They Just Don't Care about the Caring: Parents Perspectives of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy and Associated Funding Programmes

Tracey Nelson
Dublin Institute of Technology

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THEY JUST DON'T CARE ABOUT THE CARING:

Parents perspectives of early childhood education and care policy and associated funding programmes

Tracey Nelson

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Submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements leading to the award of MA Child Family and Community Studies.

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Dublin Institute of Technology September 2013
DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis toward the award of the Masters (M.A.) in Child, Family and Community Studies is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of Candidate:

__________________________________________

Date:

__________________________________________
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, and most importantly, I would like to thank the parents and grandparents who participated in the interviews, for giving up their time and providing such a valuable insight to the research topic. I would also like to thank the services who facilitated the contact with the participants.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Anne Marie Halpenny for her advice and support throughout.

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This research aimed to investigate parents’ perspectives on early childhood care and education (ECEC) policy in Ireland and the associated funding programmes available to them. A qualitative research approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews and a focus group as a research tool to gain an insight into the experiences of families regarding ECEC. Parents availing of current ECEC funding programmes and grandparents who care for their grandchildren were identified as a representative sub group of the research population.

Key findings suggest families are invisible in ECEC funding policy despite their fundamental role as co-educators in their child’s learning. Another key finding was the invisible child within policy, with the thrust for target driven age and stage based norms dominating policy. Despite their de facto exclusion from funding programmes, grandparents were found to be crucial in supporting families’ childcare arrangements through a process of mutual exchange. The traditional role of kinship is a driving factor in this emerging childcare sector.

The perspective purported to underpin Irish childcare policy is that of children’s rights, with the acknowledgement of the child’s social and cultural environments. Yet, in practice the political economic perspective dominates policy, with emphasis on the target driven priority of education and school readiness.

Key recommendations which arise from the study suggest that Irish ECEC funding policy needs to reaffirm its commitment to family and children as pivotal in the ECEC process. Real and substantive parental involvement policies and practices must be developed to re-establish the fundamental role parents play in the child’s early years. The role grandparents play in childcare needs to be acknowledged and supported through policy.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction
This study aims to examine the extent to which Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) funding schemes in the Irish context address the needs of families. This chapter will provide an introduction to the study by outlining the context of ECEC in Ireland. It explains the rationale, the aims of the study, provides a brief overview of the methodological approach and concludes with a brief outline of the chapters.

1.2 Context of the Study
Government support to families with children takes place in most developed countries, with the extent of such support often linked to the wealth of the country and the social policy traditions within that country (Department of Social Protection, 2010). The legislation within that country provides the framework for the social policy and informs social norms, values and patterns of family structure (Daly & Clavero, 2002). Policy for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland is supported through maternity leave entitlements, child benefit entitlements and specific funding for childcare. It is reflected in Irish government policy and strategy that it was within the context of a growing economy and labour market needs that the Irish Government initially tackled childcare policy (Government of Ireland, 1999; Government of Ireland, 2000; Office of Minister for Children, 2006; Office of Minister for Children, 2007). However the downturn in the Irish economy saw the need for more flexible ECEC arrangements due to changes in labour market requirements. Investment in ECEC arrangements is now seen as an investment in a future labour force (Start Strong, 2011).

The specific childcare funding streams to be explored in this research are the universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) which provides free preschool education to all children in the year before they attend primary school (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a) and two targeted funding
programmes; the Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CCS) and Childcare Employment and Training Support Scheme (CETS) which provide subsidised childcare support to parents meeting specific criteria (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b, 2013c). In all of these ECEC funding schemes, the funding goes directly to the participating service with home-based family day-care, *de-facto*, being excluded from participating, (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

1.3 **Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for this research project is to understand why government policy effectively excludes home-based care and family care arrangements from these funding schemes. Despite evidence that ECEC provision in Ireland is largely in the family or home-based setting (McGinnity *et al.*, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; Share & Kerrins, 2009; OECD, 2006; CSO 2007; Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998; Duignan & Walsh, 2004) the Irish Government does not acknowledge this, the largest sector of ECEC provision in Ireland, in terms of policy support.

1.4 **Aims of the Study**

The overall research objective of this study is to examine the extent to which ECEC funding schemes are addressing the needs of families. The study aims to answer three overarching research questions.

- To what extent are the concepts of education and care equally prioritised in Irish ECEC policy?
- To what extent are centre-based and the home-based ECEC learning environments supported by policy?
- Is there sufficient choice available to parents in relation to their families’ ECEC arrangements?

1.5 **Research Methodology**

The methodological approach for this exploratory study was qualitative research using semi-structured interviews as a research tool. This approach lends to a depth of understanding of families perspectives of ECEC policy and funding, with the goal of
identifying whether Irish ECEC funding schemes meet their childcare needs. This qualitative approach lends itself to an insight into the experiences and understandings of the research participants (Denscombe, 2010a, 2010b) with interpretivism central to the analysis of the research. The research design in order to gather information on this topic is a qualitative approach involving one-to-one semi-structured interviews in order to gain insight into personal experiences and perspectives from the participants. Using open ended questions in a semi-structured interview format provided the opportunity to generate new ideas; it also lends itself to the personal exploration required for this exploration.

The research sample comprised of seven parents availing of the ECEC funding schemes and using various ECEC arrangements such as parental care, care by relatives, care by non-relatives or childminders and care in centre based settings. Secondly, in order to offer another perspective on ECEC, grandparents, who according to recent Growing up in Ireland (2011) figures are closely involved in the care and support of their families’ ECEC needs, were interviewed using a focus group method. Five grandparents who were involved in the care of their grandchildren participated in this group and enabled the researcher gain a broad range of insights and opinions on the topic. A similar interview format of research questions was used for both the one-to-one interviews and the focus group in order to encourage more comparable data. This also lends itself to greater reliability and validity for identifying common themes and patterns for data analysis.

Ethical considerations for this study were undertaken to protect the research participants. The research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines as set out by the Dublin Institute of Technology (2013). All participants were informed of the research and signed their consent to take part. They were also given a commitment of anonymity.
### 1.6 Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>The Community Childcare Subvention Programme – provides subvention for ECEC arrangements in community or not for profit services, in designated areas of disadvantage, and is available to qualifying parents in low paid employment and training or education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CETS</td>
<td>Childcare Employment and Training Support Programme- provides subsidised ECEC places for qualifying parents attending eligible approved training courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRA</td>
<td>Childrens Rights Alliance – a coalition of organisations working to secure the rights of children in Ireland through campaigning for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE</td>
<td>Early Childcare Care and Education Programme – a universal free pre-school year for children in the year before they attend primary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEC</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education and Care – throughout this work, this refers to any childcare arrangement or setting used by parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUI</td>
<td>Growing Up in Ireland – A national longitudinal study of children in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health Service Executive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – A forum for member countries to share information on a broad range of topics in order to promote better policy development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMC</td>
<td>Office of Minister for Children - Now known as Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.7 Outline of the Study

Chapter Two of this work presents the literature review to support the research. Commencing with perspectives on early childhood education and care; Chapter Two then examines the significance of family and the home learning environment in supporting ECEC. This involves exploring the importance of the contextual environments of the developing child. Then, the history of Irish Government policy in the area of family and childcare policy will be outlined followed by current perspectives on ECEC funding policy. It will explore the themes of the prioritisation of education over care and how children are constructed within Irish society. It will also examine what influences childcare choice for parents, with the assumption of economic rationality on behalf of Government ECEC policy. This will include a focus on the emerging workforce in Irish childcare, that of grandparents providing childcare duties for their families.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology; it outlines a rationale for this method and presents the sample research group and participants. It describes the method of data collection used and why this method was chosen and then goes on to discuss the analysis of the data. The ethical considerations for this study will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Four presents the finding of the research of the study. These will be outlined under the headings and sub-headings which emerged as a result of analysis of the data.

Chapter Five offers a discussion of the findings from the research, drawing from the findings of Chapter Four and linking them with theories discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter Two and with the overall aims of the study.
Chapter six presents conclusions that can be drawn from the study. It makes recommendations drawn from the findings of the research and the discussion of these findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

There has emerged a discourse in ECEC policy that investing in children and childcare\(^1\) will produce better outcomes for the future economy (OECD, 2006, 2012). ECEC is seen as a commodity to be purchased by parents as consumers in the marketplace (Moss, 2008, 2009). This emphasis on the economy has permeated ECEC policy resulting in the emergence of ECEC policy which is seen to promote that of the adult worker family model (Lewis, 2006; NESC, 2005; Williams, 2004) and the construction of childhood as a means of creating an emerging workforce with a discourse of a universal child seen in terms of development, outcomes, measurement and school readiness (Moss, 2007).

This literature review will explore the most relevant research pertaining to these emerging trends in ECEC. Following an overview of the dominant perspectives of ECEC, the researcher will highlight the significance of the home learning environment will be explored. Following this Ireland’s historical stance in the area of ECEC will be outlined and discussed with particular reference to a dichotomy in Irish ECEC provision, where priority tends to be given to education over care. The chapter will then move to examine how children are constructed within Irish ECEC funding policy. Finally, the chapter will examine what influences parents in their childcare choice, exploring the contextual influences on this decision. This will also include a brief

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\(^1\) Throughout this work, when referring to childcare, it is in the context of caring for children on a day to day basis, and not in the context of children in the care system for child protection issues.
introduction to the emerging childcare workforce, that of grandparents providing family childcare duties.

2.2 Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Care

How ECEC policy is developed, implemented and practised within a society is shaped by the standpoint that society has in relation to ECEC. Woodhead (2006) remarks that the dominant political framework of a country is linked to historical, social and economic change within that country. The author highlights four key perspectives that influence ECEC development.

The first perspective is that of the developmental perspective. Such a perspective on ECEC centres on the acquisition of skills and competencies and defines childhood as a period or stage which is based on and limited by age and stage related milestones. This developmental perspective views children and childhood as universal, developing in a linear, deterministic fashion, with the focus on the psychological development of children and has dominated childhood studies and resulting ECEC teaching and practices (James & Prout, 1997). Many authors (Woodhead, 1997, 2006; Brannen & Moss, 2003; Cannella, 2002; Penn, 2000; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1997) critique this scientific, psychological perspective of children describing it as a Western perspective which is not at all reflective of the children of the majority world who have limited access to resources.

The political and economic perspective, claims Woodhead (2006), is shaped by the theoretical and empirical research of the developmental perspective. He highlights research projects such as Headstart, High/Scope Perry pre-school and the Abecedarian study which saw ECEC programmes targeted to compensate disadvantage, with ECEC seen as an “inoculation against failure”, (Woodhead, 2006, p. 12). The significance of these programmes went far beyond the educational policy audience to that of an economic audience with a language focusing on investment in human capital and the future returns of investing in ECEC (Start Strong, 2011; Woodhead, 2006; OECD, 2006, 2012). A critique of this perspective is its assumption of Western cultures and practices and the stance that children are products to be invested in for their future
potential as workers and their future impact on the economy rather than focusing on them in the present (Moss, 2007; Woodhead, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Williams, 2004; Canella, 2002; Prout, 2000; Penn, 2000; James et al, 1998; James and Prout, 1997).

The third ECEC perspective is that of the social and cultural perspective which arose through a critique of the universal nature of the developmental paradigm and the idealised notion that all children have the same access to resources and quality of environment (Woodhead, 2006). The social and cultural perspective draws attention to the contextual influences on children, on the resources available to them, their parents and their communities (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Canella, 2002; Penn, 2000; James et al, 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective stresses the importance of the cultural processes and actions which can shape and inform childhood. It emphasises the importance of the actors involved in formulating and delivering ECEC programmes; that influence and are influenced by social and cultural processes (Bradley, 2011; Moss, 2007; Moss, Dillon & Stratham, 2000; Woodhead, 1997, 2006; Hendrick, 1997, James & Prout, 1997).

The fourth perspective is that of human rights, with universal children’s rights underpinning this perspective. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) places the best interests of the child as a universal standard. Its strength is its political consensus (Woodhead, 2006); it has been ratified by one hundred and ninety three states, with Ireland ratifying it in 1992. ECEC within this perspective is seen as a right, not a charitable act or gift offering investment. Children are viewed as active participants within the ECEC process, with recognition of children’s agency in matters which concern their wellbeing (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Prout, 2000; Prout, 2002; James & Prout, 1997). A critique of this perspective is that children’s rights should not be confused with a policy emphasis on what children need, with a dominant discourse based on outcomes, measurement, and development (Moss, 2007). Paying lip service to children’s rights is an issue not to be overlooked. The overview of these perspectives will provide an insight into how Irish Government frames children within its ECEC policy.
2.3 The significance of family and the home learning environment in ECEC

One of the key findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project\(^2\) was the importance of the quality of the home learning environment (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). The link between the parents’ involvement with the child’s ECEC arrangements and further supporting this in the home-learning environment has a profound impact on the child’s learning outcomes (Hayes, Siraj-Blatchford, Keegan & Goulding, 2013; OECD, 2012; Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Share, McCarthy & Greene, 2011; Hayes, 2008; French, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Schweinhart (2009) claims having parents heavily involved in learning about their child’s development and how they can further develop this in the home environment is one of the crucial ingredients for effective ECEC programmes. Recent Irish research on two ECEC programmes in Dublin showed parental involvement and support in developing the home-learning environment can have positive outcomes for children and their parents (Hayes et al., 2013; Share et al., 2011) while the research of Childhood Development Initiative found gains were evident into the future through ongoing changes in parenting behaviour impacting on younger siblings (Hayes et al., 2013).

