

The Inclusive Education Framework (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2011), although focusing upon primary schools, considers the central role of the teacher in providing an effective response to the diversity of needs of the group, promoting the meaningful participation of each child rather than "simple placement or accommodation" in the educational setting (p. 14). The European Agency (2015) equally directs that "all learners of any age are provided with

meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers" (p.1). Inclusion in the ECEC setting is considered a key indicator of the quality framework (European Commission 2014) which emphasises the centrality of the voice of the child in all areas of practice. The contextual reality of a lack of understanding of inclusion and inconsistent interpretation of inclusive practice and pedagogy in the Irish context up until the introduction of the AIM (DCYA 2016c), is presented as the backdrop to this study. As mentioned previously, the study focuses upon the LINC programme which was developed to address this gap in practice (Interdepartmental Group (IDG) 2015).

The Early Learning and Care Sector in Ireland

An awareness of the complexities of the ELC sector in Ireland is an important consideration in understanding the 'lived experiences' of the study participants. According to the Pobal[2] *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report* (2021) there are a total of 180,149 children attending the 4,690 childcare facilities in Ireland. Nationally, the ELC sector comprises both private (74%) and community services (26%), the former being owned by a private owner and the latter under the aegis of a Board of Management in the local community (Pobal 2021). All services are funded by a combination of parental fees and government monies, depending on the type of service provided. In recent years, the divide between private and community settings has narrowed as all services are now eligible to deliver the range of Government childcare schemes[3] offered through Pobal by the DCEDIY, whereas in the past, community services were the only childcare centres charged with responsibility for supporting families in lower income households. There has

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[2] Pobal is the government agency responsible for the administration of funding programmes for early learning and care settings, and also carry out unannounced inspections on these settings to ensure the effectiveness and transparency of the funding allocated annually.

[3] Since 2019, there has been a phasing out of childcare subsidy programmes, including the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programme and the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), with all applications for childcare subsidies transferred to the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). The NCS provides financial support to help parents to meet the cost of childcare via universal and income-assessed subsidies.

been ongoing consternation regarding the funding model for ELC services in Ireland, where consistent under-investment has resulted in poorly paid ECTs, and resulting issues with recruitment and retention (SIPTU 2022) which ultimately impedes quality provision (DCEDIY 2021; Moloney 2021; Pobal 2021). As discussed earlier, one's mood may influence how we react to different experiences in one's life (Heidegger 1929), and financial pressure and lack of business support may be considered as a factor in participants' engagement with the LINC programme (Oke *et al.* 2021).

Although the extended availability of funded childcare programmes, across both community and private provision, has paved the path towards a more accessible and inclusive approach to ELC provision in Ireland, Pobal (2021) reports that only 32% of all services offer a full day-care facility. This has resulted in a shortage of places nationally, placing pressure on parents who need full-time care for their children (Pobal 2021). While funded programmes have, in the main, been a welcome development, Moloney and Petterson (2017) highlight the increase in administration that accompanies them. Table 1 provides an overview of key policy development in Ireland directed toward establishing a system of high-quality ELC provision in Ireland between 1991 and 2017 when the current study began.

Table 1 Overview of Key Policy Developments Relating to Establishing a System of High-Quality Early Learning and Care in Ireland from 1991 to 2017.

Year	Development
1991	• The *Childcare Act* (Government of Ireland 1991) defines criteria for preschool services and promotes child welfare.
1992	• United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) ratified in Ireland
1995	• Children's Rights Alliance established to ensure children's rights are included and respected in Irish policy and legislation.
1996	• *Child Care (Preschool services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children 1996).
1999	• *Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (*Department of Health and Children 1999) • *National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 1999) • *Ready to Learn: White paper on Early Childhood Education. (*Department of Education and Science 1999).

Year	Event
2000	• Equality Authority established • Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland 2000) • National Disability Authority established • *National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children 2000).
2001	• Establishment of the City and County Childcare Committees nationwide
2004	• *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs* (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland 2004) • Irish Childcare Policy Network, later known as Start Strong, formed.
2005	• *Disability Act* (Government of Ireland 2005)
2006	• *Siolta: the National Quality Framework* for Early Years Services (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2006) • *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Provider*s (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2006) • Revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations
2009	• *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged 0-6 years (*National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009).
2010	• Universal Free Preschool Year introduced as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme • *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (*Department of Education and Skills (2010).
2011	• *Children First National Guidance* (replaces 1999 Guidelines) • European Union Commission sets out the *Competency Requirements for Early Childhood Care and Education*. • Establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs
2014	• *Better Outcomes Brighter Future* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014).
2015	• Better Start, the Quality Development Service is established (Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
2016	• Department of Education and Skills Early Years Education Focused Inspections begin in Early Learning and Care settings. • Early Years Services Regulations • Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) • Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) • *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*(Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2016).
2017	• *Children first: National guidance for the protection and welfare of children* (DCYA 2017)
2018	• *A guide to early years education inspection (EYEI)* (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2018)

2019	• *First Five: A whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018) • National Childcare Scheme (GoI 2019). • *Professional award criteria and guidelines for initial professional education (Level 7 and Level 8) degree programmes for the early learning and care sector in Ireland* (DES 2019). • *An end of year one review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), (*DCYA 2019).
2021	• *Nurturing skills: The workforce plan for early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC), 2022-2028, (*GoI 2022).
2022	• *Core funding model for the early learning and care (ELC) and school-aged childcare (SAC),* Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY 2022)

As illustrated in Table 1, there has been a consistent emphasis on developing the quality of provision in the ELC sector in Ireland. The various iterations of the Childcare regulations and the publications of the practice frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear,* are particularly salient. While acknowledging the centrality of addressing issues relating to quality provision for children, policy initiatives did not sufficiently address other matters of contention from the perspective of the adult working within the ELC setting in relation to pay and conditions of employment. For example, while the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) (DES 2010) focused on required further and higher education providers to review their provision and implement a plan to improve quality and relevance in the light of the occupational profiles for the ELC sector, it overlooked the need to address professional remuneration for ECTs.

Quality in the Early Learning and Care Sector in Ireland

Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care & Education (CECDE 2006) provides guidance for best practice in the ELC sector in Ireland and is presented here as the contextual reality of expectation of participants' working role in this study. While the fore-mentioned childcare regulations focused primarily on structural aspects of quality in the ELC setting, the publication of *Síolta* created a

shift towards an emphasis on process quality. This in turn, informed the development of the curriculum framework, *Aistear,* with a further focus upon the importance of process quality in the ELC setting. The *Siolta* framework is based on twelve principles of quality which specify how to engage with children and families in a meaningful way to provide quality ECCE (Table 2).

Table 2 Principles of Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2006).

Siolta Principles

1. *Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.*
2. *The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.*
3. *Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.*
4. *Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.*
5. *Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.*
6. *Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.*
7. *The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.*
8. *The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.*
9. *The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.*
10. *The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.*
11. *Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.*
12. *Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.*

Siolta, meaning ‘seeds’ in Irish, set the foundation for formal reflective practice in the ELC sector in Ireland, providing guiding questions and statements to consider how one is providing the highest quality care and education to young children. Best practice is upheld through realisation of the first standard on the rights of the child, and having established this, the ECT is guided through reflection on key practice areas such as curriculum, play, parents and families, and environments. The

principles of *Siolta* (CECDE 2006), detailed in Table 2, provide the basis for the use of the framework across all early years' curricula, which may include a play-based programme or one that is influenced by the Montessori (1909/1966), Reggio Emilia (Edwards *et al.* 1998), Highscope (Wiltshire 2011) or Steiner (Nicol and Taplin 2012) approaches. Similar to the standards and principles within *Síolta*, Melhuish (2015) interprets features of high-quality early childhood provision as incorporating the quality of adult and child interactions; knowledge of how children learn; knowledge and understanding of the curriculum; supporting children in resolving conflict and in assisting parents in providing learning opportunities at home. Furthermore, consistent with the *Síolta* quality standards and the WDP (DES 2010) many researchers (European Commission 2014; Melhuish 2015; Slot *et al.* 2015; EASNIE 2017; European Agency 2021) emphasise the central role of the adult working with children as a key element of quality provision.

While the *Siolta* manual (CECDE 2006) was distributed to all ELC services nationally, French (2013) was critical of the roll-out of the framework on the basis that it provided little guidance to those working on the ground in practice. Some ELC settings had opportunity to volunteer participation in a *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), which involves having an early years' mentor or a development worker from a support agency, such as Early Childhood Ireland or the Childcare Committees[4], support them through engagement with the Framework (Skehill 2018). The QAP is a self-initiated process of reflection and evaluation which requires the whole staff team to engage with CPD in order to reflect on practice and document evidence of the quality of service provision under each of the sixteen standards, including the *Rights of the Child; Curriculum* and *Environments.* In more recent time, the Better Start Early Years Specialist (EYS) from the National Early Years Quality Development team[5], support ELC services to meet these *Siolta* *s*tandards (DCYA 2015). Some settings engage with this support and mentoring

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[4] There are 30 City and County Childcare Committees who operate as local agents of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and support the delivery of early education and childcare programmes at a local level

[5] Better Start is the National Early Years Quality Development Service which is a national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in Early Learning and Care (ELC) for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland.

service on a voluntary basis, while other services might be advised to engage with this guidance on the basis of advice from Tusla (2018) or the Department of Education and Skills (DES 2018). Although Bleach (2014) and Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011b) for example, commend initiatives to implement the *Síolta* standards, the DES (2018) suggest that the inconsistency of roll-out resulted in a lack of understanding of the framework and how it could be translated into practice. An awareness of these initiatives is a factor for consideration in understanding the perspectives of the research participants. The effectiveness and success of quality guidance is dependent on the adults working with the children. As noted by the OECD (2018), their capabilities, qualifications and willingness to engage with the process and develop their practice is critical.

***Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009)**

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2009), was introduced to the ELC sector in Ireland in 2009. When the ECCE scheme[6] was rolled out in 2010, participating settings were obliged through the contract to adhere to the principles and standards of both *Síolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009). *Aistear*, the Irish word meaning 'journey', was designed as a framework that would support and encourage ECTs to provide a consistent and play-based programme of care and education for children in the multi-faceted ELC sector. Based on the principles of *Siolta* (CECDE 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) adopts a thematic approach to children's learning and development in early childhood, as illustrated in Figure 6.

[6] ECCE scheme, often referred to as the 'Free Preschool Year', offered free sessional preschool to all children in the year prior to starting primary school. This will be detailed further in this chapter.

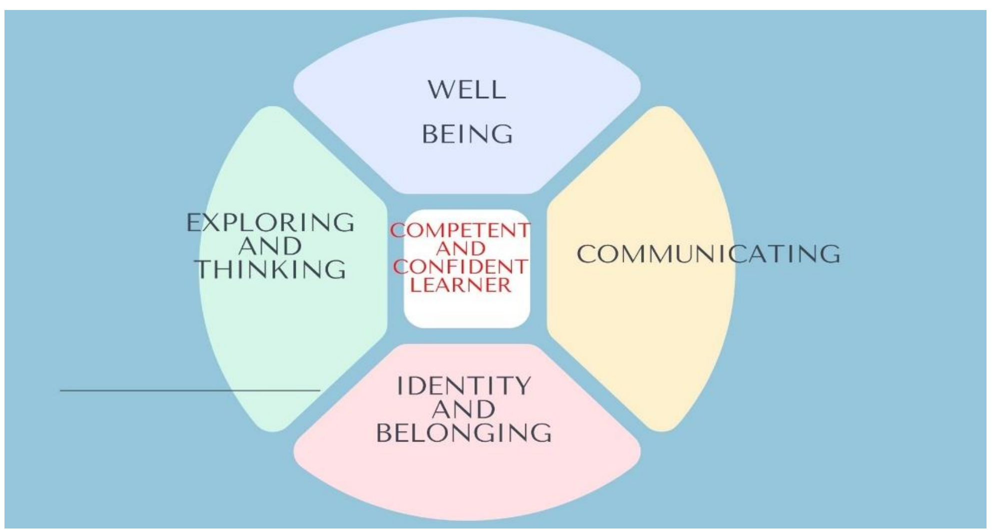

Figure 6 Thematic Approach to Learning within *Aistear*

As illustrated, learning is presented across four thematic areas: Well-Being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking, which describe what children learn as "competent and confident learners" (Kernan 2007, p.2). Each theme is associated with aims and learning goals which focus on a strengths-based approach that emphasise the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding of each child. *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) is based on 12 principles that focus on the strengths and abilities of each individual child, the right of each child to have their needs met, and their families recognised and valued in the ELC setting by responsive adults there (Figure 7).

Children and their lives in early childhood

1. The child's uniqueness
2. Equality & diversity
3. Children as citizens

Children's connections with others

1. •Relationships
2. •Parents, family and community
3. •The adult's role

How children learn and develop

1. ·Holistic learning and development
2. •Active learning
3. •Play and hands on experiences
4. •Relevant and meaningful experiences
5. •Communication and Language
6. •The learning environment

Figure 7 Principles of Aistear (NCCA 2009)

Holistic learning in the early years is defined as the interdependent nature of children's growth, their physical, emotional and social development as well as their capacity to learn about the world (Brodie 2018). Learning through hands-on and meaningful learning opportunities to support holistic development, is a central feature of the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009). As shown in the third set of principles, and congruent with *Síolta, Aistear* is premised on learning through play.

> Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners (NCCA 2009, p. 11)

It is clear that *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) embodies the principles of an inclusive pedagogy for children aged from birth to six years and also provides the basis for collaborative practice with the early years' curriculum framework bridging the boundary between preschool and primary school with the infant classes also included in this framework. There have been some noteworthy initiatives to support the implementation of the *Aistear* framework, including one in 2011 by the NCCA and

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI). This partnership aimed to bring *Aistear* to life in ELC services and to share this learning experience through an online *Aistear* Toolkit, as well as subsequent training and CPD events (NCCA 2013). Nevertheless, as with *Siolta (*CECDE 2006), the roll out of *Aistear* has been considered ad hoc and inconsistent resulting in varying interpretations of the principles and themes in practice at both preschool and primary school level (DES 2018). As a result of such variance of interpretation of *Aistear* in practice, participants' knowledge of the framework from their pre-understanding is considered a possible factor in how the LINC programme may have influenced their pedagogical practice. Regardless of the WDP (DES 2010), little attention has been paid to the qualification levels of ECTs (Moloney and Pope 2013; Moloney 2015; 2021). In fact, in spite of repeated calls for the State to introduce a minimum qualification for ECTs, no such requirement materialised until 2016, with the publication of the Early Years Services Regulations in 2016. As researcher then, I am mindful of taking a reflexive stance in recognising that participants have different levels of qualifications and experience and their personal lives may have influenced their willingness and ability to engage with *Aistear*. Qualification requirements are just one of the many changes within the ECCE policy and practice landscapes in Ireland. As outlined in the following section, regulatory and inspection processes have also changed through the years, creating competing demands and expectations for ECTs.

Governance of the Early Learning and Care Sector in Ireland

Heidegger's (1929) understanding of *Dasein* considers how one's social role influences our concept of self and may be a factor in our perception of other aspects of one's life-world. The role of the participants in their respective workplaces, and the subsequent responsibilities assigned to this role, inform their lived experience in relation to the phenomenon under study. All ELC settings in the country are governed by the Early Years Services Regulations (DCYA 2016c) which specify a broad range of requirements for childcare providers in upholding the

health, safety, welfare and development of children. Tusla[7] are tasked with ensuring that all childcare services are registered with the state body and adhering to regulations. Such adherence is monitored through a process of unannounced inspection, undertaken by agents of Tusla, with inspection reports published online (DCYA 2016c; Tusla 2018). The revised regulations of 2016 represented a considerable shift regarding the human resource (HR) management of the setting as well as creating clearer expectations of services relating to primary areas of governance; health, welfare and development of the child; safety and suitability of premises and facilities. The regulations specify that all staff working with children in the ELC setting must have a minimum qualification at QQI Level five on the framework of qualifications and have Garda Vetting[8]. These regulations underpin service provision in the early years and adherence to these specifications requires competence, skills and knowledge. In recognising the need to bridge the gap between best practice guidance and the legal requirements for the ELC sector, the *Quality and Regulatory Framework* (QRF) (Tusla 2018) was published with the aim of piloting this new framework as an inspection tool in 2020. The QRF was also distributed to all settings with plans in place for online training for ECTs to support engagement with and comprehension of the framework[9]. The updated Regulations (DCYA 2016c) coincided with the introduction of the Early Years' Education- focused Inspections (EYEI) undertaken by the DES in the ECCE preschool setting. The DES focus on four main areas of pedagogical practice (see Figure 8). Unlike the Tusla inspections, the DES provide forty-eight hour advance notice to the service provider, with an emphasis on co-professional dialogue between the DES Inspector and the ECT to support quality and development in the ECCE setting (DES 2018b).

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[7] Tusla is a State Agency which was established by the Child and Family Agency Act in 2013 to support and promote children's development, welfare and protection as well as to support families.
[8] Garda Vetting is the process of police clearance whereby the adult applies to have a background check to prove that he / she has no criminal record that would deem them unfit to work with children.
[9] Túsla began the online CPD programme on the QRF in practice in 2020.

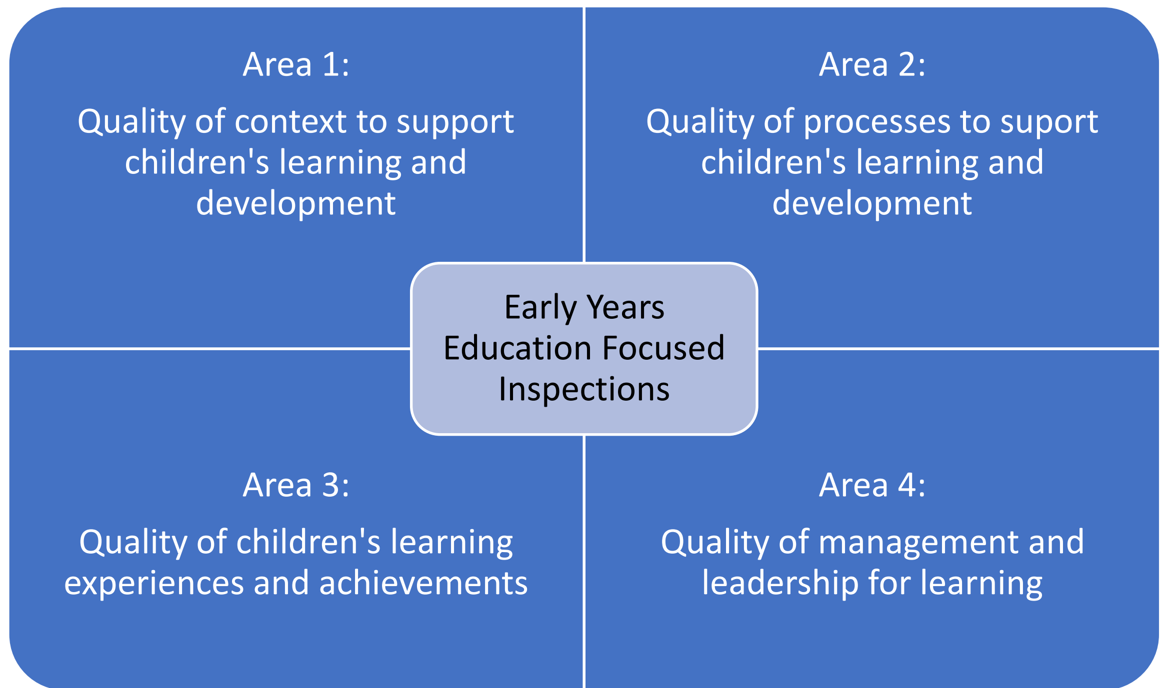

Figure 8 Focus of Early Years Education Focused Inspections (EYEI) Framework (DES 2018b)

The principles of the EYEI process clearly indicate its links to *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) with the emphasis on high quality educational experiences that support children's well-being and holistic development through a play-based programme. In keeping with *Aistear*, children are viewed as competent and confident learners, with strengths, interests and needs that should be reflected in their environment and in quality interactions with supportive adults as well as their peers (DES 2016a; DES 2018b).

As well as inspections from Tusla (DCYA 2016c; Tusla 2018) and the DES (2018b), the ELC sector is also subject to unannounced inspections by Pobal who administer funding for all the childcare schemes as previously mentioned. These inspections ensure that funding allocated to the service is being utilised for the purpose for which it was given. In other words, that parent fees for example, are reduced by the amount granted through the NCS. Essentially, the Pobal inspections are desk-based, focusing on fee policies, receipts of payments, child and staff attendance records and other relevant documentation. Childcare services are also subject to inspections from the Environmental Health Officer (EHO) to ensure that there is an effective Food Safety Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)

implemented to prevent any hazards or risks to children on the premises (Government of Ireland (GoI) 1989). As places of employment, ELC settings may also be inspected by other government agencies in relation to legislation regarding the fair employment and contractual rights of those working in the service (GoI 2015). This ongoing process of inspection and assessment is part of the realities of the participants, from their role as a manager, or as an educator within the setting. Their experiences of inspections, their interpretations of engagement with other stakeholders in this regard, must be acknowledged as being part of their professional life-world and may possibly have an influence on subsequent experiences in practice.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme

The ECCE programme was introduced to the ELC sector in January 2010 as the 'Free Preschool Year', providing fifteen hours per week over the school term of thirty-eight weeks, of preschool 'care and education' for all children in the year prior to starting primary school (DCYA 2019). Based on recommendations from the *Report of the Interdepartmental Group (IDG) on Future Investment in Early Years and School Aged Childcare* (DCYA 2015), this was expanded in 2016 to include all children from the age of three years with a rolling enrolment during three stages of the academic year at September, January and April. This was again changed to its current criteria of eligibility for access to free ECCE for fifteen hours weekly for the two full academic years prior to starting primary school, which has translated into practice as a minimum age requirement of two years and eight months. During the period of data collection for this research study, there was an increase of 63% participation in the ECCE programme owing to this new eligibility criteria, with a total of 120,601 children enrolled on the scheme (Pobal 2018). It can be argued that the ECCE programme was a seminal initiative in the Irish context, creating a firm relationship between staff qualification levels and the quality of children's experiences in settings. As indicated earlier, one of the key measures of quality in the ELC setting is the qualification of the staff working with the children (NICHD 2006; Mathers *et al.* 2007; Heckman *et al*. 2010 Slot *et al.* 2015; Melhuish and

Gardiner 2019). In recognition of the relationship between quality and staff qualifications, the ECCE scheme introduced a minimum level of qualification for those working directly with children under the scheme. It is important to note that this qualification requirement predated that minimum requirement introduced through the Early Years Services Regulations in 2016. While the ECCE scheme initially required a room leader working directly with children in the ECCE scheme to hold a QQI Level 5 qualification in ECCE, this requirement was subsequently increased to a QQI Level 6 qualification (DCYA 2013). From the horizon of significance of the participants in this study, the reality of having to upskill to maintain one's role in the preschool needs to be acknowledged in the contextual reality of their life-world. Further consolidating the relationship between qualifications and quality, the ECCE scheme operates a capitation system that incentivises those already working in the sector to upskill. The higher capitation rate of €80.25 is paid to the setting per child enrolled on the ECCE programme, while the standard rate is €69 per child in attendance. While this measure is intended to support the professionalization of the sector, there is no guarantee that this funding is passed onto the graduate working with the children in the ECCE scheme. Yet Pobal reports a year on year increase in the number of staff with a graduate qualification working in the setting. Currently 25% of staff working in ELC settings hold a degree-level qualification (8.5% Level 7 and 16.5% Level 8 degree) (Pobal 2021). However, Pobal notes that the majority of these graduates work with the ECCE age group (ibid). The higher capitation paid to graduate-led ECCE groups has an impact on the profile of the ECCE staff by creating a professional role that requires specific qualifications, knowledge and skills to carry out that role (Urban *et al*. 2017). However, Moloney (2015) and Moloney and French (2022) argue that because these initiatives exclude the younger children who are not yet eligible for the ECCE scheme, there is a perception that those working with babies and toddlers require lower level qualifications and that the work is less complex than that with the older children. In effect, the ECCE scheme has inadvertently perpetuated a long-standing two-tier system of care and education in Ireland. The perception that the ECCE scheme is more focused on education, owing to the fact that staff need higher qualifications to work with this age group, may have contributed to a

‘schoolification’ (Ring *et al.* 2016) of the preschool programme, which is being addressed by the DES inspections as outlined earlier.

Access and Inclusion Model

A significant focus upon inclusion in the ELC sector emerged with the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016, again coinciding with the Early Years Services Regulations and the EYEI. The AIM is a model of supports designed to ensure that all children can fully participate in the ECCE Programme. The model is based on the principles of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) whereby the child is at the centre of the preschool experience. Furthermore, it recognises the need for changes at societal level to ensure all children are included in a meaningful way in the ELC setting. The AIM involves seven levels of progressive support based on the needs of the child and the pre-school service as illustrated in Figure 9.

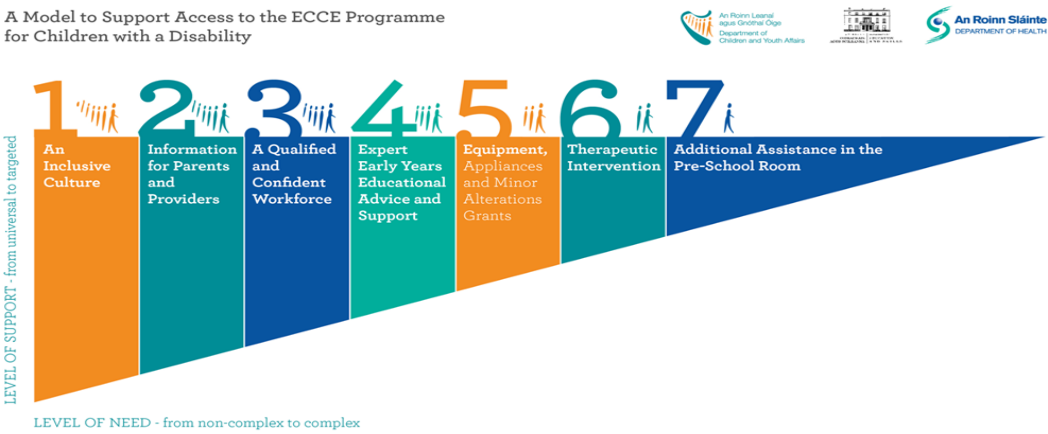

Figure 9 Universal and Targeted Supports under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

The universal supports encapsulated in Levels 1, 2 and 3 are directed towards development of inclusive ELC settings. These Levels focus on educational and capacity-building initiatives which include engaging with the training associated with the *Diversity, equality and inclusion charter (DEI) and guidelines for early childhood care and education* (DCYA 2016a). The LINC Programme, with which the

present study is concerned is central to Level 3: A qualified and confident workforce. The Hanen programme (Hanen 2020) and Lámh (2020) also fall under these universal supports from Levels 1 to 3, with the aim of creating a better societal and sectoral understanding of inclusion.

The DCYA (2016b) indicate that these universal supports, when appropriately developed and implemented, have been proven internationally to be sufficient to support many children with an additional need in the ELC setting. However, if there are concerns regarding a child's development or their participation in the ECCE programme by the ECT, one can apply for targeted supports, available through Levels 4 to 7 of the model, in partnership with the parent or guardian. The targeted supports are focused upon supporting individual children, with or without a diagnosis of an additional need, through an initial application for Level four. This involves the advice and support of an Early Years specialist (EYS) to develop strategies to support the inclusion of the child in the ECCE programme through mentoring and guidance on an ongoing basis. If additional supports are deemed necessary, grants are available at Level 5 to purchase specific equipment or to make adaptations to the physical environment, such as installing a sound system to support a child who has hearing difficulties, or to install a changing table to facilitate the personal care needs of the child. Level 6 support links in with Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), Occupational Therapy (OT) and other such services provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and other organisations. Finally, Level 7 support provides funding to the setting to employ an additional person to work in the preschool room, rather than directly with the child, or to reduce the adult- child ratio in the room to one to eight to ensure there is sufficient adult support available for the group. The EYS advises on how this level is implemented in practice depending on the needs of the child and the setting.

One of the key principles of the AIM is the shift away from the SNA Model, where an SNA supports an individual child in the education setting. While the SNA model has been beneficial in supporting children's progress, the NCSE (2018) has raised concerns about an over-reliance on SNA support which may lead to exclusion from peers. Furthermore, Moloney and McCarthy (2010) indicate that over-reliance on

the SNA may impede the child's sense of agency and autonomy. With regards to the AIM, the preschool assistant employed under Level 7 supports the room leader in the planning and implementation of the inclusive curriculum for all the children. The lower ratio of adult to child in the ECCE room supports meaningful participation through smaller group opportunities and engagement. Although the AIM supports are limited to children enrolled on the ECCE programme and does not provide support for children in the younger age groups in ELC settings, there are currently 5,708 children receiving support under this model (Pobal 2021).

Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme

As previously mentioned, Level 3 of the AIM is concerned with a qualified and confident workforce. To this end, a consortium comprising of Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MU-Froebel Dept.) developed the one-year Level 6 Special Purpose LINC programme. Funded by the DCYA, the national roll out of this programme commenced in September 2016 for an initial four-year period, enrolling approximately nine hundred students annually. The broad aim of the LINC programme is to "effect qualitative shifts in participants' professionalism across three dimensions of knowledge(s), practices and values, specifically as they apply to leading inclusion in ELC settings" (Ring *et al. 2018,* p. 17). The criteria associated with the LINC Programme require that participants must be working in an ELC setting and be nominated by their manager to undertake the programme over the academic year from September to July. The six modules of the programme, comprising 60 ECTs[10], as outlined in Table 3, are delivered in both asynchronous and synchronous online elements as well as one face-to-face class session for each of the modules with their tutor.

[10] European Credit Transfers (ECT) is a standard way of comparing academic credits based on defined learning outcomes for modules in higher education across Europe.

Table 3 The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme Modules

Module	Overview of module content
Inclusion in the Early Years Setting: Concepts and Strategies (12ECTS)	• Focus on including children with additional needs from birth to eight years through study of theory, knowledge and skills that underpin inclusion, including practical strategies to support children in practice. • Reflection on own values and attitudes and how this impacts the inclusive culture of their setting.
Child Development **(6 ECTS)**	• Theories of learning that impact on the child's cognitive, emotional and social development up to age eight. • The role of play in supporting the holistic development of the child and as central to inclusive pedagogical practice.
Promoting Collaborative Practice for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education **(12 ECTS)**	• Theories, concepts and practical strategies underpinning collaborative practice to support inclusive practice. • Reflective practice as a tool to encourage reflection on the role of the Early Childhood Teacher to engage collaboratively with other stakeholders to meet the needs of all children.
Curriculum for Inclusion **(6 ECTS)**	• Different curricula approaches and how to engage effectively with the Aistear (NCCA 2009) framework to provide an inclusive and child centred, pedagogical programme that focuses on the strengths, interests and needs of each child. • Pedagogical documentation as a means of supporting learners in their observations and planning for the curriculum.
Leadership for Inclusion **(12 ECTS)**	• Theories of leadership and to transfer these into practice in their role as Inclusion Coordinator in the setting. • Mentoring and leadership skills to support and lead the staff team to make changes and develop their inclusive practice.
Portfolio Module **(12 ECTS)**	• Reflect upon learning from the programme • Development of a portfolio that documents learners' understanding and experience of inclusive practice.

On completion of the LINC programme, learners graduate with a Level 6 special purpose award, which has now been recognised as eligible for room leader status for the ECCE programme. The student is then qualified as an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) with the primary responsibilities of leading inclusive practice and pedagogy in the setting; advocating for the rights of children and their families; engaging with the AIM application and implementation process as well as sharing information on the *DEI Guidelines (*DCYA 2016a; DCYA 2016b). Once qualified, the INCO signs a contract with Pobal agreeing to take on the role in the ECCE setting and an additional weekly payment of €2 per child attending the ECCE session is given to the service, regardless of whether a child in the setting has an additional need. In accordance with the criteria of the AIM, the setting owner has discretion to allocate this funding as they deem appropriate. Therefore, it is not necessarily paid to the INCO. As with other initiatives discussed in this chapter, the contextual reality for participants in relation to the complexity and allocation of funding through the various schemes must be incorporated as a potential factor in responding to the research question regarding to the influence of the LINC programme on practice.

Contemporary Issues in the Early Learning and Care Sector

Just as Philo (2003) argues that researchers can and should take advantage of the fact that all adult researchers in the field of children's geographies have themselves been children and hold that connection with their subject, so too must I reflect on my connection with this subject. Having worked in the ELC sector for over fifteen years as both a provider, an ECT and simultaneously in the academic field, my awareness and understanding of issues impacting the sector are acknowledged from the outset as a key component in the conceptual framework of this study. My horizon of significance (Gadamer 2004) informs participants' stories reflecting their perspectives in the context of these contemporary issues in the ELC sector. It is important that their engagement with the LINC programme is situated within the context and climate of the time and there is an awareness and recognition of underlying issues and concerns that might not be necessarily visible in the information shared during the interviews. Cohen *et al*. (2007) see this phenomenological approach as one that advocates the study of direct experience

taken at face value, but simultaneously recognise that behaviours are determined by the phenomena of these experiences. Likewise, Groenwald (2004) holds that phenomenological research must capture the personal experiences of the participants, to be true to those experiences and to understand it from the perspectives of those involved. Therefore, it was determined that an overview of challenges and issues within the sector needs to be presented to the reader to provide an ethically sound analysis and discussion of the research findings.

As evidenced in Table 1, the ELC sector has shifted from a largely unregulated and ad hoc sector in 1996 to one that is now governed by Early Years Services Regulations (Tusla 2018); significantly funded by Government, and subject to guidance from the DES (2018b) and procedures from Pobal regarding funding. Urban *et al.* (2017) note that adherence to such guidance and legislation requires knowledge and skills as well as a willingness to engage in further learning opportunities. The competencies and qualifications required for working in the ELC sector have changed resulting in compulsory participation in further education and CPD or to face risk of job loss and opportunity if not availing of a 'grandfathering' option of retirement from the sector within five years (Tusla 2018). The lack of such skills and competencies was unfortunately evidenced in a national scandal that exposed incidents of malpractice, neglect and widespread breaches of regulations in creches in Dublin and Wicklow (Radio Teilifis Eireann (RTE) 2013) and again in 2019. This had a subsequent impact on the morale of staff working in ELC sector who were under scrutiny by association with the profession, which itself was questioned with regard to how such neglect could take place in modern day Ireland, given our history of the abuses of children in institutional care (Skehill 1999).

Another key point of experience is the concept of inclusion in the ELC sector, and indeed wider society in general. The National Disability Authority (NDA) carried out a public survey on attitudes in Irish society towards disability and in 2011, six years prior to the data collection for this research study, found that prejudices were very evident within the population questioned. Thirty-three per cent of respondents thought that children with "mental health difficulties" should not attend the same

school as children without disabilities (NDA 2011, p. 33). Although the terminology changed to definitions of “autism” and “intellectual disability” in their 2017 survey, over one quarter of respondents still called for segregated education (NDA 2017, p. 41). Societal attitudes as depicted in these surveys present a backdrop for the challenges that ECTs may face in promoting inclusion in their services, as well as challenging their own perceptions and experiences.

Prior to the introduction of the AIM, children with additional needs required a diagnosis of disability by the HSE to access supports in the ELC setting in the form of a SNA funded by the HSE or other support agencies such as Enable Ireland, the Brothers of Charity, or some funded by the parents and service provider (Pobal 2018). This model in itself created a sense of exclusion as the SNA was assigned to a specific child and was an employee of another service, thereby creating challenges for collaboration and teamwork to support inclusive practice. The challenges described here are perceived and interpreted in different ways by those who work with children in the ELC setting. This contextual reality is a key factor in addressing the research questions of this study in understanding the participants’ experiences of engagement with the LINC programme and to consider if it has influenced their perceptions and practices of inclusion.

Continuing Professional Development in the Early Years’ Sector

The previous section identified and discussed some of the challenges associated with the ELC sector, setting the tone for aspirations of effecting change within this context through the realm of CPD. Owing to the fragmented nature of ECCE qualifications and course content (Nutbrown 2021; Campbell-Barr *et al.* 2020; DECDIY 2021; DES 2010), CPD is positioned as having the potential to develop professional practice and provide a mark of learner achievement. Indeed, the OECD (2019) asserts that participation in CPD experiences is the most consistent indicator of quality interactions with links to child development and learning. Nutbrown (2021) also sees CPD as an effective way to address sectoral concerns by having an attractive and accessible means of entering the workforce with enriching learning experiences to motivate educators. Moreover, the promotion of CPD is advocated by the OECD (2019) to boost staff retention by enhancing professional identity and

improving career satisfaction. However, it is also recognised that such learning experiences need to be incentivised and linked to practicality of pay and conditions within the sector. Mooney-Simmie and Murphy (2021) consider the issue of the professional role of the ECT in Ireland from a feminist perspective with competing entities of power and education underpinning policy. They highlight challenges for the predominantly female early years workforce engaging in CPD owing to lack of time, accessibility, and no wage increase for participation. While the LINC programme offers the flexibility of blended learning as well as the award of the professional title of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) on completion of the programme, such CPD is criticised in Mooney-Simmie and Murphy's (2021) report as benefitting providers rather than the learners themselves, perpetuating the potential of exploitation within a childcare business-model.

Currently, there is no regulatory minimum requirement for in-service training in the ELC sector but Tusla inspections (DCYA 2016c) request evidence of staff training. However, there are aspirations for embedding CPD as a core element of professional practice as advocated in *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) as well as the more recent *First 5* (GoI 2018). There are renewed government commitments (DECDIY 2021) to improving quality in ELC through both formal and informal CPD initiatives which are included alongside aspirations for developing the terms and conditions of the role of the ECT. In considering engagement with the LINC programme within this context, I am drawn to Guskey's (2002) critical levels of evaluation of education-based CPD experiences (Figure 10).

Evaluation level	Questions addressed	What is assessed?
Participants' reactions	Did they like it? Did the material make sense? Will it be useful?	Initial satisfaction with the experience
Participants' learning	Did they acquire the intended knowledge and skills?	New knowledge and skills of participants
Organisation support and change	Was implementation advocated, facilitated and supported? Were the successes recognised and shared? Did it affect the organisation's climate and procedures?	The organisation's support, facilitation and recognition.
Participants' use of new knowledge and skills	Did participants effectively apply the new knowledge and skills?	Degree and quality of implementation
Child learning outcomes	What was the impact on children? Did it affect their achievements? Did it affect children's well-being? Are children more confident learners?	Student learning outcomes - cognitive; affective and psychomotor

Figure 10 Guskey's (2002) Critical Levels of Evaluation of Professional Development

Although the primacy of participants' experiences of engagement with the LINC programme is the focus of this study, Guskey's model provides some guidance on considering how the learning from this CPD influenced their work with young children. It also gives an indication of expectations of quality CPD for educators which might be informed then by findings in this study in relation to the factors that influence engagement with that learning experience.

Structure of the thesis

This first chapter has provided an overview of the philosophical principles of hermeneutic phenomenology as the foundation for the research study as well as situating the study in the contextual reality of the participants' social existence in the ELC sector. Chapter Two gives a detailed description of and rationale for the methodology chosen for this dissertation, giving a clear outline of the methods taken throughout the data collection and analysis. The third chapter is the Literature Review, which also includes details of the methodology that underpinned this process from a hermeneutic perspective. The findings and discussion of the themes that were developed from the analysis are presented in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the key findings relating to how the LINC

programme influenced participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion in terms of relationships with children and the practical strategies utilised to support children's participation in the ECCE programme. Collaborative practice is discussed as a key element of quality inclusive practice in Chapter 5, including partnerships with parents, primary school staff as well as other stakeholders within the child's microsystem. In Chapter 6, the professional identity of the ECT and the INCO is discussed in light of the factors that influence engagement with the LINC programme. The final Chapter Seven outlines the recommendations from the study, as well as a reflective conclusion of the research process, giving consideration of the interpretive and inductive approach of the study.

Chapter Two

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology utilised in this study, which explores the experiences of students undertaking the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) in the Early Years Programme, and how it affects their perceptions and practice in relation to the inclusion of children in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) preschool scheme. The previous chapter presented a discussion on the philosophical principles of interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology (IHP) and the conceptual framework of this study based on these key concepts. In this chapter, I will outline the specific methodological processes of the research study and demonstrate that the phenomenological approach adopted for this thesis is, as Tam (2016, p.8) asserts, “as systematic, rigorous and capable of producing meaningful results as any other established research methods”. I further discuss the rationale for choosing this methodology and demonstrate its relevance to the research questions and objectives of the study.

Aim of the study and the research questions

The aim of this research study was to explore experience of continuing professional development (CPD) on the Leadership for INClusion (LINC) programme, on ECTs’ perceptions and practices of inclusion within the early learning and care (ELC) setting. The research questions that inform the study are based broadly around the aims and learning outcomes of the LINC Programme which detail the “Knowledge – breadth and kind; know-how and skills – range and selectivity; competence – context and role; and competence – learning to learn” (LINC Consortium 2016-

2020). These questions encapsulate the phenomenon of engagement with the LINC programme and provide the focus for the investigation. Therefore, the first three questions ask how participation in the LINC programme

5) influences ECTs' understanding of inclusion?
6) influences the perceptions of ECTs in relation to the inclusion of children with additional needs?
7) influences how ECTs include all children in ECCE settings?

The final question asks:

8) what factors affect the implementation of the learning from the LINC programme in practice?

Having considered these questions and interpreted the "lived experiences" of the research participants working in the ELC sector, it is intended that this exploration of learning from the LINC programme will provide discussion of their experiences and considerations for policy and practice. The data collection methods used to investigate these lived experiences included an initial interview with fourteen participants prior to engagement with the LINC programme. On completion of the programme, I carried out a field visit to each of the fourteen ECCE settings, incorporating conversations with children and some colleagues working with the participants, as well as having opportunity to view the learning environment and documentation relevant to their practice. At the end of the preschool 3-hour session, a second interview was carried out with each of the participants, having now completed the LINC programme. Details of the research strategy will be discussed in further detail in this first introductory chapter and then in Chapter two, the methodology chapter.

Qualitative research and interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological research

Schutz (1932/1976) argued that the starting point of investigation for the social sciences must begin with the ordinary life of the people and this is the essence of the methodological approach to this study. Bhar (2019, p. 2) considers how

phenomenological investigations open the possibility of creating a "nuanced understanding" of experiences and the theoretical framework underpinning this study presents the process of uncovering these "deeper meanings". The central focus of this phenomenological study is an exploration of how engagement with the LINC programme shaped participants' subsequent understanding of inclusion and inclusive practice. To attain this "deeper meaning" which Bhar speaks of (2019, p.2), the methodology had to address the individual lived experiences of the participants, as well as capture the understandings and perceptions that influenced their responses and reactions to the phenomenon. The investigation then proceeds through questioning of and reflecting on the situations that influenced their experience of engagement with the LINC programme, and the subsequent influence of this on their work with children (Thompson *et al.* 1989; Groenewald 2004; Englander 2012). Frechette *et al.* (2020) explain that generally qualitative research rests on a constructivist paradigm, but interpretative phenomenology, as used in this study, is different insofar as it anchors its tradition in a philosophical understanding of *being* or *Dasein.* The *being* of the participant and that of my own, as researcher, guides the research process through our combined experiences and interpretations. From this methodological approach, understanding of the phenomenon is built through the investigation of the participants' lived experiences which I then interpret from my own understandings and further develop this through the literature review. In this way, I seek to create an understanding of the influence of engagement with the LINC programme on perceptions and practices of inclusion. The conceptual framework, discussed in detail in the previous chapter, is presented here again to illustrate the key concepts and processes that guided the research study.

'Dasein' = Existence!

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LILTERATURE

Understanding

HERMENUTIC INTERPRETATION BY RESEARCHER

MY HORIZON

LINC

• The lived Experience

THE PHENOMENON

Figure 11 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Schutz (1932 / 1976, p.24) theorises that the lived experience of 'the people', which he considers to be the "first order constructs" of the phenomenon, finds meaning through the "second order constructs" of the researcher who connects the 'common –sense' world with the academic world of theories. A comprehensive qualitative study was carried out to investigate these perceptions and practices of inclusion, on the assumption that these can only truly be captured through the lived experiences of those working in the early learning and care (ELC) sector. It is through conversation and questioning that the essence of these experiences can be explained effectively to determine what constitutes inclusive practice for each of the participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology relies on the researcher to interpret and explore participants' experiences, using that awareness of *Dasein* to guide interpretation (Hall *et al.* 2016). As discussed in Chapter One, this philosophical awareness creates an understanding of the societal context of the phenomenon, the moods that may impact the experience as well as one's life attitude, thereby bridging participants' and researcher's horizons of significance to create new understandings (Gadamer 2004; Frechette *et al.* 2020). Similarly, Mason (2002) asserts that the focus of qualitative research is not simply about gathering data, but

instead about how to generate data in a meaningful way, which depicts participants' realities.

Drawing on Merriam's (2002) assertion that the key to understanding qualitative research is the recognition that meaning and reality are socially constructed by individuals' interaction with their social world; this study seeks to understand the reality of ECTs' experiences of inclusive practice in their settings and what this looked like to them. The rationale for the IHP study rather than a general qualitative study, is that philosophical foundation, which provokes a unique understanding of *being* and one's horizons of significance that may influence ECTs engagement with the programme and their perceptions of inclusion. Being aware of these philosophical concepts within the hermeneutic cycle of understanding from the researcher' perspective, provides opportunity to uncover the meaning of these lived experiences on a deeper level (Thomas 2008; Gibbs 2014; Frechette *et al.* 2020). The initial interviews conducted with the research participants were not based around a specific hypothesis, as would have been the norm with the quantitative approach, but rather adopted an ontological understanding that meanings of reality are not "fixed" but develop from the participants' interaction and experiences in their role as ECTs (Sarantakos 2005, p. 37). Using a pre-existing hypothesis in this instance would have restricted the opinions of the participants and possibly excluded important factors and ideas that might have been outside the realm of my own existing knowledge as researcher. The qualitative approach is not only about identifying these perceptions and practices, but also to develop an understanding of ECTs' experiences that may influence their work. Rather than develop a hypothesis then, this qualitative study was concerned with explaining the "meaning of social phenomena" through the exploration of these expressions and stories (Whittaker 2009, p. 6). Bhar's (2019) phenomenological study on consumerism reported the effectiveness of the approach in understanding underlying psychological influences on participants' responses in the socio-cultural milieu. Here, IHP provides a deeper level of understanding through the "bridging of the researcher's and the participants' horizons of significance" (Gadamer 2004, p. 39). According to Spence (2017), IHP illustrates the way in which understanding of a

phenomenon or experience, can, and does, change when there is an openness to interpretation given the broaden context of analysis of the findings.

Research in education is influenced by the social and political context in which it was produced (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1998, p. 585). This has particular resonance when researching the ELC sector during a period of ongoing development in policy and practice. Data gathered throughout this research project is, by the very nature of the methodology chosen, “socially and culturally saturated” (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p. 134). While the policy initiatives, outlined in Chapter One, placed an emphasis on promoting quality and best practice within the early years, the additional responsibilities and expectations of the ECT has impacted the profession in many ways in terms of the knowledge and skills required to assume responsibility and adhere to these recommendations for practice (Madden 2012; DES 2018; Tusla 2018). Inductive research into the participants’ experiences working in the sector should offer those “rich and compelling insights into the real worlds, experiences and perspectives” of those personal journeys on adapting to changes and expectations in their working lives (Braun and Clarke 2004, p. 56). Interpretation of their experiences in IHP necessitates reflexivity in the hermeneutic circle to find the essence of the phenomenon in that “back-and-forth movement from part to the whole” of the different elements of the data set (Frechette *et al.* 2020, p.4) This process is described in detail further in this chapter.

John Dewey (1920/2004, p.2) argued that it is “only reflective thought … (that) ..is truly educative in value” where there is a deliberate self-questioning about one’s views and opinions on a given topic. The LINC programme emphasises reflective practice in the ELC setting. As such, the IHP approach adopted in this study provided flexibility to give voice to the participants to share their experiences.

Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological studies differ from general qualitative studies in consideration of the process of reflexivity throughout the research study. While a reflective attitude is central to qualitative research, in IHP it is the embodiment of the epistemology of the study through an ongoing reflexive consideration of *Dasein* and one’s horizon of significance in interpreting the phenomenon as a researcher. Taylor (1985) describes this personal understanding

and interpretation of experience as the 'home culture' of both the participant and the researcher, that which is deeply woven into one's life, reflecting what matters most to that individual. This is articulated by Van Manen (1997, p. 368) who details the task of the hermeneutic researcher as one who "reflects on life while reflecting life".

Research Design

The IHP approach underpinned every aspect of the research design from the outset, with the required emphasis on the methodological principles which necessitated an open attitude, an awareness of my horizon of significance and a reflexive attitude (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004; Sundler *et al.* 2019). McManus-Holroyd (2007) reminds the researcher to be continually aware of one's personal nature of enquiry and relationship to the phenomenon in a philosophically based research study, such as this one. Similarly, Koch and Harrington (1998) explain that it is one's values, interests and histories as the researcher in IHP that drives the process of the research study.

I wanted to carry out interviews with participants on the LINC programme, prior to engagement with the programme content, and again on completion. The aim of this approach was to explore how learning from the programme influenced their perceptions of inclusion and work with children. Data collection in IHP involves "authentic modes of communication" that create space and scope for dialogue and experience around the phenomenon (Frechette *et al.* 2019, p. 6). The data collection process on completion of the LINC programme involved a follow-up interview during a visit to the ECCE setting which supported my understanding of their societal role and working experiences.

While there are critics of 'research design' and frameworks which might restrict the potential for flexibility and creativity in the process (Sarantakos 2005), for me, it was important to have a systematic approach for the study as it was tied to a very specific time frame for the data collection process owing to the nature of the research questions. Table 4 outlines the design that ensures the study is consistent with "the aims and epistemological positioning of the research, and methods and

analytical strategies that are appropriate and coherent within the project" (Rohleden and Lyons 2015, p. 3).

Table 4 Research Design Framework

Selection of Topic and methodology	Research Topic: The influence of continuing professional development under the Leadership for Inclusion Programme on early childhood teachers' perceptions of inclusion and how this experience impacted their work with children in early years' settings. Research Design: A qualitative study underpinned by an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, to research the participants' perspectives and experiences.
Data Collection	(a) Semi-structured interviews prior to participants' engagement with the LINC programme. (August / September 2017) to gather their stories of working in practice and their understanding of inclusion. (b) On completing the LINC programme, (June 2018) a follow-up semi-structured interview was carried out, complemented by field visit to the ECCE setting which included conversations with children and colleagues to support an understanding of the participants' perspectives. This data presented their experiences of engagement with the LINC programme and illuminated aspects of their pedagogical practice, including documentation of the inclusive curriculum, working in the setting.
Data Analysis	(a) Initial thematic analysis of the data set informed by Braun and Clarke (2006/2021a), guided by philosophies of interpretative phenomenological analysis in the hermeneutic circle of understanding. (b) Triangulation and discussion of the findings from the combined data collection.
Literature Review	In keeping with the phenomenological approach adopted for this study, an initial contextual and conceptual review informed the data collection, however the Literature Review itself was delayed until after the data collection process, focusing on the emergent themes and understandings from the data

	analysis with an emphasis on responding to the research questions.
Reporting	Findings from the data analysis from pre and post-LINC data collection are presented with the combined interpretation from the participants and the researcher through the hermeneutic cycle of understanding. Discussion around the primary themes and understandings of the phenomenon presented with support of literature to enhance and develop interpretation of the phenomenon.

Research Strategy

McManus-Hoyroyd (2007) emphasises the importance of the method of data collection in IHP which she sees as "determining the direction of the research and the types of outcomes achieved" (p. 7). The research strategy for this study was underpinned by the methodological principles of IHP. While Gadamer (2004) argues that philosophical interpretative hermeneutic inquiry transcends the traditional use of method, this study is informed by earlier studies, as well as a confidence in my own understanding of the application of philosophy, to guide the research process. Thomson's (2008) IHP study on enhancing pedagogical insights in teacher education serves as one example where the relationship between the teachers' perceptions of the phenomenon and the researcher's interpretation of those experiences has produced new insights from both a human and educational perspective. Similarly, a more recent phenomenological study by Bredmar (2020) on teachers' emotional experiences in their professional role illustrates the value of the shared understandings and interpretations of the teachers and the researcher in this co-constructed research project. As researcher, I am incorporating my horizon of significance and my pre-understanding of the phenomenon as well as the societal context of this study, in identifying means of data collection that will create a meaningful and holistic understanding of the participants' experiences.

In a phenomenological study there is an awareness that the phenomenon is the object of study, and not the person themselves (Englander 2012). The emphasis is on finding out how participants perceive this phenomenon and the sense they make of it in their social world (Smith *et al.* 2004). The data collection strategies in

this present study, as illustrated in Figure 12, sought to encounter this phenomenon, that of concepts and practices of inclusion and the LINC programme, via the person's descriptions, experiences and narratives.

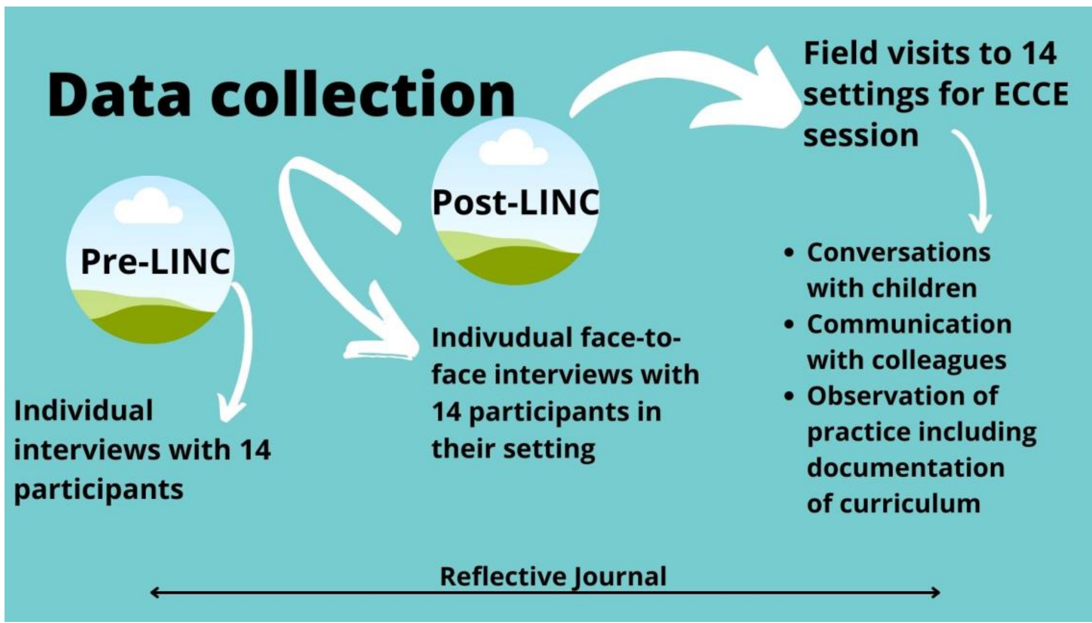

Figure 12 Data collection methods

Qualitative research in phenomenology consists of a "set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible to us" (Denzin and Lincoln 2017, p. 17), through a series of representations, which, in this instance, included two different stages of semi-structured interviews – one prior to engagement with the LINC programme, and the second on completing the programme.

Interviews

Sarantakos (2005) outlines the parameters of interviews in qualitative research as including naturalism; primacy of the respondent; absence of standardisation; openness; flexibility and explication. The phenomenological researcher wants to explore the participants' experiences in this flexible manner to capture the meaning structures in their accounts (Aspers 2009). In practice, this guided the broad themes of discussion in the semi-structured interviews as a "frame of reference" which enabled the conversation to change route if so directed by the participant (Aspers

2009, p.8). Moreover, in keeping with Wimpenny and Gass (2000), my interest in the stories of others served as the basic requirement for these phenomenological interviews. Owing to my own personal background being so embedded in the ELC sector, my interest in the stories and experiences of the participants was present from the outset. However, in keeping with the philosophical underpinning of IHP, and as discussed in Chapter One, I engaged in critical reflection throughout the research process, being mindful of my own assumptions and experiences. Sundler *et al.* (2019) believe that engaging in such critical reflection, as I have done through the process of journaling and professional dialogue with my colleagues, facilitates an awareness of how one's assumptions may influence the research process. While IHP is about that co-construction of interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon, there has to be a conscious mindfulness of the reflexive process in questioning these interpretations (Smith *et al.* 2004; Kirillova 2019; Braun and Clarke 2021b). There is a need to create a sense of rapport with the interviewees, as well as a safe space for open dialogue where the participants feel valued and that their views matter (Thomas 2017). In this respect, my first-hand experience of working on the ground with children in a preschool environment, supported the process of establishing that initial rapport that would bring me through the data collection process (Thompson *et al.* 1989).

Many researchers (e.g. Robson 1993; Price 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2017), highlight issues of 'power' between the researcher and the interviewees. For instance, respondents may answer questions according to how they feel they are expected to respond or by feeling that they are being 'tested' on a subject. However, I felt that the ECTs were more open and relaxed once they were assured of my pre-understanding and knowledge of their role in the preschool environment. Price (2002) notes that the success of interviews rests on working ethically with the participants in the study and because of my horizon of significance from the perspective of an ECT, there was that awareness and consideration for the participants. As a hermeneutic researcher, Spence (2017) notes one's task of

listening, pondering and simulating thinking during the interview process and these were facilitated by a shared understanding with the participants.

As mentioned, a key feature of the research design was that all participants would be interviewed prior to engagement with the LINC programme to understand their concepts of inclusion and the contextual reality of their working role in the ELC setting. Many of the respondents worked in sessional services and were on holidays until September (2017) and the LINC Orientation session and Module 1 class were taking place over the month of September. It was not feasible to access the participants prior to this time unless they worked in a full-day care service and were free to meet during this short time frame (see further discussion later). Hence, although aware of the concerns articulated in the literature regarding the use of telephone interview in a qualitative study (Irvine *et al*. 2012), the initial interviews, with the exception of two, were conducted via telephone.

Miller and Cannell (1997) discuss the problems associated with telephone interviews and the limitation of relying solely on auditory cues for a qualitative study. There is also concern about missing those non-verbal cues in communication, which can essentially add a lot to the understanding of the phenomenon in question (Frechette *et al.* 2019). Conversely, Price (2002) argues that the interview is not a social interaction but rather depicts a detective looking for important information. None the less, his perspective does not consider the potential fusion of horizons between the hermeneutic researcher and the participant through common interest.

Notwithstanding the recognised limitations of telephone interviews, it can also be argued that they allow for "more open communication since the respondent is not confronted with the interviewer" (Sarantakos 2005, p. 270). Indeed, Nias (1991) suggests that telephone interviews might indeed strengthen the reliability of the study as the participants might more readily disclose information that they may not be as forth coming with, in a face-to-face encounter.

Phenomenological studies aim to gather a rich description of *being* and to elicit the participants' narrative in the interview process by providing space to talk and to expand on ideas and stories (Eatough and Smith 2017; Frechette *et al.* 2019; Suddick *et al.* 2020), which is also possible using the phone as the medium for communication. In their phenomenological study on the experiences working with families, Laletas *et al.* (2017) carried out their data collection using phone interviews with childcare providers. They acknowledged that while the phone interviews might potentially have led to a compromise in rapport and visual cues, they also asserted that the anonymity, characterised by the physical distancing and ambiguity of phone interviews, made the participants more open in discussing experiences. In more recent times, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been several phenomenological studies carried out using videotelephony platforms for data collection purposes (O' Sullivan *et al.* 2020; 2021). In the present study, each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes, beginning with an informal conversation to establish rapport thus ensuring respondents felt at ease with the situation.

The decision to use semi-structured interviews was based on the need to design a schedule incorporating key issues that I wished to explore. This design is the most commonly-used format in qualitative research as it provides sufficient structure to cover the key research questions, while also giving flexibility for respondents to elaborate on topics they perceive as relevant to the discussion (Whittaker 2009). Indeed, the phenomenological interview is often defined by the lengthy and in-depth conversations pertaining to the experiences of the participants (Reiter *et al.* 2011; Walsh 2012; Fry *et al.* 2017). The interview questions, as outlined in Appendix C, were based around the participants' experiences of working in the ELC sector and of working with children with additional needs. O' Sullivan *et al.* (2020; 2021) outline how the schedule of questions for their IPA study on experiences of children and families during COVID-19, allowed for the emergence of rich data but also provided the structure and consistency to guide participants' respondents. The questions in this study also linked in with the objectives of the research project in

the investigation of their perceptions and practice of inclusion and how that looked in their ELC environment. The questions asked were sufficiently broad-based to give the respondents the opportunity to tell their own stories about working in practice with children with additional needs, and to reflect on what experiences stood out for them as relevant to their role. Eatough and Smith (2017, p.76) see this emphasis on key experiences as central to the interpretative approach in giving that space for the things that “matter” to the participants and the quality of “mineness” they attribute to the phenomenon. One of the advantages of undertaking interviews is being able to encourage elaboration on aspects of the ‘lived experience’ and to ask probing questions to promote clarification on issues as they arose.

Questions were asked regarding the context or the situations that might have influenced their practice, with prompting questions regarding their academic and practical experiences as well as external supports that might help them in their work as ECT. The focus was on affording the opportunity to think about the question and to offer prompts for reflection to capture the essence of the phenomenon from their perspective (Groenewald 2004; Englander 2012). In expanding upon the phenomenological task of interviewing, Bhar (2019) emphasises the need to encourage reflection on how the experiences have influenced the participants.

While I was aware that respondents may tend to answer questions in accordance with the considered “social standards” in an interview process (Sarantakos 2005, p. 284), there was also that camaraderie present in terms of co-professional dialogue. Having initially introduced myself outlining my role as an ECT and LINC tutor, the participants engaged with me on a level of presumption that I had an existing understanding of the issues they highlighted with reference to specific policy developments or practice requirements, which may be presented as a fusion of horizons in IHP. The interviews then developed into an “inter view” which Kvale (1996) sees as “an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p.2).

The second set of interviews were conducted in June 2018 on completion of the LINC programme. Participants had completed the programme and were finishing up

their portfolio at the time of the follow-up interview. The research questions were semi-structured and adapted for each participant to explore their perceptions of inclusion and pedagogical practice and how and why changes might have been made as a result of the learning experience (Thomas 2017). Table 5 presents how these questions were adapted to respond to participants' individual experiences:

Table 5 Overview of Adapting Semi-structured Interviews for the Follow-up Interview

Notes from first interview with Tina, an owner/manager	**Follow-up questions**
Challenges working with parents – description of incident re supporting parents unable to cope.	"So just to follow on from our last conversations about working with parents – how they are involved in your setting and the challenges you have faced – has LINC brought any new ideas for supporting you in this role?
High number of children with additional needs owing to HSE referrals "I'm not a 'special school'"– pressure on staff and associated stresses. "My teachers were wrecked last year because I couldn't say no to any of those seven children".	"How did the AIM help you to access adequate supports this year?" (Question not required as this conversation flowed from one regarding supporting children and families).
Delays in accessing supports for children – lack of communication between agencies	"What, if anything, did you do this year to develop collaborative practice with other agencies?"
Enthusiasm for her role and a really positive attitude towards inclusive practice: "I love learning! – there's so much out there that can be so helpful". "You **can** change people's attitudes!"	"I know you were exempt from some of the modules in LINC – did you do all of the modules? How was your experience with the programme?"

