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## **Inside the Black Box an Exploration of the Impact of Action and Activity in the Inner Spheres of Policy Making on Early Childhood Education and Care Policy**

Siobhan Bradley  
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***Inside the Black Box***

**An Exploration of the Impact of Action and  
Activity in the Inner Spheres of Policy Making on  
Early Childhood Education and Care Policy**

**Siobhan Bradley**

**PhD**

**Dublin Institute of Technology**

**2011**

## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

While ECEC policy decisions usually reflect the predominant ideological stance of those actors involved, they also represent the outcome of a battle over values and objectives as vested interests within the inner spheres of policy making debate, contest and negotiate the nature of the problem and prescribe solutions to remedy it. Despite the integral importance of these processes, few studies explore how action and activity in these less visible arenas impact on policy design and outcome. By shifting the focus of policy analysis from the reified product of policy decisions to the behind the scenes processes of policy production, this research adds an extra layer of depth and understanding to the complexities and intricacies that shape ECEC policy.

Using a methodical mapping exercise, this research identified the inner-elite of key policy actors engaged in the less visible arenas of policy making and explored their experiences and perspectives of ECEC policy development. Informed by theories of the policy making process and social constructions, the research adopts an interpretative approach and considers how behind the scenes complexities, contestations and struggles catalyse and constrain ECEC policy decisions.

This study's findings shed light on the many hidden and tacit dimensions of policy making and support a more nuanced understanding of the challenges involved in influencing and enhancing ECEC policy design and outcomes. Cumulatively this research study's findings highlight: how a legislative and policy failure to extricate children conceptually from parents and family constrains policy actors' conceptualisations of childhood and ECEC within a prohibitively narrow space; how a reliance on exogenous catalysts (rarely related to children) to initiate policy action relegates children to the periphery as competing policy agendas are prioritised; how political anxiety and 'government distancing' constrain commitment to children and intensify bargaining and negotiation among adult actors' whose competing agendas create an austere barrier to positioning the child at the core of policy making; and how a resistance to resolve conflict through debate on 'what we as a nation want for our children' hinders a consensual and strategic policy embrace of the multi-dimensional components of ECEC.

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## **Abbreviations**

ACF	Advocacy Coalition Framework
APE	Average Production Employee Earnings
CCSS	Childcare Community Subvention Scheme
CE	Community Employment
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CRA	Children's Rights Alliance
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CVP	Community and Voluntary Pillar
DES	Department of Education and Science
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECS	Early Childcare Supplement
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
EU	European Union
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBEC	Irish Business and Employer's Confederation
ICTU	Irish Council of Trade Unions
IRCHSS	Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences
IPPA	Irish Preschool Play Association
NCS	National Children's Strategy
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCCS	National Childcare Strategy
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NPM	New Public Management
NVCO	National Voluntary Organisations
NWCI	National Women's Council of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

PET	Punctuated Equilibrium Theory
PR-STV	Proportional Representation Single Transferable Vote
SSCI	Social Science Citation Index
TD	Teachta Dála (Irish Gaelic: member of the Irish parliament (Dáil))
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WTO	World Trade Organisation

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Abbreviations .....	iv
List of Figures .....	xii
<b>Chapter One: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
The Community of Human Agents: The ECEC Policy Community .....	3
Competing Policy Paradigms .....	6
Rationale for Study .....	9
Study Aims and Objectives .....	12
Chapter Outline .....	12
<b>Chapter Two: The Research Framework .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Introduction .....	15
Theories of the Policy Process .....	16
Multiple Streams Theory (MST) .....	18
The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) .....	22
Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) .....	26
Integrating Theories of the Policy Process into the Research Framework .....	29
Social Constructions and ECEC .....	31
Constructions of Childhood and ECEC .....	33
The Established Paradigm: Developmental Psychology .....	34
The New Paradigm of the Sociology of Childhood .....	36
The Competing Battled between Established and Emerging Paradigms .....	37
Conclusion .....	40
<b>Chapter Three: The Irish Policy Environment .....</b>	<b>42</b>
Historic Institutionalism and Path Dependencies .....	43
The Backdrop of Tradition: Catholicism, Patriarchy and the Irish Constitution .....	45
Threats to the Foundational Stones: The Emergence of Policy Dilemmas .....	47
Resistance to Change in the Face of Policy Dilemmas .....	49
The Persistence of Inherited Constructions of Gender Roles .....	51
The Political Environment: Politics, the Party System and Voting .....	54
ECEC in Context: 2000 - 2010 .....	56
Escalating Issue Attention: ECEC Emerging from the Shadows .....	57
‘Strong in ... Policy Formation’: The Policy Documents .....	59



‘Weak ... in Implementation’: The Policy Actions .....	62
The EOCP: .....	62
Limitations of Market-Based Approaches .....	63
Co-ordination Challenges.....	66
The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) .....	67
The Early Childcare Supplement (ECS): .....	68
The Preschool Initiative .....	71
Conclusion.....	73
<b>Chapter Four: Policy Making Venues in the Irish Context .....</b>	<b>75</b>
Introduction .....	75
From Government to Governance.....	76
Framing this Study within Processes of Governance.....	79
Macro Political Institutions: Government Level.....	80
Members of the Oireachtas.....	81
Senior Civil Servants:.....	82
Political Advisors and Internal and External Consultants.....	83
Social Partnership.....	83
Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Informal Policy Networks .....	86
The Insider Outsider Typology .....	88
Conclusion.....	90
<b>Chapter Five: Methodology.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Introduction .....	92
Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach.....	93
Interpretative Research.....	94
Methodological Tools & Supports .....	95
Interviews .....	95
Concept Mapping .....	98
The Layers of the Concept Map.....	99
Stage 1: Draft Concept Map Development – The Inner Layer .....	100
The Outer Layers: Key Insiders .....	101
Stage II: Populating the Final Version of the Concept Map. ....	102
Core Insiders: .....	103
Specialist Insiders:.....	104
Peripheral Insiders:.....	104
Sample Recruitment and Data Collection .....	106
Data Analysis: Thematic Network Analysis .....	107

The Organisation of Themes.....	108
The Analytic Steps .....	109
Robustness, Rigour and Consistency .....	111
Limitations .....	113
Ethical Approval .....	114
<b>Chapter Six: The Policy Making Process - Action of the Actors .....</b>	<b>116</b>
Introduction .....	116
<b>Pre-Decision Making Processes.....</b>	<b>119</b>
Endemic Consultation .....	120
Ease of Access: Multi-directional Relationships.....	121
The Rules of Access: Consultation Costs .....	123
The Constraints of Insider Funding Dependencies .....	124
International Influence .....	125
Summary: Pre Decision-Making Processes .....	129
<b>Decision-Making Environment.....</b>	<b>130</b>
Closed & Elitist Decision Sphere.....	131
Conflict-Filled.....	133
The Political Conflict of Public and Private Agendas.....	134
Politicians and Civil Servants .....	136
Cross Departmental Relationships .....	137
National Autonomy Paramount.....	140
Summary: Decision-Making Environment .....	141
<b>Modus Operandi.....</b>	<b>143</b>
Slow & Incremental Policy Development.....	144
Rapid & Swift Policy Development.....	147
Trigger Events.....	147
Actor Exploitation of Trigger Events.....	148
Conclusion.....	150
<b>Chapter Seven: The ECEC Policy Context - Constructions, Catalysts &amp; Constraints .....</b>	<b>154</b>
Introduction .....	154
<b>Constructions of Childhood.....</b>	<b>157</b>
Protectionist View: Children’s Needs.....	157
Relegation of Children: The Invisible Child.....	161
Needs Based Frameworks and ECEC Policy.....	162
Children’s Rights: Struggle.....	164

Scaffolding Rights within Legislative Frameworks.....	165
Referendum on Children’s Rights: Costs Superseding Benefits? .....	166
Summary: Constructions of Childhood.....	169
<b>Policy Catalysts</b> .....	171
The Labour Market.....	172
The Value of Early Learning.....	174
Finances.....	176
The Pot of Gold: Funding Opportunities.....	176
A Depleting Pot of Gold: Restructuring Funds in Times of Crisis.....	177
Comparative Global Trends .....	179
Summary: Policy Catalysts .....	180
<b>Policy Constraints</b> .....	182
The Constraining Force of Tradition.....	183
The Implications of Limited Finances .....	186
Limited Debate Limits Action.....	188
Splintered ECEC Policy Community.....	190
Conflicting Perspectives: The Role and Purpose of ECEC.....	190
Frailties in Sector Cohesion – Differential Resources and Variable Commitment .....	193
Summary: Policy Constraints.....	194
Conclusion.....	196
<b>Chapter Eight: Critiquing ECEC Policy – The Impact of the Policy Process &amp; Policy Context</b> .....	200
Introduction .....	200
<b>Positive Policy Results</b> .....	203
Growth of the ECEC Sector.....	203
Policy-Oriented Learning.....	205
Increasing Coherency.....	208
Summary: Positive Policy Developments .....	210
<b>Outstanding Policy Weaknesses</b> .....	211
Policy Lacking Strategy .....	212
Difficulties Translating Policy to Practice .....	215
Poor Evaluative Structures.....	216
Resolving Lack of Strategy: Clear, Agreed High & Low Level Principles.....	217
Governance and Government ‘Distancing’: Mixed Provision Model Challenges.....	220
An Extra Layer of Bargaining.....	222
Child Gets Lost.....	224

Considering the Child in Policy Frameworks .....	228
Summary: Outstanding Policy Weaknesses .....	230
Conclusion .....	232
<b>Chapter Nine: Discussion &amp; Conclusion</b> .....	<b>235</b>
Introduction .....	235
<b>Pre-Decision Making Processes</b> .....	<b>237</b>
The Contextual Background .....	238
Gaining Access to Pre-Decision Spheres of Policy Development .....	240
The Costs of Maintaining Insider Status .....	242
International Influence .....	246
The Economic Rationale Investment Model .....	246
Government Distancing: Mixed Models of Delivery .....	247
<b>The Decision-Making Environment</b> .....	<b>249</b>
Competition and Conflict in the Core Policy Maker Sphere .....	251
Politicians' Private and Public Agendas .....	252
The Civil Servant as Policy Entrepreneur .....	253
Differential Department Agendas .....	256
<b>Modus Operandi: Ripples and Waves in Policy Making</b> .....	<b>258</b>
Slow and Incremental Policy Action .....	258
Reliance on Legislative Frameworks and Limited Reflection on Social Constructions .....	260
Mobilising a Fragmented Policy Community .....	262
The Window of Opportunity: Rapid Policy Development .....	264
Policy Framing and Policy Focus .....	266
Research Implications: Considering Children within the Policy Environment .....	269
Future Research .....	274
Conclusion .....	274
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>276</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>301</b>
Appendix A: EOCP, NCIP & Preschool Initiative .....	302
Appendix B: Structure of the Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs ...	310
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule, Question Guide .....	311
Appendix D: Profile of Participating Institutions .....	315
Appendix E: Letter of Request to Participate in Study .....	324
Appendix F: Consent Form .....	326

Appendix G: Development of Thematic Network 1 .....	327
Appendix H: Development of Thematic Network 2 .....	330
Appendix I: Development of Thematic Network 3 .....	335
Appendix J: National Qualifications Framework.....	338

## List of Tables

Table 1: Key Research Themes and Data Focus of Semi-Structured Interviews .....	97
Table 2: Final Research Sample.....	106

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Multiple Streams Theory Framework.....	21
Figure 2: Core Policy Makers .....	81
Figure 3: Concept Map Layers.....	102
Figure 4: Populated Concept Map.....	103
Figure 5: Structure of Thematic Network .....	109
Figure 6: The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors [Thematic Network 1]...	118
Figure 7: Pre-Decision Making Organising Theme .....	119
Figure 8: Policy Decision Making Environment Organising Theme.....	131
Figure 9: Modus Operandi Organising Theme .....	143
Figure 10: The Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts and Constraints [Thematic Network 2] .....	156
Figure 11: Constructions of Childhood Organising Theme .....	157
Figure 12: Policy Catalysts Organising Theme.....	172
Figure 13: Policy Constraints Organising Theme .....	182
Figure 14: Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Context [Thematic Network 3].....	202
Figure 15: Positive Policy Results .....	203
Figure 16: Outstanding Policy Weaknesses .....	212

## Box

Box 1: Thematic Network Development Stages .....	111
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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

*Early childhood institutions are socially constructed. They have no inherent features, no essential qualities, no necessary purposes. What they are for, the question of their role and purpose is not self evident. They are what we ‘as a community of human agents’ make them.*

(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999: 62).

*The authoritative allocation of values draws our attention to the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy, and requires us to consider not only whose values are represented in policy, but also how these values have become institutionalised.*

(Prunty, 1985: 136)

These quotes from Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999) and Prunty (1985) highlight two integral components pivotal to the structuring and shaping of early childhood education and care (ECEC)<sup>1</sup> policy. The first relates to the socially constructed nature of ECEC and the second relates to the ‘community of human agents’ responsible for shaping, reinforcing or contesting these constructions. Combined, these two components determine the perceived value and purpose of ECEC and the various strategies and structures devised at policy level to ensure the attainment of such values and purposes at practice level.

ECEC has been variously positioned as a labour force issue; an early intervention strategy; an anti poverty strategy; a preparation for school; and a commitment to children’s rights (either provision or participatory) (Bennett, 2006; Goodbody

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, ECEC refers to all services provided to children from birth to six outside the formal primary school system), which are required to notify the Health Services Executive (HSE) and includes pre-schools, playgroups, creches, day nurseries, montessori pre-schools, naionrai, notifiable childminders or similar services.

Economic Consultants, 1998; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Esping-Anderson, 1990; Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997; Heckman, 2000; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Moss, 2006, 2009; Moss & Bennet, 2006; Press & Skattebol 2007; Schweinhart, 2000; Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 1992; Woodhead, 2006). These variable constructions of ECEC and the values and interpretations that inform them, guide the structuring and shaping of policy decisions and in turn, the associated delivery mechanisms for implementation. They influence how ECEC is funded, delivered, mandated and evaluated and have significant consequences for children accessing (or excluded from) ECEC settings.

Behind these constructions are a range of actors who employ a variety of techniques to portray issues, promote images, tell stories, explain cause and effect and describe situations in ways that reinforce or contest dominant constructions of policy concerns and solutions (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 2007; Stone, 2002; Wilson, 2000; Zahariadis, 2007). Who these actors are, the role they occupy in policy development, the policy cultures they advocate and the strategies they adopt to influence final policy decisions are imperative to understanding the mechanics of ECEC policy-making processes. Understanding how these processes impact on policy design is all the more pertinent in today's political culture, as traditional hierarchical forms of government are increasingly replaced with modes of governance which incorporate an expanded range of actors, from public, private and voluntary sectors into various realms of the policy-making process (Baumgartner, 2009; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Boyte, 2005; Gaynor, 2009; Geoghegan & Powell, 2008; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Maloney, Jordan & McLaughlin, 1994; Parag, 2006; Rhodes, 1997; Sabatier, 2007b; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988).

The policy-making process is variously described as 'complicated and untidy' (Early, 1999: 139), a 'form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf' (Heclo, 1974: 305), a 'dance of sometimes seemingly random movements, rather than choreographed order' (Bridgman & Davis, 2000: 31), akin to a 'science of muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959: 79) and an 'inherently political process' (Everett, 2003: 66). Policies are context sensitive and are usually influenced by and influence the wider economic, political, cultural and social structures and contexts. Accordingly, policy is something that is usually struggled over given the actor-context-sector-site-issue dependency and specificity associated with all social policies (Ozga, 2000; Parag, 2006). This research



uses the same depiction of policy as that described by Ozga (2000: 2) where policy is conceived of as ‘as a process rather than a product, involving negotiation, contestations or struggle between different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making’. It therefore focuses on the interactive aspects of policy making and considers how these various processes affect final policy decisions (i.e. the reified product resulting from the policy process).

This chapter introduces the concept of a policy paradigm and the ‘community of human agents’ involved in promoting, reinforcing or contesting dominant and competing paradigms in ECEC policy making processes and explores how each draws upon the other to potentially influence decisions in ECEC. The chapter then proceeds to introduce the rationale and the aims and objectives for this study and concludes with a brief description of the organisation of the study and the key themes in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

### **The Community of Human Agents: The ECEC Policy Community**

Processes of new governance are increasingly characterised by complex deliberative structures across a growing range of venues as a broader range of actors seek access to the inner layers of policy deliberation and debate to vie for their favoured policy solutions (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Casey, 1998; Deacon, 2007; Gale, 2007; Gaynor, 2009; Rhodes, 1997). Morisi (1990: 232, cited in Casey, 1998: 18) defines actors as:

*determined protagonists ... who intervene to draw attention to, define, redefine, transform, articulate, fragment, and aggregate the terms of the problem in question, through the thousand possible eventualities and unforeseen circumstances - desired or undesired - which mark the development of policies and mean that its later implementation is always open to possible reformulation.*

The inner spheres of policy making – where deliberation and decision-making occur - represent ‘systems of limited participation’ (Cobb & Elder, 1983) and are usually confined to a privileged group of participants who successfully secure government-granted access to the specialised policy domain (Broscheid & Coen, 2007; Eising, 2007; Maloney *et al*, 1994; Meade, 2005). Lindblom (1968) explains policy-making in terms of power which is always held by a number of persons rather than any one individual

who strategise to exert influence and power over others. As policy issues gain increased political attention and shift upwards on the policy agenda, the policy environment is characterised as increasingly competitive, conflictive and disharmonious as alternative actors employ a range of strategies in their battle to achieve their favoured policy solution (Baumgartner, 2009; Gaynor, 2009; Howard, 2005; Kingdon, 1995; Stone, 2002; Zahariadis, 2007).

Because all policies are multiperspectival<sup>2</sup>, different policy actors focus their attention on different aspects of the policy issue as they seek to build support for their position. Which dimensions dominate the collective debate at any given time is partly determined endogenously through the efforts of policy actors within the limited systems of participation, but also exogenously through contingent events and crises, scientific advances and new learning and through social cascade effects as policy communities variably mobilise around different policy issues depending on the level of support for the issue at hand (Baumgartner, 2001, 2009; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Zahariadis, 2007). An actor's ability to exploit the 'windows of opportunity' (Kingdon, 1984) these focusing events and processes create can either strengthen or reduce the actor's likelihood of a policy success (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007). An actor's role, status and resources (e.g. technical expertise, performance history, financial resources, membership bases and representative power) and the political power which they bring to or accumulate during the process fortify advantage for some actors over others (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Casey, 1998).

The politics and power of knowledge represent a critical strategic device employed by actors whilst advocating for their favoured policy solutions (Mac Naughton, 2005; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Mac Naughton (2005) emphasises the differential power of different ideologies<sup>3</sup> and argues that dominant ideologies are those associated with (and benefiting) the most powerful groups within society. Policy actors intimately connect knowledge with politics as they battle for policy success and strategically frame policy problems and solutions in ways which promote their favoured policy solutions (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Actors primarily achieve this through two main mechanisms; they firstly draw upon knowledge which supports their policy

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<sup>2</sup> The term multiperspectival social theory is used to describe analysis which 'seeks to accommodate the interconnection between the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions in the context of the complex social system' (O'Sullivan, 2005: 35).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this research, the term ideology is used to describe the shared sets of ideas that guide an actor's actions and enable him/her to justify them (MacNaughton, 2005).

argument *via* policy-oriented learning (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999)<sup>4</sup>, and secondly, they promote this knowledge amongst other actors within the policy community in ways that convince them of the value and benefits of their proposals. Thus the politics of power infiltrate the policy battleground creating structural inequalities and underlying tensions as some actors hold advantage and an increased likelihood of policy influence whilst others, unable to achieve such a favourable position are rendered silent and subordinate (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Schattschneider, 1960). The impact of such power struggles and the battles and challenges they create in policy making are well documented in the policy literature (Baumgartner, 2009; Everett, 2003; Gains, 2003; Grant & Halpin, 2003; Wilson, 2000). For instance, Bachrach & Baratz (1963) describe the ability of economic elites to keep alternative, counter images of important decisions off of the political agenda, through a process they term as ‘non-decision-making’. Analysts therefore warn of the need for diligence regarding the less visible and more subtle silencing strategies powerful actors utilise, particularly where policy suggestions conflict with or contradict the ideologies and proposals of the dominant political elite (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963; Hill, 1997).

The exploration of actor behaviour within these policy deliberation processes is critical to understanding how and why policy develops in the manner that it does. By drawing attention to the strategies actors adopt as they promote or challenge various constructions of policy problems and solutions, the researcher is more sensitised to and aware of the potential scale and impact of interacting processes and events – and the role of actors within these - on final policy decisions. Given the complexity of the battles and games in policy development, this research draws upon three contemporary theories of the policy-making process (Multiple Streams Theory, the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory) to sensitise the researcher to different but complementary aspects of individual and collective behaviour that actors employ in their quest to influence policy development. These theories are elaborated on in the next chapter and form part of the theoretical framework that guides exploration and analysis of ECEC policy making processes within this research study.

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<sup>4</sup> Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1999 cited in Bogg & Geyer, 2007: 142) define policy-oriented learning as ‘relatively enduring alternations of thought or behavioural intentions that result from experience and/or new information and that are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives.’

## **Competing Policy Paradigms**

*[T]he choice of [policy] tool is often a central part of the political battle that shapes public programs. What is at stake in these battles is not simply the most efficient way to solve a particular public problem, but also the relative influence that various affected interests will have in shaping the program's post enactment evolution.*

(Salamon, 2002: 11)

Paradigms are constructed by researchers and intellectuals through academic discourse<sup>5</sup>; by professionals and practitioners who directly engage with the issue; by interest groups and organizations promoting particular policy agendas; and by the policy makers who interact with these actors (Wilson, 2000). O'Sullivan (2005: xvi - xvii) describes a policy paradigm as 'an analytical construct which can be seen to have the following features:

- Conceptualisation: how something is thought of in a distinguishing manner
- Signification: how it is symbolically communicated
- Representation: distinguishable strands of knowledge
- Materiality: its implication with action, interests and power
- Legitimation: how it is justified and made appear valid
- Social formation: the social actors who share its meanings
- Psychological: its impact on their sense of self
- Political: its position in social and political power circuits
- Change: its experience of qualitative change in its individual dimensions and overall structure.'

The ideas, interests and values that comprise a paradigm and the policy responses or solutions it incorporates significantly influence its political and public acceptability. If a paradigm gains sufficient acceptance amongst those with power, its structures and features become codified and institutionalized and provide the long term framework in which policies are experienced, debated and understood (O'Sullivan, 2005; Pierson, 1993; Rigby, Tarrant, & Neuman, 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> Discourses 'embody meaning and social relationships; they constitute both subjectivity and power relations. Words and propositions will change their meaning according to their use and the positions held by those who use them. ... Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, power relations and social position. Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses' (Ball, 1990: 17 - 18).

A number of paradigmatic trends can be discerned in the framing of early childhood policy debates (Press & Skattebol, 2007). Policy paradigms have variously constructed ECEC as custodial arrangements for children while their parents work; pre-primary education to enhance preparation for formal schooling; opportunities for children to socialize with their peers and learn what it means to be a citizen; compensatory services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; or public spaces where adults and children collaboratively engage in a variety of projects of social, cultural, political, and economic significance (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). The ideologies driving the conceptualisation of the dominant paradigm are integral to the structuring of ECEC policies and provisions and in turn, children's experiences within ECEC settings. For instance, whether ECEC is publicly or privately provided is indicative of a state's perceived responsibility for ECEC and the mechanisms and policy tools it will adopt to support its favoured beliefs and assumptions (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Press & Skattebol, 2007; Sumsion, 2006; Woodhead, 2006). Direct government provision is highly visible, reinforces an active role for government in ECEC policy and decreases the legitimacy of arguments against public intervention and support whilst indirect government provision vests parents, providers, school boards, or local governments with responsibility for different aspects of ECEC as governments maintain distance from the policy field (Rigby *et al.*, 2007).

Which constructions of ECEC are prioritised and inculcated into policy paradigms and which are relegated or excluded is linked to the dominant political culture<sup>6</sup> and prevalent ideologies they choose to support (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005; Rigby *et al.*, 2007; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). While the dynamics influencing policy paradigm construction are frequently understood by members of the policy community, they are rarely revealed or explained in the broader political discourse which instead presents the instrumental or distributive features of the reified policy decision (e.g. tax relief for working parents; childcare vouchers) (Rigby *et al.*, 2007). The prioritisation of certain policy paradigms and the relegation of others in nation states' policy approaches highlights the political nature of childhood and is revealing of the political goals and interests policy decisions serve to reinforce. It means some aspects of ECEC are unmonitored and unattended to, despite their importance, whilst

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<sup>6</sup> The terms 'political culture' refers to the political values and expectations that are dominant within a given society. It describes the fundamental, deeply held views of the state and the kind of principles that should underlay political decision making (Coakley, 2005).

others are prioritised and incorporated into the decision process beyond their intrinsic merit thus exacerbating issues and frailties within the ECEC sector. Critical and persistent ECEC policy issues, which governments struggle to resolve are well documented in the literature and include: fragmented and divisive responsibilities across government departments; variable levels of quality; accessibility issues; the market-oriented focus of some ECEC providers; difficulties in recruiting and retaining ECEC professionals; and the different experiences children are subject to in light of these problems and inconsistencies (Bennett, 2006; Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2009; Cheeseman, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Mayall, 2001; OECD, 2001, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006).