Other research supporting the importance of the home-learning environment is that linking the child’s home numeracy experiences with later positive outcomes in numeracy skills (Kleemans, Peeters, Segers, & Verhoeven, 2012; LeFevre, Skwarchuk, Smith-Chant, Fast & Kamawar, 2009). Regarding literacy, parents also play a crucial role in providing a supportive and responsive home-learning environment thus being an important predictor of children’s learning and development (Newland, Gapp, Jacobs, Reisetter, Syed & Chih-Hsiu, 2011; Hammer, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2010; Melhuish, Phan, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2008; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005).

Although parental educational attainment is linked to better outcomes for children, research has found that it is the quality of the parenting practices in the home, their

\(^2\) The EPPE Project is a longitudinal study in the United Kingdom which investigated the effects of preschool education on a child’s development.
attitudes, their interactions and responsiveness, the value they attribute to reading and learning and their motivation which can have a more significant impact on the child’s developmental outcomes (Newland et al, 2011; Melhuish et al, 2008; Roberts et al, 2005; Sylva et al, 2004). Melhuish et al (2008) found that children internalised the parents’ attitudes and values attached to learning, thus impacting profoundly on all future outcomes.

This concept of the whole child perspective, with the network of relationships and series of interactions between the child and its surrounding environments underpins Irish regulatory and quality documents supporting ECEC (Aistear, 2009; Siolta, 2006; Department of Health and Children, 2006; Government of Ireland, 2000). The whole child perspective is drawn from the theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and that of the socio-cultural perspective of ECEC referred to earlier in this work (Woodhead, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner’s theories focus on the development of an individual through interactions with their immediate settings, the relations of these settings and the contexts within which they are situated. Bronfenbrenner saw the environment as influencing and being influenced by the individual through a process of what he describes as “reciprocity” (1979, p. 22). Children are considered to be active rather than passive participants in constructing their own lives (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Elder, 1998; James et al, 1998; James and Prout, 1997). The developmental process is also subject to external influences from other larger surroundings such as historical, societal and cultural influences (Elder, 1998; Lamb & Sternberg, 1992).

Figure One shows a graphical representation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological environment (1979), showing the different settings or environments of the child which are nested or contained within the larger settings. The mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is of fundamental importance in supporting a responsive home-learning environment and in promoting early learning and development (Newland et al, 2011; Melhuish et al, 2008; Roberts et al, 2005; Sylva et al, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (1979) among other authors (Kleemans et al, 2012; Newland et al, 2011; Hammer et al, 2010; LeFevre et al, 2009; Melhuish et al, 2008; Roberts et al, 2005) describes the important
primary dyadic relationship between the child and its parents and how these relationships have a powerful impact on promoting and supporting the child’s learning and development, even in each other’s absence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He goes on to hypothesise that other relationships such as the social and personal relationships of the parent can impact both positively and negatively on the motivation for learning and the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). External relationships and processes impact on the child’s development; such as that of the parents’ relationships with their own parents, with each other and with other networks such as work and community (McKeown, Pratschke & Haase, 2003; Belsky, 1984). Referring to pre-school settings, Bronfenbrenner found rather than concentrating on the child within the ECEC setting, emphasis should also be made on the interconnections and processes between different settings and contexts which involve the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the importance of familiar people when moving from one setting to another and how developmental potential is increased when there are seen to be links and engagement between members of the different settings. This underlines the value of parental involvement in the ECEC setting (French, 2007; Siolta, 2006; Aistear, 2009; Ahnert & Lamb, 2003).

The importance of acknowledging the context of the child’s family and the child’s home environment to facilitate development can be clearly seen in Bronfenbrenner’s...
ecological model or ECEC perspective. The crucial role which family and the home-learning environment play cannot be underestimated when considering ECEC programmes.

2.4 Irish policy on childcare from a historical perspective

Government support to families with children takes place in most developed countries, with the extent of such support often linked to the wealth of the country and the social policy traditions within that country, (Department of Social Protection, 2010; Woodhead, 2006; Boyden, 1997). The legislation within that country provides the framework for the social policy and informs social norms, values and patterns of family structure (Daly & Clavero, 2002). Irish childcare and family policy is embedded in its constitution which describes the family as the “natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society”, (Government of Ireland, 1937, p. 158). Historically, Irish social policy therefore firmly reflected the value and significance placed on that of the family within the context of marriage, with the male breadwinner model underpinning how policies were developed to support the family. This firmly placed childcare in the private domain of the family and in terms of policy, childcare was largely ignored and was understood and referred to as protective, institutional care for children at risk. It was only in the late 1970’s that the Irish state took on primary responsibility for childcare policies (Daly & Clavero, 2002; Ferguson and O’Reilly, 2001).

Irish social policy and funding strategies referring to family support consisted of child benefit payments which have been given universally to all families since 1944, (Department of Social Protection, 2010). In terms of working families, maternity benefit was the only government funded support available. This payment was introduced in 1953 and from 1981 a statutory entitlement to maternity leave was introduced (Daly & Clavero, 2002). It is reflected in Irish government policy and strategy that it was from within the context of a growing economy and labour market needs that the Irish Government tackled childcare policy (Adshead & Neylon, 2008; OMC, 2007; OMC, 2006; Government of Ireland, 2000; Government of Ireland, 1999). Following increases of women in work outside the home, there was a need for an
increase in the provision of childcare places. Under the remit of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Government introduced its first ECEC funding initiative in 2000 to set about creating these childcare places.

In terms of childcare policy on quality, The National Children’s Strategy was developed in 2000 to support the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 (United Nations, 1989). It had an overall vision of enhancing the status and improving the quality of children’s lives in Ireland. Government policy for the first time ever, aimed to give children a voice and promote the best interests of the child (Government of Ireland, 2000). Further quality development in the area of ECEC policy saw the publication of Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) documents which underpin quality and curriculum frameworks for early childhood. Health and safety regulations for ECEC services in Ireland come under the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and are legislated through the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006). However these regulations legislate for pre-schools services only and for those services that care for four or more pre-school children (Department of Health and Children, 2006). Therefore, family and home-based day-care in the main is exempt from any regulatory requirements in Ireland.

### 2.5 Current ECEC funding policy: practice and perspectives

Current ECEC funding policy in Ireland is in the form of three strands, all of which are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) is free pre-school education (fifteen hours per week) to qualifying children in the year before they attend primary school regardless of the employment status of the child’s parents. This is paid directly to the service provider who opts into participating in the programme, (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a). The Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CCS) is restricted to community or not for profit services, in designated areas of disadvantage, and is available to qualifying parents, in low paid employment and training or education (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b). Again, services opt to participate
in this programme. The Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS) provides subsidised childcare places for qualifying parents attending eligible approved training courses (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013c). The number of places available for this is limited, and services must apply to take part in the scheme.

Irish ECEC funding is available only to ECEC settings who are notified to the HSE as a pre-school service with an enrolment of five or more children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). This policy, *de facto*, excludes family and home-based based services from participating in any of the funding schemes. This is despite the continuing preference for home and family-based settings (McGinnity, Murray & McNally, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; Share & Kerrins, 2009; CSO 2007; OECD 2006; Duignan & Walsh 2004; Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998). Clearly the recognition of diversity in child rearing and ECEC practices referred to by Woodhead (1997) is not reflected in Irish ECEC policy. This policy sees payments made to services who apply to participate in the programmes, with the eligibility criteria for the universal ECCE programme based on the child’s age (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a). James & Prout (1997) and Canella (2002) argue this age based structuring system does not recognise maturity and may be stigmatising for some children. Eligibility criteria for the targeted CETS and CCS programmes is based solely on the welfare status and capacity of the parents to earn (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b; 2013c), thus very much leaving the children invisible or lost within the policy (Bradley, 2011; O’Donoghue & Hayes 2011).

Irish ECEC funding policy firmly places ECEC as a political and economic measure, with ECEC funding seen as a future investment for the economy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013d). The developing child is viewed as in a process of becoming rather than being, with the ECEC arrangement in place as a facility or service to care for the child while the parent engages in the workforce. The children’s rights perspective in which the National Children Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) was to underpin the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989); with a vision of children as equal citizens with equal participatory rights is not evident in
ECEC policy. The ECCE programme is available to only those children in the appropriate age cohort (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a), thus leaving children in the birth to three years age bracket and children attending CETS and CCS programmes unsupported in terms of quality ECEC provision. The Children’s Rights Alliance highlight this as an on-going concern for children in Ireland (CRA, 2013).

2.6 Ireland’s split system of childcare provision

There appears to be a clear policy division between those services that provide the care element of ECEC and those who provide the educational elements (O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Hayes, 2010, 2007, 2006; Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Kiersey, 2009; OECD, 2006). This two tiered system which has emerged in ECEC in Ireland prioritises education over care, which sees more investment in quality and staff for services providing education than those providing the care element only (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Bradley, 2011; O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Moss, 2008).

Moss (2008, p. 6) describes this “split system” of services as one which sees care as a market commodity (Moss, 2008, 2009). Care as a ‘soft’ skill, closely linked to mothering (Hayes, 2007, p. 6), which is a commodity to be purchased with those who can afford it availing of higher quality care (Hayes, 2010; O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2009; Moss, 2008). The only regulatory requirement in terms of ECEC service practitioner competency for the role is to be over eighteen years old. Regarding other quality requirements, the pre-school services regulations only require staff to have “appropriate” experience and qualifications, (Department of Health and Children, 2006, p. 42). Services that provide the ECCE funding programme are required to have higher training qualifications than those providing the CETS and CCS funding programmes (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Care is also linked to the notion of the welfare of the child, with the emphasis on targeted programmes for disadvantaged children in need (Hayes, 2010, 2007; Moss et al, 2000). The care element of ECEC is underpinned by the developmental perspective framework (Hayes, 2010; 2007). Cannella (2002) criticises this ECEC model with its excessive focus on
the development of the child claiming it reifies the notion of the normal or universal child (2002). She claims this ECEC model emphasises measurement and hierarchy and argues they are designed to highlight deficiencies in certain groups (Cannella, 2002).

Education in this ECEC dichotomy is seen as a preparation for primary school; it is seen as an entitlement and for the public good, what Moss refers to as “schoolification” of children (Moss, 2008, p. 6). Minister Andrews’ 2009 budget announcement of funding for the ECCE programme highlighted the programme as key to the development of the economy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). This link between education and the future economy underpins Irish ECEC policy (O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Hayes, 2010; OECD, 2006) with ECEC seen as an investment in human capital (Start Strong, 2011; O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Woodhead, 2006). Along with the developmental perspective, the political and economic perspective also underpins this ECEC model, with its notion of school readiness (Moss, 2007; Woodhead, 2006), with childhood seen as an apprenticeship, a means of producing future workers (Woodhead, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Williams, 2004; Canella, 2002; Prout, 2000; Penn, 2000; James et al, 1998; James and Prout, 1997). The most recent State of the Nations’ Children Report further compounds this priority of education over care in ECEC where the only reference made in relation to the quality of ECEC in Ireland was the number of services contracted to provide the ECCE programme and the number of children attending the programme (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012). There were no further references made regarding CETS, CCS or any other ECEC data.

2.7 Rationality mistake: what influences parents’ childcare choice?
“We have a belief and culture that it is best for women to return to the labour market and also that it is best for children to attend daycare,” (Waymen, 2013, np) citing Professor Tine Rostgaard of the Department of Political Science at Copenhagen’s Aalborg University who gave a keynote address at a recent conference in Ireland.
promoting the Scandinavian model of childcare\(^3\) as the “Nordic Nirvana”. This model of childcare is what is considered in the best interests of children and one which the current Irish Government aspires to achieve (Burton, 2013). How a country frames its policies and legislation is informed by its tradition, values and societal norms, (Bradley, 2011; Department of Social Protection, 2010; Hayes, 2007; Woodhead, 2006; Daly & Clavero, 2002). Bradley (2011) affirms the influence and power policy makers have in developing ECEC policy through their values, roles, status and ideologies. Her research also examines how the different paradigms or perspectives of ECEC and childhood are socially constructed, and how those actors involved in developing ECEC policy interpret and construct their perception of childhood, thus informing their perspective of ECEC policy and practice (Bradley, 2011). However, where are Irish parents and Irish children with Irish cultures and beliefs on child rearing and ECEC practices placed within the government’s ideological stance and preference for the Scandinavian model?