These interviews were supported by the reflective journaling and field notes taken during the visit to the setting, which informed and provided further insights into participants' lived experiences. Braun and Clarke (2020; 2021a) emphasise the key role of reflexivity in qualitative research, recognising how the researcher has the potential to shape processes and outputs by virtue of their positioning and theoretical assumptions. An extract from my journal considering the data collection from one of the initial interviews before meeting the participant for the second time is included in the figure below as an example of reflexivity and reflection on this process.

Looking forward to meeting C. this week and am hoping that she has had a positive experience with the programme. Her conversations depict a real kindness and modesty in her role. She seemed quite anxious taking on the little boy with additional needs this year, but was humble in her honesty in acknowledging these concerns. I really want her to have come out of this experience, from an academic and a practice perspective, feeling proud and confident. I recognise that this is my wish– because she has a warmth about her that makes me want her to recognise the importance of these characteristics – but also that she sees that professional learning is beneficial on a number of levels. I have thought of her during the year as I covered some of the content of the modules with my own student cohort, so it will be interesting to see if she has made those connections to her own practice.

Figure 13 Extract from Reflective Journal Prior to Second Interview (June 2018) with Participant.

As illustrated in Table 5, the interview schedule for the second interviews, undertaken on completion of the LINC programme, focused on individual experiences noted in the first interview and therefore were necessarily differentiated with reference to their individual experiences and contexts. In this instance, the participants led the discussion and took the role of co-researcher which Laverty (2003) asserts as essential to the phenomenological investigation. In a similar manner, Hall *et al.* (2016), in their phenomenological study of teachers' education, added probes, follow-up questions as well as specific questions which supported clarification of themes from the early coding of the first interview transcripts in this study, which will be discussed in the following sections.

All interviews were audio recorded on a mobile phone Dictaphone application with the participants' prior consent. Each interview was saved to a password-protected laptop and labelled accordingly, and then deleted from the mobile device. A more detailed discussion of ethical considerations follows later in the chapter. As soon as was possible, the interviews were transcribed with specific attention to key words,

phrases and statements as evidenced in the ECTs' conversations to ensure their voice was evidenced in the written word (Groenewald 2004). The manual transcription of the interviews was a conscious decision of engagement with the data set in accordance to the philosophical foundations of the study. Schmidt's study on spiritual education (2005) recognises these processes in interpretative phenomenology whereby researchers "are asked to not only understand others, but to recognise the place of the self in the meaning-making process" (p. 122).

Field Visits

As reiterated earlier, interpretative qualitative research is about learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world. Consequently, visits to ELC settings provided an opportunity to enhance understanding of how the LINC learning experience translated to participants' practice in the preschool environment. Spence (2017) presents IHP as accommodating the "culturally and historically situated, dynamic and interactive nature of our thinking, being and doing" (p.2). The field visits provided that space to watch, listen, consider and question the lived experiences of participants in terms of how their practice was shaped or otherwise by their engagement with the programme.

Referring back to the research questions that underpin the investigation, being present in the settings provided a perspective of the horizon of the ECT, in considering their perceptions and practices of inclusion. Hall *et al.* (2016) used observation sessions to gather direct data on teachers' strategies to promote nutrition-related knowledge as well as their attitudes towards the subject in their phenomenological study as complementary to other data collection methods. Similarly, the visits to settings for this study enhanced understanding of the phenomenon and presented some valuable information from practice, such as the use of visual displays, the accessibility of the environment, the social interactions of the staff and children and generally to "situate the collected information within the bigger picture" (Frechette *et al.* 2019). The visits took place in June 2018 over a period of approximately two and a half hours of the ECCE session in each of the participants' work setting. While only a brief snapshot in time, the visits created

another element of the phenomenon to add to the hermeneutic circle of understanding enabling me to reflect on my prior assumptions and early interpretations of the participants' experiences in practice. My own experience as an ECT, and my cultural understanding of the sector, created the possibility that I might have the ability "to read the situation (I was in) with a greater degree of accuracy and in a shorter space of time than in a culturally unfamiliar setting" (Radnor 2002, p.49). In keeping with the phenomenological approach, I was cognisant of the need to reflect on my own experiences and assumptions of working in the preschool environment and engaged in a constant cycle of meta-reflection throughout the visits (Hallet 2013), as evidenced in an extract from my field notes from a visit to Martha's preschool class in June 2018 (See Figure 14 below). While my preunderstanding of Montessori's work as well as my enthusiasm for child-led and play-based learning created an initial sense of derision at the idea of a prolonged adult-led structured activity in practice, my notes illustrate my thought processes in acknowledging the broader context beyond my own assumptions.

CD music of 'Slap the Sillies Out' – children sing along and dance – clearly love this one! All of the children very engaged during the Circle time session.

Number game – interactive game – boys stand out– '6 boys' – then Martha draws numeral 6 on handheld board– number recognition and association. Introduces '+' sign 6 + 8 (We are at half hour of this structured circle time so far!!) – "Putting number 8 in your head and count on 6"– Children answer 14.

"What does 14 look like?"– they know!!

Children directed to carry chairs to the different tables and given worksheets to do themselves. Mark is guided to trace by holding his hand – when completed the pencil is taken off him. They are all very happily engaged in the activity (is that because this has become the 'norm' of their day at this latter end of the year?) Lots of chat and easy interactions with Martha during this 'work time'.

Figure 14 Extract of Notes from Field Visit to Martha's Montessori Class

One of the key strengths of field visits is the fact that they offer first- hand information, that in this instance, can validate the accounts of the research participants in relation to the research questions (Sarantakos 2005) and provide a context for understanding their pedagogical practice. Another extract of the field notes from a visit to a sessional preschool is included in Figure 15, which again illustrates my preunderstandings of the social world of the ECT in the setting, all of which is incorporated into the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis.

R explains child's need for a 'movement break' to another child – seems very aware of the children's needs as group – sensory input – Talks to child at his level – explains behaviours
Sits with the group and guides them to problem solve
Use of timers / visual schedules evident on wall / task analysis / AIM resources
Disney's 'Inside Out' movie used as a reference point to talk about feelings
INCO already in place and reported as being proactive in supporting inclusive practice.

Figure 15 Extract from Field Notes from Visit to Sessional Service (Tina)

Levi Strauss' (1962/1966) insight of 'bricolage' in social inquiry suggests that we should adopt this 'do it yourself' method of obtaining the data in whatever way seems best for answering the research question, rather than being so self-conscious about the methods we use. Similarly, McManus-Holyrod (2007) presents a strong argument for flexibility in IHP and concludes that "no method or set framework exists upon which researchers are able to rely to clarify the conditions of understanding" (p. 10). In the case settings in question here, the field visit itself involved note- taking; conversing with the research participants and their colleagues in the preschool environment; engaging in conversation with the children; meta-reflection; and examining documents, such as the curriculum plans

and the children's learning journals to get a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences. Kafle (2011) asserts that the purpose of the data collection process in IHP is to generate the life-world stories of participants and thence the researcher must be attuned to the ontological nature of the phenomenon and use appropriate methods to consider the contextual backdrop of these stories. In some of the settings, my participation was invited through the children's interactions with me; in others, it was interested colleagues working alongside the research participant who volunteered contributions on their practice and unsolicited, engaged in conversations. In the single educator settings, there was less interaction between myself and the participant during the preschool session as they were working directly with the children. Miles and Huberman (1984, p.69) discuss the benefits of "memoing" during such sessions where the field notes of the researcher document what one sees, hears and experiences during the session. As illustrated in Figures 14 and 15, these notes provided a foundation for further understanding of the phenomenon at the core of this study, proving invaluable in the "hermeneutic circle" which Walsh (2012, p. 2) considers as an essential component of the data collection and analysis through reflection on the 'lived experience' of the participant and one's own biases and presuppositions. Time was also spent after the children went home discussing elements of practice as well as engaging in the semi- structured interview. Frechette *et al.* (2019) give examples of observational probes, questions that encourage researcher reflection on what people are doing and saying; how the environment is supporting or hindering practice; what type of strategies or emotions were evidenced – all of which add to the exploration and understanding of the phenomenon.

Conversations with Children

Involving children in the research process was a key element of the field visits, acknowledging the importance of capturing their voices on issues that involve them (Clarke and Moss 2005; Lundy 2013). Their participation in the process recognises them as part of the teachers' social world, that element of *Dasein* that plays a central role in the nature of human experience (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004).

The conversations with the children gave them the opportunity to express their views and perceptions on their preschool experiences and what mattered to them in that regard (Christensen and James 2000; Clarke and Moss 2011; Daly *et al.* 2016). As discussed in detail later, child assent and parental consent were obtained prior to the field visits.

Figure 16 Children's Art and Conversations with Researcher during Visits to their Preschool (Claire)

The children's participation in the research visits was considered central to the phenomenon under investigation as it is about their experiences of inclusion and engagement in the ELC setting. The conversations were part of the holistic nature of the data collection which may be viewed as one of the layers in the "part-to-whole" interpretation of the phenomenon (Heidegger 1929). In total sixteen children volunteered to talk with me, with prior parental consent, with the conversations being recorded using a dicta-phone. Clark and Moss (2011) emphasise this need to be flexible in relation to engagement with children during the research process and to follow their lead, whether in a structured or a more play-based approach of interaction. With this in mind, the conversations involved

small groups of children, and individual children, depending on their own choices to participate at different times throughout the morning session. The objective of these conversations was to determine the extent to which children felt involved and included in the setting, and how the early years curriculum was meeting their needs and wants. In this way, the children's responses illuminated participants' learning from the LINC programme. Lastikka and Kangas (2017) identify interviews with children in early years' research as an opportunity "to respect diversity and special needs, enhancing the competency and agency of children, stimulating humour, playfulness and imagination, and generating meaningful encounters and feelings of empowerment" (p. 86). In this instance, it was hoped that hearing the voice of the child would add another element of understanding to the research questions. The topics discussed by the children, are illustrated in Figure 17:

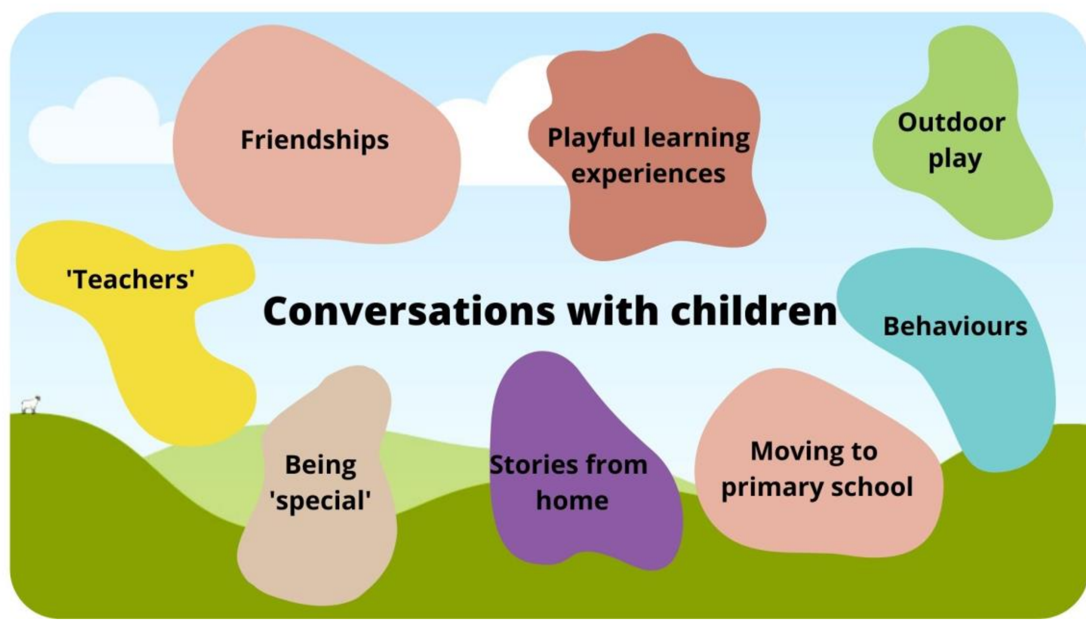

Figure 17 Topics discussed by the children during the field visits.

My experience working in the ELC sector supported conversations with the children in the settings, totalling forty-two children between all settings (Appendix J), engaging with them in a playful and informal manner to gain their trust. The conversations were playful and child-centred, and questions were posed in light of their interactions and engagements with their environment. Friendly questions about their games enabled me to guide the questions to their opinions on different

play opportunities and experiences in the setting. Their conversations were transcribed and considered in how they informed the research questions regarding the inclusive experiences of children in ELC settings. These conversations were part of the phenomenon and created another dimension of richness and validity.

Using Documentation to Enhance Knowledge and Understanding

In their interpretative phenomenological study, Bush *et al.* (2019) incorporated an analysis of documentation noting that when engaging with this approach, one needs to recognise that all elements of the data collection have the same objective: "to enhance knowledge and understanding of human experience" (p. 4). During the field visits, I observed a range of documentation of the preschool setting which provided an opportunity to see how the learning from the LINC programme may have transferred to their practice. Additionally, the documentation acted as a basis for discussion on what changes participants had made over the course of the LINC programme. Understanding the pedagogical relevance of documentation was informed by policy recommendations as well as my own knowledge of best practice guidance from my horizon of pre-understanding as an ECT and tutor on several ECCE programmes and workshops.

Table 6 Documents and Indicators of Quality Pedagogical Practice

Document:	Key indicators:
Curriculum folder	• Curriculum statement • Self-evaluation tools from Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA 2015) • Planning documentation (DES 2018)
Individual Learning Journals / Class 'Floor' books	• Links to Aistear (NCCA 2009) and Siolta (CECDE 2006) • Process art projects • Evidence of emergent curriculum • Child-led activities
Documents relating to collaborative practice	• Parent Information booklets • Newsletters • Individual Education Plans
Other relevant sources	• Inspection reports • Policies and procedures

There was no specific request to view the documentation during the field visit, however, evidence in the physical environment, and the willingness of participants to share examples of their pedagogical practice, further illuminated their lived experience and added to the reflexive nature of the data collection process at this stage. All documentation observed was viewed on site in the presence of the participant who provided explanations and commentary. Again, consideration of the pedagogical documents is considered '*part'* of the '*whole*' experience and helped to generate a comprehensive understanding of the influence of the LINC programme on participants' practices in the ELC setting (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004; Smith 2004; Bhar 2019,).

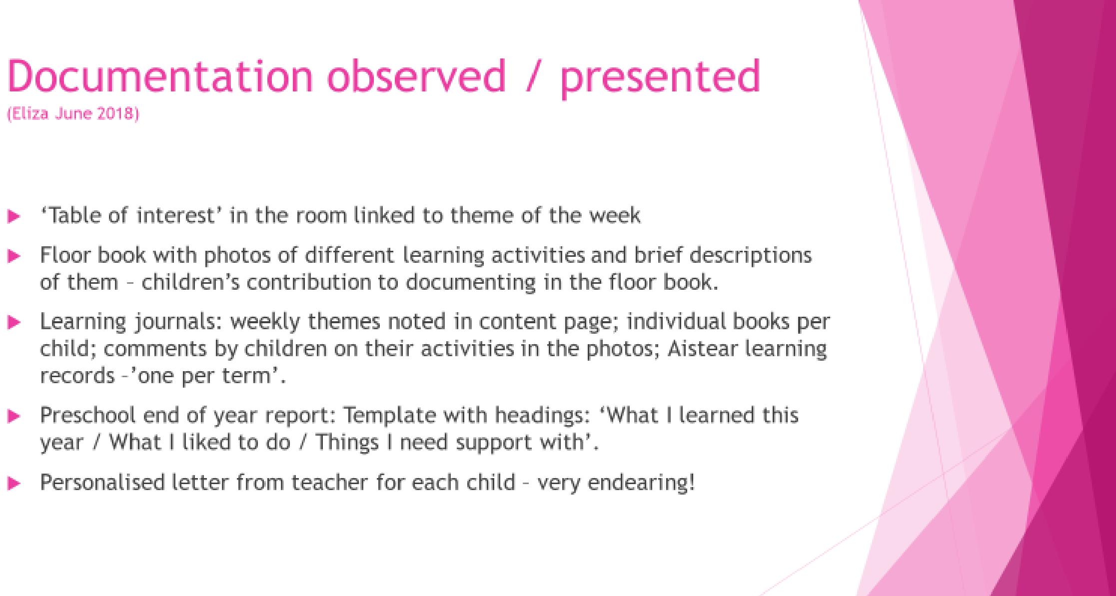

Figure 18 Field Notes Outlining the Documentation Observed and Presented During Field Visit

In order to limit any standardization of the data, I wrote summaries of each session to capture the essence of the context as recommended by Hardy *et al. (*2014) and Turley *et al. (*2016). By engaging in this reflective process as soon as possible after the on-site visits, I was enabled to place each participant's experience in the fore-ground and stay true to the phenomenological philosophy of understanding. The key learning outcomes from the LINC modules were also considered in this process

thereby creating a holistic overview of practice in each of the settings involved. In this way meanings developed through this “continuous, creative and hermeneutic conversation” (Giles 2009, p. 6).

Pilot Phase

Malmqvist *et al.* (2019) argue that a pilot study is particularly relevant to the novice researcher to develop knowledge and confidence working with participants, as well as being better equipped to deal with challenges that may arise in the data collection process. The research design of this study necessitated three distinct stages of piloting the data collection instruments and will be outlined in turn to illustrate how modifications and changes were incorporated in the pre-LINC interviews; post-LINC field visits and the post-LINC interviews. Hammersley (1992) suggests that internal validity, that which determines the extent to which the design of the research impacts the outcomes, is supported through this process of trialling and ensuring clarity on the kinds and amounts of ‘evidence’ required.

Phase 1: Pre-LINC interviews

The pre-LINC interview schedule was initially developed by means of peer de-briefing with two colleagues in academia, and then piloted separately with two educators working in early years settings and enrolled on the LINC programme. Although devised with support of knowledgeable peers with the aim of determining educators’ understandings and experiences of inclusion, these initial interview recordings depicted flaws in the data collection process. I recognised how I made assumptions of a shared understanding of my phenomenological approach and had expectations that participants would tell their stories rather than seeing where I needed to build rapport and guide conversations. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) validate the value of piloting in addressing such issues by creating awareness of how the researcher needs to focus or expand questions to have a clear conceptualisation of the topic. Having considered the findings from this first phase the questions for the pre-LINC interview were modified as follows:

Table 7 Modifications to First Interview Schedule

Interview questions before modification	**Interview questions after modification**
Tell me about your experience working in the early years sector.	How long have you been working as an Early Years' Educator? What are your qualifications in early childhood care and education (ECCE)? Tell me about your work in the preschool.
Can you tell me about what supports are available or that you might have used to support children's participation in your preschool?	Had you any input/ help from other agencies? a. AIM / Better Start b. Early Intervention c. Childcare Committee Do you have any guidelines/ policies to follow/ that help you to support children with additional needs in your preschool room?
How do you and your colleagues support inclusion within the setting?	Are you aware of any feedback from other staff regarding the inclusion of children in the preschool programme?

Phase 2: Pilot Field visits

The post-LINC field visits were piloted with the aim of considering the issues and barriers relating to observation of practice in a busy preschool environment as well as testing proposed data collection instruments during that time. Kim (2010) discusses the centrality of pilot studies in phenomenology in coming to understand the role of the researcher from this philosophical perspective and to make revisions and adjustments based on that experience. The pilot for the field visit involved the two educators from the earlier pilot study, whereby the intention was to experience their life-world in considering interactions with children, colleagues, the environment as well as their pedagogical practice during the three-hour preschool session in their own settings. The proposed modifications from these pilot visits to the settings are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8 Modifications from Pilot Field Visits

Modifications from the pilot field visits to inform data collection
Proposed use of the *Inclusive Early Childhood Education Environment Tool* (EASNIE 2017b) and the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) and National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Evaluation Framework (2013) as an observational tool to be abandoned in favour of field notes and reflective journal during and after visit.
Proposed frameworks (EASNIE 2017; MCA and NCSE 2013) to be used to inform researcher perspective and contextual reality of participants in practice.
Value of conversations with children and colleagues within setting to create a richer picture of participants' lived experiences in practice. Emphasis on note-taking and memo-ing to capture essence of perspectives.
Contextual reality of participants' working lives and researcher knowledge of practice to inform interpretation of experience during the field visit.

Working within the proposed frameworks as noted in Table 8 made me realise the need to be more focused on note-taking and memo-ing, rather than trying to complete a template in a busy preschool environment, as I was missing important bits of information as I tried to 'fit things in' with the original designed schedule. I found that once I detached myself from the rigid criteria, and just made more general notes on what I was observing in relation to the environment and the practice evident during the session, I had a richer depiction of the reality of the situation. I felt that by embracing my pre-understanding and immersing myself in their *Dasein*, I was more in touch with their reality, despite concerns about the need to work with more traditional data-collection tools. The field visit was supported then by a follow-up interview with the lead educator after the morning session.

Phase 3: Pilot Post-LINC interviews

The pilot for the post-LINC interviews were incorporated with the field visit whereby I met with the educators after the children had gone home that same day. Although the follow-up interview with research participants in the main study would also be informed by each of their individual responses in the initial pre-LINC interview, the pilot post-LINC interview enabled me to test the method and, as

advocated by Pratt and Yezierski (2018), to build researcher expertise. Although the educators in the pilot study had not yet completed the full programme at the time of interview, this follow-up interview provided space to discuss experiences and to weave together the different elements of pedagogical practice observed during the field visit. Again, it challenged me to reflect on my own assumptions about quality and inclusive practice and to consider how I could use this interview to illicit further understanding of their experiences. It also provided valuable experience in knowing how to make links between the observed environment and the interview schedule to create a richer depiction of the phenomenon. Modifications to the post-LINC interview schedule are included in Table 9.

Table 9 Modifications to second interview schedule

Interview questions before modifications	**Interview questions after modification**
What do you feel has been your key learning from LINC programme?	Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
Can you tell me about any new strategies (or resources observed) that you have found useful to support children's inclusion?	Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme? (Visual supports / Lámh signs on wall)
How do you feel about taking on the role of Inclusion Coordinator in your setting?	Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year? What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?

The post-LINC pilot study guided the data collection process and was, as indicated by more knowledgeable others (Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Kim 2010; Pratt and Yezierski 2018), an opportunity for me to develop my researcher skills as well as confidence in the methodological approach and research design.

Reflexivity

As discussed in Chapter One, reflexivity was a key element of the research process. Recognising Brookfield's (2017) autobiographical lens in the reflexive process as a model for critical reflexivity, I was able to reflect on my roles, as preschool teacher, tutor, mother and a student researcher, and consider how my perspectives may influence my interpretation of the experience. The reflective journal created a space to explore these perspectives, which Sultana (2007) sees as key to knowledge production in qualitative research and asserts that "a reflexive research process can open up the research to more complex and nuanced understandings of issues" (p. 376). Following an incident observed during one of the field visit sessions, I turned to my journal to make sense of the experience and reflect on my assumptions and feelings which is included here as evidence of this reflexive research process.

Reflective journal

- *I am bothered by the incident at the preschool today when the little boy, who had accidentally run into another child, was put on a time out step and scolded for his actions. I can feel myself becoming judgemental of how the situation was handled and I feel bad that I didn't do anything either. I am not used to sitting helplessly around children and I am annoyed at myself that I didn't intervene – but was it my place to do that? She was comforting the other child who was physically hurt – but the poor little boy was so upset – and I'm already questioning the leadership skills of J and why she didn't respond to the situation. They are working at maximum capacity with just the two staff – and should I say it… the funding would certainly cover costs of more staff to enhance quality. Maybe there are other issues between them, and maybe there are financial pressures in other areas of her life. I'm a bit disheartened after the visit though – there's a tendency to make comparisons of experiences, and this one might not be the most positive visit.*

Figure 19 Extract from Reflective Journal Following Visit to Sessional Service.

Kafle (2011) explains the need for the researcher to make one's views explicit throughout the research process, presenting reflexivity in considering how one's role has the potential to shape research output by reason of assumptions and personal positioning. This extract represents the realities of the hermeneutic circle and my commitment to 'own' my perspective and reflect on how these experiences have the potential to shape the research (Braun and Clarke 2021a).

Access and Sampling

In accordance with the aim of the research study, purposive sampling was required to access the student intake for the LINC programme for the academic year. As a tutor on the LINC programme in the Galway centre, this group was excluded from the sampling process to maintain validity and reliability of data collection and findings as it was considered unethical to involve my own student cohort in the research study in evaluating their learning of which I was a part. Mary Immaculate College (MIC) facilitated access by distribution of an email to all other students, of an approximate total of 750 enrolled on the LINC programme, informing them of the research project and with my contact details attached (see Appendix A). Cohen *et al.* (2007) emphasise the importance of this stage of obtaining access, acceptance and the need to demonstrate one's worthiness as a researcher, to the research participants, their work colleagues and the children and families they work with, in order to be provided with the time and facilities to carry out the research project.

It was originally envisaged that respondents to the email would be selected in accordance with a stratified sampling process, in accordance to geographical spread, staff qualifications and years of experience, but the response rate was low at sixteen prospective participants. Having a shared reality of the sample group as an ECT working in practice, I was not surprised at the low response and attribute it to a number of factors. Firstly, the timing of the email correspondence was during July and August of 2017 when all of the sessional services were closed for the

Summer period. However, the time scale for the research study was inflexible in this regard as it was essential that the data collection began before the research participants engaged with the LINC programme at the beginning of September. Secondly, the ELC sector has been subject to a significant number of surveys and research invitations over the previous year as a result of commitments to Pobal and Tusla, as part of funding obligations and preschool regulations, as well in the surge of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the field of ECCE inviting participation in studies. Another factor worthy of consideration is the level of scrutiny within the sector given the prevalence of inspections, with the Department of Education Early Years' Focused Inspections (EYEI) (DES 2018), Tusla Preschool Inspections (DCYA 2016c), Pobal Compliance Visits (GoI 2010), Environmental Health Inspections (GoI 1989) and possibly others in relation to Employment Legislation (GoI 2015). The invitation to participate in another observation type investigation might not have appealed to many under these circumstances. These contextual factors are important considerations in an IHP study as they form part of *Dasein*, one's '*being-in-the-world'* (Heidegger 1929) and can have a real impact on participants' 'lived experiences' in the ELC sector, and potentially impact their perception of the phenomenon.

Duke (1994) suggests an "intensive study of a small sample" to effectively engage with the research question (p. 197). Furthermore, a phenomenological study may involve one participant engaged in ongoing dialogue (Shinebourne and Smith 2009); conversations in focus groups (Bush *et al.* 2019) or online semi-structured interviews (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2020; 2021). In qualitative research, there are no definite rules on the number of participants required for a study, but in general, it is a smaller sample size to facilitate more depth and detail in the collection process (Huberman and Miles 1998). Indeed Boyd (2001) argues that two to ten research participants are sufficient to reach saturation, as evidenced in other such qualitative studies (See Moran *et al.* 2017). Overall therefore, sixteen participants were considered an acceptable sample group that would enable the researcher to garner their lived experiences in a meaningful way.

The sample group that volunteered to participate were selected as being fit for the purpose of the study owing to the simple criterion for participation was enrolment on the LINC programme, and so would have experiences linked to the phenomenon to be researched (Groenwald 2004). Nonetheless, IHP studies are not necessarily about generalizability but rather its primary objective is “to illuminate the lived experience and context in as much depth as possible” (Frechette *et al.* 2019, p. 6).

Early years educators

Ciara	Level 8	7 years
Lucy	Level 6	3 years
Emma	Level 6	8 years
Monica	Level 6	4 years
Alice	Level 6	16 years
Claire	Level 6	6 years

Owner-Managers

Siobhan	Level 8	7 years
Teresa	Level 6	34 years
Ruth	Level 8	14 years
Mary	Level 8	13 years
Maria	Level 6	15 years
Tina	Level 6	30 years

Employee-managers

Eliza	Level 6	10 years
Martha	Level 6	16 years

Figure 20 Profile of Research Participants

Figure 20 illustrates the profile of the participants with three of the respondents (Ciara, Lucy and Emma) working in a community-based setting, and eleven in private settings. Ten of the participants had a Level 6 in ECCE and four of the respondents had a Level 8 in ECCE. All of the respondents were female, as would have been expected with the low number of men employed in the early years’ sector in Ireland (Pobal 2021). From the original sixteen participants, two participants withdrew from the LINC programme owing to illness and to time constraints. The research participants were spread geographically over nine counties nationwide. While the number of respondents was low, the final sample of fourteen participants represented a broad geographical spread, with ECTs with

different levels of qualifications and experience in both community and private settings.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional approval to undertake the research study was granted by MIC Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) which approved the study prior to engagement with any data collection. The importance of ethics in research is captured by Thomas (2017, p. 37), who states "ethical principles encompass some decisions and dilemmas that do not just pit right against wrong, but balance one right action against right action, taking into account the possibly conflicting interests of the parties involved". Drawing upon Sarantakos (2005, p.18), the following ethical standards applied in the present study:

- Uphold professional integrity
- Demonstrate responsibility, competency and propriety
- Employ accurate methods of data gathering and analysis
- Make use of relevant research methodology
- Choose appropriate interpretation of the data
- Report the data accurately
- Avoid fabrication of data, which is misconduct

This study ensured non-malevolence to participants by putting in place a number of measures to protect all involved in the research process. As sole researcher, I was responsible for ensuring that no harm or deception was inflicted on the participants. The risk of "mental harm" (Sarantakos 2005, p. 19) was minimised by ensuring that questions asked during the interview process and visits did not cause discomfort, pressure or anxiety. Palaiologou (2016) discusses the axiological challenges associated with elements of educational research and emphasises the need for ethical permeability in all aspects of the research process. Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology created the parameters to facilitate this ethical consideration throughout this study through consideration of participants' perspectives as well as ongoing engagement with the reflective journal to reflect on processes.

The participants were fully informed of the research topic and what their involvement in the research would entail prior to engagement with the study (Appendix A). They were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time without reason or consequence throughout the process. Signed informed consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix A1) as well as signed informed consent from the owner / manager in each of the ELC settings (Appendix D).

The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of each of the research participants was assured with strict procedures in place throughout the research process to ensure that this was respected. No personal or private information was sought from the participants at any stage, with the focus remaining on the research questions during interactions with the ECTs. Cohen *et al.* (2007) outline techniques that one can utilise to ensure non-traceability and anonymity of the research participants, which were adopted for this study. The names of the participants do not appear on any research instruments or the data itself. Rather, random numbers and pseudo-names have been applied to each participant to mask their identity, reducing the risk that anyone other than I, can identify them or their setting. This information is kept in a separate file from the interview transcripts to ensure security and confidentiality of the data, as outlined in the previous section. Consideration was given to ensuring that geographical locations are not matched to case studies and that participants were not identifiable in the data or the final thesis.

Ethical Considerations of Involving Children in the Study

Although involving children in the research process presents a higher risk to these participants, owing to their vulnerable age, Ring and O' Sullivan (2016) highlight the significance of having their voices heard in matters that affect them. Lastikka and Kangas (2017) emphasise the importance of adhering to high ethical standards when considering children in the research process, as is necessary when working with adults. As well as ensuring adherence to child protection legislation, there should be an understanding of the rights of the child as outlined in the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Working ethically with children in this research study meant that the same steps were taken to ensure their protection from harm, protection from deceit, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. Assent had to provide "a credible and meaningful explanation of the research intentions" and include the four elements of informed consent of competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p. 54). Parental consent (Appendix B and B1) was required from all children participating in the conversations, and then the children too had their own form of assent as outlined in Appendix E. The DCYA (2012) note that if information is given to the children in an age-appropriate manner and they are supported in the decision-making process, it is possible to attain their informed assent. Brooks *et al.* (2014) note how this concept of informed assent has become embedded in an understanding of respect for others, which is particularly relevant in a study focusing on inclusion. An explanation was given to the children about 'the book' I was writing, and information was adapted to their age and stage of development to ensure that they understood the process. My experience working with preschool children was beneficial in enabling me to engage with the group, and to provide this information to them, so they felt in control of the situation and were confident of their rights to participate or not. The ECTs in all of the settings had already discussed my visit with the children, so this helped to clarify what I was doing and their options for participation. Visual images of 'Stop' and 'Go' were presented to the children (Appendix E), so they could indicate when they wanted to leave, but I found that most of the children tended to just tell me when they were finished talking and continue with their play. Ethical considerations were embedded in the reflexive process of the research study, evolving as "an actively deliberate, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise" (British Education Research Association (BERA) 2018, p. 2).

Data Storage

The audio recordings of all interviews were all saved in a file, with a specific number assigned to each one to anonymise the data, which was then saved on a password

protected laptop and deleted from the mobile device. The transcripts were assigned corresponding numbers and were placed in files in a locked cabinet. The field notes from the visits to the services are considered crucial to the understanding the "quiddity" of the phenomenon, that which Fry *et al* (2017, p. 51) see as the essence of the experience. Groenewald (2004) specifies the necessity of writing up these notes as soon as possible after the visit, and this was particularly important in the data collection process as these fourteen field visits took place within one month and there was the risk of confusing one with the other. However, the effective classification of the field notes after each session ensured that there was a clear picture created of each participants' 'lived experience'.

All data is retained and stored in accordance with MIC guidance which incorporates the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) specifying that all personal information will be protected and used in a fair and legal way.

Philosophical Underpinnings of the Data Analysis

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (1929) is underpinned by the fundamental ontological basis of how one understands and interprets our life-world. While there is a realisation that there is little guidance on how to apply his philosophical interpretations in research practice (Sundler *et al.* 2019; Crowther and Thomson 2020), I am hopeful that the ongoing engagement with the methodological principles of IHP have illustrated my role as researcher in interpreting the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Similar to the IPA approach, the analysis of the data was a "process of inter-subjective meaning making" (Larkin and Thompson 2012, p. 23). Indeed, IHP offers that flexibility to adapt the analysis process in accordance to the research needs to interpret the phenomenon (Smith 2004; McManus-Holroyd 2007). I use the term 'analysis' tentatively in the phenomenological sense as it has been argued that this term refers to a 'breaking into parts', which creates a conflict with the holistic idea of this approach (Groenewald 2004). Groenewald (2004, p. 49) refers to the process as the "explication of the data", which instead investigates the constituents of that

experience within the context of the whole. Interpretative phenomenology requires that the researcher is not only describing the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, but also that one interprets and finds meaning within these life-world experiences. The analysis of data in IHP always begins with the researcher, as the interpreter, reflecting on one's fore-projections or pre-understandings of one's knowledge and assumptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004). McManus-Holroyd (2007) describes this as "an art of understanding", that necessitates the continual reflexivity within the hermeneutic cycle throughout the research process.

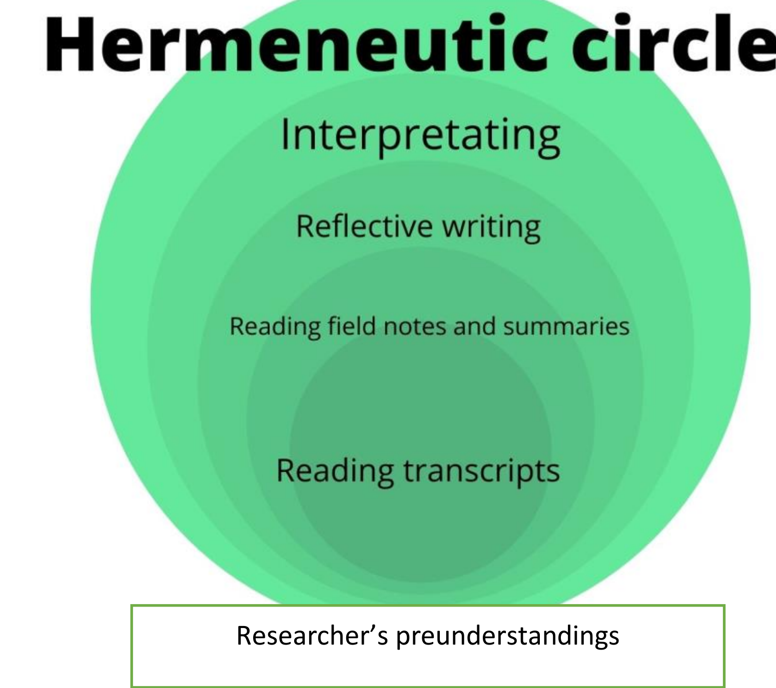

Figure 21 Hermeneutic Circle of Understanding, Underpinned by Preunderstandings of the Context

The interpretation of the phenomenon from this hermeneutic perspective has been embedded in the research process from conception of the research questions, through the data collection stages and engagement with recordings, documents and transcripts. Ricoeur (2016) explains the process of analysis in IHP is about listening to the stories of the participants while simultaneously realising that their meanings do not dissolve our own understandings, rather that our horizons of perspective move and shift throughout the research process, in coexistence with

the horizons of the participants. This is congruent with Gadamer's (2004) explanation of the fusion of horizon in hermeneutics, which creates an ongoing reflective cycle of understanding as new meanings are uncovered and explained. This reflective cycle on how participants perceived and demonstrated their experiences of engagement with the LINC programme was documented in part throughout the journaling process which supported this reflexivity and awareness of my own biases on the phenomenon and the contextual realities. This journaling, as evidenced in Figure 22, was a key part of the analysis in becoming familiar with the phenomenon providing that space to question and consider elements of the 'lived experiences' as it appeared to me as my horizons of understandings shifted throughout the research process.

> I have to put emphasis on the societal role – as well as the 'moods' of the participants. The realities of the sector have to be acknowledged – and this makes perfect sense – the lack of pay / recognition is no secret – it's no great assumption. It is what it is and I need to act as this go-between in seeing it from my horizon – and make sense of why they may have engaged with LINC and why they have not. Indeed - I have known this feeling of hopelessness within the sector. Maybe others cannot see that – and perhaps that is the issue – those who 'speak' for the sector do not truly know the sector. So today's task is to go back to the combined findings with this interpretative lens. Thinking about management, leadership, societal perceptions – draw in the philosophy and ask those questions about what it all means.

Figure 22 Extract from Journal During the Interpretative Data Analysis Process

Both Heidegger (1929) and Gadamer (2004) argue that true understanding of a phenomenon involves this dialogue between the participants' dialogue and experiences and the personal and professional context of the researcher. The first level of analysis in IHP is considered by Crowther and Thompson (2020) as crafting and describing the early interpretation of the data. This necessitates the reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and maintaining the methodological

principle of openness in understanding what is in the text and the meanings behind the words. Sundler *et al.* (2019) note that the goal at this stage is to "illuminate novel information rather than confirm what is already known while keeping the study aim in mind" (p. 736).

Reflexivity in the analysis was present from the outset in drawing together all the elements of the findings to create the 'story' of the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was selected as a reliable method of organising the data and is discussed in the following section in relation to the incorporation of the findings from the different stages of data collection.

Thematic Analysis in Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Thematic analysis (TA) is a popular form of analysis in qualitative research and involves the examination and recording of patterns and themes within data. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, emphasising that this flexibility stems from the fact that it is a "method and not a methodology" (2015, p. 95). As a method, Braun and Clarke (2020; 2021a; 2022) assert that it can be used alongside any of the major ontological, epistemological and theoretical frameworks and is particularly relevant in phenomenology. Nevertheless, there is recognition of the challenges associated with TA in phenomenology owing to the philosophical underpinnings of the approach (McManus-Holroyd 2007; Sundler *et al.* 2019; Suddick *et al.* 2020). Whittaker (2009, p. 89) asserts that analysis is "the fascinating process of making sense of what people have said, identifying patterns and understanding meanings" and in its early development, thematic analysis was often discussed as a phenomenological method (Rohleder and Lyons 2015). Analysis in phenomenology, however, is not a linear process. Rather, it demands complete immersion in the data analysis in a recursive process, searching for the meanings and patterns in the data corpus (Groenewald 2004). Figure 23 below illustrates the elements and processes of analysis of this IHP study and the key role of the reflective journal to support interpretation of the data collected.

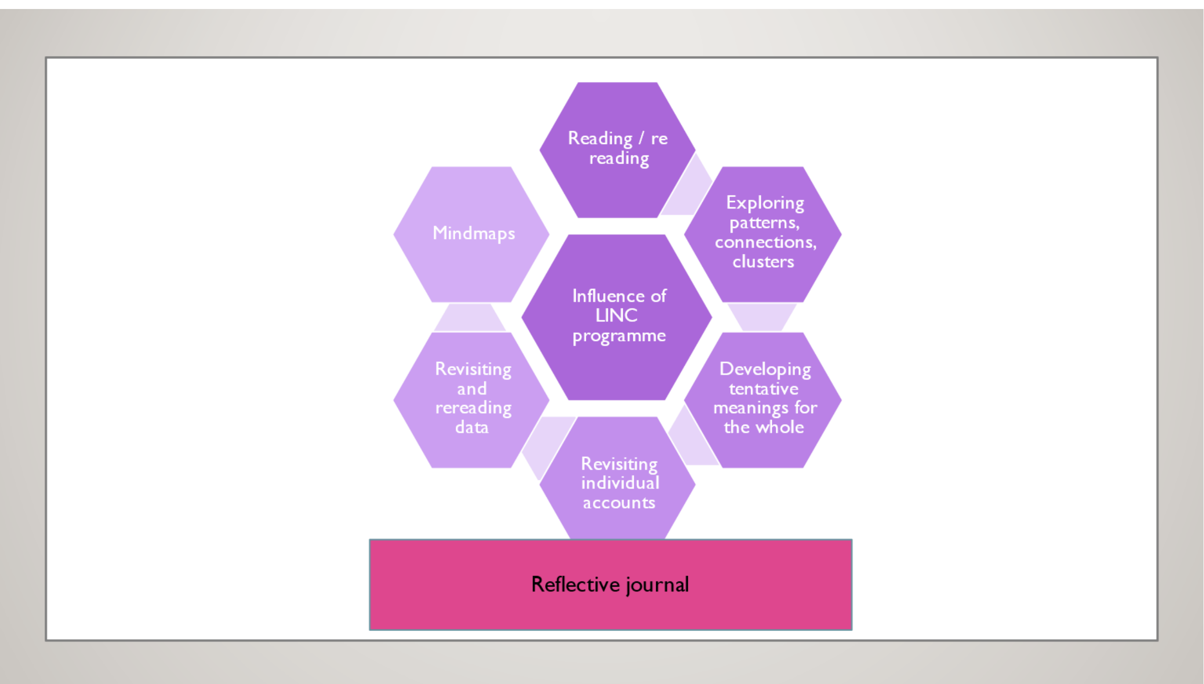

Figure 23 Aspects of Interpretive Analysis of the Data

Recent phenomenological studies have used TA to identify and understand meaning-oriented themes within the data. Indeed, Braun and Clarke's more recent review of their approach as "reflective thematic analysis" presents an argument that this "suits questions related to people's experiences, or people's views and perceptions" (2022, p. 54), which is particularly relevant to the research questions of this study. Sundler *et al.* (2019) argue that TA provides a framework to organise meanings into patterns, from which themes can develop to form a meaningful wholeness to validate robust findings in qualitative research. In interpretative phenomenology, themes are not determined by frequency in the data, but rather by the meaning attributed to these themes and the same is true in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021a). This is evidenced in the use of thematic analysis (TA) in phenomenological studies such as Laletas *et al.* (2017) study on childcare workers and their engagement with families; Bredmar's study on teachers' emotional experiences (2020) and Maxwell and colleagues' study of the reflexive journey in their education research (2020). Braun and Clarke (2021a)

present their reflexive TA approach in two categories: *small q* and *Big Q*. *Small q* is usually associated with quantitative research and has a rigid coding frame to ensure the reliability of the coding process, however, because of the features of the *Big* Q, as shown in Figure 24, it is a more fitting approach for IHP.

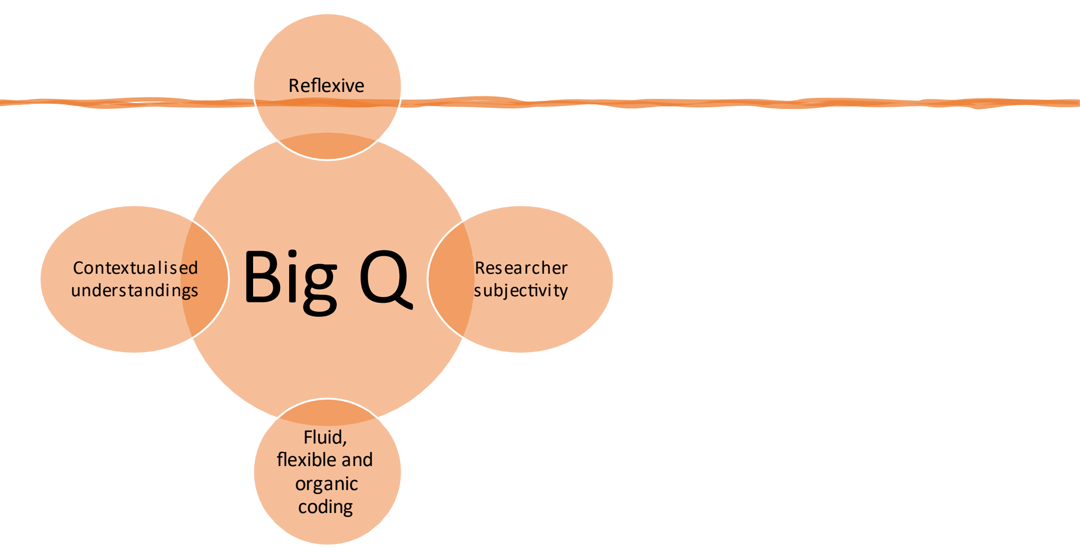

Figure 24 Braun and Clarke's (2021) Features of 'Big Q' Thematic Analysis

The Big Q position (Braun and Clarke 2015; 2021a) recognises that the researcher always brings personal experiences and philosophical assumptions to the analysis and creates a space for reflexivity within the process. A particularly appealing feature of the Big Q in this study is the creativity permitted in the flexibility of analysis to reflect my values and theoretical perspective as one who has an entangled history with the ELC sector. In IHP studies such as this, TA can be utilised as interpretating the underlying meanings embodied in the lived experiences that have been organised into codes and themes within the data set (Van Manen 2016; Ho *et al.* 2017). Smith and Shinebourne (2012) have offered guidance on TA in IPA through a step-by-step process of reading/ re-reading; coding; clustering; iteration; narration and contextualisation, which has been adapted in recent Irish research by

O'Sullivan *et al.* (2020; 2021) and this provided further guidance in the analysis process for this study.

The research design necessitated the initial analysis process of the pre-LINC interviews before looking at the full data set at the end of the data collection period. Analysis of the pre-LINC data was required at an early stage in the research process as the findings would inform the follow-up interviews on completion of the LINC programme. Smith *et al.* (2004) discuss the importance of a detailed examination of the data set at an initial stage of understanding the phenomenon, but then how the researcher must "cautiously" move to a more detailed examination of similarity and differences within and between the participants' experiences. An example of the iterative process is illustrated in Table 10, indicating extracts from the interview transcripts from the pre-LINC interviews, and the comments made in the text at an early stage of analysis.

Table 10 Extract from Transcripts Illustrating the Early Interpretation and Reflections

Ruth	**Interpretation / reflection of researcher**	**Teresa**	**Interpretation / reflection of researcher**
Set the alarm bells off for parents… am…. And you have to be so careful when you're doing that cos I find that, as a provider, you're deemed a professional in that area… it's not your field.	*Possibly avoiding telling parent re concerns / impact on relationship with parents / one's role in sharing this information?*	We got the fund for one – the parent paid for the one-to-one person because he did need the one-to-one. So when it happened – when the situation happened, we got that.	*SNA model of support; knowledge of other options available? Understanding of inclusive culture / practice? Level of child's needs?*
The parents were lucky that they had found <u>us</u> – that she had come back to us – initially come back to us – and that we were willing to stick with him and not give up on him….and we didn't.	*Recognising strengths of staff team? Altruistic motivation? Questioning re other services or supports available in the locality? Was exclusion an option? – is it 'lucky' to access supports?*	And some parents are very reluctant to accept that there is any issue at all… so…. Y'know…. You have to keep addressing things very sensitively I suppose… I wouldn't have very many, like I said, with issues, but am… it can be hard…	*Communication with parents: challenges of sharing concerns re development; skills sets required to liaise with parents – complexity of the role of ECT – confidence in professional knowledge to communicate these 'issues'.*
I think it's because life has become an awful lot busier for parents nowadays. There's not as much talking and not as much conversation going on in houses anymore –	*Empathy and consideration for parents. Full daycare service more aware of the challenges for working parents. Any judgements associated with this statement?*	Even though…. If you have someone who is in that line…. More professional in that line – who could say – who could assure us that we are right. Yknow cos it's a tough thing telling any	*Need for collaboration with other professionals – is there too much pressure put on ECTs to recognise underlying issues? Challenge with business model of sector and education / care role*

	What is the role of the ECT is bridging this perceived gap in communication?	parent that you think there's a problem obviously.	*– is this a factor in communicating news to parents?*
And parents see it in their folders as they go through each semester and how they develop and stuff like that.	*Communicating with parents – recognition of importance of parental involvement. Is it curricular based or focused on care routines? Frequency of sharing info sufficient? By what standards of collaboration?*	Get some sort of process for him and that – y'know going through the proper channels and the parents were pretty good about that but I just feel certainly now – he shouldn't be in a mainstream national school.	*Perception of additional needs – child-centred or service-centred? challenges faced re having the resources / skills / knowledge to support child – is this an 'attitude' or a recognition that the service is unable to support his needs. What is required then to include the child?*

This early engagement with the interview transcripts illustrates the depth of the analysis which van Manen (1997) argues is a key element of trustworthiness in IHP. The interpretations, indicated by the notes in the transcripts, are evidence of the process of active engagement with the data and depict my knowledge and preunderstanding at this initial stage. These notes in text support the reflexive process in data analysis, and while not as detailed as the reflective journal, act as a foundation for understanding the lived experiences of the participants. The themes which developed from this analysis of the first interviews are illustrated in Figure 25:

Figure 25 Themes from the Analysis of the Initial Interviews

Braun and Clarke (2016) use the metaphor of a cake to describe themes which develop from the process of TA in qualitative research. Each of these themes from the pre-LINC analysis is the product of a combination of 'ingredients', which are processed and interpreted to develop an understanding of these parts of the 'lived experiences' of the participants. Table 11 presents the elements of each theme:

Table 11 Themes and Sub-themes of the First Interviews Prior to Engagement with the Leadership for INClusion (LINC) Programme

Career Path	Pedagogical practice	Parents and Families	Other stakeholders	Professionalism in the sector
-Role within the setting. -Personal experience of additional needs.	-Curricular approaches - Strategies and challenges	-expectations of parents - communication between home and preschool	-Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) -Other agencies	-Management and leadership within the setting -Professional identity

Findings from this initial thematic analysis provided one of the layers of Braun and Clarke's (2016) 'cake' which requires further activity and interpretation when combined with the later analysis to determine what kind of cake one should bake. Braun and Clarke emphasise that a cake is not waiting to be 'revealed' in the baking process – it takes active engagement for this to occur. Similarly, in this instance, ongoing reflection and interpretations supported a clear conceptualisation of the themes' representation in the totality of the research study. This early interpretation of the data informed the follow-up interview and field visit on completion of the LINC programme, which will be outlined in further detail in the section on thematic analysis.

Aspers (2009) explains how the meaning of a phenomenon can only be uncovered through movement within the data set, going back and forth in the hermeneutic circle of understanding. The complexity of the data corpus necessitated an ongoing interaction between the interviews, the field visits and the reflective journaling. Frechette *et al. (*2020) discuss the syntheses of the data by moving in and out of the

transcripts and the field notes from ECCE sessions to identify how the phenomenon is being expressed in the post-LINC meeting. Holroyd (2001) indicates that while phenomenological researchers may apply the same basic guidelines in accessing lived experiences, there is flexibility in the method design to suit the investigation of experiences. Figure 26 outlines the six steps in Braun and Clarke's analytical process which acts as the framework for the TA of the data.

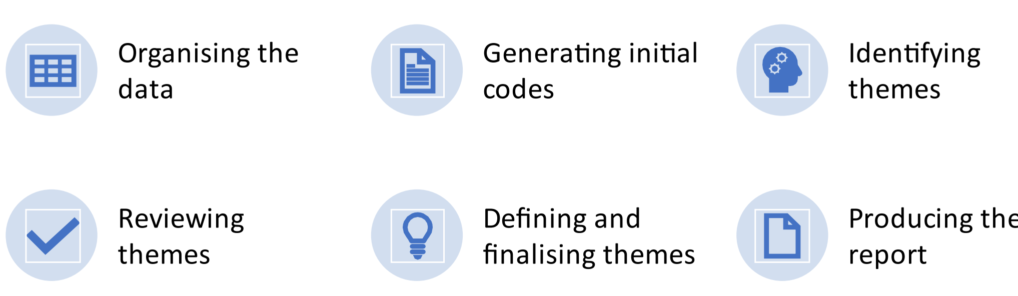

Figure 26 Six Steps of Thematic Analysis of the Data (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021a)

Braun and Clarke (2014) assert that their version of thematic analysis, as used in this study, "provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data and for then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question" (p. 33). The framework enabled me to ensure that the analysis involved the investigation of the different elements of the phenomenon while maintaining the context of the entire phenomenon (Crabtree and Miller 1992) and is illustrated here to demonstrate trustworthiness of the analysis process.

Table 12 Step One of the Analytical Process

Analytical Process	**Practical Application of Framework to the study**	**Iterative Process**
1. Organising the data	Transcription of the interviews and checking for accuracy with the audio recordings Hermeneutic cycle of interpretation in reflective journaling	Complete immersion in the data, making notes on each one, searching for meanings to develop understanding of the phenomenon. Writing reflections of my understandings and experiences of pre-LINC and post-LINC data collection experiences

Merleau-Ponty (1962) described phenomenology as “the study of essences” (p. vii) and the analysis is underpinned by theoretical assumptions of this methodology from the outset. Stage one of organising the data, involved consideration of how my understandings of the phenomenon were realised in my early responses to the data. Peshkin (1988) has an interesting perspective on the analysis process advising the researcher to reflect on the ‘warm’ and ‘cool’ spots in the data. The ‘warm’ spots are evident in where I had a positive reaction to the data, whereas the ‘cool’ spots were those times when my own values or assumptions were challenged. While stage one involved the iterative process as noted in Table 12, I also present an example from the reflective journal during this stage to illustrate reflexivity in the process of coming to know the data. Figure 27 therefore is an excerpt from my reflective journal following an interview with a participant after the field visit to her practice.

- *B talked a lot about her child who has ASD and continually referred to him in conversations. I felt that the topic might be very close to home for her and I nearly felt like I was intruding on her personal life as she was sharing so much of that experience. I felt there was a definite sense of frustration in her personal experience trying to access supports for her son, and simultaneously in her own working environment. She is very confident of her own knowledge but also quite dismissive of the LINC programme. Her colleague did it already – and B says the role of INCO makes no difference; the managers seem disconnected and she criticises their lack of qualifications. Just a real sense of unrest and frustration. I'm not sure what is going on there – the environment is quite overwhelming, and although there was plenty of staff there to support the group, she was reluctant to leave them until the sessional group were gone home. Is that a lack of confidence in her colleagues? An over -confidence in herself? Or is it about 'showing' me what she does here.*

Figure 27 Extract from Journal Illustrating the 'Organising the Data' Stage of Thematic Analysis

This early reflection on my initial interpretations provided the opportunity to "ponder and question" as a hermeneutic researcher (Spence 2017, p. 3), and it also enabled me to recognise those other elements of *Dasein* that might have influenced the participant's responses. Taken on its own merit, the interview transcript might seem quite critical and negative, but this stage in the analysis enabled me to capture those "essences" that Merleau-Ponty (1962) presents as the key element of phenomenology. These reflections will be drawn into the hermeneutic circle of understanding and add that richness to the stories of their lived experiences which van Manen (1997) sees as grounding the analysis in trustworthiness as a methodology.

Table 13 Stage Two Generating Initial Codes (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021a)

Analytical Process	Practical Application of Framework to the study	Iterative Process
2. Generating Initial codes	Organising the data from the interview transcripts into meaningful groups, using colour coding technique.	Identifying interesting features of the data and making notes on same. Linking to field notes from observation sessions

Coding in this context is described as the "most basic element of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 16). The phenomenological analysis at this stage is about immersing oneself in the data and using one's own preunderstandings to focus in on certain meanings that might have a particular relevance in response to the research questions. Codes in thematic analysis are inductive and derive from the data, rather than any preconceived theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke 2021a; Terry 2021). While engaging in this second stage of TA, the research questions regarding the influence of the LINC programme on perceptions and practices of inclusion were to the fore of the analysis process. There is recognition that at this stage, the codes focus on capturing the diversity of perspectives of the participants and the patterns of meaning that might be interpreted from the data. Terry (2021) explains that coding extracts may be semantic or latent; the former depicting an explicit response while the latter is more interpretative. While the actual coding process for this study was done manually by handwriting notes and highlighting different responses, both semantic and latent, this process is illustrated here as an example of stage 2 of the TA.

Table 14 Extract of Stage Two of Thematic Analysis of the Data

Extract of data	Codes
Interview question: *So do you have children in your service this year with additional needs or AIM support?*	
Ruth's response*… he seems to have reverted back a little bit. I dunno whether Mammy is in denial or what it is … and she works herself in adults…special needs adults. You know what I mean – she does residential care – so I just thought it would have been easier talking to her – but it's not. It's 3 weeks now – and she hasn't said anything to me so that's where I am with that one.*	Person-first language Parents in 'denial' – how are concerns communicated to parents? Time and space for difficult conversations – difficult in full day care.
I need to talk to you about a few bits and pieces and that' I said. And we had done up a report – the girl in the room did a very concise report up on her. Now she's here 3 days one week and 2 days another, y'know? But even within that space of time we've seen very strong… y'know – lining things up one after another; no concentration whatsoever – she's gone 3 – 3 and 4 months…no concentration to colour in – she'll just run off; if you correct her for anything she'll throw herself right onto the floor and she'll kick and she'll scream and she'll roar. Won't eat for us…am…lots of things…lots of different things – not toilet training or anything else like that	Documenting children's progress Staff skills in writing report Where's the strengths-based approach? English as a second language Cultural divide Role of participant in setting Colouring-in – child led curriculum?
he's in the process of – now he's very engaged – he's very willing – I told him to go on the website of the DCYA, click in on AIM, read up about the Parents' information; read up even about the Providers' information – I even drew out the little pyramid for him – so he's very engaged	Ideas of collaborative practice in LINC? English as second language Challenges in communication Perception of support Role of the ECT / manager
Ciara's response: *We even had – this year alone we've had 4 or 5 different children coming into the service with their parents at their wits end – we might not necessarily have been their first choice of service because of work or because of whatever but they can't get places – but they can't get places elsewhere cos the child has an additional need and the crèche can't take them…*	Exclusion practices of other services having impact on neighbouring settings Pressure on parents Awareness of this pressure acknowledged – own experiences? 'can't' – or won't?

I'd be saying to F – if there's anyone there – send them up to me cos you want to do absolutely everything you can for that child – you could be the only person who does that for the next 5 years for them. See we want them to have the best possible start to get – to get an idea of what inclusion is so that when they do get to primary school they can say 'hang on – when I was in preschool I was allowed to do that so why do you tell me I can't when I know I can?'	Willingness to help and support Role of the ECT Relationship with primary school Transition process

The reflexive nature of TA, as well as the principles of IHP are evident in the coding stage which is a subjective process. When one considers Heidegger's (1929) theory on *Dasein,* one can appreciate how one's societal role; our moods and our ability to face life's inevitable challenges can have a direct influence on incidents and experiences in one's life. One can appreciate how, as the researcher, I relied on the reflective journal to make sense of the data and to consider what is visible to the participant from their horizon of significance. I was afforded the opportunity to engage in the hermeneutic cycle of reflection in this back-and-forth motion between the interviews, the field notes and my own understandings.

In stage three of the analysis process, these codes were analysed through repeated reading and use of mind maps to search for patterns and themes in the data that could be combined to form an "overarching theme" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 43).

Table 15 Stage Three Identifying Themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021a)

Analytical Process	**Practical Application of Framework to the study**	**Iterative Process**
3. Identifying themes	Analysis of codes to decipher how they tie together to form themes, and collection of data extracts into themes	Use of mind maps and tables to identify how codes are inter-related and can be grouped together as a theme.

Suddick *et al.* (2020) used similar variety of data collection methods in their phenomenological study and perceived this hermeneutic cycle of reflection in

analysis as central to understanding the phenomenon in making reflections and acknowledging one's horizon and preunderstandings in this process. While Heidegger (1929) presents the distractions of one's own assumptions as potentially projecting meaning onto something or somebody else's experiences, Gadamer (2004) reminds the hermeneutic researcher that one's own perspective can co-exist in this analysis in providing a backdrop of understanding of the phenomenon. Identifying themes at this stage involved consideration of patterns of shared meaning across the data, and again, this was something carried out manually using post-its, coloured pens and note-taking amidst an array of papers and drawings. Braun and Clarke (2021a) offer a reassuring assertion that reflexive analysis requires such immersion in the data and see creativity as central to the process.

Table 16 Example of the Development and Identification of Initial Themes

Candidate Theme	Personal experiences	Perceptions of inclusion	Professional identity
Associated codes extracted from the data – interviews / field notes / reflective journal	Having child with additional needs gives one a different perspective and understanding. Advantage to have personal experience or is there assumption of authority on the subject? Positive / negative experiences of self influences one's reactions. Ease of access into role as early childhood teacher / practitioner – worked with family situation:	*So when we did them first, there were generic pictures on the daily routine – like there was pictures showing the routine was going to be – like if you were going outside or that- you would have seen me show it to Jack? I explained to Jack that we were going out. And we found that – we thought about that – and we thought it is pictures showing what we're doing but it's not relating to the children. So we've made pictures of the children in the garden so they can relate then to them* Reflection on practice to make changes Respectful regard for the child and seeing	Repeated references to BA qualifications Criticism of parents' perceptions of their role Criticism of management Ability to lead inclusive setting? Challenges re time and staffing Inspection processes *"I feel that an awful lot of the stuff sounds so petty on the course – that if you didn't already know that going in to the course – you've no business going in working*

	"fell into the role" – commitment or convenience?	things from his perspective. Meaningful participation Understanding of Aistear principles in practice? Strengths-based approach	*with children. There's a lot of it I think that has to be covered in level 5 or level 6 or level 7 or level 8"* Is there a reluctance to engage when existing qualifications not acknowledged?

This third stage of the analysis was an active and time-consuming process and was developed into candidate or prototype themes, which Terry (2021) advises should be developed with the research questions to the fore, ensuring that the initial themes are relevant and useful. The data extracts under the different codes were collected under the initial themes into separate documents and mind maps which facilitated the next stage of analysis, stage four, in reviewing the themes, re – coding some of the data, combining two themes or getting rid of others with insufficient data to support them.

Table 17 Stage Four Reviewing Themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021a)

Analytical Process	Practical Application of Framework to the study	Iterative Process
4. Reviewing themes	Refinement of themes by excluding those with insufficient data to support them and combining similar themes.	Comparison of themes and making notes on links between them. Recoding additional data into themes.