The combination, extent and the scale of these problems differ across countries depending on each state's tailoring of policy paradigms to match and support the ideologies and values it wishes to prioritise and the policy mechanisms adopted to achieve them. It is the implications of these frequently covert and subtle political processes which led Coles (1986) to emphasise how a nation's politics become a child's everyday psychology. In the case of Ireland, the government's role in ECEC is a remarkably recent phenomenon which has primarily been driven by increased public demands for political supports in ECEC as maternal labour market activity became increasingly vital to economic buoyancy from the 1990s. A reliance on market-based provisions coupled with targeted initiatives for disadvantaged children and universal cash-based transfers to subsidise familial child-rearing costs have formed the primary policy responses adopted by the government. The adopted policy approaches have contributed to and exacerbated ECEC policy and practice issues and are revealing of the significant implications of policy decisions – and the behind the scenes activity in which they are generated - on ECEC policy design and outcome (Bennett, 2006; OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2006). It is through an examination of various social constructions of ECEC, their germination and gestation points, and the activity of policy actors which works to promote certain constructions whilst suppressing counter or alternative ones, that the pivotal implications of the politics of policy making emerge. Thus the second body of literature underpinning this research study's theoretical framework explores how particular social constructions create and reinforce particular beliefs in policy paradigm development while eliding counter constructions which may challenge the dominant paradigms and their inter-related policy preferences. Further elaboration of the power of social constructions in the conceptualisation of ECEC issues

and responses is provided in the following chapter's theoretical framework discussion.

### **Rationale for Study**

*I often think that public policy is particularly complex because, using the iceberg metaphor, there is a lot that lies below the surface. There is more tacit policy at play than is ever espoused in White Papers, glossy policy statements or consultation documents, beloved of politicians, officials and interest groups alike.*

(Ahern<sup>7</sup> & Brady, 2004: 12)

Despite the complexities, contestations, uncertainties and murkiness that pervade the policy process (Bridgman & Davis, 2003; Early, 1999; Edwards, 2005; Lindblom, 1959; Ozga, 2000), few studies explore how action and activity in the less visible arenas of policy making impact on ECEC policy design and outcome (Bown *et al*, 2009; Moss & Pence, 1994; Neuman, 2007). These processes and their implications tend 'to remain hidden, both in the sense of the ideologies and structural inequities that determine the distribution of power and in the possible interests of participating actors to conceal their role in the process' (Casey, 1998: 79). Neuman (2007: 7) highlights how much research on early care and education has focused on discrete programmes (e.g. preschool, childcare) or policy products (e.g. subsidies, curriculum) rather than governance structures and processes, the 'glue' which holds the pieces of the system together. Highlighting the limited insight into this aspect of ECEC policy, Bown, Sumsion & Press (2011: 263) use the metaphor of 'dark matter' to describe 'the normalising, and therefore frequently difficult to detect and disrupt, influences implicated in politicians' decision-making in relation to ECEC policy'. Determining what drives the adoption or exclusion of various dimensions of ECEC in final policy decisions is an exceedingly challenging but critically important task. Given how policy making is fundamentally the responsibility of human beings, 'it is extraordinarily difficult to develop much of a sense of process if the linchpin of the entire process – the policy actor – is a 'black box'' (Sabatier, 2007b: 328). In effect, this requires a 'zooming out' from an exclusive focus on the reified products of the policy process, where much analysis and critique currently focuses, to an interpretive analysis of key policy actors' experiences and perspectives of the processes leading to the reified product – the final policy decision.

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<sup>7</sup> Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach (Prime-Minister) of Ireland, June 1997 – May 2008.

The research methodology underpinning this study is influenced by an interpretive approach. Such an approach emphasises that actors construct meanings based on their understanding and interpretation of their interactions in different contexts. By accessing and exploring the perspectives of this elite group of actors, this study aims to extend the comprehension of the vastness and complexity of policy making processes (Smith, 2003) and facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex aspects of policy making that influence and shape ECEC policy decisions. While the study's focus is on ECEC, it has wider impact potential on general studies relating to children, families and society.

In interpretative studies such as this, where the researcher becomes the vehicle through which the reality of actors' experiences is revealed, it has become routine to outline the authorial position as part of the process (Andrade, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2005). Having worked as a Senior Researcher in the Centre for Social & Educational Research (CSER), a research centre specialising in ECEC from 2004 to 2010, I was involved in a number of research analysis studies critiquing various aspects of Irish ECEC policy (Bradley, 2007; Bradley & Hayes, 2009; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; National Women's Council of Ireland [NWC], 2005). During this time, Irish ECEC received unprecedented policy attention and statutory investment, primarily through capital investment programmes that supported the growth of private and community ECEC provision. Along with other policy analysts (Bennet, 2006; National Economic & Social Forum [NESF], 2005; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2004), we at the research centre critiqued the partiality of government's primary responses for their limited capacity to ensure quality experiences for children attending the very settings that the policies created (Bradley & Hayes, 2009; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; NWC, 2005). However, despite the collective publication of a series of reports and additional increasing pressure from a growing range of employers, unions and children's advocacy groups, all recommending the introduction of universal ECEC, government persisted with its market-based responses supplemented by incremental increases to the universal child-benefit payment system. At a time when universal ECEC formed a cornerstone of government policy in the majority of developed countries, government resistance to the concept of universal ECEC, particularly at a time of unprecedented economic growth emerged as a perplexing concern which required exploration and interrogation.



By 2007, after much observation and critical analysis regarding government's approach to ECEC policy in Ireland (Bradley, 2007; Hayes, 2002; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; NWCI, 2005), the author, along with Director of the CSER, Professor Noirin Hayes applied for and were awarded a three year Irish Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) research grant to undertake thematic research which explored and consolidated knowledge regarding the various factors catalysing and constraining ECEC policy development in Ireland. Grounded within a rights-based context which embraces the concept of the agentive child advocated within the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; Mac Naughton, 2002; Mayall, 2000; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Smith, 2007; Woodhead, 2005), the project *ECEC in Ireland: Towards a Rights Based Policy Approach* incorporated four distinct but inter-related research strands and aimed to:

- R1. Consolidate knowledge and re-evaluate factors driving ECEC policy through desk based research which will consider ECEC policy formation, implementation and evaluation and critique Irish policy in terms of international understandings;
- R2. Comprehensively review policy documents using critical discourse analysis since Ireland's (1992) ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to identify and assess evidence of competing and conflicting ideologies;
- R3. Survey ECEC stakeholders to identify barriers and constraints to rights-based ECEC policy development; and
- R4. Identify and design a comprehensive over-arching policy model which will contribute to knowledge base of a rights-based approach to ECEC policy making.

This PhD forms part of the third research strand (R3) of this project and aimed to gain 'behind the scenes' access to ECEC policy making arenas to explore how the inner elite of actors engaged in the inner spheres of ECEC policy making processes think about and construct ECEC policy. Given the paucity of research at a national and international level regarding the less visible mechanics of policy making, this research is inductive in nature and assumed no prior hypothesis regarding the impact of policy actors' behaviour on ECEC policy decisions. Thus this study aimed to provide a preliminary and unique insight into the key behavioural strategies and processes actors employ in their quest to influence ECEC policy, from the perspectives and experiences of those policy actors directly engaged in ECEC policy making processes.

### **Study Aims and Objectives**

By accessing and exploring key actors' perspectives on action and activity in the less visible arenas of policy making, this research seeks to reveal how conceptualisation of ECEC and relations of power inside the 'black box' of policy making catalyse and constrain ECEC policy decisions. The study considers how actor behaviour may either reinforce dominant paradigms or conversely 'open up' the policy environment to new and alternative courses of ECEC policy action. To effectively explore these aspects of the policy environment, this study uses an interpretative approach to reveal actors' perspectives on:

1. The differential roles and status of actors engaged in the inner layers of policy making;
2. How variable roles and status influence actor behaviour and influential capacity in ECEC policy development;
3. The key social constructions which influence the development of dominant paradigms in ECEC policy in Ireland; and
4. The wider environmental catalysts and constraints which reinforce or challenge these paradigms.

I argue that these four features interact and integrate and form fundamental determinants in the construction of ECEC policy and believe a collaborative exploration of these components illuminate how, and why, ECEC policy has developed in the manner that it has. Existing ECEC and policy making studies note the general absence of research in this important area. This research therefore aims to draw on existing bodies of literature and contribute to this under-researched area of ECEC policy through provision and analysis of original empirical data on these fundamental processes and their impact.

### **Chapter Outline**

The thesis comprises nine chapters. The first is this introductory chapter which is followed by three literature review chapters.

*Chapter Two* presents the theoretical perspectives from the policy science and social construction literature which have informed and framed this study. It introduces three theories of the policy-making process, Multiple Streams Theory (MST), the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) that explore different but complementary aspects of individual and collective behaviour, focusing in particular on the variable strategies pursued by actors at different times and in different policy making contexts. The chapter also introduces the literature on social constructions and explores how actors shape and draw upon different social constructions of policy issues in their framing of policy issues and considers how various constructions of policy issues influence ECEC policy decisions and approaches.

*Chapter Three* contextualises ECEC policy development within the national social and political context. It draws upon the concept of historic institutionalism to explore how embedded traditions and institutionalised approaches guide typical courses of policy action. It identifies traditional value and belief systems that permeate the Irish policy environment and explores the impact of these on ECEC policy development. Drawing upon this contextual environment, the chapter then concludes with an exploration and analysis of Irish ECEC policy approaches, focusing in particular on policy developments from 2000 to 2010, the period of most active articulation of ECEC policy to date.

*Chapter Four* discusses how the shift from government to governance has impacted on Irish policy making structures. It identifies key policy making venues inside and outside government where actors engage in, and seek to influence the ECEC policy making process. It identifies key venues at the macro political and subsystem level and introduces the concept of core policy makers and the insider and outsider typology which are drawn upon to frame and support the identification of actors for inclusion in this study.

*Chapter Five* outlines this study's research methodology. It presents the research design and methodology - a qualitative, interpretative study of an inner elite of actors engaged in ECEC policy making processes. A rationale for a qualitative interpretative approach to the research is provided. It describes the various research processes through which policy actors were identified (research sample) for inclusion in the study.

It then details data collection, processing and analysis techniques and discusses the strengths and limitations of the study.

*Chapter Six* is the first of three findings chapters. It presents the first of three thematic networks which frame the findings of this research study. Thematic Network 1, *The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors* focuses on actors' perspectives of action and activity within and across different spheres of the policy making process and contains three organising themes which describe 'pre-decision making processes', 'decision making processes' and the key 'modus operandi' actors believe dominate Irish policy making processes.

*Chapter Seven* presents the second thematic network of this research study, *The Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts and Constraints* and discusses actors' constructions of childhood and ECEC and their perspectives of the various catalysts and constraints within the wider policy environment which have influenced the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy. Three organising themes emerged within this network and describe actors' 'constructions of childhood' and 'policy catalysts' and 'policy constraints' within the wider policy environment which have influenced ECEC policy development.

*Chapter Eight* presents the final thematic network, *Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Context* and explores actors' perspectives on the impact of the policy making process and environmental context on ECEC policy decisions and outcomes. It contains two organising themes, one exploring actors' perspectives on 'positive policy results' which have emerged from policy activity and development to date, and the second which identifies 'outstanding policy weaknesses' that actors' feel are in need of further policy reflection and development to improve and enhance Irish ECEC policy and practice.

*Chapter Nine*, the concluding chapter, synthesises key findings from the study and considers how these findings enhance understandings of the complexities and challenges involved in ECEC policy design. The chapter then discusses the implications of this research study and outlines future research areas emerging from the research findings.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

#### THEORIES OF THE POLICY PROCESS & SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

##### Introduction

*Power is always held by a number of persons rather than by one; hence policy is made through the complex processes by which those persons exert power or influence over each other.*

(Lindblom, 1968: 104)

In a democratic system, policy decisions are influenced by, and incorporate the views of a multiplicity of participants across a range of different venues, rather than those of a single governing body or dominant elite (Davis, 1997; Everett, 2003; Larragy & Bartley, 2007; Rhodes, 1997). The introductory chapter highlighted how, while policy decisions usually reflect the predominant ideological stance of those actors involved, decisions also represent the outcome of a battle and contestation over values and objectives as vested interests debate, contest and negotiate the nature of the problem and prescribe solutions to remedy it (Howard, 2005; Lindblom, 1959; Ozga, 2000). While any individual actor may attempt to influence the collective outcome, no one individual singlehandedly determines it (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008). Instead, the influential strategies and behavioural processes employed by different actors within these policy making processes represent a play for power as participants promote or resist prescribed and non prescribed courses of action prior to reaching a non-prescribed decision (Therborn, 1996). Thus the policy making process represents a form of political contest which determines who gets what, where the policy outcome depends on how competing actors within the collectivity behave and what deals are possible within the given context (Everett, 2003).

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework that guides and underpins this study. Given this study's focus on actors' perspectives of the impact of 'behind the scenes'

action and activity on ECEC policy development, the chapter firstly introduces three theories of the policy making process that explore different but complementary aspects of actor behaviour within policy making processes. These theories provide a guiding framework to sensitise the researcher to key constructs, processes and behaviours integral to this study's analytical focus.

As policy development is influenced to a great extent by the dominant beliefs and values present in the social context in which policy evolves, literature on social constructions is then introduced and discussed with a view to exploring how different actors shape and draw upon different constructions in their framing of policy issues and solutions. In illuminating how powerful social constructions are and the role policy actors play in promoting or contesting various constructions of policy issues, this chapter discusses the predominant paradigm of developmental psychology in ECEC and the more recently emerging paradigm of the new sociology of childhood. Exploring how policy actors draw upon and reinforce or contest these paradigms in their framing of ECEC issues is highly revealing of the political nature of policy making and the various strategies different actors adopt to reinforce their preferred constructions of policy issues whilst eliding alternative and competing ones. Combined these two theoretical frameworks guide and support this research study's objectives of uncovering the more nuanced and less disclosed aspects of policy making that significantly influence the structuring and shaping of policy outcomes in ECEC.

### **Theories of the Policy Process**

For much of the twentieth century, the political science debate centred on the rationality, or otherwise, of the policy-making process and whether or not a rational scientific linear model could adequately capture the complexity of the process (Everett, 2003). The rational or cyclical model disaggregates complex phenomena within the process into a series of sequential stages - usually involving agenda setting, policy formation and legitimation, implementation and evaluation - and examines what happens at each stage assuming each influences the following (Bridgman, 2003; Howard, 2005; Howlett & Ramesh, 1995; Laswell, 1956; Sabatier, 2007a). Despite the model's usefulness as a baseline framework to explore the discrete stages of policy making (Sabatier, 2007a), several analysts have questioned its capacity to capture the complex and muddled actuality of policy design (Edwards, 2005; Everett, 2003;

Lindblom, 1959; Marsh, Cohen & Olsen, 1982; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier, 2007a). Key criticisms centre on the model's failure to identify causal drivers that govern the process within and across stages; the descriptive inaccuracy of the phases (certain phases overlap, or cause revisions/reiterations of others); the oversimplification of multiple, interacting cycles involving numerous policy proposals at multiple levels of government; the notion that public policies are dominated and led by administrators rather than by other actors; and the model's focus on the bureaucratic process while disregarding content and context aspects (Colebatch, 2005; Everett, 2003; Parag, 2006; Sabatier, 1986, 2007). The narrow parameters of the cyclical or linear model are generally deemed too restrictive to capture the value-laden world of politics and the various intricacies, complexities and subtleties that typically characterise policy debates and decision-making processes (Edwards, 2005; Parag, 2006; Sabatier, 2007a; Schlager, 2007). Highlighting how the normative sequence of events is easily interrupted as a 'diverse range of players coming from different perspectives ... spawn a host of unexpected events', Edwards (2005: 70) emphasises how 'unlikely' it is that circumstances 'permit anything approaching classical rationality' in decision-making processes.

In response to these criticisms, significant theoretical work has been undertaken over the last three decades that seeks to identify and explain how political actors interact within political institutions to create, implement, evaluate and modify public policies (Sabatier, 2007a, 2007b; Schlager & Blomquist, 1996). Much of this work has focused on how the policy process develops over time and how the individual and collective behaviour of actors within and across institutions provide the context for analysis of policy development (Schlager, 2007). Given this study's focus on the impact of action and activity in the inner spheres of policy making on ECEC policy development, three complementary theories which focus on the different but inter-related strategies and behaviours of actors during the policy making process have been identified for inclusion in this research (Schlager, 2007):

1. The multiple streams theory (MST) (Kingdon, 1984);
2. The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988); and
3. The punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991).

Combined, these three theories form the tacit framework for this study by heightening the researcher's attention to key processes and modes of behaviour which their creators believe are highly influential in the structuring and shaping of policy decisions. Each of these theories is now discussed and their contribution to the study's framework reflected upon.

### **Multiple Streams Theory (MST):**

Kingdon's MS framework (1984) developed as an outgrowth of the *Garbage Can Model of Organisational Choice* (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). The *Garbage Can Model* depicts organisations as organised anarchies and calls into question the rational approach to decision-making by describing 'decision opportunities' as 'fundamentally ambiguous stimuli' where choice opportunity derives from 'a garbage can into which various kinds of problems and solutions are dumped by participants as they are generated' (Ibid., 1972: 2). Adapting the model to public policy, Kingdon (1995) disaggregates the loose collection of ideas which flow through the policy process into three distinct streams: the problem stream; the policy stream; and the politics stream. By distinguishing between these streams, a better understanding of agenda setting emerges as the individual dynamics characteristic of each stream become evident (Burgess, 2002).

The *problem stream* consists of conditions or dilemmas which policy makers and citizens want addressed (e.g. childcare costs, quality issues, inequities of access). Kingdon (1995) describes how problems contain a perceptual, interpretative element that results in the more problematic interpretation of certain issues over others and accordingly leads to fluctuations in the amount of policy attention different issues and problems receive. The number of problems occupying the attention of policy makers, or the 'problem load' is an important variable affecting the likely attention various problems receive by policy makers (Zahariadis, 2007). Attention may be drawn to policy problems through a range of 'focusing events' such as public crises or scandals, or 'feedback' from enacted policies which may highlight policy success and reinforce adopted solutions or conversely highlight policy problems and required revisions or new responses (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Zahariadis, 2007).



The *policy stream* consists of a ‘primeval soup’ of ideas and proposals developed by the various policy communities<sup>8</sup> which surround government and compete to win attention (Zahariadis, 2007: 76). For instance, in different contexts and across time, the ECEC ‘primeval soup’ has included fully privatised ECEC policy proposals, partly subsidised ECEC policy proposals and fully subsidised publicly provided ECEC proposals. The selection criteria influencing the perceived suitability of policy proposals includes the technical feasibility of the proposal (e.g. cost and ease of implementation) and the value acceptance of the idea, usually assessed by the perceived political and public palatability to the policy proposal. Zahariadis (2007) highlights the importance of policy community integration or cohesion in this stream as it affects how ideas are created and developed and the pace at which they rise to prominence. He identifies four important dimensions in this regard; the size of the policy community, the mode and strategies they adopt, their capacity and resources and their opportunities to access powerful decision makers. He distinguishes between more integrated networks which are smaller in size, possess a consensual mode, higher capacity and more restricted access and less integrated networks, which are larger in size, possess a competitive mode, have a lower administrative capacity and less restricted access to decision makers (Zahariadis, 2003, 2007). The skills, capacities, access opportunities and cohesion of a policy community are therefore likely to affect the probability of proposal approval and represent important variables for consideration in this study’s analysis.

The *politics stream* centres on the macro political level of policy making and focuses on the public mood, interest group politics and turnover in the administrative and legislative branches at political level (Zahariadis, 2007). The public mood refers to the public palatability to different policy proposals, in particular contexts and at particular times and forms a key political motivator in policy decisions due to the importance of maintaining electoral support. For instance, changing public perspectives regarding public and private responsibility for care, especially child care, which was once the concern of, in the main, the social democratic societies has contributed to policy development within these domains across a growing range of western societies as shifts in public opinion intensify political pressure for statutory interventions and supports (Williams, 2003). Interest group support or opposition is often conceived of as an

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<sup>8</sup>For Kingdon, the policy process is made up of a fragmented community of varied specialists (legislators, staffers, academics, analysts, and policy entrepreneurs) who are immersed in a particular problem (Ellington, 2009).

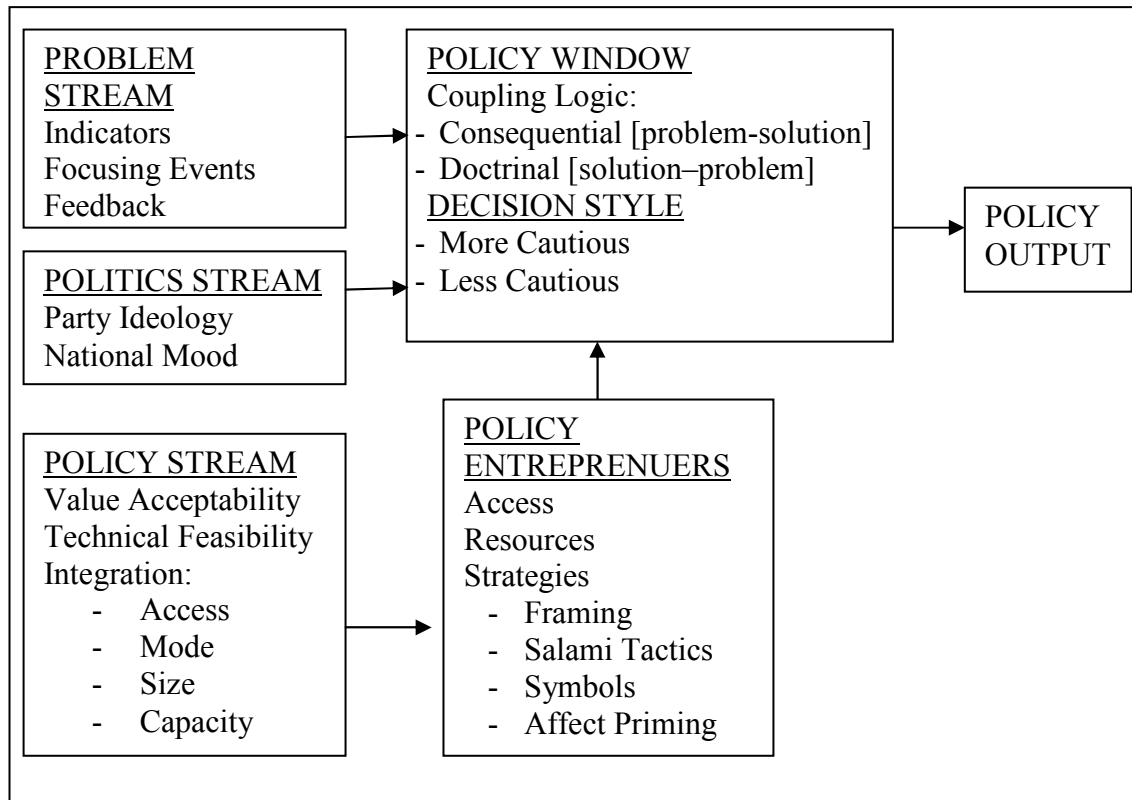
indicator or litmus test of wider consensus or resistance within the broader political arena and finally, legislative and administrative turnover are also likely to affect policy choice in significant ways (Zahariadis, 2007). For instance, new governments usually imply new politics and new policies and a new government department often leads to restructuring of aims and objectives within a policy domain.

In the MST, an issue gains traction on the policy agenda when the three separate streams of activity ‘couple’ with a choice opportunity (Zahariadis, 2007: 73). Policy change usually arises as a result of a combination of positive timing and skilful manipulation by ‘policy entrepreneurs’ who match policy solutions to policy problems and exploit opportunities to promote change during these ‘policy windows’ (Cohen-Vogel, 2009; Kingdon, 1995; Wilson, 2000). Policy entrepreneurs may adopt more or less cautious styles of decision-making. More cautious styles are those which ‘initially increase and then substantially decrease information dissipation’ (Zahariadis, 2003: 143). The more cautious the style, the higher the capability to predict the final choice up to a certain point whereas the situation reverses and predictive capability reduces substantially at less cautious decision-making levels (Zahariadis, 2003, 2007).

Of particular importance to this study’s analysis, is the powerful and strategising role the policy entrepreneur plays in effective stream coupling (e.g. attaching problems to preferred solutions that suit macro political criteria). A key factor affecting their likely success rests on their framing of the policy issue and solution (e.g. problem reduction, implementation ease, policy winners/losers etc) in a way that maximises its palatability with politicians, competing policy actors and those affected by the problem (the public). Key strategies adopted by policy entrepreneurs to maximise their likely success include the strategic use of symbols, ‘affect priming’ and ‘salami tactics’ (Zahariadis, 2007: 78). Using affect priming theory, Zahariadis (2007) hypothesises that the national mood vitally affects governments’ behaviour, given how a negative mood is more likely to elicit confrontation and dissent thus jeopardising a decision maker’s popularity. Symbols have ‘affective and cognitive dimensions’ and are used to transmit clear but simplified messages and have power to elicit emotional responses (Ibid., 2007: 78). Where entrepreneurs believe their solutions are less likely to be adopted because of various perceived risks, they sometimes adopt a sequential decision-making alternative, termed ‘salami tactics’ where they divide their proposal into distinct phases and present

them at opportune moments to promote agreement by stages (Zahariadis, 2003; 2007). Figure 1 depicts the various processes and components of the MST.

**Figure 1: Multiple Streams Theory Framework**



Source: Zahariadis (2007: 71)

A number of weaknesses have been identified in MST. The first relates to the apolitical nature of the theory and its resultant scant attention to the impact of values and beliefs on the behaviour and strategies of those actors engaged in policy development (Ike, 2009; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988). Secondly, the theory has also been criticised for the distance it postulates between the policy and political streams. By focusing on the behaviour of the *individual* within policy making, it fails to fully incorporate the powerful impact of *collective* action and behaviour and the role of institutional arrangements in policy development (Sabatier, 1998; Schlager, 2007). The political stream, the most amenable and most likely to encompass institutional arrangements as part of its explanation, only incorporates the national mood, interest group domains and administrative and legislative turnover (Schlager, 2007). While the focus on policy entrepreneurs indirectly incorporates institutional arrangements, critics suggest a more progressive incorporation of institutional structures, such as bureaucracies, the courts and intergovernmental relations could provide a more authentic and comprehensive

reflection of the policy process and capture critical traits and dimensions of different governing bodies in policy making analysis (Schlager, 2007; Sabatier, 1998).