There is an assumption that women want and should work, with the adult worker family model being in the best interest for families (Lewis, 2006; NESC, 2005; Williams, 2004; Duncan, Edwards & Reynolds & Alldred, 2004; Duncan, Edwards & Reynolds & Alldred, 2003). Irish Government policy promotes the use of centre based ECEC settings through the *de facto* exclusion of home-based settings in ECEC funding programmes (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). It is argued this is a rationality mistake on behalf of government, with the assumption of the rational economic man who makes rational economic decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis (Duncan *et al*, 2004; Barlow & Duncan 2000).

Duncan & Edwards (1997) and Duncan *et al* (2003) argue that there is more to the decision to work and the choice of ECEC arrangement than that of economics. There are cultural, societal, class and gender values at work which impact on preference and choice (Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, Malmberg & FCCC Team, 2007; Duncan *et al*, 2004; Duncan *et al*, 2003; Barlow & Duncan, 2000; Duncan & Edwards, 1997).

\(^3\) The Scandinavian Childcare Model refers to universal subsidised ECEC arrangements available in these countries from the age of one to twelve years, at a low cost to parents and high investment from Government.

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Barlow and Duncan (2000) suggest that there are moral obligations behind a family’s decision making regarding work and although processed in a rational way, economics may not be the crucial factor in deciding ECEC arrangements. Kinship, social ties and obligations, values, preference for informal home or family based care; the idea that friends and family may provide better care for young children is not acknowledged in government ECEC funding policy. Duncan et al (2003, 2004) suggest government do not take into account family life and values regarding who parents want to care for their children when developing policies regarding ECEC. Sylva et al (2007) conclude that childcare choice is also influenced by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model referred to earlier in this work, where socio-economic circumstances and maternal beliefs, values and attitudes to child rearing can all impact on childcare choice.

McGinnity et al (2013) recent Irish research found that while parents may have aspirations for their children in terms of childcare preference, choice was influenced by the number of children they had, the characteristics of their child, their socio-economic circumstances and community factors such as having family living near to them to assist with childcare arrangements. Grandparents were found to be the pre-dominant type of childcare (McGinnity et al, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; Share & Kerrins, 2009). Share and Kerrins (2009) refer to the grandparents as the “childcare bedrock” (2009, p. 34). They also emphasise how policy does not acknowledge or support this, again leaving it very much in the private domain of the family. Other researchers question the impetus for childcare duties and the depth of obligation on behalf of grandparents to provide these duties (Glaser, Price, Montserrat, di Gessa & Tinker, 2013; Share & Kerrins, 2009), with a concern for the impact this may have on grandparents ability to “self-finance their old age” (Glaser et al, 2013). That being said, grandparents are said to benefit from the intergenerational relationships which develop out of childcare duties. These benefits are said to impact positively on their wellbeing and are based on the notion of reciprocity and mutual love and caring (Share & Kerrins, 2009).

There should be a readiness on behalf of governments to accept there are other perspectives on ECEC, other ways of interpreting and learning, other than the market model of ECEC (Moss, 2009, 2008; Woodhead, 1997). Moss (2007) questions the rise
of a dominant discourse which places ECEC as a technical practice, a commodity for sale, with a language based around outcomes, school readiness, quality, development and economics. There is no normative framework of cultural values and practices across Europe, where there are diverse arrangements in child rearing and ECEC practices (Woodhead, 1997). Irish parents’ use of family or home based care, be it through economic or moral rationality, is the pre-dominant ECEC arrangement (Mc Ginnity et al, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; CSO 2007; OECD 2006; Duignan & Walsh 2004; Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998).

2.8 Conclusion
This brings to an end the review of relevant literature pertaining to perspectives in ECEC in Ireland, and reflecting how this has influenced ECEC funding policy. A discussion of this literature in relation to the findings of the present study will be presented in Chapter five.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction
The following chapter will give an overview of the research design and methods used for the study. Details of the research sample will be outlined with a description of procedures involved in the study including ethical considerations. Finally an overview of how the data was analysed will be given.

The overall aim of this study is to discover the extent to which ECEC policy and associated funding schemes in the Irish context address the needs of families.

The research questions will seek to discover:

- To what extent are the concepts of education and care equally prioritised in Irish ECEC policy?
- To what extent are centre-based and the home-based ECEC learning environments supported by policy?
- Is there sufficient choice available to parents in relation to their families’ ECEC arrangements?

3.2 Research Design

Denscombe (2010a, 2010b), Guthrie (2010) and Creswell (2009) all stress the fundamental importance of using a research design that is fit for the purpose of the research. Creswell (2010) suggests that the research design is the intersection or result of the selected research strategy, the research method or tool used; and very significantly the researcher’s philosophy. The researcher must be aware of their philosophy, as it can guide and frame the research through their underlying beliefs, assumptions and values (Denscombe, 2010a; Creswell, 2009; Foddy, 1993).

The research design that best fits the purpose of this exploratory study is a small scale qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as a research tool. Qualitative research, as opposed to the traditional positivist scientific epistemology associated with quantitative research (Denscombe, 2010a), is a relatively recent research approach (Creswell, 2010). Qualitative research lends itself to an exploratory insight into the experiences, understandings, behaviours, attitudes and values from the perspective of the research participants (Denscombe, 2010a, 2010b; Creswell, 2009; Foddy, 1993).
Referred to as post-positivist, interpretivism is central to how things are understood (Denscombe, 2010a). Bryman (2012) describes interpretivism as a body of knowledge that draws subjective meanings from social actions and interactions of humans within the social world, with individual perceptions being central to how the research is analysed (Bryman, 2012). Verbal data is gathered by asking semi-structured questions to convey the participant’s subjective perspective (Foddy, 1993) and these words are analysed, or interpreted to build a descriptive picture and depth of understanding to the study.

The strength of this methodological approach is the richness of detail which can be drawn from the participants’ personal reflections on ECEC programmes. By relying on the participant’s subjective perception, on their construction of whether childcare funding policy meets their family’s needs, we can gain a contextual understanding and depth to the study, what Guthrie refers to as subjective research (2010).

A critique of this research design is this interpretive subjectivity, which can influence and guide the researcher (Denscombe, 2010a; Creswell, 2009; Foddy, 1993) with the researcher’s ideas, values, assumptions and interpretations possibly shaping the investigation. However the concept of social constructionism outlined in the literature review is at the very core of this study so therefore having it underpin the methodological process through qualitative research design is crucial.

Although many authors in the area of research refer to research strategies or a theoretical approach to the enquiry such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology (Guthrie, 2010; Denscombe, 2010b; Creswell, 2009) this research design does not have an explicit theoretical lens. This being said however, the post-positivist phenomenological approach as an umbrella term for a research design lends itself to this enquiry due to its reliance on subjectivity, description and interpretation (Denscombe, 2010b).

3.3 Sample
In order to generate valid and reliable research, the researcher must attempt to produce an accurate sub-group of the research population (Guthrie, 2010). The importance of selecting a sample which although it may not be fully representative, must at least have the particular characteristics which are significant in the analysis of the wider issue (Denscombe, 2010a, 2010b). The criteria for the selection of the research sample is crucial in the reliability of any enquiry (Denscombe, 2010a).

The research population for this study are parents who avail of the various ECEC funding programmes in the Dublin area. Denscombe (2010a, 2010b) highlights the element of discretion and choice in a non-probability purposive sampling method. By accessing a research sample on the basis of their detailed knowledge of the topic; participants who are best placed to give quality relevant information allows for a more in-depth investigation (Denscombe, 2010a). Denscombe (2010b) stresses the importance of being pragmatic when approaching small scale studies due to resource issues, so therefore an exploratory; non-probability purposive sample was the most effective method of obtaining reliable and valid results for this qualitative enquiry.

Through the researcher’s work as a development officer in a Dublin based semi-state company with a remit to support childcare services, a cross-section of ECEC settings were approached to participate in the study. Centre-based childcare services providing ECEC funding programmes and home-based childcare services were approached by the researcher informing them of the background to the study (Appendix A, Appendix E). Letters containing information on the study were also sent requesting parents to participate in a semi-structured interview (Appendix B) to explore the research questions. Reflecting GUI data on the settings where ECEC primarily occurs, (GUI, 2011) and through the same exploratory, non-probability purposive sample an older-age group was contacted (Appendix C) with information on the background to the study and on the ECEC funding programmes (Appendix E) requesting some members of the group to participate in a focus group to further explore the research questions (Appendix D).

Profile of the research participants
A total of twelve individuals participated in the research, seven in the semi-structured one to one interview and five in the focus group. All of the research participants were women. Six of the participants were grandparents involved in the care of their grandchildren. One of the participants of the one to one interviews had a child with special needs who was participating in the ECCE programme. The social economic status of the women ranged across the spectrum, with the eligibility criteria of the parents of children participating in the CETS and CCS childcare programmes required them to be in receipt of certain welfare benefits to be eligible for the programme. The geographical location of the research was across South County Dublin, incorporating areas considered both advantaged and disadvantaged.

3.4 Research Instrument

Denscombe (2010b) claims the research instrument or tool used should enable the researcher to gather facts and evidence about the topic in order to get a clearer picture, with this information having the capacity to be reliable, measurable and transferable. In order to gather information for this enquiry, two research instruments were chosen. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were used for parents and a focus group for the grandparents; again with a semi-structured format. Denscombe (2010b) describes this method of data collection as useful for getting the participant’s opinions and feelings on the topic and lends itself to gaining privileged information. Creswell (2009) also stresses the advantage of semi-structured interviews in gaining rich, detailed information through the perspective of the interviewee with the semi-structured format offering the possibility to show comparisons between interview participants, something which Guthrie stresses as important when analysing the data (Guthrie, 2010).

Both Creswell (2009) and Denscombe (2010a, 2010b) suggest the researcher is also a key research instrument through their design, collection and interpretation of research data, with Denscombe (2010b) suggesting this can add to the thickness of description within the research. We have acknowledged the influence of constructionism in this explorative, interpretative study and how the values and assumptions and understandings of the researcher can impact on how the research develops (Guthrie,
Denscombe (2010b) refers to the interviewer effect where the identity of the researcher, their status and how they present themselves can influence the interviewee. He goes on to say that by being aware of this influence and by portraying a passive and neutral stance, by being non-judgemental and providing for a comfortable, sensitive and attentive atmosphere it is possible to ameliorate for this effect (Denscombe, 2010b).

An interview schedule (Appendix H) was developed, which in addition to the interview questions, also included a protocol for the interview which Creswell (2009) suggests can encourage standard interview procedures thus increasing reliability. The topics for discussion in the interviews attempted to address the overall research questions, while seeking to discover whether current ECEC arrangements and funding policies address the childcare needs of their family. The topics for discussion in the focus group (Appendix I) covered how involved grandparents were with the care arrangements of their grandchildren and how they were supported in this care. While there was a list of topics to be covered, the semi-structured format gave the opportunity of flexibility, to allow new areas to be explored. This is an issue which Denscombe (2010b) highlights as contributing significantly to discovering an in-depth insight into the privileged information which the research participants as key players in this research have to offer.

**Pilot Interviews**

Pilot interviews were held with two parents whose children attend ECEC funding programmes and with a grandparent, in order to discover how relevant and valid the interview questions were to the study, a task which is vital in ensuring the reliability of the research instrument (Denscombe 2010b; Guthrie, 2010 Creswell 2009). This piloting suggested that parents may not necessarily have a clear understanding of the funding programme which their child is participating in so a clear description of the funding programme was incorporated into the interview schedule (Appendix H).

A description of ECEC in Ireland was also incorporated into the agenda for the focus group with awareness that participants would not be familiar with current terminology specific to the sector. The term childcare suggested child protection for the focus group.
pilot interview, a reflection perhaps of the age profile of this cohort so this was addressed throughout the focus group by using the term childminding. So as to reflect personal experiences, thus producing more valid research, the questions were framed to suggest the context of the participants’ grandchildren, rather than a generic question on children.

3.5 Procedures

The objective of the procedures surrounding the research for this study was to ensure for increased quality of the methods of data collection, which Creswell (2009) claims can improve the reliability of the research. Procedures such as sampling, piloting, informed consent all add to the reliability of the method thus producing increased validity.

The environment of the interview and the context within which it takes place are all issues which can impact on the richness of the data collected (Denscombe, 2010a, 2010b; Guthrie, 2010; Creswell, 2009). Providing a comfortable, non-threatening, stress-free environment for the participant will provide a climate that will produce more descriptive, honest answers (Denscombe, 2010a). Denscombe (2010b) emphasises that skills such as sensitivity and attentiveness with an understanding of when best to prompt or probe, all contribute to a richer, more in-depth interview. Both Denscombe (2010b) and Creswell (2009) highlight the importance of the interview protocol, which outlines agenda and formalities of the interview (Appendix H, Appendix I) and can encourage standard interview formats thus encouraging more comparable data. The protocol also reiterates the commitment to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, thus readdressing the ethical considerations of the research before and after the interview process.