This process of examining themes gives a descriptive label to those with conceptual similarities (Smith 2004). Clusters of themes, as illustrated in Figure 28, were formed by grouping units of meaning together, with some overlapping and combining as would be expected "considering the nature of human phenomenon" (Hycner 1999, p. 144). Braun and Clarke (2021a) advise the use of thematic maps in this manner to illustrate the key concepts and the relationships between them. In mapping out the themes in this way, I was able to make connections between them

and reflect again on how one might influence the other. I removed the candidate theme of ‘Personal experiences’ for example, as these codes were relevant to other themes and my interpretations and reflections guided a deeper understanding as to the relevance of these to participants’ perception of their professional role as well as their understanding of pedagogical practice.

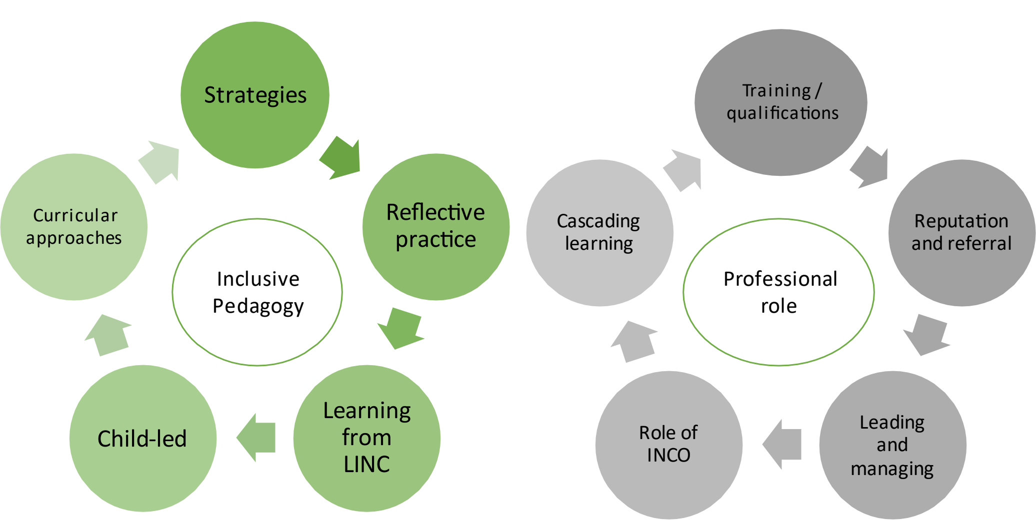

Figure 28 Exemplar of the Process of Reviewing Themes in the Analysis

Stage five involved writing up a detailed analysis of each theme, recognising that “thick description” is a valuable component of phenomenological reporting, but ensuring that the data was “challenged, extended, supported and linked in order to reveal their full volume” (Bazeley 2009, p. 7).

Table 18 Stage Five Defining and Finalising Themes (Braun and Clarke 2006 / 2021a)

Analytical Process	Practical Application of Framework to the study	Iterative Process
5. Defining and Finalising themes	Identifying the essence of each theme, and how the story of each theme fits into the broader scope of the study in relation to the research questions.	Identifying sub themes within a theme, naming each theme, creating an understanding of the relevance of each theme to the project.

As indicated, stage five involved identifying the essence of each individual theme and telling the 'story' behind each one, and how it fits into the broader picture in relation to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). The conceptualisation of the themes resulted from an analysis that is underpinned by hermeneutic principles and must be understood as an analytic output (Braun and Clarke 2021a; Terry 2021). The themes provide a basis for "constructing a narrative account of the interplay between the participants' account of her experiences and the interpretative activity of the researcher" (Shinebourne and Smith 2008, p. 14). On reflection upon the themes developed through this active and systematic engagement, I named them as a combination of data quotations and heading to capture the essence of each one (Figure 29), which will be discussed in turn in the individual theme-based chapters.

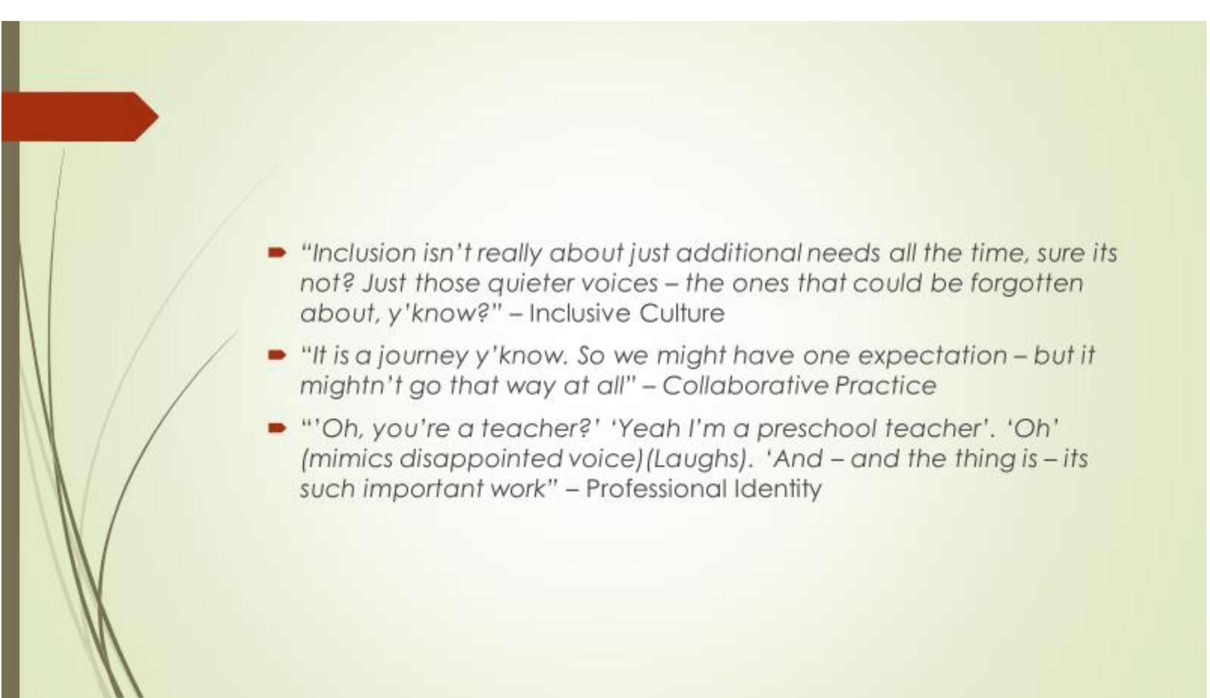

Figure 29 Names of the Final Themes from the Analysis of the Data.

Stage six in the analysis framework involved tying it all together in the production of the final report, or as Braun and Clarke note, "to tell the complicated story of your

data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (2006, p. 50).

Table 19 Stage Six Producing the Report

Analytical Process	Practical Application of Framework to the study	Iterative Process
6. Producing the report	Final analysis and write up of the findings discussion on the findings from the first and second set of interviews. Literature review focusing on each theme / meaning in turn to support and validate findings.	Creating a holistic picture of the phenomenon through the story of the data in both the first and second set on interviews, and the individual case studies. Engaging in extensive literature review to support discussion on findings.

Bazely (2009) notes that themes attain their full significance when they are linked to form a coordinated story of understanding. The triangulation of the different data collection and analysis processes worked together to develop a rich and complex account in response to the research questions. The presentation of this final stage of the analysis brought some conflict in my considerations of how to present this complicated story in a meaningful way and respond effectively to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2021a) advise that this stage should demonstrate how the "overall research explains, locates and contextualises your analysis in relation to existing theory and research" (p. 221). The challenge of presentation of the final write-up brought me back to my reflective journal again to consider how I might do justice to the stories.

- *"The hermeneutic principles don't permit an easy division between the pre and post LINC analysis or my interpretations from my horizon. The reality is, my societal role as an ECT and an academic is part of my Dasein. My subjective experiences are not meant to be split from the interviews and field notes – and the reality is that my interpretations are informed by my knowledge base. If I split the findings and discussion, I feel there will be a blur of repetition. I may have a lot to say about pedagogical practice and instinctively refer to research in my interpretations of the data because I know this research from my horizon of understanding. I may have a different perspective for other themes – but where then do I start acknowledging the literature?"*

Figure 30 Extract from Reflective Journal Considering the Final Write-up of the Analysis

In determining how to present the report, I reminded myself of the research question in considering how engagement with the LINC programme had influenced participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion. This was not intended to assess their progress on completing the programme, but rather to determine what the experience of engagement on the LINC programme meant for them. Did they feel it had influenced their work with children and what were the factors that contributed to this? Thence the decision was made to write up the findings and discussion in a more holistic approach by taking one theme at a time and create a rich analytical story of the phenomenon as presented in Chapters four to six. Lester and O'Reilly (2021) argue that methodological approaches should be appraised by the framework and theory that underpin the research as well as the goals and objectives of the study. Boosted by this shift towards a more "nuanced understanding" of qualitative research (Lester and O'Reilly 2021, p. 3), I began to weave together the stories of participants, led by their voices and guided by literature. Braun and Clarke's (2022) more recent publication reference this shift towards a more qualitative reporting model where results and discussions are

combined in this manner which gives space for interpretation and the active subjective role of the researcher.

I made a conscious, and informed decision to carry out the data analysis manually, using basic pen and paper without any technical support, which at this stage requires some justification as a strategy. There are some very useful Computer Aided Data Analysis (CADA) tools available that can produce quick results and can offer a more efficient analysis (Sarantakos 2005). I engaged in training with MIC on one such software package, NVivo, which enables you to code data and sort it into themes, which has features that can enhance analysis. However, once I started engaging in the data collection process, I felt more ‘connected’ with the phenomenon and felt more compelled to engage with it on a deeper level in a hands – on way. Sarantakos (2005, p. 359) argues that the “essence of data is not accessible to machines, regardless of how intelligent the program might be”, and Thomas (2017) outlines the risk of using CADA with the presumption that something else is going to do the hard work for you. For me, it was more about having that deeper level of connection and understanding of the participants' experiences, through the intensive reading and immersion in the data corpus. Sarantakos (2005) concurs, noting how:

> Qualitative methods offer in the essence a path away from structured thinking and operations, such as quantification and researcher distance from the researched. The use of computers in qualitative research works against this principle and makes it no different from the models it is intended to overcome.
>
> (Sarantakos 2005, p. 259)

While acknowledging that CADA works very effectively for many qualitative researchers, I felt the manual process was more fitting to the phenomenological and inductive approach of this study and better suited to my creative tendencies and kinaesthetic style of learning.

Triangulation

The triangulation of the findings from the Pre-LINC interviews, and the Post-LINC data collection was carried out with the intention of "coming to know the phenomenon for what is in itself, its features and true essence" (Kudarauskiene and Zydziunaite 2018). In order to present the 'lived experience' as the reality of the participants, the triangulation of the data methods had to make sense of the web of meaning that Schutz (1932/1976) presented as the constructs of both the participant, and of the researcher in making sense of those experiences. The task of triangulating the data sources involved making sense of the complexity of the phenomenon of the influence of the LINC programme on practice. In order to do so, I reverted back to Stage four of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework to identify the common themes within the findings from the pre-LINC interviews and the post-LINC data collection methods.

Table 20 Triangulation of Data Collection: Braun and Clarke (2006)

4. Reviewing themes	Refinement of themes by identifying similar themes within the individual analysis	Recoding the Findings into similar over-arching themes
5. Defining and Finalising themes	Identifying the essence of each theme and how these capture the phenomenon through analysis of the interviews, field notes and researcher interpretation.	Creating links to themes prior to, and after engagement with LINC programme
6. Producing the report	Final analysis and write up of the findings in each theme and discussion on the findings supported by extensive reading around each theme.	Creating a holistic picture of the phenomenon observed in the settings, and discussing the findings in relation to the research questions.

Reviewing the themes involved identifying the patterns in the data and creating links across these themes between the pre and post-LINC data to build up a complex and detailed analysis of pedagogical practice in the services. Suddick *et al* (2020) present an overview of the hermeneutic cycle of understanding which they

used in their IHP study which necessitated an ongoing movement between the collective whole and individual analyses, which although intertwined, nevertheless led an ongoing engagement with the hermeneutic circle for each case study. This epitomises Heidegger's view of the hermeneutic cycle, whereby, as explained by Kirilllova (2019, p. 14), "the whole data set is interpreted based on the interpretation of its parts, and the parts interpreted as a basis of the whole".

I was also mindful of recognising that in interpretative phenomenological analysis, aspects of experiences did not have to feature in every case to be deemed of relevance to the stories of the participants (Hardy *et al.*2014; Turley *et al.*2016). Smith *et al.* (2004) speak of Heidegger's notion of 'appearing', and how the phenomenon under investigation becomes visible to us when the researcher has explored and interpreted participants' 'lived experience'. Within the complex hermeneutic circle in IHP, the researcher is advised to find the starting point in this process of understanding, by making a 'leap' into the data, becoming immersed in the participants' stories and their horizon of understanding in order to know *Dasein* (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004). Braun and Clarke (2022) assert that the entirety of the analytical process should illustrate how the data addresses the research question and triangulation is evident in the equilibrium of reference to the narratives of the participants, the researcher as well as the literature. The final report illustrates a fusion of horizons between the ECTs and the researcher which Spence (2017) claims to create "a thought-full" work which captures the culturally and historically situated nature of *Dasein.*

At this stage, in accordance with the phenomenological approach taken, I then immersed myself in the literature review under the final themes. Fry *et al.* (2017) present the debate around undertaking the literature review in a phenomenological investigation, in terms of when it should take place, and how extensive this reading should be prior to the data collection process. The main argument for the delay in engaging with the literature is the risk of the contaminating the participants' stories by having extensive knowledge that might influence how their experiences are presented and perceived by the researcher (Dunne 2011; Jesson *et al.* 2011; Finlay

2011). Having identified predominant issues within the data, there was a real focus on supporting the findings with links to policy, practice and the research that framed these topics. This is discussed in further detail in the introduction to the literature review itself in Chapter 3.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Rohleden and Lyons (2015) assert the need for all research to have a strong conceptual and theoretical framework with clear research aims, methods and analytical strategies that are appropriate within the study. The previous sections have detailed the methodological approach of the research project and the reasoning behind the steps in this process. Crowther and Thomson (2020) argue that hermeneutic phenomenology does not aim to create any specific theory of fixed understandings of a phenomenon but rather to reveal an understanding of the lived experience. As there are no standard measures of rigor in IHP, attention is instead given to reflexivity and a commitment to the methodological principles of the study. This section further outlines the processes undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study as a whole. Research participants and consumers of research must be assured that the findings from the research are trustworthy and the onus is on the researcher to account for the reliability and validity of the processes (Merriam 2002). As Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 230) note: “Each (qualitative researcher) is a one-person research machine: defining the problem, doing the sampling, designing the instruments, collecting the information, reducing the information, analysing it, interpreting it, writing it up”. In order to establish the trustworthiness of this research study, I am cognisant of the analogous positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. However, as argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the trustworthiness of a qualitative study must be addressed in an alternative manner than these traditional concepts and instead proposed alternatives of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In addressing the trustworthiness of this study, I adopted a combination of these different approaches and measures, as outlined in Table 21.

Table 21 Methods of Establishing Trustworthiness

Internal validity and credibility	Triangulation of data sources and collection methods. Peer debriefing Coding and extracts of data Documentary evidence Writing and summarising of participants accounts Attention to researcher effect
External validity and transferability	Rich description of research context, research participants and process of data collection and analysis
Reliability and dependability	Methodological triangulation Audit trail
Objectivity and confirmability	Application of all of the above techniques in a systematic and cohesive manner Opportunity for participant feedback in Post-Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years'(LINC) Programme interviews

Internal Validity and Credibility

Validity in research refers to whether the methods and techniques used in the research study are trustworthy and truthful (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Internal validity seeks to demonstrate that the findings of the research can actually be sustained by the data (Merriam 1998; Cohen *et al*. 2000). Credibility seeks to demonstrate the probability that credible findings and interpretations are produced and to assess the isomorphism between the research findings and the realities they purport to reconstruct (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Hammersley 1990).

I have adopted a range of measures to assist in maintaining the validity and credibility of the study. Sundler *et al. (*2020) present the validity and credibility of their phenomenological study through a series of questions posed regarding the process of data collection and analysis. These questions, regarding the clarity of the process and the relevance and meaning of the findings, supported reflection on the

processes of this study. Indeed, it may be argued that validity in phenomenological analysis requires the clarification of the philosophical underpinnings of the approach throughout the entire research process, explaining the rationale, the data collection and analysis (Frechette *et al.* 2020). Van Manen (1997) considers trustworthiness in phenomenology as incorporated and evidenced throughout the research process, as noted in earlier sections as a point of reference throughout the data analysis and illustrated in Figure 31:

Orientation	Involvement of the researcher in the world of the participants
Strength	Convincing capacity of the text to represent inherent meanings expressed by the participants
Richness	Aesthetic quality of the text that narrates the stories of the participants
Depth	Ability of the researcher to create text that best expresses the phenomenon

Figure 31 Van Manen's (1997) Indicators of Trustworthiness in a Quality Phenomenological Study.

The triangulation of the data from the pre-LINC interviews, the field visits and the post-LINC interview contributed to maintaining the internal validity of the data findings as detailed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) six step framework for TA. Thomas (2017) quite simply asserts that "viewing from several points is better than viewing from one" (p.153) and in this instance, provided that holistic impression of inclusive practice from these data collection processes.

As well as the ongoing reflexivity evidenced in the reflective journal, I engaged in peer debriefing with associates in the field of social studies, as well as postgraduate colleagues working in the ELC sector, throughout the research process to support

my ability to maintain foci reflective of the research questions and the data collected. Robson (1993) supports the idea of exposing one's analysis and conclusions to a peer with a knowledge of both the substantive area of inquiry and methodological issues, as a means of fostering credibility of the study. Peer debriefing provided an opportunity for an experienced peer to question the different meanings implied in the data collection techniques and to clarify the interpretation of the findings as they pertained to substantive, methodological, legal, ethical and other relevant matters as they arose (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These debriefing sessions also served the purpose of being a cathartic experience by providing an opportunity to explore my emotions or potential biases in the research process that might potentially impact the credibility of the study (ibid 1985).

The use of codes and data extracts from the transcripts and the notes from the field visits further demonstrated that the enquiry was carried out in "a way which ensures that the subject of enquiry was accurately identified and described" (Robson 1983, p. 87). Such detail ensured clarity on the kinds of claims made in the findings which is key to the credibility of the research according to Hammersley (1992). The descriptive validity of the qualitative methods to explore the notion of understanding, is evidenced in the factual accuracy of the accounts in the transcripts and notes (Maxwell 1992).

Reliability and Dependability

Reliability refers to the extent to which a research instrument will give the same result on different occasions (Thomas 2017). Merriam (1998) cautions that while reliability examines how research findings can be replicated, within the social sciences this can be problematic as human behaviour is never static. Guba (1981) argues in favour of focusing on credibility and leaving dependability to follow on from that, which is supported by Robson (1983) who explains triangulation as a valid means of assessing dependability as well as that of credibility, which I have detailed earlier. Flick (1998) advocates for peer review and debriefing as a means

of reliability, while Drew *et al.* (1996) note the importance of using mechanical recording devices to support the dependability of the findings. As recommended by Sarantakos (2005), this study has endeavoured, throughout the entire research process, to maintain reliability and dependability in a “professional, accurate and systematic manner” (p. 87). An audit trail of the data collection and findings supports the reliability and dependability of the study as advocated by Drew *et al.* (1996) and examples of the process are presented in the earlier section of TA.

Objectivity and Confirmability

Objectivity requires that all personal values and the views of the researcher to be kept out of the research process to ensure that the research process and design is free of bias and prejudice (Sarantakos 2005). Confirmability is concerned with the outcomes of the research and emphasises that interpretations should be grounded in the data and formulated in a way that is consistent with the data. Owing to the “subjectivity of respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives” that naturally contribute a sense of bias, the credibility of the study has been continually asserted in relation to the relevance of these ‘lived experiences’ in the broader sense. (Cohen *et al*. 2007, p.133).

Qualitative research is often criticised in relation to the efficacy of the study, (Benini 2000) as it is unable to “study relationships between variables within the degree of accuracy that is required to establish social trends or to inform social policy” (Sarantakos 2005 p. 45)

Drawing upon Sarantakos (2005), Table 22 outlines the strategies utilised to minimise bias in the present study.

Table 22 Strategies to Minimise Biases in the Research

Areas of Potential Bias	Possible Limitations / risks	Strategies to minimise bias
The research topic	Choosing topic that produces favourable data and ignoring others	• Study focuses on the learning from the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme. Sampling purposely excluded candidates from my own student cohort. • Voluntary participation of the sample group, with representation from both community and private settings, participants with varying level of qualifications and experience, and with different roles within the ECCE setting. • Acknowledgement that voluntary participation in the project might involve early childhood teachers who are more confident in their role, and may not be representative of the LINC student body. • Interviews recorded and transcribed and continually checked for reliability.
Review of literature	Focusing on supportive sources and ignoring others.	• Initial contextual review of relevant policy and literature to form the basis for understanding the reality of the early learning and care sector in this point in time for the participants in the research study. • The incorporation of literature was delayed until after the data collection and analysis with the rationale that the emphasis should focus on the topics highlighted by participants. The literature then focused on the themes that had emerged from the findings, with detailed discussion and interpretation with the relevant sources.
Research purpose	Aiming to prove personal convictions	• Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological technique of reflexivity to reflect my own experiences and knowledge and to interpret the participants' 'lived experiences'.
Research design	Choosing sampling / methods of data collection that favour production of certain data	• Purposive sampling only required enrolment on the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years' (LINC) programme as a criteria for participation, excluding my student cohort. • Triangulation of findings from first and second interviews to develop a credible discussion of the findings.

		• Writing and re-writing 'stories' and conversations to promote meaning and understanding • Thematic analysis following the guidance of a framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
Interpretation	Interpretation guided by fusion of horizons in line with philosophies underpinning the approach.	• Interpretative hermeneutic approach taken is grounded in philosophical underpinnings and justified for methodology selected for the study. • Clear outline of the analysis that can be verified through the stages of the process. • Interpretivist paradigm of the project. • Peer de-briefing with colleagues in the social sciences.

Limitations of the Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenological studies have been criticised for a lack of clarity on the philosophical underpinnings of the approach which can result in a lack of understanding of the rationale behind the methodology (Norlyk and Harder 2010; Sundler *et al.* 2019). Although Heidegger's work on hermeneutic phenomenology has been around for many decades, it was largely ignored within academic circles because of his affiliation with the Nazi party in Germany during World War 2. He did not develop a methodological framework for ontological study but instead emphasised the need for reflexivity to gain understanding of lived experiences. Interpreting his understanding of concepts of *Dasein*, the hermeneutic cycle and how these relate to both the participant and the researcher has created some conflict in the practicalities of data collection and analysis. Many researchers note the lack of guidance in interpretative phenomenology to guide the research process (Smith *et al.* 2004; McManus-Holroyd 2007; Crowther and Thomson 2020). Although interpretative phenomenology has gained popularity within the nursing and social sciences, it has, as noted by Peters (2013), been neglected in the field of philosophy of education which has resulted in a limited number of IHP research papers in education to guide the novice researcher. The fact that there is a reliance, and indeed a centrality, of the researchers' interpretation of the participants' interpretations of their experiences, represents a real shift in the traditional

approach to qualitative and descriptive phenomenological studies, while simultaneously creating a risk of bias if the researcher does not engage fully with reflexivity throughout the research process. Musgrave (2019) cautions the researcher of the risk of 'navel-gazing' in becoming overly focused on one aspect of their positionality and neglecting to consider the broader perspective (p. 15). She also acknowledges the limitations of interpretative analysis through reflexivity that may move the research to a more emotional interpretation rather than a calculated and scientific process. However, Sultana (2007) argues that reflexivity in research is not self-indulgent but rather that it supports the knowledge production in a given research area. Reflexivity and awareness of the limitations of the approach and the findings are incorporated throughout this thesis as an element of the philosophical principles underpinning IHP.

Recognising the limitations of an approach, with key features of a non-linear and cyclical process, is most evident in the challenge of presenting data in a linear manner for a thesis. The limitations of this study will be further considered in the closing chapter, in line with the IHP approach in reflecting on the research process.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the rationale for the methodology employed in this study on perceptions and practices of inclusion as they are understood by ECTs. It illustrates the complexity of the data collection and analysis processes, and in turn, details the rigour of the investigation, and the process involved. The research questions embedded in this phenomenological study created these 'webs of meaning' as they emerged from the conversations and field visits (Schutz (1932/1976). The next step of this study is to present the literature review which informs the findings and support the interpretation of participants' 'lived experiences'.

Chapter Three

Literature Review

Introduction

As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, phenomenological study raises the question about how one should undertake a literature review, when it should take place, and how the researcher might possibly "contaminate" the interpretation of participants' lived experience (Finlay 2011; Fry *et al*. 2017). In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the Literature Review occurred following data collection and analysis. Delaying the Literature Review assumes that extensive reading of literature on the phenomenon in question, prior to data collection, might lead the researcher to apply preconceived ideas or judgements to the research questions (Groenewald 2004; Ryan *et al.* 2007). Although Morse (2012) criticises the phenomenological approach in this regard, questioning whether researchers are limiting the rigour of inquiries if previous studies and research are avoided, she simultaneously acknowledges that setting the context of the study prior to data collection supports the validity and trustworthiness of the research. Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological (IHP) studies, as outlined in the previous chapters, are flexible in design insofar as there is not, as Smith (2004) asserts, "a pre-existing format" but rather an emphasis on the individual experience and consideration then of how best to design a framework to investigate the phenomenon (p.45). Pre-existing frameworks may not be always appropriate for qualitative studies and this point is argued by Brocki and Wearden (2014) who assert this is not about the

researcher rationalising a need for flexibility or to avoid analysis with preconceived ideas. In the present study, I chose a later engagement with the literature based on the rationale that the findings from the data would direct in-depth research into those topics prioritised by the participants. It is reasonable to assume, given the interpretative nature of the approach, that as researcher, I have an existing preunderstanding of the general contemporary policy and literature surrounding the area under investigation. Smith and Shinebourne (2012) outline the stages of analysis in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which includes engagement with existing knowledge as well as research on the findings to take place in the final stage of data analysis. While this approach differs slightly from IHP, there is a shared understanding in this regard that there is not a pre-existing theoretical framework to guide the research process. Instead, the emphasis is on participants' responses and the researcher' interpretation of the experiences, which congruent with Braun and Clarke's framework (2006 / 2021a), is then informed by relevant literature to explain and understand the phenomenon.

Chapter One considers the context of this research and outlines the policy and legislation governing practice and provision of early learning and care (ELC) services in Ireland. A key part of the methodological approach of the research is to acknowledge the context of the phenomenon under investigation, which Aspers (2009) explains is central to the process of 'understanding' in the philosophical sense. Heidegger (1927 / 1962) clarifies 'understanding' as something that is intimately connected to the concept of meaning, and this understanding is created through a process of interpretation. As explained, the initial contextual review of policy and practice in Chapter One is part of the process of interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon. It also "ensures that the phenomenological researcher is fully aware of the shared meaning and understanding of the words used within his or her area of research" (Fry *et al.* 2017, p. 53). Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) argument, the approach adopted in this study is not about "filling the gap" but rather that it informs and contextualises the experiences of participants in different spaces, places and periods in time.

Having engaged with what Walsh (2012, p.2) describes as the "first relational context" through conversations with the research participants, this phenomenological study now continues in the flow of the hermeneutic circle seeking to relate this evidence to relevant literature to provide a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. The Literature Review has focused on those themes associated with the phenomena that were developed from the explication of the data. However, while the research process provides a rationale for the delayed review of the literature, I was conflicted in considering how to present the literature to the reader which might contradict the methodology of the research. There is the additional challenge of acknowledging the vastness of the literature pertaining to the themes that were developed from the analysis. In itself, the themes illustrate the complexity of inclusion as a concept in the early years, and emphasises how quality inclusive practice encompasses many elements pertaining to children's participation in the ELC setting. In order to appreciate the relational context of the Literature Review within this 'non-linear' process, the research strategy is illustrated here in Figure 32 to depict the process of data collection and analysis and the positioning of the literature in the research design.

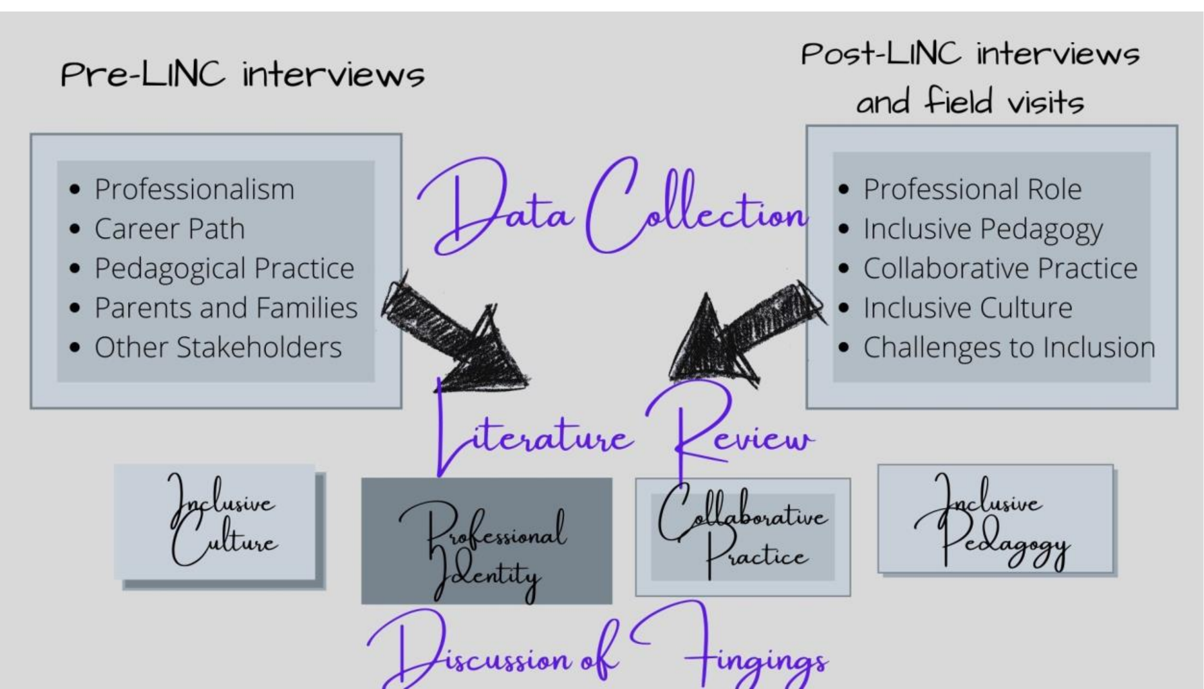

Figure 32 Overview of the Research Strategy

The Literature Review is presented through the themes developed from the analysis of the pre-LINC and the post-LINC data. It also seeks to illustrate the interconnectivity and overlap of concepts and ideas that contribute to an understanding of the “quiddity” or “whatness” of this phenomenon. Fry *et al.* (2017, p.51) define this “whatness” or “quiddity” of a phenomenon as the inherent essence of something, and from this understanding then, as researcher, one can “move beyond a coherent, yet simple account to one that is complex and nuanced” through the exploration of literature (Walsh 2012, p.6).

This chapter begins by outlining the methodology adopted in reviewing the literature. The themes of Inclusive Culture; Professional Identity of the ECT; Collaborative Practice and finally of Inclusive Pedagogy are then presented through an exploration of literature pertaining to them.

Literature Review Methodology

As fore-mentioned, the themes developed from the pre-LINC and post- LINC data analysis provide the basis for the structure of the Literature Review, recognising the function of each theme in context of the phenomenon, both prior to engagement with, and on completion of the LINC programme. The following graphics outline the themes from the explication of the data and how they were grouped together for the basis of the Literature Review. Figure 33 illustrates the themes from the initial data analysis of the first stage of interviews prior to participants’ engagement with the LINC programme. These are categorised into five themes: Career Path; Pedagogical Practice; Parents and Families; Professionalism and Relevant Stakeholders.

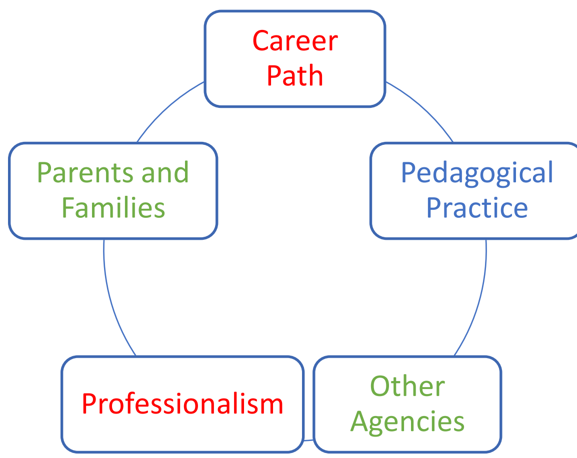

Figure 33 Themes from the Pre-Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years' Programme Data Analysis.

More detailed analysis following the post-LINC interviews and field visits to ELC settings, led to the themes illustrated in Figure 34. The themes identified in the findings from the post-LINC stage of the research, and incorporating the findings from the pre-LINC interviews, were Collaborative Practice; Inclusive Culture; Challenges to Inclusion; Inclusive Pedagogy and Professional Role.

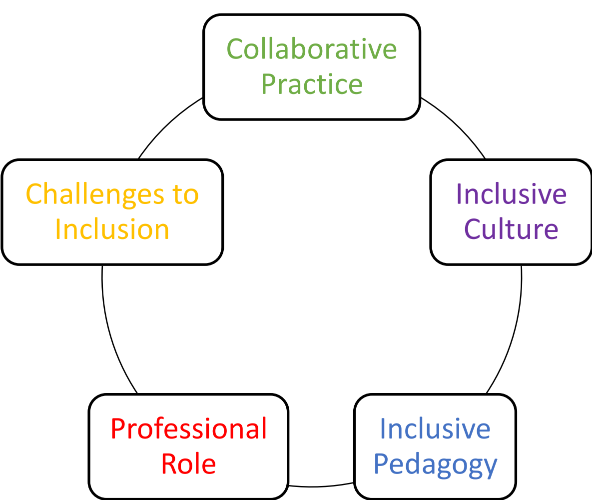

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Figure 34 Themes from the Post-Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years' Programme Data Analysis.

The themes from the initial analysis were incorporated into the methodology of the Literature Review, even though some of these earlier themes were merged as codes to inform the broader themes of the final analysis of the data set. However, it was important that these initial themes were investigated further in their own right to situate them within the findings on the basis of knowledge and research. The similarity of themes from both pre-LINC and post-LINC analysis informed the Literature Review methodology, and these were grouped together to provide a focus for this chapter. Table 23 summarises the themes from the data analysis process and how they were clustered in that context.

Table 23 Initial Headings Linking the Themes from the Pre- and Post-engagement with the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme

Literature Review Heading	Link to Pre-LINC Themes	Link to Post-LINC Themes
Professional Identity	Professionalism Career Path	Professional Role
Inclusive Pedagogy	Pedagogical Practice	Inclusive Pedagogy
Collaborative Practice in the Early Learning and Care setting	Other Stakeholders Parents and Families	Collaborative Practice
Inclusive Culture		Inclusive Culture
		Challenges to Inclusion

The Literature Review provides the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the discussion of the findings from the research study. There was a focus on identifying peer-reviewed publications published in English from 2010 to 2021 with reference to themes from the data analysis of the pre- and post-LINC data findings. The rationale for these years of investigation was to ensure contemporary research informed the phenomenon. The introduction of the ECCE programme (2010) and the *Aistear* curriculum framework (NCCA 2009) into the ELC sector signified a considerable shift in the qualification requirements and expectations of the ECT in practice. A contextual review of the literature prior to engagement with the research participants during the data collection process provided a broad basis of understanding the sectoral backdrop of the study in this regard. The post-analysis

Literature Review required contemporary sources to further inform these findings and to develop an understanding of the experiences of participants working in the ECCE setting. Due to the rapid developments in the ELC sector in Ireland and internationally over the past ten years, I determined that contemporary research studies were more relevant and reflective of current practice in ELC settings, while simultaneously maintaining the child development and pedagogical theory necessary to this investigation.

While the broad themes of Inclusive Culture; Collaborative Practice; Inclusive Pedagogy and Professional Identity underscored the fundamentals of the research investigation, the Literature Review also focused on searches for literature as relevant to the sub-themes. Table 24 lists the key words used when conducting literature searches. Cognisance was taken of the variety of titles used in relation to an early childhood teacher (ECT), the terms for early learning and care (ELC) settings, as well as terminology related to experiences of children with additional needs as linked to the findings from the data analysis.

Table 24 Keywords Used to Search During the Literature Review Process

Early childhood teachers	Preschool teacher
Kindergarten teacher	Pedagogue
Childcare workers	Preschool assistant
Montessori teacher	Professional development
Preschool children	Children with additional needs
Children with special needs	Children with disabilities
Support services	Speech therapists
Occupational therapists	Access and inclusion model
Transitions to primary school	Collaborative practice
Parents and families	Professional identity
Quality	Inclusion

These key words were used as the basis of the computer-based searches using the following databases: Science Direct (Elsevier 2019); ERIC International (Australian Education Index (AEI); British Education Index (BEI) and Pro Quest to identify original studies in the ELC sector in both international and Irish contexts. In addition, social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook were used to search for recent studies and reports pertaining to the research themes. During the literature search, sources prior to 2010 emerged and were reviewed if considered significant and relevant to the themes. This was an ongoing exploration of what Fry *et al.* (2017) describe as the "boundaries of the phenomenon within the literature" (p.54).

Google, Google Scholar and national or government websites proved invaluable when searching for policy papers and legislation. Table 25 lists some of the key policy documents included, which were considered central to the study owing to their influence on policy governing the ELC sector nationally and internationally. While some of these policy papers are detailed in the initial contextual review of the literature in Chapter One, this more comprehensive in-depth Literature Review, which focuses upon themes from the explication of the data, examines these documents in a more detailed manner to investigate their relevance to the reported experiences of the research participants.

Table 25 Key Policy Papers Consulted for the Literature Review.

Siolta: The national quality framework for early childhood care & education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) 2006).
An evaluation of education provision for children with autistic spectrum disorder in the Republic of Ireland (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2015)
*Statutory framework for the early years' foundation stage: Setting the standard for learning, development and care for children birth to five (*Department for Children (DfE) 2017)
*Diversity, equality and inclusion charter and guidelines for early childhood care and education (*Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2016).
A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland (Department of Education & Skills 2010)
*Professional award criteria and guidelines for initial professional education (level 7 and level 8) degree programmes in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland (*Early Years Education Policy Working Group 2017).

Inclusive early childhood education: new insights and tools – Final summary report. (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2017a)
Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2019 Edition. Eurydice Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019)
*First Five: A whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-2028 (*Government of Ireland 2018).
*Universal design guidelines for early learning and care settings (*Grey *et al* 2019)
Supporting access to the early childhood care and education *(ECCE) programme for children with a disability* (Inter-Departmental Group 2015).
*Evaluation framework to underpin the evaluation of education provision for students with ASD (*Middleton Centre for Autism and National Council for Special Education 2013).
*Aistear Siolta practice guide (*National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2015).
*Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework (*National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009).
Nurturing skills: The workforce plan for early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC), 2022-2028 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021).
Partnership for the public good: A new funding model for early learning and care and school-aged childcare (Government of Ireland 2021).

Literature Searching

Prior to engagement with the literature, key words, as detailed in Table 21, were identified to locate the documents and articles as relevant to the themes from the data analysis. As noted previously, the terminology associated with the role of the ECT, the child with additional needs and the ELC sector differ from one country to another, and, therefore, were used interchangeably during the search and review process. Walsh (2012) sees this investigation as involving “the process of projecting oneself into a phenomenon in order to understand it” (p.2) and making informed connections between themes and how one enhances the ‘meaning’ of the other. Aspers and Corte (2019) support this argument, describing how true understanding in qualitative research means that we can recognise how these parts of the study, themes and sub-themes, are related to each other and provide deeper meaning to such concepts from the data analysis. For example, in some publications, the

professional title of the adult working with children in the ELC setting provided insights into perceptions of that role as a teacher or as a childcare worker (Murray 2013; Moloney 2015; Urban *et al*. 2017). In other research, the practical nature of full-day care provision to accommodate working parents is presented at times as something different to the educational focus of pre-school settings. This in turn may create a divide between the 'education' and the 'care' element of ECCE provision and presents a different view of how pedagogical practice is framed to respond to the needs of children and families in ELC settings (GoI 2018; Moloney and McCarthy 2018). The use of new terms and phrases were added throughout the literature search as the readings revealed new findings and guided me to links to international research and more contemporary literature.

Synthesis of the Literature

The data extracted from the literature was initially organised into broad categories in accordance with the themes as illustrated in Table 23, and notes were taken manually to document the essence of each particular piece of literature. This involved a process of an initial reading for understanding and progressing to subsequent note-taking to document the key ideas and concepts of the literature. Extensive reading, focused on the main themes, provided a broad framework of knowledge on each topic, which were then categorised into sub-themes (Thomas 2017). Post-its and notes were used to identify where there was an overlap of themes to support detailed and informed review of the literature (Hart 2005). This involved a similar process to the clustering of units of meaning from the data analysis, however engagement with the literature involved eliciting the "essence of meaning within the holistic context" (Groenewald 2004, p. 50) to provide a depth of understanding of the themes. Colour-coding the handwritten notes on each piece of literature provided the visual cues to identify similar ideas and concepts from different researchers, as well as highlighting where the themes overlapped and potential connections could be made between different studies and policies (Braun and Clarke 2006). The synthesis of the literature generated the themes and subthemes detailed in Table 26 below.

Table 26 Themes and Sub-themes in the Literature Review

Theme	Sub-themes
• Inclusive Culture	• Reflective Practice and the Image of the Child • The Learning Environment
• Professional Identity of the Early Childhood Teacher	• Role of the Early Childhood Teacher • Perceptions of the Role of the Early Childhood Teacher • Professional Education in the Early Learning and Care Sector • Leadership within the Early Learning and Care sector
• Collaborative Practice	• Relationship between Parents and Early Childhood Teachers • Early Learning and Care settings as a Family Support System • Parental Participation and the Holistic Development of the Child • Collaborative Practice between Early Learning and Care Settings and Primary School • Working Collaboratively with Better Start (AIM 2017) and Early Intervention Teams (Tusla 2018)
• Inclusive Pedagogy	• Relational Pedagogy • Play-based and Emergent Curriculum • Documentation in the Curriculum

The methodology informing the Literature Review encompasses the phenomenological approach throughout this chapter as a means of creating understanding of the experiences of participants in this research study. I focused my readings on topics and themes that participants emphasised in their conversations with the goal of adding meaning to these experiences. The fact that thematic analysis (TA) had been carried out prior to the Literature Review, resulted

in an engaging and meaningful link with the literature as the focus remained on those themes developed from interpretation of the data. Aspers (2009) advocates for this phenomenological approach which ensures that the participants' experiences are central to the explanation of the topic under investigation. He asserts that the "meaning structure" must be directly linked to the practices of the participants and add to the understanding of these experiences (p. 10). The Literature Review necessitated a continual referral back to the thematic analysis of the data to ensure the focus was kept on those topics prioritised by the participants, the reality of which Halling (2012) links to two interrelated dimensions of the phenomenological approach:

1. To recognise and prioritise what the participants are telling us in their personal accounts and lived experiences.
2. To move past one's own "egocentric and previously unrecognised perspective" in order to fully understand and inform the phenomenon in question (p.3).

The reflective journal discussed in Chapter One and Two was an essential research tool throughout the literature review process in providing a space where I could engage in reflexivity and reflect on my assumptions and preunderstandings to attribute meaning to the participants' accounts. The extract illustrated in Figure 35 demonstrates reflexivity in consideration of the literature review to explain and understand participants' experiences:

Reading Lundy's work – need to consider how this fits in with the contextual reality in the sector and also in the Literature Review.

Her views on children's rights and participation needs to be linked back in the findings and the discussion from a rights-based perspective – while simultaneously acknowledging that this is about the teacher experience. This is such important research and recommendations – but it is not something that is widely disseminated in the sector. Who is sharing this literature with those working in practice? When it is not shared with the sector, can I make judgements then on their pedagogical understandings?

Figure 35 Extract from Reflective Journal While Reading Lundy's Work (2007; 2019)

The Literature Review is now presented through the themes of Inclusive Culture, Professional Identity of the ECT, Collaborative Practice and Inclusive Pedagogy in accordance with the themes that were developed from the participants' responses. The research questions are to the fore in carrying out the review of the literature and are reiterated here in Figure 36 to maintain focus on responding to these questions.

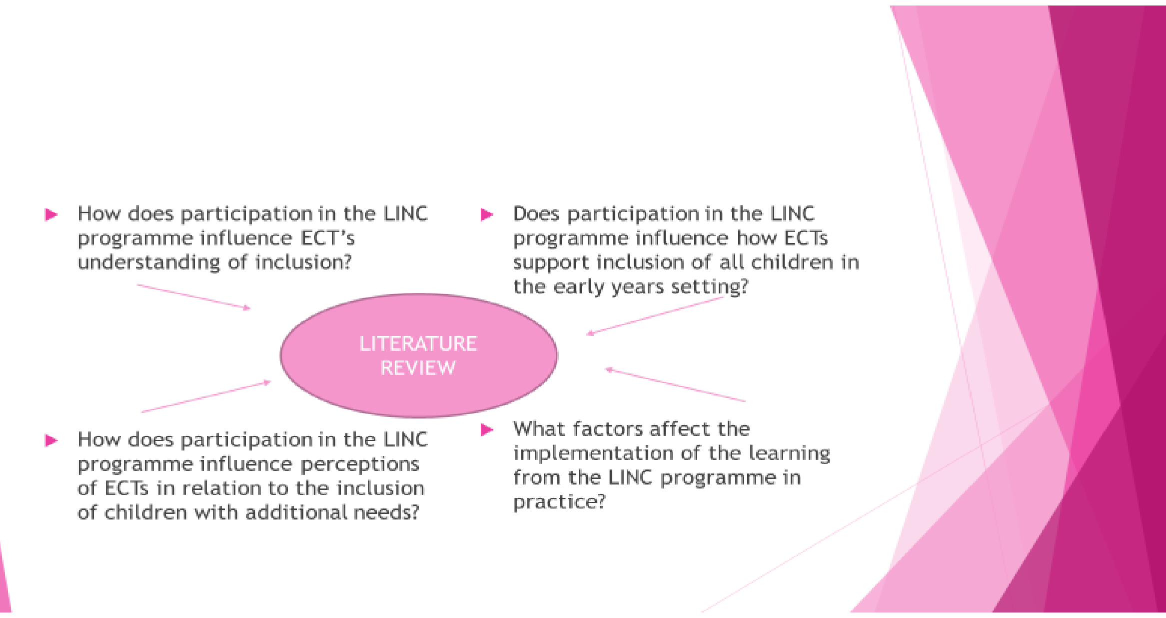

Figure 36 Research Questions Informing the Literature Review

Inclusive Culture

An inclusive culture is one of the key principles underpinning the LINC programme. As such, it is specified that upon graduation from the programme, the graduate, known as the Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) will take a leadership role in defining and creating an inclusive culture within the ELC setting. Hong (2009) defines culture as "networks of knowledge consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world" (p.4). In consideration of the educational setting, Keith (2011) presents a concept of culture as one based on shared beliefs and ideas that have been learned from others and continue to influence the behaviour of others within that group. As such, Juszczyk and Kim (2017) suggest that the culture of an educational institution has an impact on one's perception of the self and how one communicates with colleagues and children in that setting, which is particularly relevant in consideration of the responsibilities of the INCO in cascading learning from the LINC programme to the staff team. In attempting to understand the quiddity of inclusion as part of shared beliefs and ideas that influence behaviours of the ELC team, there is a recognition of the complexity of the concept which embodies the values, policies, and practices that support children's right to engage in meaningful learning and play experiences with key features of access, participation, and available supports (Lundy 2007; European Union 2021). According to Florian (2008) an understanding of inclusion is generally accepted as part of a human rights agenda that demands access to, and equity in, education and perceptions of this concept is part of the shared culture of a setting. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) present inclusion and equity in education as the guiding principles that should influence all aspects of policy and practice (1994; 2017; 2021). Creating an educational culture based on these principles requires "a shared set of assumptions and beliefs" within the education system from policy level to the teaching staff working directly with the children (UNESCO 2017, p. 23). However, the complexity of the early years workforce, as discussed in Chapter One, creates challenge for the development of this culture in a sector with varied experience and knowledge of inclusive practice.

Therefore, although UNESCO (2017) signifies the key responsibility of the INCO in leading inclusion, it may appear idealistic in relation to the contextual reality of their working environment. The Inclusive Education Framework (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2011) promotes the meaningful participation of the child rather than "simple placement or accommodation" in the educational setting (NCSE 2011, p. 14), and the development of LINC was envisaged to address such issues within the Irish sector.

While Nutbrown and Clough (2009) see inclusion as "a social and political struggle where individual identity and difference has prominence" (p. 193), they also acknowledge the broad scope of the term 'inclusion' which can mean different things for different people, depending on a number of factors including age, gender, additional needs or race as well as one's experiences and expectations (Moloney and McCarthy 2010; 2018). This is particularly relevant in consideration of the philosophical underpinnings of this study that recognises that *Dasein,* people's lived experiences, are directly influenced by their preunderstandings of inclusion and by experiences in their societal role (Heidegger 1927; Gadamer 2004). The perceived ideal of an inclusive culture is one where every child is welcomed and valued, and there are equal opportunities for all children and their families to participate and belong in the ELC setting (DCYA 2016a; LINC Consortium 2016-2020; European Agency 2021). It is not simply about an organisational change within that setting but involves a change in the philosophical perspective of those working within the educational institution (Fulcher 1989; Skehill 2021a). In itself, the responsibility of the INCO in leading this attitudinal shift may be considered as a challenging task in light of existing responsibilities within the preschool setting. Smith and Smith (2000) draw attention to the reality of teacher experiences working in practice who theoretically support inclusion, but rather on a "case by case basis" depending on the intensity of the child's needs (p.6). Similarly, Tiernan and colleagues (2020) present the foundation of inclusive education as the recognition of children's right to education alongside their peers, while simultaneously accepting the challenges in achieving these goals. This may be

considered in light of one's horizon of significance which informs one's perception and knowledge of how to respond to different situations based on existing assumptions of an appropriate reaction (Gadamer 2004). Alexander *et al.* (2016) study on ECTs' experiences in both Israel and America, illustrates how different factors, such as behaviour disturbances, availability of support services and the type of disability impact views on inclusion. Similarly, Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) review of teacher experiences of inclusion illustrates that the "nature and severity of children's needs" has a direct impact on perceptions, illustrating what Clough (1999) called "hierarchies of tolerance" (p. 55). More contemporary research by Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2021) address these challenges in practice in supporting the rights of all the children to participate in the education setting when managing interactions and behaviours in schools.

Adam Harris, Founder and CEO of AsIAm[11] asserts that there is a distinct difference between an awareness of and an understanding of, what inclusion means, and states that "Awareness is about knowing something exists; understanding is about stepping into a person's shoes and validating their perspective" (Ring *et al* 2018, p. xiv). The principles of hermeneutic phenomenology underpinning this study are aptly designed to ascertain the perspective of those who are tasked with responsibility of leading inclusion and to consider how their horizon of significance influences their understanding of children's experiences in practice. Researchers including Underwood (2013) and Moloney and McCarthy (2010; 2018) argue that inclusive early education is not just about placement in a programme, but about the child's active participation in social interactions as well as development of their abilities and skills. The ultimate goal to ensure equity and inclusion in education is to implement changes where barriers to access and participation are identified in settings so that all learners are valued and engaged (UNESCO 2017; Tiernan *et al.* 2020; Gillett–Swan and Lundy 2021; Ring 2021).

Within the Irish context the *Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DEI)* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016) provides guidance on

[11] AsIAm is Ireland's national charity and advocacy organisation for the autism community.

how the ELC environment is inclusive and accessible for all, as well as outlining the role of the ECT in enabling children to participate in a meaningful way in the preschool programme. In this regard, inclusion is considered to be a process, one that is built on evaluation and development of quality pedagogical practice through teacher self-reflection (Barton 1992; Daly *et al*. 2016; Tynan 2018). This ethos is central to the LINC programme (Ring *et al*. 2018) with the provision of contemporary module content based on best practice guidance and emphasis on self-reflection. While the concept of an inclusive culture permeates all elements of this study, this theme is sub-divided to provide an overview of literature relating to reflective practice and subsequently on the learning environment as elements of that inclusive culture as outlined in the Competency framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020). These sub-themes which have been developed as part of the process of clustering units of meanings from the data analysis, simultaneously encapsulate the statements in the framework regarding how children are valued and supported in the ELC setting. The inclusive culture of the setting is dependent on the perception of the competent child by those who work in the preschool environment, and the respect that is given to the rights and views of children in that setting (Lundy 2007; Moloney and McCarthy 2018; UNESCO 2017).

Reflective Practice and the Image of the Child

The *Inclusive Education Framework* (NCSE 2011) encourages teacher reflection and discussion on the development of inclusive practice, which O' Connor *et al.* (2012, p.12) assert is central to any understanding of children's experiences in order to avoid "tendencies towards tokenistic participation". The art of reflective practice and one's image of the child are presented here as the basis of pedagogical practice of the ECT which Flannery-Quinn and Parker (2016) see as a continuous process of adaptation and development. They discuss the importance of providing opportunity for the ECT to express and question values that underpin their work with children. Schon (1983) pioneers the role of the reflective practitioner by identifying ways that professionals could become more aware of their knowledge and learn from practical experiences and incidents in their professional roles. His development of

the concepts of 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflection-in-action' provides guidance to professionals on how to consciously recognise, describe, analyse and evaluate practice with the aim of gaining insights into how to develop and improve. While acknowledging the value in Schon's work, van Manen (1990) places more emphasis on the need to step out of a situation and to reflect retrospectively on incidents. While Kyles and Olafson (2008) are convinced of the importance of having novice professionals reflect on their practice in order to improve and develop, it is also argued that teachers must firstly acknowledge their own biases and prejudices before they can address issues of diversity and inclusion in their classrooms (Blanchard *et al.* 2018; Skehill 2021a).

The concept of reflection on practice is fundamental to the *Siolta standards* (CECDE 2006), beginning with *Standard 1* on the *Rights of the Child* as the basis for quality provision with democracy and participation central to the guiding principles. French (2007) identifies the importance of capturing the voice of the child through this reflective process in order to support inclusive practice. Similarly, Kernan (2007) argues that when addressing equity issues within the ELC setting, "there is general agreement that a key starting point is the importance of early years' practitioners reflecting on their own personal values, as well as the professional values of the organisation or setting where they work" (p. 21). Lundy's *Model of Participation* (2007) provides a guide for the practical conceptualisation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1992) through the chronological implementation of the elements of space, voice, audience and influence, with reflective prompts to support those working with children in educational settings. Lundy's voice model checklist was adapted as the foundation for policy development supporting children's rights (DCYA 2015b), placing the child at the centre of all decision-making that affects them, recognising that it is our responsibility as duty-bearers in our respective societal roles to support this. In consideration of this responsibility, the concept of reflexivity in practice might be guided by Brookfield's (2017) lenses in acknowledging the different roles of the ECT that inform her horizon of significance. Musgrave (2019) too, indicates that her

societal roles of teacher, mother, nurse and researcher create different lenses which inform her perception of situations and incidents in practice. This in turn links in with the hermeneutic interpretation of participants in understanding their perceptions of inclusion for all children in the ELC setting from their personal perspective.

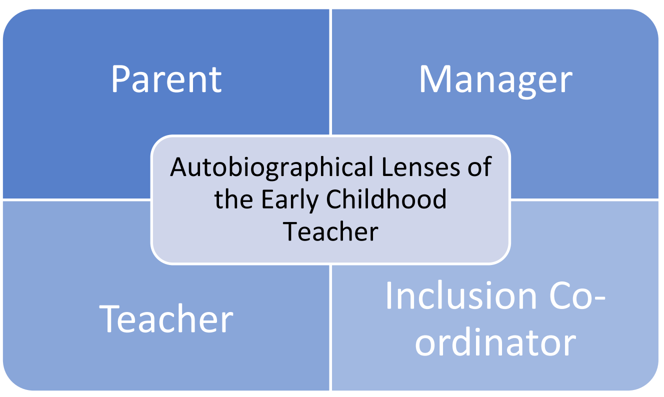

Figure 37 Exemplar of Autobiographical Lens of the Early Childhood Teacher (Adapted from Brookfield's (1995) Lenses of a Critical Reflector).

The *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) was developed to support the ECT to engage in reflective practice on one's role working with children, through online practice videos, podcasts and self-evaluation tools on the curriculum foundations of play; partnership with parents; professional practice; transitions and environments, all of which are considered as components of an inclusive ELC setting (DCYA 2016a). The contextual reality of participants is directly influenced by the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA 2015) which informs the work of the Better Start Early Years' Specialists (EYS) who mentor ECTs in practice, as well as providing guidance for the Early Years' Education Focused Inspections (EYEI) (DES 2015a). At the foundation of this quest for quality provision within the Practice Guide (NCCA 2015) is the consideration of one's image of the child. However, Casey *et al.* (2017) argue that "mandating reflective processes" through the use of these self-evaluation tools might lead to "reproduction, standardisation and forced universalities, rather than the critical and innovative pedagogy they intend" (p 124). Rix (2011) emphasises the value of supporting reflective practice in the inclusive ELC setting by encouraging the ECT to reflect on how one might position oneself in the dominant

culture of the “normalising society” (p. 79), and how one’s identity, and subsequently the identity of others, is created in the context of relationships and structures in society. He sees reflective practice as “developing a deeper understanding of your own views and ways of working and behaving, the context in which you are operating, and the perspective of others” (ibid, p. 81). Conversely, Kim and Kim (2017) question the effectiveness of such reflection when teachers are held accountable through various assessments and inspections and question whether the reflective process is “simply reduced to the technical questions about what works” (p. 33).

A culture of inclusion in education can only become a reality when there are shared assumptions and beliefs amongst all stakeholders (UNESCO 2017; Moloney and McCarthy 2018; European Agency 2021; Skehill 2021a). At the heart of quality and inclusive practice, is the attitude of the adult working with the children and how they understand and implement the principles of the quality and curriculum frameworks in their settings. Both the *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and the *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) frameworks are underpinned by the UNCRC (1989) which are surmised under four general principles. These principles state that the rights guaranteed by the convention must be available, without discrimination, to all children and ensure the best interests of the child is central to all actions concerning them. The child has the right to life, survival and development and their views must be taken into consideration in all matters affecting him or her (UNCRC 1992). Within the Irish political and legislative context, the fundamental rights of the child are emerging to the fore (Ring *et al.* 2021; Lundy 2019), however the interpretation and implementation of these rights in practice is dependent on how adults support, facilitate and empower children in educational settings.

Reflecting on how, as an ECT, one perceives children’s rights and experiences, can have an impact on how one views the child and how they are enabled to participate in the ELC setting (Paige-Smith and Craft 2007; Moloney and McCarthy 2018). Sorin (2005) discusses constructs of the image of the child and how perceptions have an

impact on interactions and engagements with children. She considers ten different depictions of the child illustrated in Figure 38:

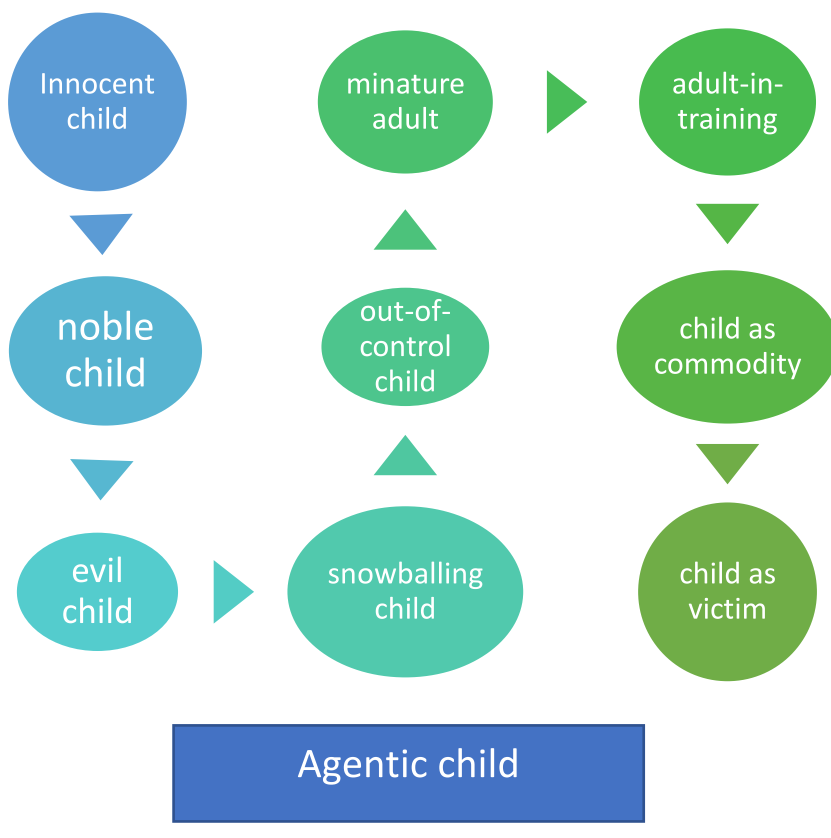

Figure 38 Sorin's (2005) Constructs of the Image of the Child

In keeping with IHP principles, how the adult perceives the child from their horizon of significance has direct impact on their creation of the construct itself. Sorin encourages the ECT to reflect on how they view the child and to consider the impact of "power relationships" between children and adults on children's experiences (2005). O' Leary and Moloney (2020) emphasise the importance of the adults' awareness of their own "values, beliefs and narratives" that guide interactions with children in order to avoid "imposing an identity on our children that is based entirely on the perspectives of others" (p. 2). *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) embraces Sorin's concept of the "agentic child" (2005, p.19) which challenges the notion of the innocent and powerless child, instead seeing children as partners in the educational environment. If the ECT can truly appreciate the confident and competent child (NCCA 2009), seeing what the child 'can do' in a strengths-based

approach, this sets the foundation for all other elements of practice in the ELC environment (NCCA 2015; DCYA 2016; Ring *et al.* 2018). Concurring with this perspective, Moloney (2018) identifies meaningful inclusion as a combination of two primary factors – the empathic attitude of the adult working with children in the ELC setting, and the leadership capacity within the service to model and support inclusion. Consideration of how one develops this empathy is at the heart of discussions relating to inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream educational settings (NCCA 2015; Ring *et al.* 2016; NCSE 2018; Tynan 2018). *The DEI Guidelines (*DCYA 2016a) suggest that when ECTs, inspectors, lecturers and others involved in the sector critically reflect on their own attitudes and values, then, as professionals working with children, they provide and support more inclusive environments in practice. This ethos is shared across the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in consideration of the strengths of the child and reflecting on how one can implement changes in the learning environment to support all children (Interdepartmental Group (IDG) 2015). Nutbrown and Clough (2013) offer a simplified concept of inclusion stating that it is "ultimately about how people treat each other" (p.4) and it rests with each ECT to reflect on how they respond to each individual child and ensuring their rights are being met in the ELC setting.