MST has also been criticised for the strong element of serendipity in the coupling of the different streams (Dudley, 2000) and the limited testing, elaboration and falsification of MS theory (Sabatier, 2007b). However, others argue that the theory's emphasis on ambiguity and loosely integrated models is indicative of post positivist theory and is 'extremely strong within an epistemology informed by scientific realism' (Radaelli, 2000: 134). For the purposes of this research, MST draws the researcher's attention to the various strategies actors employ to maximise their entrepreneurialism (e.g. stream coupling, policy framing, 'salami tactics') and increase their likelihood of securing agreement for their favoured policy solutions which accordingly warrant attention in the field work stage of this research. Its usefulness as an analytical policy framework is evidenced by its high citation on the Social Science Citation Index [SSCI]<sup>9</sup> and its wide application across a variety of European countries (Dudley, 2000; Radaelli, 2000; Sabatier, 2007b; Schlager, 2007; Zahariadis, 2007). This study's complementary inclusion of the MST with the ACF which explores how belief systems influence policy development and PET which incorporates analysis of institutional contexts and structures counter balances and compensates for the outlined limitations of MST and ensures a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of policy development than any individual theory could possibly encapsulate.

### **The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF):**

The Advocacy Coalition Framework fleshes out a more complete understanding of the policy-making process by considering how belief systems and limited information processing abilities affect how individuals and groups acquire, use and incorporate – or filter out - information in policy development (Fischer, 2003; Schlager, 2007).

Given the tightly crowded nature of policy agendas, most policy development occurs within policy subsystems (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). These subsystems may be tightly or loosely grouped and usually comprise different levels of government actors, interest groups, think tanks, academics institutions and research centres, journalists, and other

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<sup>9</sup> Sabatier (2007a: 9) argues that 'although the MS is not always as clear and internally consistent as one might like, it appears to be applicable to a wide variety of policy agendas and was cited about 80 times annually in the SSCI.'

vested interests, all of whom share ‘a set of basic beliefs and seek to manipulate the rules, budgets and personnel of various governmental institutions in order to achieve’ shared goals over time (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993: 5). The ACF posits that policy participants within a policy subsystem seek allies with those who hold similar policy beliefs and a number of advocacy coalitions form based on these shared beliefs, interests and concerns. Within any policy subsystem there will generally be two to five advocacy coalitions, usually, one more dominant than the other minority coalitions that attempt to gain advantage through increased resources (e.g. increases in advocacy coalition membership base, high profile advocacy campaigns) and policy-oriented learning which favours their beliefs (Wilson, 2000). For instance, in the case of ECEC, those who primarily conceptualise ECEC as a private family matter may form one coalition, those who conceptualise ECEC as a labour market supply factor may form another coalition, those primarily focused on ECEC as a pre-primary education structure may form a third coalition and those who conceptualise ECEC as a children’s rights issue may form a fourth. These advocacy coalitions compete to translate their belief systems into public policy mediated by a third group of actors called policy brokers<sup>10</sup> (Jenkins-Smith, 1990).

The ACF organises belief systems into a three tier hierarchical structure comprising the deep core of a belief system (Level 1) which includes basic and normative ontological assumptions (e.g. the relative priority of fundamental values, rights or needs-based frameworks driving ECEC) (Meijerink, 2005; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). The policy core (Level 2) represents basic normative commitments and basic perceptions that span the entire policy domain, such as the primary causes and seriousness of a problem and the appropriateness of different institutional arrangements to address the perceived problem (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1998). Secondary beliefs (Level 3) are usually less than subsystem wide beliefs concerning problems, causes and solutions (Meijerink, 2005). Deep core beliefs and policy core beliefs are very resistant to change while secondary beliefs are more susceptible to change as their narrower scope requires less evidence and belief change among fewer individuals (Sabatier & Weibel, 2007). For instance, a shift from private to public provision of ECEC is less likely than an incremental adjustment to child benefit payments, given the shift in deep core beliefs

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<sup>10</sup> This group is assumed to be in a position of formal authority (e.g. chief executives, commissions, courts etc.) and to be primarily interested in finding compromise among the adversarial stakeholder coalitions that could lead to conflict de-escalation (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

and policy core beliefs the former requires as opposed to the narrower shift in secondary beliefs an incremental adjustment to an existent payment requires.

Policy change takes place as a consequence of the policy-oriented learning effects of advocacy coalitions or as a result of some external trigger or exogenous event<sup>11</sup> (Ibid., 2007). The first and relatively stable exogenous influence relates to the basic attributes of the problem (e.g. the basic distribution of natural resources; core socio-cultural values and basic constitutional structures) which rarely provide the impetus for behavioural or policy change within the subsystem (Ibid., 2007). The second and more dynamic influence relates to exogenous changes in socio-economic conditions, systematic governing conditions and changes within other policy subsystems, all of which affect the behaviour of subsystem actors and potentially lead to changes in belief and advocacy structures over time (Meijerink, 2005; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Whereas dynamic external events may lead to rapid policy change in a subsystem structure and individual policy core beliefs, the relative stability of deep core and policy beliefs mean the impact of changes from policy-oriented learning may be very gradual and have a larger effect on secondary beliefs (Fischer, 2003; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Weiss, 1977). Accordingly, the ACF is interested in policy change over a decade or more given the increased propensity for change over longer time periods (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). As coalitions try to learn more about possibilities to reach its own policy objectives (policy-oriented learning), belief systems generally form a type of information filter, where individuals are predisposed to reject or dismiss information that challenges their core policies but readily accept and incorporate supportive [advocative] information as a persuasive means to maintain solidarity and strengthen advocacy support (Meijerink, 2005; Schlager, 2007).

Sabatier & Weible (2007: 200) identify two ‘opportunity structures’ that strongly affect the resources and behaviour of advocacy coalitions:

1. The degree of consensus needed for major policy change: in general the higher the degree of consensus required in political systems, the greater the incentive for coalitions to be inclusive and seek compromise and share information with opponents; and

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<sup>11</sup> Learning within and across coalitions may account for incremental policy change as coalitions may incorporate secondary aspects of opposing coalition’s belief systems as policy-oriented learning occurs (Meijerink, 2005).

2. Openness of the political system: two functions are relevant here, the number of decision-making venues that any major policy proposal must pass through and the accessibility of each venue<sup>12</sup>.

The key policy relevant resources that advocacy coalitions use in their attempts to influence public policy include: skilful leadership (to create an attractive vision for a coalition and manage resources effectively); financial resources (e.g. to fund research, establish think tanks); high profile campaigns (e.g. public protests, media campaigns); technical expertise (to enhance knowledge of various aspects of the policy issue and supportive solutions); and integration of formal legal authority supports by ‘placing allies in positions of legal authority through elections or political appointments or crafting and launching political campaigns to sway officials with legal authority’ (Sabatier & Weible, 2007: 203).

While some applications of the ACF merely identify competing sides of political debate, Sabatier & Weible (2007) emphasise its much broader value in explaining belief change and policy change over long periods through policy-oriented learning and internal and external system shock occurrences. For instance, the impact of evidence-based studies highlighting the economic rationale of ECEC investment have altered beliefs about the value of ECEC, particularly amongst neo-liberal politicians and have inspired a range of targeted interventions in the US (HeadStart), UK (SureStart) and Ireland (EarlyStart) (Bennett, 2006; Lister, 2003, 2006a; Woodhead, 2006). Sabatier and Weible (2007: 208) also emphasise how the ACF provides theoretical guidance ‘to researchers for understanding the complexities of political conflict and mobilisation’ and to identify ‘properties of policy subsystems, stable and unstable parameters of the broader policy system and the different components of policy core beliefs’. For the purposes of this study, the framework supports an exploration of how collective behaviour – based on core beliefs and core policy beliefs – influences actor engagement and interaction in policy making processes and draws attention to the importance of policy-oriented learning and exogenous trigger events in destabilising dominant beliefs systems by creating moments for policy reflection and review.

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<sup>12</sup> Sabatier & Weible (2007: 200) argue that countries such as the US with separation of power and strong state/regional governments combined with strong traditions of accessible bureaucracies, legislature and courts create very open systems and involve many different actors while corporatist systems tend to be less open as decision making is more centralized and participation is restricted to a ‘smaller number of government authorities and leaders of peak authorities who observe norms of compromise and acquiescence to decisions’ (traits they also attribute to Westminster systems).

### **Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET)**

In contrast to the MST and the ACF, Baumgartner and Jones's (1991) punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) explores overall *patterns* of decision making in policy making processes. The theory was designed to explain both stability *and* change within the policy process (former models had proved more successful at explaining one or other) and to identify factors which cause a shift from stability to change<sup>13</sup> (True *et al*, 2007). PET explains policy stability, the dominant pattern in policy decision-making, by the existence of institutionalized policy monopolies<sup>14</sup> within policy subsystems that usually dampen pressures for policy change (Ibid., 2007). However, even long-term periods of policy stability are always susceptible to interruption as 'exogenous shocks to a policy monopoly' disrupt policy equilibrium and creates 'a tipping point, oriented toward sharp and explosive policy change' (Givel, 2010: 188).

A 'crucial condition for policy change is political *issue attention*' (Walgrave & Varone, 2008: 367). As highlighted in the MST and ACF, the complexity of the environment and the cognitive limitations of the decision maker impose selective bias on the flow of information and the attention different policy issues attract (Wildavsky, 1964). Given how policy making usually occurs within several specialized subsystems which focus exclusively on a specific range of policy issues away from the glare of publicity associated with high agenda politics, most policy making results in incremental change or marginal adjustments to existent policies in response to bargaining amongst interests as circumstances change (True *et al*, 2007). Jones & Baumgartner (2005: 337) describe how the decision maker, in effect, 'locks choice into a set of facts based in the past which he/she must update in a punctuated manner in the face of change that cannot be ignored'. Incremental adjustments to childcare subsidisation rates in response to public criticisms of rising costs, rather than a restructuring of public/private responsibility for ECEC, provides one such example of incremental change within policy subsystems. Because of their limited information processing capabilities, individuals within the subsystem usually attend to the more salient and urgent characteristics of a situation and

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<sup>13</sup> The use of PET in policy theory derived from PET which had been originally developed within the paleontological literature (Eldredge & Gould, 1972). In punctuated equilibrium theory, species spend most of the time in a period of stasis, where small genetic differences are present but do not greatly affect the structural characteristics of the organism. Periods of stasis are interrupted by rare episodes in which the forces for change override the barriers to change and generally happen when pressures from the environment combine with internal genetic pressures for change. These periods are called punctuations and the resulting process combining stasis with rare punctuations is punctuated equilibrium (Robinson, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> A policy monopoly has 'a definable institutional structure responsible for policy making in an issue area' which is 'supported by some powerful idea or image' which is 'generally connected to core political values and can communicated simply to the public' (True *et al*, 2007: 159).



prioritise their decisions on that basis (Schlager, 2007). However, when certain trigger events or perturbations expand the focus, attention is alerted to additional inter-related policy issues and a decision maker is forced to update using other potential indicators through a process termed ‘boundedly rational updating’ and a pattern of stability and punctuations occurs (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005: 337).

Just as with MST and the ACF, PET incorporates analysis of causal factors which lead to lurches and shifts in policy development patterns. Drawing on the agenda setting literature, Baumgartner & Jones (1991) demonstrate how most subsystems contain actors who have an interest in replacing the existing subsystem with a new one or new definition, meaning subsystems are susceptible to occasional reorganisation as policy monopolies become vulnerable to redefinition of a policy image and to the existence of multiple policy venues. As an issue is redefined, or new dimensions are added to the debate, new actors feel qualified to exert their authority where they previously abstained (True *et al*, 2007). Thus, those ‘who previously dominated the policy process may find themselves in the minority, and erstwhile losers may be transformed into winners’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991: 1047). For instance, the ratification of the UNCRC has contributed to the greater incorporation of children’s rights organisations in ECEC policy debates that might once have been dominated by employers and unions (childcare) or educationalists (preschool). As attention increases around an issue through for example, increased media attention and broader public awareness, the associated conflict expansion may shift the issue upwards on the policy agenda away from the policy subsystem and into the macro political institutions, what Baumgartner (1989) terms ‘the peak of the policy-making hierarchy’ where radical policy change is possible. While agenda access to the macro-political system level does not guarantee change, it is a precondition for major policy punctuations (True *et al*, 2007).

The number of policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984) and the number of institutional *policy venues* (institutional arenas policy development and decisions occur) that can be used to sell an alternative *policy image* (i.e. a different construction or conceptualisation of the issue at stake) are key factors affecting the number of punctuations within a policy system (Walgrave & Varone, 2008). To bring about policy change, issues are redefined or new dimensions are added to a prevailing policy image. Subsequently, proponents of policy change engage in the strategic process of ‘venue shopping’ (Baumgartner & Jones., 1993) where they actively seek out new receptive policy venues

which increase their chances of getting support for their newly fashioned policy image. Obtaining support for a new policy image in venues at a higher administrative level potentially induces significant policy change as increased attention is generated by the new policy image and increasingly ‘groups within the political system become more aware of the question’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991: 1048). In Ireland, the 2006 relocation of ‘childcare’ responsibility from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) to the newly established Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA)<sup>15</sup> is illustrative of a shifting policy image and venue. When a new policy image attracts supporters, and becomes widely accepted, this generally marks the beginning of another lengthy period of policy stability. As the policy image becomes institutionalized and a new policy monopoly is established, the policy domain is once again contracted out to the policy subsystem (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Meijerink, 2005).

Schlager (2007: 297) describes PET as the most ‘coarse’ of the three theories and argues that the features, or variables it uses - interest mobilisations, policy image, and venues - to explain patterns of decisions are ‘few in number’, making it ‘the most parsimonious’ of the theories. However, PET does pay significant attention to the role of institutional arrangements in policy change – and compensates for the more limited attention to this aspect in the MST and ACF – by highlighting how institutional arrangements may affect the magnitude of policy change. The PET also enhances understanding of the importance of policy images and the exploitation of multiple venues. While the reframing of a new policy image is easily related to opposing coalition behaviour addressed by the ACF, the concept of exploiting multiple venues, and the potential impact of ‘venue shopping’ on the course of policy action, is a new dimension which offers an important complementary insight into an additional aspect of policy dynamics (Meijerink, 2005). PET also highlights and accounts for both stability and change in the policy process, whereas previous theories tend to focus on one or other aspect (True *et al*, 2007). For the purposes of this research, PET draws the researcher's attention to the importance of exploring those factors within the policy environment which constrain policy development to a predominantly incremental approach, and those trigger events, which contribute to the dynamics of lurching and

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<sup>15</sup> On the 2<sup>nd</sup> June the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was renamed the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It maintains its former name throughout this study in reflection of the time frame in which this study is concentrated.

rapid and sudden policy change and highlight the inter-linked importance of image and venue as a strategy for policy development.

### **Integrating Theories of the Policy Process into the Research Framework**

By drawing attention to partly overlapping and partly rival hypotheses, the MST, ACF and PET provide a complementary framework for this research study. The theories highlight different but equally important aspects of the multi-actor and multi-sited policy making process, which when combined, account for and support intricate analysis of important aspects of actor behaviour in policy development (Schlager, 2007, Meijerink, 2005). Given the very limited existing research on the impact of behind the scenes activity in ECEC policy development, these three theories sensitise the researcher to diverse strategies and behaviours pursued by different categories of actors as they seek to influence policy development from inside ‘the black box’. Drawing attention to the impact of wider contextual changes, individual and collective strategies adopted by actors in pursuit of certain policy solutions (e.g. policy framing, salami tactics), the role of belief systems and institutional structures in guiding actor behaviour and the responsive fluctuations in policy decision outcomes, the researcher is more sensitised to and aware of the potential scale and impact of interacting processes and events. Combined, these theories provide a rich framework to support the researcher’s exploration of causal factors influencing ECEC policy development over time.

Dudley (2000) suggests that the three theories add a three dimensional quality to our understanding of the dynamics of major policy change as the significance of factors such as time, space and cognitive learning are highlighted and demonstrate how new ideas, values and knowledge may be successfully transplanted into established policy domains. While the frameworks emphasize the importance of variables, such as external focusing events or governmental turnover, they also emphasise that these events do not account for policy change in their own right, but must firstly be exploited by policy entrepreneurs (Meijerink, 2005). Thus the important role of the actor in influencing policy development, by their interaction with and exploitation of exogenous (outside the policy subsystem) and endogenous events (e.g. policy-oriented learning within the subsystem) is illuminated. Secondly, the theories, particularly the ACF and PET also draw attention to the general resistance of policies to change and the importance of exploring the ‘residue’ of previous policy decisions and wider contextual

changes over elongated time periods to provide an authentic appraisal of the impact of actor behaviour (Dudley, 2000; Radaelli, 2000; Schlager, 2007).

Parsons (2000) has criticised the deductivist and at heart deeply positivist approach of these three theories for their relatively confined analysis and interpretation of highly complex policy processes. He emphasises how a more open exchange between different theoretical frames which includes, rather than excludes approaches informed by social, critical and cultural theory can enhance relevant insights and contribute to the development of richer theories (Ibid., 2000). While the ACF has much in common with a social constructivist approach by virtue of the fact that both theories focus on the importance of explaining how belief systems influence the policy process, the theories contrast in how they situate beliefs within the process. For the ACF ‘beliefs are the glue that bring and hold coalitions together and it is the competition, conflict and sometimes cooperation of coalitions (along with a number of other factors) that produce policy change’ meaning ‘politics affect policies.’ (Schlager, 2007: 299). In contrast, ‘for social constructions theory, the design or content of policies and how benefits and burdens are distributed are a function of the social constructions and political power of target groups’ meaning ‘policies affect politics’ (Ibid., 2007: 299).

By incorporating analysis of social constructions theory into this research’s framework, this study aims to respond to the limitations of the three positivist theories and provide a richer framework which explores the social and cultural aspects that influence actor behaviour in ECEC policy development. Radaelli (2000) also argues that the theme of knowledge utilisation – which social construction theory addresses - offers an opportunity to tackle the issues of ethics, democracy and democratic practices in policy analysis which the ACF, MST and PET fail to comprehensively explore. The incorporation of both sets of theories within this study is two-fold. Firstly, analysis of social constructions theory within this research’s framework ameliorates the social and cultural analytical voids that have received criticism in the theories of the policy process. Conversely, the literature on social constructions has also been criticised for its limited attention to institutional arrangements as an explanation for policy making (Schlager, 2007; Sabatier, 2007). Thus by incorporating analysis of social constructions with theories of the policy process that explicitly incorporate institutional arrangements into their analytical frameworks, this research provides an integrated and more nuanced analytical framework that explores the interactive nature of social constructions and

actor behaviour within institutional frameworks in policy making processes. Corroborating the benefits of such an integrated approach, Ball (2006: 43) highlights how the complexity and scope of policy analysis – from the political structures, to culture, to social interaction and individual interpretation – ‘precludes the possibility of successful single theory explanations’ and instead requires ‘a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories – an applied sociology rather than a pure one’.

### **Social Constructions and ECEC**

Analysis of social constructions help explain how and why particular kinds of policy are produced in particular contexts and reveal how different constructions of policy issues influence actor participation patterns, political orientations and the form of democracy that prevails (Ingram, Schneider & de Leon, 2007). Social construction theorists explore how key aspects of policy paradigms (e.g. problem framing, problem definition, problem resolutions) are constructed through an ongoing social process in which a range vested interests (e.g. citizens, journalists, academics, politicians, and practitioners) bring personal experience, perspectives and values to give meaning to a particular issue (Ingram, Schneider, & de Leon, 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Stone, 2002).

The selection and prioritisation of certain social constructions and the suppression and relegation of others in policy making highlights how knowledge is always perspective-based, always subject to interpretation and revision and therefore always provisional and always plural (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Governments (and those with whom they interact) draw on, utilise, develop, prioritise and promote certain social constructions of policy issues to establish what Foucault terms ‘regimes of ‘truth’ that produce and rationalise ‘techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour’ (Foucault, 1997: 81). Thus socially constructed truths represent an art of government that generates an authoritative consensus regarding appropriate courses of action which then discipline and regulate us by governing ‘what is held to be normal and desirable ways to think, act and feel in, for instance, early childhood institutions’ (Mac Naughton, 2005: 32). Truth and knowledge are therefore understood, ‘not in terms of the essential truth or falseness of a claim in the absolute or objective sense’, but in terms of how ‘particular claims come to be treated in a particular time and place as *if* they were true knowledge’ (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007: 30). For instance, Cannella (1999) highlights how

parents and educators have unquestioningly accepted and contributed to the discourses of scientific childhood without recognition or reflection on whether or not the pre-determinism imposed by others benefits younger human beings. Foucault describes this official sanctioning of certain truths and the marginalisation or suppression of others as a 'violence' (1977: 163 cited in Mac Naughton, 2005: 43) that privileges homogeneity by discounting and silencing the multi-perspectival reality of truth and knowledge.

Regimes of truth have equity effects and are closely related to power as particular truths prioritise and legitimise certain actors' perspectives over others, thereby granting some actors advantage in determining the conceptualisation of a policy issue and the inter-related institutional response (Mac Naughton, 2005; Rigby *et al*, 2007). For instance, whether the interpretations of employers or educationalists or children's rights advocates are prioritised in the structuring of ECEC policy responses has significant implications in terms of prioritisation of policy functions (capacity over curriculum over agency of the child) and fundamentally impacts on children's experiences of ECEC. Much of the dynamism of policy making is in persuading others that a particular construction and framing of policy issue is the 'right' one and, therefore, particular policy design elements are the logical choice (Ingram *et al*, 2007; Wilson, 2000).

To disrupt these regimes of truth and to free ourselves from inequitable relations of power and their effects within specific regimes of truth, 'we must tackle our will to truth within the very regimes of truth that govern us' (Mac Naughtan, 2005: 44). To accomplish this, we employ the tactics of 'parrhesia' (Foucault, 2001) by using the practice of free speech to speak out, and question and challenge dominant truths thus raising and drawing attention to those alternative truths which are denied official status within the prevailing regime of truth. The exercise of parrhesia enables possibilities for change for 'as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible (Foucault, 1988: 155).

Of particular importance to the present study are the social constructions of childhood which have evolved over time and their consequent impact on ECEC policy decisions and approaches. This study draws on the work of social constructions' theorists to explore the inter-related nature of power, knowledge and discourse in constructions of childhood and ECEC and consider how certain discourses are promoted in the framing

of policy issues and construction of policy images to justify and rationalise selected policy approaches as the best and most appropriate form of policy action (Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). The study also considers the struggles advocacy coalitions, proposing alternatives and counter constructions and images encounter in challenging dominant constructions of ECEC policy thus uncovering how role and status and relations of power impact on actors' influential capacities by catalysing or constraining variable courses of policy action.

### **Constructions of Childhood and ECEC**

It was Aries (1962) who first highlighted the socially constructed character of childhood in his seminal research into children's lives from the Middle Ages. Making extensive use of medieval icons he argued that, beyond the dependent stage of infancy, children were not depicted and existed only as miniature adults until the fifteenth century when evolving understandings of children as different and particular resulted in their gradual removal from the everyday life of adult society and the social, political and economic institutionalisation of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; James & James, 2004). By highlighting how childhood cannot be regarded as an unproblematic descriptor of a natural biological phase, Aries offered a taste of cultural relativity and stimulated a range of studies exploring the diverse, rather than universal, nature of childhood (James & James, 2004). These studies have analysed and illuminated how assumptions and constructions of childhood are tied into our social and political systems and goals (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Mayall, 2002; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). For instance, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory led to a strong belief and associated policies which prioritised exclusive maternal care in the earliest years of a child's life. However by the 1980s, economic shifts and gender equality reforms led different advocacy groups to speak openly about the importance of investment in childcare as an effective means to maintain a stable workforce and an accompanying discourse which constructed non-maternal care as an alternative child-rearing support and important labour market supply factor slowly emerged (Dahlberg *et al*, 2007). Governments' responses, and by association their contribution to the changing construction of motherhood gradually resulted in a diverse range of supports across countries from direct provision of 'childcare', to tax relief and financial subsidisation of childcare costs to support the altering construction of motherhood – as carer and worker – from this time (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2007; Moss & Pence, 2002; Woodhead, 1996).

Thus social constructions of childhood are influenced by and inter-connect with politics and policy development and provide explanation of how and why ECEC policy paradigms develop in the way that they do. Two key paradigms of ECEC, grounded in and emerging from contrasting constructions of childhood provide the contextual frame within which much contemporary ECEC policy is developed and/or contested and provide a grounding framework of analysis within this research. The first relates to the long-standing and highly influential dominant paradigm of developmental psychology (Bruner, 1980; Piaget, 1971) and the second discusses the more recently emerging ‘new paradigm of the sociology of childhood’ (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998: 6) which, by unpacking the assumptions underlying the dominant paradigm has challenged the former’s authoritative position and right of primacy in informing ECEC policy construction (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; James & James, 2004; James & Pence, 1997; Mayall, 2001; Moss, 2007; Moss & Pence, 2002). Exploration of these paradigms synthesises how powerful constructions are in influencing individual and collective action within the policy process and illuminates how the action of actors reinforces or constrains receptiveness to different constructions of childhood and ECEC in contemporary policy making. An exploration of the intertwined relationship between the conceptualisation of a policy concern and the role of actors involved in these processes reinforces Ball’s (2006) earlier arguments regarding two theories being better than one in any analysis of the complexities of the policy process.