All interviews for this study were audio-recorded which interviewees were made aware of before agreeing to participate in the study. Alongside this, field notes or descriptive contextual notes on any non-verbal communication were made which Denscombe (2010b) and Creswell (2009) state can assist the researcher in interpreting data. The
interviews were fully transcribed, verbatim with annotations included such as non-verbal communications, pauses and other relevant observations (Appendix K).

3.6 Ethical Consideration

As in all research undertakings, there is an onus on the researcher to protect their research participants (Denscombe, 2010a, 2010b; Guthrie, 2010; Creswell, 2009). There is a need for all researchers to be aware of any ethical concerns in their research in order to ensure any concerns are addressed. The research for this study complied with the ethical guidelines for research as set out by the Dublin Institute for Technology (2013).

Creswell (2009) highlights the need for all participants in the research to be aware of the intent or purpose of the research, and how their contribution may be interpreted or used. Participants should be ensured of full confidentiality and anonymity throughout the course of the study and the researcher should have the full co-operation of the participants to take part in the study, who should at all times be aware of their right to withdraw at any stage. The issue of confidentiality and anonymity must also be addressed, with the participant being fully informed of the purpose of research and of their role within the study. Denscombe (2010a) suggests not only do these procedures protect the participant but they also lend strength to the integrity of the research.

Ethical considerations for this study were acknowledged through the informed consent form (Appendix G) which all research participants were required to read and acknowledge their understanding of its contents before signing. This involved them consenting that they understood the purpose of the research and that they would remain anonymous throughout the study. Moreover, participants were clearly informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. They were also given information on the study in the letters requesting them to participate (Appendix B, Appendix C, Appendix E). Throughout the research, participants remained anonymous, specific geographical locations were not mentioned, childcare services approached to
request parents to participate in the enquiry were not named and names used mentioned throughout the interviews were changed in the transcription process.

3.7 Data Analysis

Through listening and re-listening to the recorded interviews, reading and re-reading the transcriptions of the interviews and taking account of the tone of the conversations through the field notes, an analysis of the content of the interview can occur. Bryman (2012) describes frameworks or strategies for data analysis such as grounded theory and analytic induction which can guide the analysis of qualitative research. Data analysis for the present study was influenced and guided by these approaches. The main analytic approach adopted in the present study was a thematic analysis which is a common element in much qualitative data analysis. Bryman (2012) however critiques this data collection method as an underdeveloped procedure, claiming it is not an easily identifiable approach and lacks specific direction. Despite this, he does acknowledge it is a fast growing approach for data analysis in qualitative research.

Thematic analysis involves identifying themes or categories that relate to the research focus and that can contribute to the research study (Bryman, 2012). Bernard and Ryan (2010) mention that these themes are more easily identifiable through the physical handling of the transcribed data. The more repetition of a topic the more likely it is to become a theme. A pattern then begins to emerge. They go on the say the degree of strength of the themes may lead to naming of themes (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). Bryman (2012) describes how a framework of themes and sub themes can emerge through re-occurring topics within the text. He goes on to emphasis the repetition of a topic alone however does not warrant it being considered a theme. The researcher must reflect on the linkages between themes, on the tone of the conversation and often by reflecting on what was not said (Bryman, 2012). Drawing on these principles, the first level of coding involved a broad identification of the key themes emerging using a colour coding strategy on the computer. As themes began to emerge, relevant sections
from the data were colour coded and grouped or clustered to develop and support the relevant themes. A second level of coding identified sub-themes which were highlighted and grouped with the relevant data to illustrate and support these sub-themes. A final level of coding enabled the researcher to draw together the key themes and sub-themes coherently and to further develop the links and meanings emerging from these data.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has described how the research sample for this study was chosen. It has outlined and warranted the method of data collection used and highlighted how the use of protocols and procedures resulted in valid and reliable data collection. This chapter also discussed the ethical consideration for the study.

The next chapter will present the findings of the study.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction
This chapter presents the findings of the research study as they arose following the thematic analysis of the data. Five main themes were identified through the data analysis and this chapter will present these themes with the sub-themes which emerged. The five themes identified were:

- Benefits of ECEC policy.
- Challenges of ECEC policy.
- The reliance on family in supporting ECEC.
- The invisible family in ECEC policy.
- The invisible child in ECEC policy

4.2 Benefits of ECEC policy and funding programmes
The study found there are, unsurprisingly, clear benefits in ECEC funding policy for families, in particular for those families availing of subsidised childcare through the targeted CCS and CETS programmes. The financial benefits were of significance to all families, allowing them to avail of subsidised childcare thus lessening the impact of the overall finances of their household. It is evident the funding programmes presented families with opportunities to avail of training and up-skill in order to participate in employment. Families place a significant value on the social development of their children while participating in the ECEC programmes.
4.2.1 Financial Benefits

“Well it makes a big difference when you’re not handing out whatever…”

(Interviewee 6)

The financial benefits of ECEC funding policy are of fundamental importance to families. Given the current economic climate the financial assistance given to families to support them in their childcare costs is critical to families, thus ensuring alongside other running costs of families they “didn’t have to pay as much at the end of the month”.

High childcare costs are a prohibitive factor to families participating in employment and training due to “the likes of the private places are too expensive. However the targeted subvention offers to “help families have affordable childcare”, it enables families the financial assistance to have their child in an ECEC setting which otherwise they would not have afforded.

4.2.2 Opportunities

Findings from the study showed that ECEC funding programmes presented families with opportunities to train and work.

“It’s allowed me to set up my own company. It’s allowed me break away from the construction industry; focus on a different career path altogether…which was brilliant for me”

(Interviewee 2)

Increased possibilities are created for families of lower socio-economic status in particular to access childcare for their children thus allowing them to participate and contribute fully in the economy, “there wasn’t going to be a possibility for me to go back to college if I was to pay private childcare fees”.

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4 In order to keep within the word count recommendations for this work, details of the interviews participants are included in Appendix K.
4.2.3 **Social development**

“She’s absolutely, she’s blossomed, her interaction with adults, her play skills…everything has just …wow!…she just ready for school now, September here we go!!!”

(Interviewee 3)

Families value the developmental aspect of ECEC for their children. The gain in the social development of their children was of huge importance to them. “Mixing with other kids” was valued very highly by parents, with interactions with others outside of family seen as important “for building on their social skills” and for “bringing her out of herself”.

Ultimately, the overall benefit of ECEC funding for the parents regarding their children was the preparation it gave them for school. Parents place importance on “breaking them in gently” into the pre-school environment in order to prepare them for the transition to primary school and “building on their social skills” is seen as hugely significant for this process.

4.3 **Perceived shortcomings in current ECEC policy and funding programmes**

This research has found that parents were dissatisfied with many aspects of ECEC funding programmes. Overall, the administrative procedures governing the funding were found to be lacking in detailed information and restrictive with limited choice and availability for families. The overall affordability of childcare was a challenge to accessing and availing of ECEC.

4.3.1 **Accessibility and restrictiveness**

“A lot of the programmes finish in June and if like for me now starting up a new business it means now that I can’t get really stuck in until the kids go to school in September”

(Interviewee 2)

“Then in the summer like, I wouldn’t be able to get a job or anything coz I’ve no-where to put him”
The childcare available for the funding programmes tended to be aimed at term time arrangements which parents found did not fully address their childcare needs. Parents needed to fully participate and be available “to get back into the workforce”.

The CCS programme was found to be restrictive with thresholds for eligibility seen as a deterrent to accessing paid employment; “so their less inclined...their afraid to lose their subvention”. The limited availability of the CCS was also seen as a difficulty, with long waiting lists due to the programme being only available in community crèches in areas diagnosed as disadvantaged.

There was also a perception that there was limited availability of places leading to pressure to enrol them in services participating in the ECCE programme to “have your child down on a list” to increase their chances of enrolment in the programme.

4.3.2 Lack of information
An important finding to emerge from this study was the general lack of information or understanding of ECEC policy and funding. Information on the targeted CCS and CETS programmes in particular was found to be very limited for families.

“And also, I didn’t even know that it existed until I really went looking for it”

(Interviewee 1)

“But then it’s very hard to grasp what way it works. You know that sort of way”

(Interviewee 4)

Parents did not understand the overall educational aim of the ECCE programme and the obligation of services to provide an educational curriculum. “Alls I know is that you get one year free?That’s it.
“I was worried the scheme would have been scrapped, and then come the next year when I should have been getting my second part of my allocation I was worried I wouldn’t get the money so I took it all the first year”

(Interviewee 5)

This lack of information led to a perceived lack of trust in the government to continue to deliver the programme on an on-going basis and to keep families informed of their rights regarding the programmes.

**Researcher** – So it’s not well advertised?
“No I don’t think it is. And I think that maybe it’s purposely done that way...”

(Interviewee 2)

### 4.3.3 Choice

“No. Within, for me the only funding scheme that’s available to me within the crèche facility is the ECCE, because we wouldn’t qualify for any of the others”

(Interviewee 7)

“Because if I go back to work, then they can’t come to this setting. Em because of the times, you know, it’s not full day care. So no. there isn’t any choice”

(Interviewee 5)

Families found their childcare choices limited both as part of the funding programmes and in their choice in general. The lack of choice stemmed from the lack of information on and the eligibility requirements within the programmes with affordability being a huge impact on childcare choice.

With the targeted programmes, the limited availability of spaces in participating services impacted on families attempting to avail of childcare more suited to their needs, “maybe I would’ve went looking at something nearer...or on the way home or something like that...”. Eligibility bands also restricted access to subvention, thus
impacting on choice of services “so it meant then trying to look well, can we get her into an ECCE place”.

4.3.4 Affordability

As a result of the eligibility requirements and the tight restrictions of the funding programmes, the overall affordability of ECEC was perceived to be a difficulty across the board. Even with subvention, childcare costs were considered to be a disincentive to participating in training and employment.

“I think the likes of the private places are too expensive. It’s like having a second mortgage”.

(Interviewee 3)

“I wouldn’t have been able to afford to have had the twins going into care at that level, affordability. It wouldn’t have been worth my while to go back to work”

(Interviewee 5)

With income poverty very much an issue, parents found affordable childcare difficult to access thus being one of the major factors in the return to work after maternity.

4.4 The reliance of family in supporting ECEC

One of the major findings of this study was the importance of family in supporting childcare arrangements. Families rely heavily on other members of their family and extended family, primarily grandparents, to assist them in order for them to participate in employment. The findings very clearly demonstrated this reliance on family, although a constrained choice due to affordability of other childcare options, was one which best fit their desire for a loving care arrangement for their children. An important finding was that grandparents, whilst they wanted to support their family, felt there was
a sense of duty in this and these kinship ties could indicate a strain for this generation. This being said, the new generational bonds being developed through the close relationship with their grandchildren was something they cherished.

4.4.1 It’s not just about the cost

F4 – well all I know is that my daughter couldn’t go to work
F3 – no, well neither, my daughter couldn’t go to work neither
F5 – well childcare is so expensive, isn’t it?
F2 – God yeah
F3 – it’s too expensive

(Focus Group discussion, Grandparents)

“Well my parents have looked after all three of my children while myself and my husband have worked...They wanted to do it wholeheartedly, and financial reasons as well. I wouldn’t have been able to afford a crèche”

(Interviewee 6)

The high cost of childcare has led to a need for grandparents in particular to assist families with their childcare arrangements. However, affordability is not the only reason for these choices being made. The “getting the one-to-one attention there with my Mam and Dad” and “the endless patience my Dad has with him” were sentiments that parents expressed as ultimately important when referring to the care arrangements provided by family. This belief that “I just know she was really being looked after” and “getting plenty of love” was something which they felt could not be replicated in a crèche or more formal ECCE arrangement.

4.4.2 Our duty to care?

“Yes, Yeah. Well if I wasn’t childminding for her, she’d have to give up work. And then they would probably lose their house”

(Interviewee 3)

There was a sense from grandparents providing childcare that they needed to do this in order to support their children financially. They viewed their role in the childcare of their grandchildren as a duty in terms of “help” for their children with a sense of “what else could you do?”
“Researcher: so following on then, do you feel important? 
F3 – Em...not important.
F4 – You see we are appreciated, you know what I mean
F2 – You see the kids love you, you have more of an input into their lives...”

(Focus Group discussion, Grandparents)

There is reluctance from grandparents to see the significance of the contribution they make to their family. The contribution they make to their family is a labour of love for their children and grandchildren. Some of them got the “odd few bob” for their childcare work but the consensus was “ye kind of don’t expect anything”.

The finding showed however that “it shouldn’t be taken as a given”, they didn’t want a “presumptuous” arrangement on the part of their children. They acknowledge that “It should be your time. You know” and that they have already done their child rearing with their own children, “Been there done that. Bought the t-shirt”.

4.4.3 New generational bonds

Findings from the study showed that there are increasing cross generational bonds due to the consistent and regular contact children are having with their grandparents while their parents are working. Parents value these new bonds between their parents and their children “…he learns a lot from Dad I think… which is lovely”.

F3 – well its little things that they say, well my granddaughter would say to ye “nana I love you” and it kinda....
F5 – yeah it’s the same...
F3 – and your heart would...
F2 – and lovely little notes you know...