The findings of the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education project* (EPPE) by Sylva *et al* (2004) indicates that quality ELC settings were characterised by caring and qualified adults who prioritised both intellectual and social development, which particularly benefitted children who were deemed "at risk" (p.12). In an Irish context, *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) recognises the child as a competent learner and emphasises the adult's role in reflecting on their personal experiences and views to ensure the needs of each individual child were being met in the setting (Kernan 2007; Hayes 2008). Kernan (2007) further considers how the ECT has to address moral, ethical or equity issues as they arise in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the early years' curriculum through a cycle of reflection and consideration of how the child's rights are being addressed. This process of reflection on inclusion has also been identified as a key element of good practice

when supporting children with additional needs at the primary school level (NCSE 2011; Daly *et al.* 2016; NCSE 2018). Moreover, Long (2018) who highlights this as an area requiring development and further training, looks to the AIM approach to CPD and how this might be adapted across the educational system to address inequities and inconsistencies in approaches and accessibility for teaching staff. In this respect, Ingleby (2018) notes that if the model of CPD supports the process of extending one's knowledge and understanding, and provides opportunities to reflect on experiences and make changes accordingly, it can lead to "transformational changes" in practice (p. 45).

Guskey's (2002) *Levels of Professional Development* recognise the features of meaningful and purposeful learning by determining how participants use their new knowledge and skills, and if there has been organisational change as a result of the learning experience. The LINC programme, at Level 3 of the AIM, seeks to have the Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) qualified in leading inclusive practice, having the confidence to support children and their families, as well as implementing changes in pedagogical approaches to ensure all children in the setting are included in a meaningful way (DCYA 2016b; Skehill 2021a). Promoting children's well-being in this regard is central to the inclusion of all children in the ELC setting (Heaney and Feeney 2021).

There are, however, concerns regarding the interpretation of structural and process characteristics of an inclusive learning environment (Slot *et al.* 2015) and the danger of physical inclusion of the child which may exclude them on a curricular and emotional level (Nutbrown and Clough 2013). How one interprets inclusive practice and is willing to make changes to established routines in the learning environment is dependent on a number of factors. A lack of knowledge about inclusion can lead to negative attitudes towards consideration of these inclusive practices (Sucuoglu *et al* 2015). From a phenomenological perspective, Gadamer (2004) sees one's horizon of significance as the context for understanding a phenomenon, believing that every assertion has its horizon of meaning which begins as a response to a question or a situation. In this context then, the horizon takes on a point of view that reflects individual teachers' different perspectives on

their concept of inclusion and how that is realised in their pedagogical practice (Figure 39).

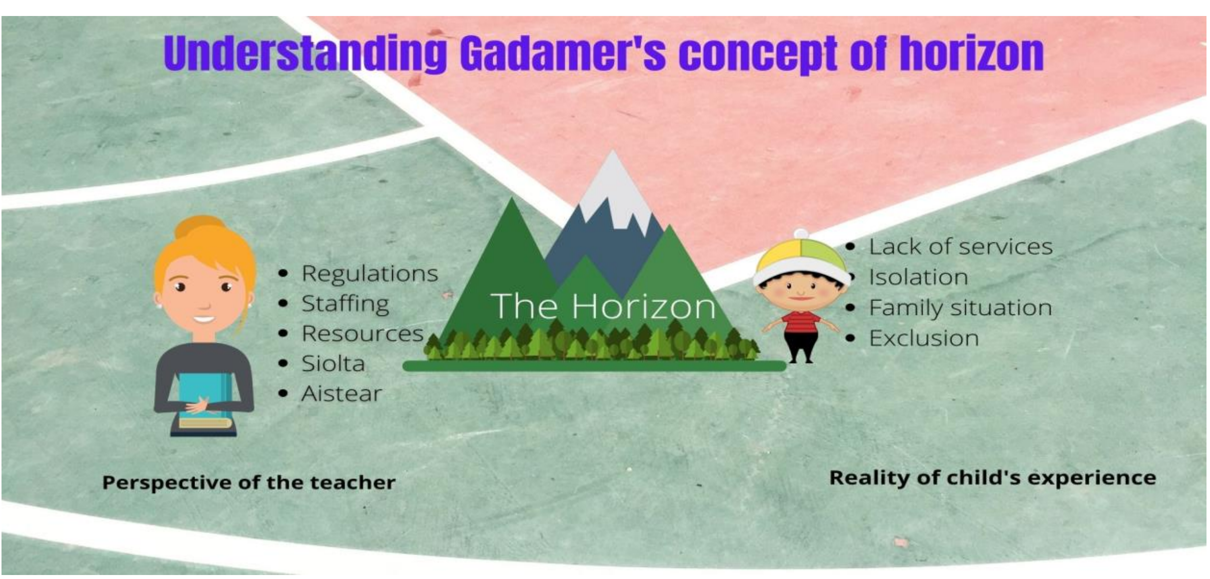

Figure 39 Explaining Gadamer's (2004) Concept of Horizon when Considering the Perspective of the Early Childhood Teacher.

Heidgger's (1929) interpretation of *Dasein* explains that one's own life experiences has a direct influence on how we react to and understand different situations one encounters. With this understanding in mind, the importance then of the recommendation of Daly and colleagues (2016) for professional development for those working with children with Autism Spectrum Difference (ASD) is recognised here to ensure that their horizon is impacted by knowledge and skills to ensure effective inclusion in the educational setting. Blanchard *et al.* (2018) support this idea, identifying the need for purposeful learning opportunities that are linked to diversity, inclusion and social justice to help teaching staff understand the perspectives and experiences of others. Research indicates such professional education opportunities have the potential to encourage this self-reflection and develop confidence and competence in the ECT working in the ELC sector (Guskey 2002; Osgood 2010; Hawkins 2014; Dyer 2018).

The Learning Environment

Sorin's (2005) depiction of the agentic child draws influence from the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education which makes explicit the construct of the child as "rich" in potential, strong and competent. Others such as Moloney and McCarthy (2018) and Ring (2018) recognise the Reggio environment, 'the third teacher', as an accessible and inclusive element of the educational setting and discuss how this approach can be adapted to the Irish context. The Reggio Emilia approach envisions the learning environment, not just in relation to the physical space, but also the temporal and interactional environment that includes consideration of the role of the adult, the routines and structures in place, and the resources and provocations for play that are available to the children (Malaguzzi 1993; Kelleher and Fenlon 2021). While elements of this theory are reviewed in the section on pedagogical practice, consideration of the actual 'classroom' is a key feature of inclusive culture and one which is identified in the *Competency Framework* (LINC Consortium 2016-2020). The physical layout of the environment is reflective of the teacher's image of the child and their view of the child as a 'competent and confident' learner (NCCA 2009; NCCA 2015). Westwood (2013) outlines the importance of facilitating interactions in the inclusive ELC setting through the physical layout of the space and resources which reflects the individual interests of the children. Similarly, Grace *et al.* (2018) argue for a learning environment that supports communication and developing friendships, which Jarman (2013) describes as a Communication Friendly Spaces Approach. She considers the combination of the physical environment, the available resources and the role of the adult within that setting, as central to promoting the holistic development of the child in an inclusive ELC setting. The publication of the *Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Setting* (UDG) (Grey *et al*. 2019) advocates for an inclusive and accessible ELC environment underpinned by the *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) standards of the Rights of the Child, Parents and Families, Interactions, Play, Professional Practice and Community Involvement. The principles articulated in these standards are aligned with the specified objectives of the inter-departmental government policy, *First Five* (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018),

which aims to support children's learning and development, as well as the needs of their families, adhering to UNESCO (2017) guidance on embedding inclusion and equity in government policy.

Recognising the importance of the learning environment in supporting the participation of all children, the self-evaluation tools in the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) were developed to guide reflection on the physical space while simultaneously incorporating reflection on the temporal and interactional environment through consideration of provocations for play and presentation of resources and materials. Similarly, the *Inclusive Early Childhood Education Environment Self-Reflection Tool* (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2017b), the resources in the UDG (Grey *et al*. 2019), the *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* (Harms *et al.* 2018) and the *Teach me As I Am: Early Years Autism Training Programme: Sensory Environment Observation* (AsIAm 2018) provide further guidance on creating that inclusive space for preschool children. While these resources provide relevant prompts for reflection on the different elements of the indoor and outdoor environments and consideration on what is working well for the children, they also face criticism for an over emphasis on environmental quality (Messan Setodji *et al.* 2018). Questioning the validity of observation tools and traditional measures to assess quality in the ELC setting, Soukakou (2012) asks if they are capable of capturing the varying dimensions of quality within that environment. This was also discussed as a point of concern in two Irish studies, referring to the Siolta standards (CECDE 2006) for specifications of these dimensions of quality, questioning the accuracy of such measurements in complex environments when a number of factors can impact the observation process (Neylon 2012; Bleach 2014).

The AIM emphasises the learning environment and the potential of that space to support strategies which promote positive interactions and learning in the ELC. Heaney and Feeney (2021) argue that facilitating meaningful peer interactions is a central requirement of an inclusive setting and creating such spaces is a key feature of a high-quality learning experience for children. While contemporary research reports the frustrations of teachers in managing 'behaviour disturbances' of

children with additional needs (Alexander *et al.* 2016; Ring *et al*. 2019; NCSE 2018; Gillett-Swan and Lundy 2021), Heaney and Feeney (2021) invite reflection of how 'challenging behaviour' can be reframed and considered within that environment. Sorin (2005) identifies the need for practitioners to consider their image of the child as constructs of "the out-of-control child" or "the wicked child", challenging them to see what the child is trying to communicate through these behaviours and what changes they can make to the learning environment to respond to children's needs. Reflective practice on the environment in this regard can support the ECT in considering the factors that may contribute to a child's upset or lack of engagement in the preschool programme and provide guidance on recognising what is working well, and what needs to be changed or adapted (NCCA 2015; Grey *et al*. 2019; Daly 2020).

Professional Identity of the Early Childhood Teacher

The theme of professional identity as it relates to the adult working with children in the ELC setting permeates the findings in the data corpus, as well as in the literature relating to quality inclusive practice in the sector. Heidegger's (1927) understanding of *Dasein* philosophises that one's societal role has a direct influence on one's concept of self, which in turn, has a direct influence on how one perceives different life experiences (Horrigan-Kelly *et al.* 2016). The complexity of ECT professional identity is continually developing in accordance with national and international policy directives on what that role involves and subsequent reactions from the ELC sector to the expectations of the ECT in that regard (Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP) 2018; Ingleby 2018; Havnes 2018; Moloney 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021). Colmer (2017) presents the professional identity of the early years' educator as a social construct that is linked to personal identity and external discourses within the social system, indicating a sense of helplessness of the practitioner in this regard. On the other hand, Osgood (2010) questions these external influences and considers the importance of confidence from within the profession to advocate for recognition of the knowledge of the ELC team. One's interpretation of these external influences might be examined in terms of *Dasein*

and how subsequent reactions can influence the 'mood' of the ECT and impact perceptions of and responses to different situations (Heidegger 1929). In defining what a profession is, one might refer to Sexton's (2007) depiction of the key components of a profession, as specified in Figure 40, which can be considered in light of the role of the ECT in the Irish and international context. Sexton considers that as a 'professional', the ECT should have a specialised knowledge base and have a commitment to engaging in ongoing CPD. She should have a degree of autonomy in her work which is guided by personal responsibility and a code of ethics. In return for this commitment to their work and their role, the ECT then should hold a position of high status in society and be paid well for their teaching and caring endeavours. However, the multifaceted role of the ECT, and the varying qualifications and perceptions of that role (DES 2010; IDG 2015; Nutbrowne 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021), present a complex, and often contradictory, depiction of this teaching profession which will be considered in this theme.

Figure 40 Key Components of a Profession

Evetts (2003) presents a similar view of professional identity whereby a group operate as a collective with shared experiences which are affiliated with a professional status based on public recognition of the work carried out. This concept of the 'collective' in regard to the role of the ECT is challenged by Dyer (2018) owing to the varying roles and titles of the adult working in the ELC setting and the subsequent impact on professional identity. Citing the fragmented nature of the workforce, Hordern (2016) asserts that the sense of community that should define a professional group through the knowledge and practice of that group of professionals, is lacking in the ELC sector. Murray (2013) questions whether the professional identity of the ECT has been perceived as functional, rather than exemplifying high standards of practice and whether the ECT has been proactive in asserting the professional self. She argues that "internal beliefs and perceptions need to be recognised with a critical reflection of external requirements and expectations" to develop this confidence in one's professional identity (2013, p.5).

The following section appraises the literature pertaining to the prominent sub-themes from the data analysis through discussion of the role of the ECT; perceptions of the role of the ECT; professional education in the ELC sector and finally, leadership within the ELC team.

The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher

In the Irish context, the ECT presents with varying levels of qualification, experience and responsibility (Tusla 2018; Pobal 2021). According to Hallet (2013) the role of the ECT is culturally specific depending on the country in question, and is reflected in the various titles of the adult working with the children as well as the qualifications required to work in that role. Similarly, Moloney (2019; 2021) considers how this diversity of early years' provision worldwide hinders the evolution of the sector as a profession. While Urban *et al.* (2011) explored concepts of professionalism in the sector and identified conditions to develop and maintain competencies within the early childhood system in the *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRE) report*, the role of the ECT continues

to be one that is varied and unclear (DCYA 2014; DES 2016). In a study of kindergarten teachers and assistants, Steinnes (2014) identifies the problematic nature of conflicting perceptions of role identity of the adult working with children. Owing to the fact that the teacher and assistant work together in the same room, often performing similar tasks with children, the lines between the professional identities of both parties are somewhat blurred and hence not as transparent as Sexton (2007) indicates. For instance, Taggart (2016) suggests that while the professional knowledge base and autonomy of action of the ECT in these interactions with the children may not be as visible as the traditional adult-led teaching position, the intentions behind their actions may be informed by child development theory and best practice guidance.

In 2017, Urban *et al.* carried out a review of the occupational role titles for the early years' workforce in Ireland, which had previously been categorised from basic to expert practitioner level. These terms discussed by Urban and his colleagues (2011) provided guidance on the skills required for 'practitioners', but were not adopted into early years' policy and practice. The difficulty lies in identifying how to equate experience and qualifications on these levels, and if the suggested terminology reflects the skills and knowledge that underpins practice. Although the recent *Nurturing Skills* publication (DCEDIY 2021) details specific roles and responsibilities within the sector, only three career grades are identified: early years educator, lead educator and manager, which may limit the scope of professional roles in light of experience and qualifications. Moloney (2019) questions whether all professionals within the ELC setting should have the same level of qualification, and if so, how then can the graduate ECT stand out as being an expert in their field of early years' education, or the "agent of change" as advocated in the Children's Workforce Strategy in England (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2006, p.16). Bleach (2014) presents her findings from a study investigating the impact of a CPD programme on the implementation of *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) and the *National Early Years Access Initiative* (NEYAI) with a sample size of seventy ELC settings and over seven hundred staff, working in predominantly community-run services in Ireland. Her findings suggest that pedagogical

knowledge and professional judgement came from extensive experience working as an ECT rather than a formal qualification. However, those participating in this study were supported throughout the process by a mentor, which Bleach (2014) found to considerably impact staff engagement and learning.

The European Commission (2019) suggest that ECTs with degree-level qualifications are more likely to use appropriate pedagogical strategies, create stimulating learning environments as well as providing quality care and support in the ELC setting. This report illustrates a continual flux in the role of ECT with a shift from a vocational and practice-based sector, to one that is now more focused on academic study and qualifications (Urban *et al*. 2017; GoI 2018; Nutbrown 2021). In fact, many researchers point to a consistent link between high quality preschool experiences and the quality and qualifications of adults working with children (e.g. Melhuish 2004; Urban 2008; European Commission 2014, 2019; Urban *et al*. 2017).

The traditional, vocational role of the ECT, and the emotional and caring nature of that role, is also worthy of attention in this context. Moyles (2001) articulates how ECTs in the ELC sector are highly emotive about their role, suggesting that such overtly affectionate notions may be perceived as "anti - intellectual, idealistic, objective, indecisive and feminine" (p.6). Furthermore, they may inadvertently embed the maternal role and nature as intrinsic to the ECT. Thus, Osgood (2006, p.45) argues that the "discourse of emotionality" is evidence of the gendered context of the early years' workforce which Simpson (2010, p.88) recognised in her study with participant discussions of "love of children", "caring" and "passion", rather than the technical proficiency of a graduate professional. None the less, both Page (2018) and Taggart (2001) indicate that recognising the ELC sector as a "caring profession" is an essential understanding of work with children. Taggart compares ELC with 'caring' professions, like nursing, that is valued for the "emotive work" undertaken by skilled and qualified professional nurses. This "emotional labour", (Taggart 2001, p.19), is a recognition of the kind of caring that comes from effort rather than instinct and is often only evident when it is not done. Regrettably, in the Irish context, the absence of emotional labour was all too evident in media exposure regarding malpractice in certain ELC chains in Dublin and Wicklow (Radio

Teilifis Eireann (RTE) 2019). Both Moyles (2001) and Osgood (2010) advocate for recognition of the essential place of emotion and passion in the role of the ECT owing to the affective nature of this role in working with young children. However, both also agree that developing a professional identity requires the ECT to reflect on and evaluate their own practice and to engage with relevant discourses within the ELC setting.

The initial DES (2010) Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector in Ireland, indicated that many students undertaking childcare courses had poor records of academic achievement and needed language and literacy support as well as mentoring and guidance. In spite of the high expectations of the ECT, therefore, there are prevailing societal perceptions that "childcare is a low status occupation that is seen as appropriate employment for unskilled and unqualified workers in spite of the importance of early childhood in children's development" (Start Strong 2013, p. 32). Similar concerns are recognised internationally whereby successive reports identify the challenges of recruiting skilled and qualified staff into the ECEC sector (OECD 2017b; 2019; European Commission 2014; 2019). This issue has also been identified within the English system (Hallet 2013; Murray 2013) where concerns are expressed regarding the academic capabilities of newly qualified 'practitioners', "notably that some are unable to write well enough to complete the requisite reports and observations on children" (Cottle and Alexander 2012, p. 637). Havnes (2018, p. 67) discusses the need for "bottom-up processes" within the ELC sector, where professionalization is situated from within the professional setting, in a triangular relationship with policy, research and the profession itself. Similarly, Urban (2008) recognises that professional knowledge is also produced on the ground working with children in the ELC setting and questions the hierarchal system of those who produce knowledge through research, and those who produce knowledge through practice. Skehill's (2021b) action research study with ECEC colleagues in practice, with qualifications varying from QQI Levels 5 to 9, provides an example of the professional identity and role of the ECT in creating knowledge and research from a practice perspective and the subsequent impact on professional identities as well as benefits for those using the service. Colmer (2017)

supports this idea, stating that professionalism grows from "professional relationships and shared professional practices that create meaning for educators" (p. 447).

In critique of the English ECCE system, Dyer (2018) outlines the hierarchal approach governing changes to policy, curriculum and inspection which is mirrored in many ways within the Irish context, in a 'from above' approach. As mentioned in Chapter One, prior to the publication of *First Five (*GoI 2018), the term ECCE was ubiquitous in policy and practice in Ireland. Yet in the absence of consultation with those working in the sector, the term Early Learning and Care featured in *First Five.* While policy-makers speak the rhetoric of consulting with the sector in Ireland, their actions at times can be construed as tokenistic, serving to undermine concepts of self and professional identity formation.

Perceptions of the Role of the Early Childhood Teacher

Murray (2013) considers how one's perception of the professional self is influenced by how one is valued in their role by colleagues and others in society. This in turn may influence how the ECT reacts to other life-world situations from a hermeneutic interpretation of their experiences. This concept is linked to the culture of the setting which is based on shared beliefs and ideas that have been learned from within the team and continue to influence practice in the ELC setting (Keith 2011). Simultaneously, one also has to reconcile one's own beliefs and perceptions of the role of the ECT with external expectations, in order to practice their profession with integrity and confidence. Colmer (2017) asserts the need to recognise ELC settings as "complex social systems" (p.89) that are constructed and influenced by a number of factors identified as elements of the "competent system" (Urban *et al.* 2011, p.12) within which the ECT must work. However, Urban (2008, p. 27) also recognises that there is "a powerful top-down stream of knowledge" that the ECT is expected to interpret and implement. Both Osgood (2006) and Chalke (2013) argue that ECTs adapt a professional approach to their work in adherence to regulations, inspections and policy, and this in itself should validate their professional identity.

However, Moloney (2016) criticises this myriad of inspection processes in Ireland in comparison to other countries such as Denmark, Finland and New Zealand. She suggests that such processes impact the professional autonomy of the ECT in continually having to defend practice through this rigid regulatory system. Sexton (2007) identifies this 'professional autonomy' as a key feature of a profession and should be attributed to teachers in Irish ELC settings as afforded to their peers in other countries or in the primary school sector (Oberhuemen 2015; Moloney 2016; Oke *et al.* 2021). Moloney's earlier study (2015) did however indicate that graduates working in the ELC sector had a sense of self-confidence in their role and perceived themselves as professionals with knowledge of the curriculum frameworks, demonstrating the relevance of this knowledge base as a key component of professional identity and regard (Sexton 2007). It might be considered that it is this professional education that promotes self-reflection and awareness which creates a sense of self-efficacy (Osgood 2010), however, there are ongoing concerns expressed within the ELC sector in Ireland and internationally, regarding the perception of the ECT (DES 2016; Urban *et al*. 2017; Oke *et al.* 2021).

Dyer (2018) considers that perhaps it is the language itself that "practitioners" use to describe their work, as well the lack of a collective voice, that undermines their claim to be recognised as a professional group. On the other hand, one might consider how *Dasein* is understood and realised by individuals through the hermeneutic principles of Heidegger (1929). He philosophizes that one's own perception of self within society; one's moods as well as one's ability and attitude to face life's inevitable challenges, create and inform our responses to different phenomena. An interesting perspective has been put forward by Gibson (2015) who considers the ECT as a "heroic victim" who recognises the importance of their role working with young children, but that this is not something that is valued in society. The ECT is therefore, a "victim" of this perception, yet "heroic" in that she perseveres in her role regardless (p.302). Urban (2008; 2017) elaborates on this perceived dilemma regarding the perceptions of the role and the need to communicate their professional identity. While Colmer (2017) sees professional identity as being socially constructed within teams of educators, it is not necessarily

communicated effectively beyond this circle. These perceptions of one's role are very relevant when considering the ECT's, and subsequently that of the INCO's, responsibility and capability in engaging in collaborative processes with parents, primary schools and other relevant stakeholders. Murray (2013) discusses these conflicts between the ECT's self-image and the external expectations of their professional role, and the need to balance both to create a social legitimacy for recognition.

Professional Education in Early Learning and Care

Although there are high expectations for the quality of teaching in the ELC sector in Ireland, there are minimal qualifications required of ECTs. As discussed in Chapter One, mandatory minimum qualification at QQI Level 5 was only introduced to the sector in 2016 (DCYAc). This means that all staff working with children in the ELC setting must hold a minimum Level 5 qualification. Beyond this, greater qualification levels are required of ECTs working with children in the ECCE scheme. As noted by Pobal (2021), the number of graduates working in the ELC sector increases year on year with 25% of staff currently holding a degree-level qualification at Level 7 and 8. Moloney and French (2022) argue that an unintended consequence of the ECCE scheme is that the most qualified staff are likely to be working with children aged three to five years. They further argue that the generally lower qualifications of those working with younger children, leads to questions about the rights of babies and toddlers to quality ECEC, however this has been considered in the recent proposal for core funding for the sector by allocated funding in line with graduate educators working with all age groups (DCEDIY 2022). Ring *et al.* (2019) discuss the myriad of qualifications recorded in the ELC sector in Ireland (DES 2016), and the gaps that exist in relation to education and play, as well as the need for a stronger focus on the inclusion of children with additional needs. A further concern is documented in the *Workforce Development Plan (WDP)* (2010, p. 12) whereby "there are no policies or procedures in place which would ensure that those delivering programmes in ECCE have the necessary qualifications or expertise to do so". This reference to the fact that post-primary teachers have been

delivering modules on these programmes, rather than someone who is “qualified in ECCE, have appropriate sectoral experience and that their knowledge and skills are up to date with the latest developments in research, policy and practice in ECCE” (WDP 2010, p.12) implies that one requires little academic knowledge to teach such modules thereby undermining the quality of the ECCE courses. While there have been developments within the sector to remedy these issues over the duration of this study, the complexity of qualifications and experiences within this context over the past number of years has given cause for concern regarding the profile of the current cohort of ECTs in practice. Researchers argue that historical training experiences impact ECTs’ capabilities and knowledge to implement an effective and contemporary early years’ curriculum and to adhere to best practice (e.g. Urban *et al*. 2011; Start Strong 2014; Urban *et al*. 2017; Ring *et al.* 2019).

While Peeters *et al.* (2017) support Urban’s (2008; 2011; 2017) argument about the need to establish a “competent system” to create a solid foundation for quality in the ELC sector, they also note that such a system must be one that is based on the “good education” of those working in the sector (p.86). Higher levels of education result in increased knowledge of child development and a better understanding of how to support children’s holistic development and a deeper empathy for children (Goble *et al*. 2015; GoI 2018; Trodd and Dickerson 2018). Arguing that a degree qualification alone is not sufficient to constitute quality, Beavers *et al.* (2017) point to the need for a blend of knowledge, skills and reflection on practice, with supports in place to guide such reflective thinking, which indicates the innovative development of the LINC programme to extend practitioner expertise relating to inclusion.

Oberhuemen (2015) outlines the education path for ECTs in other countries such as Sweden, Norway and Italy, where they are under the auspices of the education sector studying alongside their peers in initial and continuing teacher education for the primary school sector, which is lacking in the Irish context. This cooperative approach to initial teacher preparation creates a stronger sense of identity within the teaching profession, with specific qualifications required for roles within the ELC setting (ibid.), thereby creating a shared understanding through the education

levels, of relational pedagogy and inclusive practice. The importance of mentoring and pedagogical coaching for ECTs has also been identified as a key element in supporting reflective practice and developing confidence and competence (Bruden *et al*. 2013; Peeters and Sharmahd 2014; Oberhuemer 2015 Beavers *et al*. 2017; Urban *et al.* 2017; Doan and Gray 2021; Skehill 2021a). In fact, Osgood (2010) considers this mentoring process, the practical experience in the ELC setting, as well as the cycle of reflective practice, as most valuable to practitioners in increasing their skills and confidence in their ability to apply theory to practice when working with children.

Waters and Payler (2015) report on international projects regarding quality in the ELC sector and discuss how the gradual upskilling of an experienced and vocationally trained ELC workforce to obtain graduate qualifications on a part time basis, has created a blur between the initial teacher education and CPD. The literature presents the struggle to provide consistency of qualification for the "knowledge, practice and values" (Urban *et al.* 2017, p.40) required to work within the ELC, as well as supporting and implementing the policy developments of the sector. A Turkish study undertaken by Sucuoglu *et al. (*2015) to evaluate a teacher-training programme illustrates this point. Sucuoglu and colleagues (2015) found that an over-emphasis on knowledge acquisition failed to equip the learners with the necessary skills and strategies to support children with additional needs. Murray (2013) discusses the role of the early years' practitioner (EYP) in the English system who is viewed as an "agent of change" (p. 101), responsible for implementing policy developments and raising standards of practice and professionalism through their transformational leadership (DfES 2006). Similarly in the Irish context, the high quality of practice and provision outlined in policy demands "broad skills, shared reflection (and) common responsibility" on behalf of the ELC workforce (Fortunati *et al.* 2019, p.229). The LINC programme was developed with clear learning goals for ECTs; "to inform and challenge learners' attitudes and values, leading to increased professionalism and knowledge that improves the inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in early years' settings" (Ring *et al*. 2019; p. 27). Comparisons might be drawn with the VIDA (Knowledge-based

efforts for socially disadvantaged children in day-care) programme in Denmark (Jensen and Brandi 2018) which is implemented to change pedagogical practices to improve children's well-being and learning. Jensen and Brandi (2018), in their evaluation of VIDA, argue the need for openness and reflection in the ELC sector when the goal is to change and develop pedagogical practice, and that such CPD programmes need to make sense for participants by using formal and informal practice-based learning. They refer to Bleach's study (2014) of CPD on the *National Early Years Access Initiative* (NEYAI) and the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) (CECDE 2006) in the Irish context and note the importance of facilitating learning to transform this evidence-based knowledge into their practice, thereby creating meaningful and relevant professional development opportunities. The aspirational recommendations in *First 5* (GoI 2018), as well as more recent commitments to improving working conditions and developing the professional role of the ECT (DCEDIY 2021) indicates a growing awareness for change within the sector to support the rights of the child in early childhood.

Leadership within the Early Learning and Care Team

Northouse (2010) defines leadership as a process whereby a person exerts their influence over a team of individuals to achieve a common goal. Taking into consideration the complexity of the ELC sector in Ireland, the 'leader' in the setting might be the owner; manager; supervisor; room leader or the INCO. At times, this 'leader' may encompass all of these roles and hold a qualification from QQI Level 5, Level 6 or higher, that may support them in those roles. Figure 41 provides an overview of the responsibilities of the role of the traditional leader, as developed from the participants' accounts in this study, as well as my pre-understanding as illustrated in extracts from the reflective journal during the data analysis process.

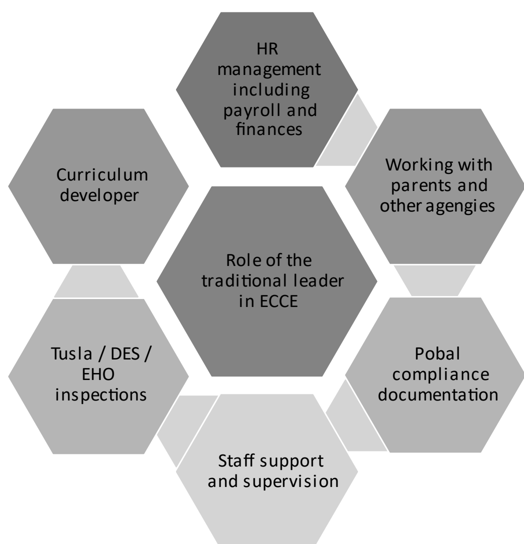

Figure 43 Mind-map from Reflective Journal on the Role of the Traditional Leader in Early Learning and Care Setting

Recognising the challenges of the organisational structure of an ELC setting, Rodd (2012) considers how leadership may be presented as a process of actions which requires focus on multiple roles and tasks in order to promote the shared values and visions of the team. A successful leader is one who is knowledgeable of their field and is committed to staying up to date with current developments in the sector, while simultaneously having the enthusiasm and skill to motivate the team to achieve their vision (O'Sullivan 2015; Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Skehill 2021a). In consideration of the complexity of leadership skills required to inspire people and build relationships (Maxwell 2017), attention must be given to the training, qualifications and the supports available and evidenced in the ELC sector to lead the team effectively.

On completion of the LINC programme, graduates are qualified to take on the leadership role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) which involves supporting management in the provision of leadership and guidance for the inclusion and full participation of all children in the ECCE programme (DCYA 2016b). Traditionally, the concept of leadership within the ELC setting rests with the manager (Rodd 2004;

Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Moloney and McCarthy 2018), and the paradigms of leadership in this regard are largely wedded to the idea of one associated with power and authority (McDowall Clark 2012; Cook 2013; Murray 2013). Siraj-Blatchford and Manni's (2007) study of leadership in the ELC sector identified ten categories of effective leadership practice, illustrated in Figure 42, which might be considered in the Irish context in relation to the responsibilities of the role of the manager and leader as noted earlier in Figure 41.

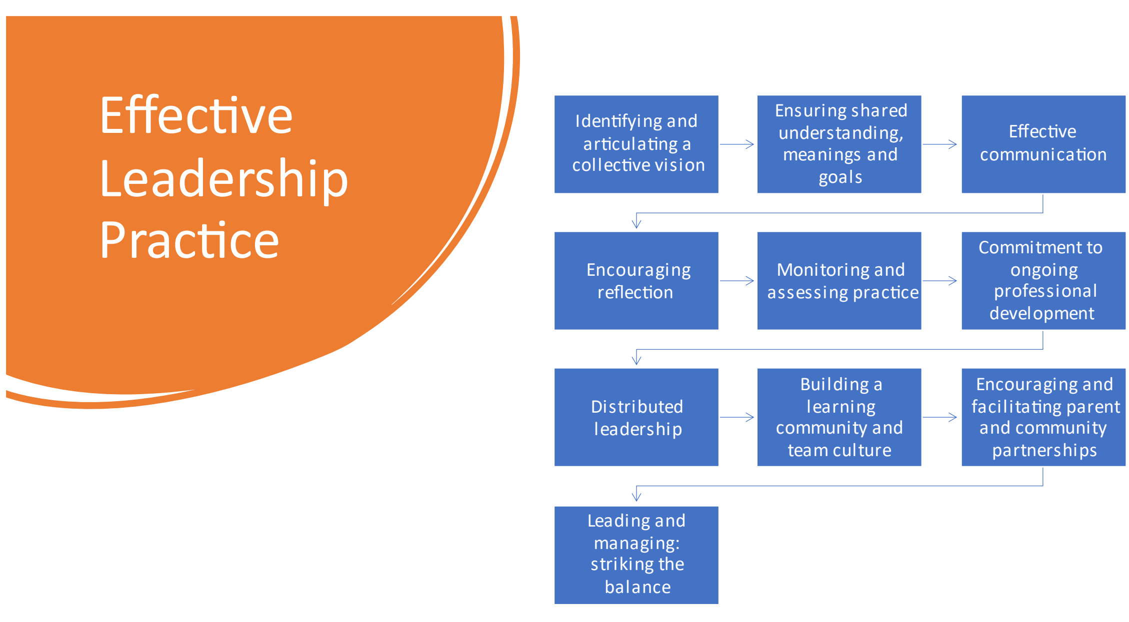

Figure 42 Categories of Effective Leadership Practice (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007)

Osgood (2010) and Moyles (2001) emphasise the need for confidence to take on a leadership role to support professional learning and to develop and sustain the complexities of team relationships and interactions in the ELC setting (Sullivan 2010; Colmer 2017; Skehill 2021b). Within the Irish context, while there is an expectation of leadership to meet high quality standards in accordance with regulations and guidelines (DES 2016; Tusla 2018), there are concerns regarding the qualifications and experience of those tasked with leading and managing ELC settings (WDP 2010; Moloney and Pettersen 2017).

Graham (2017) outlines the importance of fostering positive teamwork to facilitate quality inclusive practice and to share the vision and goals for the service so the team know "when they are required to do things, and why and how they are expected to do things" (DCYA 2016a, p. 48), in keeping with *Siolta* standard 11: Professional practice (CECDE 2006). The leadership role of the 'registered provider' in the ELC is defined in the Early Years Services Regulations in relation to one's responsibility in ensuring the quality and safety of care provided to those using the service (DCYA 2016c; Tusla 2018). Leadership for management is also addressed within the EYEI framework (DES 2018b). There is a shared agreement between all these agencies that specific skills are required to lead quality and inclusive practice, but the complexity of the Irish situation with the multitude of qualifications within the sector further complicates this leadership role. The fact that the owner/ manager of a private service, or the manager of a community service are not mandated to hold any qualifications to lead the team in the ELC setting, creates challenges for practice in this regard (Knox and Moloney 2021). However, the new core funding model seeks to incentivise managers to upskill to graduate level by allocating additional funding on the basis of their qualifications (DCEDIY 2022).

In their 2013 study of leadership in the Finnish early years sector, Heikka and Hujala (2013) found that while leadership responsibilities focused on quality improvement, pedagogical leadership as well as ensuring management of daily routines and human resource issues, these increasing managerial duties were negatively impacting time allocated for quality improvement. Hoas Moen and Granrusten (2013) note a similar issue in the Norwegian sector. They found that pedagogical leaders were spending less time with the children owing to other commitments relating to supporting other staff members. Within the Irish context then, it is thought that the leadership role within the setting is divided into responsibilities relating to pedagogical, strategic, administrative and staffing issues, and these can vary widely from one setting to another (DES 2016; Urban *et al*. 2017). Adding to this list, Moloney and Pettersen (2017) refer also to the leader's role in terms of financial and people management. Leadership is based on relationships and interactions within a group, and there are many factors that might impact the

dynamics and the effectiveness of the team under specific leadership (Nicholas and Burnham 2016; Skehill 2021a).

The LINC programme places an emphasis on distributive leadership within the ELC setting which would support engagement with the role and responsibilities of INCO on completing the programme (LINC Consortium 2016-20). Steinunn *et al.* (2017) identify a consistent move towards strategies for distributive leadership within school and teaching environments, but also question the delegation process and whether, in reality, these decisions are based on hierarchical control. Allred and Hancock (2015) consider these pressures to create a professional culture within the ELC setting, and question how shared power with colleagues and families can be established in a family-centred setting. Acknowledging that distributed leadership in ELC settings can create opportunities to utilise the skills and expertise of the whole team, Moloney (2018) nonetheless expresses concern that the single role of INCO "may be spread too thinly across too many areas" (p. 66). Coupled with such a concern is the entry requirement of QQI Level 5 for participation on the LINC programme, with the assumption that the learner has the authority in practice, as well as the capacity for leadership responsibility, given the contextual reality of the sector as previously discussed.

Nuthall *et al.* (2018) consider the "underlying desire for a sense of collective cohesion" within the ELC setting but recognise that the sector "has a long history of respecting and addressing the needs of individuals, whether children, parents or educators" (p. 82). This may be incorporated into Heidegger's (1929) understanding of one's societal role and the perceived responsibilities attached to these roles. Fortunati (2019) reported on the findings of the evaluation of LINC students' perceptions of their preparation to lead inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy at over 95% in the academic year 2017/18. However, Skehill (2021a) argues that engagement with the responsibilities of the role of INCO may be dependent on a number of factors within the ELC setting, including the management structure in place; the number of staff and children in the service; the willingness of the staff team; non-contact time allocated for leadership responsibilities as well as the time and funding available.

Collaborative Practice

Collaborative practice may be defined as cooperative and joint working on a clearly defined task in a reflective manner (James *et al.* 2007). In relation to inclusive education, collaborative practice ensures that relevant professionals are working together to support children and their families to access comprehensive supports for the child's holistic development (McKernan *et al.* 2011; Barr and Hilliard 2021). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems emphasise the importance of the environment that the child lives in, and the interactions within and between the people who inhabit those systems as relevant to children's development. Collaboration with key people in the child's life and recognising the value of these interactions to support the child's holistic development, is particularly relevant in the ELC sector (Bronfenbrener 1979; Ring *et al*. 2018). Being situated in the microsystem of the child's world, Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) demonstrates how effective collaborative practice within and between those systems necessitates partnership with parents and families, as well as engaging with the local schools and community, are crucial to children's development (CECDE 2006; NCCA 2009, 2015). The introduction of the AIM (DCYA 2016b) into the ELC sector, as previously discussed in Chapter One, functions on this assumption of collaboration between the ELC setting, parents, local services and other specialists in supporting a child with additional needs. This initiative requires more responsibility on behalf of the ECT to identify any developmental concerns, obtain parental consent and liaise with the Early Years' Specialists (EYS) and other professionals as required. This section will consider firstly the collaboration with parents in the ELC sector, reviewing the relationships between parents and the ECT; the ELC as a family support system; and the impact of parental involvement on a child's early development. An overview of the literature relating to collaborative practices with primary schools, the early years' specialists, and other relevant stakeholders will then be provided.

Relationships between Parents and Early Childhood Teachers

The importance of parental involvement in children's education is embedded in early years' policy documents, reflecting the constitutional role of the parent in being the primary educator of their child (CECDE 2006; NCCA 2009; DES 2016; DCYA 2016c; GoI 2018). Recognition of the primary role of parents in their child's life necessitates the development of relationships and effective means of communication between the home and learning environment (Daly *et al*. 2016; Gazi and Mandell 2016; Barr and Hilliard 2021). Rentzou and Ekine (2017) assert that parental engagement is most beneficial during a child's early education and that parents have a right, and indeed "an obligation", to be consulted and informed about their child's experiences in the ELC setting. Congruent with *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), O'Byrne (2018, p. 168) discusses the importance of "cultivating and nurturing positive relationships between home and education" through effective communication. Involving parents in the ELC environment from the outset provides the basis for mutual respect, whereby the teacher recognises the primary role of the parent in caring for the child and the funds of knowledge that comes from the home environment (Gonzalez *et al.* 2005), and in turn, the parents respect the role of the ECT in teaching and supporting the child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; CECDE 2006; NCCA 2015; Sherfinski 2018). Ward (2018, p.279) advocates for support for ECTs in England to reflect on their relationships with parents and to challenge "attitudes and approaches" to parental involvement. Vuorinen *et al*. (2014), in their Swedish study, noted the importance of developing dialogue with parents to gain their trust, and this is particularly true in consideration of the role of the INCO in communicating concerns to parents about their child's development. The perspective of a parent in a focus group session for a study about informing parents of their child's disability illustrates this point:

> ' …and it's not just a sentence, every word is important because you are hanging on to everything they say and you will remember every word that they say, it sticks in your mind. They need to really plan their sentences and their words because this is going to stay with you for the rest of your life.

(National Federation of Voluntary Bodies Providing Services to People with Intellectual Disabilities in Galway 2009, p.48).

This perceived “lack of sensitivity” is also noted by parents utilising early years services in Lee’s (2015) Swedish study. Parents suggested the need for professionals working with children in preschool to provide greater emotional and psychological support. Cottle and Alexander’s (2014) study of English practitioners found they place great value on parental partnership and consider it a key component of a quality early years’ service. However, these partnerships were perceived and enacted in very different ways from the perspectives of parents and practitioners (ibid.). Similar findings from a Finnish study (Hakyemez-Paul *et al.* 2018) indicate that ECTs had positive attitudes towards parental involvement, but expectations of both groups were not managed sufficiently to develop effective collaborative practice. Rentzou and Ekine (2017) discuss these perceptions of “parental engagement” and what that looks like from the parental and educational setting’s perspective. They question the structures in place to facilitate effective communication to support all stakeholders and if there is a shared understanding of expectations within the ELC setting. Similarly, Van Laere *et al*. (2018) query parents’ “meaning making” of parent-school relationships and the need to develop communicative spaces to enable dialogue and interaction. This draws one back to the horizon of significance (Gadamer 2004) and how one’s knowledge and experience can influence one’s perception of different situations in life and consideration of how the LINC programme contributes to developing collaborative relationships with parents. Congruent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, the ECT and INCO is situated in a primary position to use their knowledge and perspective to support children and families.

Early Learning and Care Settings as a Family Support System

Family support systems endeavour to enhance the well-being of the family and to strengthen parenting capacity to overcome issues within the family unit. The primary objective of family support is to provide families with skills to cope with adversity and overcome crisis (Murphy 2004). While Lee (2015) questions the

development of parental partnerships that might be considered as intrusive of family life and busy schedules, research also highlights the value of the ELC setting in supporting families in the community (Garrity and Canavan 2017; McGregor *et al.* 2019). Parents of children with additional needs experience elevated levels of stress in supporting their child in school (Ryan *et al*. 2017; O'Byrne 2018; O'Leary and Moloney 2021) and collaborating with knowledgeable and concerned stakeholders can potentially provide support to minimise stress in the home environment (Garrity *et al*. 2017). Cameron and colleagues (2014) identify the supportive role of the school system in providing services to families in their study of kindergartens in Norway. In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) assertions about the value of relationships within and between systems supporting the child, parents report a "sense of security" and "relief of stress" they receive from their local kindergarten and indicate how they identify their children's teachers as professionals and experts in the field of education, "who in many ways, function as an extension of the parental role" (Cameron *et al.* 2014, p.249). A study carried out in the West of Ireland (Garrity and Canavan 2017) similarly illustrates the potential of ELC settings to act as a support-system for vulnerable families. This study highlighted the positive influence of the ELC setting in providing "invaluable emotional and material supports for parents" (McGregor *et al*. 2019, p. 71). Likewise, in the English context (Owen and Anderson 2017) found that engagement with such social support networks has a positive impact on parents' well-being and peer interactions, providing an opportunity for mutual parenting support. O'Byrne (2018) discusses the "family centred" approach in a child's education whereby the home environment is acknowledged as the main learning environment and the foundation for learning is based on the establishment of "mutually trusting relationships between teachers and families" (p. 165). This respectful relationship is evidenced in an earlier study by Daly *et al*. (2016) whereby teachers of children with ASD articulated their views on parents as experts in their child's education, each recognising the role of the other in supporting the child's learning.

Parental Participation and the Holistic Development of the Child

It has been long recognised that participation in ECCE can have a significant impact on children's long-term prospects, particularly for children in vulnerable situations (Heckman 2017; GoI 2018; Ring *et al.* 2018; European Union 2019). Lohmann *et al.* (2018) discuss how these benefits are further improved, on both an academic and social level, when there is effective collaboration between schools and families, asserting that such collaboration is critical for young children with additional needs. O' Byrne (2018) emphasises the importance of parental involvement in decisions about their child's education and asserts that involving parents in this process means that "we need to make the decision-making process transparent, intentional, structured and more inclusive of parents" (p. 170). Janssen and Vandenbroeck (2018) argue that ELC settings that fail to collaborate with families are missing out on an important element for increasing children's achievement and development in the early years.

In seeking to promote parental participation, Epstein's framework (2018) is presented in the LINC programme as a model for developing relationships between the educational setting and home environment under the six types of parental involvement: Parenting; Communicating; Volunteering; Learning at Home; Decision Making; and Collaborating with the community. Each type of parental involvement details strategies to guide the collaborative practice required to support the child's holistic development and is used as a guide within the LINC programme to develop partnership with parents. Heidegger's question of the perception of one's societal role (1929) comes to the fore here when engaging with parents and establishing oneself within that role so the meaning behind that relationship is explicit and intentional. Fuertes *et al*. (2018) carried out a study in Portugal which highlighted the role of ECTs and parents as "diverse, but complementary educational role models (who) provide different learning opportunities" (p. 221).

Within the Irish ELC sector, the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) provides guidance and reflection for ECTs, as well as students on the LINC programme, on how to apply this research regarding partnership with parents when working with children and their families. However, Van Laere and Vandenbroeck (2017) question

whether parents, children and staff, who are at the centre of early years' practice, are sufficiently involved and consulted in debates, policies and practices that affect them. This is echoed by Ryan and Quinlan (2017) who note that while parents of children with additional needs might identify the need for greater collaboration with professionals, the lack of child and family-centeredness, and uncertain access to a complex early intervention and school system may create a sense of 'us vs them'.

Collaborative Practice between the Early Learning and Care Setting and the Primary School

Ring and O'Sullivan (2016) argue for the need to adopt a pedagogy of voice and a pedagogy of listening, to support children transitioning to primary school to ensure that their rights and views are responded to in a meaningful and practical way in the process. While many children encounter difficulties with transitions at some stage in their educational journey, children with additional needs may experience significant challenges and require a range of interventions and supports (Daly *et al.* 2016; Twomey 2016; O'Leary and Moloney 2021). Fabian and Dunlop (2007) illustrate how transitioning from one phase of education to another involves a number of changes for the child which is far more complex than moving from one physical environment to another. The transition from preschool includes a change in the child's key person or teacher, who may have different perspectives on the image and constructs of the child and a different pedagogical approach to teaching in the early years. The European Commission (2019) emphasises the importance of collaboration between the preschool and the primary school staff in sharing information on the child and cooperation in the curricular approaches during the transition stage. Ring and her colleagues (2016) illustrate that there is an awareness in practice of the need to support children in the transition process and identify strategies implemented by schools such as open days, information evenings, shortened school days and summer camps. However, the findings also indicate a lack of communication between preschools and primary schools to support the transition process, despite acknowledgement that collaboration and

communication are key to effective transitions for all children. Ravenscroft *et al.* (2018) outline similar findings in their research on factors associated with successful transitions for children with additional needs in eight European countries, including Ireland, emphasising the need for the child and their families to be at the centre of all decisions that affect them. Within the Irish context, there have been innumerable attempts to support transition from preschool to primary school, which O' Kane and Murphy (2016) discuss in their overview of the ten transfer documents, developed collaboratively between schools and preschools at that stage. The Individual Learning Profile (DCYA 2016b) and the transfer documents designed by AsIAm (2017) are also used to share information with the primary school regarding the strengths, interests and learning goals of the child with additional needs. Having recognised the multitude of transfer documents within and between the education sectors, NCCA developed the *Mo Scéal* (2018) document, translated from Irish to mean 'My Story', which is based around the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009), to support the transition from preschool to primary school. This document is designed to facilitate collaboration by seeking input from the child, the parent and the ECT before it is shared with the primary school.

There is a growing consensus regarding the need for the primary school to be "ready for children" rather than the child being "school ready" (UNICEF 2012; NCCA 2018), which Dockett *et al*. (2010) discuss in relation to the challenges of finding a school that has the ability and the resources to meet the needs of each child attending. Despite aspirations for a shared pedagogical approach between preschool and infant classes, emphasized by play-based learning (NCCA 2009; 2015), interpretations of curricular approaches, as well as varying understanding of the rights of the child, creates challenges in this transition process. Ring *et al*. (2016) outline the characteristics of such a 'ready school' as having this continuity between preschool and primary school as well as a commitment to a child-centred approach and ongoing teacher development. Similarly, the UNESCO *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion* (2009) emphasise that inclusive educational settings ensure that the education system is able to reach all students, promoting a shift to this

model of inclusive practice rather than one of integration. However, inclusive education settings have to involve all stakeholders, thereby creating a shared responsibility and commitment to reflection and up-skilling (Fortunati *et al*. 2019). Twomey (2016) identifies the need for educators working with children with ASD or other additional needs, to have the professional skills to work alongside other stakeholders. She emphasises the importance of effective collaboration between these stakeholders to develop individualised programmes. Developing a partnership between preschool and primary school is presented by Duignan *et al*. (2016) as a pre-requisite to successful transitions whereby they share vital information, recognising that the child's adjustment to the new school environment can have a real and lasting impact on their lifelong learning experience. While Ring *et al.* (2016) recommended the development of formal communication structures between the ELC and primary school settings, engagement with the NCCA *Mo Scéal* (2018a) transition documents are optional for both parties, despite the assertion that transitions are a shared responsibility (NCCA 2018b). The Final Report of the NCCA transition documents (2018b) outline the impact of the initiative to support children and their families and how it supports a professional and collegial relationship between the ECT and the primary school teacher. However, it simultaneously recognises the challenges that impact the roll-out of resources on a wider platform as a standardised practice to support transitions from preschool to primary school (NCCA 2018b).

The lack of consistency in provision of supports for children with additional needs in preschool and primary schools has been outlined in a review of the Special Needs Assistants (SNA) scheme by the NCSE (2018). While the AIM is a strengths-based approach which focuses on inclusion through the provision of resources and implementing strategies that support the ELC environment to become more inclusive (AIM 2016), the traditional model of the 'Special Needs Assistant' in the primary school classroom still prevails (NCSE 2018). The NCSE (2018) outlines guidance on supporting the teaching staff and suggested a change of term to 'Inclusion Support Assistants', in order to create a more inclusive environment for children recognising the need for training and communication to ensure the effective implementation of this model in the primary school. Consistency in

curricular approaches, particularly in the younger classes, with the play-based early childhood programmes is another key indicator of successful transition (O'Kane 2016; NCCA 2018b) and will be outlined in further detail in relation to pedagogical practice. *First Five* (GoI 2018) recognises the importance of transitions to primary school and having a competent system which promotes this communication between ELC settings, primary schools and parents, "particularly for children with additional needs" (p.14). The concept of inclusive education, as advocated by the AIM in the early years sector, and presented through the learning from the LINC programme, has the potential to influence this shift to a more child-centred approach in the primary school.

Working Collaboratively with Better Start and Early Intervention Teams

As mentioned previously, prior to the introduction of the AIM, there was a number of different initiatives to support the inclusion of children with additional needs into mainstream educational institutions which included limited ad hoc HSE funding for "Special Needs Assistants" in the preschool setting; support and guidance from the childcare committees, which was then formalised somewhat with the introduction of the Better Start quality programme (IDG 2015). Up until recent years, the ELC setting played a very minor role in supporting children and their families in accessing services despite recognition that early intervention has a direct link with more positive outcomes across all areas of development (NCSE 2011; Recchia and Puig 2011; Ring *et al*. 2018; DCEDIY 2022b). The Interdepartmental Group (2015) anticipated that ECTs might require "support and advice from external early years' educational experts to assist them in enabling a truly inclusive practice and the optimal participation of a child with a disability in the pre-school room" (p.33). Owing to the complexity of qualifications and experiences within the ELC sector, this expert advice is intended to support the ELC team in considering how to create an inclusive environment to work for all children in the setting. The Early Years Specialist (EYS) is also expected to support the setting to work in partnership with parents and liaise with a range of other professionals as required. As detailed in Chapter One however, the initial AIM application to obtain this Level 4 support

must be made by the setting, with parental consent. Once the application has been processed, the EYS and the ECT work collaboratively to liaise with parents on strategies and interventions which are based around an assessment and observation of the child's strengths and needs (DCYA 2016b). A Masters study on the AIM in its early stages (Joyce 2018) found that staff in ELC settings who had availed of support from the EYS were very positive about the efficiency and quality of supports received. These supports involved assisting the ECT to engage with parents, liaise with therapeutic services and in offering practical strategies to support the child with additional needs. The practical suggestions to develop the child's communication and social skills, as well as the use of observation methods modelled by the EYS, to recognise the child's strengths, supported the ECT to adapt the curriculum to enhance these strengths (Joyce 2018). However, a more recent study carried out by Roberts and Callaghan (2021) indicate concerns about the role of the EYS in making recommendations for Level 7 support and setting goals for the child after a brief visit to the setting. The consultation process between the ECT, parent and the EYS in identifying the strengths and needs of the child is not discussed by the participants in this regard, which may further inform the need for more effective communication and collaboration (ibid.).

The need for such collaboration has been identified in the review of the first year of the AIM (DCYA 2019) to bring different agencies and supports together within a region and consider how best to co-operate in the best interest of the child. Although concern was noted in the evaluation from those involved in organisations delivering disability services to young children, about stepping back in order for AIM to take over their role, it was acknowledged that the AIM was not designed to 'replace' or 'roll back' local services.
A DCYA (2019) report outlined findings from both the Better Start EYS and the ECTs, of minimal communication with associated therapists working with the children. The report did however note some exceptions where there was an existing relationship between the preschool and therapist prior to the child starting pre-school. Case studies carried out by the DCYA (2019) note a distinct lack of reciprocity and responsiveness to the child's needs by therapeutic services in four

out of the five settings examined. This had a direct impact on the development of positive working relationships as well as impacting the work of the ECT in supporting the child's holistic development in an inclusive environment as theorised in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems. Lee (2015) identifies similar issues regarding parental and teacher frustrations with the lack of communication and collaboration between services in Sweden. Parents want and need better collaboration with all stakeholders involved in their child's life. As noted earlier, Ryan and Quinlan (2017, p. 47) identified as an 'us V them' theme in relation to the lack of child and family centeredness in a complex system. *First Five* (GoI 2018) has identified the need for integrated services "where the workforce within and across health, Early Learning and Care, primary education and family support services share a common language and work together" (p.15). This stance is again specified in the European Council Recommendations (2019) that adequate supports and provisions for children with additional needs and their families should involve all relevant 'actors' including educational, social and health services, again denoting to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979).

Inclusive Pedagogy

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) outlines the rights of children with additional needs to access schools with a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs. It asserts that "regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (p. 33). The realities of this assertion rest on that assumption of an inclusive orientation which as previously discussed, is dependent upon the role of the adult, their knowledge, skills and perspective, to create such a learning environment. While Siraj-Blatchford (2004) describes pedagogy as the practice or the art of teaching, indicating the creative process that is involved in the sharing of information in a meaningful way with others, Ljungblad (2019) argues that while "interpersonal relationships constitute the cornerstone of teaching" (p. 2),

participation in pedagogical relationships can be problematic due to the complexity of interactions between the teacher and child. The Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020), the foundation of the LINC programme, incorporates twelve key statements under the term 'inclusive pedagogy' (Table 27) to reflect the temporal and interactional environment of the ELC setting, emphasising the importance of a child-led programme based around the interests and needs of all children.

Table 27 An Inclusive Pedagogy Reflective Statements in the Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care (LINC Consortium 2016-2020)

1. Children's experiences are planned with the needs of all children in mind.
2. Strategies are in place to promote the participation of all children in learning.
3. A range of appropriate pedagogical approaches is used to support the holistic development of all children.
4. Play and playful learning are key features of practice for all children.
5. All children's communication and interaction are promoted.
6. All children's views are valued and responded to.
7. Early identification of children who require additional support is central to practice.
8. A variety of approaches to observation, recording and assessment is in place.
9. Early years educators plan, implement and evaluate children's learning in partnership with children, parents and relevant others.
10. Positive relationships are understood and nurtured.
11. Children's specific assessed needs are understood as 'signposts' that support children's learning and development.
12. External assistance is elicited where required to support the setting in meeting children's additional needs.

As indicated, the Competency Framework (ibid) includes different elements of the ELC curriculum and invites reflection on the statements regarding how children are supported in the setting. A central feature of an inclusive pedagogy is the fact that it works for all children and is not specifically designed to support children with additional needs (Moloney and McCarthy 2018; Donnellan *et al.* 2021; Ring *et al.* 2021). Instead, it considers each individual child and how the learning environment and curriculum can ensure quality provision of care and education for all children in the group. Inclusive pedagogy will be reviewed in the following section under the

themes developed from the data analysis: Relational Pedagogy; Play-based and Emergent Curriculum; and Documenting the Inclusive Curriculum.

Relational Pedagogy

The concept of relational pedagogy focuses on children's relationships with others, their communication and interactions (Papatheodorou 2009; O'Toole *et al.* 2014; Page 2018), emphasising what Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognises as the microsystem of important people who play a central role in children's development by virtue of regular and personal interactions. Prior to the introduction of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), Hayes (2008) outlined her argument for a 'nurturing pedagogy' in the ELC sector in Ireland, a place where care and education were intertwined with the nurturing engagement of quality interactions. *Siolta* (CECDE 2006), the quality framework, had already recognised the key role of interactions in the early years' and the importance of those meaningful relationships between children and adults, as well as acknowledging the rights of the child in having this safe space where their needs are met across all areas of development (Lundy 2007). Including children is interpreted by Malaguzzi (1993) as providing children with an awareness and recognition of their rights and strengths in the preschool and passionately speaks of the 'rich child' in the Reggio environment. This 'rich child' is one who is "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and children" (p.12). The centrality of a quality interactional environment was observed by Daly *et al.* (2016) as having the potential to enrich children's learning or to consequently impact negatively on children's development and well-being, depending on the opportunities for communication and engagement with others.

This space then needs to be "an emotionally safe environment" which Bluestein (2001, p. 66) identifies as a place where children feel valued and safe, as well as challenged in their learning. A key feature of an emotionally safe environment is a sense of identity and belonging where one is treated with respect and there are no judgements, discrimination or prejudices. Within the Irish context, and as discussed in Chapter One, the *Aistear* framework embraces inclusive concepts through the

four interlinked themes of *Well Being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating,* and *Exploring and Thinking (*NCCA 2009*)* which emphasise the importance of relationships in the early years and how these are fundamental to development. Children's connections with others are a key principle in *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), recognising the importance of their relationships with parents, family and the community, as well as the adult in the ELC setting. The EYEI (DES 2018) indicates quality of the relational environment by identifying how the ELC is supporting responsive and respectful relationships as well as nurturing the children's sense of identity and belonging and the uniqueness of each child in the setting. Similarly in the *Early Years' Foundation Stage* (EYFS) in the English system (DfE 2017), children are supported to learn and develop through positive relationships with each other and with early years practitioners. A pedagogy of listening, which is informed by a slow and nurturing approach, underpins the quality of the relational environment as well as indicating a commitment to supporting diversity and inclusion in the classroom (Lundy 2007; Ryan 2021). Simpson *et al*. (2017) argue that this pedagogy of listening has the potential to lead the ECT to become more sensitive to the impact of inequality and disadvantage in children's lives and therefore support children's empowerment and participation in the learning environment. Supporting this assumption, O' Rourke *et al.* (2017), in their Irish study on the implementation of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) in primary schools, found that children's relationships with peers, family and teachers had a definite impact on the quality of their experiences in the setting. For children with ASD in the classroom, the absence of such support had a direct impact on interactions with others and the range of connections with peers were shown to decrease with age (Daly *et al*. 2016; O'Sullivan *et al*. 2018). Indeed, Moloney and McCarthy (2018) view relational pedagogy as the "bedrock of ECEC". Hence, they emphasize the key role of the ECT in their interactions with children thereby "supporting social-emotional development, fostering learning dispositions and laying the foundations for lifelong learning" (p. 101).

Play-based and Emergent Curriculum as Key Features of Inclusive Pedagogy

Chapter One highlights the central role of play in children's learning and development in the early years, as evidenced through a myriad of policy initiatives in the Irish context, most notable, the practice frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The concept of 'learning through play' is equally central in international curricula, including *Being, belonging and becoming* in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2010) and *Te Whariki* in New Zealand (Ministry of Education 2017). This emphasis on play stands in stark contrast to that of academic performance and school readiness in the English early childhood system (Hoskins and Smedley 2018).

In relation to early childhood in Ireland, the *Guide to Early Years Education Inspection* (DES 2018) specifies that play should be central to children's learning and development forming the foundation of an inclusive and meaningful early years programme. The EYEI process, guided by best practice as advocated by *Síolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear*, outlines the value of play to provide opportunities for exploration, creativity and meaning-making for all children in the ELC setting. Opportunities to engage in such play opportunities should be "freely available, accessible, appropriate and well-resourced to sustain purposeful learning" (DES 2018, p. 21), emphasising child-directed engagement in a space that reflects their interests and identities. The signposts for practice (ibid.) encourage the ECT to consider how different types of play are offered to children and their role in facilitating, guiding, leading and partnering in the play process to support children's inclusion. Play, in itself, is multifaceted and complex, and has many features, including choice, voluntary engagement, internal rules and based on the process rather than the end-product (Gray 2008; Whitebread 2010; O'Sullivan *et al*. 2018; O'Sullivan 2021). It has the potential to lead to changes in children's knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and skills (Davey and Lundy 2011; Ifenthaler *et al*. 2012). Indeed, children themselves consistently report on the importance of play in their lives (Horgan *et al.* 2017). Lundy (2019) posits play as a rights-based issue arguing that there is not enough emphasis on Article 29 of the UNCRC, which she sees as

more aspirational in its insinuation of the value of play in education in a more child-centred and empowering interpretation.

The concept of the emergent curriculum in many ways fits the criteria of Lundy's (2019) interpretation of Article 29 in terms of basing a curriculum around their individual interests and needs, in an environment that reflects these interests and supports their belonging (NCCA 2009; NCCA 2015; Kelleher and Fenlon 2021). Using Lundy's model (2007) as a framework for discussion, Skehill (2021c) explains how provocations for play, set out within the early years' environment, provides opportunity for choice and engagement for all children, while simultaneously empowering the ECT to guide and scaffold children's participation. It is thought that a play-based curriculum is a level playing field for all children and ensures that everyone in the group can participate at their own stage of development in accordance with their strengths and interests (CECDE 2006; Kernan 2007; Whitebread 2010; Blake *et al.* 2018; Skehill 2021c). In a study exploring the impact of outdoor play experiences for preschool children with ASD, Sexton *et al.* (2018) found that their play was about choice and personal autonomy, which had a direct positive impact on behaviour within the ELC setting. Similar findings are reported by Daly *et al*. (2016) from their study of children with ASD in the primary school sector in Ireland who identified play opportunities as important features of their educational experiences. However, O'Sullivan *et al.* (2018) raise concerns regarding the potential loss of playful opportunities for children with ASD in the curriculum when there was a preoccupation with interventions and schedules. They therefore argue for a play-based approach as a core feature of education provision for children with ASD, identifying play as a "powerful contribution to emotional well-being which is critical to overall learning success" (O'Sullivan *et al*. 2018; p. 43). Concerns have also been identified in contemporary research regarding the recognition of play-based learning once children leave the ELC or kindergarten setting, and the focus on more structured, adult directed activities in the primary school curriculum (Ring *et al.* 2016; O'Leary and Moloney 2021). Specifically, in relation to children with ASD, O'Leary and Moloney (2021) identified how the

diverse expectations of primary school teachers, ECTs and parents can negatively affect the children's experience of the curriculum in the early years.