### **The Established Paradigm: Developmental Psychology**

Burman (1994: 18) suggests that ‘the emergence of developmental psychology was prompted by concerns to classify, measure and regulate’ through ‘a paradigmatically modern discipline arising at a time of commitment to narratives of truth, objectivity, science and reason’. Developmental psychology has established a dominant position in the field of early childhood in English speaking countries and its capacity to maximise school readiness, equalise opportunities and promote social justice are widely cited as an underpinning rationale for ECEC investment (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Woodhead, 2006; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

Inspired by studies such as the Perry High Scope project, ‘which made extreme claims from very limited data’ regarding the economic and social returns from early investment, ‘a powerful mythology has grown up around the idea of early intervention’



and its capacity to resolve inequality and poverty (Penn, 2005: 49). It is these 'scientific' studies and their numeric quantifications of ECEC's capacity to produce a stable, well-prepared future work force that has aroused most interest in early childhood amongst the heretofore largely uninterested politicians and business leaders (Dahlberg *et al*, 2007; Penn, 2005; Woodhead, 2006). Proponents of this view of early childhood institutions give little indication that the dominant discipline has been problematized and seemingly ignore the limitations of these 'evidence-based' studies and broader criticisms of developmental approaches in policy discourse (Bown *et al*, 2011; Cannella, 1999; Penn, 2007; Woodhead, 2006), thus creating and embedding a regime of truth regarding the value and purpose of ECEC within these countries' social, educational and political systems. Instead of being understood as just one social construction of the complex reality and one possible way to describe children's development, these theories have a tendency to function as if they were 'true' and to become the territory itself (Dahlberg, *et al*, 2007). Kvale (1992, cited in Dahlberg *et al*, 1999: 15) emphasises the extreme significance and implications of this disciplinary dominance as it 'adopts a highly positivistic, decontextualised and universalizing approach to children and their institutions'. As early childhood institutions are constructed as sites of technical practice and primarily focus on the school readiness of children, 'deficit approaches, where teachers assess children by a list of basic skills and teach skills that are poorly developed or lacking, overshadow much of the child's experiences and capabilities' (Mitchell, 2007: 24). Dahlberg *et al*, (2007) emphasize how the elevation of this one discipline over others has cast pedagogy adrift from societal and value-based considerations.

However, over the last three decades, by producing a wave of new research that deconstructs, challenges and contests the veracity of the dominant regime of truth, a group of reconceptualist scholars have invoked Foucault's tactics of parrhesia by problematising and destabilising the notion of predetermined, universal childhoods that require specific forms of educational experience determined by scientific discovery (Cannella, 1999; Dahlberg *et al*, 2007; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). These reconceptualists have produced a vast literature which questions the assumptions of universal truths and a new paradigm of childhood which features a new understanding of children and childhood, not as a preparatory or marginal stage but as an equally important stage of the life course has emerged (Cannella & Viruru 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; James & Prout, 1997; Jans, 2004; Mac Naughton,

2005; Mayall, 2000, 2002; Moss, 2007; Moss & Pence, 2002; Viruru, 2001; Woodhead, 2006; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

### **The New Paradigm of the Sociology of Childhood**

While acknowledging childhood as a biological fact, the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood also emphasises its' socially constructed nature and highlights how subjective interpretations of childhood provide the frame for contextualising the early years of life (James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; Woodhead, 1996). As a social construction, childhood is a variable of social analysis and comparative, cross-cultural analysis reveals many varieties of childhoods rather than a single, universal phenomenon (Prout & James, 1990). For instance, Fleer's (2003) cross-cultural analysis of educational practices in Australia found that taken-for-granted practices for those who are not part of the culture with power actively work against indigenous learning and highlighted how the culturally exclusive nature of many practices position indigenous children without a voice or a familiar context in which to learn. By contrast, the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood positions children as social agents with an active role to play in the construction and determination of their social lives and those with whom they interact. It emphasises how children, as agents, contribute to learning and accordingly have a right to participate and have their voices incorporated into decision making and understandings of childhood (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; James & James, 1997; Prout, 1990).

In contrast to the apolitical depiction of developmental psychology, the sociology of childhood's concern with the present tense of childhood and with children as a social group, especially in terms of the daily effect of their relations with adults' lives draws attention to power relations and is fundamentally political in nature (Mayall, 2002). The discipline has fuelled criticism of modernist, western assumptions about children and has explored multiple perspectives and diversities of childhood and ways of being previously silenced and suppressed in favour of the dominant paradigm of developmental psychology. The collaborative work of early childhood reconceptualists has called for and substantiated arguments for a 'shift in the policy landscape' with 'advocacy for early childhood increasingly based on recognition of children's universal rights' (Woodhead, 2006: 24). By exercising parrhesia and deconstructing and challenging 'truth orientations' and power relations promoting and institutionalising the

dominant discipline of developmental psychology in the structuring of ECEC, early childhood reconceptualists have opened doors and created new spaces and positions from which the field of ECEC can be reconsidered and reconfigured.

### **The Competing Battle between Established and Emerging Paradigms**

Despite the achievements of the new paradigm, the prevailing dominance of the developmental psychology paradigm and its remarkable resistance to criticism intensifies the challenge for those seeking to destabilise it from its position of primacy in ECEC policy (James & Prout, 1997; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). This is in part at any rate, attributed to developmental psychology's ubiquity and high productivity in knowledge creation and dissemination, but also to its political appeal because of its positivistic focus (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1999; James & Prout, 1997; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). In more recent decades, developmental psychology has also worked to incorporate the more contextualised components of child development into its paradigm to reflect new knowledge and evolving interpretations of childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bruner, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978). However, despite these recontextualisations, the discipline's long-established theoretical traditions persist and continue to ensure that its' dominant concerns continue to be distinctive and remain essentially future-focused and concerned with the individual child (Mayall, 2002). Proponents of the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood acknowledge the immense and significant contribution of developmental theorists, whose productivity has generated much research and debate which has contributed to the growth of early childhood studies (James & Prout, 1997; Yelland & Kilderry & Kilderry, 2005). However, they emphasise its value as *one* paradigm of childhood and call for its removal from its position of primacy in governing, informing and determining ECEC policy and practice (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Mayall, 2002; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

The new paradigm's deconstructive analysis of the dominant constructions of childhood has been particularly effective in highlighting how power and politics interweave with discourse and paradigm creation to promote certain 'truths' over others and to rationalise and justify certain courses of action in ECEC. This rethinking forefronts the recognition that all aspects of the field are inextricably tied to value agendas and intertwining relations of power and thus problematises and challenges what were once

uncontested and broadly accepted mechanisms and approaches to ECEC (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

As political discourse promotes the expansion of preschools in an apparent social, political and ethical vacuum instead choosing to prioritise questions of technical practice relating to the effectiveness of preschools in producing certain outcomes, certain truths are promoted and reinforced, whilst others, particularly those relating to the agency of the child and children's rights – and what these mean in constructions of ECEC - are averted. This subtle operation of power and the consequences it entails for children's early years experiences becomes all the more pertinent as the institutionalisation of childhood enters a period of acceleration and growing numbers of children spend increasing proportions of their time within such institutions (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Yet, despite the increased public and private attention and the growing range of vested interests in ECEC, Dahlberg *et al*, (2007: 1) highlight how little has changed in terms of the priorities emphasised:

*most seem to talk the same language ... [and] share the same vocabulary: promoting development; ensuring readiness to learn and readiness for school; enhancing school performance; early intervention for children deemed to be in need, at risk or otherwise disadvantaged; developmentally appropriate practice and desirable outcomes; models and programmes; plans and cost effectiveness; regulation, standards; and the most pervasive of all, the language of quality.*

This discourse is clearly affiliated with the neo-liberal discourse (discussed further in Chapter Four) with its emphasis on personal autonomy and the future productivity of children 'and pedagogies influenced by those who think education systems should be structured and assessed via tests and measurable outcomes and strict adherence to standards that are overt and efficient' (Yelland & Kilderry & Kilderry, 2005: 2). Fundamentally, the neoliberal discourse not only constructs early childhood institutions as producers of predefined outcomes but also as businesses competing in a market to sell their product to customers or consumers, invariably adults and mostly parents, but never children who lack the means to be consumers (Dahlberg *et al*, 2007). This development is particularly prominent in English-speaking countries such as the US, UK and Australia. It also forms the primary mechanism through which ECEC services are delivered in Ireland, encouraged by government, who have over a ten year period

from 2000, provided capital subsidisation to private and community providers to resolve capacity shortages and deliver ECEC ‘services’ on their behalf (Bennett, 2006; Hayes, 2010; Hayes & Bradley, 2006). The adoption of this policy approach illuminates the power of actors and the implications of their adopted constructions of childhood on ECEC policy and practices and the experiences of children attending (or excluded from) settings.

These constructions of childhood and the inter-related policy paradigms that reinforce them involve interplay, negotiation and contestation between those vested interests within the inner spheres of ECEC policy making who vie to have their interests and perspectives about the beliefs, values and objectives of ECEC incorporated into final policy solutions (Moss & Pence, 1994: 5). Yet, despite the fundamental implications of these interactions, very little is known about the processes through which issue conceptualisation and policy framing occur and how interactions amongst vested interests impact on the development and structuring of early childhood institutions. Taking the definitions of quality in ECEC as an example, Moss & Pence (1994: 5) emphasise:

*how* a definition of quality has been arrived at, by *whom* (and who was excluded from the process) and *why* is often not clear ... The values and interest underlying the choice of objectives and priorities may remain implicit and unacknowledged; agendas may be hidden or disguised; differences of opinion go unrecognised or may be disregarded or suppressed; and issues of power and influence may be ignored. That defining quality is a political process may not be acknowledged as such at all; instead, defining quality may be treated purely as the application of scientific, managerial or professional expertise or ‘consumer’ preference. ....

By accessing an inner-elite of actors who regularly engage in ECEC policy deliberation, the study explores the impact of interpersonal dynamics and relations of power on ECEC policy construction. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to these voids in ECEC analysis by exploring the *process* through which ECEC policy decisions occur and identifying how actors’ beliefs and the often subtle and covert politics and power structures behind their behaviour influence the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy decisions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the important contribution that theories of the policy process and social construction frameworks provide to understanding the powerful influences and dynamics which affect decision making processes in ECEC policy. These theories form the tacit framework for this research study and provide the researcher with an elevated understanding and underpinning framework to support exploration of the nuanced processes which impact on ECEC policy development.

Given the complexity of the policy process and the limited existent ECEC research exploring behind the scenes policy activity, the three theories of the policy process heighten the researcher's sensitivity to the different strategies pursued by different actors in seeking to influence final policy decisions and secure their favoured policy outcomes. Collaboratively, the theories draw attention to distinct but inter-related aspects of actor behaviour and form a pivotal support that heighten attention to several important variables (e.g. constructions and policy framing, actor strategies and objectives, power relations in policy deliberations) that require investigation in analysis seeking to identify causal factors influencing policy ECEC policy decisions. MST draws attention to the role of the individual and highlights how entrepreneurial and manipulative skills in effectively coupling streams during key windows of opportunity increase the likelihood of favourable policy decisions. The ACF considers how belief systems influence the collective behaviour of actors within policy subsystems through policy-oriented learning and the potential trigger exogenous perturbations create for alterations in belief systems and policy responses. PET focuses on the factors and processes which account for patterns of stability *and* change in policy making and explores how institutional arrangements affect the magnitude of change. The fact that all three theories incorporate analysis of the impact of exogenous events on endogenous behaviour within the policy making system (i.e. at the sub-system and macro-political system level) sensitises the researcher to the potential scale and impact of interacting processes and events in policy development.

The inclusion of social construction theory within the research framework compensates for the post positivist focus of the three theories of the policy process by incorporating analysis of social, cultural and critical theory into the research framework. Exploration of social constructions supports analysis of how and why particular policies are produced in specific contexts and draws attention to the inter-linked nature of

knowledge, power and discourse in policy development. This section highlighted the fundamentally political nature of childhood and revealed how knowledge, power and discourse are used by those with power to influence the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy. While highlighting the positive contributions developmental psychology has made to the ECEC field, the chapter also illuminated the inherent risks and dangers a reliance on a uni-lateral or one-dimensional view of development has created in the structuring of ECEC settings and the experiences of children attending settings. Despite the substantial and significant contributions of the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood, the chapter revealed the difficult challenges new paradigms experience in destabilising established paradigms from their position of dominance, particularly when they match the political preferences of the majority. The new paradigm of childhood has drawn significant attention to the political nature of policy making and emphasises the importance of analysing actor behaviour and power structures to reveal the implicit and hidden factors that drive the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy. By exploring the impact of action and interaction in the policy *process*, this research seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge by highlighting how subtle and covert power structures and behavioural codes impact on final policy decisions.

Given how social and cultural processes and contexts interact with actor behaviour in policy development, the following chapter provides the contextual framework for this research study. It explores key aspects of the Irish cultural landscape, including traditional value systems and key policy triggers and events which have catalysed or constrained the dominant approaches to ECEC policy. This is then followed by a critique of dominant ECEC policy approaches and initiatives to date.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE IRISH POLICY ENVIRONMENT:

#### CONTEXTUALISING ECEC POLICY DEVELOPMENT

##### **Introduction**

*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.*

(Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1962)

Policy preferences are activated ‘by how individuals interpret context and it is this combination of preferences and context that yields choice’ (Jones, 1994: 8). The previous chapter highlighted how social constructions and the behaviour and strategies pursued by policy actors form vital determinants in the structuring and shaping of policy action. Policy making is ideologically and culturally specific and the underlying social, political, cultural and economic contexts are usually drawn upon to help explain why particular types of policies are produced in particular types of contexts (Coakley, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Ingram *et al*, 2007). Yet even though existent traditions and social structures form the background against which policy actors consider future policy options, these actors are still always agents who possess a capacity to act in new and innovative ways to transform both themselves and the traditional background (Bevir, 2004). In other words, few states are merely passive victims of their political and social culture, but instead the type of policy action pursued derives from the ways in which actors choose to replicate or develop traditions by structuring policies in accord with their intentions (Ibid, 2004).

Irish policy development is primarily characterized by features of persistence and continuity rather than change, a pattern attributed to the political preference for conflict aversion and social stability and a public uneasiness with challenges to traditional order



and social norms (Girvin, 2008, 2010; Hardiman, 2009; Murray, 2010; O'Connor, 2008). However, to conceive of tradition as a static concept or simply as opposition to change is to misunderstand one of the key tensions in policy development (Girvin, 2010). Instead its importance centres on how inherited traditions and existent social structures are integrated into policy change and influence to a greater or lesser extent policy debates and outcomes given how the capacity of situated agents means alternatives to the traditional approaches are always, at least theoretically, possible (Girvin, 2010; Bevir, 2004). Thus history, experience and tradition form an important frame within which policy development is at least, initially contextualized.

This chapter explores how tradition is situated in Irish policy debates and deliberations and considers the extent to which it has influenced ECEC policy development. It firstly draws upon the concept of historic institutionalism to explain how traditional beliefs are frequently institutionalised and reinforced through the path dependency processes that predominate in policy making patterns. Given the powerful role of social constructions in policy making, it then introduces key traditional value and belief systems which provided the foundational stones for policy making in the Irish Free State - Catholicism, patriarchy and neo-liberalism – and considers how successive policy decisions have reinforced or deviated from these. As Irish policy making is typically depicted along a continuum of continuity rather than change, this chapter draws on the theories of the policy process to explore how actors have employed agency to resist or promote change and considers how these actions have influenced the parameters within which ECEC policy has been considered and constructed. The chapter concludes by drawing upon this contextual environment in its exploration of ECEC policy initiatives from 2000 to 2010, the period of most active articulation of policy development in Irish ECEC policy history to date.

### **Historic Institutionalism and Path Dependencies**

Historic institutionalists argue that policy decisions at one point in time restrict future possibilities by creating path dependencies that lock policy arrangements into place and push future reform agendas, ideas and interests in the direction of incremental adjustments to existing policy arrangements (Weir, 1992; Pierson, 2001). The preferential tendency towards incremental policy design is primarily attributed to the 'institutional stickiness' of policy designs which creates difficulties in altering courses

of action once a particular path has been chosen (Pierson, 2001: 414). Thus policy makers, overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of the problems they confront, tend to make marginal modifications to pre-existing frameworks to accommodate the distinctive features of new situations (Pierson, 1994). For instance, the Irish government decision to encourage private sector development of ECEC through the provision of capital grants is one that is not easily reversed, given the time and resource investment of private sector providers [and the state], meaning subsequent ECEC policy decisions are likely to incorporate these institutionalised models of provision into their next round of policy making. Thus, despite the always existent agentic capacity of policy actors to promote and adopt alternative courses of policy actions to the established or existing ones, Hecló (1974: 315) acknowledges how, while ‘policymakers may not exactly salivate at the sound of the usual bell ... there is something of a conditioned reflex in a great deal of their behaviour’.

Just as in the Punctuated Theory of Equilibrium, historic institutionalists divide historical events into periods of continuity, that are punctuated by ‘critical junctures’ where dominant policy paradigms are undermined and significant and substantial policy change becomes possible thus creating ‘a branching point that leads historical development onto a new path’ (Neuman, 2007: 35). Thus, to argue that the development of institutions is fixed by rules or path dependencies inherent within them, it to elide the contingent and contested nature of traditions given the variable and open-ended ways in which situated agents may respond to existent beliefs in response to certain policy ‘dilemmas’ (Bevir, 2004). Given how people change their beliefs or actions depending on their contingent reasoning, Bevir (2004: 617) further argues that ‘explanatory concepts should indicate how change arises from a type of reasoning that is neither random nor fixed by logical relations or given experiences’. Thus while policy analysts and policy makers frequently rely upon historical institutionalism to explain courses of action, institutions are not necessarily static or fixed and the agentic capacity of individuals creates leeway to challenge prevailing path dependencies and propose alternative and new paths for policy development. Nonetheless, arguments regarding historic institutionalism are also revealing of the inherent challenges of alteration to dominant and embedded institutionalized policy paths and the consequential predominance of incremental policy development wherever feasible.

With a view to gaining insight into the precise factors which have influenced decision-making patterns and processes in the Irish context, the following sections provide an overview of the social background and contextual framework in which political action has occurred. By exploring the social background and environmental context, these sections provides an important framework that supports exploration of actor's agency, predominant policy patterns and approaches and as such, provides a useful guide, to support this study's analysis of the impact of actor behavior on ECEC policy development.

### **The Backdrop of Tradition: Catholicism, Patriarchy and the Irish Constitution**

Ireland's predominantly rural and agricultural society set the economic context and the Catholic ethos and its favoured subsidiarity<sup>16</sup> imbued the value system for the founding of the Irish Free State (The All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, 2006). From the enactment of the 1937 Constitution, a broad consensus existed regarding the dominant values and expectations which should inform laws and policies and the Constitution (Chubb, 1992; Coakley, 2005; Early, 1999; Powell, 1992). By building 'itself into the very vitals of the nation' over the course of the nineteenth century (Chubb, 1992: 14), the Church 'for many purposes operated like a second government, or a state within a state' (Garvin, 2004: 5), reinforcing its values and power through its monopolistic role in the delivery of key social services especially education and health care (Chubb, 1992; Fanning, 2003; Kiely, 1999; Powell, 1992).

The Constitution's so called 'Directive Principles of Social Policy' (Articles 40 – 44), concerned with family, education, private property and religion all testify to the Catholic core of newly consolidated democracy (Adshead & Neylan, 2008; Fanning, 2003; Powell, 1992). Specifically, Article 41<sup>17</sup>, grounded in the Catholic principal of subsidiarity supports a highly privatised autonomous model of family life in which the woman cares for home and children while husband acts as breadwinner with state intervention confined to exceptional circumstances where parents fail in their duty to

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<sup>16</sup>The dominant social thinking of the time, pre-eminently as expressed in the papal encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, published in 1931, favoured 'subsidiarity' – that the state should offer support or help (subsidiium) to smaller groups, including the family, but should not supplant them' (All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, 2006: 34).

<sup>17</sup> *In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved* (Bunreacht na hEireann, Article 41.2.1). *The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties within the home* (Bunreacht na hEireann, Article 41.2).

their children (Article 42<sup>18</sup>) (All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, 2006). While the intention of Article 41 and Article 42 may have been to defend the family against unwarranted interference by the state, analysts have argued that the emphasis on the rights of the family and the clear subjugation of children within that institution resulted in the granting of higher value to the rights of parents over those of children, a point returned to in a number of high profile court cases (Ibid., 2006; Nolan, 2007)<sup>19</sup>. The principal of subsidiarity and the privatised model of family life it espoused has considerable affinity with liberalism as a moral welfare discourse and enabled the state to occupy a distant and non-interventionist role thus situating the church, the voluntary sector and the family as the main and in certain instances sole supplier of social services (Fanning, 2003; Chubb, 1992; Kiely, 1999).

Analysis of Irish policy development highlights how Constitutions, by their very nature tend to enhance continuity rather than change in policy development and thus form an important framework within which value based policy domains such as ECEC should be considered and reflected upon. In these early decades of the Free State, a marriage bar which prohibited married women's employment in the public sector, the prohibition of divorce and contraception and a welfare system constructed around the male-breadwinner model provide just some examples of the means through which the traditional value system was institutionalised and embedded within the political and policy landscape (Fanning, 2003; Powell, 1992; Conroy, 1999; Garvin, 2004; Kiely, 1999; O'Connor, 2008). The theory of punctuated equilibrium highlights how long periods of policy stability predominate when institutionalised policy monopolies prevail and external perturbations or advocacy challenges remain largely absent or silent. The Irish case provides a prime example in this regard. This is evidenced in the conservative fashion in which successive governments legislated in these decades as widespread acceptance of the predominant catholic values and belief system across all strata of society reduced pressure for change (Chubb, 1992; Fanning, 2003; Garvin, 2004; Girvin, 2008).

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<sup>18</sup> *In exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children, the State as guardian of the common good, by appropriate means shall endeavour to supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and imprescriptible rights of the child (Bunreacht na hEireann, Article 42.2.5).*

<sup>19</sup> See for example the Kilkenny Incest Investigation (1993); the Baby 'Ann' Case (2006); the Monageer Report (2008) and the Ryan Report (2009).

### **Threats to the Foundational Stones: The Emergence of Policy Dilemmas**

Free access to secondary education and the gradual relaxation of national protectionist policies from the 1960s triggered some erosion of the traditional belief systems as opinion polls reported increasing support for divorce, contraception and gender equality from the 1970s (Coakley, 2005; Fanning, 2003; Fogarty, Ryan & Lee 1984; Garvin, 2004; Kiely, 1999; Powell, 1992). Joining the European Union (EU)<sup>20</sup> in 1973 introduced the influence of European social policy into Ireland and required a series of legislative changes including the removal of the marriage bar (1972), the introduction of the Employment Equality Act (1977), the Unfair Dismissals Act (1977) and the Maternity (Protection of Employees) Act (1981) (Conroy, 1999; Fanning, 2003; O'Connor, 2006). At this same time, the government was coming under intensified domestic pressure from the women's rights movement who began to challenge the constitutionality of laws relating to sex discrimination and equal rights<sup>21</sup>. The establishment of the first *Commission on the Status of Women* in 1972 represented a landmark in institutional change but also heralded the beginning of a strategy of 'government distancing' from unsettling policy topics by establishing exogenous *fora* and creating opportunities for reports which might or might not influence policy rather than directly debating, proposing and implementing policy solutions (Hayes & Bradley, 2009: 24). The pressures resultant from these social changes and the challenges they posed for politicians are reflective of arguments within the Advocacy Coalition Framework which highlights how changes to core beliefs and core policy beliefs may accumulate over time and gradually create pressure to change or modify out-dated system structures to reflect new beliefs and ways of being (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). A range of category based benefits such as deserted wives benefit (1973); unmarried mothers benefit (1973) and single women's allowance (1974) were also introduced into the welfare system from this time which were part of a 'broader restructuring of gender and motherhood' and granted 'new individual entitlements to women but simultaneously reasserted their status as wives, mothers, daughters and unpaid carers' (Conroy, 1999: 43).

Yet, despite the agentic capacity of government to respond to these dilemmas by challenging and re-evaluating inherited traditions and initiating changes to

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<sup>20</sup> Termed the European Economic Community (EEC) at the time of Ireland's entry.

<sup>21</sup> Between 1971 and 1987 alone, there were 45 major challenges by a group of individual women 'illustrating a definite move on the part of the judiciary from this time to let the courts play a key role in outlining the scope of constitutional rights' (Adshead & Neylon, 2008: 20).

accommodate new beliefs, the state instead adopted a reluctant and resistant role. The changes which were introduced primarily occurred *in response* to external legal pressures (i.e. EU and Supreme Court rulings) and various advocacy coalitions (e.g. women's groups) escalating and intensifying attention to these issues at that time. Thus while an agentive capacity always makes reform possible, the Irish case corroborates the extreme resilience of institutions to change, particularly in the absence of an agentive willingness to alter courses from the prevailing policy paths. Commenting on government resistance to modify legislation in response to EU Directives, Conroy (1999: 40) illuminates the palpable government reluctance to deviate from institutionalised policy patterns:

*The ink was hardly dry on Ireland's membership ... when a process of opting-out of social provision commenced.... In 1974, the government ... requested and was refused permission from the European Commission to derogate from the introduction of equal pay between women and men for equal work.... In 1978, Ireland made no moves to introduce equal treatment between women and men in social security schemes. This second opt-out was contested through the European and Irish courts for 18 years, when the last compensatory back-payments were finally made to Irish claimants. ...*

With specific reference to the issue of childcare, the legislative and policy changes introduced in the 1970s, which guaranteed women equal labour market rights to their male counterparts, were accompanied by an initial albeit limited trickle of attention to childcare as a workplace support measure and a small number of related policy reports finally appeared in the 1980s<sup>22</sup>. However, this attention was cursory and perfunctory and the accompanying pace of development equally staggered and insignificant. Overall, direct government action in the area remained essentially absent for much of the 1980s and 1990s, as did the presence of an ECEC sector of any significant scale (Fine-Davis, 2004; Hayes, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, S., 2009; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005; OECD, 2004). The prevailing dominance of the patriarchal paradigm which constructed ECEC as a private responsibility and one in which state interference was unwarranted and unnecessary prevailed over this extended time frame due to its widespread acceptance and the limited public demand or political desire for an altered statutory role in the area (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Kirby, 2007).