(Focus Group discussion, Grandparents)

Grandparents to a great extent value the relationships which develop through the increased contact with their grandchildren. They acknowledge how this had changed for them, from “I never knew my granny” to the relationship they now have with their grandchildren which is a very comfortable relaxed relationship, “they become part of you”, “they’re not shy or anything”.
4.5 The invisible family in ECEC policy

This study found that despite the fact that ECEC policy was there to support family childcare arrangements, families were invisible within the policy. A very significant finding was parents did not have a clear understanding of the concept ECEC. This impacts on how they value it for their children. Parents have a clear understanding on what they want in terms of their children’s wellbeing, however there is a perception this is not supported through government ECEC policy. They are the primary carers for children and this role needs to be acknowledged through concrete and substantive parental involvement in ECEC arrangements.

4.5.1 Parents lack of understanding of ECEC

*I don’t know what it is particularly, I would probably assume that they were talking about… but in terms of an umbrella statement I don’t really know what it means, what that is, it’s a very vague term.*

(Interviewee 7)

*“Em. (pause) I suppose it’s probably just. I don’t know how to word it. (pause) it’s probably the standard. That they want to. You know…I’m not actually sure. I kind of like. Or is it just….”*

(Interviewee 1)

A significant finding was parents did not have a clear understanding of ECEC when they were asked. This overall lack of understanding led to a confusion on whether it was solely pre-school education for the transition to primary school or “just a minding service” with little understanding of legislation and policy. This finding shows that this lack of understanding will have a huge impact on parents’ expectations of ECEC. When there are no clear expectations of ECEC and with parents not “aware that there was meant to be a specific educational, em things to be done” then parents will be unable to value and therefore support their Childs’ ECEC.

4.5.2 Parents want and know what’s best for their Children
Despite the fact that parents didn’t have a clear understanding of the concept of ECEC, they had a distinct and exclusive awareness and understanding of their own child’s needs and what best suits them in their development.

“Like I had Mark in Montessori and I think that was great for him. But I wouldn’t think it would be a great idea for Claire because. She’s. She’s very social. And she’s. She expresses herself that way”

(Interviewee 2)

“…and the health and safety. I didn’t feel. It felt very clinical. It just wasn’t. Homely. It just wasn’t”

(Interviewee 5)

Parents “just want them to be happy” regarding their children’s wellbeing. They want a care arrangement which will primarily provide for this but also support their child’s learning and social development “to, em, to appreciate differences among other children”. Parents want learning through play, “There has to be play, mixing, being able to socialise”.

4.5.3 Parental involvement is fundamental for ECEC

This study found that parental involvement underpins the care arrangement and ultimately will guide how successful ECEC will be in terms of outcomes for the child.

“I’m only there in the evenings, em so whomever you employ then to look after them you would hope they have the same principles and beliefs, you know, that you might have, you know but I suppose every mother feels, their, her role is imperative, you know”

(Interviewee 7)

“Maybe if the sheets…we never get to see them…but even just once a month? I suppose you just worry in a way. That if there was a major problem, that they weren’t, that they, I’m not sure what the rules are, that they have to tell you or not?”

(Interviewee 1)
Parents need to feel involved and welcome to contribute to all aspects of their children’s development, even when they are not present. There is a sense of exclusion from ECEC arrangements with parents detailing current levels of parental involvement practices as “you were never asked or never…you were just given sheets”.

Parents were very sure in their role as the primary educators of their children, “We are the teachers”. They understand the critical role they play in their child’s learning and development and the importance of how they can support this in the home learning environment. They understand the importance of how they can “continue on that at home” regarding “like the Siolta that they do here now” and how this needs to be supported in a real and meaningful way.

The study found that involvement should be at all levels, from basic interaction with service providers to “keep me linked in with their day” to more substantive involvement at policy level.

“They need to sit down with people who have their children in childcare, to see how they feel and what do they think”

(Interviewee 6)

4.6 Invisible Child in ECEC policy

A key finding in the present study was that overall the parents had a perception that ECEC funding policy was not about their children. Parents found the emphasis of ECEC to be on targets unrelated to their child’s wellbeing with a government priority of educating children for school rather than on the caring practices which parents value.

4.6.1 ECEC: Target driven, technical practice

“All the levels they have to do, the childcare workers. The paperwork. Everything. They don’t do the hands on that they do. It’s all more paperwork and filling out forms”

(Interviewee 4)

“Get them in, get the three hours done, then at least we can say that we’ve given everybody three hours of free childcare”
Parents feel the emphasis on meeting standards and requirements set out in ECEC policies impacted on the level of care their children received. The saw the resulting care as “clinical” with standards set by government officials “on what they think...on what they feel”. As a consequence, practices were seen as “all money related”.

Parents saw ECEC purely as “investing in the children, before school age” with the overall agenda “to supply an education for a child”. Education was seen as prioritised in ECEC with parents feeling ECEC was “all about the giving them that start”, “all about the education and the system...” This is not seen as a high priority for parents in relation to their children, “they’re only babies, and I think to be pushing them in there, into that classroom”. They saw this emphasis on education as “putting too much pressure on them”

4.6.2 They just don’t care!

“I haven’t heard anything about love and security you know, from them...from the government on the telly”

(Interviewee 6)

“To care for him instead of educating, you know that way? That he’ll be loved. And looked after. And cared for. Or minded by them”

(Interviewee 4)

Parents sincerely value the place of caring and trust and love in ECEC and are acutely aware of how critical this is in their childs’ development, that “they are moulded by the people around them”. Yet they do not see this supported in policy. There is a palpable sense that this critical element of ECEC is absent in ECEC policy with the government seeing this “not their responsibility”, “they don’t care about the caring”.

4.6.3 It doesn’t seem to be about the child really...
“I was very, very surprised that the private crèches don’t need Garda vetting, don’t need child protection training, don’t need qualifications...that baffles me”

(Interviewee 3)

The findings of this study showed that overall, parents felt children were not central in ECEC funding policy. They highlighted this lack of child centeredness through what they see as lack of priority in quality standards for their children, “I would have assumed that all carers would have had a basic minimum qualification?”

“And it’s all very...I don’t know...I think they’re more...it doesn’t seem to be about the child really...they just”

(Interviewee 1)

Grandparents also expressed their concerns at the “highfalutin notions” ECEC policy appeared to have regarding children and families, “the child is part of the family...and that’s that!”

“Because of Nicola not being ready to start school, I needed the extra year. Coz she had Downs Syndrome”

(Interviewee 5)

The findings also showed parents felt the funding programmes, in particular the targeted ones, were not directly centred on their children’s ECEC needs. They felt that their family income, “it depends on the Da...the income” influenced their child’s participation in ECEC, “...my medical card is out next year so I’ll be gone”.

4.7 Conclusion

This draws a conclusion to the main findings of this study. These finding will be discussed greater detail in the next chapter, considering the research questions and current literature.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction
This chapter will discuss the main themes that emerged as a result of the findings of the research whilst addressing the overall research questions highlighted in the methodology chapter. The main themes to be considered are the reliance on family in supporting ECEC, the invisible family in ECEC, the invisible child in ECEC and finally the perceived shortcomings of ECEC policy and funding programmes. These themes will be discussed with reference to relevant national and international research on ECEC which offers support to the findings of this study.

5.2 The reliance on family in supporting ECEC
One of the major findings of this study was the importance of extended family, in particular grandparents, in supporting childcare arrangements. This is also seen in the most recent research on childcare choice in Ireland (McGinnity et al, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; Share & Kerrins, 2009).

The high cost of childcare can be driving factor in influencing childcare choice, (McGinnity et al, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011). However, this present study found that affordability was not the only factor influencing the choice to have grandparents caring for children. The type of caring valued by parents, the need for a caring arrangement where children received “plenty of love”, rather than that of economics ultimately influenced ECEC choice, a finding also identified by McGinnity et al (2013) and Sylva et al (2007). Sylva et al (2007) discuss how the contextual
influences of the family impacts hugely on their values and attitudes to child rearing influencing their childcare preference. Yet, despite the demonstrated need and value placed on grandparents as ECEC providers, ECEC outside of centre-based settings continue to be unsupported and excluded from Government ECEC policy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The present study has shown, and is supported by others (Moss, 2009, 1998; Woodhead, 1997) that there must be a readiness from Government to acknowledge that there are indeed diverse childrearing practices in Ireland. These diverse practices should be supported through ECEC funding policy in order to ensure that the Scandinavian childcare model which is being lauded as the way forward (Burton, 2013; Start Strong, 2013) is not a rationality mistake on behalf of Government. This research undoubtedly shows families want and value family care for their young children. The choice for families in accessing childcare which they value is very limited if not non-existent.

Another very significant finding identified in this research and one which has been highlighted as needing further research (Share & Kerrins, 2009) was the grandparents’ perspective of their role in supporting their family’s childcare. The present study found that grandparents had a sense of duty in providing this care for their family, and their choice in providing the care or “help” as they saw it was constrained due to the financial implications for their family if they did not. An important aspect of this finding was the impact of providing childcare on their own work-life balance. This present study found that grandparents had reached a stage in their lives where they wanted to proceed with their retirement and resulting lifestyle. However childcare duties for their grandchildren impacted on this, leaving them “snookered”. Findings further highlighted how grandparents did not want a “presumptuous” arrangement; they did not want an obligatory arrangement to support their family’s childcare. This issue on the impetus to providing childcare has been identified by others as also needing further research (Glaser et al, 2013; Share & Kerrins, 2009).

Conversely, the research found that this sense of duty or obligation in providing childcare for their family was not to be seen as a burden. The love labour and caring duties were provided through a process of reciprocity and mutuality.
benefitted a lot from caring for their grandchildren and parents valued the care which grandparents give (Glaser et al, 2013). The study found that grandparents cherished the time spent with their grandchildren and the resulting development of intergenerational bonds which they had not experienced with their own grandparents. Share & Kerrins (2009) highlight this positive impact childcare has on the mental well-being of grandparents.

5.3 The invisible family in ECEC policy

A critical finding of this present research was despite the fact that ECEC existed to support the family, families were in effect invisible within the policy. Notwithstanding the constitutional stance on the fundamental importance of the family (Government of Ireland, 1937) the comprehensive significance of the family within ECEC funding policy was practically non-existent.

This study found parents had a limited and vague understanding of the concept of ECEC. The review of literature in this research has stressed the importance of the value and impact of parents and the home-learning environment in motivating and influencing children’s developmental and learning outcomes (Newland et al, 2011; Melhuish et al, 2008; Roberts et al, 2005; Sylva et al, 2004). This research has discussed the crucial role of the values and attitudes of those who interact with the developing child in their different settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Woodhead’s (2006) social and cultural perspective of ECEC highlights the significant impact of contextual influences on the child (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Canella, 2002). However, findings from this study clearly point to the fact that parents have no distinct grasp of what quality ECEC is. They have no understanding of ECEC policy and legislation and as a result have no expectation of what is required from ECEC services. With no understanding or expectation of ECEC policy, parents ultimately cannot value the importance of ECEC thus impacting on their attitude, interactions and motivation. This is crucial in providing a responsive and supportive home-learning environment.

Another finding which emerged supporting the concept of the invisible family is that despite the fundamental premise of the family being the primary educators (Government
of Ireland, 1937) and that they have an intimate knowledge of their own children and understand the individual nature and resulting needs of their children, this is not reflected in ECEC practice. Parents were seen to value the social development of their child, they value play, they value love and hugs and to “appreciate differences among other children”. Yet the political and economic perspective which shapes Irish ECEC funding policy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013d; Start Strong, 2011), in contrast to valuing individual differences, is underpinned by the developmental perspective (Woodhead, 2006). This perspective sees childhood as universal and emphasises the scientific linear development of children (Woodhead, 1997, 2006; Brannen & Moss, 2003; Canella, 2002). This perspective does not account for difference. It does not account for parents wanting children “to be happy”.

The literature review highlighted the important role of the link between parents and the child’s ECEC arrangement (Hayes et al, 2013; OECD, 2012; Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Share et al, 2011). However the present study found that although parents identify this as important in ECEC, that they “are the teachers”, they perceived they were excluded from the process. This work has underlined the crucial impact of the contextual influences of the environment in shaping the child’s future outcomes (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Canella, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This social and cultural perspective (Woodhead, 2006), claimed to underpin Irish ECEC policy (Aistear, 2009; Siolta, 2006; Department of Health and Children, 2006; Government of Ireland, 2000) is not evident in practice.

The minimum legislative and regulatory extent of requirement regarding parental involvement in ECEC services amounts to services only needing to have written parental involvement policies (Department of Health and Children, 2006). No further engagement or involvement is required. Recent Irish research (Hayes et al, 2013; Share et al, 2011) and international research (Schweinhart, 2009) has shown having parents heavily involved in their child’s ECEC, in learning about their development and further supporting this at home leads to much better outcomes for children. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses the need to concentrate on the interconnections and processes between settings, in establishing solid connections. Parental involvement needs to be a true and
meaningful connection with tangible and substantive measures in place to ensure this happens. The parent’s role in ECEC as the primary educators of their children is not evident in this present study. Families are invisible within Irish ECEC funding policy.