Drawing upon Table 27, it is clear that the Competency framework (LINC Consortium 2016 - 2020) positions inclusive pedagogy as incorporating strategies to support children's learning and development in a playful environment. Ring (2018) argues for the Reggio environment in the educational setting which is designed to support all children through the complex interwoven elements of the physical space, the role of the adult as well as the routines in place in the classroom. Within such a space where the emphasis is on small group activities, open-ended resources and provocations for exploration and investigation, the child is supported through a variety of strategies that are incorporated into the environment (DCYA 2016; Egan 2018; Feeney 2018; Skehill 2021a). Following much criticism focusing upon the overcrowded subject based, and teacher-directed primary school curriculum, that has been associated with the 'institutionalisation' of children's educational lives (O'Rourke *et al.* 2017; Cummins 2018; NCSE 2018), the NCCA (2019) published a draft revised curriculum. In a timely review currently revising the *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) framework, there is opportunity to reflect on the successful implementation of play-based, thematic learning within the ELC sector as a model for quality and inclusive early childhood education in the primary school sector. A deeper understanding of the principles underpinning the national curriculum framework (NCCA 2009) is required to address a lack of understanding of the holistic nature of *Aistear* which is often confined to an '*Aistear hour',* rather than recognition of the broad-based learning outcomes that are relevant across the daily routines, subject areas and interactions within the school setting. This consistency of pedagogical approach then, from early childhood to primary education would support the transition process for all children (Griffin 2018; NCCA 2018).

Documenting the Inclusive Curriculum

Within the ELC sector, there is an expectation of the ECT to use a variety of assessment approaches to gather information about the child, and to use such

information to support the child's development (DES 2018; Dunleavy-Lavin *et al*. 2018; Ryan 2018; Albin-Clarke 2021). This involves the effective interpretation of information gathered to guide practice as well as the planning and implementation of the emergent curriculum (NCCA 2015; Carr and Lee 2019). Hayes (2008) identifies the need to develop skills of observation and reflection that would enable the ECT to engage effectively with children through non-intrusive planning processes. Pedagogical documentation goes beyond the idea of recording for the mere sake of adhering to guidelines and inspection processes and instead is to be valued for the ways in which it guides pedagogical practice and promotes reflection on the values and ideas that underpin that practice (Flannery-Quinn and Parker 2016). In attempting to understand the value of meaningful pedagogical documentation, French (2007) identifies the need for the *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) to support inclusive practice through the guiding principle of democracy whereby the children's voices are at the heart of the preschool curriculum. Similarly, Kang and Walsh (2018) emphasise the importance of documentation to promote dialogue and communication between parents, teachers and the children themselves, and this is evidenced in recommendations in the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) regarding planning and assessing in the ELC, as well as promoting partnership with parents. Documentation is a core feature of the Reggio approach discussed earlier in regard to its inclusive curricular approach. In this respect, Malaguzzi (1993) considers pedagogical documentation provides opportunities to carry out research on practice to understand learning that takes place in the ELC setting, noticing the uniqueness of each child. However, the variability of approaches and the lack of clarity regarding expectations of documentation in the setting can impact engagement with such pedagogical approaches, as evidenced in inspection reports within the Irish context (DES 2016-2019). Colliver's study (2017) indicates that there is insufficient guidance for adults working with children regarding the shift away from listening, to "truly understanding them", and the need to develop practice from the "adultist" assumptions (p.21). This links back to earlier discussions about the knowledge and skills required to work effectively with children in the early years by virtue of one's own training experience and ongoing access to CPD experiences.

The child-centred approach underpinning *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), is further developed with the AIM (DCYA 2016c) whereby the strengths and interests of the child are observed and identified to devise strategies to support development and participation. The LINC programme incorporates learning around observations and planning to extend learners' awareness of the value of pedagogical documentation, with particular reference to the AIM *Inclusion Plan* (2016b). However, as discussed in Chapter One, many learners are exempt from modules *Child Development* and *Curriculum for Inclusion* based on recognition of prior learning, thereby missing opportunity to develop additional skills in accordance to recent policy and research as relevant to their role. Effective pedagogical documentation of the early childhood curriculum promotes adherence to those standards of inclusive pedagogical practice as advocated in the Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020), as well as meeting the considered standards of best practice in the self-evaluation tools promoted within the ELC sector (NCCA 2015; AsIAm 2017; EASNIE 2017b).

Summary

The Literature Review illustrates how the themes of the research study overlap as their use in this phenomenological study is primarily to support the understanding and the organisation of the large amount of data gathered from the participants' experiences, and not necessarily to create clear distinctions between each theme (Aspers and Corte 2019). The main themes of Inclusive Culture, Professional Identity of the ECT, Collaborative Practice and Inclusive Pedagogy and the subsequent sub-themes were identified by linking back to the Findings from the pre-LINC and post-LINC analysis of the data. The IHP approach created a real sense of engagement with the literature as I endeavoured to create understanding of participants' experiences of their engagement with the LINC Programme. The thematic analysis of the findings served as a platform for investigation into the concepts that arose from this process and created more of a connection and flow in the research. The literature search was an extension of the data analysis process and served true to phenomenology in prioritising the experiences of the

participants. However, engaging with the literature also highlighted what Urban (2009) theorised regarding those who are talked about and those who do the talking, and the imbalance of power in that regard. While this Literature Review was not about finding a 'gap' in the literature (Braun and Clarke 2022), it has however highlighted a lack of practitioner voice in a meaningful way in the research.

The Literature Review informs how participants 'life-worlds' are understood and presented by those who experience the phenomenon and sets the stage for the Discussion chapters "where personal, academic and profession knowledge is once more returned" through dialogue between the findings, the initial contextual review, and the detailed conceptual examination of this chapter (Fry *et al.* 2017). Again, in reflecting on the research process, the presentation of the Literature Review within the tradition doctoral thesis posed some conflicts with the chosen methodology. I feel I have been challenged in consideration of the requirements to illustrate a broad understanding of key concepts, while simultaneously remaining focused on the meanings placed on experiences by participants. There is a risk of repetitiveness in the Discussion chapters having presented the literature in this section, however, it is the engagement with this literature that has broadened my understandings of these concepts. Investigating the experiences and perceptions of participants through the literature has caused me to challenge my assumptions and to recognise that I too need to be continually aware of my horizon of significance and how that influences my interpretations of the findings. This chapter sets the foundation for the subsequent discussion and the rationale for recommendations for practice and policy development.

Chapter Four

The 'Whatness' of Inclusion: Findings and Discussion

"Inclusion isn't really about just additional needs all the time, sure it's not? Just those quieter voices – the ones that could be forgotten about, y'know?"

Introduction

Heidegger (1929) describes the starting point in attempting to uncover people's realities of a phenomenon as having to make a 'leap' into the data. He uses the imagery of swimming, philosophising that one cannot know what swimming is like, unless you dive in and experience that sensation. This interpretative journey into the phenomenon experienced by the participants feels like something similar in that I have been testing the waters, questioning how deep I should wade in to find that meaning. Endeavouring to capture the essence of what inclusion means to participants – that which Fry *et al.* (2017) describe as the 'whatness' of a phenomenon (p. 51) has involved the writing and re-writing of their experiences and perspectives. Heidegger's ontological stance articulates the need to be 'in' the world, emphasising that knowledge comes from that 'being' and engagement with the phenomenon. From a philosophical perspective, my pre-understanding of the early years sector presents me with a broad and informed horizon. However, in keeping with the hermeneutic approach, reflexivity and a willingness to understand the participants' experiences remains central to analysis of the findings.

The research questions create the foundation for the discussion and form the link between themes developed from the analysis:

1) How does participation in the LINC programme influence how early childhood teachers (ECT) define inclusion?
2) How does participation in the LINC programme influence their perceptions in relation to the inclusion of children with additional needs?
3) How does participation in the LINC programme influence how ECTs include all children in ECCE settings?
4) What factors affect the implementation of the learning from the LINC programme?

Discussion is based on the hermeneutic circle of understanding, which recognises that themes cannot be isolated from each other, but rather that each relates to the other to create a holistic comprehension of the phenomenological experience (Groenewald 2004; Bazely 2009; Englander 2012; Bhar *et al.* 2019). The decision to combine the findings and discussion was the result of much deliberation in considering how best to present the constructs of the phenomenon while remaining true to the interpretive and reflexive paradigm of this study. The first order constructs (Schutz 1932/1976) of the phenomenon are presented in the participants' stories, capturing what they prioritised as central to their experience. Then as researcher, I have organised and interpreted these stories, creating the second order constructs by using the literature and theory to inform my interpretation, which in terms of relative reflexivity, is about showing the meaning behind these realities. This study has not been about 'testing' the knowledge gleamed from the programme or necessarily having a comparative case study of inclusive and quality practice. To attribute a comparative element would potentially undermine the subtle shifts in consciousness that had a real impact on elements of practice. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe this stage of the data analysis in reflective thematic analysis as "arriving home and telling a story about your adventure" (p. 117), while also advising the researcher that this process of writing the story is part of that analysis. For me, this element of the data analysis has comprised innumerable drafts of participants' stories; ponderings and drawings in my reflexive journal and ongoing revisions to capture the essence of this "whatness" of inclusion from the realities of practice. The final themes and

subthemes of the study are presented in Figure 43 to illustrate the interconnectivity and complexity of understanding the influence of the LINC programme on participant's perceptions and practices of inclusion.

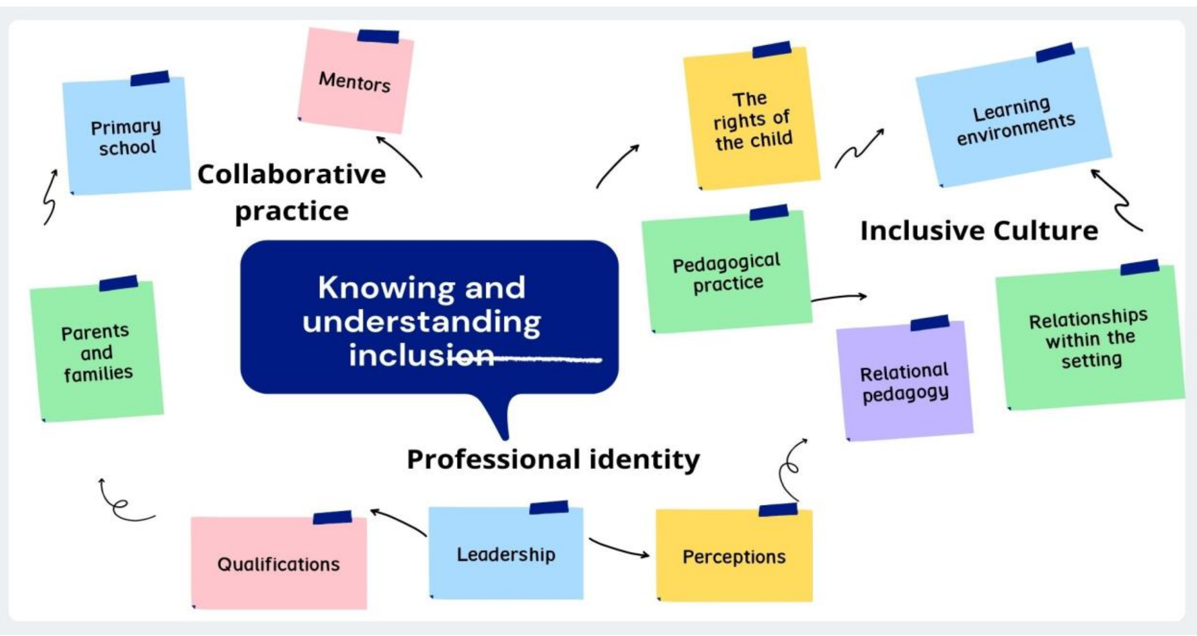

Figure 43 Final themes and subthemes of the study considering the influence of the LINC programme on knowing and understanding inclusion

This theme of Inclusive Culture is the foundation of the study, discussing how ECTs view children in their setting and identifying core elements of their pedagogical practice, which demonstrate their understanding of inclusion in daily routines. The emphasis in this theme is about noticing the actions and interactions on an everyday basis within the setting. The analysis and discussion identify the subtle differences in understandings following engagement with the LINC programme as well as addressing challenges in implementing change in accordance with new knowledge. In considering how this theme contributes to the overall analysis, the fact that it is grounded in practice provides insight into the lived experiences of ECTs who are expected to lead and guide inclusive practice. It links to the other themes relating to collaborative practice and the professional self, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, by identifying ECTs' pedagogical knowledge and perspective of inclusion and their role in leading this in the ECCE setting.

The findings and discussion in this study are not about filling a gap in the research but instead are about "contributing to a rich tapestry of understanding…in different places, spaces and times" (Braun and Clarke 2021c, p. 120) which in this case places attention on the role of the ECT working with young children. This chapter provides a theoretically-informed and contextual rationale in response to the research questions, guided by key concepts developed from the data analysis (Figure 44) to tell the "story about my adventure" (ibid, p. 119).

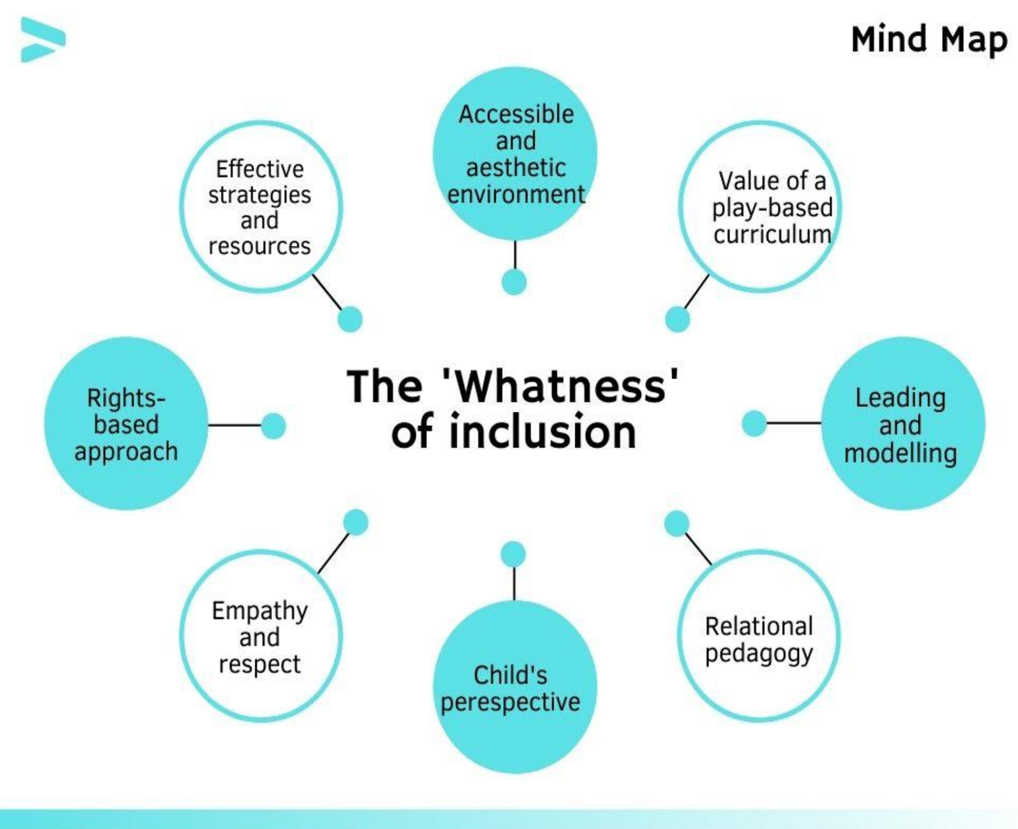

Figure 44 The 'Whatness' of inclusion: Key Concepts of the Theme

This theme, '*The Whatness of Inclusion'*, is informed by these key concepts (Figure 44), which are interwoven and connected as parts of the whole phenomenological experience. These concepts might also be considered the 'ingredients' of the story (Braun and Clarke 2016), each enhancing the meaning of the other and creating new understandings as a result of this blended discussion. The contextual

background of aspects of participants' *Dasein* sets the scene for this 'story' as a foundation for exploration of the 'whatness' of inclusion. Relational Pedagogy is analysed in consideration of one's empathic and respectful image of the child from a rights-based perspective. These 'ingredients' are added to understandings of the early years' curriculum and environment, discussing strategies and pedagogical practice to consider the influence of learning from the LINC programme.

Setting the Scene for the Story to Begin

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the profile of the participants is indicative of the sectoral profile in so far as there was a broad geographical spread across nine counties, with a blend of full day-care and sessional services as well as representation from both private and community-based settings. Participants include both managers and practitioners within the sector, with owner-managers playing an active role working directly with the children (Figure 45). Mary, Siobhan, Ruth and Ciara have a Level 8 B.A. degree in ECCE, while the other participants have a level 6 in ECCE completed or near-completion prior to starting the LINC programme.

Figure 45 The Role of the Research Participants in their Respective Settings.

Interestingly, the initial findings indicated that six of the fourteen participants had direct experience with additional needs either personally or involving a close family member. This personal experience was highlighted by Ciara as an issue which influenced her role in working with children, resulting in her wanting to push children to socialise:

> I think my own personal experience would make it the way I am – that I make sure every child gets access by every member of staff. I know that my own son was in the Naíonra[12] last year, he was waiting for a space to come free in the local special needs school so he was in a Naíonra and he spent all day sitting at a table on his own cos he couldn't talk…… it is tough but like that's what would make me push them a little bit harder to socialise.

Similarly, Claire discusses her experience many years ago with her daughter when the local preschool "didn't want to mind her" This experience has increased her sensitivity and empathy towards parents. She states "I can understand how a parent could feel – how a child can make you feel different – like I can understand that". Participants who have a family member with additional needs report that this aspect of their *Dasein,* had a direct impact on their role in the ELC setting and were often considered a support point for colleagues in relation to working with children with additional needs. As a parent of a child with autism, Emma notes "the experience that I have at home is what stands to me here – cos if anyone here has a query about a child, I'm the one that they would come to".

The informed pedagogical practices and strategies of the ECT are central features of an inclusive early learning and care (ELC) setting (Hawkins 2014; Taggart 2016; Moloney and McCarthy 2018; French 2019) but the contextual lives of participants also influence their professional role. From the outset, it is clear that all participants, in both the pre and post-LINC interviews and visits, care for the children in their respective settings. While the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009), discussed in Chapter One, might be lauded for the flexibility it offers the early years' curriculum, there are varying interpretations of its themes and principles regarding

[12] Naíonra is an Irish medium playschool for preschool children

implementation in practice, depending on one's knowledge and experience. The varying qualification levels of participants in this study, as well as differing educational providers, has resulted in a lack of consistency in quality and provision as discussed in earlier chapters (Pobal 2018; Moloney 2020; Oke *et al.* 2021). In practice, as evidenced in this study, this translated into different interpretations of what an inclusive preschool should look like, as well as varying degrees of willingness and enthusiasm for embracing change in the setting. With this contextual reality in mind, the LINC programme module content was developed and has been reviewed based on feedback from students and other key stakeholders to ensure the content is based on contemporary policy and best practice guidance and research (Interdepartmental Group 2015; Ring *et al*. 2018). Students who had completed a level 6 module in *Child Development, Early Childhood Curriculum* and a *Special Needs* or *Disability awareness* (QQI 2020) in the last five years were exempt from two LINC modules: *Child Development* and *Curriculum for Inclusion*. Similarly, anyone with comparable modules completed for their degree in the past ten years were exempted from these modules as part of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy of the programme. However, in consideration of the changes in policy and practice in the ELC sector over the past number of years, it could be argued that those who availed of this exemption missed out on some valuable learning in relation to different elements of the inclusive curriculum.

During the initial data collection process, all participants were asked about their expectations of the LINC programme and what they hoped to learn from this experience (Figure 46).

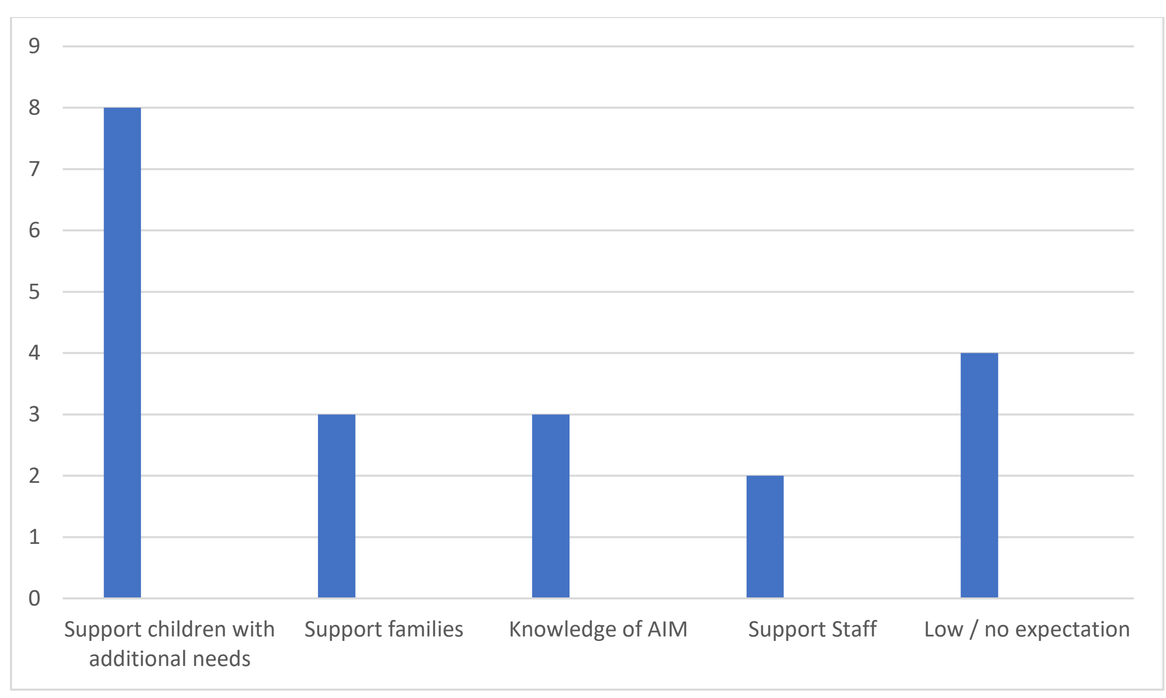

Figure 46 Expectations of Learning from the Leadership for Inclusion Programme

As illustrated in Figure 46, participants expected that the programme would provide learning around inclusion in the ELC environment and how to support children with additional needs. Lucy, an ECT, notes her expectation that it would "build my knowledge and boost my confidence to be able to help children". Maria and Ruth, both owner-managers, anticipated that their learning would benefit their colleagues in the preschool. Maria expressed her hope that the LINC programme would act as "a little cushion", where she might be able "ask questions and get pointers" for her and her team. Others were looking forward to meeting fellow professionals to share practical ideas, with Claire anticipating learning from the experiences of "the broad range and age of people who are going to be doing it (LINC)". Four of the participants, all Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) graduates, reported a low expectation of the programme, feeling already confident of their knowledge and experience in the field of additional needs. Mary, for example, asserts that "I don't think I'm going to get a lot of learning out of it 'cos I do have a lot of experience".

In considering these expectations and the reality of their subsequent engagement with LINC, as evidenced in the findings, one is drawn to Ingleby's (2018) concept of CPD as "transformational" when "professional experiences of the educators are changed in significant ways" (p.23). The findings discussed in this chapter illustrate some significant development in participants' understanding of inclusion underpinned in the LINC Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020) (Table 28).

Table 28 An Inclusive Culture (LINC Consortium 2016-2020)

1.	All children are welcome.
2.	All children are valued.
3.	A focus is placed on promoting respectful interactions.
4.	There are high expectations for all children.
5.	Partnership with parents is actively promoted.
6.	Difference is acknowledged and celebrated.
7.	The environment accommodates the needs of all children.
8.	All policies are inclusive policies.

The reflections presented in Table 28 mark a shift away from the "quantifiable, locational terms" that Nutbrown and Clough (2013, p. 4) argue can falsify inclusion in the ELC setting. Instead, they provide a focal point for reflection when one considers how these statements are evident in practice. While the technicalities of completing the final Portfolio Module of LINC through evidence of these reflections on inclusive culture is embedded in student assessment, the reality of guiding and mentoring colleagues to share such ideals incorporates more complex issues. Intertwined with this theme, is the awareness that inclusion must be led from within the setting and be part of everyday practice when working with children and families. Leadership for such quality practice requires commitment and willingness to embrace change, as well as motivating colleagues to do the same (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007; Hallet 2013; Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Skehill 2021b). Thence the effectiveness of the LINC programme must be considered in two ways: firstly, how it influences the participants' understanding of inclusion and

their portrayal of that in practice, and secondly, in relation to their ability to lead the staff team in embracing this understanding as required by their graduation to the role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) on completion of the LINC programme.

Relational Pedagogy as the Bedrock for an Inclusive Culture

A key finding in this study relates to the importance of relational pedagogy, and a conscious awareness of that in practice, as the foundation for meaningful inclusion of children in ELC settings. Ljungblad (2019, p. 6) identifies relational pedagogy as that "in-between space" between teacher and student where trust and respect exist between the two parties, thereby nurturing positive relationships where the child can flourish and grow. Developing and maintaining this relationship is central to the child's sense of security and well-being and, as discussed by Reeves and Le Mare (2017), sets the foundation for their overall positive development. Relational pedagogy reverts back to the "image of the child" as perceived by the ECT (Sorin 2005; NCCA 2015; O'Leary and Moloney 2021), and the interpretation of the principles of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) of the child as a "competent and confident learner". An inclusive preschool is based on the democratic right of each child to have access to, and meaningful participation in, the ECCE programme and is presented in this sub-section as the basis for this exploration into participants' perceptions and practices of inclusion and the influence of LINC on their understandings.

Questioning the Rights of the Child in Education

The findings illustrate how the ECT or the leader within the setting has the power to set the conditions for inclusive education or, as Ljungblad (2019, p. 8) asserts, are "also the people who decide what others to include". Lundy's (2007) model of child participation (Figure 47) outlines the concepts of space, voice, audience and influence that are required to ensure children's rights are upheld in accordance to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). The space given to the child requires more than a physical presence, but a place where one has an opportunity to express their views and opinions. Regardless

of the age or ability of the child, Lundy (2007) asserts the rights of the child to be facilitated and empowered to express and share their view.

Figure 47 Lundy's (2007) Model of Child Participation

The intended chronological implementation of Lundy's (2007) model evidences the intentions behind actions and where some pedagogical practices fall short of meaningful participation. Prior to engagement with the LINC programme, all participants expressed the view that they wanted to support inclusive practice with Claire explaining how:

> we would do our very best to include him, we would. Sometimes we'd have a little place sorted out for him so if he wanted to go and have a bit of quiet place, then he could have that quiet place but we'd also encourage him to take part in the routines.

She recognised how the needs of the child may change depending on circumstances in the child's life like "the Mam could be in hospital or something like that… a child could have an additional need 'cause they actually need that bit of comfort. It's very broad – it can't be just confined to one thing". Like Claire, Emma is a parent of a

child with an additional need, and this empathy is also evident in her perception of inclusion and how it has changed over the years explaining that she

> ..used to think that every child was treated equal – but that's not actually the case. Every child can't be treated equal cos every child is so different and there's different needs there.

O' Connor (2012) asserts that such teacher reflection and discussion on inclusion is central to understanding children's experiences to avoid "tokenistic" gestures of participation (p. 12). The research findings clearly illustrate the regard participants have for children in their settings and their genuine care for their well-being, recognising the relevance of these existing relationships when considering the research questions. While 'emotive' language has at times been criticised in reference to the professional role of the ECT (Taggart 2011), it does in fact encapsulate the very essence of the inclusive culture that LINC espouses. The child in the ELC setting needs to feel welcomed and know that he belongs in that place. The child needs to know that she is valued and her voice is heard within that group environment. Reflection on the key statements in the Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020) encourages the ECT to see things from the child's perspective from the outset, and consideration of all other aspects of ECCE provision is based around these principles and how they are reflected in practice. Schon (1983, p. 44) pioneered this "reflection on action" and "in-action" for all professionals to encourage learning and to guide development and change. *The Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) is referenced extensively in the findings as a useful tool to support this reflective process. Emma, for example, found engaging with the self-evaluation tools in the Practice Guide "really really helpful … it's all about reflection and its easier 'cause it guides you". Similarly, Alice refers back to guidance in the Practice Guide when planning for parental involvement, which emphasises that partnership is "all about communication". She acknowledges that prior to engaging with the LINC programme, she had little knowledge of *Siolta* but now feels that she has "learnt more about *Siolta* I'd say in the last three months than I've ever known".

While *First Five* (GoI 2018) suggests the expansion of this model by introducing a system of self-assessment in measuring quality within the sector, the Children's Rights Alliance (CRC 2020) notes the challenge of measuring and implementing quality in the early years owing to the qualification profile of those working in the sector. However, findings from the pre-LINC interviews illustrate some competent and informed examples of reflective practice on one's work with children by practitioners with a Level 6 qualification. In our initial phone interview, Claire presented an empathic and reflective approach in her work with children, providing an example of this when describing how she supports a little boy with an underlying medical condition in her setting:

> When he would have this slump – he would need to lie down – and then to explain to the other children that sometimes his body just needs to have a little rest…the children in the room need to know what's going on as well. If you are dealing with something else in the room that they would consider out of the norm, children want to know. So, I talked with the Mam about it - and then once you explain to the children, they are fine – and make that space.

Engagement with the learning from the LINC programme provided scope to deepen reflective practice illustrating the value of professional learning to enhance these skills.

There is however recognition of other factors that may influence the learning from LINC in that regard, insofar as acknowledging the *Dasein* of individuals such as Emma and Claire who, as discussed earlier, already demonstrate an empathic disposition and willingness to embrace learning and change. As an ECCE graduate, Siobhan was very confident in the first interview of her informed pedagogical knowledge, presenting her concept of inclusion as*:*

> ..a non-typical expectation….to me additional needs is anything that is outside the ordinary of a child - a child who doesn't speak, a child who has a difficult home, a child who just needs extra care, as well as children who have sensory or other additional needs that are more common.

Siobhan's confidence in her own knowledge however, resulted in lack of engagement with the AIM as advised by the child's occupational therapist (OT). She

described how “the occupational therapy people said that she should apply through AIM, speak to an expert, and I said I was the same, I had the same level of education and training as the people in AIM”. While Siobhan’s reaction may be interpreted as defensive, it might be understood in terms of the contextual reality of her professional qualification not recognised in her role, and an assumption of a deficit perspective in considering the knowledge base in the sector to promote inclusion in practice.

These early findings also illustrate perceived challenges involving the child with additional needs in specific activities and depicted perceptions of ‘integration’ and exclusion with expectation of the child adapting, or not, to the existing environment, mirroring findings in the initial review of the AIM (DCYA 2019c). Both Mary and Teresa, owner-managers in two separate settings, talked about the decision to inform parents that they could not take their child back into preschool unless they had a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) with them. Teresa describes the challenges of working with a boy whom she described as “very aggressive” and how he “would scream – he would just scream”. Although commenting on the fact the “he was intelligent enough” and that “when he was nice, he was extremely nice”, she found his needs too challenging for the preschool environment:

> He didn’t like groups either – he was better on one-to-one – the challenge for us was trying to manage him without any supports in place. We actually said we couldn’t take him back after Christmas unless there was one-to-one.

In both Teresa’s and Mary’s preschools, the parents funded a SNA until AIM support was sourced. A delay in provision of supports, coupled with the referral system by Tusla, was held accountable for practices of further exclusion, as well as putting pressure on those ELC services that had established a reputation for themselves in relation to working with children with additional needs. Tina recounted how she initially felt ‘great’ when she heard that Tusla were recommending her service to parents of children with additional needs, but this had an impact on her practice owing to the large percentage of children within the group with additional needs and the resources she had to support these needs:

. …look – I mean – it wasn't so great because.. look… look…I mean… I suppose they were just… they had problems and they needed to find a place and they were just sending them on, do you know?....I mean there are other preschools in the area that don't have any children with special needs and they are being funded by the DCYA (Department of Child and Youth Affairs). That has… I mean… I'm not a special school… I mean, we're just a regular.. you know…

This insinuation of exclusionary practices by other services, is masked by selective admissions policies, which Ciara also discusses in relation to the high number of children with additional needs coming into her service, "with their parents at their wits end", owing to the fact that "they can't get places elsewhere cos the child has an additional need and their (local) crèche can't take them". She was very critical of this perceived exclusive nature of other local childcare services in this regard, and this was echoed by Siobhan who criticised her local Montessori preschool, claiming she has had three children in the last three years move from that service to her one as "they didn't 'fit' their criteria".

The contextual reality of participants, as well as children in their care, provided insight into lived experiences that were not previously in my horizon of understanding. While there has been a traditional path to the public health nurse (PHN) as a strategy for getting parents to access supports for a child, a different perspective is shared by Ciara who commented on the increase in the number of children with additional needs that haven't "been picked up on". She highlights a key factor in the lack of support for these children:

> Also, a massive issue in the town that we live in is the GP – if you've moved in here in the last 5 years, you can't get a GP in this town. You'd have to go to (local town) – all about 20 minutes from where we are – a lot of our parents are from a lower social class and might not necessarily have the mode of transportation to get their child to a doctor so they aren't going regularly for their doctor check-ups; they aren't going regularly for the district health nurse check-ups – there's a lot of stuff there that goes between the cracks. So, there's a real issue in that area.

There was a sense of helplessness and frustration as participants report on how they are tasked with responsibility of providing support for children with additional needs without the supports or resources to do so. Specific incidents depict how this

impacts children's experiences and that of the settings they attend. In her initial interview, Ruth described her experience of working with a young child presenting with considerable behavioural issues in her small full day-care service:

> ..it was like as if all hell had broke loose in the house – that we had a monster in the house - but this was a child – but we actually had a monster – that was the only way to describe it. There was no… he beat everybody. He kicked. He lashed. He spat. He bit. You name it – what he didn't do.

Sorin (2005) discusses this construct of the "evil child" whose inclusion within the group is only possible "through a realisation of the bad behaviour and a commitment of conformity to the adult's expectations of good behaviour" (p.15). She also depicts the construct of the "out of control child" and how the ECT needs to consider her expectation of children and endeavour to understand what the child is trying to communicate through these disruptive behaviours. Indeed, on following up with Ruth on completion of the LINC programme, she reports a more positive experience for the child, having accessed funding through Level 7 of the AIM. Coupled with the support of an Early Years Specialist (EYS) to guide their work with the child, Ruth explained:

> We had four very, very, very good visits with C (EYS) after that – and she was always online – like you could email her if you had a question you wanted to ask – clarify anything with her – it was superb, absolutely superb. We got the level 7 – that high level of support – and now the extra person didn't literally smother him – but she was still needed there cos he had very high developmental needs.

It is noteworthy that concerns regarding the impact on other children, and subsequently their parents, came from owners in the study. The reality of a childcare business model is communicated in an honest reflection by Maria in the pre-LINC interview. While Maria is committed to making changes to her practice to include children with additional needs, she is reluctant to change the programme too much as she just wants "to find ways to make it work for everyone, for all the children" Although she is "quite open to change, she does not want to "have to change too much if I'm perfectly honest". She justifies this stance by highlighting how her existing clientele are happy with current practices in her setting:

> ..you see people have signed up for the way we run the preschool at the moment and they love what we do and they love the programme that's in place so I'd be nervous a little if I had to change an awful lot.

Her hopes for engagement with the LINC programme therefore were to "get the skills so that I can try and get a balance for everyone". Several other participants contextualised their understanding of participation in terms of supporting the larger group when catering to the needs of a child with additional needs within their service. Tina recalled a "very quiet little boy" in her setting who was "so scared" of a child within the room and the challenge of building up relationships with him so he knew that "we were there to protect him and that he had a voice and that he had the ability to say no and to walk away and then to give him tools on what to do and how to protect himself, you know?". The honesty of her reflection on their concerns for overcoming these challenges indicates a willingness to address these issues in practice. Mary, who also mentioned children's fears in terms of interacting with children with additional needs, explains these issues further. In the following excerpt, she describes challenges she has faced in practice in supporting children with additional needs:

> There are children that come into preschool and they've never been around a child with additional needs. And sometimes the children are afraid – especially if the child screams a bit or cries a bit – like with that child - and they're afraid – and they're all aware….. and it's because they've never experienced it – and that's difficult on them so it is…. And then, am…. You could have a child that has behavioural issues – and the other children find that difficult to understand – and to grasp – and to take in….

Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2021) suggest that there should be a rights-informed response to situations such as this whereby the interests and rights of one child may conflict with the rights of others in the learning environment. They call for a systematic process for resolving tensions and concerns that may arise in practice but emphasise that the voice of the child must be central to all decisions affecting them. In following up with Mary in June, she commented that "a lot of what was on the LINC course – we were putting into practice already", yet the field visit illustrated some challenges in ensuring that the ethos of the setting is fully

understood and implemented by the whole staff team. A little girl with autism sat at a table with her key person for much of the session. During the visit, the staff were preparing for graduation and put a hat and gown on her for a graduation photo which she did not like. Her "audience" however, did not consider her view, as the focus was on capturing that image for parents, and while it was only a brief incident, the child did not have the right to "influence" this situation (Lundy 2007). As previously mentioned, the space given to the child requires more than a physical presence – integration - but a place where one has an opportunity to express their views and opinions. In Mary's case, she displays very positive regard for best practice, having achieved the highest level in the *Siolta* QAP (CECDE 2006). In the context of this incident, Mary's experience may also be considered within the realm of her reality as reflective of the challenges of the role of the INCO in cascading the learning from the LINC programme to the staff team (DCYA 2016b). There was a similar situation in Teresa's setting during the post-LINC visit, when a colleague demonstrated behaviour management techniques that were not cognisant of an inclusive environment nor did it reflect the High Scope Approach (Wiltshire 2011) which had been specified in the interview. In the outdoors, a child was climbing on an apparatus but on the outer part of the tunnel and managing quite well, when the ECT lifted him from behind, told him that it was dangerous and he wasn't allowed on it anymore. There was no discussion with the child. Similarly, when there was an incident where one child ran into another accidentally in the garden, the ECT went over to comfort the child who had been bumped into and told the other child to sit on the step. There was no discussion with him about the incident and he was left to make sense of this on his own. The contextual reality of the working environment of the ECT is considered as having an impact on quality and inclusive practice, insofar as the service is operating at maximum capacity with two adults with 22 children. This is in keeping with the minimum quality standards as required within the Early Years Regulations (DCYA 2016c). As discussed in Chapter One, the sector in Ireland comprises private (74%) and community services (26%) (Pobal 2021). Maintaining the mandated minimum adult/child ratios may therefore signify a business model of provision or possibly, it is owing to difficulty in recruiting staff, both contemporary challenges within the sector (Moloney 2021; Oke *et al.*

2021). This approach to behaviour management and the subsequent dealing with incidents within the setting might be influential in the child-conversations that morning with two children when asked about their friends in preschool:

Ethan:	Mary's my friend as well. She lives beside me and Bobby lives across the road.
Amy:	And Bobby usually be's bold.
Ethan:	Only sometimes…
Amy:	But kinda most of the time.
Ethan:	He's not bold today!
Amy:	And..
Ethan:	*(interrupts her*) Liam thought his brother was bold that time but after my birthday he wasn't cos he liked my birthday.

The children's use of the word 'bold' may reflect behaviour management in the setting and how such labels might be attached to a child when this is inadvertently modelled by adults in the setting. Such terminology could also be attributed to external environments, but it is a point to consider in regard to the role of the adult in the ELC setting in leading inclusion and empathy in practice. The incidents noted were based on the interactions and comments of colleagues of the participants, and although both Mary and Teresa are the owners of settings, the challenge of cascading learning from the LINC programme to support the rights of children and their meaningful participation is evident here. Smith and Smith (2000) discuss the tendency of teachers to support inclusion on a "case by case" basis, depending on the extent of the child's needs and how "behaviour disturbances" impacted their ability to carry out their teaching responsibilities in the classroom (p.2). These "hierarchies of tolerance" (Clough 1999, p. 55) are evidenced in findings of this study through statements that support the participation of children with additional needs in the ECCE programme, but with conditions attached to that involvement. Moloney and McCarthy (2018) present a similar argument in their study asserting that willingness to facilitate a child's participation does not necessarily constitute inclusive practice. Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2021) emphasise the role of the adult in determining children's right to participate and address similar challenges as

evidenced in this study regarding how children's behaviour is perceived and managed within a group environment. Children are welcome, but they must be accompanied by an SNA or Level 7 AIM funding; the curriculum may be adapted to include children, but not too much that might impact parents' perception of the type of service provided. Yet, there are positive examples of how perceptions changed over the academic year with the post-LINC findings, discussed throughout this chapter, illustrating examples of active and meaningful participation of children in the preschool programme which Underwood (2013) presents as the definition of inclusive early education. However, these findings are based on the participants as the ECT working directly with the children in the setting. The real challenge of inclusive practice is ensuring that all the children in the preschool are welcomed and valued (UNESCO 2017), and not just those in the care of ECTs who have engaged in the LINC programme.

Relationships within the setting

Throughout this thesis, a relational pedagogy is presented in terms of its focus on interactions with and between all of the children, in a respectful and considerate manner. Noddings (2012) attributes her care theory that those who are cared for by others in a genuine and sensitive manner, will in turn develop this empathy and such caring virtues. Teachers are the models for such caring behaviour, and recognition of the value of this nurturing pedagogy in the ELC sector is considered central to quality and inclusive practice (Hayes 2008; Moloney and McCarthy 2018; French 2019; O'Leary and Moloney 2021). As mentioned earlier, all of the participants demonstrated a positive regard for children in their care during the field visits which took place on completion of the LINC programme, with many examples of quality interactions evident in the settings. Without explicit reference to the module content, one cannot assume that positive pedagogical practice is attributed exclusively to this learning experience, but rather to illustrate evidence of inclusivity and consideration of children's rights within the settings. For example, Siobhan is observed facilitating inclusion in the manner in which she supports a child with a serious medical condition. She joins the group at the table to eat with

them, using the opportunity to chat and interact, while simultaneously supervising the child's eating and ensuring his needs are being met. This modelling of positive interactions is evidenced in the child-conversations from this session where a few of the children sat to talk with me and one little girl told me about the friendships that had been nurtured in this setting:

> I like playing with K (little girl) a lot… we've known each other since we were toddlers so we're always, y'know – playing with each other and sometimes we're playing different games nearly every day and sometimes we play the same games… we have lots of fun.

In another setting, Emma describes a powerful example of inclusion regarding Bobby, a child with autism, "who mixes really well", but who can get overwhelmed if it gets "too noisy" within the setting, and his friend Charlie:

> Then Charlie comes over to me and says 'he needs his ear things' – so I give them to Charlie and he says 'Bobby– put them on' – and he's really, really good and if Bobby is distressed or upset when he comes in, he knows not to go straight for him – to give him a few minutes and then says 'Do you want to play with the bricks?' And he doesn't take offence if Bobby is like 'No!' – he just goes away and comes back again and it's just so lovely to see- at that age, that they've – that they're so accepting – and that will stay with them – which I just think is so lovely..

It was observed throughout the ECCE session that Emma was modelling and guiding interactions with all the children within the group, using key pedagogical strategies to support inclusive practice. The data analysis post-LINC also presented examples of changes specifically linked to engagement with the programme. Maria, who owns and teaches in her setting comments on her learning from the LINC programme in this respect. In considering the use of visual supports in her room, although these are new additions to the setting, she continues to reflect on the presentation of resources from the child's perspective:

> Yeah – and the Jobs Ladder as well – and it's only from sitting down on the floor level myself over there that I realise that the children that are over there can't really see their pictures and what their little job is – so I'm going to try and do that in more of a linear version – so it's accessible for all the kids – inclusion isn't really about just additional needs all the time, sure it's not? Just those quieter voices – the ones that could be forgotten, y'know?

Although having made many changes to her practice, Maria demonstrates her nurturing pedagogy in this cycle of reflection on her work to ensure all the children are valued in the setting. Indeed, she is almost jubilant in her praise of the LINC programme. Her initial intention of engaging with the programme was to support a child with Down Syndrome who was due to start in the setting, and she had expressed concerns about adapting her curriculum and environment to accommodate his needs. The field visit and the follow-up interview captured features of an inclusive culture being led by this ECT with enthusiasm and commitment, having taken on and implemented innumerable strategies and suggestions made on different areas of practice throughout the LINC programme. Maria was confident in attributing changes in her practice to her learning from the programme, and her conversations were reflective of the respect she has for the children and consideration of their perspective. Sorin (2005) emphasises the necessity of reflecting on one's image of the child in this regard in order to provide quality inclusive experiences, and this shift away from the image of "the child as victim" to one of the "agentic child" (p.19) is presented in this case study with Maria.

On completing the programme, Claire, although noting that "the course (LINC) is aimed at children with additional needs", recognises the learning has a broader scope within her experience as "any child can have an additional need – depending on what's going on in their life for them…a bereavement…a break-up in the family". This is echoed by Tina, who was very positive in her regard for the learning from LINC, appreciating that "each child is such an individual", but continues to reflect on her practice "and wonder am I doing the right thing here and I have to listen and watch and observe and wonder what does this child need?".

As she reflects on her experience over the past year on the programme, Lucy provides further insight into how learning from the LINC programme challenged her thinking. Mirroring a rigid, structured approach to children's learning prior to engagement with the programme, Lucy notes:

> …(my) perception before I came in here was they HAVE to learn to hold a pencil; they HAVE to be able to this; they HAVE to be able to do that; they HAVE to know their ABC's', and would have needed a diagnosis (to access supports).

On completion of the LINC programme and workshops with AsIAm[13], she reports on the value of the learning about a child-led approach and responding to their needs through a play-based programme demonstrating a shift in horizon of understanding. This was observed in her practice when getting ready for snack time and the child in her care was starting to get agitated, but she calmly distracted him by suggesting he takes on a 'job', being aware that he liked taking responsibility for different tasks. A focal point of an inclusive culture is the recognition of each child as an individual in that group environment, and consideration of how that individual can thrive and be supported by the adult in the setting (Sorin 2005). Reflective practice throughout the LINC programme places responsibility with the adult to consider how to make changes to respond more effectively to the children's needs and wants (Moloney 2018; Skehill 2021b). It considers those ethical dilemmas that may create conflict between team members, parents, and the general status quo, but it translates to supporting the child at the heart of this.

Responding to research questions one and two, Lucy talked about how engagement with the LINC programme supported her in her role as a preschool assistant working alongside a little boy. In the pre-LINC interview, she spoke of the challenges of getting him to sit in circle-time and follow the morning routines, whereas the post-LINC field visit and interview presented a different scenario of a respectful relationship with the child clearly at the centre of practice. She speaks of making changes to schedules to create a more child-led programme and adapting the physical environment by including ease of access to the outdoors and creating a quiet area for relaxation. She provides examples, perhaps unwittingly, where she has become 'the voice of the child', successfully requesting meetings with the EYS so she can collaborate on plans to support the child, identifying and naming the strengths of the child. Lucy recounts a recent tragedy in the child's family and her

[13] AsIAm is Ireland's national charity and advocacy organisation for the autism community.

empathic pedagogical approach is evident in the space she holds for this child and his mother:

> I just really want to enforce the positives of the day with her – now I know she's gone through a lot herself – but the first thing she asks is 'what did you do today?' – and then he'll go to tell her and he might do it in a bit of a raised voice – and then (the mother says) 'Ahhh – don't be shouting at me!' and she cuts him off straight away.

Lucy explains how she might interject and tell Mum about how they read a "wee story and he loved that one-to-one time", mindful of shifting the emphasis away from "the negative", while simultaneously sharing strategies that may work at home. In their recent study, O'Leary and Moloney (2020) validate the need for such involvement of the child in conversations pertaining to issues affecting them, particularly for children with autism who may need support communicating their wants and needs.

Developing an inclusive culture necessitates this circle of reflective practice where one has to question incidents and issues within the setting and consider the child at the heart of these. In a highly regulated sector, it involves a shift away from the self, and how new policies and practices might impact the ECT personally, to reflecting on why changes are being made and how they might benefit children. This is turn leads to the concept of reflecting on the curricular approach of the setting and how routines and the environment need to respond to the audience who use it.

Pedagogical Practice and Curricular Approaches

Pedagogical practice is defined as teachers' interactions with children and the understanding and knowledge that informs the communication of learning in the classroom (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002; Gray *et al.* 2015; Hoskins and Smedley 2018). However, the influence of other factors, such as societal and cultural norms, as well as perceived expectations of one's role working with children, can influence a teacher's pedagogical practice (Graham 2017; Horgan and Gardiner-Hyland 2019). The nature of the semi-structured interview provided opportunity to encourage the

participants to expand on their experiences of curriculum implementation and development to capture their perceptions of inclusion in practice.

Pedagogical framing is about the intentional processes that inform practice, based on theoretical knowledge, practical experience and reflection on teaching and learning in the ELC setting. McMonagle (2012) discusses pedagogical techniques and strategies to support children's development, including scaffolding, questioning, problem solving, co-constructing and empowering, with such strategies being evidenced during the field visits. The curriculum serves as the frame for the pedagogy of practice and implementation of the aims and learning outcomes of that curriculum. This sub-section explores how participants understood the aspirations of an inclusive curriculum and considers the influence of the LINC programme on their work with young children. In adhering to the principles of *Aistear*, LINC advocates a more play-based and child-led approach which is accessible and follows the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child.

Reflecting the broader sectoral representation of curricular approaches in Ireland, the settings in this study were described as being 'Montessori' (Ciara, Claire, Tina, Ruth and Monica) or 'play-based'. The Montessori method of education (Montessori 1909/1966) is based on the presentation of specific materials and activities focusing on curricular areas of Mathematics, Language, Sensorial, Practical Life and Culture. In reflecting upon the influence of the LINC programme on how participants support children's participation, the contextual reality of their settings, expectations and established routines are considered. Prior to the introduction of the ECCE programme in Ireland in 2010, sessional preschool facilities were generally marketed as 'play schools' or as 'Montessori schools', and parents paid to avail of such services. Anecdotally, there was a certain status attached to Montessori settings due to their association with academic learning. The Montessori preschools were not necessarily affiliated with a particular body, although those who qualified from St. Nicholas Montessori College are accredited with membership of their governing body. However, in general, 'Montessori' preschools were marketed as

such owing to the associated link to academic learning under the Montessori curriculum (Montessori 1949). The interviews in the pre-LINC data analysis illustrate how the Montessori method has been misinterpreted as an adult-led and 'schoolified' curriculum for children in preschools, rather than Maria Montessori's intention of a child-led programme that was rooted in relational pedagogy to meet the needs of each individual child where they were at in life (Montessori 1909/1966). Montessori based her work on following the needs and abilities of each child, allowing them the freedom to choose their "work" and master the self-correcting materials in the child-led programme (Montessori 1949). Ciara, a graduate working in a full day-care setting, noted that she was "very stringent on (my) routines, we do the same thing every morning" and detailed a very specific daily schedule which included their Montessori work time, free play, outdoor time, as well as fifteen to twenty minutes of circle time where they "go through our Jolly Phonics and our colours and our shapes and our songs". The "Jolly Phonics" referred to in the interview, is a Junior Infant language programme which promotes children's reading and writing from an early age. Accordingly, and contrary to the child-led agentic philosophy of the Montessori method, Ciara engaged in a schoolified teacher-led pedagogy. Ruth, the owner of a full day-care service with a Montessori preschool group, noted that they use "little workbooks" with the children and emphasised the importance of developing skills in preparation for primary school such as:

> ..knowing how to communicate with their peers, knowing how to look after their own little hygiene, take off their coats, take out their school bag, take out their lunch, hold a pencil, follow direction and listen to the teacher.

The emphasis on "letters and numbers" and wanting them to *"*learn everything" is again outlined in another Montessori preschool where Monica talks about an annual curriculum plan of specific themes to be covered with the group. The findings from the early interviews mirror research regarding the "schoolification" of preschool settings through formal learning processes with intention of preparing children for primary school (Ring *et al.* 2016). There is an awareness among participants of this perception of Montessori settings and their association with

formal learning as being more desirable in terms of ‘teaching’ young children. Siobhan expresses frustration that her informed play-based pedagogy is not fully understood but rather that:

> ..people see preschool as either a Montessori or nothing else and I would be non-Montessori because I think it’s too limiting, too straight, all of the items and equipment has one use and one use only.

However, Siobhan’s perception also indicates a misunderstanding of the intentional pedagogy of the original child-led programme designed by Montessori. Alice, an ECT in a sessional service, highlights the different perceptions of Montessori and play-based ELC settings within her community whereby parents tend to send children to her play-based setting for one year, and then move them to a local Montessori for the second year, explaining “…I honestly think a lot of people, you know… believe that Montessori is the better one (curriculum)”. However, the descriptions of the curricular approaches in the Montessori settings in this study do not necessarily adhere with the true Montessori philosophy and instead depict a variety of activities and materials not specifically attached to that philosophy. A more flexible example of incorporation of the Montessori method into the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009) is presented by Claire in her pre-LINC interview. She described their curriculum as being “very child-led”. While the setting has “a curriculum plan up for the year”, Claire explains that it is flexible, enabling the teachers to follow the children’ leads and interests Thus, “if there’s something that a child is interested in, or the children are interested in, we would do that for whatever number of weeks the child is interested in”.

Mary’s sessional service had recently made the change from Montessori to a play-based curriculum prior to engaging with the LINC programme. She discussed the benefits of imaginative play and illustrated her competencies and knowledge in recognising how :

> ..the play-based curriculum suited a lot of the children that needed extra support…giving that opportunity for the child to make that decision and bringing that to wherever that leads them.

Monica, who is employed as an ECT in a full day-care setting, talks about her experience of working with the Better Start Quality Development Service and the Early Years' Specialist (EYS) who is guiding the service on how to develop their curriculum to follow the interests of the children in their care. In the pre-LINC interview, Monica describes how this guidance is "help[ing] us to improve the setting, how it is beneficial for the children… so if Robbie wants to play with the cars, we kinda have to let them play in the area they want to play".

There is a recognition of the importance of a child-led and play-based approach in supporting the needs of all the children in the group in these earlier reports. The only other curricular approach mentioned in the research is the HighScope[14] method which was referenced in Teresa's setting in relation to behaviour management within the ELC setting, and two other participants who had completed training in this area.

On completion of the programme, all participants linked their post-LINC practice to a play-based approach, with eleven of the fourteen participants referencing the "emergent curriculum". Monica talks about how, with support from the EYS, and the LINC programme she has embraced a child-led approach. Prior to engagement with LINC, she explained how she "just used to sit at circle time and give them blocks and give them this". Her attitude was "I have my curriculum and we have to do this". Following participation in the LINC programme, Monica adopted a more child-centred approach, "giving them the opportunity to choose what to play with".

Lucy, who also engaged in the Better Start programme with an EYS, talked about the shift away from the "old school" approach of large group sessions, whereas now, even though they continue to have structured activities as part of their programme, it is more about choices within those routines. The setting's positive practice was evident during the field visit where children were engaged in a range of different playful learning opportunities. Some children were playing in the Home Corner with a staff member involved in the game; one ECT leading a playful

[14] Highscope is a curriculum approach which operates on the belief that quality early years' provision involves the children's construction of their own learning through active play and participation, where they can choose, plan, carry out and reflect on their activities.

structured activity with a small group of children and another sitting doing documentation, while Lucy was guiding an art activity with three children at the table. Two ECTs, Ciara and Monica, as well as three managers, Martha, Ruth and Tina, noted that they continue to incorporate their interpretation of the Montessori method (1949) into their programme, with Tina describing how the "hidden curriculum" can marry with this approach:

> Well that term – the hidden curriculum – I would always have learned from Montessori that you observe the children and you see what their interests are – but I think I'm doing that a lot more – and I'm standing back a lot more – I'm trying to observe a lot more – to see exactly where they are going, what exactly they are telling me, what they are interested in and how can I provide – and that – I think that is based on the LINC programme.

The hidden curriculum referenced by Tina refers to the social rules, attitudes and values practiced and modelled in the preschool environment which Brock *et al.* (2009) describe as the unplanned learning experiences for the children.

As mentioned earlier, some students received exemptions from *Child Development* module and the *Curriculum for Inclusion* module in the LINC programme as recognition for prior learning (RPL). Ciara, a graduate ECT, who was exempt from these modules, expressed her concerns about incorporating her Montessori approach with that of the new Room Leader who had a more play-based, HighScope approach in practice so "it's all very political at the moment". She is a strong advocate for a "more regimented" approach and that "all the children with additional needs in the service would be here so I find that they work really well with the structure". Although she "did kinda give them (exempted modules) a bit of a glance over", she criticises the content she has seen stating:

> …an awful lot of the stuff sounds so petty on the course – that if you didn't already know that going into the course, you've no business going in working with children.

Despite Ciara's criticism of the programme, her own pedagogical practice and working environment does not fully equate with an inclusive culture. Her reluctance to engage with the programme content may be influenced by other elements of her

Dasein – as a graduate frustrated with the lack of recognition of her professional role; as an employee with insufficient authority to implement change; as a parent with her own experience of additional needs; all of which will be considered as factors impeding the learning from the LINC programme throughout this discussion.

Martha, an employee-manager, from a Montessori setting described the emergent curriculum as "fantastic", although her practice observed was primarily based around a series of structured activities reminiscent of a primary school approach. The children's day began with a circle-time session that lasted twenty minutes, where the children participated in interactive songs and rhymes; number recognition up to twenty; addition and subtraction exercises up to twenty as well as discussion about their theme on planets. From this activity, they were led to their specific places at the tables to do a tracing worksheet, before having lunch, and again a structured activity of choosing materials from the shelves for the remainder of the session. In the child-conversations, I asked a small group of four children what they liked most about preschool and their responses echoed the routines in place there, listing "the farm puzzle; reading a book; and dancing and singing". They told me they learnt about "sounds; letters; Jolly Phonics and reading" while simultaneously demonstrating the camaraderie within the group who appear very contented in their environment:

> Jamie: 'Three girls in this school have a crush on me'.
> Anna: 'That's me - I'm crushing on him!' (laughs!)

Notwithstanding the children's contentment, the structured activities are not focused on the strengths or the interests of the children, but rather about meeting perceived expectations of parents and are reminiscent of the concept of 'schoolification' discussed in the literature (Ring *et al.* 2016; DES 2018). From a phenomenological stance, it may be that those participants who were overly focused on academic learning in the preschool may be asserting their professional role as a 'teacher', and are not quite understanding how an inclusive, play-based programme under the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009) can be more effective and meaningful for children in the setting. Similarly, those who dismiss the Montessori

approach as being too rigid, are also illustrating a lack of understanding of early childhood curricula and how the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009) can guide the implementation of the Montessori method in accordance with child-centred principles.

The formal approaches to early childhood education evident in this study, illustrate how such structured programmes can exclude children with differing needs, interests and abilities within the group owing to the expectation of compliance to an adult-led programme. The exemptions from modules on *Child Development* and *Curriculum for Inclusion*, as discussed earlier, is evidenced as having a real influence on the quality of learning relating to pedagogical practice in the early years. Play levels the playing field so all children can get involved at whatever stage they are at. Responsive adults create environments based on the observations of children's interests and needs. They set up these provocations for play and learning in accordance with the emergent interests of the children (NCCA 2015; Ring and O' Sullivan 2019; Turner *et al.* 2020). Those who engaged with the learning from these modules in the LINC programme provide wonderful examples of such playful learning opportunities for the children. During the visit to Maria's service, I was introduced to a little boy with Down Syndrome who was in the outdoor space in the playhouse when I arrived. Maria and her colleagues told me about his interest in role play activities and how they had created a Home Corner outside and brought out props and resources to facilitate his play. To the untrained eye, one might just see a group of children having fun playing out in the sunshine, but here was a boy developing his social skills by involving others in his game and taking turns in the activity. There were three other children who were developing skills of communicating and cooperation as they used simple Lámh signs to ask for the handbag from the playhouse. Alongside them, there was a responsive adult who was knowledgeable in her role to know when to step in and guide the interactions, and when to model behaviours and language. She asked guiding questions to extend learning when she deemed it appropriate to be involved in their game, and later explained how all of this was part of the process of promoting the children's holistic development and participation in the curriculum. Lundy's model of child

participation (2007) is evidenced in practice here by Maria's ability to firstly create a *space* where the child's *voice* is heard and responded to, then how his interests and needs *influence* the design of the learning environment. The ELC team are a proactive *audience*, who have adaptive technology and informed pedagogical strategies to communicate the child's voice within the setting. Maria informed me that this was the first time that a child with additional needs had attended their service, bar one little boy with ADHD. Her engagement with the LINC programme was very evident in the learning environment and the shared team ethos of the setting. Tina, an owner-manager, also modelled quality playful pedagogical practice under the framework of a Montessori programme which was presented in aesthetically inviting displays for children to engage with as they choose themselves, each activity self-correcting yet open-ended so all children can participate in a meaningful way. Tina's understanding of an inclusive playful pedagogy was linked to what "I was learning with LINC about the small groups and getting the right people with the right children and creating opportunities for learning". The Better Start Quality team were also credited with providing guidance and support on developing an emergent curriculum in both Emma's and Monica's settings. The consistency of guidance from a mentor, which will be discussed further in relation to collaborative and professional practice, is reported as supporting the development of quality inclusive programme and created an awareness of a pedagogy of listening and including the voice of the child (O'Leary and Moloney 2020; Turner *et al.* 2020; Doan and Gray 2021).

Inclusive Learning Environments

Hui *et al.* (2017) present the inclusive ELC setting as a complex system which involves interacting variables with each playing a role in supporting children's learning and development. The inclusive learning environment advocated in the LINC programme reflects the constructs of Sorin's "agentic" child (2005, p.12) referencing a Reggio-inspired setting with accessible resources presented as aesthetic and inviting provocations for play (Malaguzzi 1993). This learning environment refers not only to the physical space and resources, but also to the

temporal environment, which includes daily routines, as well as the central role of the adult working with the children. Westwood (2013) has highlighted the importance of the aesthetic design and layout of the room to facilitate effective communication and interactions between the children. Children should be welcomed into beautiful spaces where their interests are reflected and there is a relaxed and easy atmosphere, rather than a 'classroom' setting. The quality of the physical environment of an ELC setting is informed by Early Years Services Regulations (DCYA 2016c) and best practice recommendations as presented by the *Siolta* Quality Standards (CECDE 2006), with both of these acting as a foundation for development of inclusive practice in the LINC programme.