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<sup>22</sup> The Report of the Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents (1983) and the Report of the Committee on Minimum Legal Requirements and Standards for Daycare Services (1985)

## **Resistance to Change in the Face of Policy Dilemmas**

Despite some notable support for changes in legislative and public policies, a series of events in the 1970s and 1980s highlight the slow and contentious battles and struggles proponents of change encountered as majority opinion mobilised politically to defend their values and way of life (Chubb, 1992; Fanning, 2003; Girvin, 2010; O'Connor, 2008). For instance, in the year following the McGee case (1973)<sup>23</sup>, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition's contraception legislation was defeated when seven government TDs including the then Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, crossed the floor and voted with the opposition against legislation sponsored by their own government (Gallagher, 2000; Powell, 1992). In 1978, when legislation to legalise contraception within marriage was eventually passed it was framed in the 'most conservative form possible'<sup>24</sup> and arguably would not have occurred without the McGee Supreme Court decision<sup>25</sup> (Girvin, 2010: 354). Even the 'constitutional crusade' initiated by Garret FitzGerald<sup>26</sup> failed to change the prohibition on divorce in 1986 and demonstrates the limits to change, even where the political will existed and opinion polls indicated majority favour for change (Ibid., 2010: 354). These cases illuminate the criticality of the public mood as an influence in policy proposal development, depicted within the MST's political stream as a vital key to securing policy change (Zahariadis, 2003; 2007). Girvin (2008: 470) warns that the culture wars of the 1980s should not be seen as exceptional but instead reflected a deep concern that changes in attitudes and politics would undermine a society that the 'mass mobilisation of conservative Catholics ... believed was worth preserving.' Thus the power of social constructions and their capacity to become so ingrained that people tend to accept them as real and the only interpretation they can imagine (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) is illuminated by the widespread and steadfast resistance to any challenges that threatened the value and belief system enshrined within the Constitution. The narrow passing of divorce a decade later (by a margin of 0.6%) and the continued

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<sup>23</sup> This followed a landmark Supreme Court ruling in the McGee case in 1973, where a married catholic woman successfully contested her right to contraception and 'the ban on the sale and importation of contraceptives was deemed unconstitutional on the basis of a personal right to privacy and an interpretation of family rights to include marital privacy' (McDonnell & Allison, 2006: 821).

<sup>24</sup> The Health (Family Planning) Bill legislated for the sale of contraceptives through chemist shops on presentation of a doctor's prescription that could only be given if the doctor was satisfied that the person was seeking the contraceptives, bona fide, for family planning purposes or for adequate medical reasons and in appropriate circumstances (Keogh, 2003: 375).

<sup>25</sup> The then Taoiseach also accepted that 'members of the party who had conscientious objections to the legislation could abstain on the vote and a number did so, an unprecedented decision for Fianna Fáil' (Girvin, 2010: 354)

<sup>26</sup> Garrett Fitzgerald was Taoiseach (President of Ireland) from 1981 – 1982 and 1982 – 1987 and Leader of Fine Gael 1977 – 1987.

illegality of abortion in Ireland testify to the resistance of core policy beliefs and core policy beliefs and their potentially constraining impact in public policy.

Even more recently, resistance and apprehension to increasing pressure from the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child*<sup>27</sup> to expressly grant rights to children in the Constitution (Hayes & Bradley, 2009) is indicative of the persistence of conservatism and resistance to shifts from traditional children and childhood. The *All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution* (2006: 88) concluded that ‘the silence of Article 41 in relation to children means that the rights of the family are effectively exercised by the parents and that the rights of children may not be given due weight within the family’. The Committee (2006: 46) emphasised how ‘by contrast with seventy years ago, there are today unceasing pleas for the state to assume more and more the traditional tasks of the family, from childcare to care for the elderly.’ However, despite its Report, the increased media attention to children’s rights, the growth in advocacy work by children’s organisations and the publication of the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution Bill in 2007<sup>28</sup>, in April, 2009, the then Minister for Children, Barry Andrews, declared that ‘government has made no decision on the question of whether or not to have a referendum’. Thus historic difficulties in successfully securing alteration from the inherited traditional and moral order continue to constrain policy constructions and are indicative of the difficult struggles proponents of change encounter in securing favoured alteration from dominant policy paths. Political anxiety regarding challenges to the strong populace attachment to traditional socio-cultural values is evidenced in the former Minister for Children’s concerns about a children’s rights referendum:

*Any change to the Constitution would involve a referendum. Time and again, the Irish people have demonstrated their strong attachment to our Constitution by rejecting government efforts to change it. Therefore, there is a heavy onus on the Government to approach this issue carefully so that a good formula is devised which would ensure that the best interests of children prevail in matters which impact on them, and at the same time would meet with required public support.*

(Lenihan, 2006b).

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<sup>27</sup> The Irish Report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) criticised Ireland’s slow progress in implementing parts of the UNCRC, in particular those related to the status of the child as a rights-holder and the adoption of a child rights-based approach in policies and practices and called for the inclusion of children’s rights in the constitution.

<sup>28</sup> Proposed published Amendment, Article 42.5: 1. The State acknowledges and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children (Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children, 2008).



These outlined example cases illuminate a number of key points pertinent to this study's analysis. Firstly, they are synonymous with the MST's political stream arguments regarding the importance of the public mood as a key political motivator affecting government behaviour (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2003, 2007). Secondly, they are corroborative of the ACF's arguments regarding the relative stability of deep core and policy core beliefs which rarely provide the impetus for policy change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Thirdly, the synopsis of public and political reaction to policy dilemmas reveals the power of social constructions and the variable levels of political commitment to challenging dominant beliefs and reconstituting social and cultural policies pertaining to family life (Bevir, 2004; Ingram *et al*, 2007). The examples are also revealing of the variable levels of public receptiveness to change and the 'gravitational pull' of tradition (Bown, *et al*, 2011) in policy debate and policy development. The resultant pattern of policy making thus mirrors the dominant pattern of stable and incremental policy change as outlined in the PET and illuminates the importance of exogenous triggers, advocacy challenges and policy entrepreneurialism to seize 'policy windows' as they occur given the preference for policy continuity wherever feasible (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Pierson, 1993). Bearing in mind this policy context, the following section explores how, even when radical shifts occurred in women's labour market participation during the 1990s, the resistant and the notoriously, non-interventionist, conflict averse approach to family policy persisted. Thus, as highlighted in the previous chapter's discussion, environmental triggers or events are insufficient to bring about change in their own right, as policy action is essentially dependent on policy actors to push through policy change during these policy windows, an important requirement that forms a key point of analysis within this research study.

### **The Persistence of Inherited Constructions of Gender Roles**

Between 1994 and 2002, Ireland's annual GDP growth averaged 7.9%, the highest rate of GDP growth of any OECD country in those years (Bennett, 2006) and the so called 'Celtic Tiger' was born. In response to labour market shortages at this time, women were identified as the principal untapped source of labour supply and came under increasing pressure to engage in labour market activity as a means to resolve critical labour market shortages (Bennett, 2006; Coakley, 2005; Hayes, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Kirby, 2007; OECD, 2004; Sweeny, 2006). Female labour force

participation rates which had remained largely unchanged at around 30% over the period 1926 – 1981 (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2007) rose faster than anywhere else in the OECD increasing from 40 per cent in 1994 to 58 per cent in 2005 (Sweeny, 2006: 4). Yet despite the opportunities such social and cultural changes create for private issues to become public issues, the state's role and responsibility towards the care and education of young children hardly altered during this time-frame (O'Connor, 2006; Sweeny, 2006). Where mothers entered the labour market, it remained the private responsibility of parents - rather than a shared responsibility with the state - to make alternative care arrangements for their children while they worked, many of whom relied on other women as unpaid or possibly paid, albeit low paid, carers (Hayes, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; O'Connor, 2006, 2008; Sweeny, 2006). Women's labour market participation was not encouraged by generous maternity leave, developed childcare facilities, family-friendly workplaces, or similar incentives generally deemed to be supportive of working parents with government instead choosing to provide capital subsidisation grants to private and community providers to grow sectoral capacity, access to which was reliant upon parent's individual means (NWCI, 2005; OECD, 2003; Sweeny, 2006). O'Connor (2006: 6) emphasises the particularly paradoxical nature of this approach, since 'until very recently, in a society dominated by the institutional catholic church the differences between men and women were 'obvious' and seen as rooted in their biological make-up'.

All three theories of the policy process draw attention to the important and powerful role of actors at the macro-political institutional level of policy making (Jones, Baumgartner & Talbert, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; True *et al*, 2007; Zahariadis, 2007). Gender composition at the macro-political level is frequently highlighted as a potential variable in the framing and rationalisation of the role adopted by the state in the construction of policy relating to women and children (O'Connor, 2006; 2008; Bown *et al*, 2011). Bown *et al*. (2011: 267) draw attention to the high female representation at government level in countries such as Sweden<sup>29</sup>, where Bergqvist (2001 as cited in Nyberg 2007: 40) found that 'government's encouraging response to requests for publicly financed ECEC was due to 'the rather large number of women involved in political decision making''. In Ireland by contrast, with the exception of the European

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<sup>29</sup> In Sweden 45 per cent of the seats in the Lower House are held by women with women constituting 52 per cent of Government Ministers (United Nations Development Programme, 2005).

parliament<sup>30</sup>, women are consistently under-represented in the political executive (i.e. the Dail, Senate, Cabinet and local government) and hold only 15 per cent of the seats in Dail; less than 17 per cent in the Seanad; and only one in five of those at Cabinet Ministerial level (O'Connor, 2008). Yet even in countries where female political representation has increased in recent years, early childhood policy analysts still draw attention to the persistent 'pull of maternalist discourses'<sup>31</sup> in ECEC policy approaches (Bown *et al*, 2011). For instance, Bown *et al* (2011: 263 - 264) highlight how 'despite the increasing prominence of women in senior positions in the Australian political landscape ... maternalist discourses continue to influence politicians' perceptions and understandings of ECEC and thus continue to shape the ECEC policy landscape.' Using the metaphor of 'dark matter' to describe the continued 'gravitational pull of maternalist discourses', they highlight the rarely acknowledged but powerful influence and 'covert nature of these discourses in policy and political arenas' (Ibid., 2011: 265). There are parallels between the persistence of maternalist discourses and the persistence of the developmental psychology paradigm in ECEC policy debates. The previous chapter revealed the difficulties in dislodging developmental psychology from its position of dominance in debates regarding children's development (Cannella, & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). This same persistence is illuminated in this section's discussion on the dominant patriarchal paradigm and highlights the deep resistance to change or alteration from the inherited beliefs regarding the role of women in child rearing responsibilities. It is consistent with those concepts articulated in the ACF regarding the extreme resilience of core beliefs and core policy beliefs (Meijerink, 2005; Sabatier & Weible, 2007) and is corroborative of the difficulties and challenges involved in dislodging or disrupting established policy paradigms.

Thus political management of this tension between change and persistence proves highly significant in Irish policy making as governments' endeavour to 'facilitate the management of crisis without tipping the society over into revolution' (Girvin, 2008: 465). Policy makers therefore aim to impose change, when required, but to accomplish

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<sup>30</sup> Women made up 38 per cent of those elected from Ireland to the European Parliament in the 2004 elections (roughly double the proportion of women elected to that Parliament in 1984) (O'Connor, 2008: 13)

<sup>31</sup> According to DiQuinzio (2005: 228) essentialist motherhood discourses, like maternalist discourses, are: an ideological formation that...naturalizes motherhood, positing that women's mothering is a function of women's female nature, women's biological reproductive capacities, and/or human evolutionary development...[and] requires mothers' exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children (cited in Bown *et al*, 2011:265).

and implement change without institutionalized constraints that correlate with the desirable social values of the majority and do not disrupt or challenge dominant core beliefs or core policy beliefs. Given the importance of the macro-political level in policy development and decisions, the next section explores Irish political structures and voting systems to uncover how structural and institutional processes at this level [the site of greatest power] catalyse and constrain policy continuity and change. This is then followed by a detailed exploration of how these combined processes and environmental contexts influence the development and structuring of ECEC policy.

### **The Political Environment: Politics, the Party System and Voting**

The Irish political and party system includes a number of distinct features which differentiate it from the more typical political and party schema found in most of its western European counterparts (Gallagher, 1985). The lack of a clear political cleavage rooted in the social system, the historic electoral weakness of the political left and the ‘catch all’ nature of the two main political parties form three differentiating features of significance (Ibid., 1985)<sup>32</sup>. Adshead & Neylon (2008: 17) describe how the two major parties originally ‘distinguished by the sides they took in the civil war ... moved closer to ‘middle ground’ as ‘the significance of the civil war receded’. The absence of the conventional left-right political cleavages means the two main parties have long been characterized as catch-all parties that belong somewhere in the centre of the left right spectrum and are prone to a degree of populism to build and secure broad-based coalitions of support (Fanning, 2003; Gallagher, 1985; Hardiman, 2009, 2010; Girvin, 2008). The fact that coalition governments have become the norm in Ireland – no single-party majority government has ruled since 1977 – also has at least some effect on intra-party dynamics and further blurs the boundaries between political parties, as compromise and dilution of party goals form an increasingly common feature of different parties’ political behaviour (Adshead & Neylan, 2008; Gallagher, 2000; Girvin, 2008).

The impact of the lack of left-right distinctions has meant that many of the major preoccupations of Irish social policy debate have historically articulated along an

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<sup>32</sup> It is ‘notable that the combined vote for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael [the two main political parties] between 1959 and 1989 rarely falls below 80 per cent and even when it does, this does not last’ (Girvin, 2010: 353). While a 2002 general election study (Marsh, et al, 2008, p. 31-39) revealed a decline in the overall levels of support for both parties and greater changes within the Labour Party, it has not challenged the dominance of the other two parties whose combined vote continues to dominate in electoral competition (Girvin, 2010).

ideological continuum of responses to policy change (Fanning, 2003). This is evidenced through the previously outlined political behaviour in referendums and the general resistance to gender equality legislative changes from the 1970s. Typically, parties to the political left are considered most favourable to gender and equity issues and the historic weakness of such parties in Ireland exacerbates difficulties in securing progressive gender and equity based policies as corroborated by the staggered and limited policy action in this area (O'Connor, 2008).

These constraints and the resistant and hesitant policy change that envelops them partly derive from the outlined characteristics of the political system but are further compounded and reinforced by the patterns of behavior that result from Ireland's voting system. The Proportional Representation Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) system allows voters mark as many preferences as there are candidates in multiple seat constituencies and not only obliges candidates of the same party to compete against each other, but also offers the opportunity for voters to switch between parties, according to their preferences (Adshead & Neylon, 2008: 17 - 18). The system results in a highly personalised and localised electoral competition that reinforces the middle ground nature of politics and entices short term policy prioritisation of the immediately visible issues, thus detracting from public debate and a longer term policy focus (Adshead & Neylan, 2008; Callanan, 2006; Hardiman, 2009; Kirby & Murphy, 2007). Where a lack of consensus prevails regarding policy issues, there is a tendency to use sensitive but ambiguous discourse to mask and hide it (Kirby & Murphy, 2007), given that the 'art of political success is to be all things to all men, to bundle constituencies and, wherever possible to avoid, or at least fudge contentious issues in a bid to maintain as much support as possible' (Adshead & Neylon, 2008: 17 - 18). Thus contentious policy issues are often side stepped and left untackled in favour of safer, neutral and incremental policy decisions. These political processes reinforce a political anxiety and minimise political will to challenge institutionalised beliefs and social order and value laden policy domains such as ECEC represent highly vulnerable and risky policy areas where, insofar as possible, political abstention has formed the more prudent and favoured policy approach. This art of political evasiveness and non-decision-making is highly revealing of a political loyalty to the predominant regimes of truth and the inherent resistance to challenge core beliefs and core policy beliefs that characterise the policy domain. As Hill (1997: 7) emphasises 'the study of policy has as one of its main concerns the examination of non-decisions' given how 'much political activity is

concerned with maintaining the existing status quo and resisting challenges to the existing allocation of values.’ The murkiness, uncertainty and reactive and expedient behaviours which permeate the environment are exacerbated by the very limited public debate on social policies, a scenario Murphy & Millar (2008: 78) also attribute to a political culture that ‘prides itself on a pragmatic and practical discourse, a weak social policy community and under appreciation of the importance of social policy to both social and economic success.’ Combined, such measures lead to and encourage political caution and ambiguity wherever possible and, in high crisis moments, where inaction is not an option, resultant ‘erratic and capricious decision-making where effectiveness is compromised by a lack of contextual sensitivity and a tendency to embrace the pragmatic fashion of the day’ form the dominant policy making pattern (Kirby, Gibbons & Cronin, 2002: 15). The policy patterns depicted here mirror the two dominant modes of policy development described in the PET and the factors or processes driving policy stability correlate with those arguments of historic institutionalists and illuminate the power of social constructions and regimes of truth and the inherent difficulties in dislodging these once embedded within the policy landscape (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Pierson, 1993; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Weir, 1992).

The policy landscape depicted to this point illuminates the context in which ECEC issues have been conceptualised and contextualised. While neither tradition nor cultural politics explain ECEC policy decisions in their own right, they illuminate how social and cultural features and dominant policy making trends have contributed to the largely inactive and distant approach adopted by government to date. Given that this study focuses on how conceptualisations of ECEC and relations of power influence action and activity in ECEC policy development, the final section of this chapter considers how key contextual events and actor behavioural processes within these have influenced the construction and shaping of ECEC policy. It pays particular attention to ECEC policy developments between 2000 and 2010, the period of most active ECEC policy development to date in Irish history.

### **ECEC in Context: 2000 - 2010**

*The Irish Public Service has been relatively strong historically in the area of policy formulation. I have come to the conclusion, however, that we are relatively*

*weak when it comes to implementation and many good policies fail due to a lack of appropriate structures and processes to ensure their successful implementation from policy objectives to tangible outcomes.*

(Langford, 2007: 250)<sup>33</sup>

The development of ECEC generally, and statutory engagement in ECEC in particular, is a remarkably recent phenomenon. Constitutional and welfare provisions which interpret and thus situate ECEC as a private family concern were successfully drawn upon to justify the lack of government intervention within the policy domain up until the mid 1990s. From that time however, a series of factors converged which rendered political inaction an increasingly untenable political response to what – a growing range of interest groups, parents, employers and unions - increasingly interpreted as a public concern (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Bradley & Hayes, 2009; Bennett, 2006). Up to that point, the majority of ECEC provision was small scale, part-time and not-for-profit, with a small commercial presence and a number of community based services. In the absence of policy and support, a fragmented and unregulated sector of variable costs and quality developed where geographic location and ability to pay largely determined right of access and quality of experience (Bennett, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; OECD, 2003, 2004). State support was very limited and what did exist was targeted at children considered ‘at risk’ or socially disadvantaged (Hayes, 2008). Once a child reached the statutory age for school attendance [six years], the state assumed responsibility for the ‘education’ of children, while their ‘care’ continued to fall within the remit of the family. The persistence of this perceptual split between education and care is clearly illuminated through the distinct policy initiatives in the discussion that follows, where ‘care’ is predominantly conceptualised as a solution to parents workforce needs and early ‘education’ as a supplementary educational support prior to formal schooling<sup>34</sup>.

### **Escalating Issue Attention: ECEC Emerging from the Shadows**

All three theories of the policy process emphasise *issue attention* as a crucial condition for policy change (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Baumgartner &

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<sup>33</sup> Sylva Langford, is former Director General of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs .

<sup>34</sup> The term childcare – rather than ECEC – is deliberately used, where appropriate in this section to highlight and differentiate the focus on childcare as a workplace support measure for parents rather than a care and education support for children.

Jones, 1991). Throughout the 1990s, a series of inter-related events and developments converged and generated sufficient issue attention to ECEC where political engagement and intervention within the domain was largely unavoidable (Bennett, 2006; Bradley, 2009; Fine-Davis, 2007; Hayes, 2008). As the economy grew and female employment rates increased, the lack of appropriate support structures to assist mothers in balancing work and family life led to growing public dissent amongst parents, employers and unions (triggered by associated retention and recruitment problems) who contested the inequities and inadequacies of workplace cultures that developed around male breadwinners (Sweeny, 2006). Internationally, by this time, the majority of European countries had been providing universal ECEC for children for at least one and most often two years prior to public school commencement, in addition to subsidised childcare to assist parents in balancing work and caring responsibilities (OECD, 2001; 2006; NWCI, 2005; NESF, 2005). Proposals included in the Lisbon Strategy and Barcelona Summit under which Ireland had agreed set targets of a 60% employment rate amongst women aged 15 – 64 by 2010 and childcare provision for at least 90% of children aged between three and mandatory school age accentuated pressure for political action (Bennett, 2006; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005).

In parallel with the labour market oriented debate, although somewhat further below the policy radar, was the increasing political attention to a growing range of global evidence-based studies regarding the value of ECEC (Bradley & Hayes, 2009; Hayes & Bradley, 2010). Economic analyses by Schweinhart (2000), Cleveland & Krashinsky (1998) and Heckman (2006) amongst others quantified the significant economic returns from early investment in children and highlighted ECEC's capacity to alleviate educational disadvantage by equipping children with the necessary social and cognitive skills to enhance school and later labour market performance. Early childhood policy initiatives, 'once framed in the language of early human development, social reform and equal opportunities was translated into the language of economics, human capital, and returns on investment' and successfully inspired traditionally non-interventionist politicians in the developed world to invest in ECEC (Woodhead, 2006: 14). Largely inspired by this scientific evidence and its inter-related redefinition and reframing of the ECEC policy issue, targeted early intervention programmes had become increasingly popular in like-minded neo liberal states (e.g. HeadStart in the US and SureStart in the UK) (Lister, 2003, 2006a; Penn 2005; Woodhead, 2006). In 2002, the UK, which similarly to Ireland, had long avoided direct intervention in the domain, also introduced



free part-time universal pre-school under Blair's Labour government as part of its ambitious reform of all children's services under *Every Child Matters* (Lister, 2003). As highlighted by all three theories of the policy process, the impact of these economic studies illuminates how the addition of new dimensions to a prevailing policy issue supports issue redefinition and the entrance of new entrants to a policy debate (i.e. economists) and heightens interest amongst other groups within the political system as they become more aware of a 'moving' policy issue (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Zahardias, 2007). The increased attention garnered at this time also highlights the impact of policy-oriented learning as advocacy coalitions incorporate supportive information as a persuasive means to strengthen advocacy support (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

A range of comparative global reports had also entered the public domain, all of which highlighted Ireland's poor comparative international position in terms of public expenditure and provision of ECEC. For instance, the OECD's (2004a) *Education at a Glance* reported that ECEC expenditure amounted to 0.2% spend of GDP<sup>35</sup> in Ireland compared to the OECD average of 0.4% and a UNICEF (2007) *Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* ranked Ireland child poverty rate 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 25 OECD countries<sup>36</sup>. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Science supported a number of small-scale early childhood pilot initiatives such as the Early Start<sup>37</sup> and support for Traveller preschools but the fact that it took no policy position on ECEC outside the formal schooling system (Hayes, 2002) preferring instead to target 'childcare' was proving an increasing source of discontent amongst educationalists and the wider public.

### **'Strong in ... Policy Formation': The Policy Documents**

As public pressure escalated, an increasing number of government working groups were established and a flurry of government reports commissioned. From 1995 alone, the *Commission on the Family* was established and published its report, *Strengthening*

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<sup>35</sup> Gross Domestic Product refers to the total market value of all final goods and services produced in a country in a given year, equal to total consumer, investment and government spending plus the value of exports, minus the value of imports.

<sup>36</sup> Ireland outranked only Italy, the USA and Mexico.

<sup>37</sup> Established by the Department of Education and Science in 1994, Early Start is a one year early intervention initiative catering for three and four year olds in designated disadvantaged areas which aims to reduce educational disadvantage. Operating from existing primary schools, groups of fifteen children are taught by a qualified primary school teacher and an early childhood worker. The Programme provides support to more than 1,500 children (DES, 2005).

*Families for Life* in 1998, which included a comprehensive set of recommendations emphasising the need for improved provision and financial subsidisation of childcare for families with young children. In 1998, the Department of Education & Science (DES) held a *National Forum on Early Childhood Education* which was followed by a *White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn* (1999). The White Paper focused on the early educational needs of children from birth to six and included a series of recommendations regarding the need for action across the whole system including ‘curriculum, training [...] and quality and quantity of inputs’ (DES, 1999: 43). In response to the recommendations within the *White Paper*, the DES established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2001<sup>38</sup>. The primary tasks of the CECDE were to draft, in consultation with practitioners and other stakeholders across the ECEC sector, a quality framework for the early years sector; to develop initiatives for children with special needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage; to support research in the early education field; and to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency as proposed in the White Paper (Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

An *Expert Working Group on Childcare* was established under *Partnership 2000* [social partnership agreement] to consider the childcare needs for children from birth to twelve, bringing ‘afterschool, as well as preschool and other forms of early childcare into the policy arena for the first time’ (Hayes, 2006: 5). Meeting under the direction of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), the group produced a *National Strategy for Childcare* in 1999. The Strategy proposed a seven year comprehensive plan for the management and development of the childcare sector which coincided with the National Development Plan 2000 – 2006 (Hayes, 2006) and ‘underpinned the creation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme’ (NESF, 2005: 14). However, a critical feature of the *Expert Working Group* was the restrictive nature of its terms of reference, which limited the group to considering the childcare needs of working parents alone. While Hayes (2008) suggests expedient budgetary explanations may have contributed to this limited focus, it nonetheless reinforced the foundation for a fragmented policy response to childcare and failed to recognise the wider issue of ECEC as a resource for all children, their families and society.