5.4 The invisible child in ECEC policy
The findings of the present study point to the fact that the child’s status in ECEC funding policy is not that of an equal and active participant in society. Parents’ experience of ECEC was that their child was not central at all in the ECEC process with the overall emphasis of policy being unrelated to their child’s wellbeing. This is despite that fact that ECEC policy in Ireland was developed out of an obligation to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). This Convention aimed to enhance the status of children as equal and active participants in society as were other policy documents which were developed to promote and support quality services for children in Ireland (Aistear, 2009; Siolta, 2006; Department of Health and Children, 2006; The National Children’s Strategy, 2000)

Findings from the present study demonstrated that priority was given to the target driven practices such as meeting government imposed standards which parents found “clinical”. Parents had a clear perception that the educational element of ECEC was given a much higher priority than the caring practices which they place a higher value on. Moreover, school readiness was prioritised within these policies according to the views of the parents. The overall agenda parents felt was to get children ready for school. Moss (2007) strongly criticises this discourse in ECEC which focuses on school readiness, development and outcomes. This emphasis on the future child is highlighted in Woodhead’s (2006) political and economic perspective of childhood where the focus is on the child’s future potential in the economy (Moss, 2007; Woodhead, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Williams, 2004). However, ECEC policy is underpinned by the link with the economy and education (O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Hayes, 2010; OECD, 2006). The split system of childcare provision with more emphasis and investment given to education is evident in policy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Bradley, 2011; O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2011; Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Moss, 2008) and this study found that this is experienced by parents in ECEC practice.
Parents, however, according to the present study do not value this precedence given to education. They value the caring elements of the ECEC practice which they see as not at all supported in ECEC policy. This is illustrated in current literature, with caring seen only as a commodity to be purchased (Hayes, 2010; O’Donoghue & Hayes, 2009; Moss, 2008). There is no regulatory requirement for those services providing childcare outside of the ECCE programme to have minimum qualifications (Department of Health and Children, 2006). Astonishingly, those services that provide the ECCE funding programme require staff to have higher training qualifications than for those caring for younger children not yet in their pre-school year and those providing the CETS and CCS funding programmes (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Department of Health and Children, 2006). This notion of care as a soft skill (Hayes, 2007) being linked to welfare and to targeted programmes for the disadvantaged and the developmental framework underpinning ECEC (Hayes, 2010, 2007; Moss et al, 2000) is current practice in Ireland’s ECEC funding policy. According to participants in the present study, the overwhelming perception of the Government is that “they don’t care about the caring”.

Despite a growing perspective within ECEC on children’s rights, this emphasis on the child is not evident in Irish ECEC policy with this study finding ECEC funding policy “doesn’t seem to be about the child really”. The research found parents were surprised at the lack of requirement for training and standards, an issue also highlighted by the Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA, 2013). Another concern is the policy of CETS and CCS funding criteria being based on the welfare status of the parents rather than on the needs of the child (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013b; 2013c). Children with additional needs outside of those considered to be universal or normal were not seen to be addressed in ECEC funding policy, which is identified by Cannella (2002) as a flaw in this developmental perspective of ECEC. The notion of children being active participants in social life as championed in The National Children’s Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) is unfortunately not seen in practice, with the Irish stance on ECEC evidently strong in policy and weak in implementation (Bradley, 2011). The human rights perspective referred to by Woodhead (2006) in ECEC policy
in not reflected in the practical experiences of families, a finding which supports Kierseys’ (2009) notion of policy being purely rhetoric.

5.5 Perceived shortcomings of ECEC policy and funding programmes

Findings from the study showed there were undoubtedly benefits in ECEC funding policy. The financial assistance to families, giving opportunities to avail of training thus further increasing their chances of employment were undeniably a great benefit to increasing family outcomes. Moreover, the social development of children through participating in ECEC is valued highly by parents. However, a number of shortcomings in the ECEC funding policy were identified. These shortcomings impacted on family perceptions of ECEC funding programmes.

The shortcomings in the funding programmes were fundamentally linked to the major findings of this present study already discussed, that of the invisible family and the invisible child within ECEC funding policy. The accessibility and restrictiveness of the eligibility criteria left families limited with the choices available to them and subject to the technical target driven ECEC practices referred to by Moss (2007) with a higher priority placed on education rather than care. The study found parents were reluctant or unable to access employment when participating in the targeted CETS and CCS programmes where eligibility was based solely on their welfare status, an indictment again of the invisible child within ECEC policy (Bradley, 2011; O’Donoghue and Hayes, 2011).

Lack of information and understanding of ECEC policy and funding was also emphasised as a shortcoming in funding programmes. This lack of information and understanding impacts significantly on the role parents play in their child’s ECEC arrangements and ultimately supporting and scaffolding children’s learning and development (Hayes et al, 2013; Share et al, 2011; Schweinhart, 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The lack of information which was perceived as “maybe it’s purposely done that way” has resulted in there being a lack of trust in the government to deliver ECEC for children, with the wellbeing of children not seen as central to the process.
The language used within policy highlighted by Kiersey (2009) and the ideology of government highlighted by Bradley (2011) has resulted in ECEC funding policy excluding those who it aims to target, the family and the child.

5.6 Reflection on the present study process and conclusion

This study was carried out at a very critical time in Irish ECEC history following an investigative documentary on national television exposing what allegedly appeared to be mistreatment of young children in day care services (Primetime, 2013). This unquestionably had a bearing on perceptions of ECEC in the interviews following the aftermath of the programme. That being said however, it cannot be seen as a limitation of the study, but rather a consideration within the context of the study findings and was seen to very much compound parent’s already uncertain and uneasy relationship with ECEC arrangements.

The study has provided a valuable opportunity to hear from the silent partners in ECEC, the families and in particular the grandparents. Their insight into the needs of children and childcare allowed the researcher appreciate just who ECEC is designed for, the children and their families. The research proved to be a very enjoyable experience, with the input from the families giving a deeper understanding of the experiences of the end users of ECEC services.

This brings the discussion of the findings of this study to a conclusion. The overall conclusions and subsequent recommendations will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to discover the extent to which ECEC policy and associated funding schemes in the Irish context address the needs of families. The questions which it sought to address were:

- To what extent are the concepts of education and care equally prioritised in Irish ECEC policy?
- To what extent are centre-based and the home-based ECEC learning environments supported by policy?
- Is there sufficient choice available to parents in relation to their families’ ECEC arrangements?

This chapter will present the conclusion of this study with reference to these questions and to the main findings of the study. It will then suggest recommendations to support and address the topics which arose as a result of the findings.

6.2 Conclusion

One of the questions this research aimed to focus on was the prioritisation of education and care within Irish ECEC funding policy. The present study found that parents were in no doubt that education was given a higher priority than care. Policy appears to be centred on the technical practices within services, with a target driven priority to have children ready for primary school. There is a general sense that care is not a significant
feature in ECEC with the parents preference for caring practices not recognised in funding policy. Parents do not value the priority given to education and to what they consider a drive to prepare their children for school. This emphasis on the future child, on their future potential as educated workers is central to the political economic perspective of ECEC. Parents found their children not at all central in this ECEC process leaving their children were invisible within policy. This lack of recognising family preference for caring practices and prioritising educational practice within ECEC compounds the invisible family which this research also found to be a feature in ECEC funding policy.

The second research question to be addressed was to what extent are centre-based and home-based ECEC learning environments supported by policy. According to the views of six out of the seven parents and all of the grandparents interviewed in the present study, parents’ inclination for home-based childcare, in particular family-based childcare arrangements was ultimately disregarded in ECEC policy. Given that home-based ECEC arrangements are the main preference for families (McGinnity et al, 2013; Growing up in Ireland, 2011; Share & Kerrins, 2009) they are *de facto* excluded from participating in ECEC funding schemes (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The significance of the contextual influences on a child’s development, the social and cultural perspective referred to throughout this work (Woodhead, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and purported to underpin Irish ECEC policy (Aistear, 2009; Siolta, 2006; Department of Health and Children, 2006; Government of Ireland, 2000) is not reflected in ECEC funding policy practice. This present study found parents were excluded from the ECEC process. Parents’ engagement with their children’s learning amounted to written parental involvement policies, again reinforcing the notion of the ‘invisible family’ within policy.

Finally, the research sought to discover if there was sufficient choice available to parents in relation to their families’ ECEC arrangements. Overall, parents found they were not effectively supported in their childcare choice. A significant finding of the present study was the huge role extended family; in particular grandparents play in supporting ECEC. Grandparents are the main preference for these families in
supporting their childcare needs. As outlined and discussed in previous chapters, this type of ECEC arrangement is excluded from ECEC funding policy. The diversity of childcare arrangements which exist in practice are not supported in the political and economic perspective which shapes and underpins Irish ECEC funding policy.

This study found grandparents to be a crucial element of providing quality ECEC. Their economic value to their family was a fundamental factor in influencing this type of childcare arrangement. The impetus from the grandparents in providing the care is an area needing further research. The somewhat obligatory nature of the work conversely also provided grandparents with a cherished role in their grandchildren’s lives. This process of reciprocity and the role of kinship are deeply rooted in Irish culture and practised on a daily basis through these informal childcare arrangements. These arrangements are not at all recognised in Irish ECEC funding policy. The home-based setting which is the prevalent childcare arrangement in Ireland is not supported in government ECEC policy.

This study found families and children to be invisible within ECEC funding policy. The overall requirements and eligibility criteria for the targeted CETS and CCS programmes were based on parents’ welfare status and the universal ECCE programme was related to the child’s date of birth (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). None of these requirements reflect individual needs, cultures, values or choice regarding childrearing practices. ECEC funding practice in Ireland exposes the ideology of the policy makers (Bradley, 2011), that of the political economic perspective of ECEC. The social cultural perspective which is claimed as underpinning ECEC policy, or the children’s rights perspective which it aspires to have are lacking in ECEC practice.

6.3 Recommendations

The home-learning environment needs to be further supported:
• Parents were found to have an unclear understanding of the value of ECEC for their child’s development. Alongside eligibility requirements and details of the application process for ECEC programme, parents need to have information on the benefits of ECEC for their children and how this must be supported at home. The findings of this study suggest an information pack on the importance supporting early childhood development should be developed for parents of children in their early years that are eligible for ECEC programmes. This pack should detail regulatory and legislative requirements for services providing the ECEC funding programmes.

• Parental involvement needs to be more substantive than currently required in pre-school legislation. It is recommended more formal parent committees be established at pre-school level, mirroring the practice that has occurred at primary and secondary school level where parents have true involvement in the policy surrounding their children’s learning.

• At a local level, parents need to be invited to participate more actively with their children’s ECEC setting. It is recommended information on the child’s learning and activities, with key developmental practices to scaffold children’s learning in the home be developed on a more formal and standardised basis.

The role of extended family, in particular the role of grandparents, needs to be further acknowledged:

• Grandparents are providing substantial economic support to families by providing childcare duties. This economic support needs to be acknowledged at policy level embodying the reciprocal nature of the work. It is recommended an advisory committee be established at national policy level to examine the possibility of grandparents who are providing childcare duties being able to avail of additional medical, pension or other social welfare benefits to compensate for their contribution to childcare.
The forthcoming National Children’s Strategy needs to acknowledge and address the diversity of ECEC practice and endorse the central role families and children have within the process:

- This study found according to the views of parents; families and children were invisible within the ECEC funding policy. It is recommended that the central role of children and families and the diversity of needs and values they have regarding childcare be addressed and supported in the forthcoming National Children’s Strategy.

It is recommended the following research be carried out to further support and address the findings of this study:

- The role of parents and the links with the child’s ECEC setting are crucial in supporting the child learning and development. It is recommended further research be done on parents’ engagement with the ECEC process. This will assist in assessing the level of information and support required to develop a framework for parental involvement.

- Grandparents are a prevalent source of childcare in Ireland. It is recommended more research be carried out on the role of grandparents in childcare to establish the impact of this on the child’s learning and development. This could be achieved through secondary analysis on the already established Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study.

- Regarding grandparents, this research found the impetus in providing such childcare duties to be somewhat obligatory despite there being huge benefits to them. Further research on the subject of the impetus of grandparents in providing childcare, and how this can affect their health and wellbeing should also be undertaken.
REFERENCES


Daly, M. and Clavero, S. (2002). *Contemporary family policy in Ireland and Europe.* Belfast: School of Sociology and Social Policy, Queen’s University


Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013b) *Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme.* [online]


**APPENDIX A**

**Letter to Services**

Dear

**Re: Study on Childcare funding programmes (ECCE Programme)**

Following our recent phone call, please find enclosed letters for parents within your service regarding information and participation in the study I am completing as a part of a Masters in Child Family and Community Studies. I would be grateful if you could distribute these to parents availing of the relevant funding schemes.