On visiting the settings on completion of the LINC programme, all ECCE rooms, with the exception of one, had some evidence of recommended interest areas such as a Home Corner; Construction Area; Table-top area and Cosy Corner. Defined areas for different types of play opportunities are recommended within the ECCE room to facilitate interactions and to support the needs and wants of the children (NCCA 2015; DES 2018). In keeping with elements of the traditional Montessori learning environment, Martha's room was set up in a more structured fashion with tables and chairs for each child, shelves of Montessori equipment and limited open-ended resources for the children's play. The quality of the interest areas varied from one setting to another in accordance with *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) standards and best practice guidance (NCCA 2015; EASNIE 2017a). The three services that were currently engaged with the Better Start Quality team (DCYA 2015), as well as Mary's service with the *Siolta* QAP award, all presented an aesthetically inviting environment for the children. These services had engaged with the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) self-evaluation tool for their rooms and this was evident in the layout of the interest areas and the presentation of resources, with some real props for their play, natural materials and open-ended resources. Claire and Maria had completed the self-evaluation tool as part of the LINC programme, and they too presented inviting and inclusive environments in accordance with guidance from this resource (NCCA 2015). Claire illustrated her reflective practice on how the space was working for the group of children and that she has "changed it many times…then we found there was too much of a criss cross – it wasn't

working for them – so we've moved that". Ciara noted that she engaged with the self-evaluation tool through her work colleague, who had to engage with this resource as part of her studies with another third level university. However, the environment here presented some challenges, specifically in relation to noise levels with only a glass partition between two large preschool rooms, as well as the lack of natural resources and open-ended materials available to the children. There was a significant challenge in Alice's work environment, whereby the community hall is shared with other groups therefore the whole space had to be cleared away at the end of each session. Teresa had received feedback from the DES inspector of her EYEI to develop her indoor space as she has done her outdoor space, which had attractive interest areas as advocated by the Practice Guide (NCCA 2015); however, at the time of observation, the recommendations had not been implemented in the classroom. The complexity of the ELC sector as discussed in the literature (DES 2010; DCYA 2013; DES 2018; Moloney 2021) is evidenced in the variety of physical environments that function as an ECCE setting. The physical accessibility and layout of these spaces differ considerably from one setting to the other, providing a broad basis of understanding of participants' experiences working in practice and illustrates the individuality of one's life-world in the working environment. The on-site visits provided an opportunity to observe the children in these environments and to present another perspective on factors that may influence the learning from the LINC programme on inclusive practice.

Considering how the LINC programme influenced their work with children, the earlier interviews illustrate strategies already used in the ELC settings. Prior to engagement with the programme, twelve out of the fourteen participants described different strategies and resources they had used to support inclusion of children with additional needs in their setting. Participants referenced using Lámh sign language[15] (2020) and visual schedules to support communication as well as one preschool installing a sound system for a child with a hearing aid. Promoting

[15] Lámh is a manual sign system used in Ireland by children and adults with additional needs in order to support communication and speech development (2020).

positive behaviour and engagement with activities within the setting were linked to the use of 'wobble' cushions which support balance and concentration, breathing techniques and sensory play activities. While these resources and strategies are recognised as beneficial for supporting children in the setting, some of the incidents discussed in the pre-LINC interviews do not necessarily adhere to best practice guidance for inclusion.

In the following excerpt from an interview with Eliza, an employee-manager, she provides insight into challenges associated with accompanying a two-and-a-half year old child with physical disabilities to the bathroom:

> …she had been carried to the toilet, she had to be physically lifted – she was toilet trained. When she started it took twenty-five minutes – to just walk from the classroom to the toilet and then twenty-five back. But it's lovely now 'cause she is down to nine minutes – which is again, a real success. The child was two and a half so we worked a lot on that..

While the intention behind this 'strategy' is one of support for the child but depicts a difficult journey for her that might have been easier if other options were explored to achieve the goal. This may be representative of an understanding of 'integration' rather than that of 'inclusion', which is described by UNESCO (2017) as a process that helps to remove barriers in the system which may potentially impact the meaningful participation and achievement of children. Integration, on the other hand, sees children with additional needs placed in mainstream educational settings but with the expectation that they will "fit in with pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment" (UNESCO 2017, p.7). As well as addressing accessibility in the physical environment, perceptions of the inclusive temporal environment were also reported in the initial findings. Earlier conversations saw Lucy, Ciara, Alice and Ruth all highlight the need for strategies to support the child with additional needs to join in the structured activities of the day, depicting a concept of integration with an expectation of the child "fitting in" to the existing routines.

Ciara described the difficulty in managing a situation when a child with ASD was

> …refusing to sit down and he wants to do something different and if you try and let him do something different, then they all want to do something different and it was very hard to sit and do circle time cos he wouldn't want to listen and he just wants to go and play.

She reports the concern with the child's behaviour rather than consideration of the need to adapt the activity to reflect the principles of a child-led playful approach.

The AIM resources[16] were seen in practice in eight of the participating services, namely the sand timers and the dark den, and were observed in some cases as being used appropriately to support transitions throughout the day as well as creating a quiet space for the children to rest (DCYA 2016b). These AIM inclusive play packs were distributed to all ECCE setting and accompanied by a manual with instructions for the resources as well as access to the website for further guidance. In Teresa's setting however, although the timer was taken out to manage turn-taking on the swings, it was not used correctly throughout the morning. The inconsistent use of the timer may present challenges for children in developing self-regulation and co-operation with peers when modelled incorrectly.

The use of visual supports and photographs to support children's learning and development was clearly linked to settings that had engaged with the EYS, the Better Start Quality team, as well as learning from the LINC programme. Ten of the settings demonstrated evidence of visual supports that were presented and utilised in an effective manner during the field visit. During one of the child-conversations at Claire's setting, I was directed towards their '(Setting Name) Promise' where one child explained "That's where you use Walking Feet, Nice Words, Kind Hands and Sharing with our friends. And our Pinkie Promise!" In this same setting, Claire was observed using the visual supports with a child with autism, replacing one picture with a photo of him so he could understand what it meant for him personally. In

[16] AIM inclusive Play packs were distributed to all ECCE services in 2018 to support inclusive practice with resources including a Dark Den cube / pop up tent; kinetic sand; massage set; timers; puppets; sensory balls; strobe bar and tweezers.

conversation with Claire during the interview she notes how she initially had generic pictures in her daily routine but has since "thought about that – and we thought it is pictures showing what we're doing but it's not relating to the children". Consequently, they made changes, using personal interchangeable photos, so the strategy would work more effectively for all the children. Maria, who specified that she "did the LINC to try to come up with strategies to help" as she had never had a child with additional needs in her service before, had a myriad of visual schedules in place to support the child, as well as his peers, in the ELC environment: a daily routine; choice boards for table top activities and free play options; 'jobs' chart; 'buddy' chart; family wall; lunch placemats with personalised photos; as well as Lámh signs subtly available on the walls around the room to support her and her colleagues in communicating effectively with the child. They were observed using the Lámh signs with ease throughout the morning, and when the group gathered for lunch, they all signed a blessing before eating. There were four settings that did not have evidence of any visual schedules within the setting, only one of whom had accessed AIM support for a child in her care. The evidenced use of visual supports in a practical and informed manner demonstrates how the ECT creates a forum for children's participation, illustrating an example of the implementation of Lundy's model in practice (2007). There are many examples of relevant and supportive strategies being implemented by participants as advocated by the LINC programme. Identifying and documenting these strategies are also recognised as important components of an inclusive ECCE setting.

Documenting the Inclusive Curriculum

Albin-Clarke (2020) confidently asserts that documentation "does things". It is about a process of identifying and naming the curriculum and the ethos behind the approach as well as developing plans to implement it in practice. The expectations of the ECT in carrying out the documentation of the curriculum has changed considerably in recent years with the introduction of *Aistear* as the official curricular framework (NCCA 2009) for the ELC sector and the more recent introduction of the EYEI to inspect the provision of ECCE. While Ring (2015) reflects

on these education-focused inspections as a possible reason to celebrate the recognition of the early years as part of the education system, the findings in this study present an element of apprehension linked to this new inspection process. It may be argued that responding to the expectations of the education system has created the need for one to 'prove oneself' in that professional role. The ongoing debate over the professional identity of the ECT is potentially clarified and publicised through the EYEI process of inspection and publication of the findings under the four areas of quality practice (DES 2015). Hayes (2008) has been advocating for the need to develop skills of observation and reflection in the ELC setting even prior to the introduction of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), however, the complexity of the training and education experience of the ECT as discussed previously, has resulted in a myriad of approaches and understanding of pedagogical documentation. Malaguzzi (1993) advocates for documentation in the early years that will capture the voice of the child, linking back to concepts discussed in the earlier section, thereby creating understanding of how the child learns in the environment, and how the adult can guide and support this playful learning experience. The findings from this study present a broad range of methodologies in documenting the child's learning in the ELC setting.

Planning and documenting the early years' programme is an indicator of quality inclusive pedagogy and considered a key pedagogical strategy in supporting children's development (McMonagle 2012; EASNIE 2017a). The Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020) references the planning and documentation of the preschool programme in relation to the inclusion of the child's voice in the process; utilising a range of different observation and recording techniques, and the importance of early identification of children who require additional support. In the visits to the settings on completion of LINC, nine of the participants volunteered presentation of their individual learning journals for the children, which varied in content from one setting to another.

Carr and Lee (2019) assert the value of learning stories in the ELC setting as a two-way process that supports assessment for learning, recognising the children's stores of dispositions and funds of knowledge from home, which Gonzalez *et al.* (2005)

identified as a key element of parental involvement in children's education. The learning from the LINC programme, and again with support from the Better Start Quality team, was very evident in two settings where Lucy and Emma worked as ECTs. The progression towards a more child-led curriculum was evident in the observations recorded and learning stories included in the journals over the year. Emma notes "I'm better at documenting it now…doing anecdotal notes and plan a few things" and shared examples of these journals where she had linked theory to practice, referenced Aistear (NCCA 2009) learning goals, and had documented the child's voice in the process. A similar example was found with Lucy, who had developed her documentation by doing learning stories and "linking it to Aistear" and attributed this to her learning from Better Start Quality and the LINC programme. Eliza, an employee-manager, presented learning journals from her staff team, with a list of contents of all the weekly themes over the preschool year, including a range of photographs of the child engaged in different activities throughout the term, with the children's comments documenting the story, illustrating their emergent curriculum in practice. This is then complemented by "one learning story per semester", as well as an end of year report around what the child learned this year and what they liked to do. In Martha's setting, the learning journal comprised mainly of worksheets based around the different themes in the Montessori setting, such as 'Geography', evidenced by templates of flags from around the world, coloured in by the child, reflecting the more structured programme evident in the field visit and interview.

Observations were specified as being carried out once a term by Ciara, Alice and Siobhan, while Mary and Eliza do an end of year checklist, as well as ABC[17] and narrative observations. Claire noted that doing the LINC programme "changed the way we were doing the observations" and led to a greater understanding of the purpose of the observations as well as the child's role in that process:

> I think that's something that's come across to me from the course. That the child doesn't have to be not engaging with you throughout the observation whereas before I probably may not have engaged with the child as much as I observed.

[17] Antecedent; Behaviour; Consequence: observation technique of identifying patterns of behaviours in order to support development.

> Y'know? Maybe not have interacted as much. I would probably have seen myself as leading the observation where that's not …that's not the case.

Alice and Siobhan expressed concern regarding the documentation of the curriculum and the children's learning, although both are doing child-observations, with Siobhan commenting that "the worry is that I'm doing it for myself and not for bringing the child on and maybe I'm not showing it properly" and that it is not "more meaningful observation". However, she notes that she was exempt from the two modules and so did not engage with the content in the LINC programme regarding curriculum documentation. Alice noted that she had been doing one observation per term but was "told we need one a month". However, as she is the only person currently doing the observations on the twenty-two children in the setting, she is "kinda rushing through them as you've so many". Having received an exemption from the *Curriculum for Inclusion* and *Child Development* modules, she had not engaged with this content from the LINC programme either.

Other examples of documentation in the data include group learning journals; short, medium and long-term planning documents, and Monica had her 'Curriculum Statement' on display in her room. Four of the ECTs, Lucy, Ciara, Claire and Emma, as well as owner-manager, Maria, report active engagement with and knowledge of the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) to guide their practice. This resource is referenced throughout the LINC programme content as a support to developing quality inclusive practice. Emma finds the Practice Guide "really helpful… it's all about reflection. It's easier cos it guides you – so you know exactly what you need to reflect on". Maria exclaims that the audits (self-evaluation tools) in the Practice Guide are "brilliant – they really, really are!"

Some participants demonstrate a real understanding of pedagogical documentation, which Flannery-Quinn and Parker (2016) assert should promote reflection on the values and ideas that underpin practice. These participants have demonstrated engagement with the learning from the LINC module content relating to the documentation and there is some evidence of learning journals that effectively capture the voice of the child and their personal journey, reflecting a

playful curricular approach. Several of the participants were using the learning journals as a means of communication and collaboration with parents, linking with recommendations from the literature in this regard (NCCA 2015; Dunleavy-Lavin *et al.* 2018; Kang and Walsh 2018). However, for other participants, the documentation of the child's learning is presented in accordance with their perception of what the DES 'want to see', as evidence of the teaching that has taken place and 'proof' of the ECCE programme, to the extent that Siobhan "dreads the DES inspection". Equally anxious about this process, Alice, as supporting ECT alongside her manager in a sessional service, feels the pressure of being allocated responsibility for doing all the observations 'required' on the 22 children in the setting. She reports that the DES inspector informed her "we need one (observation) a month", yet is simultaneously confused by different accounts from other settings regarding their experiences of EYEI and expectations for planning processes.

There are a number of factors to consider regarding the effective and meaningful documentation of the curriculum and the child's learning in the ELC setting, and they link back to the professional identity and experiences of the adult working with the children, as well as their image of the child as central to their practice. When the ECT can reflect on what they are doing, and why they are doing it, and show a willingness to engage in such reflection-in-action (Schon 1983) on their work, then they can understand the purpose of pedagogical documentation. This reflection on practice necessitates consideration of seeing things from another perspective and recognising that the EYEI are not about the notion of 'checking up' on practitioners but are representative of a child-centred approach that was designed to provide quality experiences for all children (Ring 2015; DES 2018).

The findings in this study present a variety of different approaches to pedagogical documentation reflective of the multitude of educational and CPD experiences of the participants. The LINC programme has the potential to make a significant contribution to the understanding of this process, not necessarily in a way of standardising documentation, but rather to create that understanding which Colliver (2017) states is lacking in teacher education. The EYEI reports (DES 2016-

2020) illustrate the varying interpretations of the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009), and the need for services to engage further with the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) for all areas of practice. The findings and literature indicate a need to develop awareness of differing pedagogical approaches through ongoing CPD that is based on contemporary policy and research.

Summary

In consideration of Heidegger's concept of *Dasein,* it was evident that participants' interactions with the processes, structures and persons in their life-world influenced their engagement with and learning from the LINC programme. Heidegger's interpretative philosophy enabled an emphasis on the notion of *being* as part of the world in which we exist, that which may appear as the everyday normality of one's life. A feature of this methodology was to find the meaning of this familiar existence and to make explicit the participants' perspective of the influence of the LINC programme on their perceptions and practices of inclusion. The idea of the "joint authored" interpretation shared by the researcher and the participants (Wimpenny and Gass 2000, p.34) is presented in this understanding of what inclusion means for those who work with young children in the sector. It involved engagement with their lived experiences as they reported these realities from their individual experiences and their societal roles. Through their stories as educators and teachers in the broader societal context, they reveal how their personal stories from different biographical lenses (Brookfield 2017) influenced their engagement and interpretation of the learning from the LINC programme. It is through such reflexive lenses that this theme has uncovered a more nuanced and layered understanding of the influence of the LINC programme on perceptions and practices of inclusion within the ELC setting. As researcher, one has to understand the perspective of the participants' perceived ordinary existence through these biographical lenses in order to create a fusion of horizons, thereby finding meaning in their experience of the phenomenon.

Chapter Five

Collaborative Practice: Findings and Discussion

"It is a journey y'know - So we might have one expectation – but it mightn't go that way at all"

Collaborative Practice in the Inclusive Early Learning and Care Setting

McKernan *et al.* (2011) define collaborative practice as central to inclusive education as a process to guide the work of relevant professionals to support children and their families to ensure access to supports and resources for the child's holistic development. This theme responds primarily to the research question regarding the influence of the programme on perceptions of inclusion. It discusses how inclusion is facilitated beyond the relationship between the early childhood teacher (ECT) and the child within the setting and considers the importance of seeking out and developing positive relationships with other important people in the child's life. This theme illustrates how effective communication, and the confidence to initiate such communication, is a key responsibility of the ECT in supporting children's participation. It outlines how skilled and experienced educators hold a very important role in supporting children and their families. The relational pedagogy discussed in Chapter Four infuses this theme in working to support the child, as well as indicating the professional knowledge and skills that are required to engage in meaningful and purposeful collaboration with others.

The LINC programme has one complete module on promoting collaborative practice and incorporates learning on partnership with parents, families, primary schools, and other relevant stakeholders in the child's life. The role of the early learning and care (ELC) setting in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979) of the child's life has been recognised in Irish policy development since the publication of *Siolta* (CECDE) in 2006, with an emphasis on the importance of interactions with the wider community in supporting the child in a more holistic way (O'Toole *et al.* 2014; Hayes *et al.* 2017). However, the gap between policy and practice regarding the implementation of the *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) standards in a consistent manner across the ELC sector is evident in the findings from this study where there are a variety of approaches and interpretations of the quality framework, particularly in relation to those standards linked to collaboration (Goodbody Economic Consultants (GEC) 2011b; DES 2016-2019). Coupled with this lack of consistency in the roll out of the *Siolta* standards (CECDE 2006; GEC 2011b) is the link to the professional role of the ECT in engaging effectively with best practice guidelines. The ability of the ECT or the manager of the ELC setting to meet these guidelines is consistent with Sexton's (2007) conception of a profession as one where people engage with continuing professional development (CPD) to ensure they are up to date with recent developments as well as gaining qualifications through a reputable and informed early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme (Care Council of Wales 2016; Moloney 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021).

The complexity of the organisation of the ELC sector in Ireland, with a majority of private run settings (Pobal 2021), has created a business model whereby the running of the preschool is the responsibility of the owner, who then has authority to make choices about aspects of service provision, with the obvious exception of adherence to the Preschool Regulations (DCYA 2016c). While the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla 2018) and the early years' education-focused inspections (EYEI) (DES 2016) advocate for a model of cooperation and collaboration with parents and external agencies, the willingness to engage in such practice rests with the management of the setting. The role of the Inclusion

Coordinator (INCO) in this collaborative process must also be considered in light of her position within the organisation and if she has been given responsibility to liaise with other stakeholders. While Steinunn *et al.* (2017) recognise the move towards distributive leadership within teaching environments, there are concerns regarding this delegation process and this is evident in the findings from this study. As well as responding to the fourth research question in relation to the factors that may impede learning from the LINC programme, it brings attention to the professional role of the ECT and how this theme of professional identity weaves through responses to the research questions.

The ELC setting may be viewed as a central component of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological system whereby the child's development is dependent on relationships and interactions within and between people and their environment. The role of key people in the child's microsystem is recognised in literature as having a direct impact on the child's holistic development (Landry 2014; O'Toole *et al.* 2014; Hayes *et al.* 2017). Collaboration within the ELC sector involves many stakeholders who all play an important role supporting the child, including his or her parents and family, key person and staff in the ELC setting, early years' specialist (EYS), occupational therapist (OT), speech and language therapist (SLT), local primary school teachers and health professionals (Barr and Hilliard 2021). This theme reports on the development of collaborative practice on engagement with the LINC programme and is presented under two sub-themes as outlined in Figure 48 below:

Figure 48 Collaborative Practice Sub-themes

This chapter evaluates the influence of the learning from the LINC programme on the relationship between parents and the ECT; the ELC as a family support system within the community; collaboration with the primary school and finally, collaboration with the EYS and other relevant stakeholders. This theme is incorporated into the discussion as another part of the whole phenomenological investigation (Groenewald 2004; Bazely 2009) and presents the underlying holistic understanding of experience in this socio-cultural milieu (Bhar 2019).

Parents and Families

The importance of cultivating positive relationships with parents in the ELC setting has been recognised as a key feature of inclusive and quality education (Daly *et al.* 2016; Graham 2017; O'Byrne 2018; Barr and Hilliard 2021). In the initial interviews, thirteen of the fourteen participants discussed working with parents and described varying degrees of communication and interactions. Contemporary policy (DCYA 2016b; 2016c; DES 2018; GoI 2019) emphasise the importance of the role of the

parent in the child's education and mark a shift towards collaborative relationships to support the child. Understanding this relationship from participants' perspectives is dependent on factors that define the concept of *Dasein*. Heidegger (1929) philosophises that one's moods, as well as one's response to opportunities and threats, have a direct impact on how one experiences different life situations. The lived experiences of the participants in relation to their engagement with parents and families is interpreted in this section with this philosophical principle that any act of interpretation is always informed by a fore-structure of understanding (Horrigan-Kelly *et al.* 2016).

When one understands the nurturing pedagogy that underpins quality and inclusive practice, as discussed in Chapter Four, one is aware of the need for respectful and considered engagement with children's families. Developing, maintaining and respecting this relationship between the ECT and the parent, is key to inclusive practice, yet is dependent on a number of factors. One's perception of the other is evidenced to have an influence on the level of parental involvement in supporting the child within some of the services. A primary example of this is articulated by Mary in the pre-LINC interview:

> I suppose one of the key issues for me really is building a relationship – with the family – it's not just the child you're working with. You're working with the whole family – and y'know going down through the years, you might have parents that have come in and they're really hostile – and not realise that they're really hostile – but the reason that they're really hostile is that they've had such a raw deal before they even got to you. And they went from Billy to Jack to Joe and nobody could help them and they just feel this is another hitch on the line – and you really have to break down the barrier there before you can build up the relationship with a parent like that. And you've other parents, really starting from the very, very start and you have to guide them and support them.

Mary, as an owner-manager, has embraced partnership with parents and been proactive in carrying out home visits to provide support and advice on issues such as using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)[18], toileting and

[18] In the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) children are taught to communicate using visual images to enhance their communication abilities and understanding of the function of communication.

personal hygiene. She also takes on a role of family support worker in other ways in helping parents fill out application forms for housing and education. Although there is often a perception of difference between private and 'not-for-profit' services, the findings in this study illustrate how small, private services are an essential part of their communities, providing support for local families, as much as those run by a Board of Management. Emma, a room leader in a full-day care setting, also conducted a home-visit with a child with autism who was starting in her group in September and reflected on how this "made the transition very smooth" by having established that link to the home environment. Siobhan, on the other hand, reports a different approach and in the initial interview commented that "in Ireland, people do not like you knowing about the family set up" and while expressing her willingness to do home visits, had not done so because of this perception. However, the contextual reality of the ELC setting also needs to be considered in this response. It is reasonable to assume that rural or small-town settings will be more familiar with families within the locality owing to the geographic demographic of the catchment area. The understanding of lived experiences, one's *Dasein,* also needs to consider what a community looks like in each of these case studies, which would have a direct influence on their interpretation of the learning from the LINC programme.

Reflecting on Ricoeur's (2016) argument regarding the role of the interpretive hermeneutic researcher, I am mindful of taking a stance of empathy in understanding and reporting participants' experiences, while simultaneously questioning the rationale of participants' engagement with parents and families. The role of the ECT in this community support role may be interpreted from an altruistic perspective in wanting to help and provide guidance to families. In light of the ongoing discussions about the professional role of the ECT, these acts might also be considered as validating the ECT's sense of worth.

In the initial interview process prior to engagement with the LINC programme, Claire demonstrated a sense of empathy with the parents and a reflective process in consideration of the relationship:

> Some parents – I think they can't juggle – cos everybody – everybody wants the best for their child and everybody wants their child to be perfect. Cos everybody…I mean, everybody does… so it's hard for some parents…it is hard.

Her attitude reflects the involvement of parents within her setting and describes examples of parental involvement in the transition process as well as volunteering in different preschool activities. Her experience in a busy urban commuter town, suggest that more effective communication with parents, leads to more parental support within the setting, as well as more positive engagement with the ECT. Claire's experience depicts a sense of partnership and community irrespective of the urban environment, so this raises the comparative questions of what is the contributory factor that supports parental involvement in her setting. In considering Brookfield's (2017) lens of a reflective educator, Claire, as a parent of a child with additional needs, her personal life experiences, as well as working alongside a supportive manager, has established her fore-understanding of parental perspectives and life situations.

Communicating with and involving parents was recognised as an important element of practice prior to engagement with the LINC programme, with examples provided by participants in the first interviews (Figure 49).

Figure 49 Methods of Communication with Parents

The primary focus in relation to the initial conversations about collaborating with parents was around accessing support for children with additional needs. This was noted as being particularly challenging when there was no diagnosis of an additional need or disability and the ECT was attempting to communicate concerns to parents about the child's development. Half of the participants in the pre-LINC interviews, referred to parents' lack of knowledge and sense of 'denial' when addressing concerns about the child's additional needs. Ciara expresses the view that "a lot of parents are in denial". Drawing on her own experiences of having "a child with additional needs" herself, Ciara goes on to say, "I completely understand how someone would go into denial". She then describes a situation involving the parents of a child who had been diagnosed with autism:

> For example, I've a little girl who has recently been diagnosed with autism – and initially her parents were absolutely disgusted – they were pulling her out of the service – how dare I suggest that there was even something there – and obviously I would never suggest that … I'm not qualified to say that the child has anything –I never mentioned the word autism – but I might mention that maybe you could get an appointment – she's not reaching her milestones or whatever – but some parents are disgusted that there could be something there.

Alice described her experience with a family "who doesn't even want to know". Similar to Ciara, she asserts that the parents were "in denial, so you know that sort of thing…you see the red flags, but the parents don't always and you know, even when you say 'what do you think?', 'Ah no – he's fine, it's just boys' – y'know?" In this case, it took nearly a year for the parents to act to access supports for the child, and that was due to the father getting involved with the child's sports club and "all of a sudden he looked at him and (seen) he is actually different". A further example is provided from Monica who notes that "it depends on what the parents' perception is as well" in relation to the child's development and behaviours, while Siobhan comments that *"*it's a tough thing telling any parent that you think there's a problem obviously". Heidegger (1929) recognised these traits of facing up to life challenges as one of the key principles underpinning his philosophy informing *Dasein.* One of the goals of IHP is to find the meaning in these instinctive familiar moments of one's life world and to uncover how these experiences and

interactions have an influence on subsequent experiences (Horrigan-Kelly *et al.* 2016).

Building Partnerships with Parents and Families

Inclusive practice is closely affiliated with parental partnership and participation, indicating a willingness to draw on parents' knowledge and expertise to support the child in the ELC setting (CECDE 2006; European Commission 2014; Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018; Barr and Hilliard 2021). Module 3 of the LINC programme focused on the promotion of collaborative practice in an inclusive ELC environment with definite strategies and rationale for developing cooperative measures as a basis for an inclusive culture (LINC Consortium 2016-2020). As noted in Figure 50, the post-LINC findings illustrated that learning from the LINC programme influenced purposeful communication with parents in half of the settings in this study.

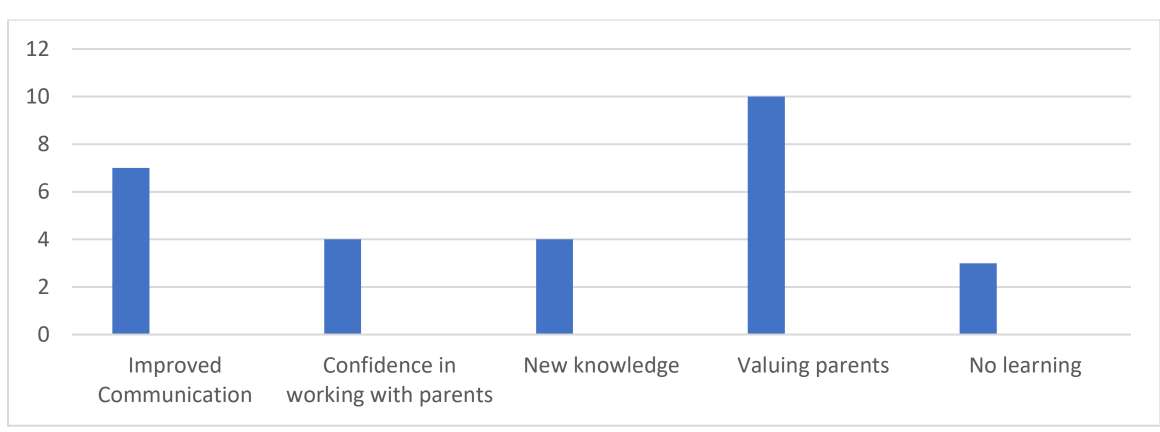

Figure 50 Findings Linked to Collaborative Practice with Parents and Families

Developing effective communication with parents and families was identified as an important component of inclusive practice within the findings, supporting ideas in the literature pertaining to parental involvement (Epstein 2001; CECDE 2006; NCCA 2015). Mary, who already had been using learning journals[19] to document the

[19] Learning journals are folders of observations of the children's development and of the children's work to illustrate their learning journey in the ELC setting. They are ideally used as working

children's learning, took ideas from the programme to develop further communication with parents specifying that "the communication was always there but I needed to EMPHASISE the importance of it –as a two-way method of communication…just it's fantastic – and the parents write back in them… and it's nice to get that feedback". As owner-manager, Mary had low expectations of the LINC programme owing to the fact that she already has a degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE), but her engagement with the modules resulted in changes to her practice in this regard. Similarly, Maria, Lucy and Emma noted that they were using their observations and learning journals more effectively as a result of learning from the programme. They used their documentation to share information with parents on an ongoing basis, as a focal point for meetings and to send home during the year to keep them updated of their child's development. The learning from the combined module content regarding collaborative practice and documenting the curriculum is evidenced in their changes to practice in this regard. These practices illustrate progression to a state of quality and inclusive practice in recognising the value of pedagogical documentation to support children's participation and development in the setting (Malaguzzi 1994; DES 2018; Albin-Clarke 2020).

Monica, an ECT, reflected on the fact that parents of children in the setting who have English as a second language experienced difficulties in their ability to communicate effectively with staff in the ELC setting. As observed in my visit to her setting, she had put up displays outside every room with phrases from different languages, as well as photos of the children engaged in learning opportunities to ensure all parents were informed of the preschool programme. Claire and Maria had set up a Parents' What's App social media group to communicate with the parents and used this as a basis for sharing examples from practice as well as keeping them informed of relevant issues. These ideas are referenced directly to the LINC module content indicating the influence of the programme on practice in relation to effective communication. The proactive engagement with suggestions from the LINC programme adhere to Guskey's (2002) criteria for effective

documents to plan for each child's individual needs and to provide opportunity for the children to reflect on their learning, as well as communicate progress and development with parents and families.

professional development when there is evidence of action as a basis of the learning.

Relationships with Parents

Eliza and Martha, as employee managers, as well as Claire and Ruth, directly specified that they felt more confident in dealing with parents as a result of engagement with the LINC programme with Claire asserting that the modules "have helped me to be more confident in dealing with parents – and the knowledge that came – there's always something that you will take from it...". Eliza and Claire also noted that their new role of INCO is something that they feel will support their collaborative practice with parents and were enthusiastic in sharing their new learning with them:

> It's even much better because on top of my experience – and I could say a 'specialist' – now as an Inclusion Coordinator, 'this is what I have learnt. This is what I've been told. Let's try A, B, C and we will find a way to work it out.

The knowledge gleaned from the programme was specified by two participants in particular, in relation to knowing what supports are available for parents and families and the collaborative nature of the application for the AIM. Both Lucy and Teresa, one a preschool assistant and the other an owner-manager, stated they were not fully aware of the AIM processes and how one accessed support for the child. Challenges working with parents were noted by the participants prior to engaging with LINC, "because you are completely dependent on parents' involvement, if they are not on board, you really have nowhere to stand" (Siobhan*)*. Initial concerns identified this as one of the "big problems" with the AIM as well as not having the authority to discuss issues with anybody else for support and guidance owing to the necessity of getting signed consent from the parents prior to the AIM application. In the initial interview, Teresa expressed her concern about communicating with parents, suggesting that rather than be solely responsible for identifying and communicating concerns about a child's development that:

> ..it would be nice maybe if there was someone we could ring and say 'Look, here is a child we are worried about; we're not sure about what it is' – it would be nice to have someone to come in maybe and observe…if you have someone who is in that line – more professional in that line.

On completing the programme, Teresa was more confident in this regard noting that she was able to "guide the mam through the forms and that – and I didn't even know it was there before this". As owner-manager, Tina reflected on how her learning of Epstein's Framework (2001) of parental involvement in Module 3, although she had covered this on previous courses, "woke me up again" and helped her to re-focus on her role after a somewhat stressful year in her service.

The reflective nature of the LINC programme in relation to partnership with parents was specifically evident in ten out of the fourteen settings in the post-LINC analysis. The programme content, emphatically in Module 3, placed emphasis on promoting empathy and respect for parents in their role, as well as outlining strategies for resolving conflicts and improving communication. This reflective process is encapsulated in Claire's observation:

> I think seeing parents as experts in relation to their own children – I think that…. I think recognising that – and building better respectful relationships with parents and children as well. The same way as we would be non-judgemental with children – I think it's vitally important that you're not judgemental with parents. Y'know? I mean, being open to that - being open to that – not having any preconceived ideas coming in, or not to be judgemental or anything like that.

Literature has identified the need to empathise with parents and understand their perspective to develop and maintain positive relationships (NCCA 2009; O'Toole *et al.* 2019). An awareness of an anti-bias approach (Graham 2017; Derman-Sparks and Olsen-Edwards 2020) when working with parents is evidenced in the findings whereby one manager, Mary, recognised the need to "watch the parents' body language" when communicating concerns to ensure she was doing so respectfully. A further example is provided by Lucy, who subtly counteracted a mother's criticism of her child's behaviour with a positive remark, linking this to a strengths-based approach (Early Childhood Ireland 2016). Advocating for parents and

families, Tina fought to have the child's tutor work with him at home rather than at preschool as she felt they "needed it more there".

Although the majority of participants identified ways in which the LINC programme had influenced parent – setting collaboration, Ciara and Siobhan, an employee and an owner-manager respectively, clearly specified that the LINC programme had no influence on their collaborative practice with parents. Siobhan comments that parents are not involved in her setting, "they don't come in and do any of the parent stuff if you know what I mean". As an employee ECT in this regard, Ciara had questionable authority to implement changes to collaborative practice within her setting owing to her role and responsibilities within the service. Both Ciara and Siobhan are Level 8 graduates (QQI 2020) in ECCE, with both having a number of years' experience working in the ELC sector. In the first instance, Siobhan described her relationship with parents, alluding to a somewhat altered relationship resulting from the free ECCE programme:

> maybe it's cos my parents know me very well – y'know – who I am, what I've come from… I don't know… I think as well that people see the free ECCE thing is 'hand your child over' – y'know – cos you're not paying for it… I felt the first year when I was charging and I had children who were not covered by the scheme, I think you did have a different relationship because I think when parents were paying they expected certain things in return – maybe it's to do with that.

She also considers that the LINC programme content was more focused on ideas for a full-day care setting "which parents are much more invested in". Parents in her setting "don't come in…they drop them off – that's my job. And I suppose it's up to me to be more proactive and get them involved more". Despite this assertion, she clearly states that she did not get any ideas from the LINC programme, yet there is evidence of areas of communication that she finds difficult in her partnership with parents:

> And I also feel that some parents wouldn't take – not negative news, maybe non-positive news, very well…. I don't know how to deliver that… For that child whose parents I can't do anything else with – that we've had no conversations whatsoever about that child's progress…I can't draw in the parents.

During the field visit and follow-up interview, there were discussions about the upcoming preschool outing, but there were no parental volunteers accompanying the group, indicating a possible lack of parental involvement in her early years' programme.

Ciara explained that her personal experience of additional needs as well as her professional qualifications and work experience had equipped her with sufficient learning in collaboration with parents. However, her description of those relationships with parents suggest misunderstandings of her perception of collaborative practice:

> Actually, we had one particular child at the start of the year and the parent was like 'No – definitely not'. And I was the one who had initially brought it up the previous year – she wasn't in my room at the time – she was in the other room and I was covering for someone one day. And at the end of the day the parent said 'Oh you're someone new I want your perspective on things'. And I said 'do you want my honest perspective or do you want me to just tell you he had a great day?' And she was like 'your honest perspective'. And I said 'he's completely non-verbal; he's three years old; he's not making any eye contact whatsoever; anytime there's a loud noise he does not move; there's absolutely no reaction to noise whatsoever…

She elaborates on how this parent is "giving (me) a really hard time with the younger sibling as a result of finding fault with their other child" and creating stressful situations in the workplace. Englander (2012) advises the hermeneutic researcher to be cognisant of seeing the phenomenon from the perspective of those who are experiencing it in order to discover the meaning behind the stories. The 'story' of engagement with parents and families in this theme need to be considered as part of a whole and viewed in context of the world and experiences of each individual participant (Merriam 2002; Whittaker 2009; Braun and Clarke 2016; 2021c). The challenges reported with the ECT's role and the sector are part of this phenomenon in relation to the factors that may influence engagement with the LINC programme. Such incidents of perceived insensitivity in communication with parents, mirror findings from Lee's (2015) study of the relationships between parents and ELC settings where the lack of reflection on the process of communication has a detrimental impact on those relationships. One of the key elements of effective communication is the ability to listen and to avoid sharing

one's own experiences of the same phenomenon. While Ciara was talking from a place of experience, having a child with additional needs herself, she may have lacked the empathy of being in that parent's shoes in that moment, which is presented as a direct example of Gadamer's horizon of significance (2004). Ciara was critical of the LINC programme and dismissive of the content, yet the guidance on working collaboratively with parents may have supported her in finding a better outcome to the current situation whereby the parent is giving her "a hard time".

An over-confidence in one's role may come from a place whereby the ECTs with a degree in ECCE, feel the need to assert their qualification and knowledge to the parent in comparison to colleagues in the same role who might have a lesser qualification than them. Heidegger (1929) emphasises how one's societal role has a direct influence on our *Dasein*, and Brookfield's (2017) lens might be considered in this situation whereby one's role as a mother, teacher, or employee can alter our response to different situations. The findings indicate an underlying tone of elitism among some of the participants in the present study, between those who do and do not have that degree-level qualification, which will be discussed in the next chapter regarding professional identity as a factor that may influence learning from the LINC programme. Those who have this degree qualification are central to the State's aspiration to establish a 'graduate led workforce' (GoI 2018). In context of the present study, these participants indicate that they have acquired the knowledge necessary for the role of ECT during their studies and in some instances seem somewhat resentful of having to undergo further training with the LINC programme at a lower level than their existing qualification.

While this frustration with the lack of recognition of the role is understandable against the backdrop of the policy and developments of the ELC sector, it nevertheless impacts the quality of provision if one has considered that the degree programme undertaken has provided all the answers to early childhood education and care. Indeed, the findings indicate that those who engaged with the module on collaborative practice had stronger partnership with parents. These participants reported on different methods of communication that they had since developed to ensure more effective collaboration with parents and families as a result of

reflection on their practice through the LINC programme in response to research questions two and three.

The need to address attitudes to and perceptions of parental involvement is discussed by Ward (2018) and Sherfinski (2018) from the perspective of the ECT and the parent, considering the supports required to develop positive engagement. These perceptions of relationships with parents might be linked back to an understanding of the child-centred approach and the ability of the ECT to put the rights and needs of the child before their own feelings or biases. A child-centred approach necessitates engagement with their families, and it takes a strong leader within the setting to be that 'voice' to offer another perspective for parents' perceived attitudes or behaviours (Ryan and Quinlan 2017; O' Leary and Moloney 2020; Skehill 2021a). This is further complicated by the differing perceptions of participants of the educational dimension of their role with children in the sessional ECCE service, in comparison with those in crèches where they felt there was more of an emphasis on care and 'minding' children. It is interesting to consider the contrasting views within the sector itself of the importance of the role in working with the ECCE group and with the younger age group under the age of three years. How one perceives one's role working with children has an influence on relationship with parents, and perceptions of how that relationship should work in practice. This dilemma of partnership with parents was also identified in the findings of a Finnish study (Hakyemez *et al.* 2018) whereby there was recognition of the importance of parental involvement but the expectations of both parties were not sufficiently managed to develop effective collaborative partnerships. It might be argued that there is a sense of defensive response when addressing the role of the ECT from the parents' perspective where there might be a risk of over-familiarity on one hand, and a lack of engagement on the other. The ECT is trying to assert one's professional role, but again, this is dependent on one's own perception of what that role is and the responsibilities attached to that role. A lack of effective communication may be at the basis of this confusion over the role of the ECT, and again links back to reflecting on one's practice and how the role and responsibilities of the key person is communicated to parents.

Van Laere *et al.* (2018) discuss the importance of effective communication processes in the learning environment. Rentzou and Ekine (2017) question the structures in place in the ELC setting to promote and facilitate effective communication and the findings from this research support the need for leadership and responsibility to create an ongoing system of communication in the preschool. Engagement with parents again is very dependent on one's role in the setting and the processes established to enable the ECT to share information effectively. The LINC programme provided different strategies for such engagement in the module content, but the question arises again of the authority of the INCO to develop and implement these strategies. However, if settings could engage more effectively in partnership with parents through ongoing communication, then this may have an impact on parents' perspective of the role of the ECT and the work that is done in the ELC setting. This may result in a fusion of horizons whereby parents and ECTs have a shared understanding of each other's perspectives (Heidegger 1929; Gadamer 2004). If learning stories are shared with parents via social media apps, emails and learning journals; if an 'open door' policy meant that the ECT facilitated flexible meeting times for working parents; if parents were consulted on their views of service provision and contributed to the curriculum, then the ECT could convey the professional aspect of their role. Continuous open engagement with parents and families, as advocated by *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) would result in a more confident and secure relationship where each is respected for their role in the child's life.

Early Learning and Care Settings as a Family Support System

Murphy (2004) identifies the primary objective of a family support system as promoting the well-being of all members of that family and providing them with the skills to cope with adversity in their lives. This section responds to the second research question through the evidence of understanding that inclusion goes beyond the ELC setting and necessitates family involvement. Since the expansion of the Community Childcare schemes to enable all service providers to reduce childcare costs for eligible families and the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), the gap between the private and the community setting in the ELC

sector has narrowed (GoI 2019). Garrity and Canavan (2017) discuss the potential of ELC settings to act as a support system for vulnerable children and families based on their study of a community setting in Mayo. The findings in the current study indicates the potential of all quality services to provide similar support indicating another element of the influence of the learning from the LINC programme on inclusive practice. This is particularly relevant when working with families who have a child with an additional need and may require guidance and support to locate and access supports when they are dealing with the emotions of a diagnosis or concerns regarding development. There were already some very positive examples of family support, particularly in reference to Mary and Tina, both private owners of sessional services, who had carried out home-visits, supported families with application forms for different services and clearly played a very important role in supporting the child and his or her family. Mary describes one such visit to support the family of a child with additional needs who is enrolled in her sessional service:

> If the family is having difficulty – say we had another family last year where the family were…am..having difficulty getting the little man into the shower – really difficult trying to get the little man into the shower – So I landed up to the house anyway and I brought a baby bath with me. So I ran it – in the bathroom..- ..beside the shower – ran the shower off it and put it beside it – and then we washed him - his mam and me, we washed him down that way. And then eventually we got to put the baby bath into the shower, and then eventually ran the shower – so it was a slow process that one, but it was in order to try to get him into the shower.

Owen and Anderson's study in England (2017) reported similar findings regarding the positive impact of collaboration between parents and settings in supporting the holistic well-being of all the family. However, this enthusiasm and willingness to help had also impacted the services in this study in other ways providing another perspective in response to the research questions regarding perceptions and practices of inclusion. In total, three services, in different parts of the country, found that their openness in supporting families of children with additional needs earned them a reputation for inclusivity within the wider ELC sector. As a result of this, their services were recommended by other agencies, such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), which put pressure on the staff team and resources in

these settings owing to the high number of children with additional needs in one setting. Tina explains her situation in her private sessional service:

> And I unfortunately made some mistakes last year. We had too many children without enough supports and for the first time ever, I had to send a child home. And it really, really, really upset me. It really upset me because we actually could not support the child. It was not safe. … and I found that really, really hard.

Tina explains how she has reflected on her experience, and illustrates a genuine shift in her understanding of inclusion, recognising that it is more than just physical access to a space:

> Am….so now I'm really looking at children to see what are their needs and can we support all of them…and so,… now I haven't had to say no to anybody – cos that would really hurt me because I think… I think we can help any child. We can support any child – we just need the resources. I mean, if we're not given the resources… I mean the first year we were given the AIM and I had that many children – and it was the toughest year ever – and we actually did get the support – and I would have ended up … I actually dipped into our own funds to hire someone in the hopes that we would get AIM.

A similar situation was reported by Ciara regarding parents seeking to enrol children in her setting, having being refused admission to their local preschool. These practices are essentially creating exclusive environments, which as Tina states, were not designed as a "special needs preschool". Both participants allude to selective admission policies of other services and while recognising that the AIM does not seek to designate special needs preschools, they insinuate that inclusive settings, such as their own, are disproportionately enrolling children with additional needs as they have been excluded from their local preschool.

Supporting families requires specific skills and attributes, and the reality of balancing family needs with what the setting can provide, can be difficult to decipher in practice. O'Byrne (2018) specifies how the education setting needs to be focused on the family however it necessitates discussion and negotiation to determine how this will work effectively and practically for all involved. The QRF (Tusla 2018) detail the specification of management structure within the setting but this needs consideration of who has the knowledge of the family and the skills to

communicate effectively with parents, which again links to the theme of professional identity. Communicating effectively with parents requires skills and professional knowledge, and specifically a need to empathise and understand their perspective. If the ECT is addressing parents from one's own horizon of significance and failing to see the situation from a parental perspective, there is a risk of upset as evident in Ciara's situation discussed earlier. Acknowledging other perspectives and other ways of doing things is a key part of professional development. The fact that we don't know what we don't know, until we know it, is a pillar of the profession that Sexton (2007) outlines regarding the need for ongoing professional development to build on our learning.

The findings clearly respond to question two in that the LINC programme influenced participants' understanding of parental perspective in this regard and the need to shift from a charity model of sympathy to a social model of empathy and understanding to advocate for inclusion for all families (Daly *et al.* 2016; Ring e*t al.* 2018). There was a real richness of relational empathy expressed by participants, who, by their very expressions of understanding and reflection on practice, provide that support for parents and families.

> it's very open door – and maybe some places would say. 'oh god how could you do that?' I mean they wander in here from 9 o clock – it doesn't start here til 9:30 – but they do - they come in and you can chat to them, and they even love to be with the kids for a couple of minutes – and y'know it is lovely (Maria).

However, participants in this study also reported challenges to developing and maintaining relationships to support families which included a lack of resources, and a lack of time as evidenced in the literature (Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Oke *et al.* 2021). Emma explains the reality of supporting parents and families in practice from her perspective as an ECT:

> The challenge is going to be logistically is speaking to the rest of the staff in the setting. Cos when you have a lot of staff – it's not always possible for everyone to come together. And when they work full time, they're not going to want to come back and listen to me…when you think about it really…

These factors may create barriers to inclusive practice in settings and to the practical implementation of learning from the LINC programme in reference to the fourth research question. While the sessional services may be more flexible in their availability with shorter working hours, arranging a meeting in a full-day care facility requires more coordination and organisation. Such challenges evident in the findings correspond with the review of the EYEI (DES 2017) which highlights the need for leadership and management in supporting ongoing partnership with parents.

Collaboration and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

The ELC setting is situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory that argues that the environment that one grows up in affects all areas of the child's life, with a particular emphasis on interactions between people and agencies within the different systems (O'Toole *et al.* 2014; Hayes *et al.* 2017; Moloney and Pettersen 2017). In the ELC sector, there are several agencies that are part of the ecological systems which can potentially influence the learning from the programme, and subsequently affect inclusive practice and pedagogy. The potential influence of learning from the LINC programme in relation to collaborative practice with other relevant stakeholders focused on agencies as depicted in Figure 51:

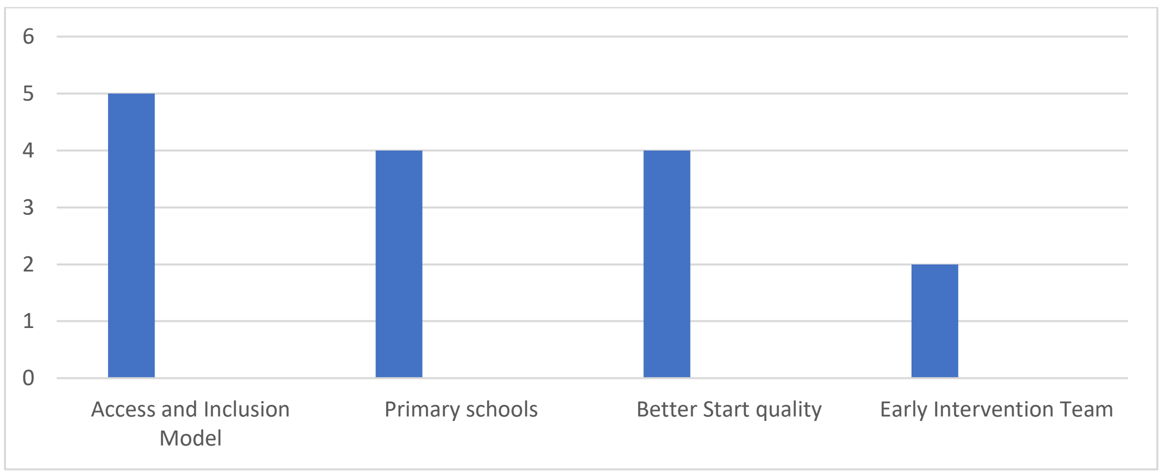

Figure 51 Engagement with Other Stakeholders in the Early Learning and Care Settings

The findings of this research study correlate with the review of the AIM (DCYA 2019) which identifies the positive elements of the model in supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs in the ECCE setting and in challenging attitudes towards inclusive practice, responding to the second and third research questions. Engagement with the Early Years Specialist (EYS) and the AIM was the most common stakeholder discussed in the initial interview by participants. Nine of the fourteen participants had accessed AIM support in their setting, all having been awarded Level 7. As discussed earlier, this provides support in the form of funding to employ a preschool assistant in the room or to reduce or maintain ratios in the room of one adult with every eight children, with the exception of one participant who was still awaiting the outcome of the decision at the time of interview. Figure 52 summarises the initial engagement with this model:

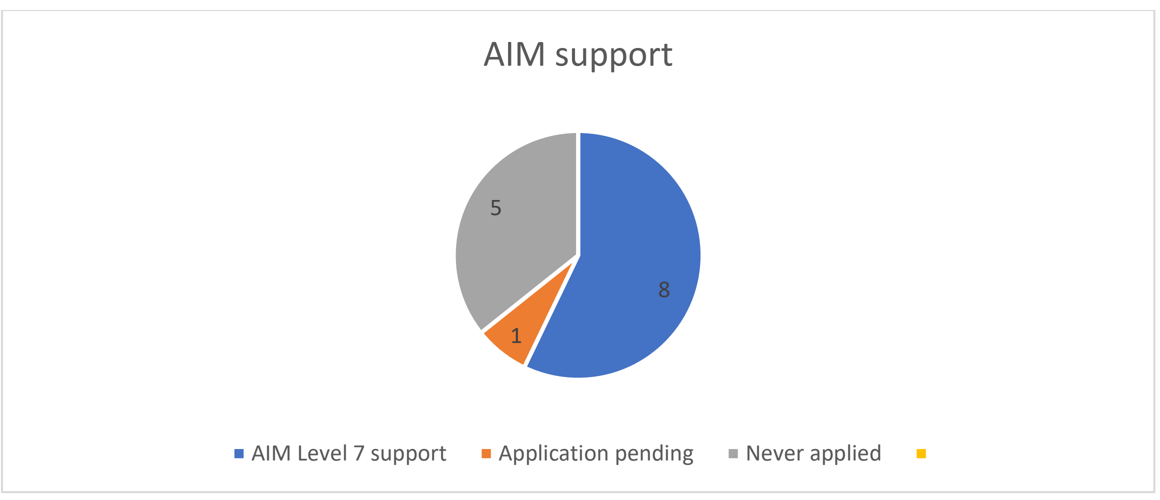

Figure 52 Engagement with the Access and Inclusion Model Support

In the initial interviews, participants discussed the positive aspects of the AIM, which are also identified by Ring and O' Sullivan (2019) in ensuring that children with additional needs can access ECCE services. The findings make particular reference to support from the EYS in guiding inclusive practice within the settings. Ruth, an owner manager, who had emphasised the challenges she had experienced working with one particular child with additional needs enthused:

> It was like as if - _it was gold from heaven for us! That's the only way I can describe it!...But only for the Better Start, - (Name of EYS) out of Better Start – and the whole AIM programme – we would not have got any headway at all – good bad or indifferent. And that's where…. I, I, I… I don't take my hat off to the government many times to be quite honest – but this is one thing they are getting right. This is DEFINETELY one thing that they are getting right.

However, there were concerns from two ECTs, Lucy and Emma, who work directly with the children in the preschool rooms, that they were not involved in meetings with the EYS and so lost out on opportunities to discuss strategies and issues they might encounter. Lucy was unsure about "what way do they want us to work with this child" and expressed how she would have appreciated the opportunity to..

> ..have had maybe a bit of a talk with the Better Start team to say y'know this is what we're looking at – and do you have any feedback on the child cos I'm working with him x amount of hours in the week.

Although the AIM had been in operation for a year at the time of the initial interview, there was still considerable confusion about the concepts of inclusive practice and the different level of supports available for children and families. This had a direct impact on two of the settings owned by Mary and Teresa respectively, whereby the lack of knowledge of the AIM resulted in parents being asked to fund a SNA for the child with additional needs rather than applying for AIM support:

> The model that we started with last year – because we had such a high number of additional needs children, and…. Um… we had initially am… well I don't know enough about the AIM last September when we started off to be honest… am… It was only beginning to come out then so am… We had so many hours from Enable Ireland and the rest of the hours were made up so am… so- what I suggested to a number of parents was – the parents that had additional needs children – if everybody came together and gave x amount of money it was given to have a full time SNA in the classroom to make up between the hours we were given from Enable Ireland and between those hours – and then I contributed to that as well (Mary).

Teresa had specified to parents that "we couldn't take him back after Christmas unless there was one-to-one" which resulted in the parents appointing and funding a person "that they felt was suitable" to work as a SNA in the preschool. As owner-

manager, she noted that she “wasn’t fully aware of AIM” at the time which may potentially have provided funding for additional support in the setting. Such exclusion of children with additional needs has been identified in review of the AIM (DCYA 2019) whereby there is a lack of consistency in supporting children’s participation and although there was “ad hoc good practice, many were also excluded” (p. 21). Other participants demonstrated a lack of understanding of the eligibility and criteria for support under the different levels of AIM believing it to be “common knowledge about children going into playschool who may have special educational needs have to be given a label in order to access funding to get their needs met” (Siobhan). However, one of the features of the AIM application process is that there is no requirement for an official diagnosis of a specific need or disability to access supports (DCYA 2016b).

The review of the AIM (DCYA 2019) acknowledged the complexity of the workforce in the ELC sector, and the findings from this study provide examples of the direct influence of one’s professional role on inclusive practice in this regard. These initial interviews illustrate how one’s role in society, and one’s lived experiences, can influence our *Dasein* (Heidegger 1929) in consideration of understandings of inclusion and commitment to develop one’s professional knowledge in that regard.

Another issue highlighted by participants was the funding model for the fifteen hours of Level 7 support which was criticised for the rigidity of the payment for direct contact hours with the child. In practice this meant that *“*the LINC (*meaning AIM)* person is walking in the door when the child is walking in the door, so she has no preparation for her day if anything needs to be prepared. She…she doesn’t have time whatsoever and then you have parents who want to have time to talk” (Tina). However, on completing the LINC programme, Tina shared a very positive example of collaborative practice within her setting following an inspection by Pobal who “kept focusing on who was bringing the children out here doing exercises and how many children did they have”*.* Although initially unsure of “where she (Inspector) was going with this”, she realised that the focus was on the number of children attached to the ECT with the Level 7 degree as per the higher capitation criteria for the ECCE payments (DCYA 2019). The participant asserted that “I feel like I got my

back teeth with the LINC programme" and had the confidence to address the situation as "I was learning with LINC about small groups and getting the right people" to effectively support the children within the group. She went on to contact her EYS to discuss the issue, before writing an email to Pobal to ensure there was a mutual understanding of the situation and that she was operating in accordance with best practice under AIM. This contextual reality of an over-emphasis on the funding allocation is reflective of findings in the literature in relation to the challenges of sustainability for some services owing to the current piecemeal funding model (Moloney 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021).

On completion of the LINC programme, five of the participants in this study discussed their engagement with AIM and the EYS. Lucy, Ruth and Tina all reported positive engagement, with the AIM. As discussed earlier, Ruth explained how collaborating with the EYS had very positive outcomes for a child in her service, whose behaviours and overall development progressed, "even within the year here with us under the AIM programme you could see his behaviour beginning to improve". She credits the support from the EYS and the AIM in supporting the team around the child so "he was taking ownership and learning how to cope with us being firm, but fair". There was also positive action reported from Lucy, who had previously expressed concern at the lack of communication regarding support for the child with additional needs. Motivated by engagement with the LINC programme, she had meetings with the EYS and reports how she was able to discuss strategies and ideas with her:

> Well they (Management) had asked me because I was doing the LINC to work with – to go downstairs and speak to (Early Years' Specialist) about the children even though I didn't work directly with two of them. She says well you're doing the LINC and you've done this that and the other so you go down and you be the link – the link for the preschool. So I had a good chat with her that day and I took so much from that – she was in specifically for those three children and I was there for about an hour and a half I'd say. And you learn so much from just bouncing ideas and just knowing where she's coming from.

However, Mary, who had availed of AIM support, referred to having a 'few' meetings with the EYS which involves "generally just feedback from me in the office", and had not involved the key person within the preschool group. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory regarding the interactions and relationships within the child's ecosystem may be considered in regard to the working relationship between the EYS and the child's key person and the potential challenge for collaborative practice. The "training and support" (DCYA 2019, p. 1) that LINC provided in relation to supporting collaborative practice with the EYS is discussed by four of the participants and is linked to the "confidence" that came with that CPD experience, responding to questions two and three. However, as outlined by Guskey (2002), attainment of knowledge does not necessarily lead to organisational change, which is determined by those in positions of leadership and authority within the setting.

The IDG (2015) highlighted a need for external supports to guide inclusive practice in the ELC setting, but perhaps this publication in itself may be representative of that "historical policy gap" (DCYA 2019) that fails to coordinate the multitude of supports that have been available in the sector under different agencies. The pre-LINC interviews mention a total of ten other support agencies: the childcare committees, the HSE (General practitioners and Public Health nurses), Enable Ireland, the Brothers of Charity, Tusla, Pobal, Better Start Quality and AIM EYS, DES, Early Intervention Teams and Early Childhood Ireland. All of these agencies have different approaches and perspectives of collaborative practice with the ELC setting, and challenges have been identified in the findings, as well as in policy regarding the multitude of "voices" in the sector. While there was positive regard for the role of the speech and language therapist (SLT) and the Occupational therapist (OT), questions were also raised regarding the support provided by the Early Intervention Team (EIT) and if they were cognisant of the principles of the play-based and child-led programme in the ELC setting when recommending strategies for supporting children with additional needs. It may be ironic that the very agencies that were developed to support ECCE might actually be one of the

factors that affect the implementation of inclusive practice in a response to the research questions.

Mentoring Support in the Setting

The effectiveness of professional dialogue between mentors and early childhood students and educators has been recognised as a central feature of leadership within the ELC setting and has a direct impact on quality of service provision (Goodbody Economic Consultants 2011b; DES 2013; European Commission 2014; Doan and Gray 2021; Skehill 2021a). The LINC programme itself has embraced the andragogic practice of mentoring support for students through on-site visits from their designated tutor (LINC Consortium 2016-2020). As well as having access to mentoring support from the LINC tutor, three of the participants on this study, Lucy, Monica and Emma, were engaged with the Better Start Quality programme[20] (DCYA 2015), while Mary's service had been validated at Level 4 in the Siolta Quality Assurance Programme[21] in the past year (CECDE 2006). While the Better Start Quality team[22] are focusing on providing guidance on developing curriculum and the environment in these settings, the interviews and field visits highlighted how the ongoing mentoring of the AIM EYS (DCYA 2016b), the Better Start Quality team (DCYA 2015) and the LINC programme (LINC Consortium 2016-2020) overlapped and caused an amused confusion of where they might have learnt what with each one. The combined approach of these CPD opportunities indicate a positive outcome on the quality of inclusive practice in these settings. The services engaged in these mentoring programmes demonstrated positive attitudes towards their

[20] Better Start Quality Development Service is a national service established by DCYA (2015) to support quality and best practice in ELC settings through ongoing mentoring support for the facility.

[21] The Siolta Quality Assurance Programme is the formal engagement with Siolta standards with the support of a mentor to provide structured engagement with and assessment of their service against the Siolta standards and components of quality (CECDE 2006).

participation in the LINC programme indicating the benefits of mentoring and support on developing inclusive and quality practice, as well as an enthusiasm to reflect and develop their practice.

Both Lucy and Tina noted that they engaged more positively with the EIT (Tusla 2020) over the past year as a result of their experience with the LINC programme. As owner-manager, Tina was very proactive in this regard and had..

> ..brought in a person, the speech therapist, the OT – so that was the first time ever we got the group together – well I shouldn't say that – sorry – the year before, I'd been invited to two case conferences – but this was something that I had instigated – because of the LINC programme and that was very positive.

While this study has not been about a formal evaluation of the LINC programme, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge participant learning outcomes which may be illustrated through anecdotal accounts and affective outcomes. Guskey (2002) insists that the influence of teacher professional development on student learning in educational settings is too complex to attribute solely to engagement with a programme, but simultaneously recognises that one can gather evidence to determine if the CPD programme contributed to specific developments and changes in student learning, as evidenced in some of the participants' accounts as noted above.

Collaboration with Primary School Settings

Supporting transitions from the preschool to the primary school sector is a key element of quality and inclusive practice (CECDE 2006; NCCA 2015; GoI 2018; NCCA 2018) and collaboration with teachers in the school is an essential part of that process. This section, responding to research question three in particular, marks a notable gap of the influence of learning from the LINC programme with minimal implementation of recommended strategies from the CPD experience. *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) reminds us that transitions to primary school are not about an

‘ending’ of one stage and the ‘beginning’ of another, but rather that it is a process that takes place over an extended period of time to support the child’s move from one environment to the other. The findings from this research study indicates that, despite the wealth of literature specifying the need for collaboration between the preschool and the primary school (Daly *et al*. 2016; O’ Kane and Murphy 2016; Ring *et al.* 2016; NCCA 2018), there is a lack of cohesive planning and consistency in approach to supporting children’s transitions. While many of the participants did not discuss the transition process, there were some observations of practice in the last term of preschool which illustrated positive examples of supporting transition within the setting, through play-based opportunities including having school uniforms in the dress-up areas and social stories about school.