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<sup>38</sup> The management of the CECDE was supported by a partnership initiative between the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Saint Patrick’s College, Drumcondra

Ireland's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) in 1992 proved an important landmark that generated much discussion and debate regarding children as individual rights holders and associated statutory responsibilities for children (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). The *National Children's Strategy*, guided by the principles of the UNCRC was published in 2000. The Strategy (2000: 4) outlined its vision of an 'Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; and where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential'. Three national goals were identified towards the attainment of this vision. Goal One is that children will have a voice in matters affecting them; Goal Two, that children's lives will be better understood; and Goal Three, that children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development (Department of Health & Children, 2000).

Following the EOCPs introduction in 2000, the plethora of policy documents continued: in 2002, the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning*; the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development of the ECCE Sector*; in 2004, the OECD *Thematic Review of ECCE Policy in Ireland*, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*; the CECDE *Audit of Policy Practice and Research (1990–2004)* and *Insights on Quality and Making Connections*; in 2005, ECEC policy analysis reports by the NESF and the National Women's Council in Ireland (NWCi); in 2006, the CECDE's *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood*; in 2007, *The Value for Money Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*; and in 2009, *Developing the Workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA).

The scale and fluidity with which these reports emerged, many undertaken or directly commissioned by government, is indicative of the growing attention to the importance of ECEC as an employment, economic, education and public concern and is revealing of an increasing receptiveness within the policy environment to ECEC. From its once barren and concealed location within the patriarchal shadows, this cogent attention shift is indicative of the policy-oriented learning gradually infiltrates the policy environment and is, in this instance accompanied by a gradual shift in core beliefs and core policy

beliefs regarding the possibilities out of home ECEC offers young children and society. Indeed the scale and diversity of policy documents and recommendations from this time testify to and substantiate Langford's claim regarding Ireland's strength in policy formulation. However, analysis of the scale and extent of implementation of these myriad recommendations in the following section reveals an altogether less favourable picture thus substantiating her counter argument regarding Ireland's relative weakness when it comes to policy implementation.

### **'Weak ... in Implementation': The Policy Actions**

In 1999, the publication of the *National Childcare Strategy* and the successful acquisition of EU Equal Initiative funding, led to the establishment of the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme* (EOCP) and represented the largest statutory investment in ECEC to that time.

### **The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme**<sup>39</sup>

The EOCP represented government's first policy attempt of scale to advance from policy rhetoric to policy action in the area of childcare (Fine-Davis, 2004, 2007; Hayes & Bradley, 2009). Implemented through the *National Development Plan* (2000 – 2006), the Programme has had the most penetrative and significant impact on ECEC policy and practice to date and through it, the seeds were planted from which Ireland's primary response to ECEC was to develop and grow. As a co-funded equal opportunities measure for social inclusion, the EOCP operated under the DJELR and aimed to facilitate parents to participate in employment, training and education by increasing the number of childcare spaces, improving quality and introducing a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services (Langford, 2006). To manage the impact of the EOCP, 33 City and County Childcare Committees [CCCs] were established to develop locally focused County Childcare Strategies and to support delivery of services at local level. Staffing grants were provided for community/not-for-profit organizations and private providers towards the cost of staff for community-based provision in disadvantaged areas. Financial support was also granted to seven

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<sup>39</sup> A detailed description of the EOCP is included in Appendix A.

NCVO's to subsidise their operational costs in exchange for the provision of advice, support and training to on-the-ground providers (in partnership with the CCCs)<sup>40</sup>.

Of the overall €535 million budget<sup>41</sup>, approximately half was used to provide capital grants to build and refurbish childcare facilities and the remaining funds were divided into staffing grants (35%) and quality initiatives (16%) (O'Meara, 2008). In total, the EOCP supported the creation of 41,000 new childcare places between 2000 and 2007 and assisted a further 25,000 existing childcare places to meet the new regulatory standards (O'Meara, 2008). This provision of capital grants to commercial and community providers elicited what Hayes (2006: 6) describes as 'a robust response from the construction industry' towards the rapid development of centre based care without 'the concomitant development of smaller sessional services and family based childcare.' Government's persistent use of these measured capacity increases and financial expenditure as proof of their 'success' (Lenihan, 2006) in public discourse and policy debates is illustrative of its resistance to alter the arms-length approach that the EOCP facilitated and, as will be discussed shortly, the Programme's successor was similarly developed, albeit with marginal adjustments, to prioritise and reinforce these same capacity focused aims.

### ***Limitations of Market-Based Approaches***

Fundamentally, government's reliance on market-based capacity growth as its primary response to growing demands for ECEC is synonymous with the neoliberal approach pursued in countries such as Australia, the US and UK and illuminates the political preference to distance itself from a direct role in the delivery of ECEC. By vigorously sub-contracting out responsibility for capacity growth and the delivery of ECEC services to the private and community sector the care of young children essentially remained a privatised familial expense and concern<sup>42</sup>.

Significantly, the issue of quality in ECEC provision was rarely emphasised and the programme's limited capacity to address the already variable levels of quality

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<sup>40</sup> The seven NCVOs in receipt of funding are: Barnardos; National Childminding Association of Ireland; Forbairt Naíonraí Teo; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association (ISWECA); National Childrens Nurseries Association and St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

<sup>41</sup> 40% was provided through EU structural funds and the remaining 60% was exchequer funded (O'Meara, 2008)

<sup>42</sup> Up until 2010, universal subsidization of ECEC did not exist in Ireland.

characteristic of the sector formed a critical limitation (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005). While *Siolta, the National Quality Framework*<sup>43</sup> and *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*<sup>44</sup> were both under construction throughout the EOCP's lifetime, their launch *after* EOCP programme completion is illustrative of the disconnected approach between ECEC policy development and implementation, and illuminates the policy and regulatory void in which rapid capacity growth occurred. As government funded accelerated capacity growth within the sector, the very basic quality initiatives and minimal regulatory criteria attached to capital grant acquisition substantiate Kirby *et al's* (2002) claim regarding the 'lack of contextual sensitivity' in pragmatic and expedient policy making. Throughout the programme's lifetime, ECEC services were required to meet only the very basic *Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations* (2006) which primarily concerned health and safety issues and staff child ratios. By the DES's (2009: 6) own admission, these regulations did not 'focus on many important elements of practice such as adult-child interactions, extending and enriching children's learning by understanding each child as a learner, and planning, creating and using a stimulating and nurturing learning environment.' They contained no stipulation regarding the formal qualifications of staff (DES, 2009; Hayes, 2006).

Reliance on market-led approaches proved highly problematic, as tiered market growth of a 'private good' of variable quality continued. The prioritisation of capacity growth to facilitate working parents, without a concomitant and equally balanced focus on quality was criticised for its failure to solve the persistent problems of high costs and variable quality, key reasons behind the EOCP's initiation in the first place (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Bennett, 2006). ECEC subsidisation remained far below the EU and OECD average and, correspondingly, direct parental expenditure remained far above (OECD, 2003, 2004). For instance, in its policy comparisons of Austria, Ireland and Japan, the OECD (2003) reported an average Austrian childcare fee of 5% of Average Production Employee Earnings (APE)<sup>45</sup>, an

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<sup>43</sup> *Siolta, the National Quality Framework* provides a set of national standards for quality practice in early childhood education

<sup>44</sup> *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* is designed for use in the range of early childhood settings including children's own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services and infant classes in primary schools. The Framework uses four interconnected themes to describe the content of children's learning and development: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking.

<sup>45</sup> The Average Production Employee refers to the average gross wages earnings of adult, full time workers in the manufacturing sector of each country. In 2002, these were €23,963 in Austria, €25,330 in Ireland and €33,926 (OECD, 2003).

average Japanese fee of 8% of APE, and an average Irish fee of 20% of APE which was estimated to rise to 50% of APE for two children in day care.

The negative correlation between commercial policy approaches and quality ECEC settings is well documented in ECEC policy literature (Bennett, 2006; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; Goodfellow, 2005; OECD, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Press & Skattebol, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). Profit maximisation and commitment to consumer choice (most favourably towards those with greatest assets) form the imperative linchpin of 'business' sustainability. Bennett (2006: 28) describes 'how private provision of human services in 'an open and deregulated market frequently leads to corner cutting and inferior services'. Similarly, the OECD (2006: 29) highlights how efforts to 'control public expenditure and entice commercial providers into the field' can lead to government reluctance 'to require degree level qualifications and to even see the sector as an appropriate field of activity ... to absorb lowly qualified women into the work force'. In Ireland, government promotion of community employment (CE) schemes<sup>46</sup> to respond to staffing shortages in community settings substantiates arguments regarding the risks of corner cutting in a poorly regulated market<sup>47</sup>. Recruitment, remuneration and high staff turn-over issues are frequently highlighted as characteristic of market-based approaches where cost curtailment is a primary objective, findings corroborated by Irish ECEC policy analysis literature (OECD, 2004, 2006; DES, 2009).

In 2007, the 1996 Childcare Regulations were revoked and replaced with the Revised Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulation which, once again did not include a formal requirement regarding staff qualifications (2007: 39, emphasis added):

*It is acknowledged that many childcare staff have a qualification or are working towards achieving one. In centre-based services, it is considered that the person in charge should aim to have at least fifty percent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children. The qualified staff should rotate between age groupings.*

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<sup>46</sup> The Community Employment (CE) scheme is administered by FÁS, Ireland's training and employment authority and aims to support those who are long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people re-enter the labour market by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities.

<sup>47</sup> In 2008, the number of childcare projects ring-fenced in Community Employment (CE) accounted for 1,760 places (Department of Education & Science, 2009)

In this instance, the DES (2009: 7) do not criticise the lack of clear regulatory stipulation regarding staff qualifications and instead contend that the new regulations ‘clearly recognise the relationship between qualifications of staff and meeting the requirements of the Regulations.’

### ***Co-ordination Challenges***

In addition to unresolved equity, access and quality issues during the EOCP’s time frame, the parallel development of childcare and early childhood education, in terms of policy, funding, delivery and staffing is revealing of the persistent conceptual split between education and care (Hayes, 2008; OECD, 2006). The fragmented and dispersed responsibility across a range of government departments was consistently highlighted as a blockage impeding integrated policy development and reform of early education in Ireland (OECD, 2001; 2004; 2006; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005; Hayes, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2006). In their *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland*, the OECD (2004: 23 - 24) criticised the perceptual split and argued that:

*No one Department or Agency had been given clear responsibility to lead integrated policy or to provide coherence across the various childhood bodies and services. Part of the reason for this lack of coherency is attributed to the fact that traditionally early childhood policy has been subsumed under larger issues, such as family policy, primary schooling and general health policy, rather than a defined age group with its own specific health, developmental and cognitive traits*

At the time of the OECD Review, the Department of Health & Children was responsible for nursery provision for 0 to 4 year olds (provided for 2% of 0 – 6 cohort in 2003), the Childcare Directorate within the DJELR was charged with responsibility for implementation of the *National Childcare Strategy*, including the EOCP and the DES was responsible for provision (in primary schools) for preschool aged children<sup>48</sup>.

To enhance cohesion and integration across a variety of child-related policy issues, the Office of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs [now the Department of Children and

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<sup>48</sup> In 2003, it was estimated that services provided by the DES covered 104,437 children, or 32% of the 0 – 6 age cohort (OECD, 2004).



Youth Affairs] was established in 2006. Of particular relevance to ECEC, was the relocation of the Childcare Directorate from the DJELR and the newly established Early Years Education Policy Unit from the DES to the OMCYA (Hayes, 2006)<sup>49</sup>.

Despite representing an important shift towards enhanced coherence in a highly fragmented sector (OECD, 2006), Hayes (2006: 7) warns that ‘co-location alone does not integration make’ and argues that a serious attempt to integrate care and education would have led to a ‘re-titling of the National Childcare Investment Programme as the ‘National Programme for Investing in Children’s Services and the units developing and implementing early childhood policies would have been merged.’ These arguments regarding policy venue and policy images are synonymous with the PET’s arguments regarding the possibilities shifts in policy venues potentially incorporate in terms of issue redefinition and revised policy images and focus (Walgrave & Varone, 2002; True *et al*, 2007).

### ***The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP)***<sup>50</sup>

The EOCP’s successor, the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) was announced in 2006 and according to the then Minister for Children aimed to ‘build on the success of the (existing) EOCP Programme’ (Lenihan, 2007). The impact of historic institutionalism is once again illustrated through the very marginal adjustments the new programme made to the pre-existing EOCP framework in response to negative policy feedback whilst simultaneously reinforcing and further embedding market-based arrangements within the policy landscape. Management of the new, now completely exchequer funded programme was transferred to the Childcare Directorate in the newly formed OMCYA. A notional conceptual rebalancing is evident in the programme’s discourse towards ‘a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare, *which is centred, on the needs of the child*’ (Lennihan, 2007, emphasis added). However, the programme’s introduction in the ongoing absence of nationally regulated quality and curriculum frameworks or stipulated regulations regarding staff qualifications, led analysts to conclude that the target aim of 17,000 additional trained personnel by 2010 formed the core and rather tokenistic mechanism through which the ‘child centred’ focus would occur (Bradley & Hayes, 2009; Hayes & Bradley, 2009). Importantly, the

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<sup>49</sup> The structure of the OMCYA and the integrated departments and agencies are illustrated in Appendix B.

<sup>50</sup> Further details on the NCIP Programme are available in Appendix A.

market-based approach did not require any assault to the inherited patriarchal paradigm as the use of ECEC remained very much a private familial consideration.

The NCIP had an initial total budget of €575 million, €358.8m for capital investment and €218m for operational/current expenditure (O'Meara, 2008). The capital proportion of its budget therefore amounted to almost two thirds of the total fund (62%), surpassing the EOCP's estimated 50%. The programme continued to provide staffing grants to community settings<sup>51</sup> and to support the county and city childcare committees and the NVCOs. Despite the rhetorical 'child-centred' policy reframing, the programme failed to add any regulatory criteria regarding curriculum frameworks or staff qualification criteria which remained a private decision for ECEC providers. This lack of policy revision in response to public criticisms illuminates the dominant policy pattern of continuity and persistence in Irish policy making despite the always existent agentive capacity to create a branching point by adopting alternative policy approaches. It is this evidence of policy persistence in the face of persistent public criticisms regarding the inadequacies of policy responses that forms a core consideration of this thesis. By accessing the perspectives of those policy actors directly engaged in the policy development process at this time, this research seeks to identify and explore the less visible action and activity behind the scenes that generate and reinforce these high levels of policy persistence.

### **The Early Childcare Supplement (ECS)**

In defending its efforts to resolve affordability issues, government drew upon its targeted early intervention initiatives such as Early Start and its action plan for *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* [DEIS]<sup>52</sup> (DES, 2005). More broadly, government defended its supply-side strategies by highlighting its parallel increases to child benefit payments, additional financing which they argued could be used by parents to subsidise childcare costs if they so desired (Bennett, 2006; Bradley & Hayes, 2006). Over the ten year period from 1997, the payment increased by 400% (Langford,

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<sup>51</sup> In 2008, the staffing grant system was replaced with a Childcare Community Subvention Scheme [CCSS] which provided per child tiered subsidy fees to community settings based on parental income rather than the former non-means tested staffing grants available to community-based settings.

<sup>52</sup> The DES's *DEIS* programme aims to assist families to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. The programme, initially targeting 180 disadvantaged schools, acts as an additional support to address the early learning needs of young children, the implementation of which, is supported by the OMCYA's linkages with services in the childcare sector (Bennett, 2006).

2007). However, these measures were deemed inadequate to the escalating public demands of parents, employers and unions for government amelioration of the cost issue. In the 2005-06 Budget, ‘in the face of a defeat in two by-elections in commuter areas where child care was a crucial electoral issue’ (O’Connor, 2008: 11), the government, supplemented its provisions under the NCIP through another increase to Child Benefit and a new additional payment, *the Early Childcare Supplement* (ECS). The ECS, a universal annual payment of €1,000 for each child under six years with an estimated annual exchequer cost of €350 million aimed to support *all* parents in *their* care and education choices for their young children (Hayes, 2006). O’Connor (2008: 11) suggests that the political popularity of the initiative centred on its capacity to ameliorate high childcare costs while simultaneously ‘providing token recognition to the value of mothers’ care for under fives within the home’.

At the time of the ECS announcement, a number of government commissioned reports had *all* recommended the introduction of universal preschool provision and grounded their rationale in the evidence-based studies emphasising the economic returns from early investment which now populated the policy arena (NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005; OECD, 2004; Heckman, 2006). The employers, business and union organisations had also added their voices to the calls from the NCVOs and other children’s organisations such as the Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA) and Barnardos for a universal system of ECEC (ICTU, 2002; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005). Yet despite the growth in advocacy mobilisation and the increased public demands for action during this window of opportunity (i.e. electoral campaign) and the increased issue attention to the policy domain, all factors which the theories of the policy process highlight as favourable for policy change, the adopted policy response represented a form of policy continuum rather than radical change. Analysts criticised the limited capacity of the ECS to strengthen the early childhood sector, improve and sustain quality or improve the early years experience of young children. As Hayes and Bradley (2009) argue, there was to begin with no guarantee that the supplement would be used by parents to enhance the early years experiences of young children, or that children would directly benefit from the payment at all.

Government’s failure to deviate from the market-based approach reinforces earlier arguments regarding continuity and persistence as dominant characteristics of Irish policy making and is indicative of a political tendency to ‘fudge’ controversial public

issues which may disrupt their affiliation with embedded traditional belief systems regarding the private nature of maternal care choices (NWCI, 2005; Hayes, 2006; Fanning, 2003; Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Kirby & Murphy, 2007). Here, the power of social constructions and their embeddedness in policy responses is highlighted, as too is the political reluctance to challenge these. While each of these dilemmas afforded policy decision makers an opportunity to review their existing beliefs and propose alternatives systems that may reflect reconsidered beliefs, policy choices predominantly occurred along a continuum with little evidence of alteration from the traditional belief system and institutionalised policy approaches. Policy analysts argued that political anxiety regarding decisive policy decisions which may unduly favour those who care for their children full time or those who – for varied reasons - share the care of their children resulted in policy paralysis and a recourse to cash payments rather than a shift or alteration to the path of policy action (Sweeny, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Kirby, 2007). Conflict aversion and minimisation of contentious policy decisions form an important component of this approach. Kirby and Murphy (2007: 14) argue that:

*A neo-liberal fixation on limiting state intervention is a partial explanation but policy inaction is not just about ideology or cost avoidance. Policy paralysis is due to politicians' fears of introducing reforms in the absence of policy consensus and to the political difficulty of mediating between those advocating conflicting policy options. Policy is also limited by the strong veto power of employers who resist parental leave policies. The lack of policy to promote women's economic participation is also due to a deeply rooted ideological ambiguity about mothers' labour-market participation in a conservative, patriarchal political culture.*

Political procrastination and the reluctance to challenge traditional patriarchal beliefs underpinning the policy frame is clearly reflected by the then Minister for Children's statement emphasising how '*parents are best placed to decide how to care for their children. Our job is to support them in that decision and that is what we are doing*' in announcing details of the ECS scheme (Lenihan, 2006a). Thus while policy rhetoric and political discourse may have alluded to progressive constructions of the child, through documents such as *The National Children's Strategy*, policy action and policy tool selection which persistently protected parental choice [by privatising child rearing decisions] proved contradictory and incompatible with the rhetoric.

### **The Preschool Initiative**<sup>53</sup>

However, while reversion to cash-based transfers proved a politically feasible and financially viable option during the 2006 ECS decision, the rapidly altered and depleting state finances two years later rendered it an increasingly unfeasible and untenable long-term policy response. Fianna Fail won the 2007 general election and began its tenth consecutive year as the dominant party in government. The context of what were to be its last years in power prior to its defeat in the 2011 general election, differed substantially from its former reign during Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' period. During that decade, it had adopted policies which rapidly grew the private ECEC sector, increased child benefit payments by more than 400%, introduced a series of targeted initiatives for disadvantaged children and finally, in 2006, introduced an additional universal cash payment through the ECS. However from 2008, burgeoning and critical solvency problems emanating from Ireland's excessive spending and toxic banking failures during the previous decade led to a budget deficit of 14% of GDP in 2009 and a beleaguered government request for a European Union and International Monetary Fund 'bail-out' in November 2010 (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2011). Prior to the government bail-out request, it engaged in critical reviews of all public expenditure to identify *all* possible areas where public cuts could feasibly be made. As one of the first acts of these reviews, the CECDE was closed in 2008. In addition to a freezing of capital grants from early 2009 under the NCIP, the ECS, which had represented an appealing political weapon prior to the by-elections and during the boom was also identified as an excessively costly exchequer expenditure (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). Having cost the government €480 million in 2008 alone, the government announced the phasing out of the Supplement<sup>54</sup> in the Supplementary Budget of April 2009, and its replacement with a year's free preschool for all children between the ages of 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months from January 2010, a move which the government estimated would save €310m annually (Lenihan, 2009). The introduction of the preschool initiative represented an unexpected landmark decision, particularly in light of the decade-long resistance to persistent pleas for such a policy provision from national and international experts (OECD 2001; 2006; NESF 2005; Bennett, 2006). However and imperatively, it was the fiscal rationale – rather than ideological evaluation and reflection - which generated its long awaited adoption in policy, as clearly evident in the Minister for Finance's statement:

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<sup>53</sup> Further details on the Preschool Initiative are included in Appendix A.

<sup>54</sup> The monthly supplement payment was halved to €41.50 per child from 1 May 2009 and abolished from December 2009 (Lenihan, 2009).

*This scheme [the ECS] was introduced to help people with the cost of childcare at the height of the boom. While appropriate to the time, it cost the state €480m last year. The programme is now being replaced with the early childcare and education year [sic] for preschool children at an estimated cost of €170m.*

(Lenihan, 2009)

The move to introduce free preschool from January 2010 marked a shift in government approach away from ‘childcare’ towards ‘early childcare and education’ and has been broadly welcomed for the opportunity it presents to develop and enhance the ECEC sector (Bradley & Hayes 2009). It is however significant that its introduction occurred during a political and economic crisis when economics, rather than the protection of traditional values, represented the policy maker’s ‘dilemma’ that demanded the policy shift. Consistent with all three theories of the policy process, it is indicative of the ‘windows of opportunity’ crisis moments and exogenous shocks to the political system create for rapid and crisis policy alterations and is corroborative of the dynamics of ‘lurching’ described in the PET (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Schlager, 2007). The Minister emphasised how the initiative provided an example of how ‘a programme can be reshaped and made more effective at a lower cost to the tax payer in a climate’ where the imperative must be to achieve better results with fewer resources (Lenihan, 2009). The Minister also emphasised how ECEC generates ‘significant enhancement of subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for state investment generally’ (Ibid, 2009) thereby clearly grounding and contextualising ECEC within the economic-based imperatives that had already proved palatable with neo-liberal politicians in the US and the UK. The ‘future-focused’ nature of the discourse, where the state provides a one year educational component oriented towards enhanced educational and later employment achievements, clearly grounds and rationalises the action within the developmental psychology paradigm rather than the rights-based frameworks or the new sociology of childhood paradigm, the limitations of which have been outlined in Chapter Two.

While the decision to introduce a year’s universal ECEC was not driven by any assault on past hegemonic constructions or traditions surrounding children and childhood, it is nonetheless indicative of the fundamental shifts in policy direction crisis moments

potentially generate, and also, the expedient and pragmatic nature of Irish policy making during these crisis moments. Following the budget announcement in April, full scale implementation of the preschool initiative was planned for just eight months later, in January of 2010<sup>55</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter overviewed the social, cultural and political context in which ECEC policy has been framed and demonstrates how key values, traditions and beliefs from the foundation of the Free State to the present day have influenced interpretations of policy issues and the construction of policy solutions. While highlighting how tradition forms only the initial starting point in policy development given the agentive capacity of individuals, the chapter reveals the persistence, continuity and avoidance of radical policy shifts which dominate in Irish policy making processes. The extent to which certain values and beliefs have become embedded in the policy environment and the path dependencies these have created amplify the longer-term implications of dominant social constructions – and the values and beliefs behind them - on courses of policy action. Political and cultural resistance to endogenous policy innovation is highlighted by the documented battles surrounding the women’s rights agenda and the extent to which such rights were enforced by exogenous pressures (primarily the EU and domestic constitutional challenges) rather than political foresight and endogenous government-initiated activity. The fact that ECEC remained below the policy radar until the mid 1990s is indicative in itself of the powerful and hegemonic influence which embedded social constructions carry in Irish policy development, no doubt reinforced by political and voting structures which encourage conflict aversion and staggered, safe and neutral policy action wherever feasible. However, in a largely pragmatic and reactive based policy environment, the powerful influence of exogenous triggers and altered social and cultural behaviours illuminate how, in certain contexts, even where resistance is the predominant modus operandi, social constructions eventually and inevitably evolve as gradual belief changes or trigger event moments create ‘windows of opportunity’ to initiate or demand policy change. What is

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<sup>55</sup> Interviews for this thesis were conducted following the announcement of the preschool initiative but prior to its implementation, and accordingly analysis of actor perspectives on various components of the policy environment were examined to this point only [preschool initiative announcement]. Therefore, the policy environment within which this research is framed incorporates analysis of actors’ perspectives on the impact of the policy environment from the foundation of the Free State to the preschool announcement in April, 2009 and excludes policy developments thereafter.

imperative here and clearly highlighted in this chapter, is the narrow and cautious manner, in which policy action is taken in response to these wider dilemmas. How actors behave and the proposals they advocate in these key moments are vital to the structuring of policy responses and are explored further throughout this research study.