This research aims to examine whether the Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes such as the ECCE, CCS and CETS meets the needs of families. As you are aware, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme offers 15 hours of free pre-school education to all children in the year before they attend national school. In particular, the study will focus on the parents’ feelings about the scheme with regard to whether it benefits the early childhood care and education needs for them and their family.
I would like to thank you sincerely for assisting me doing this research by distributing the information on the study to the parents within your service. I will stress again that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and my college examiner.

Should you have any further questions on this study please don’t hesitate to contact me at xxx.

Once again, many thanks for facilitating my research.

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, MA Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT.

Dear

Re: Study on Childcare funding programmes (CCS Programme)

Following our recent phone call, please find enclosed letters for parents within your service regarding information and participation in the study I am completing as a part of a Masters in Child Family and Community Studies. I would be grateful if you could distribute these to parents of pre-school children availing of the CCS programme.

This research aims to examine whether the Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes such as the ECCE, CCS and CETS meets the needs of families. As you are aware, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme is a support programme available in community based childcare services to parents in receipt of certain social welfare payments, Family Income Supplement and holders of medical cards to avail of a reduction in their childcare costs. In particular, the study will focus on the parents’ feelings about the scheme, and whether it benefits the early childhood care and education needs for them and their family.
I would like to thank you sincerely for assisting me doing this research by distributing the information on the study to the parents within your service. I will stress again that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and my college examiner.

Should you have any further questions on this study please don’t hesitate to contact me at xxx.

Once again, many thanks for facilitating my research.

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, MA Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT.

APPENDIX B

Letter to Parents

Dear Parent,

Is your child in the CETS programme?

My name is Tracey Nelson and I am a post graduate student with Dublin Institute of Education where I am doing a Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies. I am currently doing a research study, under the supervision of Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny. The purpose of the study is to examine whether the Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes such as the ECCE, CCS and CETS meets the needs of families. In particular, the study will focus on parents’ feelings about the scheme, and whether it benefits the early childhood care and education needs of your family

As you are aware, Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) Programme is subsidised childcare for eligible parents attending various approved VEC or FÁS courses. I am looking for parents availing of this programme to take part in this study. It will involve a one-to-one interview with me to get your perspective on the Government’s policy on childcare funding.
The interview will be approximately 30 minutes long and can be arranged at a time and place to suit you.

I would like stress to that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and college examiner.

I would appreciate your assistance and support in doing this study. Should you have any further questions, or wish to participate in this study, please don’t hesitate to contact me at XXX

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, MA Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT.

Dear Parent,

Is your child in a home-based childcare service?

My name is Tracey Nelson and I am a post graduate student with Dublin Institute of Education where I am doing a Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies. I am currently doing a research study, under the supervision of Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny. The purpose of the study is to examine whether the Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes such as the ECCE, CCS and CETS meets the needs of families. In particular, the study will focus on parents’ feelings about the programmes, and whether they benefit the early childhood care and education needs of your family.

As you may be aware, the only childcare programme available to all children is the ECCE programme, which offers 15 hours of free pre-school education to all children in the year before they attend national school. This programme is not open to home-based childcare services. I am looking for parents who currently avail of home-based childcare. It will involve a one-to-one interview with me to get your perspective on the Government’s policy on
childcare funding. The interview will be approximately 30 minutes long and can be arranged at a time and place to suit you.

I would like to stress that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and college examiner.

I would appreciate your assistance and support in doing this study. Should you have any further questions, or wish to participate in this study, please don’t hesitate to contact me at XXX

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, MA Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT.

APPENDIX C

Letter to Grandparent Group

Dear

Re: Study on Childcare funding programmes

Following our recent phone call, please find enclosed letters for the grandparents in your group regarding information and participation in the study I am completing as a part of a Masters in Child Family and Community Studies. I would be grateful if you could distribute these to the grandparents who childmind their grandchildren.

This research aims to examine whether the Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes meets the needs of families. In particular, the study will focus on the fact that recent research has shown that grandparents are often providing the childcare while parents are working or in training.
I would like to thank you sincerely for assisting me doing this research by distributing the information on the study to your group. I will stress again that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and college examiner.

Should you have any further questions on this study please don’t hesitate to contact me XXX

Once again, many thanks for facilitating my research.

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, DIT

APPENDIX D
Letter to Grandparents

Dear Grandparent,

Do you mind your grandchildren?

My name is Tracey Nelson and I am a post graduate student with Dublin Institute of Education where I am doing a Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies. I am currently doing a research study, under the supervision of Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny. The purpose of the study is to examine whether Irish Early Childhood Education and Care funding programmes meet the needs of families. In particular, the study will focus on the fact that recent research has shown that grandparents are often providing the childcare while parents are working or in training.
I am looking for a group of up to 6 grandparents who mind their grandchildren either occasionally or on a more regular basis to take part in this study. It will involve taking part in a focus group interview with 5 other Grandparents to get your views on how the Government funds childcare. The focus group interview can be arranged at a time and place to suit you.

I would like stress to that all information gathered will be totally confidential and anonymous. The data will be used only for the purposes of this study, and will be seen only by myself, my supervisor and college examiner.

I would appreciate your assistance and support in doing this study. Should you have any further questions, or wish to participate in this study, please don’t hesitate to contact me at XXX.

Kind Regards,

Tracey Nelson
Post Graduate Student, MA Child, Family and Community Studies, DIT.

APPENDIX E
Information on the research
This study aims to examine whether childcare funding programmes meets the need of families. It will try to discover is there sufficient choice available to parents for their childcare arrangements. It will try to discover to what extent is the home and family supported in early childcare and education government policy. It also hopes to examine to what extent are childcare and early education equally prioritised in government policy.

ECCE Programme: The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme offers 15 hours of free pre-school (playschool) education to all children in the year before they attend national school (from about 3½ years old). This scheme is available in almost all crèches and playschools. It is not available where people mind children in their own homes (childminders, family members).

CCS Programme: The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme is a support programme available in community based childcare services to parents in receipt of certain social welfare payments, Family Income Supplement and holders of medical cards to avail of childcare at a reduced rate.
This programme is only available in certain community crèches and playschool in areas which are designated as disadvantaged. It is not available where people mind children in their own homes (childminders, family members).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher’s Name:</th>
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<tr>
<td>TRACEY NELSON</td>
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**CETS Programme:** The Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) Programme is subsidised childcare for eligible parents attending various approved VEC or FÁS courses.

This programme is only available in crèches who apply to take part in the programme. There are only a limited number of places funded and it is on a first come first served basis. It is not available where people mind children in their own homes (childminders, family members).

**APPENDIX G**

Consent Form
Title of Study:
An investigation into the extent which current Irish Government early childhood care and education funding programmes and policies are addressing the childcare needs of families

To be completed by the interviewee:
1. Have you been fully informed / read the information sheet about this study?  
   YES/NO
2. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?  
   YES/NO
3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?  
   YES/NO
4. Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?  
   • at any time  
   • without giving a reason for withdrawing  
   • without affecting your future relationship with the Institute  
   YES/NO
5. Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published?  
   YES/NO
6. Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher?  
   YES/NO

Signed
Date

Name in Block Letters

Signature of Researcher
Date

APPENDIX H

Semi-structured interview schedule

Welcome and Introductions:
- Housekeeping
- go through ethical considerations (confidentiality/right to withdraw
- outline of study
- description of ECEC programmes

**Ice-breakers:**

- How many children do you have/ages?
- Do you work/in training/
- Full or part-time?

**Questions:**

1. What is your childcare arrangement?
2. What ECEC programme (funding scheme) is your child in, could you tell me a little about what you know about this programme?
3. Could you tell me, in your opinion, what benefits this programme has for you and your family?
4. Can you talk a little bit about your personal opinions on this programme; do you have any difficulties with it?
5. Can you talk a bit about your use of family such as your child’s grandparents; or your friends to help you with your childcare needs.
6. Could you explain your understanding of what early childhood education and care is?
7. In your view what is the most important in early childhood care and education, the education aspect or the care aspect?
8. What do you think, in your opinion, the government sees as important in ECEC programmes (education or care)?

9. In your opinion, do you feel important and involved in your child’s early education and learning?
10. What, in your opinion, would help you feel more involved in their education and learning?
11. What was it that made you choose the type of childcare setting you use today? Do you feel that parents today have a choice in their childcare arrangements, are they supported in their choices?

12. What are your personal opinions on what would better suit you and your family’s needs in terms ECEC programmes?

**Close:**

- Thank participants for their time and input
- Ensure confidentiality and reiterate the right to withdraw from the study at any time
- Ensure everyone has further contact details

**APPENDIX I**

Agenda: Focus Group
Welcome and Introductions

- Welcome and introductions.
- Housekeeping (rules/confidentiality)
- Brief outline of the study
- Explain ethical considerations:
  - Reiterate right to remove themselves from the study at any time
  - Ensure everyone has signed informed consent forms
  - A copy of the finished study will be provided for each participant should they wish

Early Childhood Care and Education programmes:

- Explanation and overview of the programmes
- Explanation of ECEC/Childcare in Ireland
- Read through documentation given (information leaflets)

Discussion: The following topics will be discussed

1. Can you discuss how involved you are in the care of your grandchildren?

2. Do you feel you play an important role in your grandchildren’s early education and care?

3. Do you feel valued in terms of the contribution you make to the childcare of the family? Do you recognised?, do you feel appreciated?

4. Do you feel you get support and acknowledgement for the work you do? How do you think this support could be improved?

5. These days we talk about early childhood education and care? What is your understanding of what this term means?

6. Can you discuss what is the most important aspect, if any (in relation to preschool children) – education or care? Warmth, affection? Can you elaborate a little on why you feel this?
7. What do you think would better suit your grandchildren and their family in their childminding needs?

Close:

- Thank participants for their time and input
- Ensure confidentiality and reiterate the right to withdraw from the study at any time
- Ensure everyone has further contact details

APPENDIX J

Information on Research Participants

One to one interview participants:
**Interviewee 1**
This was a mother with one child; a boy aged three and a half. He attended a full day centre based day care service in the subsidised CETS programme while the mother attended a training course.

**Interviewee 2**
This was a mother with two children, a girl aged four and a boy aged six. The six year old was in after school care and the four year old was in full-time centre-based care. Both were funded through CETS programme while the mother attended a training course. She was in the process of setting up a new business as a result of the training.

**Interviewee 3**
This was a grandmother who dropped off and collected her four year old granddaughter to a community crèche. The child’s fulltime place at the crèche was subsidised through the CCS programme.

**Interviewee 4**
This was mother with one child; a boy aged two. He attended a community crèche on a full-time basis, with his place subsidised through the CCS programme. His eligibility was based on his mother’s status as a lone parent with a medical card, but this was due to change next year as she was to be married. The mother worked full-time.

**Interviewee 5**
This was a mother with three children, twins aged five and a boy aged two and a half. The boy was in sessional pre-school; one of the twins was in school and the other was in pre-school in the ECCE programme. The one in the ECCE programme had additional needs, and was developmentally not ready to attend primary school. The mother no longer worked but when she was in employment her parents provided the childcare.

**Interviewee 6**
This was a mother with three children. Two were school-age and the other attended a sessional pre-school in the ECCE programme. She worked two days a week and her parents cared for the children while she worked.
Interviewee 7
This is a mother with three children aged eight and a half, seven and two and a half. They are in a home-based childcare arrangement while the mother works full-time. The youngest child will be eligible to participate in the ECCE programme in September 2014. The mother relies on her father on a regular basis to assist her with her childcare.

Focus Group Participants:
Focus Group 1
This grandmother in the past had one of her grandchildren living with her as an infant due to the mother ill health. Now a teenager, the child still lived with the grandparent. She also cares for her other grandchildren on a regular basis.

Focus Group 2
This grandmother had recently retired. She had provided regular care, mainly at weekends to her two grandchildren until the recent break-up of her son’s marriage. The care was now more sporadic due to the circumstances of her son.

Focus Group 3
This grandmother provided the full-time for her school age grandchild for the past five years and more recently part-time care for an infant grandchild while her daughter works.

Focus Group 4
This grandmother collects her grandchildren from school every day and cares for them while her daughter works.

Focus Group 5
This grandmother provides childcare for her grandchildren during the summer months while their own childminder takes the summer off.

APPENDIX K
Sample interview transcript
R - What is your childcare arrangement?
P7 – 3 children, em 8.5 almost 7 and 2 and half, eh eldest is a girl and then 2 boys. I work 3 days a week one and I work 4 days the following week so 3 days a week, Monday to Wednesday Aishling* minds them here in her house, childminding.

R – Your children aren’t in any childcare funding programme or free pre-school year at the moment?  
P7 – No no no, he will hopefully now avail of that now not this September but September 2014.
R – What do you know about the funding programmes? 
P7 – The only funding programme that we’ve ever been aware of was the eh the free pre-school year, but the other two would have, well eh Emily didn’t have it Sean would have had it, Sean availed of the ECCE scheme yeah, yeah...
R – And how did that work out?  
P7 – I’m, you see we were in, we were using a crèche facility so it was just em less money to be paid to the crèche at the end of the month really, in terms of the standard of care , the level of service, the em Montessori he got was the same, you know. We, you know just for us it meant we had, we didn’t have to pay as much at the end of the month...it was purely financial.