Four of the participants in this study discussed transitions and expressed frustration at the absence of communication and collaboration with local schools, attributing this to the lack of regard of their role within the educational system, again linking back to the theme of professional identity as a key factor in affecting the learning from the LINC programme. Having considered contextual realities of the role of the ECT in Chapter One, this may have an element of truth in it and might also be attributed to the attitudes of individual primary school teachers and principals. However, one might also consider to what extent the participants are advocating on behalf of the children and including their voice in this transition process. Confidence in one’s professional role, which will be discussed in the next chapter, has a real impact on the participants’ engagement with the school and also raises a potential ethical dilemma of being part of a hindrance to a child’s development if faced with challenges making connections with the primary teacher. This lack of collaboration has been noted by the DES (2018) whereby such collaborative relationships with the local school had either not been established or were not working effectively to support the children’s transitions.
Ravenscroft *et al.* (2018) European study emphasised the need for a child-centred approach to support transitions, and this is particularly relevant when working with children with additional needs (Daly *et al.* 2016; Ring *et al.* 2016). The introduction of the AIM to support children in the ELC setting has benefited the transition

process for children with additional needs through the use of a transfer document outlining the strengths and needs of the child, however, the disconnect between the AIM, the ELC and the primary school system continues to be problematic (DCYA 2019). The review of the AIM identified this lack of collaboration and documented concerns expressed by parents and ECTs regarding this transition to the primary school setting. The case studies from this first review (DCYA 2019) recognised the need for more intensive and individualised supports to facilitate the child's meaningful inclusion and participation in the infant classroom.

The development of the transition initiative, *Mo Scéal* (NCCA 2018), provides guidance for supporting transitions through the use of play-based activities, online podcasts and videos as well as two different options of transfer documents which are based around the *Aistear* framework (NCCA 2009). These transfer documents, extensively referenced in LINC, offer a holistic view of the child's development and is based around *Aistear's* (NCCA 2009) broad themes of Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. This resource has the potential to provide a basis for discussion between the ECT and the primary school, with parental consent, but with the exception of one ECT, Mary, the other participants did not discuss the use of transfer documentation in the transition process. The lack of engagement with learning from the LINC programme was evidenced by Ruth, a graduate, who specified that there was no contact at all with the local school across the road, and was critical of their lack of initiative in contacting her when a child with additional needs started in the school:

> I was waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting for them to ask us for a report and………..there was no engagement. There is no engagement. Y'know us in the early years – we can talk about transitions all we like but transitions happens when we are preparing the children for transition. That's what we do – that's what we do here. We prepare them. There's no link between early years and primary schools – not that I know of here. Not from here. The majority of our kids go across here and there's no link.

When asked about different strategies for collaboration suggested in the LINC programme, she added that she "hadn't thought about that" and had not taken the initiative herself to contact the school. Another degree qualified participant, Ciara,

noted that with over thirty ECCE children in the setting, they could not afford the time or the cost of completing and filling out this extensive documentation and indicates that she did not learn any new information from the LINC programme. This sense of detachment from some learning opportunities from BA graduates on the programme again raises the question about professional identity within the sector and how this might influence inclusive practice by virtue of staff morale working in the sector. Ciara was also critical of management within the setting which leads to concerns relating to leadership for inclusion and how the culture of a setting has a direct influence on what is happening in each of the rooms in the service:

> Well, we don't have staff meeting – no sign of them – had another 'staff meeting' where A came in and said 'Anybody have any issues?' – that's the height of team meetings that we have here.

The professional role of the ECT or the INCO in impacting changes and advocating for progress is illustrated as being hampered by a lack of authority to do so. The LINC programme has supported a process of reflective practice throughout the modules in deepening the understanding of what a child-centred practice is about, responding to research question two. This is evidenced in the reaction of Lucy, who had been very positive about her learning experience with the programme and reflected on her role in speaking up for the child in her care in relation to this transition process. Ring and O' Sullivan (2016) discuss the importance of capturing the voice of the child and Lucy clearly depicts the importance of her role in providing information to the school about the little boy in her care, fearing that if a teacher "dislikes" his behaviour, then he could "get lost in the system". Ciara echoes this concern about teachers' lack of knowledge of how to support a child with additional needs in the primary school classroom. While Ciara's societal role as a parent of a child with additional needs, as well as her own experiences with the education sector, may influence her views, there is nevertheless a valid rationale for her suggestion that all primary school teachers should have better knowledge of inclusive practice in supporting transitions.

Summary

Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology encourages one to re-look at one’s life-world and those taken-for-granted experiences in everyday routines. In consideration of the phenomenon of the experience of engagement with the LINC programme, collaborating with others is understood from the societal role of the participants as ECTs working with young children. Suddick *et al.* (2020) emphasise the ongoing dialogue and engagement with the participants’ accounts which is required to reach a comprehensive understanding of the meaningful life-experience of the participants. This chapter has illustrated how the shift away from the natural attitude to the philosophical interpretation of their experiences has shown the characteristics of the phenomena of engagement with the LINC programme on their inclusive practices. Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* incorporates the concept of being with others and how our life-world is influenced and shaped by those we interact with in our social existence (1929). The relational processes of collaboration with significant stakeholders in children’s lives is understood in this context in response to the research questions in determining influence of the programme on participants’ understandings of inclusion. This discussion illustrates the centrality of their professional self in taking on collaborative responsibility in practice to promote inclusion in the ELC setting.

Chapter Six

Professional Identity: Findings and Discussion

"'Oh you're a teacher?' Yeah I'm a preschool teacher' 'Oh' (in disappointed voice!) (Laughs) And – and the thing is – it's such important work"

Introduction

Smith *et al.* (2004) talk about the "gem" in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a significant idea that emerges as a key finding which underpins the responses to the research questions. In this study, the professional identity of the participants and how this role is perceived by them and others as part of their *Dasein*, is a central feature of the findings. It resembles the base 'ingredient' of the whole 'cake' (Braun and Clarke 2016), or the shadow forever lurking throughout the 'story' of the analysis (ibid 2021c). This chapter focuses upon findings relating to the factors that affect how Early Childhood Teachers (ECT) perceive their role in terms of working with children in early childhood settings. These factors, as illustrated throughout the findings, are intertwined with their sense of professional identity, which feature predominantly across the pre and post LINC interviews.

This theme demonstrates how one's professional identity informs how one carries out responsibilities as an ECT to support children in the early years setting. Professional identity is presented as a contextual understanding of one's *Dasein,* and our horizon of understanding when coming to interpret life experiences. This

theme demonstrates how one's horizon of understanding – what one knows and has experienced – informs interpretation of new knowledge and experience. It considers how the contextual reality of participants' professional identity has influenced their engagement with the learning from the LINC programme and the subsequent influence of this on children's inclusion in ELC settings.

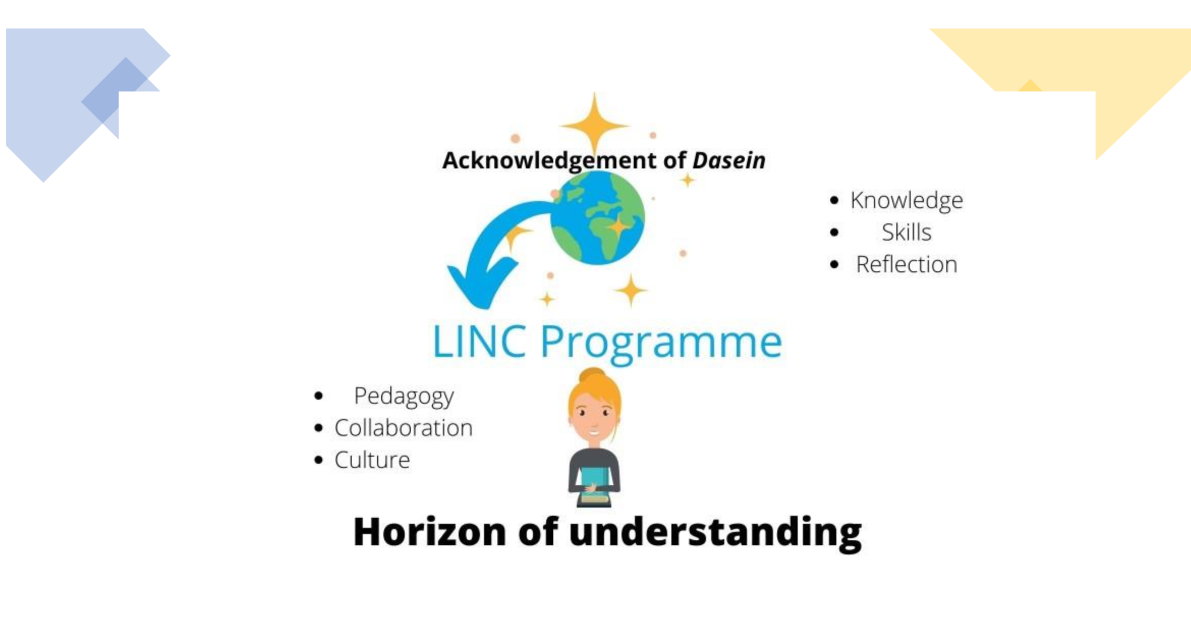

Figure 53 Key Findings Regarding the Influence of the LINC Programme on Participants' Understandings.

By acknowledging the lifeworld of participants, there is opportunity to support the fusion of horizons (Gadamer 2004) thereby creating a space where the ECT is more open to the potential learning from Continuing Professional Development (CPD) experiences. This in turn has the capacity to extend their professional knowledge, skills and ability to reflect on their life experiences, which will enhance their capabilities and enthusiasm for their role working with children. The knowledgeable, skilful and reflective practitioner may then have a different perspective and understanding of elements of their role in supporting an inclusive culture and pedagogy, through collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders. The previous chapters addressed the findings relating to the influence

of the LINC programme on participants' understanding of inclusion and their work in practice. This theme answers more specifically question 4 regarding the factors that affect the implementation of learning from the LINC programme, while simultaneously understanding that any opportunity for learning and up-skilling will have that potential to impact professional identity. Completion of the LINC programme qualifies the learner as an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) – a leadership role within the ELC setting and the potential of developing their professional identity in light of this new title.

With this understanding in mind of the leadership capacity of the INCO, the figure below provides a summary of the key characteristics of this foundational theme which provides a "particularly salient meaning" (Braun and Clarke 2021c, p. 140) to the experiences of participants in this study as developed from the data and the literature.

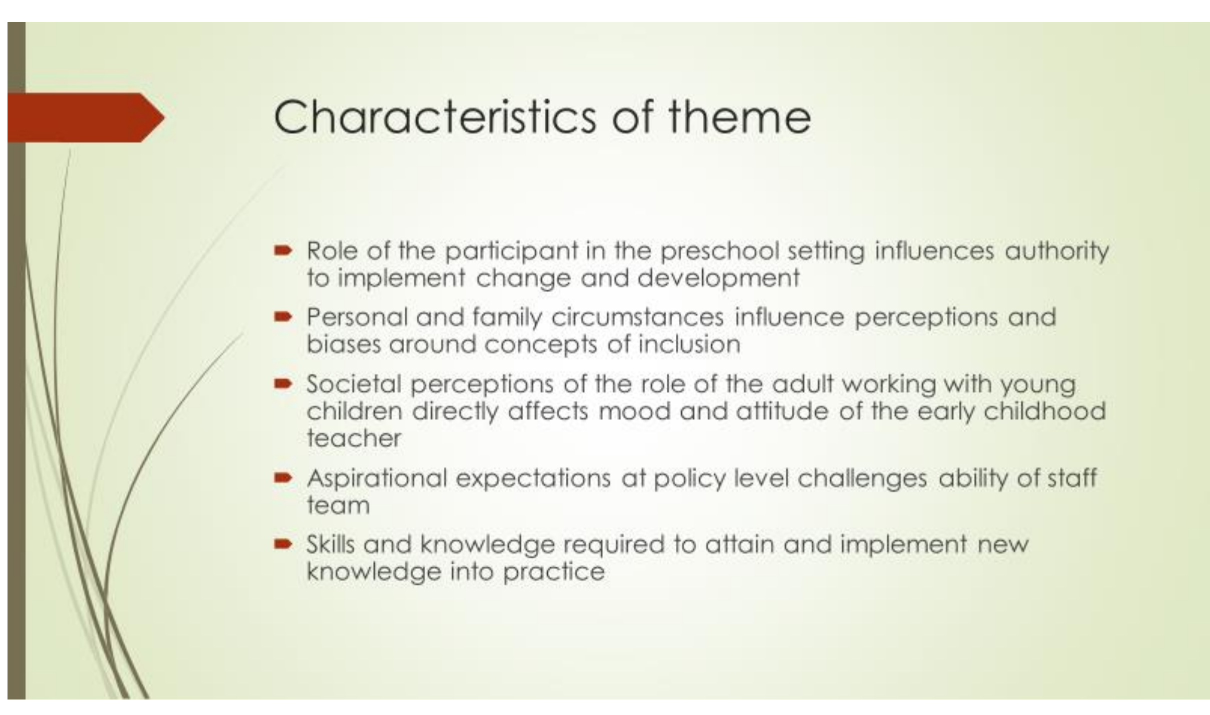

Figure 54 Characteristics of the Theme of Professional Identity

“I wanted to have it – for myself – I wanted to have the qualification” (Claire)

In the initial interviews, which took place prior to engagement on the LINC programme, I was mindful of creating an open and responsive space for engagement with the participants, and thence opened conversations with a discussion about their own background in the ELC sector. Merriam (2002) recognises the value of this interpretive approach in qualitative study to understand how participants present life experiences and the meaning they place on these experiences in their social world. Although an easy opener for the interview process, asking this question provided real and genuine insight into their *Dasein.* The findings from the initial interviews illustrated how several of the participants began their career in the ELC sector through an unintentional process that was befitting for their lifestyles at that time. Lucy, who is relatively new to the sector, describes her personal experience:

> I started doing my level 5 when I was 30 – and the reason was, I had a child and I had to work something around him - the interest came up in that and I enjoyed doing the course – and the place where I did my student time – I ended up getting a place there and then I did my Level 6 then while I was working part-time.

Three of the participants were offered a job by a friend, only one of whom had relevant qualifications at the time. A further two participants were approached individually by members of their respective communities to assist in setting up a preschool, as described by Maria, who explains her path into the early years when:

> …in the community we had informal play sessions and then someone approached me and said a playschool was needed and would I be interested so we set up in the local community hall and then I said I better do a course.

Maria has gone on to take over this community setting and run it as a private sessional preschool for over fifteen years. A further three participants obtained employment following work experience under their training on a Community

Employment Programme[23] (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) (2018); and the other participant had been offered two positions within a couple of days on arrival in Ireland with qualifications from a European country. It must be noted that all of these employment opportunities took place prior to changes in regulations (Department of Health and Children (DoHC) 2006) regarding the qualifications of staff working in the early years' sector. It is however an important point to consider in light of the societal backdrop regarding perceptions of the role and the responsibility of the adult working with children in the ELC sector. The findings reflect the realities reported in policy papers outlined in Chapter One, in relation to the complexity of the workforce (DES 2010; DCYA 2013; Pobal 2021). To date, as fore-mentioned, all participants have completed training to a Level 6, with four of the fourteen participants holding a Level 8 Degree in Early Childhood Education and Care (Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2020).

The overall findings in the initial interviews illustrate the personal connections between the ECT and the children, as well as the emotional and practical ties with the services where they work. Claire declares her enthusiasm for her role after over 12 years in the sector, explaining how she "originally went out to cover and that's where I am now. And I'm still there now and I love it. I absolutely love it". Reflecting the predominantly female workforce in the early years, and the traditional role of the mother as primary caregiver, several of the participants explain how they "fell into the role" and joined the ELC workforce to accommodate their family life and other responsibilities. The maternalistic nature of the ECT is portrayed through their experiences where their personal histories, as discussed in Chapter Four in relation to caring for family with additional needs, are called upon to support them in their working environment. Having considered the role of the ECT in Chapters Four and Five in relation to leading an inclusive culture through informed pedagogical practices as well as collaborating and engaging with others, this chapter reports on the theme of Professional Identity. Figure 55 illustrates the interconnectivity of the

[23] Community Employment Programmes (CE) are a government initiative to support people in long term unemployment to get back into the workforce by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs within the community (DEASP 2018).

sub-themes in relation to how one's professional identity influences, and is impacted by, engagement with the LINC programme.

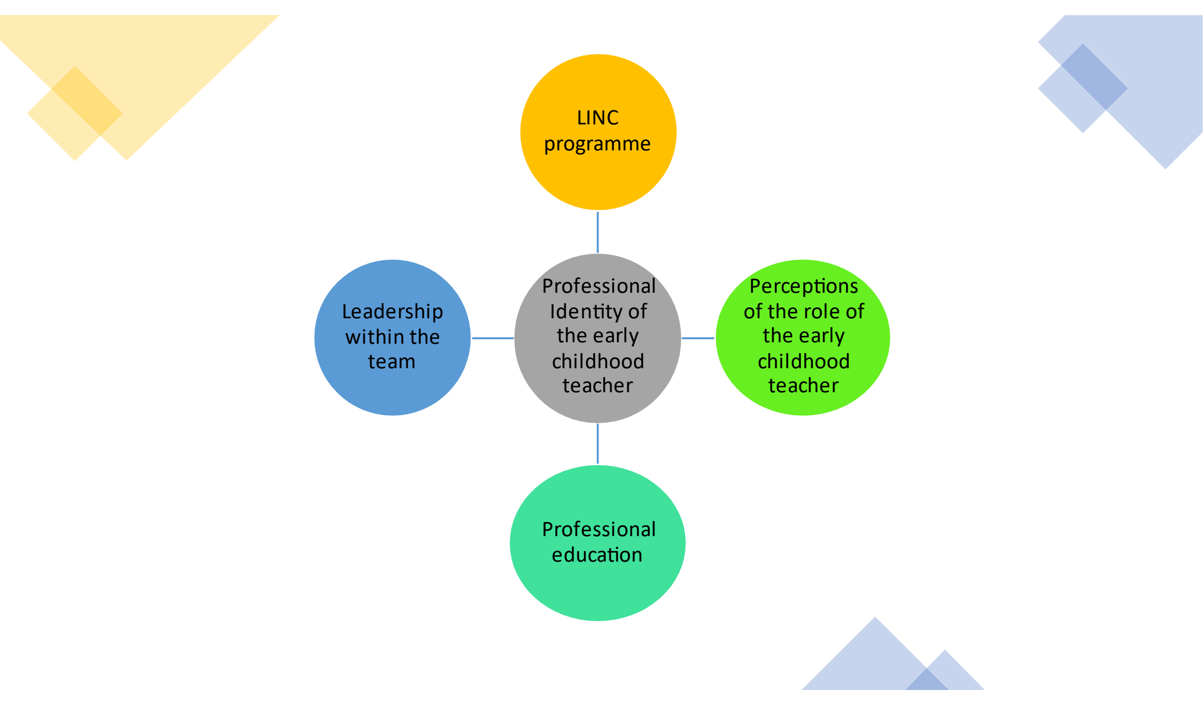

Figure 55 Sub-themes of Professional Identity of the Early Childhood Teacher

Professional Identity of the Adult in the Early Learning and Care Setting

Heidegger (1929) speaks of this notion of "appearing" which Smith *et al.* (2004) explain as an idea that is ready to shine out in the findings but requires the researcher to facilitate and understand the process of uncovering this meaning. This theme speaks in particular, to the fourth research question regarding the factors that influence learning from the LINC programme. The findings and literature indicate that perceptions of the role of the ECT, by the self and in societal views, has an influence on commitment to engage with CPD, to collaborate with others and to develop inclusive pedagogical practice. Sexton's (2007) components

of teaching as a profession includes the recognised knowledge-base and commitment to ongoing professional development. The influence of the experience of the LINC programme on participants' professional identity will be discussed here in light of themes from the literature and research findings. The topic of professional identity developed as a semantic code in the analysis, which Terry (2021) explains as an explicit finding in the data. It also is understood as a prominent theme owing to the crucial fact that on completion of the LINC programme, one has gained a new leadership role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) in the setting. However, the IHP approach emphasises the interpretative role of the researcher in understanding the latent meanings behind a prominent theme such as this. Having emerged spontaneously in conversations from the participants in both pre-LINC and post-LINC analysis, this theme reflects the contextual backdrop of the study during a period of change and development in the ELC sector that has a direct impact on the role of the ECT in practice (RTÉ 2013, 2019; DES 2015; DCYA 2016a; 2016b; Moloney 2020). Throughout this research study, I have used the term 'early childhood teacher', one which was adopted by the LINC Consortium, influenced by John Dewey's view of the 'teacher' as one who guides and interprets the child's re-enactments and discoveries (Ring *et al.* 2019). This, however, is a point for discussion in relation to the education and qualifications of the ECT, how that role is perceived by the self and others, and the leadership capacity within the ELC setting to support quality inclusive practice.

Perceptions of the Role of the Early Childhood Teacher

Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (1929) philosophises that how one sees oneself in a social role influences how we respond and react to life experiences. The complexity of the social dimensions of the role of the ECT and the findings from this study need to be interpreted with an understanding of the lifeworld of the participants. Ricoeur (2016) argues that the hermeneutic interpreter should consider taking an interpretative stance of empathy and one of suspicion in order to draw out an understanding of experiences. This translates to an analysis of my own awareness

of the contextual realities of the participants' lifeworld, while simultaneously seeking to explain their engagement with the LINC programme.

The *Workforce Development Plan* (DES 2010) outlined the challenges in developing the professional role of the adult working with children in the ELC setting. This report documented concerns that there was a common perception that "childcare" was essentially a job for "unskilled" workers and reported on the low level of academic achievement within the profession. Acknowledging the dated source of this earlier WDP (DES 2010), the facts stated in this plan present a profile of the sector who predominantly entered 'childcare' as there were lower expectations of work performance, many of whom continuing to work in the sector. In more recent years, there has been an increase in the number of ECTs gaining third –level qualifications in ECCE, which then creates the challenge of establishing oneself as a professional in early childhood education within this working environment (Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Urban *et al.* 2017; Pobal 2018; Oke *et al.* 2021).

The professional identity of the participants, as in how they perceived their role as ECTs, as well as how they consider themselves to be perceived by others, is a recurring theme across eleven of the initial interviews and one that raises concern from the participants:

> I think there are even parents who are bringing out their children to the early years' services and they… they think we are just playing with the children. They don't realise what…what goes on with it and we're… I mean, we're not treated as professionals – sure the government doesn't even treat us like professionals (Siobhan).

There is a sense of disenchantment with Government throughout Siobhan's interview, not just in terms of her professional identity, but also societal recognition of the value of play in supporting children's development at this stage. This sentiment is echoed by Alice, an ECT who despairs at "other people", again indicating the broader societal perception of the role, who say "sure they only go down there and have a little play". These discussions provide insight into a perception of play as something frivolous while simultaneously undermining the professional knowledge of the ECT. As mentioned in Chapter One, the ELC sector

nationally and internationally is characterised by poor pay and conditions (European Commission 2019; Pobal 2021). Monica alludes to this reality noting that "at the end of the day, it's not all about the money – but we have to think financially as well…if you are working with children, you might need to be more appreciated and valued for what you are doing for the children". In common with Ciara, Ruth, as an owner manager, emphasises the importance of ELC settings as sites of early intervention for children with additional needs. She is adamant that such early intervention "starts at the grass roots of the preschool, or the Montessori or the crèche" but in spite of its purported importance in supporting children with additional needs, she highlights again that lack of recognition for the work of the ECT commenting "I just wish we were recognised that little bit more… for the work that we do".

The personal recognition of the importance of their role is overshadowed by frustrations of having to assert their professional worth. Siobhan, an owner manager, referred to her college education six times in the course of the first interview asserting that she "really believe(s) in preschool education. I really believe that I should make a difference in their lives. I know I will". However, tensions in relation to how the sector is governed, the traditional care / education divide and top-down directives clearly affect her self-belief and confidence. She uses the example of the Early Years' Education-Focused Inspections (EYEI), to illustrate her concerns - that it "frightens" her and that "they will go after someone like me who's on my own, who's independent". One's confidence in a qualification is susceptible to scrutiny from another's perspective and this 'worry' can be appreciated as well as justified when one's concept of one's professional role hangs on having that degree, a concern which is also echoed by Ciara in subsequent discussion. In a complex sector, that qualification is what separates Siobhan from the majority and puts her on a step above others in the aspiration for a graduate-led sector (GoI 2018; DCEDIY 2021). For her, to receive an unfavourable report from the EYEI may impact this perception of expertise. Heidegger (1929) considers how one's attitude to life's challenges and occurrences, can have a direct link to one's interpretation of a phenomenon. In this case, there was a sense of resignation in her conversations

as she questioned the point of the LINC programme and the role of INCO stating "I don't think it's taken seriously in the services. I don't think the people have any power whatsoever to change anything". In considering the *moods* that impact one's *being* (Heidegger 1929), this reaction from Siobhan needs to be interpreted in that light of her lived experience working in practice. Will the role of INCO make a difference to her perception of her professional self and how she is viewed by others? Critically, will the LINC programme have influence on how she can develop and support an inclusive culture and pedagogy within the setting? The findings indicate that these contextual realities of participants, their horizons, play a central role in leading and facilitating inclusion in practice.

Ciara, another college graduate like Siobhan, is also very confident of her qualifications and experience, arguing that all staff working in the ELC sector should "all be at the same level of education where we all understand the same things and we're all working towards the same goals". She presumed she has "a very different view on this to most people" when she refers to herself as a "teacher" and to her time spent in college to obtain her qualification. She lamented the fact that her fellow graduates reduce the role to stating that they "work in a crèche", rather than to see themselves as a 'professional' working as a 'preschool teacher'. This experience links to the idea of a collective professional identity and illustrates the frustration of losing one's voice within the complexity of the sector. Mary, Siobhan and Tina, as owner-managers, as well as Lucy and Ciara, specifically referred to how others perceive them in their professional role in a negative capacity in the post-LINC interviews; with four of them having degree qualifications. The terminology used for their role causes considerable concern with Siobhan noting that in a planning application, they referred to her setting as "a childcare service" which she feels is "awful", and akin to "calling a sculptor a builder". This raises the issue of Gadamer's (2004) horizon of understanding and how one's perspective might be limited by virtue of one's own life experiences. There is a perceived notion that a preschool setting provides a different service to that of a 'childcare' service, one that is somewhat less skilled. The irony of one who works in a preschool setting, advocating for recognition, while simultaneously presuming peers who work in a

full day care service to have a lesser professional role, illustrates the frustrations within the sector. In reality however, as noted by Moloney and French (2022), these frustrations have been created and perpetuated by Government policies pertaining to the ECCE sector in Ireland in the last decade.

Ring *et al*. (2018) highlight the diversity of terms used to refer to the staff team, from early childhood educators, childcare workers, preschool teachers, preschool assistants, practitioners and early years' teachers. While Urban *et al*. (2011; 2017) have attempted to classify the different roles of the ECT in the sector, the terminology used in relation to the varying levels of "practitioner" working with children, highlights the gap between policy and practice. Criticism of the suggested "practitioner" title was documented in the consultation for the Final Review of the Occupational Role (2017). Urban (2017, p. 53) nevertheless suggests that:

> …two possible ways forward are either numerical, i.e. level 1, level 2 etc. (an approach which also allows for further possible future iterations) or an approach which more explicitly relates levels to job roles, for example assistant practitioner, lead practitioner etc.

The recent policy publication *Nurturing Skills* (DCEDIY 2021) provides a limited scope of role titles under 'early years educator', 'lead educator' and 'manager'. Siobhan's frustration of having to record her profession as a 'childcare worker' on an insurance document as there was no other option for her as a graduate working in a 'preschool' setting, encapsulates the dilemma of terminology that Urban (2017) has tried to address in his writing. While Urban considers the varying levels of "practitioner", which offers a very practical scale for reference purposes, it does not marry with one's sense of self-efficacy within the sector to consider the grading from basic to expert in the field. This language in itself might be considered belligerent as a response to the consultation with the sector and does not take into account how these roles might be perceived and communicated on a societal level. To proclaim oneself as an "expert practitioner" provides little information pertaining to the role or the competencies required to acquire such a vague title. However, the 'educator' roles proposed under *Nurturing Skills* (DCEDIY 2021) might

be similarly criticised for the lack of distinction of the qualifications required for each role from a societal perspective.

The lack of clarity around the title of the adult working in the setting is perceived as a lack of recognition and of respect for their professional role. Ciara asserts that she is "very obstinate about this whole thing" regarding her professional identity and described her experience in the local library trying to access a 'teachers' card' and having to convince the staff there that "I am a preschool teacher – I'll bring in my degree if you need it. You can see it and I am a preschool teacher". These explicit associations between having a degree level qualification and seeing oneself as a teacher further emphasises the need for this recognition of the professional role of the ECT, and the idea that one has to 'prove' one's worth is not something that occurs in other sectors in such a manner. Mary, another BA graduate, expressed concern regarding the sometimes "dismissive" attitude of primary school teachers towards the ELC sector, while another referred to a father's patronising comment regarding her skills at "childminding".

McGillivray (2008, p. 252) considers that the multiplicity of titles in the ELC sector has "contributed to confusion about identity, creating uncertainty as to what the various titles, roles and responsibilities mean". Societal perception of the work of caring for children has a real impact within this context and raises questions regarding how 'education' and 'care' are incorporated into the ECCE model, or if they are, as Hayes (2007) asserted, necessarily intertwined in the concept of 'educare'. McGillivray (2008, p. 253) suggests a possible division within the workforce as a result of this confusion over roles between those "who made career choices to join a workforce whose pre-requisites were maternal and caring personal qualities" and those who see their role as teachers and educators of young children. Participants in this study reported this frustration when there was an over-emphasis on this caring element, which they considered to be affiliated with negative connotations, providing another perspective of the response to research question four regarding the factors that influence learning from the LINC programme. While Siobhan, as an ECCE graduate, uses the contrast of "builder" and a "sculptor" in her comparison of the work involved in caring for a child in a crèche

environment and the ECCE preschool setting, there is a gap in her perspective of early years' education and care. Taggart (2011; 2016) advocates for the ELC sector to place more value on this caring element and emphasises the importance of "reconceptualising practice within a political ethic", in order to "champion 'caring' as a sustainable element of professional work, expressed not only in maternal, dyadic key working but in advocacy for care as a social principle" (2011, p. 94). This "emotional labour" that Taggart (2011, p. 97) speaks, is a recognition of the kind of caring that comes from informed intention rather than instinct and is often only evident when it is not done. However, the presumption that this trait is innate or instinctual in the predominant female workforce may contribute to the undervalued role of the ECT in society. The gap between the 'care' and 'education' element of ELC continues to be evident in the literature and the findings of this study and marrying these concepts may require further exploration in CPD programmes.

The experiences of the participants echo the assertion of earlier research which considers "at root, 'childcare' is a low status occupation that is seen as appropriate employment for unskilled and unqualified workers" (Start Strong 2013, p. 32). Despite all participants declaring their love of their job and demonstrating awareness of this important stage in children's lives, they felt that societal perception of their role, undermined the work and effort they put into their job. However, the varying perspectives of their individual roles needs to be acknowledged in context of their qualifications and experience. Moyles (2001) discusses the fact that workers in the ELC sector are very emotive about their reasons for being in the sector and noted that such overtly affectionate notions can be perceived as "anti-intellectual, idealistic, objective, indecisive and feminine" (p. 6) and further embed a stereotype of the maternal role and nature as intrinsic to the ECT. However, the Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2020) incorporates the necessity of 'caring' for all children in the ELC setting by ensuring that they are all welcomed, valued, and that their individual needs are responded to in an inclusive environment led by qualified and experienced adults. All the participants, including those who might dispute the caring element of their practice

in the ECCE room, nevertheless demonstrated a caring disposition for the children in their setting. However, the reality also needs to be acknowledged of frustrations of having spent time and money studying for a degree, and to have nothing to distinguish one's professional self from a colleague who has undertaken a QQI Level 5 or 6 qualification. The idea that the 'education' element of ECCE takes precedence might be linked to that need to assert one's knowledge and 'teaching' qualifications, rather than pausing to reflect on the value of these gentle interactions with the children, again informing the response to the last research question. Research by Ring *et al.* (2016) on concepts of school readiness support these findings whereby ECTs place an emphasis on 'preparing' the child through more formal instructions. Ciara, a level 8 graduate, explains their morning routines which adheres to this didactic school-like environment. In relation to her depiction of practice, one has to ask, what differentiates this setting from primary school and how it supports inclusion?

> There's an art table, a play table and a Montessori table and each child gets a 30-minute cycle at each table and then they move – there'll be a member of staff at each table…. then a 20 minutes of Circle time at the end of the day so all of the chairs are set up in a big circle with their bags and their coats on the back of the chairs so they know it's almost time to go home and we go through our jolly phonics and our colours and our shapes and our songs and they get to tell me a bit of their news.

From observing the environment and the routine when visiting her setting on completion of the LINC programme, the same routine was in place, with a set schedule and structured activities, as discussed in Chapter Four regarding pedagogical practice. The emphasis remains on that 'teaching' element of her role and does not evidence the learning from LINC relating to inclusive practice.

The professional role of the ECT might be held in comparisons with other 'caring' professions, such as nursing, where this is valued as an essential element of their professional role (Taggart 2016). It is interesting to consider the emergence of nursing as a highly regarded professional role over the past twenty years in Ireland, which is directly linked with changes in the quality of their training through the

introduction of the Bachelor of Science Nursing degree as compulsory for this new graduate- led sector.

Research has consistently highlighted that the highest indicator of quality in the ELC setting are the qualifications of the adults working with the children (Department of Health and Children 2000; Hayes 2008; O' Sullivan and Ring 2016; GoI 2018; DCEDIY 2022b). The positioning of the LINC programme, and the consistency of the delivery and content by the Consortium, may have that capacity to create a path from 'practitioner' to 'teacher' whereby completion of LINC might provide the learner with a clear progression path to further higher education opportunities while simultaneously being recognised for its benefits for CPD for qualified graduate teachers and adapted accordingly. The professional education of the adult working in the ELC setting is one of the most significant factors that influence the learning from the LINC programme. While there are many features that can support or inhibit an inclusive education system, teacher skills and education create the foundation for the implementation of equitable and inclusive practices (UNESCO 2017; European Union 2021).

Leadership in the Early Learning and Care Sector

This sub-theme again provides a strong response to the research question in identifying factors that influence the implementation of learning from the LINC programme. Societal perception of the role of the adult working in the ELC sector has been identified as having a definite impact on one's professional self-image (Kelchterman 1993; Start Strong 2013). The management and leadership within the setting is a topic that was evident in most of the interviews with the research participants and is particularly relevant in consideration of the authority to lead inclusive practice in the setting. Current regulations do not outline any specific qualification for the owner or manager of an ELC setting but dictates a minimum qualification of a Level 5 certificate in ECCE (QQI 2020) for those directly with the children (DCYA 2016a; Tusla 2018). Eight of the participants were already in management roles within their settings; six as owner-managers and two as

employee-managers as illustrated earlier in Figure 42. For those participants already in a leadership or management role within their workplace, they would have the authority to act on new learning from the LINC programme and to make changes in practice, however those who are employees of a setting may not have this freedom to adapt curriculum, policies or the learning environment. All participants in a management role worked directly with the children, six of them working as a key person within the ECCE room, and the remaining managers providing more of a support role in the setting but with obvious hands-on experience in the room as well. There were examples of the positive leadership within these settings from the outset, with one manager of seven staff recognising the strengths of her colleagues commenting on their professional role as follows:

> (They are) all well-educated. And I do say to these girls – 'Hold on here a second here girls – you do not really need me telling ye what to do – you don't me to do that. I'm being quite straight honest – that's not what I'm here for. I'm here as yer support – I'm here to look after ye – as well as everything else – and to keep the place running as best we can y'know. Am – we are not – I am not here to tell you what to do… ' so…. I trust my girls. Because we're small – because it is not that big – that I can keep my eye – I can have my eye on every room and I might be only down the hall – but I can hear and I can see everything that goes on. Nothing goes past my eyes or my ears. Absolutely nothing – y'know what I mean? So the girls are great (Ruth).

While Ruth praises the staff team and trusts them in their role, she simultaneously calls them "my girls" and is very clear on her role in overseeing practice in her service.

Although admitting to being a little anxious about a new child with additional needs starting in her ELC setting, Maria, as owner-manager noted:

> I love that it's going to be a shared experience for everyone - all children are going to benefit; young children will become aware of children with additional needs. If it starts there, I think that's where it starts because you can't get anyone more honest than children (laugh) isn't it the truth though?... it's just going to be a lovely challenge really if I can say it like that, - it really is going to be a nice challenge, and something we're not afraid of.. yeah -we're looking forward to it and the girls are the same so it's great.

Maria's leadership style in this pre-LINC interview illustrates her commitment to learning and already recognises the benefits for all the children and not just the child with an additional need. Visiting her setting on completing the programme, was a testament to the potential of CPD to influence practice. Maria represents a model student in her enthusiasm and her proactive participation with the learning from LINC as discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, Eliza, an employee manager, had the authority and the support to make changes to support inclusion in her full day-care service. She initially discussed her leadership skills pre-LINC, in organising staff meetings with her team and comments on how she had "found them very interested in inclusion", and is hopeful that the LINC programme will bring "more learning experiences to what I have already so I can teach them to my current staff members". She continued with praise for the owners of the setting who had invested money "in everything" and set "high standards" for the ELC setting. On visiting her service post-LINC, Eliza's leadership skills evidenced her engagement with the LINC programme with specific reference to changes in elements of the curriculum and documentation as a result of learning as discussed in Chapter Four. The second employee manager, Martha, spoke with high regard for the owner of her workplace, who has re-trained as a primary school teacher and supports the ELC setting in doing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the children "that would need them" and meets with her regularly. Although reporting a positive relationship with the owner of the service who apparently is supportive of Martha's managerial role, the post-LINC visit demonstrated very little evidence of engagement with the module content, with strict 'Montessori' routines and school-like classroom environment as previously highlighted. Siobhan has asserted her confidence from the outset in leading inclusive practice in her own setting stating that:

> I see myself, by having the training, the knowledge, the experience…that altogether it does add up to a very successful setting. That's my experience and nothing really that comes up is really that big an issue – as really I know what to do about it.

Claire depicts a different scenario whereby although not in a leadership role in the preschool, as an employee working alongside the owner manager, an ECCE graduate, and spoke highly of this relationship. The team have worked together in a collaborate manner for a number of years, including having meetings whereby they would "have discussions about what the children are doing, what we could do better, what is working and what isn't and we would change around the routine to make it better". On completing the LINC programme, Claire was empowered to make leadership decisions in relation to inclusive practice. The already established collaborative processes in their working relationship, facilitated the development of their pedagogy owing to the inclusive culture of the setting as discussed in Chapter Four.

However, some of the other employee ECTs were a little more critical of the management system in their setting, especially when it comes to supporting children with additional needs. In the pre-LINC interview, there was discussion of "an issue" at Ciara's setting which she felt was a result of "little training in special needs" or that they were "never really taught how to deal with it – how to plan for it", resulting in "other members of staff are kinda struggling". She volunteered to partake in the LINC programme, perhaps to formalise the support she already provides for the team in regards to her existing experience as a parent of a child with additional needs. However, the post-LINC interview and visit do not evidence engagement with the learning from the LINC programme. Again, Ciara's *Dasein* has to be considered in purporting to interpret her experiences. Another BA graduate was employed in the setting during that year, and had already completed the LINC programme. This may have been perceived as a threat to a leadership position as Ciara states herself that there are tensions in relation to her curriculum implementation with that of her colleague who places more emphasis on a play-based approach. In another service, Emma commented that lack of communication with her manager resulted in her feeling "quite alone…it's a lonely job sometimes". Although working as part of a large staff team, she expresses a sense of isolation owing to the busyness of the full day-care setting where the day is filled with responsibility and routine which often means that there isn't time to talk and

collaborate with others. In another full day-care setting, Lucy expressed similar concerns in the pre-LINC visits and recommended:

> ..that management should be supporting the staff so staff can be able to turn around and say – 'There's this child here and I think that there's x, y and z ' – that the knowledge is there. Whether its booklets or something that can go into settings that staff can have easy access to, to have a look at. I mean I know that's down to management at the end of the day – but if you don't look for these things – you don't learn these things…

Both Emma and Lucy speak positively here of their experience of the LINC programme, both noting that they felt more confident in asserting their knowledge to management in relation to their learning on the LINC programme. While the concerns of the ECTs are articulated reasonably, their horizon of understanding is somewhat different than that of the management cohort. Coupled with the challenge of staffing issues within the sector (Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) 2020), there were also concerns raised by three participants about stresses and pressures on their existing staff team in relation to supporting children with additional needs. Tina, who had a high number of children with additional needs in her service, was very vocal on this topic reflecting as follows:

> I had to learn from last year, because, I mean, my core teachers were absolutely stretched and it was my fault because I said yes to every single one of those children – that I could not say no… I made the mistake because it was a very difficult year and I can't believe my teachers were willing to come back.

Tina's empathic nature and commitment to supporting children with additional needs is evident in her intentions, however, as previously mentioned in this thesis, access to an ECCE place does not equate with inclusion if the staffing and resources cannot support meaningful participation. On returning to this issue in the post-LINC data, Tina reports feeling "more confident" in managing enrolment and using the skills of her staff team to support the children in her setting in accordance to regulations and best practice guidance.

Madden (2012, p. 65) undertook a study exploring the professional identity of those working in the ECCE sector in Ireland and found that poor professional identity is

strongly related to a lack of self-worth or a perception that your work is undervalued by government and society. These findings are consistent with those in the present study. However, it is argued here that a contributing factor to this perception may be the result of insufficient communication between the setting and the community regarding the work being done, and about the staff qualifications required to do such work. Gibson's (2015) view of the "heroic victim" in the ELC sector presents a sense of helplessness within the workforce who have no control over their destiny. Rather, this study argues that, effective communication and engagement with families and communities about the value and importance of the role of the ECT has the potential to influence staff morale and motivation. Tucker (2004) documents the influence of training, new curricula and methods of assessment as a major factor in forming professional identity within the sector, with historical, social, political and economic factors also playing a central role. He claims that identity is how we recognise ourselves and are recognised by others. The fourteen participants in this research study were all very confident of the importance of their role working with young children in the early years, and the LINC programme had a definite influence on how the majority of the ECTs perceived this role. On completion of the LINC programme, it is anticipated that the INCO will work in a leadership role within the ELC setting with the responsibility of cascading the learning from the programme to the staff team, thereby leading and managing change to create an inclusive ECCE learning environment (DCYA 2016b). Nine of the participants (Mary, Ciara, Alice, Claire, Emma, Eliza, Ruth, Maria and Tina) specifically stated that they felt more confident in their role as an ECT and INCO through their engagement on the LINC programme. Those participants in existing management roles had the advantage of having already established themselves in a leadership position but expressed positive regard for the learning in module five *Leadership for Inclusion.* Moloney and Pettersen (2017) present the contextual reality of many childcare providers, as coming into the sector without the managerial and leadership training required for their role, and the findings from this study indicated this reality for some participants. Ruth, who has owned her service for over twenty years and witnessed

a lot of change and development over that period, presents the LINC programme as part of a broader shift in the perception of the role of the ECT:

> …you feel now you're more of a professional now in the early childhood care and education rather than – well… we just kinda felt we were just here to look after the children – it's now beginning – I can see the structure – early years education is coming under a huge professional umbrella. And certainly, without a shadow of a doubt, the LINC programme has offered that – and has definitely highlighted a lot of that for me.

Eliza, as an employee-manager, found that the Leadership module was useful in supporting her in "being a good role model" for her team and had already shared learning from the LINC programme through "leaflets; information; samples of activities; to listen to the child's voice". Mary, who owns her own sessional service "found that leadership module a really good module" and had developed her leadership skills by carrying out "mentoring" sessions with her deputy manager every week. The learning from the LINC programme gave Mary the confidence to delegate more effectively and empower her colleagues within the setting, akin to the concept of distributed leadership espoused in the programme. She described the impact of these changes

> ..that has benefitted absolutely everybody. And it really helped her (Deputy) confidence and her self-esteem, you know what I mean? And also it has helped me cos I find I'm… I'm giving her more roles in her room and more responsibility – you know that sort of way? So that – for me doing the LINC course- that was the best module for me. Cos that was what I needed – that was the support I needed from it.

Meeting with Maria at her private service on completion of the programme was a really positive experience and her enthusiasm and joy for her role was inspirational. Describing the LINC programme, she enthuses:

> There's so much! Even if not thinking about including children – even for just running a preschool service – I mean, it's got everything! I've really enjoyed it, I have to say. I wish I had more time to absorb it all – that's the only thing – but as I've said, I've all the folders printed and everything written on them and we will be dabbling in and out of them.

She also reflected on the Leadership module and her skills in guiding her team, feeling that it is “an area we’re not giving enough time to” in regard to “trying to get the girls to think about – and to reflect and what to do and what to be thinking about”. Although she was observed in practice as leading a very positive and inclusive setting, as well as demonstrating excellent capacity for guiding and mentoring her colleagues, she still asserted that “I’m not a very good leader Sharon – that’s my only thing – I’m not very good explaining myself”. She elaborated further on her engagement with module five giving an example of an online lesson on promoting change in the setting that included a link to an animated video based around a motivation book: “Y’know that story? ‘Who moved my cheese?’ – I bought that book! I did! I bought that book! Honestly!” She had noted her plans for going forward in supporting her colleagues and again references learning from the LINC module in relation to use of the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015) to support team reflection. The findings here illustrate the eagerness of several participants to develop their leadership skills in practice, supporting literature (Moloney and Pettersen 2017) regarding the need for such managerial and leadership training for those working in settings.

Five of the six participants who are not currently in a leadership role also outlined plans they had to take on the role of INCO in their setting with Claire describing how she and her manager had been talking about “having a meeting with parents, explaining about the role, what the role is and what supports will be available through that role”, as well as having information for parents on AIM. Emma had considered putting up a staff notice board to share knowledge on inclusion and to use her learning from the LINC programme to communicate with her team. She had already distributed an information sheet about AIM and her role as INCO “as some people wouldn’t know about AIM cos they’ve no reason to know”. Monica had also communicated with her colleagues about her new role as INCO and had used a recent team meeting to outline the responsibilities of this role so all are informed “that I will be the Inclusion Officer and every month I am planning to go in their classrooms and talk about inclusion”.

A key factor in developing the professional identity of the INCO is the support of management within the setting in recognising the responsibilities of the role and providing the time and resources to enable the staff member to take on such duties with the setting (DCYA 2016b). The examples detailed above, illustrate those positive relationships between the ECTs and their management team, which indicate a cooperative relationship to support the INCO in fulfilling the role as specified by Pobal contracts.

Ciara, a graduate ECT, was unclear on how the role of INCO would work within her setting in September, with due cause for concern being that there is already a LINC graduate in the other preschool room, but whose responsibilities as INCO were not specified within the service. Ciara was critical of the management of the setting and the lack of awareness around inclusion, recommending “there should be some kind of a course brought in for management so they’re aware of what it is”. Indeed, the management within the setting, if holding a Level 5 qualification, could have applied for the LINC programme to develop their knowledge around inclusion. Perhaps there was little personal interest in the programme, or that management determined that one working directly with the children should complete the course. It may also be indicative of the business model of the sector whereby additional funding is paid to the service once an INCO is in-situ. She noted that there are no staff meetings in the service and criticised the lack of communication as well as the fact that the managers have “no pressure on them, particularly if they’re not working with the child”. She considered that there needed to be a management structure in place where there is a “team of leaders” who are “setting an example and encouraging” the staff rather than having a “terrible attitude” towards professionalization when the current managers in her setting only hold a Level 5 qualification. However, Ciara’s perspective towards management in a full day-care service may be influenced by her horizon of understanding whereby realities of funding, rostering, human resources and organisation may not feature in her life-world.

This issue of staff CPD to promote knowledge and awareness emerged in six of the post-LINC interviews in relation to the need to support team members who, as Lucy

comments, might “be still set in older ways – even when it comes to autism”. Her experience as a Preschool Assistant doing the LINC programme links back to the earlier discussion regarding the authority of the ECT in leading inclusive practice. She expresses frustration that some of her colleagues “disagree with the way I would deal with Luke (child with autism)”, and argues that “a lot of re-training has to be done on inclusion”. However, Lucy’s learning from the LINC programme in terms of inclusive strategies to support the child, as well as collaborating to access support, is evident in our conversation when she tells me about organising meetings with the EYS to verify her strategies and support her in modelling this to the team.

While there were a number of different courses and workshops mentioned, including the new initiatives of Hanen[24] and Lámh training for ECTs, there were also recommendations for the extension and development of the LINC programme, about which one participant asserts: “I think we are a more inclusive service as a result of LINC” (Claire). She recommended that “everyone would benefit from it”, if it was rolled out to more than one member of staff per service. This resonates with Moloney and McCarthy’s (2018) concern that locating all the responsibilities with the INCO may be spreading the role too thinly across the setting. Maria concurs with this idea of sharing the learning from the programme with the wider staff team recommending that “LINC could be condensed into a couple of days’ course – an annual thing – it would be so beneficial for everyone”.

The capacity to lead inclusive practice, as manager, ECT or as INCO, is dependent on a number of factors within the setting (Moloney and Pettersen 2017). Again, it must be reiterated that the knowledge, skills and values of the leader in the setting is key to quality provision (Urban *et al.* 2017; European Agency 2021; Skehill 2021b) and this is embedded in the professional qualifications of the leader. This aspect of one’s position in the ELC setting provides a definite response to the research

[24] Hanen training aims to enable parents and professionals working with young children to transform their daily interactions with them to build lifelong social, language and literacy skills.

question in identifying factors that affect the implementation of learning from the LINC programme. While those who engaged with the LINC programme were confident of their learning around inclusion, the capacity to implement the learning from the LINC programme rested on one's position within the organisation and the relationship with management to make changes as recommended in the LINC modules as well as sufficient staff to support inclusion in practice. The role of INCO incorporates a number of key responsibilities that are outlined in Table 29 below:

Table 29 Role of the Inclusion Coordinator (INCO)

Leading inclusive practice and pedagogy	• Leading inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy and an inclusive culture within the setting and providing support and information to staff and parents on inclusion of all children. • Cascading learning throughout the staff in the setting so as to foster an inclusive culture. • Supporting staff in the implementation of inclusive practices in curriculum planning and assessment. • Sharing learning and good practice regarding observations, documentation and curriculum planning and development, modelling good practice and utilising different strategies for collaborating with the team regarding effective communication with children, with reference to Aistear and Siolta principles and guidelines. • Engaging with national and local developments related to inclusion in order to continue to lead the implementation of good practice in the setting. • Engaging with ongoing CPD to ensure adherence to good practice.
Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)	• Disseminating information on AIM, as well as on inclusion more generally, to parents and staff. • Assisting with applications for supports under AIM and liaising, where necessary, with the Early Years Specialists and other professionals working with the child. This could include meeting with parents through to using the PIP portal for the AIM application. • Liaising with Early Years Specialists to develop strategies to support participation to ensure all children and their families are supported. • Working closely with parents and other professionals • Liaising with parents and other professionals, including the Early Years Specialists and Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) as appropriate, to support the transition of children to primary school. • Participating in any relevant evaluation or AIM review to inform future practice and policy developments.
Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines	• Promoting the National Inclusion Charter and supporting staff to engage with the revised Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines 2016. • Supporting the setting to complete and regularly review its Inclusion Policy.

Views of parents and children	• Advocating on behalf of children and engaging in regular consultation with children to allow their ideas, feelings and thoughts to contribute to service provision and delivery. Using feedback from children and their parents to inform the settings inclusion procedures, evaluation and to input into wider policy developments, as appropriate.

Those participants who are already in a management or leadership role had the freedom to implement changes as they decided, having the established authority to do so. However, as discussed throughout this section, some participants who were not in an existing leadership role, faced challenges in engaging with the learning from the LINC programme on a practice level. Although module 5, *Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years*, was commended in the review of the programme (see Ring *et al.* 2018) for its quality of information and learning by participants and the wider LINC student body, this learning remained 'academic' if the ECT had no authority to lead the team and make changes. This leadership position is dependent on the setting manager formalising and authorising the INCO to lead colleagues in inclusive practice. Colmer (2017) emphasises the need to see ELC settings as "complex social systems" (p. 37) which is evident in the findings relating to the social construction and the effective communication of the role of the INCO within that environment. The different horizons of understanding of the participants in relation to engagement with the LINC programme is very evident in their responses regarding one's role in the setting and clearly indicates the need for that communication within the staff team to understand each other's perspective.

The findings illustrate a need for a communicative space where there is time and place for meaningful conversations and support sessions for the staff members in the ELC setting. While the LINC tutor provided mentoring support and guidance through class discussion, online tutorials and one visit to the student's workplace, there is a need to consider the supports required to implement changes in each setting to counteract the challenges of leadership identified in the findings. Research outlines the need to organise specific mentoring sessions between the staff members where there is sufficient time to transfer knowledge and model skills and strategies (Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Doan and Gray 2021). Participants in this research study who had shared support and learning from the LINC programme

and the Better Start Quality and AIM teams were very confident of the developments and changes being made in their settings. They felt that ongoing access to professional advice and mentoring supported their practice and they could see the benefits for the children, and this was evidenced in the observations of their practice, responding to the second and third research questions. Mary, Lucy, Eliza, Monica and Emma felt that having their ideas supported and validated by a qualified mentor, whether from LINC or the Pobal teams, gave them more confidence to make changes and to challenge old routines that may have been in place. Monica described her tutor as being "really helpful" who continually encouraged and reassured her throughout the programme. She also benefitted from the support of the Better Start (BS) Quality mentor who validated what she was learning from the LINC programme. Similarly, Emma is reassured by both mentors from BS Quality and LINC in developing her observation skills:

> I couldn't figure the planning because it was all child-led – and I was getting a bit confused – because it is supposed to be child-led – so I spoke to K (BS mentor) and G (LINC tutor) too – and they said just do your anecdotal notes and plan a few things and if it doesn't happen that way, that's fine and just move onto the next thing.

However, one has to question how the INCO, in turn, has opportunity to mentor colleagues on inclusive practice and pedagogy as outlined in the responsibilities of this role, again depicting a factor that may affect implementation of the learning from LINC in response to the fourth research question. The busyness of the environment, particularly in a full day-care setting, with routines and schedules to facilitate staff breaks, meal times, nap times and school pick-ups, presents challenges in finding time for the INCO and another team member to have shared non-contact time for mentoring sessions. Heikka and Hujala (2013) illustrate such challenges of those in leadership positions in the ELC in the Finnish system who indicated similar concerns regarding the time and space required to engage effectively with their ECCE team. For them, leadership enactment of sharing professional knowledge, reflective practice and planning processes was sacrificed to deal with managerial issues within the setting. Similar concerns are reported in the

findings of this study in relation to adherence to the inspection processes and regulatory requirements of the Irish ELC setting. Moloney and McCarthy (2018) question the capacity of the INCO to take on the complexity of responsibilities listed in the job specification as illustrated in Table 26 (DCYA 2016b) and this is a reasonable doubt considering the varied profile of those working in the sector. However, it might also be argued that the leadership skills acquired from the learning on the LINC programme may support the effective delegation of tasks within the staff team. Effective leadership practices involve collaboration within the staff team to articulate a collective vision which Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) see as a requirement for the foundation for building a learning community and team culture in ELC.

However, a model of ongoing mentoring support is something that should be a component of this 'competent system' (Urban *et al.* 2017), whereby ECTs and INCOs, can have continual access to professional guidance to support inclusive and quality practice. Moyles (2006) recognises the need for those in a leadership role in the ELC setting to set the culture of the setting. In practice, this translates to developing the knowledge and skills of those who have the power to implement change, to establish and maintain a quality and inclusive culture. Currently, there is a fragmented system of supports in the ELC sector in Ireland, with varying levels of access and quality of provision. The findings resonate with this reality and present challenges to the effective implementation of learning from LINC and subsequently the development of inclusive practice in ELC settings.

Frankel *et al.* (2014) discuss the importance of combined theoretical and practical knowledge in teacher education to provide inclusive learning experiences for children. Ciara and Siobhan, who were more critical of elements of the LINC programme and of their role as ECTs, both had degrees, and their frustrations, incorporated throughout the findings, are understandable in light of the societal context in which they are situated. As an employee in the setting, Ciara clearly articulates her feelings:

> Y'know there's kinda that attitude as well that because we're not seen as professionals in the sector – it's not professionalised – there;s no onus on anyone to look at what's the benefit. If you're only going to be a child care worker for the rest of your life, what's the benefit of going off doing a degree? It's only personal development – it's not going to get you a pay-rise, it's not going to get you recognition or better terms…

Both of these participants had completed their degree and expressed concerns about having to engage with this programme, which is a Level 6 special purpose award. Siobhan asserts that LINC is "catering for people with too diverse a background" and that for her, with a Level 8 degree, "going over the modules that you've got already is just a waste of very precious time". Throughout the interview process, they reference their prior learning and qualifications, emphasising that they are 'teachers', having earned that title on completing their undergraduate studies at level 8. However, all of the graduates of these ECCE programmes, from Level 5 to Level 8, are often indistinguishable from each other in terms of their professional role in practice, so one has to assert one's qualifications when it is not clearly evident by virtue of your position in the setting (Taggart 2011). Ciara explains how she asserts her role in a passionate discussion:

> If I was walking up the street there and someone asked me what I did – I'd say 'I'm a teacher'. 'What do you teach?' 'I teach preschool!' I would view myself as a teacher. I spent 3 years in college – I have a Level 8 degree; I have a Level 6 cert; I have a Level 5 cert; I am constantly upskilling and I'm constantly training and I refuse to allow myself to be called a childcare worker – another childcare worker. I work in early years education – so parents see me as a professional because I would call myself their children's teacher and I have very much put myself out there as that and I conduct myself in the most professional manner at all times when I am at work.

It is understandable that indifference or frustrations expressed for learning on the LINC programme by students with a degree qualification is a consequence of the same indifference that they feel is present for their existing knowledge and expertise. This is a challenge identified as a factor that affects the influence of the learning from the LINC programme as presented in the last research question.

Consequently, the participants who engaged with the LINC programme saw this as an opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge as an ECT as discussed earlier. The annual review of LINC (Ring *et al.* 2018) content since the first year of delivery ensures that the modular content reflects development and changes in the sector and could potentially serve as a model for CPD for all staff working in ELC. The positive engagement from the majority of the participants on this study indicate the effectiveness of the model for impacting inclusive practice in the sector illustrating a definite response to the first three research questions.

Summary

Interpretative hermeneutic explorations into the lived experiences of those working in practice in the ELC sector indicate that the influence of professional identity of one's societal role has far-ranging influence on other areas of one's life-world. The complexity of *Dasein* incorporates one's societal role, moods and emotions as well as one's attitude to facing challenges and adversity in life. Heidegger (1929) philosophised how these elements inform the fore-structure of understanding in reflecting *Dasein* and the centrality of a care structure within our *being.* Exploring *Dasein* exposes what matters most to the individual and what it is that they care about in their lives (Horrigan-Kelly *et al.*2016). The lived experiences of the participants are influenced by the existing world they inhabit, with the norms, values and culture that have shaped society and subsequently their role within that. Through the interpretation of their roles and experiences working in the ELC setting, this phenomenon of engagement with the LINC programme on their perceptions and practices of inclusion has been revealed as a more complex discourse. The phenomenological stance provided an inductive revelation about the meaning participants ascribed to their work with young children and to recognise the importance of theory generation from practice. The final interpretation of the findings and recommendations will be presented in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven

“So it was a very good community I found with LINC – it wasn’t like I was just another number – I’m involved in this community – and that was nice…” (Lucy)

Conclusion and Recommendations

In coming to the end of the ‘story’, I am cognisant of the need to gather together the threads of each participants’ tale and consider what we can learn or come to know from the interpretations of their experiences. This phenomenological study was guided by the key research question regarding the influence of engagement with the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme on perceptions and practices of inclusion in the early learning and care (ELC) setting. So far, the ‘story’ has been woven through the combined findings and discussion of the themes of inclusive culture, collaborative practice and professional identity in the last three chapters. The interpretation of the findings provides a detailed and informed response to the embedded questions which were concerned with how ECTs define inclusion and to consider if participation in the LINC programme influenced their practice working in the ELC setting. Another key objective of the study was to identify factors that may affect the implementation of the learning from the programme.

This chapter firstly considers what learning one might take from this study in questioning what one now knows about inclusion in the early years that one might not have known before. In keeping with the methodological principles of IHP, the voice of the participant remains central to the very end and are referenced here to

illustrate the concluding interpretations and recommendations of the study. It then provides a series of recommendations for policy and practice in this regard, presented as statements throughout this chapter for clarity and emphasis. The chapter further explores how the findings from the study reinforce, validate or differ from existing scholarship relating to the upskilling of the early years' workforce.

Knowing and Understanding Inclusion in Practice

In considering the 'quiddity of inclusion', the complexity of the early years sector illustrates the diversity of needs of the children, educators and the services they work in. While this study has discussed the research informing policy regarding inclusion of children in early childhood settings, the interpretation of this in practice varies across this diverse sector. The LINC programme has been recognised for the quality of content, delivery and innovation (Fortunati *et al.* 2019). This study validates the effectiveness of the learning for the majority of the participants in the current study, while simultaneously highlighting certain issues and challenges associated with supporting inclusion in practice in the early years. Braun and Clarke (2022) ask the important '*so what'*? question in qualitative research – what can one take from this study that might make a difference to practice and policy? Figure 56 presents key findings from the study in relation to understandings about inclusion in the ELC sector, which have been developed from the analysis of the data and the literature.

Figure 56 What new learning about inclusion has been developed from the analysis?

First and foremost is the recognition that there are different understandings and perceptions of inclusion which are dependent on the context of educators' horizon of significance and life experiences (Gadamer 1979). One's *Dasein* influences one's actions and reactions to life situations in a delicate balance of self and society (Heidegger 1929). What has been established is the various interpretations of reality that influence one's understanding and practices of inclusion, which are not necessarily informed by professional qualifications but rather a kindness that underpins pedagogy. The LINC programme awoke a renewed sense of empathy in participants which created a shift in perspective by realising the importance of their role in facilitating participation in the group, which is communicated very effectively by Tina:

> I always would have learned from Montessori that you observe the children and you see what their interests are – but I think I'm doing that a lot more – and I'm standing back a lot more – I'm trying to observe a lot more – to see exactly where they are going, what exactly they are telling me, what are they interested in and how can I provide – and that – I think that is based on the LINC programme.

Similarly, Emma reflects on her learning experience with LINC and, although having personal experience of caring for her child with additional needs, she found the programme "fantastic" as it provided "practical advice" and led her to develop her own awareness of her role as an ECT:

> It (LINC) was so interesting on both a personal and professional level to be learning stuff…it just makes you think 'Oh that's why so and so does that' – and this is what I can do now to help so…it's a brilliant course – I really, really, really enjoyed it.

Maria demonstrates her empathic concerns questioning whether she has done enough to support the little boy in her care, despite the speech therapist assuring her that he is making good progress in the preschool:

> I hope I haven't failed him – but we have another year. Y'know, I'd love to just getting him saying more – and opportunities where he can say more. It's great at lunchtime cos you say to him 'what are you having first – your bar or your cracker? So he has to say it!

As well as influencing how participants engaged with children in a more nurturing way, the LINC programme also helped Eliza to be "more aware of people's feelings" when engaging with parents. This is echoed by Teresa, who comments that LINC "made me more aware" of communicating effectively and empathically with parents in relation to supporting children's participation in the setting. Clearly, upon completing the LINC programme, participants articulate a renewed awareness of the need for relational pedagogy, which guides their work with children and families. They therefore speak competently and confidently about their work and inclusion upon completion of the programme.