The chapter concluded with a detailed analysis of ECEC policy development, focusing in particular on policy developments between 2000 and 2010. By analysing key strengths and weaknesses of policy approaches adopted during this time, the chapter provides a rich framework to support analysis of how the action and activity of actors engaged in ECEC policy development have influenced ECEC policy decisions and outcomes. However, despite the significance of these various policy decisions very little is known regarding the behind the scenes policy action and activity which catalysed or constrained their production. By accessing a key groups of actors who engaged in policy development during this time, this research seeks to uncover and enhance understanding of the various factors and processes which influenced the development of these policy decisions. Prior to elaboration of the research methodology, the final literature review chapter introduces key policy making venues inside and outside government where policy entrepreneurs, advocates and decision makers strategise, debate and deliberate on social policy matters.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### POLICY MAKING VENUES IN THE IRISH CONTEXT

#### **Introduction**

*In seeking to chart the different sites of influence within the overall policy making process with a view to identifying where a paradigm might be most likely to have an impact on decision making, the immediate problem is theorising the policy community itself. This is because opinions differ on where within the policy community it would be most beneficial for a paradigm to gain a foothold.*

(O'Sullivan, 2005: 83)

The introductory chapter to this research described the ever-increasing complexity of the policy environment as a growing range of actors from an increasing diversity of policy venues seek access to the inner spheres of policy making in their quest to influence policy decisions within their specialised domains of interest (Baumgartner, 2009; Gaynor, 2009; Maloney *et al*, 1994; Ozga, 2000; Rhodes, 1997). Given that this interpretative study aims to access the perspectives of those elite actors with privileged access to these inner spheres, this chapter frames this study within Ireland's national policy making structures and identifies key policy making venues inside and outside of government where those actors seeking to influence ECEC policy are located.

To accomplish these aims, this chapter firstly explores how the shift from government to governance – which has resulted in the incorporation of an increasingly broad range of actors into various aspects of policy deliberation and implementation with or on behalf of government - has altered the structures and processes through which policy making now occurs. In order to ensure research clarity, this chapter then elaborates on the framing process (Rein and Schon, 1994) employed to identify key and influential policy venues at the subsystem and macro-political level. The chapter discusses each of the key policy making domains identified: the macro-political institutional level, social partnership and non-governmental organisations and provides a rationale for each

venue's incorporation into this study's research framework. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the insider/outsider typology, which categorises actors into distinct groupings and supports this study's exploration of the different roles, status and behaviour of different actors engaged within the inner spheres of policy making.

### **From Government to Governance**

Upon its founding, the Irish Free state inherited an almost complete administration system together with other important state agencies from Britain, known as the 'Westminster model' (WM) (Collins, 2004; Murphy, 2006). The Westminster model is characterised by parliamentary sovereignty; strong cabinet government; accountability through elections; majority party control of the executive (that is, prime minister, cabinet and the civil service); elaborate conventions for the conduct of parliamentary business; institutionalised opposition; and the rules of debate (Gamble 1990: 407). It describes an authoritarian, centralised and top-down system of government (Callanan, 2006; Collins, 2004; Gustaffson & Driver, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Rhodes, 1997).

In Ireland, as elsewhere in the developed world, there is a growing trend for traditional government arrangements to be supplemented by a broader scope of governance practices that herald a shift from centralised and bureaucratic forms of decision making to flexible and facilitative forms of collaboration between government and wider networks of interests across the business and community sectors (Gaynor, 2009; Larragy & Bartley, 2007). This shift from direct government to 'multi-sited, multi-layered and multi-actored' processes of governance (Deacon, 2007: 177) partly emerged in response to the external pressures of globalisation, particularly the deregulation of the financial markets and also as a result of the influence of the wave of public sector reforms adopted by neoliberal governments in the US and the UK during the 1980s (Adshead, 2006; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Bevir *et al.*, 2003b; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Larragy & Bartley, 2007; Rhodes, 1997). The term 'hollowing out of the state' has been used to describe: the loss of government functions upwards to the European Union and downwards to special purpose bodies; the increasing privatisation of public services and a growth in public/private partnerships; the more limited scope and forms of public intervention and growing use of agencies; and new forms of public management that mimic market style relationships through an emphasis on transparent objectives, performance standard requirements and managerial accountability (Bache &

Flinders, 2004; Bevir & Rhodes, 2001, 2003; Dale, 1999; Deacon, 2007; Neuman, 2007; Rhodes, 1997). The cumulative effect of these changes has fundamentally impacted on the way in which ECEC services are delivered *and* the means through which decisions regarding ECEC policy are managed and developed. The shift from government to governance therefore has important contextual significance for this study's analysis of ECEC policy development.

Ireland, along with most English-speaking countries has become 'a veritable laboratory for experimentation with new forms of governance arrangements both within and beyond government systems' since the late 1980s (Larragy & Bartley, 2007: 197). Health policy shifts to incentivise the market to build private hospitals and education policy shifts which have 'increased resort to fee-paying education, subsidised by the state' are just some examples of the 'neoliberal commodification' governance structures have introduced into Irish social policy (Kirby & Murphy, 2007: 15 – 16). Given the very limited political attention to ECEC in Ireland prior to the adoption of wide-scale governance processes, the privatisation effects of governance have been particularly pertinent in the construction and delivery of ECEC services as Allen (2000: 90) highlights:

*The case of pre-school children illustrates most dramatically the pressure on people to use privatised options rather than providing a state service. ... It appears the Irish state takes literally the injunction that a woman's place is in the home and makes no provision for crèches, nurseries and forms of pre-school learning. The result has been an almost totally privatised and de-regulated facility where many parents pay for childminders in the black economy.*

The delegation of political authority from government to quasi autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGOs) has also been a particular feature of the governance movement which has also impacted on the structuring of the ECEC policy field<sup>56</sup>. Hardiman (2010: 13) suggests that some of this agency creation 'clearly stemmed from the need to increase policy capacity in specific areas and to expand the range of specialist expertise working in a dedicated way'. The CECDE provides a prime example in this regard. Also of particular relevance to the ECEC sector is governance's greater emphasis on 'active citizenship' and the concept of an 'enabling state' and the

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<sup>56</sup> The OECD (2008) *Public Management Review* estimating the existence of in excess of 500 agencies operating in the Republic of Ireland.

subsequent augmented reliance on the community and voluntary sector to manage and deliver services that were once subsumed under government departments. The *White Paper on a Framework for Voluntary Activity* (2000: 14) emphasises the:

*parallel development both internationally and nationally ... in recent years away from state welfarism towards a more pluralistic system of provision, with many governments looking to the voluntary sector and to volunteers to play a larger role in the direct delivery of welfare services.*

Similar to privatisation, the greater reliance on community and NGO activity encouraged through governance has also vitally affected the way in which ECEC is delivered in Ireland, a point elaborated on later in this chapter.

This shift from governing through direct control to governance, where government collaborates with a diverse collective of actors who operate in networks cutting across public, private and voluntary sectors and across different levels of decision-making is well documented in Irish policy literature (Adshead, 2006; Gaynor, 2009; Hardiman, 2005, 2006; Kirby, 2007; O'Donnell, 2001b; O'Riain, 2006; Sweeny, 2006). 1987 has been described as a watershed in the evolution of governance in Irish social policy (Larragy & Bartley, 2007) as it marked the beginning of a new era of 'social partnership' as a basis of a new networked policy approach that continued uninterrupted for the following two decades<sup>57</sup> and inspired wide-scale replication of networked policy approaches across Irish economic and social policy domains. Changes at this level are particularly pertinent to this study as they have altered the structures, processes and range of policy venues through which policy is negotiated and developed.

Governance when conceived of as an appreciation of an increasingly complex state-society relationship which incorporates a growing range of actors and network relationships elicits important questions about the challenge to state power and democratic accountability in policy development (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Gaynor, 2009; Murphy, 2006; Rhodes, 1997). For instance, Murphy (2006) highlights how the increasing influence of non elected representatives in policy deliberation has resulted in

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<sup>57</sup> Social Partnership refers to a governance process 'where representatives of employer organisations, trade unions, farmers and - since 1997 - community and voluntary sector (i.e. the 'Social Partners') work in common institutions [NESC, NESF and National Economic and Social Development Office] with government to deliberate about economic and social policy resulting in social partnership agreements' (Adshead & Neylan, 2008: 20).

a discontentment amongst many politicians who believe these network processes undermine their position within the political system by removing the Dáil (parliament) from the deliberative process of economic and social policy making. This study is therefore important in exploring the extent to which the shifting dynamics of governance alter the policy deliberation structures and sites and points of influence in ECEC policy. By exploring relations of power within ECEC policy making, it seeks to explore how democratic governance structures are in incorporating and giving due weight to the different voices of actors who seek to engage in and influence ECEC policy making processes.

Given that the ‘who and how of policy production are dialectically related’ (Gale, 2007: 220), narratives of inclusion and exclusion and the strategies, behaviours and influential capacity of these different sets of actors become ever more integral to understanding the complexities of policy development. This point is particularly pertinent to this research which seeks to incorporate analysis of actor’s perspectives on the role of actors *outside* (as well as inside) of government on ECEC policy development. Importantly, Rhodes (1997: 15) highlights how ‘acknowledging the emergence of governance as a challenge to state power is not the same as assuming state power has been eviscerated’ and emphasises that altered policy structures do not despite how it may appear, necessarily imply a demise of state power. He does however concede to the persistent tension a wish for authoritative action and a parallel dependence on compliance from actors outside of government creates and emphasises the importance of incorporating these structures into analysis of contemporary policy making (Ibid., 1997).

### **Framing this Study within Processes of Governance**

Given the complexities of the policy process and the myriad structures, processes, actors and influences which penetrate the policy environment at macro political and subsystem level, exhaustive analysis of all policy actors and venues which incorporate aspects of ECEC into their policy-making brief is beyond the parameters of this or any study. Sabatier (2007a: 325) highlights how:

*... when seeking to understand any reasonably complex set of phenomena – and public policy processes are clearly complex – the observer must begin with a set of presuppositions concerning the entities worthy of notice, their characteristics*

*that are worth remembering, and the types of relationships among entities that are worth observing. ... That perceptions of complex phenomena is mediated by a set of presuppositions constituting at least a simple conceptual framework.*

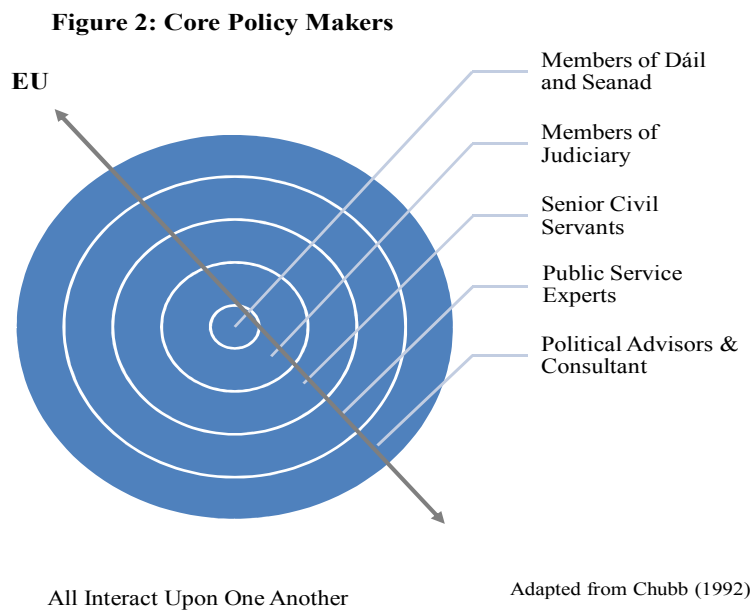
Similarly, Colebatch (2005: 14) argues that ‘any account of political practice means attributing significance to some things rather than others, recognising some participants and some practices as being important and valid (e.g. ‘decisions’ and ‘decision-makers’) in preference to others’, through a ‘framing’ process (Rein & Schon 1994) where the ‘analyst imposes an order on the array of phenomena involved in the process of governing’. In order to ensure sufficient exploratory depth within research parameters that are reflective of the inner spheres of the policy environment, this research employs a framing approach to identify key and influential ECEC policy venues (and their actors) at the subsystem and macro political level that support exploration of the phenomenon under study. Who these actors are, their perspectives and beliefs, and the strategies and approaches they adopt in policy deliberations and debates are likely to reveal key factors and processes influential to ECEC policy decisions. Accordingly, three key policy making structures, consistently documented in Irish policy making literature as integral domains in contemporary policy making systems, have been identified and incorporated into this study’s national policy making frame (Fanning, 2003; Gaynor, 2009; Kirby *et al*, 2002; Murphy, 2006; NESF, 2005; O'Donnell, 2001b; O'Riain, 2006; OECD, 2004, 2008; Sweeny, 2006) and relate to:

1. Macro political institutions at government level;
2. Social partnership as a policy making site; and
3. Engagement of NGOs in policy making.

### **Macro Political Institutions: Government Level**

In *The Policy Making Process*, Lindblom (1968 cited in Chubb, 1992: 155) uses the term ‘proximate policy makers’ to describe key policy actors at government level ‘who share immediate legal authority to decide on specific policies, together with other immediate participants in policy decisions’. Chubb (1992) applied Lindblom’s concept to the Irish policy making system and identified a key set of proximate policy makers, depicted in Figure 2 (what I term ‘core policy makers’ hereafter for ease of clarity). These are members of the Oireachtas [members of government, Dáil and Seanad and

the Judiciary], senior civil servants, public service advisors and political advisors. The EU is also incorporated into Figure 2 as Ireland’s EU membership means certain policy decisions are made at that [EU] level, by-passing not only the Dáil but also national parliaments in other member states (Gallagher, 2000)<sup>58</sup>. The following sections contextualise the roles and activity of each identified category of core policy maker.



### ***Members of the Oireachtas***

The Oireachtas (National Parliament) comprises the Office of the President, Dáil Éireann (directly elected parliament) and Seanad Éireann (indirectly elected upper house)<sup>59</sup>. Most decision-making takes place in the Dáil which is dominated by very strong, cohesive political parties (Gallagher, 2000). Gallagher (2000: 4) notes how ‘extremely rare’ it is for a member of the Dáil (TD) to ‘defy the party line on any issue’ and notes how ‘such defiance, when it occurs, almost invariably results in immediate expulsion from the parliamentary party’ (see Chapter Three for discussion on political and voting processes). The Executive power of the State is exercised by or on the authority of the Government (Ibid., 2000). The Government is collectively responsible

<sup>58</sup> While this study focuses on national policy making processes and the role of national actors within the policy process, perspectives on supranational influences are incorporated into the interview schedule to fully explore the range of actors with whom national actors engage and to uncover the extent to which the international realm influences national decisions.

<sup>59</sup> The Seanad has minimal powers which are primarily related to minor delaying powers over legislation (Gallagher, 1999).

for the fifteen Departments of State administered by its members and is responsible to Dáil Éireann. The Judiciary administers justice through the courts. The Constitution also provides for the Office of Attorney General, the legal advisor to the government. The powerful constraints judicial interpretation of the constitution imposes for political actors has been elaborated upon in the previous chapter (Chubb, 1992; Gallagher, 2000; Girvin, 2010).

### *Senior Civil Servants<sup>60</sup>:*

The civil service comprises the permanent staff of the 15 government departments and certain specified ‘core’ agencies or offices<sup>61</sup> (OECD, 2008). While Ministers make the crucial ruling in policy decisions, the advisory role of senior civil servants in policy development and their proximity to the Minister legitimates their categorisation as core policy makers. Senior civil servants are required ‘to develop policy options, analyse their likely impact and advise Ministers on the most appropriate policy responses in any particular set of circumstances’ (Donnelly, 2007: 241). While the traditional view posits that politicians decide and civil servants implement, the important resources they acquire (e.g. technical expertise, time commitment to issues, access to vested interests) as part of their role puts them in a potentially powerful position to influence those with direct political authority (Niskanen, 1986; Page, 2003; Richards & Smyth, 2004). A pivotal aspect of the civil servant role, and one that makes them particularly pertinent to this study, is their negotiating responsibilities vis-a-vis influential actors outside of government (e.g. social partnership, interest groups, NGOs) and with other departments of state that must be consulted (Chubb, 1992). The shift from government to governance means the negotiating and ambassadorial role senior civil servants occupy in these policy discussions posits them as central actors and mediators in the policy development arena, thus accentuating and reinforcing their status as ‘core policy makers’. The following chapter elaborates further on the importance of senior civil servants to this study’s analysis.

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<sup>60</sup> Senior civil servant refers to those of principal officer status and above (Chubb, 1992). There are nine rankings within the civil service: clerical officer, staff officer, executive officer, administrative officer, higher executive officer, assistant principal, principal officer, assistant secretary and secretary general.

<sup>61</sup> Agencies include Central Statistics Office, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Office of the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Office of the Ombudsman.



### ***Political Advisors and Internal and External Consultants***

In addition to advisors within government, government Ministers increasingly employ political advisors or aides, whose counsel they desire because they are politically in tune with them or knowledgeable or both (Chubb, 1992). The increasingly complex demands of modern policy making has also led to an increased tendency to devolve the process of determining appropriate policy responses in particular circumstances to consultants and expert groups outside of the civil service (Chubb, 1992; Donnelly, 2007). Hardiman (2010: 11) highlights how, unlike the British system, the Irish civil service ‘has not introduced new streams of acquiring specialist expertise to remedy the skills deficiencies’ within the generalist, civil service system and notes how this has contributed to an increasing reliance [and high costs] on private sector consultancies for policy advice. Evidence of government reliance on external expert advice in ECEC is apparent through, for instance, the commissioning of Goodbody Economic Consultants (2002) to undertake the evaluation *Staffing, Quality and Childcare Provision: An Evaluation of the Community Support Childcare Initiative of the EOCP 1998 – 2002* and Fitzpatrick Associate Economic Consultants (2007) to undertake a *Value for Money Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*.

### **Social Partnership**

As previously highlighted, governments pursuing complicated social and economic agendas increasingly bring important social actors (usually business associations and labour confederations) into the decision-making process as a strategy to increase their effectiveness by trading expanded group access to policymakers for group acquiescence to current initiatives (Pierson, 1993; Gaynor, 2009). Ireland’s social partnership provides the ultimate example in this regard.

Variably described as a form of ‘negotiated governance’ (O’Donnell, 2008), ‘flexible network governance’ (Hardiman, 2006), ‘a form of ‘competitive corporatism’ (Roche & Cradden, 2003) and a continuation of ‘clientelism’ where the institutions ‘are fundamentally anti-democratic’ in nature (Ó Cinnéide, 1998/99), the networked structure of social partnership has significantly altered Ireland’s policy making structures (Adshead, 2006; Hardiman, 2005, 2006; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Larragy, 2006; Larragy & Bartley, 2007; O’Donnell, 2001a, 2001b; O’Riain, 2006). The uniqueness of social partnership and that which differentiates it from the ‘network

approach' described in British policy making literature (Rhodes, 1997; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003) derives from the multi-dimensional policy issues it covers and the fact that 'networks of interaction are not strongly differentiated by policy area, but are linked into a dynamic process of political deliberation' (Hardiman, 2006: 347). The amalgamation of a wide variety of policy actors across a diverse range of intersecting policy domains is revealing of the non-linear processes through which policy deliberation occurs and a core feature considered in the identification of this study's research sample. While some contend it to be unclear if social partnership will survive the current challenging economic climate, it is highly likely that the governance ethos and mechanisms which underpin it will, at least, continue in some form or other (Gaynor, 2009; Stafford, 2011).

Its inclusion as one of the three key policy making venues of this study's framework is two-fold. Firstly, social partnership has over the past two decades formed a cornerstone in Irish policy making and its national agreements have incorporated recommendations regarding childcare and more latterly ECEC<sup>62</sup>. Secondly, the analyses and critiques of social partnership draw attention to critical aspects and features of Irish policy making processes thus heightening the researcher's sensitivity to key intricacies and nuances that are characteristic of Irish governance processes.

Social partnership is typically reflective of the 'iron triangles' and 'limited systems of participation' that describe the inner and most elite spheres of policy making. For those insider organizations privileged enough to be accepted as social partners, its participatory parity provides a form of recognition prized in contemporary politics (Meade, 2005). However, behind this shroud of participatory parity and collaboration, various analyses reveal structural and participatory divisions, inequities and hierarchal layers of elitism that reveal an altogether different reality from the much heralded collaborative 'partnership' process (Gaynor, 2009; Hardiman, 2006; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Meade, 2005; O'Hearn, 2000; O'Riain, 2006).

A key criticism of social partnership centres on the unequal and divisive treatment of the economic partners and the community and voluntary pillar (CVP) during policy deliberation and development. Meade (2005: 363) highlights how the work of the

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<sup>62</sup> For instance, *Sustaining Progress* (2003) included specific recommendations around childcare and *Towards 2016* (2006: 41) included a specific range of measures and recommendations relating to 'Early Childhood Development and Care'.

NESC, 'a more influential contributor to the macro-economic debate and an institution from which the community and voluntary sector was excluded, until the negotiation of *Partnership 2000*' has 'tended to overshadow' the work of NESF, which primarily concentrates on social policy matters. From the time of their inclusion (and still), the CVP is identified as a junior partner and excluded from the negotiation of pay and tax issues (Meade, 2005). The fact that the pillar 'unlike the other partners cannot withdraw or threaten withdrawal of capital investment of labour power' (Meade, 2005: 366) is revealing of the power of actor resources in policy deliberations and debate, a point also emphasised in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). This differentiation between the economic and social partners leads Meade (2005) to describe the CVP participation as one which is 'shorn of influence' (p. 351) given how 'privileged access to *economic* decision making' represents 'the real prize' of social partnership, and without such access, recognition is tokenistic (p. 363).

The fact that framework agreements at the heart of social partnership are coordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach, 'which retains an overview of the process and *control over decision-making* and the budgetary allocation to support them' (Hardiman, 2006: 348, emphasis added) is revealing of persistence of government authority within new modes of governance. Politics therefore 'retains its primacy' and 'social partnership has not displaced nor replaced government authority in areas which government defines as central to its electoral priorities' (Hardiman, 2005: 2). Thus differentiations in access rights to various subsystem coalitions within social partnership and the persistence of hierarchical structures in deliberation and decision-making processes substantiates Rhode's (1997) warning regarding the need for caution in interpreting the extent to which new modes of governance have reduced or altered government authority within new processes of governance.

Broader questions regarding 'how democratic' partnership as a policy making process have also gained attention. Kirby (2002: 32) berates how policy agreements 'which bind the rest of us' are now made 'by full time officials in the civil service and in the organisation of major interests ... around committee tables behind closed doors'. Similarly, Ó Cinnéide (1998/99) expresses concern about the degree to which significant decision-making has moved outside the control of elected politicians and into the hands of small elites where accountability is difficult to track and enforce. Kirby & Murphy (2007: 11) describe how this changing context of governance has

resulted in ‘blurred’ roles as ‘social partners chair key state boards, key policy-making functions are delegated to private consultancies and agencies’ and public/private partnerships permeate the social services. They argue that this fusion of roles and the contrasting and contradictory objectives it implies, particularly in more controversial policy domains, exacerbates the danger of policy paralysis when consensus cannot be reached and cite ‘childcare’ as the ‘obvious example’. Similarly, Sweeny (2006: 16 – 17) describes the impact of competing agendas and uncertainty and disagreement amongst the social partners on childcare policy development:

*Childcare is proving a particularly difficult issue ... to resolve because the expectations people have of public policy in this area reflect fundamental values.... Some believe ... Ireland is turning away too quickly from the traditional respect it had for women’s roles in child rearing and home making ...Others believe that women who take employment ... should get a state subsidy specific to them .... An OECD Review (2004) ... found a significant difference of views ... on just why it is the state’s responsibility to invest in early childhood services, what formal childcares achieves for children that is better than parental care, etc.*

Analysts suggest that the delegation of policy to committees, which governance processes and government distancing encourage, facilitates avoidance of public debate about values and ideologies integral to effective social policy development (Hardiman, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Meade, 2005). This is particularly pertinent in the case of ECEC, given the particular sensitivity and embedded traditional value systems which penetrate the policy domain and the reactive ‘policy paralysis’ this has generated in the deliberative processes of governance.

### **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Informal Policy Networks**

While social partnership represents a structured form of policy network, the ‘contracting out’ of services to commercial and voluntary organisations and the market-based externalisation of others has led to a proliferation of informal policy network structures between government and the various NGOs who deliver services on their behalf (Geoghegan & Powell, 2008; Kirby & Murphy, 2007). These collaborative structures are especially relevant to ECEC, given the prominent role of ‘outside’ providers ‘in the absence of any tradition or expertise in local government for providing childcare’

(Sweeny, 2006: 17). The resultant state reliance on private and community sector provision of ECEC, aided through the capital subsidy schemes and operational funding for NCVOs to assist in on-the-ground training provision and quality assurance, accentuates the inter-dependence of both sets of actors in policy development and implementation. Accordingly, the NCVOs are regularly invited to participate and liaise with government departments regarding ECEC policies through a variety of media such as the *National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee* as well as related strategy and working groups such as *The Expert Working Group on Childcare* (2000) and the *Non Governmental Advisory Panel* and the *Research and Information Advisory Panel* for *The National Children's Strategy* (2000).

The incorporation of NGOs into policy deliberation processes is not unique to Ireland, but reflective of a global trend of altered group-government relationships that accompany the shift from government to governance (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Bevir *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b; Deacon, 2007; Gaynor, 2009; Grant & Halpin, 2003; Grant, 2004; OECD, 2008; Rhodes, 1997; Richardson, 2000). Maloney *et al.* (1994: 22) suggest a cultural or constitutional convention which holds policy making to be 'more legitimate when affected interests are involved and ideally satisfied' and describe consultation as 'a functional necessity in the process of developing effective policies'. The benefits of government engagement and consultation with these outside actors are well documented and include a capacity to identify stakeholders; define the policy agenda; improve government information; improve the quality and legitimacy of decisions; encourage compliance through ownership; and avoid challenges or public criticism of final policy decisions by maintaining groups on-side throughout the policy process (Davis, 1997; Grant, 2004, 2005; Hill, 1997; Howard, 2005; Maloney *et al.*, 1994; Tisdall, 2004). In return, NGOs are afforded access to policy makers and a potential opportunity to influence the policy agenda and policy decisions, and to have their views incorporated into the policy making process as well as an increased likelihood of direct and valuable information and an increased likelihood of statutory funding (Casey, 1998; Hill & Tisdall, 1997; Davis, 1997; Maloney *et al.* 1994). Governments usually adopt various strategies and criteria to identify and select those groups/actors they believe most pertinent and beneficial to their specific aims and objectives (Eising, 2007; Grant & Halpin, 2003; Maloney *et al.*, 1994).