R – How come you changed from a crèche to a childminder?
P7 – eh...2 reasons, em we did place em Aiden back in the crèche, the local crèche em and em when I went back to work after a year out but he became really unwell in the crèche, and he ended up having to have grommets inserted when her was a year old. So he had repeated ear infections, that I was constantly called out of work for so it was very hard for me to keep working and keep him out of crèche like that, you know they have such stringent guidelines around how long they have to be on the anti-biotic before they , you know brought back in. just the exposure, the constant exposure to the, all the bugs he kept, he was getting...and he was getting sick every couple of weeks. He’d something like, in the space of what was it, 3 or 4 months we were at the doctor every fortnight or less. So we were bouncing from anti-biotic to another, I mean we’d something like seven anti-biotic in a very short space of time.
R – So this suited you better, the home-based arrangement?
P7 – well it did, it did for...and then financial reasons it did because for its, its largely cheaper to get your child minded and avail of afterschool childcare as well, as part of a package. You know...if you were in a crèche facility you were paying for afterschool care which is excessive in my view, the price of it for the length of time they have them. You know they only have them a couple of hours but it extremely expensive. So it wasn’t financially viable.

R – so your youngest will be availing of the free pre-school year the year after next, 2014...how will that work for you then. Will you send him to a centre fulltime or will you continue with this childcare arrangement?
P7 – yeah, I will hope to...I suppose I haven’t discussed this with Aishling*, so perhaps I’m speaking probably out of turn, but em she does know that this coming September she has him...em she has him Monday to Wednesday so I’ll be sending him to Montessori on a Friday to the crèche that he’ll be going to to avail of the ECCE, so I had to do that to get him in. that’s the other problem...theres not many places available in these schemes, so if you don’t have your child down on a list or if you don’t avail of some Montessori prior to that year its hard to get them placed....
R – so is there preferential treatment given to children ..
P7 – they are giving preferential treatment to children that are already in the service, to siblings that are currently in their service, and then they will look after eapople they’ve had in their service and then after that then it’s a wing and a prayer...I heard somebody telling me that they’ve tried to get their child who’s a similar age as Aiden* into the crèche that I’m going to , going back to and they cant get him in
R – ok, so there’s a shortage?
P7 – there appears to be a shortage of places for that year locally, that’s locally now, I don’t know about, but that’s local now, the conversation around. But after that then, I’m hopeful, I’ll discuss it then with Aishling because Aishling* obviously, because he’ll be gone for three hours Monday to Wednesday, so she’ll obviously need to look at her situation and see will it suit her, will she still be able to keep Aiden* on. I mean I’d love her to drop the 2 older ones to the school, drop Aiden to the crèche ick him u at 12 and hang onto him. I like her to do that but that’s obviously a discussion we’ll have to have down the line.
R – so apart from the financial benefits, what is it that would make you send your child to the free preschool year, can you see other benefits?

P7 – well, em you see, I’d have to, it really does deend where your child falls in the family. Certainly, I don’t really believe em having had two in the crèche system and one availing of the ECCE already, you know Aiden is already XXXXX ???. Aishling does a lot of stuff with him, whereas he know his colours already, he is extremely chatty, capable, social little fella. I think if that was your first child and didn’t have the same social interactions, with other children, or older siblings or cousins or whatever in his wider community I think they would em, I think it would be useful. So what I’m hoping to get is em more social interaction for him, coz he doesn’t really mix unless Aishling’s* meeting friends of hers that have children, their a similar age to my fella and they play. That is the only exposure he gets to small people ...so from a social perspective.

R – From what you know of the programme then, what difficulties do you perceive this programme has, the downside?

P7 – I suppose like everything, your given something, but its, and its presented to you as this great fabulous thing. But in actual fact its only three hours out of an eight hour day, or more. So it’s a very...now its not to be sneezed at and its, everything is welcome but you know it would be great if it was an entire full-time lace given for children for their first year. Financially paid for that you didn’t have to pay. That would be great, that would be fantastic. But you know, they’re not going to do that. So it limited, yeah, its limited, I has limited use really ...three hours, not really...

R – ok, now do you use family, any family to help you in your childcare arrangements?

P7 – em, I suppose were unfortunate in the sense my husband’s parents are from the country, so contact…they have no contact, day to day contact with the children, they don’t see them, once every six weeks or so. My mother isn’t all that interested really, she’s kind of reared us really so that’s that. My father will step in if I’m stuck. And that’s where the Thursday comes in if I’m in work for an extra Thursday if he’s around and he’ll take Aiden* for me. If not my husband does it if he’s off. So yes, from time to time my father would help with childcare, which is essential

R – So you do rely on it to some extent?

P7 – I do rely on it definitely, I rely on it for that extra day, em,

R – And do you like them spending time with their grandfather…the benefits?

P7 – oh yes, oh I mean. I think the patience, (laughs) the endless patience my father has for him really. He just really enjoys him. My own father would say he just recently retired, but he doesn’t remember us as children, coz he wasn’t really around. So that generational gap really I think that because he’s not his child, he can just really enjoy him, and he knocks great crack out of him. And Aiden just loves being with him, and they go off together and they just love being together. So I think it’s, he learns a lot from dad I think, so there’s a bond which is lovely. But now in saying that, if Dad had him four days a week, three days a week, I’d say he’d be equally peeved, you know! You know I think the fact that he only just has him every so often..

R – These days we refer to early childhood education and care, what’s your understanding of that?

P7 – I don’t know what it is particularly. I would probably assume that they were talking about...the only scheme I’m aware of because it’s only relevant to us because we wouldn’t be able to avail of the other schemes, is the ECCE year. Its...though that’s limited to one child in terms of my experience now...but in terms of an umbrella statement I don’t really know what it means, what that is, it’s a very vague term.

R – What then on your opinion would you see as the most important regarding your children. The education aspect or the care aspect?

P7 – I’m not interested in education, I think they’ll get that when they go to school, they’ve a lifetime of education ahead of them. I just want them to be happy…I suppose really it’s, it’s to learn to engage with other children, to em appreciate differences among other children...even to start learning all that, you know. Sharing, em...he would badly need that coz he doesn’t get that, we can’t give in to him, where again with the others if he’s whingey and tired we say just for a minute give it to him...which isn’t good.
You know, that’s not good parenting on my part, but I think he needs to learn that, you know, every takes turns and everybody has a voice and it’s not all about him you know. So from a spiritual, holistic approach I suppose is where I’d be looking …

R – so formal education isn’t what you’re looking for?
P7 – no, no, so long as he’s happy, you know, looked after, I don’t really mind, you know.

R – So where do you think the government stands on that?, to they value the education or the caring?
P7 – well I suppose that’s! well the probably see care as important now since the last 2 weeks (Primetime documentary) but you know up to that it was all about the education, and the system and …

R – so what would be giving you that idea?
P7 – well I suppose first of all, well I suppose in light of the recent in terms of the creche facilities, in light recent media frenzy around some of the bad press, within some of crèches, some of the bad practices that are existing in some crèches they don’t place any value, they don’t employ staff as in public health nursing staff, or environmental health officers to properly inspect these facilities, there are some crèches that have never been inspected!, em in effect there, if they’ve been inspected and there has been a flag raised its not followed up on , you so the whole, you can query the whole care bit but they wouldn’t….they’d tell you that’s rubbish that they do care but its, I just don’t see it

R – So your of the opinion that they just don’t value care?
P7 - They, they’re not giving a lot to, to young families. They seem to be taking. You know the only thing were getting 3 hours, when they’re, you know the year before school so they’re not putting any real systems in place to help young families…whether it be in terms of their care or their education or their whole wellbeing, there just doesn’t seem to be any system..

R – With regards your child’s learning, and you mentioned you value a holistic approach…how important do you feel in that?
P7 – (pause)...I suppose every mother feels, or every parent feels that they’re integral or they are the centre of their child’s world, and you are!. But the fact that I’m not there 3 days a week, I’m only there in the evenings em so whomever you employ then to look after them you would hope they have the same principles and beliefs, you know, that you might have, you know but I suppose every mother feels, their, her role is imperative, you know..

R – And when they were in an early childhood setting, the free pre-school year did you feel linked in with that as regards their education? Did you feel you had an involvement?
P7 – they brought us in for one, they at the beginning of September I think they brought us in for one evening or whatever to explain the programme, so that gave us an opportunity to see how....coz the Montessori is very different, to see how they use it and apply it so that was probably the only thing. But I suppose in fairness the centre that the kids have gone to, or that Aiden* is going back to, you know, they would always tell you if they had a problem. They would be very clued in, and they would be very, you they would give you a nod or a wink if there was anything, and you always felt very, that you could go in and say anything anyway. I suppose in lots of ways, if you asked my husband that question, he wouldn’t have a clue! Coz he didn’t, you know, as long as they were happy, it wouldn’t be something that he would do, as long as they were being looked after?

R – ok, so he didn’t feel that he was central to that, involved in that, whereas you wanted that involvement?
P7 – yes, yes, they would always say to me X, Y or Z, you know, that they’ve done this or they’ve done that...

R – And would you carry that on at home?
P7 – yes, I would, yes, oh I would always ask. Well I mean it’s the same now, this evening. I mean it’s not even in relation to the creche facility. Like even today now, this evening, at dinner time we always ask now how was everybody’s day, what did you do today, what happened in school today

R – And you think that’s important?
P7 – yes, that conversation yeah…it keeps me linked in with their day, even though I’m not part of it, I’m not there 3 days a week.

R – And would you link in with the childminder too?
P7 – yeah, she gives me, Aishling* gives me a daily report on what Aiden* has done for the day. And then a verbal report, a summary report you know. So if I see something on that I’ll ask Aiden* about it! now he’s only two and half but he’s starting to participate in the conversations!, he’ll say that he saw X or Y he saw then ans he was playing with them, or he went with Aishling to the park, and he’ll tell me about it

R - And as that’s important to you, is there anything more that you’d like to help you feel more involved in their learning?

P7 – no, I think if you’ve got open, I suppose it depends on your communication with your childcare provider, if you, if there isn’t good lines of communication between two people, then you miss, there’s something missing and that will affect your children ultimately...so I think it’s important that there’s a two way communication with them

R – So clear policies?

P7 – yeah, and that’s something that we, Aishling* and myself from the outset , we worked together so everything is organised, it’s clear, in advance, so there’s no she said I said ...

R – We had touched on it earlier on; you mentioned finances, is that why you picked this type of childcare setting?

P7 – no, no, because Aiden was unwell, and we had to take him out. So crèche was not an option, and I wouldn’t change it now, I wouldn’t go back ...

R – You’d never go back to a centre based setting?

P7 – no, no I just feels this suits

R – And do you feel that there is enough choice in childcare arrangements, given the funding schemes, is there a choice ?

P7 – no there’s no choice. Well there’s not. You’ve two choices, childminder or a crèche. Within, for me the only funding scheme that’s available to me within the crèche facility is the ECCE, because we wouldn’t qualify for any of the others. Em even though a large proportion, a huge proportion of my income has gone on to pay for crèches, I mean were working to pay for crèches in lots of ways over the years, em but so there is no wide range of choice. And then in terms of the childminder I mean when Aine* was born first were we lived in another part of Dublin, I did go to a childminder and it didn’t work out so that’s why we went to crèche then when we moved over here. And the reason why I was very explicit with Aishling*, and I I chose carefully. Now first of all I wanted her to be registered and then the other thing I wanted was that Aiden* would be, in the main, now I mean over time, next year now that might change, that children, that he would be the sole child that she would look after , you know...

R – Would you be happy, the funding then sent to your service, your choice?

P7 – oh absolutely, I think it should be paid into the, no more than the child benefit is paid into the mothers account. That some sort of funding could be made available to whoever avails of it, you know, paid that way

R – So that the funding could follow the child?

P7 – yes, or that it is paid to the child, you if the child had an account , follow his PPS number you know ...

R – Would you be happy to see a second pre-school year if you were to take a reduction in your child benefit every month?  (child came in and very distracted from this point…)

P7 – oh yeah, oh yeah I would. Now it has to be equitable. It has to be fair for everybody, em you know. And you know at the moment a lot of my child benefit pays for my childminder.

R – So have you any opinion on what would better suit you in terms of ECCE funding?

P7 – I suppose ideally, I suppose for example, if there was low ratio facility that a child, a number of children could learn, you know as best their needs, designed for them. Rather than this curriculum based thing that they do..., something more flexible ...

R - Have you any other comments, suggestions regarding childcare?

P7 – I suppose what’s happened recently has been particularly shocking, and certainly it wouldn’t encourage you to use a crèche facility, a current crèche facility, with the high ratio’s ..I suppose more registered childminders with appropriate training ...Offering low ratio kind of care, not a situation you know where you have large numbers of children being minded by you know .