Braun and Clarke (2022) challenge the researcher to present the validity of qualitative studies by arguing generalisability of the findings in line with the philosophical assumptions of the study. In the present study, it seems that the participants' renewed competence and confidence, which stems from their new learning and knowledge has created a sense of pride in one's role and a renewed sense of purpose in their professional responsibilities as early years' educators. The emphasis is less on concerns of societal perceptions of the role but instead, the ECT

can look from one’s own horizon of significance (Gadamer 1979) and appreciate the view from that perspective. It is about influencing one’s own *Dasein* (Heidegger 1929) and feeling empowered and enthused by new learning, and know the value of one’s nurturing role and the importance of relationships with the children, families and one’s colleagues in practice.

Recommendation 1

That the DCEDIY, as the lead funder for the LINC programme, ensures that a shared understanding of relational pedagogy is embedded within programmes of initial early childhood teacher education programmes as the foundation for quality inclusive practice.

Kindness and care generate that “in-between space” of trust and respect between teacher and child, thereby creating effective learning environments (Ljungblad 2019, p. 6). My own pre-understanding of the sector alerts me to the irony of aspirations of professional satisfaction as sufficient to ignore the issues of low pay and poor conditions for many working in the sector. However, it is important to acknowledge other elements of the professional role which focus on job satisfaction and motivation to engage and develop (Sexton 2007).

In coming to know and understand what inclusion in practice means then, this study has highlighted the fact that inclusion underpins all elements of quality practice, and should not necessarily be viewed as this ‘additional’ element within early years education. Lundy’s (2007) model of participation has recently come to the fore in policy (DCYA 2015), promoting children’s rights and creating a platform for reflection on pedagogical practice and daily routines. The findings from this study illustrate how inclusion as a concept incorporates curriculum planning and documentation; working with parents; liaising with other professionals; supporting transitions to primary school as well as leading and managing the staff team.

Recognising the multi-faceted role of the ECT in practice leads to questioning of CPD experiences and what learning can be taken from this study about the LINC

programme within the early years sector that might enhance future student experience and engagement (Figure 57).

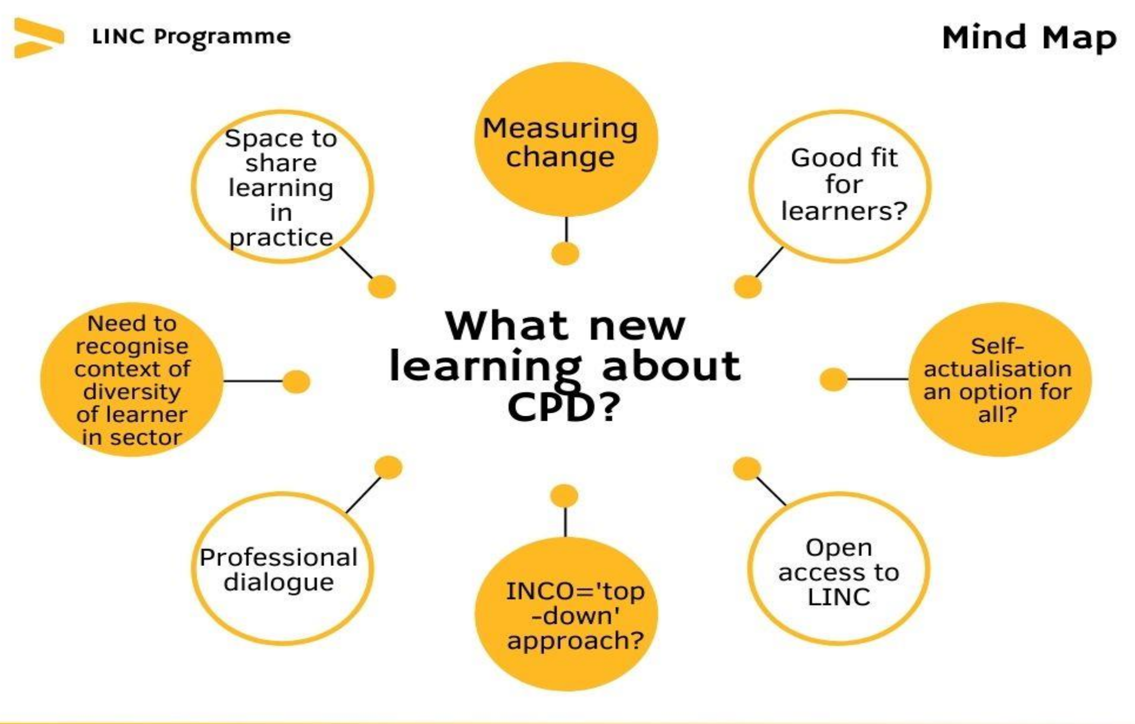

Figure 57 New Learning Relating to Continuing Professional Development

This study has illustrated how quality and inclusive experiences in the early years underpins all areas of practice. The findings overall, point to the need for a shared understanding of this inclusive culture.

Recommendation 2 That inclusion should be embedded across modular content both during initial early childhood educator training and CPD experiences in the early years rather than an 'add-on' or concessionary component.

However, notwithstanding the benefits of CPD experiences to offer new knowledge and skills, the findings indicate that the LINC programme was not necessarily considered a 'good fit' for the graduate participants in this study. Siobhan, who

owns her own sessional service, criticises LINC as “catering for people with too diverse a background”, and states that the role of INCO is “not taken seriously in services”. Ciara also felt that “an awful lot of the stuff sounds so petty on the course” and felt that “a lot of it I would know already”. However, in the graduate settings, there was concern expressed from the participants themselves, as well as interpretation of their experiences, which indicated scope for development in their pedagogical and collaborative practices to support inclusion. In light of participants’ differing perceptions and practices of inclusion on completion of the programme as discussed in earlier chapters, one must consider how all learners can be supported to engage with new learning experiences and be open to the idea that there are other interpretations that may be beyond their own horizon of significance. However, incorporating Maslow’s motivation model (1962), one might consider how the current sectoral reality is impacting early years educators in both their personal and professional roles in terms of pay and conditions of employment. While we are on the cusp of change towards a new core funding model (DCEDIY 2021), the findings from this study support previous research (Moloney 2021; Oke *et al.* 2021) illustrating the impact of this contextual reality on ECTs and consequently, the children they work with.

In view of Guskey’s (2002) criteria for effective CPD experiences, this study, concurs with the initial review of the AIM (DCYA 2019), which illustrates how the LINC programme has influenced practice within settings, but it has also identified challenges in the model by virtue of entry criteria to the programme. Creating the role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) without practical consideration of how this might work in settings has emerged as a key factor in response to the research question. The potential for positive change and development has been demonstrated through participants’ stories, but the practicality of leading inclusion is very dependent on one’s role within the setting, as well as one’s attitude towards the CPD experience. Respondents from the AIM review (DCYA 2019) indicated these challenges in how the learning from the LINC programme could contribute to an inclusive culture within the setting.

On a practical level, assuming one has engaged with the programme and acquired new knowledge around inclusive practice, there is the challenge of finding time and space within the daily routine to share this learning with the staff team. This is further complicated when the INCO in situ is not in a leadership position within the setting and resources are not in place to support their shift into this new role or consideration of how additional duties will be incorporated with existing responsibilities as an ECT. Limiting entry to the LINC programme and the newly developed LINC CPD[25] programme to only one person per setting, means that other educators fail to benefit from potential learning that would support the development of quality inclusive provision which would be embedded in the culture of the setting.

Recommendation 3 That the DECDIY facilitates access to the LINC programme and the LINC + programme should be accessible to all ECTs wishing to avail of CPD opportunities, thereby creating a stronger knowledge base for an inclusive culture in ELC settings.

Recognising this perspective from the field is presented here as a key recommendation from this study and is outlined in the following section as a foundation for other proposals for practice. These recommendations will be discussed with reference to a proposed framework to support and empower ECTs in ELC settings.

Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Educational Research

A key finding from this research study is the value of the methodology chosen to examine the experiences of early years teachers to ascertain how to support and extend inclusive learning experiences for all children. The principles of Heidegger's

[25] The LINC plus programme opened in March 2021 as CPD for graduates of the original LINC programme. Although not accredited, the six packages, each with 10 hours course duration, cover topics such as Communities of Practice; Role of the INCO and Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Development.

concept of *Dasein* (1929) recognises the necessity of incorporating people's realities as well as their personal moods and life experiences to understand their interactions with and responses to different phenomena. In consideration of the fundamental right of all children to access quality and meaningful educational experiences at all levels, the reflexive and interpretative nature of this study illustrates how the lived experiences of teachers should be incorporated into the effective planning and implementation of inclusive education, given their role as duty-bearers (Gillett-Swan and Lundy 2021).

Recommendation 4 Incorporation of the framework for learning and development in education, (Figure 56) to be used as guidance for successful CPD programmes for those working with children as well as policy development for quality inclusive education underpinned by the philosophical principles of both Heidegger (1929) and Gadamer (2004).

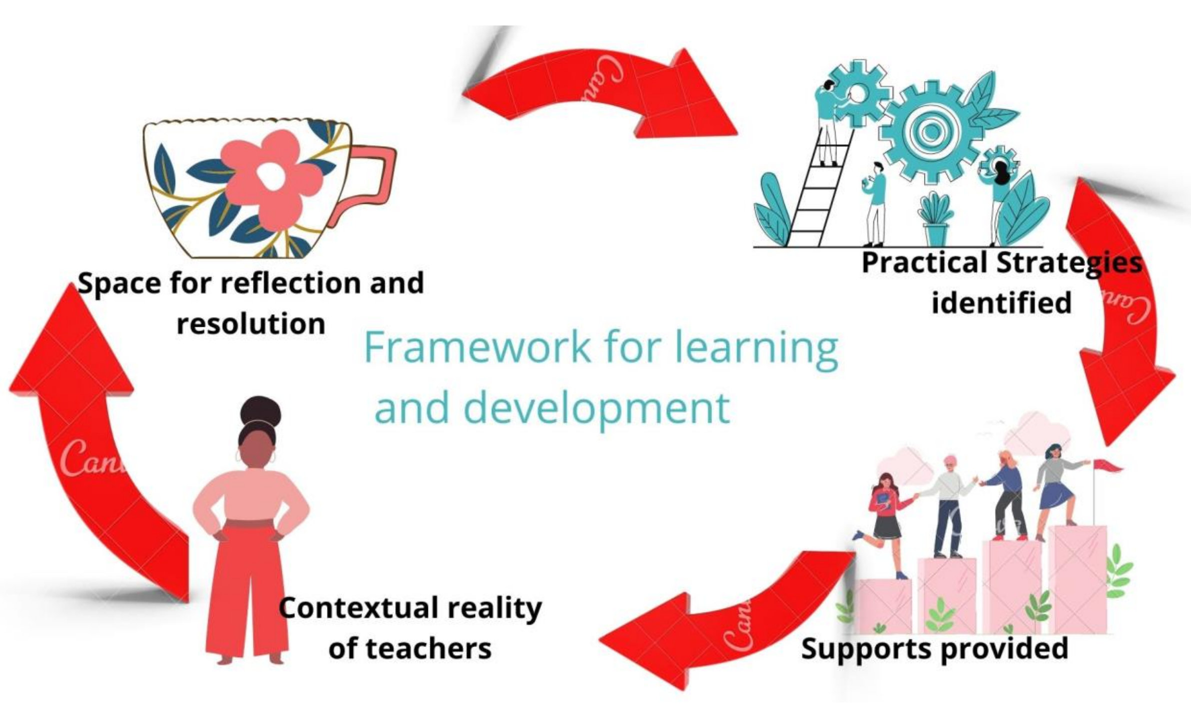

Figure 58 Proposed Framework for Learning and Development in Education

The proposed framework recognises that the role of the adult working in the educational setting as the foundation of quality and inclusive pedagogical practice. The ECT in a leadership role is the person who sets the standard for the inclusive culture of the setting as well as being the duty-bearer for the rights of all children attending the service. The contextual realities of teachers need to be recognised as their lived experiences have a direct influence on their reactions to phenomena within societal and policy developments. The recommendations from this study are underpinned by this framework in considering how a space can be created for reflection on *Dasein* in order to respond to the responsibilities of their role to ensure that they are part of that quality and inclusive educational setting. Practical strategies should be devised through collaboration within the ELC team, reflection and action, informed by the realities of working with children, marrying horizons of significance (Gadamer 2004) so there is a shared understanding of what action has to be taken. The next step is to identify what supports are required, both on a broader societal level, as well as relevant to individual local cases, whether this is in the form of CPD, additional resources or mentoring sessions.

Professional and Informed Leaders

As discussed earlier, the findings and the literature emphasise the importance of the role of the leader in the ELC environment in setting the standard of quality and inclusive practice in the educational institution (Waters and Payler 2015; Alexander *et al.* 2016; UNESCO 2017). Concurring with this, findings in this study indicate that the professional identity of the leader in the ELC setting has a direct influence on the development of an inclusive culture. There is an overlap and interconnectivity within and between the themes here which Aspers and Corte (2019) assert as an illustration of real understanding of the deeper meanings of the data analysis. In this instance, such meaning clarified how engagement with the LINC programme illustrated the capacity of the leader to lead and implement change, and

consequently the challenges of doing so, in the ELC setting to promote the inclusion of all children. In considering critical levels of evaluation of professional development, Guskey (2002) discusses how although participants' reactions to a CPD programme may be positive, it does not necessarily follow that level two, participant learning, will be achieved. In turn, this has an influence on how engagement with the programme may influence one's work performance within the setting.

Developing an inclusive culture involves a whole-setting commitment to a child-centred and quality provision of care and education. The reality of the leadership role within any organisation is the need to take responsibility for guiding the team and setting standards of practice. The leader in the ELC setting needs to have the qualifications, knowledge base and skills required to take on this role (Urban *et al.* 2017; Skehill 2021a). The findings from this study hang delicately on the interpretation of the perception of the "heroic victim" (Gibson 2015) in the Irish ELC sector whereby there is a risk of sacrificing ideals of quality and inclusive practice through an understanding of one's own role in a debilitating view. The contextual reality of precarious funding, staff shortages, inconsistency of quality, inspection processes and lack of value on the sector, is balancing against the other perspective of enthusiasm for new learning, feeling valued by children and families, and knowing the difference one might make in their life. Creating a leadership position with the role of INCO, has the potential to counteract these challenges by developing a path of professional progression with a pay scale in line with allocated funding.

However, rather than adding another title to the already confused identity of the adult working in the ELC setting, one needs to address the variety of roles within the sector. Their professional identity cannot be simplified into one basic professional title as the qualifications of the sector range from a Level 5 to post-graduate qualifications. In responding to the research questions, the professional knowledge and skills of the ECT has a definite influence on one's understanding and perception of inclusion, as well as one's ability to adopt inclusive pedagogical

approaches in practice. Despite the collegial gesture of affording the title of 'Early Childhood Teacher' to those working in the ELC sector in the LINC programme content, this in itself may be construed as part of the problematic issue of professional identity that influences engagement with the learning. The role of 'teacher' is traditionally associated with one who has specific qualifications and knowledge of a subject area. Despite the similarities in tasks associated with that role, there is informed pedagogical knowledge guiding the work of those who have studied for their teaching qualification evidenced in the strategies implemented and their knowledge of child development. The 'Special Needs Assistant' in the primary school classroom engages in tasks similar to that of the classroom teacher, but there is a separate knowledge base that informs that pedagogy to lead the class. The healthcare staff in a hospital setting may partake in caring tasks similar to that of a nurse, but there is a differentiation in the knowledge and observation that informs that work. Thence it should be in the ELC setting, that those who have studied to obtain their teaching degree should be afforded the title and recognition of that role. The reality of the sectoral profile (Pobal 2018, 2021) illustrates a broad range of qualifications and experience of the adult working with children in the ELC setting. The skills-set and knowledge base of the sector must be acknowledged in order to establish a collective voice and a standard of qualifications as relevant to one's role within the setting. The findings from this study illustrate the variety of understandings and interpretations of early childhood education within the sector and simultaneously indicate the need to develop and improve practice in accordance to one's existing knowledge or one's perceived understandings of quality care and education.

There have been innumerable discussions regarding professional titles within the ELC sector (Urban 2008; Urban *et al.* 2011; 2017; Moloney and Pettersen 2017; Nutbrown 2021), but consultation with the masses working in the sector has not produced a consistent response regarding this title owing to the multitude of perspectives on the horizon.

Recommendation 5

Professional identity needs to be affiliated with the qualifications of the adult working with the children and be adapted into policy to reaffirm the professional role of the teacher / educator in the ELC sector.

This is turn will develop confidence in that professional group at sectoral level and at policy level, being cognisant of the skills and qualifications of those working within the early education system.

This study recognises the need for adaptation of professional titles within policy and practice relating to early childhood care and education (ECCE), to illustrate role by qualification awarded regardless of the age group that one is working with. The titles of 'early years educator'; 'lead educator' and 'manager' in *Nurturing Skills* (DCEDIY 2021), and the proposed salary scales corresponding to staff qualifications, is a step in the right direction in recognition of a professional and graduate workforce (Joint Labour Committee (JLC) 2022). In light of these recent developments, further consideration is required regarding how the LINC programme can be used to support development of skills as relevant to one's role in practice. The responsibilities affiliated with the role of the Inclusion Coordinator might be adapted accordingly so it is meaningful and relevant for those who have completed the LINC programme in respective settings and place them within this framework of professional roles in the early years setting, on a salary as relevant to that role.

Recommendation 6

Adaptation of the framework of professional titles in the ELC setting (DCEDIY 2021), and the proposed salary scales (JLC 2022) to incorporate the role and responsibilities of the INCO thereby promoting awareness of qualifications required for specific roles and creating clear career progression path.

The findings from this study indicate the significant influence of professional identity on the implementation of learning from the LINC programme and one might consider how this finding might be applicable to other CPD initiatives to develop the sector. Consistency in the provision of ECCE programmes and the subsequent recognition of qualifications obtained by staff in the ELC setting, from Level 5 through to degree programmes, will support confidence in the role of the ECT, as similarly recommended by Nutbrown (2021) in the English ELC sector. Recognition of role titles will support the development of salary scales for staff in the ELC sector, with models for sessional services and for those who work in full-day care facilities. Supporting the development of the teaching profession in ECCE through recognition of the knowledge base and commitment to CPD would have an impact on altruism and enthusiasm in developing inclusive practice (Maslow 1954; Sexton 2007; Skehill 2021a).

In response to the challenges in leading inclusive practice as well as the practicality of time and resources to do so, the roll out of the LINC programme should include all staff working in the ELC sector to bridge the current gap in qualifications and knowledge, adapting the format as appropriate and relevant to the needs of the staff working in the sector. This would necessitate consideration of the training needs of the team within each setting, using the proposed framework in Figure 56 to guide this understanding, as well as considering the compulsory engagement of relevant content for those in leadership and management positions within the setting to ensure they are up to date with recent research, policy development and best practice, as identified as factors which influenced learning from the programme. While Ring *et al.* (2019) highlight the need for relevant CPD opportunities for those working in the sector so there is shared understanding of key elements of quality and inclusive practice, Blanchard *et al.* (2018) argue for purposeful CPD as relevant to the professional role of the adult working with children. Consideration of levels of qualification and knowledge, and developing content in line with learner needs, will further support their understanding of differing perspectives of diversity, inclusion and equity in the setting. While this is the rationale for the CPD element of the LINC programme, extending this to all

ECCE staff, rather than limiting it to the INCO, would support the concept of a shared inclusive culture in practice. This study illustrates the positive influence of the LINC programme within the sector, but also recognises the limitations of participants in cascading learning to the team.

Recommendation 7

Facilitation of consistent and ongoing mentoring support for INCOs, managers and other team members by existing support agencies to support the development of inclusive practice.

Findings from this study illustrate the correlation between quality provision and engagement with a professional mentor in the form of the Early Years' Specialist (EYS) from the Better Start AIM or Quality teams (IDG 2015) and the LINC tutor. The opportunity to engage in professional dialogue with a colleague who has a shared interest and background in ECCE provides that support in what has been described as a "lonely place" (Ruth) for the ECT working in isolation. This, as outlined in the proposed Framework (Figure 56) can offer a safe place for conversations and discussions regarding professional practice with an interested and informed stakeholder, without the pressure of inspection of practice.

Professional practice assumes a knowledge base, experience and a level of confidence in carrying out one's role in the educational setting. The complexity of the role of the leader in the ELC setting encompasses a broad range of responsibilities that underpin the provision of a quality and inclusive early years' service. These elements of practice form part of the hermeneutic circle of understanding in consideration of how the LINC programme can influence perceptions of inclusion.

Proactive Collaboration in the Early Learning and Care Setting

The literature presents collaborative practice as cooperative working on a defined task in a reflective manner (James *et al.* 2007) which, in the quality educational setting, necessitates partnership with parents, families and other relevant stakeholders, to ensure the full inclusion of the child in the learning environment. Collaboration is seen as central to inclusive practice and is at the heart of quality provision (CECDE 2006; O'Toole *et al.* 2019), and this is particularly relevant when working to support the meaningful participation of the child with additional needs (DCYA 2016). The importance of parental involvement in their child's education is embedded in policy relating to the ELC sector (IDG 2015; DES 2016; DCYA 2016a; Tusla 2018), however the literature and the findings illustrate the challenges in developing and maintaining quality relationships with parents. While there are very positive examples of partnership with parents in the findings, some of which were attributed to ideas obtained in the LINC programme, there were also concerns regarding the perceived expectations of the role of the ECT and that of the parents using the service, mirroring findings from international studies (Hakyemez-Paul *et al.* 2018; Van Laere *et al.* 2018). Partnership with parents was also evidenced as being influenced by the professional identity of the ECT, who through over-confidence in one's knowledge, a lack of sensitivity, or a misconstrued depiction of the child (Sorin 2005) did not include the child in the setting in a meaningful way.

The potential of the ELC setting to act as a family support system is evidenced in the literature (Garrity and Canavan 2017; McGregor *et al*. 2019), and also in the findings in relation to the exceptional work carried out by participants to support children with additional needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. While O'Byrne (2018) acknowledges the value of this family-centred approach to supporting families, unexpected issues arose in the findings regarding the impact of the supportive nature of these particular settings. Having gained a reputation for their inclusive practice and a willingness to support families in need, three settings found themselves with a disproportionate number of children with additional needs

attending their services owing to referrals from other agencies and preschool settings. While these settings advocated inclusive practice, the findings indicated the exclusive nature of other settings in the locality that were unable or unwilling to support these children.

Recommendation 8

That the LINC consortium adapt the module on Collaborative practice and make it available online to all early childhood educators as a way to promote effective collaboration with parents and families.

Again, the hermeneutic circle of understanding creates awareness of the need to motivate the ECT to engage in the learning process as well as encouraging reflection on practice that might recognise the perspective of the parent in this regard (Cameron *et al.* 2014; Nutall *et al.* 2018; Barr and Hilliard 2021). The ECT must develop the skills to communicate effectively with parents, and this in turn must be supported by those communicative spaces in the learning environment (Jarman 2013; Grace *et al.* 2018). Consideration of the role of the fore-mentioned mentor and the *Framework for learning and development* to support the INCO in leading collaborative practice within the setting is recommended to develop professional relationships and guidance in the leadership role.

The lack of clarity regarding the profile of the ECT complicates this relationship with parents and families, and it is recommended that if the role is afforded the recognition of professional title, then the ECT may have the knowledge and confidence to engage effectively and empathically with parents. They in turn, will be assured of the knowledge which informs the teacher's guidance and strategies in the setting.

Transitioning to primary school can be difficult for many children, however those with additional needs may experience significant challenges and require

interventions and supports to help them navigate this move from the preschool to the primary setting (Daly *et al.* 2016; Ring *et al.* 2016). One's image of the child (Sorin 2005; NCCA 2015) and perception of one's role as an ECT provides guidance on the process of transition and also tasks the ECT with an ethical dilemma of challenging existing processes in order to meet the needs of a child moving from the preschool setting. The findings from this study illustrate some concerns regarding the lack of engagement and communication with local primary schools, particularly in reference to supporting children with additional needs. O'Kane and Murphy (2016) present some ten transfer documents that are available to support communication between the preschool and the primary school setting, with the most recent contribution of the Mo Scéal (NCCA 2018) resources to guide the transition process. Dilemmas identified in this study between perceptions of hierarchy between preschool and primary school teachers have influenced engagement with the learning on this topic from the LINC programme. Reflection – on – practice (Schon 1983) in these instances does not focus on the needs of the child, but rather on the self with perceptions of feeling undervalued within the education system. Having perceived that their contribution to the child's education is not valued by the primary school, most of the participants had not completed a transfer document despite being aware of this through the LINC programme. If, however, empowering the sector with professional titles relevant to their role, the preschool teacher or INCO may feel more confident; public perceptions of the role might change; and the emphasis could shift back to the child at the centre rather than an ongoing defence of one's profession as discussed earlier.

Recommendation 9

That learning from the LINC programme be adapted to provide shared and collaborated CPD opportunities for both preschool and primary school teachers to extend knowledge of the theory and the strategies recommended to support transitions, including engagement with the *Mo Scéal* (NCCA 2018), *Aistear Siolta Practice guide* (NCCA 2015) and AIM resources (DCYA 2016b).

Additionally, supporting transitions necessitates the creation of a more meaningful connection of curricular approaches from preschool to primary school based on the shared understanding of the principles of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and *Siolta* (CECDE 2006). O'Rourke *et al. (*2017) discusses the value of the learning in a play-based programme in the infant classroom and the adaptation of the *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) framework in this manner creates a more inclusive environment to include all children in the early years.

Recommendation 10

That third level institutions develop shared undergraduate modules for both early years settings and primary schools based on the national frameworks *Aistear* and *Siolta,* in order to embed a deeper understanding of the child-centred principles underpinning quality early childhood education from 0 to 6 years. As well as informing the development of an inclusive curriculum, this shared learning experience will situate early years' pedagogy across both pre and primary school settings.

The Interdepartmental Group (IDG 2015), recognising that practitioners might need additional support and guidance in inclusive practice, recommended the development of the Early Years Specialist (EYS) team as part of the AIM to support the participation of children with additional needs in the ECCE programme. The findings indicate a positive regard for the role of the EYS, again illustrating the influence of a mentor in supporting inclusion, particularly when there was a shared vision of a quality and inclusive environment from all stakeholders involved with the setting. The European Council Recommendations (2019) advocate for adequate supports and provisions for children with additional needs, which involves all key stakeholders in the child's life. In the present study, the findings illustrate how the learning from the LINC programme was credited with equipping some participants, as a key person of the child with additional needs, with the confidence to step up and ask to be involved in these conversations to support the child in the setting.

While the literature identified the need for collaboration of services to support children with additional needs (GoI 2018; DCYA 2019), the findings depicted incidents whereby there was not only an absence of collaboration between services, but a complete lack of access to basic healthcare. Participants identified families who were unable to register with a GP and instead went to the Accident and Emergency Department when the child was unwell. The ECT is faced then with the additional challenge of that lack of support to refer the family to other agencies, again emphasising the need for the knowledge and the skills to implement strategies within the setting to provide that support and guidance. The emergence of unexpected findings in education, as evidenced in this phenomenological study, emphasises the influence of the social and political context, on understanding experiences of participants (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1998). By ensuring the practitioner voice remained central to the study emphasises the significance of their lived experiences and the value of this methodological approach in educational studies.

Reflection on the Research Process of the Phenomenological Study

It is generally assumed that pedagogical practice is informed by knowledge which has been generated through scholarship in practice. As an experienced preschool teacher and managing director of a full-care facility, as well as a tutor and content developer on the LINC programme from the outset, I was coming to the research field with enthusiasm for the innovative learning for practice in the module content. Urban (2009) recognises that much of the policy and practical recommendations for the Irish ELC sector is presented from the top down, reflecting a perception that there is a lack of scholarship within the field to effectively contribute to policy. Schutz (1932/1976) argues that the starting point for investigation in any area of the social sciences, must begin with those who experience that phenomenon in their everyday lives. The conceptual framework of this study reflects the phenomenological basis in terms of understanding the lived

experiences of those enrolled on the LINC programme. The nature of inquiry was to seek a perception of truth and an understanding from the perspective of those being studied, while simultaneously recognising that it is the phenomenon under investigation and not the participants themselves (Van Manen 1990; Groenewald 2004). The limitations of phenomenological research are acknowledged in recognising that these experiences are personal to the participants, informed by their own perceptions and the truths that are relevant to their lives (Norlyk and Harder 2010; Sundler *et al.* 2019). However, consideration of these experiences provides an insight into realities that should be acknowledged and valued in order to address any disconnect between policy and practice. While this study did not necessarily start out to address the lack of practitioner voice in educational research, the journey has highlighted the need for an informed perspective on policy initiatives in practice. A shared perspective on elements of practice, and realisation of one's horizon of significance, enabled me to give voice from the life world of the practitioner working in early years settings. Coming to know and understand these perspectives from practice, while simultaneously acknowledging and addressing the context of my understandings, validates the experiences of those of us tasked with the responsibility of caring and educating young children.

Recognising that the influence of learning from the LINC programme could not be fully understood through conversations alone, incorporating field visits into the data collection methods provided another perspective of understanding regarding the learning from the programme. Immersion in the phenomenon through participation in the morning ECCE sessions with the participants provided me with an opportunity to gain those "rich and compelling insights into the real worlds, experiences and perspectives" of the participants (Braun and Clarke 2004, p. 22). Schutz (1932/1976) discusses phenomenology as an initial construct of understanding of the evidence in practice as the lived experiences of the participants, and subsequently, as the researcher, I adopt the second order construct which is making sense of those interpretations and what they mean in both practice and academic terms. The phenomenological approach allowed for

this depth of understanding and of empathy by placing the emphasis on the participants' experiences as central to the research question, and then applying my own interpretation by linking to the context and literature to support this understanding.

While I remain convinced that interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology (IHP) was the best methodological fit for this study, there have been challenges in the research process which may have been avoided had I chosen a traditional qualitative study (Smith *et al.* 2004; McManus-Holroyd 2007). There were other options for data collection that would have provided a comparative pre and post-LINC evaluation of the learning from the programme. A case study approach, as evidenced in the review of the AIM (DCYA 2019), was also an option to provide a detailed and exploratory report of participants' engagement with the LINC programme. Owing to my own experience and ongoing involvement working as both a preschool teacher and as a tutor and lecturer in early childhood education, I believe my interpretations from my horizon of understanding has provided a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the contextual realities of participants' experiences. Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology is not a linear process and there have been challenges throughout this process in firstly understanding the complex philosophical principles, and secondly to have the confidence to adapt this methodology to fit the research questions. There is limited use of IHP in educational studies to guide the process and while the flexibility and reflexivity of the approach suited my creative tendencies, there were times when I battled with the presentation of the rich findings in a traditional doctoral thesis. However, these battles made me read and research more, helping me to understand the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology and become more confident in justifying the use of this methodology, and to advocate for its use in educational research.

As part of the phenomenological understanding of the experience under investigation was the awareness that as researcher, I was part of this research through my interpretations of the findings. Mason (2002) suggests that the role of reflexivity requires that I, as researcher, show a sensitivity to the range of

interpretations and voices in the data, as well as continually questioning my own assumptions and perceptions. The realities of my own working life as an ECT and my simultaneous involvement on the LINC programme meant that there were times when my own identity was intertwined with that of the participants and our shared experiences were blurred. Soros (1995, p. 67) describes reflexivity as having to do with “the role of the thinking participant and the relationship between his thinking and the events in which he participates” and recognises the challenges of this position “because he is trying to understand a situation in which he is one of the actors”. Acknowledging my active participation as an informed and interested party in the research adds to the credibility of the study being that there is that vested interest and knowledge in the subject area from a personal and professional level (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Consideration of Strengths and Limitations of the Research Study

Strengths:

A key strength of this study is the emphasis on practitioner voice in interpreting participants’ lived experiences in the early years. The principles of hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledge the centrality of context and personal experience when it comes to understanding people’s reactions and responses to any given phenomenon. In this study, that has been about creating awareness of different perspectives and considering how there can be a fusion of horizons between policy and practice to create a shared vision with practical solutions for inclusion.

This study has validated the worth of the LINC programme and the potential for broadening the influence of the learning to support meaningful participation of all children in early years settings. It simultaneously identifies factors that have a real and profound impact on educators’ ability to enact change and lead inclusive practice. Practical recommendations, underpinned by informed interpretation, educator experience and contemporary literature, have been outlined as feasible and achievable to influence societal understanding of inclusion.

In considering how the research findings might be of use to me personally, I feel that I have already taken inspiration from the research findings, embracing my voice and experience from practice. My horizon and my perspective centre around a rights-based approach, for the children, and the educators who work alongside me, leading me on a path whereby we model and publicise our pedagogical practice on both a national and international stage, thereby making real the contributions and the potential for influencing knowledge, theory, and practice.

Limitations:

As a researcher starting out on this research journey, I can look back now from a more informed horizon and recognise the limitations of this study. The narrow focus of the pilot study is indicative of that naivety whereby I undoubtedly could have reflected further on the value and purpose of those initial conversations and visits with educators.

When I look back at the entire research process, I can see the missed opportunities for conversations or where there were gaps in the descriptive field notes that might have enhanced the understanding of the participants' lived experience owing to my lack of awareness at that point in the process. Having previously discussed the methodological challenges of reflexivity in qualitative research (Sultana 2007; Musgrave 2019; Braun and Clarke 2022), this limitation was evidenced in my initial inability to develop and assert my confidence in my own professional knowledge to validate the analysis and interpretation of the findings. A lack of specific guidance on IHP study in education contributed to such challenges in the research process.

Notwithstanding the depth of understanding presented in this study regarding the 'quiddity of inclusion,' the format of a doctoral thesis presented challenges in engaging with the complexity of the findings. Each of the themes developed, on inclusive culture, pedagogy, and professional identity, warrant a dissertation and at times I felt that I was unable to do justice to aspects of the findings owing to a rigid word count. However, I feel that the limitation in this regard might be addressed in

future research plans in considering where I feel there is scope for further investigation and discussion.

Acknowledging the limitations of sample size is also a consideration here, as well as an awareness that this study has taken place throughout a period of upheaval and unrest in the early years sector. Those who responded may have done so in seeking an outlet for their voice in a sector where they felt lost rather than a genuine interest in the research topic. However, this is reflective of the context, and the philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer which underpins the conceptual framework of the study in coming to know and understand people's perspectives.

Contributions to Knowledge, Theory and Practice

First and foremost, this study illustrates how the learning from the LINC programme has the potential to support and develop educators' perceptions and practices of inclusion in the early years. Furthermore, it acknowledges that knowledge and the implementation of learning is dependent on the context of the learner's reality. It presents a perspective from the sector illustrating how different understandings of inclusion can be influenced by their life-world, depending on their lens and the horizon on which they stand. It validates the positive influence of the LINC programme on inclusive practice in the early years sector (Fortunati *et al.* 2019), while simultaneously acknowledging the need to provide supports to facilitate the sharing of learning and reflecting on practice as relevant to each setting. The proposed framework for learning and development (Figure 58) provides a basis for acknowledging the individuality of early years settings and a process of identifying supports needed within that context.

This study advocates for the extension of the LINC programme to all educators and teachers working in early years educational settings in order to support the development of an inclusive culture through a shared understanding of the competent child. This study has established the centrality of relational pedagogy, underpinned by the principles of Aistear (NCCA 2009) and Siolta (CECDE 2006), as the bedrock of inclusive practice. In contributing to theory (Lundy 2007; DCYA 2016

Moloney and McCarthy 2018), it has been argued that concepts of inclusion are necessarily entwined across all elements of quality early years education and care and should permeate modular content from a child rights-based perspective. It also builds on existing research relating to the influence of professional identity on quality inclusive education for children by considering how the role of INCO needs to be addressed and supported within the service.

One of the key contributions from this study is the inclusion of practitioner voice in research (Arnott and Wall 2021; Skehill 2022) and the use of hermeneutic phenomenology in facilitating that process. It presents an accessible format for research in education through incorporation of the realities of practice working with children and families and guidance for respectful resolution of challenges in the educational setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of using this doctoral study as a basis for future research, there are a number of different topics that I feel deserve to be explored and researched in their own right. In keeping with the interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it would be interesting to consider how the role of INCO has been implemented into early years services and to identify the factors that supported or impeded effective engagement with the associated responsibilities of this role.

There have been a number of initiatives to support the transition process from preschool to primary school (O'Kane and Murphy 2016b; NCCA 2018) and I believe case studies from the Irish context might provide models for quality, inclusive collaborative practice within and between relevant stakeholders.

In keeping with the practitioner enquiry approach, research around the role of the early years educator in terms of supporting parents and families might contribute to acknowledgment of the value of the role of the ECT as well as identifying how a competent system can come together to support the child, as advocated in policy (Bronfenbrenner 1979; GoI 2018).

In itself, I feel there is scope to develop and engage further with interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology as a model for qualitative research in education and create an accessible guide for students, researchers and practitioner enquiry in educational settings.

Final Thoughts on Informing Practice and Self-discovery

Denzin and Lincoln (2017, p. 10) describe the role of the researcher in qualitative research as attempting "to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". This research study has addressed the question of how engaging with the LINC programme influences perceptions and practices of inclusion in the ELC sector. It identified significant findings regarding the effectiveness of the learning, as well as challenges in communicating this knowledge in practice. The study also identifies a gap between aspirational policy and the contextual reality of practice in the ELC sector. The findings therefore, indicate that this gap between policy and practice has created a sense of mistrust of government initiatives and policy relating to ECCE. Such perceptions have a detrimental effect on progressive actions such as the LINC programme which is evidenced as having a positive impact on inclusion from both these findings and with student evaluations of the learning (Ring e*t al.* 2018; DCYA 2019). The quality of the content and delivery of the LINC programme has been recognised and effective engagement with the learning by those working in the sector will doubtlessly have a positive influence on children and families.

Essentially this study has achieved the aims of this investigation in consideration of the influence of the LINC programme, providing recommendations for further development, as well as considering how it might be adapted as a model of CPD for agencies within and linked to the ELC sector. However, it also raises the question about creating the "competent system" (Urban *et al.* 2017) and the interconnectivity of services and resources (GoI 2018) to develop all areas relating to young children and their families. Urban (2009) discusses the fact the within

policy and research, there are those who do the talking, and those who are talked about, and power is attributed on the basis of this. It is my belief that power needs to be distributed on the ground in ELC settings, where the staff have their defined roles, and are recognised and valued for their contributions to the educational environment. Each setting is led by a qualified and skilled leader, who has the knowledge, qualifications and the competencies to lead quality inclusive practice, to engage in professional development, and to effectively manage a team.

On a personal reflection, I believe we can all have the tendency to be that "heroic victim" in our working lives, a title Gibson (2015) queries in relation to the ECT. I have recognised myself in the graduate teachers, shouting for recognition for my work and my qualifications. However, through this process of research and investigation, my own construct of children, and those of my colleagues who work alongside me in the ELC setting, has developed and enhanced our practice. Being more mindful of the importance of our role working with young children, and the influence that our practice has on their lives, has made me recognise the importance and the privilege of this position (Skehill 2021b). I am in the fortunate situation of having links with both practice and academia in the field of early childhood, and I am optimistic of having the capacity and the enthusiasm to combine these to develop my professional role.

On a final note, I feel that my engagement with interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology throughout this research process has helped me to understand my own personal role in a leadership capacity in my work in the ELC sector. Acknowledging my own horizon of significance (Gadamer 2004) and the different lenses with which I encounter life experiences (Brookfield 2017) has led me on an empathic path whereby a shift towards reflexivity on my actions with children, families and colleagues has translated to a deeper understanding of people's perspectives.

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Appendix A

Information letter to Early Years' Educators and Consent form

Dear Early Years' Educator,

My name is Sharon Skehill and I have been working as an Early Years' Educator for over ten years as well as teaching on various Level 6 ECCE programmes with Early Childhood Ireland and Galway Roscommon ETB. I am currently employed as a tutor on the LINC programme with Mary Immaculate College (MIC). Under the supervision of Dr. Emer Ring, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies (DRPECS) in MIC, Dr. Kathleen Horgan, Lecturer in the DRPECS in MIC and Dr. Lisha O' Sullivan, Lecturer in the DRPECS in MIC, I am undertaking a PhD study entitled "Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators' perceptions and practice".

The study aims to examine early years' educators' perceptions of the inclusion of children with additional needs in preschool services, and to evaluate the influence of the LINC programme on practice in preschools.

Participation in this research will involve an initial interview with you to discuss your experiences and understanding of inclusion, prior to your commencement of the LINC programme in September 2017. This interview will take approximately one hour. A follow up interview will take place on completion of the programme to discuss the impact of the learning from the course, in Autumn 2018. This meeting will also involve a field visit to your preschool session to see the learning environment and the daily routine in practice.

Your participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation is entirely voluntary, you will be free to refuse to answer any question and you may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time.

It will be necessary to audio record all the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained. If possible, I would welcome discussion on relevant IEPs or observations pertaining to the inclusion of children with additional needs in your setting.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitation of the law, and will be available only to the researcher. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process will be used in the final thesis but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying details be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of seven years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

If you are interested in participating in this research, I would be grateful if you would indicate your interest in participating by signing the consent form below, which I will collect on arrival.

I thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me (0872******3) if you have any queries.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact

MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick.

061-204980 mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours Sincerely

Sharon Skehill

Appendix A1: Early Years' Educator Consent Form

Name: ____

Preschool: ____

Phone: ____

Email: ____

I _______________________________ am willing to participate in the research study entitled 'Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators perceptions and practices' being conducted by Sharon Skehill. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed: ____

Date: ____

Appendix B

Information letter to Parents and Consent form

Dear Parents/ Guardians,

My name is Sharon Skehill and I have been working as an Early Years' Educator for over ten years as well as teaching on various Level 6 ECCE programmes with Early Childhood Ireland and Galway Roscommon ETB. I am currently employed as a tutor on the LINC programme with Mary Immaculate College (MIC). Under the supervision of Dr. Emer Ring, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies (DRPECS) in MIC, Dr. Kathleen Horgan and Dr. Lisha O' Sullivan, Lecturers in the DRPECS in MIC, I am undertaking a PhD study entitled "Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators' perceptions and practice".

The study aims to examine early years' educators' perceptions of the inclusion of children in preschool services, and to evaluate the influence of the LINC programme on practice in preschools.

As part of the research I will be visiting the preschool your child attends to talk to the Early Years' Educator who works in the room with your child, and to observe the group in their morning routine. I would also like to have a short conversation with a group of children in the ECCE group. I feel it is very important that we seek and listen to children's views, ideas and opinions on their own educational experience.

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish for your child to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to allow your child to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. Before you make your decision, I will be available to answer any questions you have about the research project. You can ask for any information you want.

Your child's participation in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your child's participation is entirely voluntary, he/she will be free to refuse to answer any question and can choose to withdraw from the research project at any time. This will be fully explained to them.

I will visit the preschool for one morning session. For a short time on this visit I will conduct a group conversation with the children. A member of staff will be present with me at all times. Child-conversations will involve a discussion with the children in relation to their experience of preschool, and they may be asked to draw a picture of their ideas. It will be necessary to audio record the interviews to ensure that all of the information is retained.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitation of the law, and will be available only to the researcher. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final thesis but under no circumstances will their name or any identifying details be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of seven years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

If you are interested in allowing your child to participate in this research, I would be grateful if you would sign the consent form below, which I will collect on arrival.

I thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with your child

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me (0872******3) if you have any queries.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact

MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick.

061-204980 / mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Skehill

Appendix C

Early Years' Educators: Semi-structured interview Schedule

2) How long have you been working as an Early Years' Educator?
3) What are your qualifications in early childhood care and education (ECCE)?
4) Tell me about your work in the preschool.
5) Had you any input/ help from other agencies?
    a. AIM / Better Start
    b. Early Intervention
    c. Childcare Committee
6) Do you have any guidelines/ policies to follow/ that help you to support children with additional needs in your preschool room?
7) Do you face any challenges in your role supporting children with additional needs in the preschool?
8) Are you aware of any feedback from other staff regarding the inclusion of children in the preschool programme?
9) Any other questions? Comments?

The researcher is adopting a phenomenological approach and so these questions are designed to lead to discussion to enable participants to share their lived experiences of inclusion.

The second interview, on completing the LINC programme, will be based on themes emerging from this initial stage of the research.

Appendix D

Information letter to Early Years' Managers / Owners

Dear Early Years' Manager,

My name is Sharon Skehill and I have been working as an Early Years' Educator and Manager for over ten years as well as teaching on various Level 6 ECCE programmes with Early Childhood Ireland and Galway Roscommon ETB. I am currently employed as a tutor on the LINC programme with Mary Immaculate College (MIC). Under the supervision of Dr. Emer Ring, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies (DRPECS) in MIC, Dr. Kathleen Horgan and Dr. Lisha O' Sullivan, Lecturers in the DRPECS in MIC, I am undertaking a PhD study entitled "Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators' perceptions and practice".

The study aims to examine early years' educators' perceptions of the inclusion of children in preschool services, and to evaluate the influence of the LINC programme on practice in preschools.

Participation in this research will involve an interview with your employee at your setting, to discuss their experiences and understanding of inclusion, prior to commencement of the LINC programme in September 2017. This interview will take approximately one hour. A follow-up interview will take place on completion of the programme to discuss the influence of the learning from the course, in Autumn 2018. This meeting will also involve a field visit to observe the 3 hour ECCE session

to see the learning in practice. Participants in the research will receive a letter from the Head of DRPECS, MIC, Dr. Emer Ring, acknowledging their participation in the research study and the value of this in terms of continuing professional development. Your support in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time.

It will be necessary to audio record interviews to ensure that the information is retained. If possible, I would appreciate discussion around IEPs or observations that are relevant to the inclusion of children with additional needs in your setting.

Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitation of the law, and will be available only to the researcher. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final thesis but under no circumstances will any names, that of the setting, or any identifying details be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of seven years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research. If you are willing to support your team members' participation in this research, I would be grateful if you would indicate your consent by signing the enclosed consent form, which I will collect on arrival. I thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me (0872*****3) if you have any queries.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact

MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick.

061-204980 mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Skehill

Appendix D1: Early Years' Manager / Owner Consent Form

Name: ____

Preschool: ____

Phone: ____

Email: ____

I ______________________________ give consent for educators at my service to participate in the research study based on 'Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators perceptions and practices' being conducted by Sharon Skehill. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any publications that arise from this project.

Signed: ____

Date: ____

Appendix E

Involving Children in the Research Project

Information and Assent Form

The preschool children will be invited to participate in proposed research project and their assent is required prior to any observation of the practice.

The researcher will introduce herself to the children, and tell them that she has come to visit so she can talk to them about their time in preschool. She will also explain that she will be talking to their key person as well about what they do in preschool, and explain that this is called research.

The researcher will show the children the device for recording conversations, and demonstrate how this works, also providing an opportunity for them to try out the equipment and learn how it can record voices.

The researcher will explain to the children that she would like to ask them some questions, and they can point to the 'Happy Face' if they want to agree to the questions. It will be explained that if they do not want to answer the questions, then they do not have to point at the face, and that it is ok if they do not want to talk or answer the question. The children will also be reminded that throughout the research, that it is ok to say 'I don't want to this' or to leave the group activity whenever they choose.

Below is the proposed outline for the child conversations:

Hello - my name is Sharon.

I am visiting your preschool today because I would like to talk with you about preschool. I would like to know about what you do in preschool, what you like about preschool.

I have already talked to your teacher, xxx, about what you do in preschool. I am doing all of this talking because I am doing 'research'. 'Research' is where you find out lots of things and then write them in a book. I will be writing what you say to me in a book and I might also be putting some of the pictures you draw in the book. Your name or preschool will not be written in the book, only what you say and draw. I am really glad that you are helping me with this.

However, you don't have to talk with me if you don't want to. If you want to stop answering questions all you have to do is say "I'd like to stop" or you may point to the red circle on the table. You can leave the group at any time and go play something else.

I am going to be recording what you say so that I can listen carefully to it again later as what you will say is very important. I have a recorder here to do this. When I press the green button, the recorder is on and when I press the red button the recorder is off. We will see if the recorder is working before we begin. When I press the green button, we can all say 'hello' together and I will play it back to you so that you can check if it is working.

Before we start, I would like to be sure that all of you are happy to start so I brought along a sheet for each one of you to sign for me. I will read the writing and you can put a mark on the green hand if you are happy to talk to me and put a mark on the red hand if you are not happy. Remember you don't have to talk to me if you don't want to so it is alright to put a mark on red hand.

Child's Name:

I am happy to talk with you about preschool today.

You can write what I say in your book.

I can leave the group at any time.

Tell me about what you do at preschool?

What do you like the best in preschool?

Is there anything you don't like doing in preschool?

Who helps you at preschool?

Who are your friends in school?

What do you do with your friends?

What do you like best doing with your friends?

Do you like school?

Thank you so much for talking with me today and letting me spend time here in your preschool.

Appendix F: Follow up Information letter to Early Years' Managers / Owners

Dear Early Years' Manager,

My name is Sharon Skehill and I have been working as an Early Years' Educator and Manager for over ten years as well as teaching on various Level 6 ECCE programmes with Early Childhood Ireland and Galway Roscommon ETB. I am currently employed as a tutor on the LINC programme with Mary Immaculate College (MIC). Under the supervision of Dr. Emer Ring, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies in Mary Immaculate College, Dr. Kathleen Horgan and Dr. Lisha O' Sullivan, Lecturers in the DRPECS in MIC, I am undertaking a PhD study based on "Early Years' Educators' Perceptions of Inclusion in early years' settings, and the influence of engagement in the Leadership for INClusion in the early years (LINC) programme on early years' educators' perceptions and practice".

The study aims to examine early years' educators' perceptions of the inclusion of children with additional needs in preschool services, and to evaluate the influence of the LINC programme on practice in preschools.

An interview was carried out with your team member discussing her experiences and understanding of inclusion, prior to commencement of the LINC programme in September 2017. I am now hoping to carry out a follow up interview, as we near the end of the programme to discuss the influence of the learning from the course. This meeting will also involve visiting the ECCE session to see the learning in

practice, and if you and parents consent, to talk with the children about the things they like in preschool.

Your support in the research would be greatly appreciated and would considerably enhance this research project. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time.

It will be necessary to audio record the interviews to ensure the information is retained. Electronic and written information will be kept strictly confidential, subject to the limitation of the law, and will be available only to the researcher. Excerpts from the data collected during the research process may be used in the final thesis but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying details be included. Data collected for the research will be stored securely on a password protected computer and in locked cabinets. All data will be destroyed after a period of seven years. Data may be used in an anonymous form in any publications that arise from this research.

If you are willing to support your team members' participation in this research, I would be grateful if you would indicate your consent by signing the enclosed consent form, which I will collect on arrival.

I thank you for your interest in this research and look forward to meeting with you.

In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me (0872*****3) if you have any queries.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact

MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick.

061-204980 / mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Skehill

Appendix G:

Certificate of Research Participation

This is to certify that _______ has completed five hours of Continual Professional Learning through participation in a research study on inclusion in the early years' sector.

Signed: Sharon Skehill Date: October 2018

Appendix H

Interview schedule for second interview on completion of LINC programme

(Questions are open-ended to facilitate discussion from conversations during the first interview prior to engagement with LINC programme)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Appendix I

Individual adapted interview schedules for each participant

Interview schedules were adapted for each participant in accordance to conversations/ issues discussed during first interview prior to engagement with the LINC programme. As the interview took place immediately after the field visit to the settings, it also provided an opportunity to ask questions about the morning session or to ask about different elements of practice or the environment.

Martha (Employee manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
   Have you accessed AIM support this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I see you are using the resources from the AIM play pack – have they been useful for the children?
   I know you are very committed to your Montessori approach so can I ask how the module on 'Curriculum for Inclusion' worked with your existing programme?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   I see your colleague is busy with the children's journals – can I ask how you document their learning and how that is shared with the parents?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Mary (Owner / Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   We had talked last September about the challenges at the beginning of the school year -so how have all your children settled in and did the LINC programme provide support in that regard?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   You talked about how you had moved from Montessori approach to a more play-based curriculum – how has that helped to include children and did you get any more ideas from that module on Play / Curriculum to support you?
   I see that you have an extensive outdoor area – do you find that this supports inclusion and your work with the children in general?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   Last year, you mentioned parents funded additional support in the room – have you engaged with AIM and the early years specialist and how is that working for you?
   You had talked about Tusla referrals last year – are you managing that ok this year or how are things going?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
   In our last conversation, you spoke about doing home visits and how you are working with children and their families in the community – how are they all settling in and are you continuing to support transitions? Did any of the module content support or add to your practice in relation to this?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Eliza (Employee Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   At our first meeting you talked about the challenges of communicating with parents in relation to concerns about a child's development, has the learning from LINC been useful in your personal circumstances?
   You've talked about your managerial role in that regard so I'm wondering how you support the educators in the rooms to meet and talk with parents as well?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   How do you think you can lead practice within the team – it's a busy environment in full day-care!
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Caroline (Owner Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   When we spoke in September, you talked about being a little nervous about the little boy (with Down Syndrome) starting in your setting – and it certainly looks like he is very settled in here! – so did the LINC programme help you in that regard?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I can your environment has some great visual supports as well as the Lámh signs – how is that working for you?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   In our initial meeting you talked about a very positive relationship with parents anyhow and had a number of different strategies in place to support communication – so did the LINC programme bring new learning in that regard?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   I was talking with B (colleague in the setting), and she seems very competent and aware of her role in supporting the children's learning and participation – you all seem to have adapted very well to using the new resources (audio equipment / Lámh signs/ visuals) – can you tell me a little more about your leadership role in promoting inclusion?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Tina (Owner- Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   I know when we spoke at the beginning of the school year, you were facing a lot of challenges in relation to your practice – staffing; parents; inspections – how are things going – and did the LINC programme help?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I know you are very much Montessori-inspired – but were there changes you made to your practice or your programme as a result of the LINC programme – did you find that Montessori supported an inclusive approach?
   What about documenting the children's learning – you spoke about different observations and that you are not happy with them – was LINC useful in that regard?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   Last time we spoke, you had a lot of concern about the AIM and the funding process – how has that worked for you this year?
   You had talked about the challenge of accepting children with additional needs as referred by Tusla – how are you managing this year?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Ruth (Owner-Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   At the beginning of the school year, you were telling me about all your experience with children with additional needs, so how has your year been and has the LINC programme been influential?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
   Were there any strategies or anything that you changed or introduced to support inclusion as a result of engagement with LINC?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I know you have used Montessori and some phonics programme in your preschool rooms, did you find the lessons on play useful in that module on Curriculum for Inclusion?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   You had expressed some concerns that parents don't really know what goes on in the setting – did you get any ideas from the module about how to share information with them about your curriculum and the likes?
   You spoke about challenges in communicating with the local school across the road – were there any ideas in LINC to support you in that transition process?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Lucy (Preschool Assistant)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I can see the child-led programme in place here – and how it is working for B (little boy with autism) – are there any strategies in particular that work well to support his participation?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   Last year when we spoke, you commented that you don't get to engage with the Better Start team – have you been able to get advice or support in your role this year?
   The setting is also involved with the Quality Better Start – how is that working for you?
   I can see the work that has gone into the children's journals – do you send them home to the parents as well?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   When you are working as a preschool assistant in the setting, do you find it difficult to share your learning then with room leaders or management?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
   You mentioned that you are employed here on the Community Employment Scheme – what does that mean then for your job next year or do you know yet?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Teresa (Owner-Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   There were a few things you had discussed in our first interview about supports you would need in preschool to help include children – how do you feel about that now and has the LINC programme helped in any way?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
   You mentioned earlier that you had an inspection from the DES – how did that go for you and did you feel LINC helped with any area to support this?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I see you are using the resources from the AIM play pack – do you feel they help with the daily routine to support children?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   Last year, you talked about having the parents fund a SNA in order for the child to attend your setting – have you availed of AIM since and has that helped at all?
   In our last interview, you were saying that you needed more supports – to be able to call someone for advice and help – do you feel more confident yourself after doing the LINC programme – or to know who to call as well?
   You mention that the children are all heading off to the local school – the majority to the same one -that is great for them – do you meet with the principal or the infant teacher?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
   Are there any particular strategies you use to support children's participation in the programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   There's just the 2 of you working here with the 22 children – and you've another session straight after this one – do you get to have time to meet or where do you find opportunity to talk about your work?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Claire (Early years educator)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I noticed this morning that there's a real calmness in the room – how do you manage the daily routines to create that atmosphere?!
   I see you all have little notebooks and are jotting things down throughout the morning – did the learning from LINC influence how you do observations?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   I see how you have fruit and snacks ready for the children – regardless of when they arrive in! – can you talk to me about that?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
   I see you had little visuals with you when you went to change J (little boy with additional needs) – can you tell me about that?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   I seen M (colleague) talking with the children – just being respectful – and knowing that they were immersed in a game so didn't necessarily have to share if they were in the middle of something- how are you all working together to create this culture?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
   You seem to have a very positive relationship with T (manager) – have you talked with her about the role of INCO?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Emma (Early years educator)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   Last time we spoke about a little boy in your group starting preschool – how has he settled in?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I see you have your journals available for the children – can you tell me a little about them or could I see one?
   Your setting is a lovely space – you have engaged with the Practice Guide I would say?!
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   You had mentioned doing home visits – how did that work to support inclusion?
   You have spoken about your mentor – is that from Better Start AIM or Quality, or the LINC programme?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   You talk about managing time – between your own work and family life – have you talked with your manager about how the role of INCO is going to work with the additional responsibilities?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Alice (Early years educator)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
   You had spoken previously about your learning experiences at levels 5 and 6 – how did LINC compare to those?
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
   Last time you mentioned challenges in managing children's behaviours within the group and how this impacted the group – did LINC help with any of that?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   Last time we spoke you talked about the challenges of doing documentation – are you still taking responsibility for the whole 22 children? Have you thought about making changes to that process as a result of LINC?
   You talked about your DES and felt that you were getting mixed messages re expectations of the play-based programme – can you tell me more about that?
   You have a challenge in your environment in having to clear everything away at the end of the session – how does that impact on your work?
   You mentioned about toilet training – is the space here a challenge for children with additional needs (community centre)
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   You talked about parents' perceptions of Montessori versus play-based learning – have you thought about ways to communicate more about your programme?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
   Considering the expansion of the ECCE programme to 2 years next year, have you thought about changes you might need to make to accommodate children at that younger age and if LINC has ideas around that?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Monica (Early years educator)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I see you have your individual learning journals for the children- did the LINC programme help with that documentation?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   You mentioned that you have a mentor coming in from Better Start – can you tell me more about that?
   Last time you talked about some challenges in communicating concerns with parents about a child's development – how are things now?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
   There is quite a big staff team here – is your manager supportive of this new role of INCO?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Siobhan (Owner-Manager)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
   I know you mentioned that you have recently completed your degree – but did you engage with those additional modules on child development and curriculum for inclusion?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   I see you take a lot of photos – what do you do with these?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   In our last conversation you mentioned you have a friend who is a psychologist who is very supportive with advice – have you engaged with other support agencies or with AIM or the early years specialist?
   You talked about challenges in communicating concerns to parents and getting them involved in things – can you tell me a little more about that and if LINC helped?
   You talked about parents not understanding or valuing play-based learning – did LINC help you with ideas to communicate further with them about your practice?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   (Works alone) Would you consider applying for AIM and getting additional assistance within the room?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

Ciara (Early years educator)

1. Tell me about your experience with the LINC programme.
2. Was there any part of the learning experience that was beneficial for your work in practice this year?
3. Tell me about your curriculum – did engagement with the LINC programme have any influence on it this year?
   In our last conversation you noted that you are very committed to Montessori and having a more structured routine for the children – how is that working this year for you?
4. Did the learning from the LINC programme support your relationship with parents and families / other stakeholders this year – particularly in relation to children with additional needs?
   You spoken about challenges engaging with local primary schools, have you identified any strategies to support transitions?
   You told me about challenges you have experienced with parents and how you were having a hard time with them as a result of voicing your concerns about them – has that situation improved or how are you managing?
5. Have you made any changes to your practice to support children's participation and inclusion in your setting since starting the LINC programme?
   Last time we spoke, you mentioned the high number of children attending your service as a result of other settings unable to accommodate them – how are things this year and are you able to support their participation here?
6. Have you had an opportunity to share your learning from LINC with your colleagues throughout the year?
   In our first interview, you talked about 'conflicts' in curricular approaches so have you been able to address this and talk about inclusive practice?
   You mention your professional identity – how does this affect your role when, as you say, that people – colleagues, the community, primary teachers - do not recognise your role as a 'preschool teacher'?
7. What plans do you have for the role of Inclusion coordinator when you graduate from the LINC programme?
   I know there is another INCO who moved to your setting recently, how do you think that will work then when you complete the course?
   Have you spoken with manager about the role and how the responsibilities of INCO can be carried out alongside your existing role?
   If you are having challenges with managers as you mentioned, are you able to talk with a board of management?
8. Have you any other plans for developing your practice as a result of LINC?
9. Have you any other thoughts about the LINC programme and your experience with it that you would like to share?

APPENDIX J

Summary of Data Collection from the Field Visits

Participant	**Documentation**	**Conversations with children ***	**Conversation with colleagues****
Ciara	Yes	0	0
Martha	Yes	5	0
Mary	Yes	8	0
Monica	Yes	1	0
Siobhan	No	4	N/A
Eliza	Yes	2	0
Maria	Yes	6	1
Claire	Yes	5	1
Emma	Yes	0	0
Alice	No	7	1
Ruth	No	0	0
Lucy	Yes	0	1
Tina	No	0	0
Teresa	No	4	0

*****_Conversations with children generally occurred in small groups at different stages throughout the morning._

**Conversations with colleagues involved informal interactions to ask questions re daily routine or to explain re element of the environment / curriculum.

Appendix K

Details of documentation observed during field visits

Participant*	Documentation observed
Ciara	Curriculum plans; Evaluation of activities; Daily routine; Aistear Learning Story; Parent App.; Long-term plan (links with Aistear)
Monica	Individual learning journals; group learning stories; visual schedules- daily routine; labelled interest areas;
Martha	Worksheets / theme-based templates; workbooks; Individual journals with worksheets and art work;
Mary	Emotion visuals; Jobs chart; Individual labelled trays/coat-hooks; individual journals
Eliza	Individual learning journals; Floor books (group learning stories); daily routines / task analysis visual schedules; Aistear learning stories on display; table of 'interest' – theme based learning focus.
Maria	Visual displays of daily routine; jobs chart; Lámh signs; Labelled interest areas; individual learning journals; personalised cubby holes; Aistear Siolta Practice Guide self-evaluation tools; group project photos on display and linked to Aistear / Siolta; anecdotal notes; parent suggestion box; parent notice-board
Lucy	Individual learning journals; 'rules' of the group; Community wall (parent information); Practice Guide self-evaluation tools
Claire	Individual learning journals; visual of daily routine and jobs chart; task analysis; group learning stories in floor book; 'rules' of the room
Emma	Parent newsletter; anecdotal notes; Practice guide self-evaluation tools; Social stories; individual learning stories; 'mood-board' – inspiration for new outdoor space.

***Nine out of the fourteen participants presented documentation to illustrate their learning from the LINC programme.**