## The Insider Outsider Typology

This research draws from Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin's (1994) adaptation of Grant's (1978) insider/outsider typology as an exploratory framework to uncover key criteria and selection mechanisms governing group/government relationships in the policy-making process. The insider/outsider typology was originally developed to explore *interest group* relationships with government. This research describes interest groups as those 'organisations separate from government, though often in close partnership with government, which attempt to influence public policy' (Wilson, 1990: 1).

The insider outsider typology distinguishes between insider groups who are ascribed legitimate status by government and are involved in meaningful conversation on a regular basis and outsider groups who are unable to achieve this favourable status and do not become engaged in consultation processes<sup>63</sup> (Maloney *et al*, 1994). Given, this research focus on actors engaged in ECEC policy making processes, exploration of the model is confined to the insider component of analysis.

Maloney *et al* (1994: 28) argued that the original typology's conflation of status with strategy created ambiguity in differentiating groups within the classifications and consequentially revisited the model to 'consciously separate what Grant had joined together'<sup>64</sup>. Accordingly, they distinguished between *strategy* which they describe as a matter *selected by* the group and *status* which is conditional upon government granted legitimacy, *ascribed by* policy makers *to the* group (Ibid., 1994: 28). Their revised classification identified three types of strategy: insider strategy; outsider strategy; and thresholder strategy based on May and Nugent's (1982: 7) depiction of groups who 'vacillate between pursuing and not pursuing a symbiotic relationship with government' and shift between insider and outsider strategies. Insider strategies are more cordial,

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<sup>63</sup> Outsiders formed a disparate and heterogeneous category and were divided into outsider groups 'by necessity' and outsider groups 'by choice'. The former were groups that 'would like to become insider groups, but lacked the necessary resources or skills to gain recognition'; whilst the latter were 'ideological protest groups that did not want to be drawn into the embrace of government' (Grant, 2004: 409).

<sup>64</sup> Grant (1989) depicted three sub-divisions of insiders: *prisoner groups*, who find it difficult to break away from an insider relationship due to their financial dependency on government assistance; *low profile groups*: who place great stress on 'behind the scenes' interactions with government and are unlikely to use controversial means of influence; and *high profile groups*: who aim to persuade government through the use of the mass media and appeals to public opinion

consultative and less contentious or controversial in nature, while outsider strategies, typically involve protest and visible opposition to government initiatives or inaction<sup>65</sup>.

Maloney *et al* (1994) then identified sub-categorisations of insider in their revised adaptation of the typology:

Insider Status:

- a) *Core Insiders* who are able to bargain and exchange with policy makers over a broad range of issues;
- b) *Specialist insiders* who have narrower policy niches but are still seen as reliable and authoritative; and
- c) *Peripheral insiders* who carry little influence although they participate as insiders.

The status classification distinguished groups according to the degree of acceptance for a group by the relevant [government] department (Maloney *et al*, 1994). Insider status ranged from regularised participation in policy discussions on a wide variety of issues cognate to a policy area (i.e. core) to participation in particular or niche areas (i.e. specialist), to that which has the insider form but relatively little influence (i.e. peripheral). According to the typology, core insiders are regarded as an important and relevant information source over a broad area and are regularly involved in exchanges while the involvement of other insiders is more sporadic. They attributed a 'cosmetic' type status to peripheral insiders to include those found on consultation lists but whose influence over policy development is usually, in their terms 'marginal at best' (Maloney *et. al*, 1994: 32).

A group's resources are fundamental determinants in status allocation as it is these that attract policy makers to groups. Grant (2000) distinguishes seven types of group resources of interest to policy makers: a group's financial resources; staffing resources; a group's capacity to mobilise its membership (e.g. protest power and visibility); internal decision-taking and conflict resolution skills of the group; a group's marketing skills, in terms of attraction and retention of its members; its sanctioning capability (i.e. capacity to refuse to co-operate with policy decisions and resultant implications); and

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<sup>65</sup> Other depictions and categorizations which delineate between group strategy include 'non-contentious and contentious actions (Tarrow, 1995); routine advocacy and non-routine protest (Minkoff, 1994); assimilative and confrontational groups (Meyer & Imig, 1993) and persuasion, inducement and coercion (Mathews, 1993)' (As cited in Casey, 1998: 60).

the strategy of the group (e.g. its avoidance of negative strategies such as breaking confidentiality with civil servants).

An insider strategy tends to create a basis of exchange between policy makers and interest groups that reinforces stable policy making conditions and, hence, incremental policy changes (Maloney *et al*, 1994; Grant, 2000; 2005). The typology implies that insider groups are more likely to be successful given their enhanced access to decision makers, although this has to be balanced by the constraints imposed by working within existing political structures (e.g. accepting the outcomes of the bargaining process). Importantly, however, Maloney *et al* (1994: 25) distinguish between ‘access’ and ‘influence’, depicting the former as a means of ‘consultation’ and the latter as a means of ‘negotiation’. Consistent with this, the policy making literature describes being consulted (access status) as a sign of being treated as insiders but emphasises how it does not indicate the ability of groups to influence policy outcomes (Broscheid, 2007; Mc Kinney & Halpin, 2007). There is, however, an assumption that biases in the political arrangements tend to favour insider groups and that influence without access is much more difficult to attain (Broscheid, 2007; Maloney *et al*, 1994; Mc Kinney & Halpin, 2007; Page, 1999).

The insider outsider typology and the various factors and components it incorporates into its differentiations of groups provide a useful mechanism to differentiate narratives of inclusion and exclusion within policy-making processes. Its potential usefulness in identifying and delineating the different range of actors engaged in ECEC policy systems where complex webs of networks of actors interact and engage across a range of policy subsystems makes it a particularly useful device to frame this study’s research sample, and is elaborated on in the following chapter. Its attention to group’s resources and the strategies groups employ in their efforts to influence policy decisions is also a particularly useful analytical device for this study’s purposes and is drawn upon in the analysis of this study’s interview findings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the increasingly complex and crowded policy environment associated with the shift from government to governance and illuminated how different processes of governance affect the policy making structures within which ECEC policy



is deliberated and developed. Of particular importance is the increasing reliance on the community and voluntary sector, the growth in public private partnerships and the growth in policy networks through which ECEC policy consultation now occurs. Given the increasing complexities of the policy environment, an exercise in framing was employed to identify prominent policy venues within the Irish policy environment where key policy actors – and advocacy coalitions – vie to engage with powerful government actors and seek to influence ECEC policy making. Using Lindblom's definition of proximate policy makers, the chapter explored key actors at the macro-political level who have direct input into policy development and elaborated on the role of senior civil servants in particular as their negotiative role with actors *outside* of government makes them particularly pertinent to this study's objectives. The Chapter then discussed the role of social partnership and highlighted key intricacies and nuances of the Irish policy making processes which this much analysed aspect of Irish policy making has revealed. The chapter then explored how processes of governance have led to an increasingly inter-dependent relationship between NGOs and government within the ECEC policy domain and considered how these altered processes influence group-government relationships and interaction. As governance processes grow in prominence, both social partnership structures and NGOs have secured an increasing role in policy development and comprise important groupings of actors for this study's analysis of policy development. These various processes and their importance to this research study are elaborated on in the following chapter which details the research methodology process.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This study seeks to investigate how the policy-making environment influences ECEC policy design and outcome by accessing the perspectives of key actors – across a range of policy venues – and exploring their direct experiences and perspectives of the impact of behind the scenes activity on ECEC policy development. To effectively explore such processes, this study uses an interpretative approach to reveal actors’ perspectives on:

1. The differential roles and status of actors engaged in the inner layers of policy making;
2. How variable roles and actor status influence actor behaviour and influential capacity in ECEC policy development;
3. The key social constructions which influence the development of dominant paradigms in ECEC policy in Ireland; and
4. The wider environmental catalysts and constraints which reinforce or challenge these paradigms.

Through an exploration of these aspects of policy-making, this research seeks to reveal how these various factors converge to influence the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy design. Previous chapters have discussed the theoretical frameworks which guide and underpin this research study and have highlighted how actor behaviour and strategies interact with constructions of policy issues to influence adopted policy responses. The remainder of this thesis seeks to explore how the very processes outlined in these frameworks interact and influence ECEC policy design in the Irish context.

The introductory chapter to this study highlighted how existing ECEC policy research primarily focuses on the discrete programmes (e.g. curriculum childcare) or the reified product of policy (i.e. specific policy decisions) rather than the intricate struggles, contestations and challenges within the inner spheres of policy making which lead to

the production of the final policy decision (Bown *et al*, 2009; Moss & Pence, 1994; Neuman, 2007). Accordingly, this research seeks to respond to this research void by incorporating a variety of perspectives from an elite group of actors who directly engage in ECEC policy making in order to provide a deeper insight into ‘the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt, 1994: 118). Investigative analysis of the processes and strategies at play in the less visible arenas of policy making uncovers unique, empirical knowledge that adds a further layer of understanding to the nuanced processes that are fundamentally important to Irish ECEC policy construction.

This chapter presents the research methodology for this study. It introduces the rationale which led to the selection of a qualitative methodology to explore the phenomena under study. It then discusses the interpretative framework which guided data collection, processing and analysis. The methodological process leading to the identification of the range of actors for inclusion in the study is discussed. Tools developed for sample identification (concept maps) and data collection (interview schedules) are presented and data analysis techniques (thematic network analysis) are also elaborated on. The chapter concludes by discussing the research strengths and limitations and the ethical procedures adhered to during the research process.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research analysts argue that the ever-increasing popularity of the language of quantification as institutional trends towards evidence-based policy grow in prominence has resulted in a narrowing acceptance of what counts as legitimate evidence in policy decision-making processes (Neylan, 2008; Torrance, 2008). Neylan (2008) highlights how the universal language and properties of standardised signification heighten the appeal of quantities over qualities and increase their influential capacity in policy development. The fact that evidence-based policy studies quantifying the long-term benefits of ECEC have proven especially popular with political leaders in the western world who use and exploit such evidence as a driving rationale for investment in the sector has already been highlighted (Bown *et al*, 2009; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Penn & Llyod, 2007; Woodhead, 2006).

However and importantly, the processes guiding politicians and policy advisor's adoption of policy solutions are rarely amenable to statistical deduction alone and are usually far more complex than large scale quantitative studies can ever encapsulate. Policy decisions are rarely based on only simple calculations of easily discernible costs and benefits and instead usually incorporate a far broader and more complex set of less tangible, context-specific processes, such as ideology, culture, values and personal experiences (Neylan, 2008; Room, 2008; Smith, 2003; Torrance, 2008; Trauth, 1997; Wilson, 1998). A credible and authentic examination of policy making therefore requires rigorous interrogation of these less tangible factors and processes to fully capture the complexities and intricacies of policy development, a methodological challenge beyond the capacity of large scale datasets, which are more preoccupied with counts and scales (Bridgman & Davis, 2003; Neylan, 2008; Room, 2008; Smith, 2003; Torrance, 2008).

Trauth (2001) suggests that the nature of the research question, that is, what we want to learn, and how we want to achieve it, coupled with the already existing knowledge about the phenomenon are most significant in selecting a research methodology. Given the limited research of the internal 'black box' of ECEC policy making, a qualitative approach grounded within an interpretative frame emerged as the most appropriate methodology to facilitate a more nuanced analysis of the less quantifiable but pivotal influences in ECEC policy design. Qualitative research can extend the comprehension of the vastness and complexity of policy processes and support a more insightful and discerning understanding of policy making through a line of thought that is oriented towards meaning, context, interpretation and understanding (Smith, 2003).

### **Interpretative Research**

Interpretive research acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality and assumes policy influences and processes are not an objective phenomenon with known properties or dimensions and accordingly, does not set out to test hypotheses (Rowlands, 2005). Instead, 'it aims to produce an understanding of the social context of the phenomenon and the process whereby the phenomenon influences and is influenced by the social context' (Walsham, 1995 cited in Rowlands, 2005: 81 - 82). Interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes *human interpretation* as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world and stresses the

importance of investigating action and the social world from the actor's own subjective experience and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Knoblauch, 2005; Prasad, 2005). Understanding how actors order, classify, structure and interpret the world and act upon these interpretations is therefore vital to understanding the phenomenon under study (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Prasad, 2005; Rowlands, 2005).

Guba & Lincoln (1994) advise researchers to make explicit both their ontological and epistemological assumptions prior to embarking on any research project. This study's research approach is consistent and compatible with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that the world and reality are interpreted by policy actors in context-bound social and cultural practices. In line with this, the interpretive researcher's epistemological assumption is that findings are created as the research investigation proceeds (Ibid., 1994). While the research is grounded in and supported by theories of the policy process and bodies of literature on social constructions, no prior hypotheses was made regarding the variable impact of different factors or processes on actor behaviour or policy development, prior to undertaking the research study.

### **Methodological Tools & Supports**

This research employs two qualitative research tools to frame the study and access the necessary depth of data to explore the phenomenon under exploration. An in-depth semi-structured interview schedule was designed to facilitate interview discussions and support thorough and reflective qualitative data collection from research participants. A concept map was developed to facilitate the sample selection process and to explore participants' perspectives on the researcher's interpretation of actor engagement in ECEC.

### **Interviews**

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for use with key policy actors to explore the phenomenon under question and illuminate how those involved in ECEC policy design think about ECEC and interact within the policy environment to strategise and influence policy decisions. Rubin & Rubin (2005, vii) liken the interview to 'night goggles' which assist the researcher to see 'that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen.' In line with the interpretive tradition,

semi-structured interviews helped ‘uncover understandings, meanings, stories and experiences, feelings, motivations and beliefs’ of the actors on key phenomenon pertinent to this study’s analytical focus (Andrade, 2009: 52). Holstein & Gubrium, (2004: 150) describe the interviewing process as a ‘meaning making project’, where the ‘subject is fleshed out’ from ‘the time one identifies a research topic, to respondent selection, questioning and answering, and, finally, to the interpretation of responses.’

The focus of this research and the limited existent research relating to the phenomenon under study influenced the structure and style of questions of the interview schedule. The open-ended schedule aimed to create a responsive context and was designed to reflect the integrated theoretical approach and the interpretative nature of the study. Given the key task in interpretative research is to seek meaning in context, questions were grounded in, and derived from, the past and present social, cultural and political contexts in which Irish ECEC policy has been and is created. Accordingly and within this context, the research instrument was designed to explore how key contextual factors and processes influenced actors’ understandings, perspectives, values, beliefs and constructions of ECEC and how these influenced their interaction and engagement throughout the policy-making processes. The semi-structured schedule provided a guide during the interview process, yet the interpretative nature of the research meant that policy actors were afforded considerable freedom to deviate towards issues that they considered important or relevant to the broader subjects under discussion (Robson, 2002). Key research themes identified for interview discussions are outlined in Table 1 (See Appendix C for detailed Interview Schedule).

**Table 1: Key Research Themes and Data Focus of Semi-Structured Interview**

Research Theme	Data Focus
Actor Context	Role of actor & objectives of actor institution Actors’ perspectives on their institutions role and objectives in ECEC policy making
Traditions and Values	Actors’ perspectives on how traditions/values are situated in Irish policy making processes Actors’ perspectives on key traditions/values influential in ECEC policy design Actors’ perspectives on role of traditions and values in shaping and structuring of ECEC policy

Research Theme	Data Focus
International Governance	<p>Actors' perspectives on the role of supra-national governance in national policy approaches</p> <p>Actors' perspectives on international policy approaches to ECEC and the extent to which these influence national policy approaches in ECEC</p>
National Policy Making Processes	<p>Actors' perspectives on national policy making process and personal experiences of the policy process</p> <p>Perspectives on ECEC concept map, including actor's perspective on their location in the policy nexus and location and role of other actors within the model</p>
Perspectives on ECEC and Irish policy approaches to ECEC	<p>Actors' perspectives on government approach to ECEC policy</p> <p>Perspectives on select ECEC policy initiatives. Discussion on perceived policy objectives, impact on quality within sector and strengths/weaknesses of policies in supporting children needs and rights</p>
Constructions of Childhood & Children's Rights	<p>Actors' constructions of childhood and children's rights</p> <p>Actors' perspectives on current constitutional strengths and weaknesses for children's rights and the implications of these for policy development</p> <p>Actors' perspectives on rights-based frameworks in ECEC</p>

## **Concept Mapping**

As shifts from government to governance increase the range of actors and the number of venues through which various aspects of policy deliberation and development occur (Bridgman & Davis, 2000; Edwards, 2005; Everett, 2003; Ozga, 2000), the identification of the research sample proved a particularly challenging task. Chapter Three discussed the relatively nascent state of ECEC policy development in Ireland, a point corroborated by the former Director of the OMCYA's admission that the *National Childcare Strategy* (1999) represented government's 'first attempt at a coherent approach to the range of issues involved in early childhood care and services' (Langford, 2006: 65). This relatively nascent state of ECEC policy development means the range of actors that comprise the policy community is, as of yet, relatively limited by comparison to countries whose more lengthy history of engagement within the policy domain has facilitated the growth of a more densely populated policy community and a more elaborate range of policy networks. Accordingly, a key objective of this research was to ensure the inclusion of a sufficiently broad range of actors from the inner spheres of policy making to capture the diversity of perspectives across a range of policy venues while simultaneously ensuring a thorough and non-biased research sample that is reflective of the inner policy domains under study.

To ensure a systematic process and comprehensive incorporation of key actors in this study's research sample (within the constraints of time and resources), a process of 'concept mapping' was utilised to support the 'framing' of the research sample. Concept mapping is a technique used to demonstrate visualisations of 'dynamic schemes of understanding within the human mind' (MIs, 2004, cited in Wheeldon, 2009: 69) and can assist in the depiction and analysis of complex processes and play a role in knowledge translation (Ebener *et al*, 2006).

The development of a concept map provided a systematic methodological approach for the identification of key policy actors – across a variety of policy venues – in ECEC policy-making processes. Underpinned by the theories of the policy process's delineation of advocacy coalitions, policy subsystems and macro political institutional levels, the concept map aimed to identify and categorise key groups of actors according to shared and common dimensions (e.g. role and status, actor resources, institution objectives and focus), while simultaneously protecting actor anonymity, by grouping actors into broader groups or categories in order to protect individual actor anonymity



The concept map also provided a useful analytical tool to acquire feedback from policy actors on their perspectives of the researcher's interpretation and depiction of actor engagement in policy making. Hathaway & Atkinson (2003: 162) suggest that less structured means of interviewing that incorporate creative means of engagement with participants may shed light on the 'back regions of a social setting or practice' by transcending 'a rehearsed form of narrative that precludes more spontaneous answers'. By presenting the map to research participants during interviews, the researcher aimed to facilitate greater depth of discussion by prompting spontaneous and reflexive answers on actors' personal interpretations of the role and interplay of various actors and policy venues which intersect during ECEC policy development.

Chapter Four identified the national policy making venues framing this study. The concept map aimed to identify an appropriately correlated research sample within these parameters. It was important to include actors *inside* and *outside* of government to ensure the complexities of the deliberative structures and the range of actors engaged within these was incorporated into the research sample. The theoretical framework for this study highlights the importance of actor interaction across policy venues and subsystems in terms of policy progression and development. For instance, interviewing actors within government exclusively would give insight into government's perspective only and may not reflect or reveal the type of relationships government has with *outside* actors and the extent to which these affect the policy process and policy development. If the interpretive researcher wants to create an integral and persuasive piece of research around a phenomenon, it is important to ensure a multiperspectival approach which incorporates the views of key actors across a diverse range of policy venues that is reflective of the authenticity of the environment in which policy making occurs.

### ***The Layers of the Concept Map***

The development and framing of the concept map germinated from the primary policy-making venues identified in Chapter Four. The map was developed by amalgamating constructs from the literature on core policy makers (Lindblom, 1968; Chubb, 1992) to identify key actors *inside* of government and the insider/outsider typology classifications to identify key actors *outside* of government (Grant, 1978; Maloney *et al*, 1994).

The development of the concept map incorporated two key stages. The first involved the development of an original *draft* concept map based on the researcher's personal interpretations of key actors engaged in the policy-making process across a number of policy spheres/layers. The second stage involved adaptation of the original draft concept map based on feedback from the initial round of interviews with core policy makers.

### ***Stage 1: Draft Concept Map Development – The Inner Layer***

Figure 2 [Chapter Four] presented an adapted version of Chubb's (1992) categorisation of core policy makers in the Irish policy making system which included members of the Oireachtas, senior civil servants and political advisors and internal and external consultants contracted by government to advise on policy development. Given the extensive range of core policy makers, an exercise in framing (Rein & Schon, 1994) was employed which led to the identification of senior civil servants from the relevant government departments as most pertinent and relevant to the study of the phenomenon under investigation. The selection of senior civil servants was based on two key factors:

- Their relationship and proximity (and thus ease of access) to Ministers who make the final policy decisions: while policy decisions are a function of Ministers and Government, a key role of civil servants centres on the development of policy options, analysis of their likely impact and the provision of advice to Ministers on the most appropriate policy response in any given context (Chubb, 1992; Donnelly, 2007; Page, 2003); and
- Their engagement and negotiative role with other government departments and important actors outside of government who seek to influence policy development work: their extensive interaction and engagement with different actors across different policy venues (from ministerial level to interest groups) positions them as central actors and potential mediators in terms of the development of policy proposals. It was this interactive role with a broad range of internal and external policy actors which provided the key rationale driving their selection for inclusion in the study.

### ***The Outer Layers: Key Insiders***

The insider/outsider typology provided a useful analytical lens through which to explore policy-making processes and identify and categorise key actors in various domains outside government who engage with core policy makers within government. Maloney *et al's* (1994) insider/outsider typology was originally developed based on government/group behaviour in UK policy-making processes<sup>66</sup>. Despite the many similarities between UK and Irish policy-making systems (e.g. the continued relevance of centralised decision-making, growing use of public/private partnerships, agencies and networks), differences – particularly demographic differences - necessitated adjustment of certain components of the typology to ensure it reflected the uniqueness of Irish policy making. The adaptation of the typology and application to this study's context are now described:

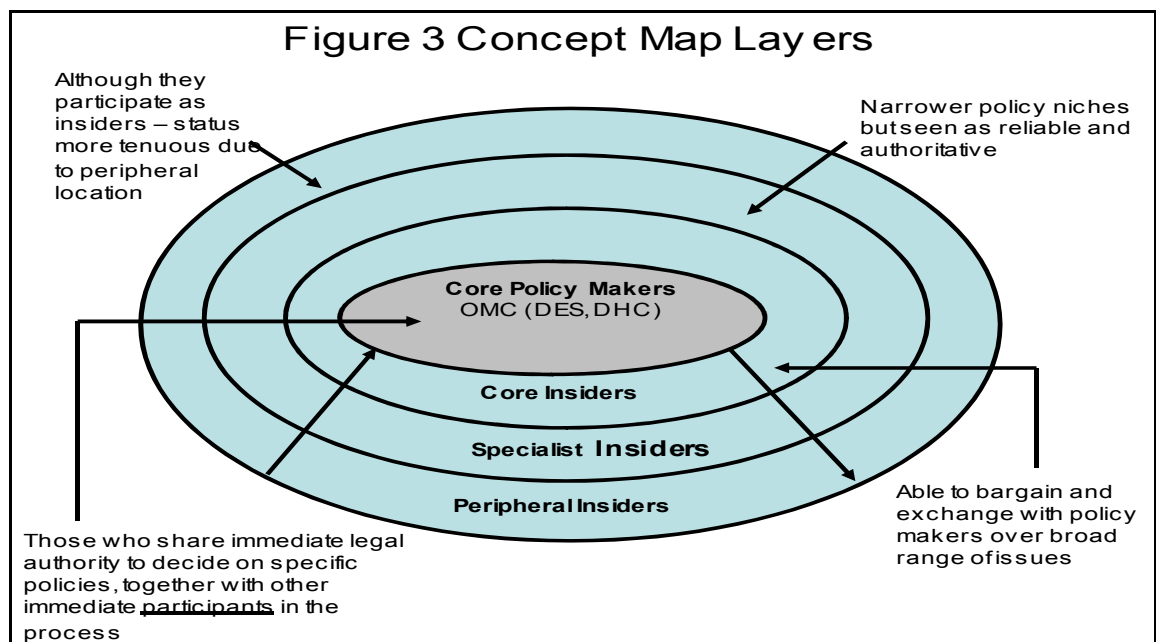
- Given this study's focus on 'behind the scenes policy making', analysis of perspectives is confined to those actors *engaged in* ECEC policy development (i.e. core, specialist and peripheral insiders) meaning 'outsiders', i.e. those actors who are not regularly engaged in policy consultation form a disparate group outside the parameters of this research and were thus excluded from the concept map.
- Another key feature, and one which was strictly adhered to in the development of the model, was the stipulation by Maloney *et al* (1994: 28) regarding *status* being contingent on 'government granted legitimacy ascribed by (core) policy makers' to the group. This required core policy makers (in this instance, senior civil servants) to ascribe *status* to all those insiders in the outer layers of the concept map to validate their inclusion in the study.
- The definitions of core and specialist insiders were adhered to [see Chapter Four] in devising the model for this study and formed the framework for identification of core and specialist insiders for inclusion within this study.
- Given Ireland's smaller demographic, the status of peripheral insider was elevated from its original 'cosmetic' status to reflect a more select group of insiders who have regular access to core policy makers and are regularly consulted by core policy makers regarding ECEC policy issues (rather than inclusion on consultation lists only). However, they remain peripheral, as certain factors, such as resource dependency (e.g. government funding, temporary nature of alternative funding

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<sup>66</sup> McKinney & Haplin (2007) notes its extensive usage as a key analytical tool for political scientists in Australia as well as the UK.

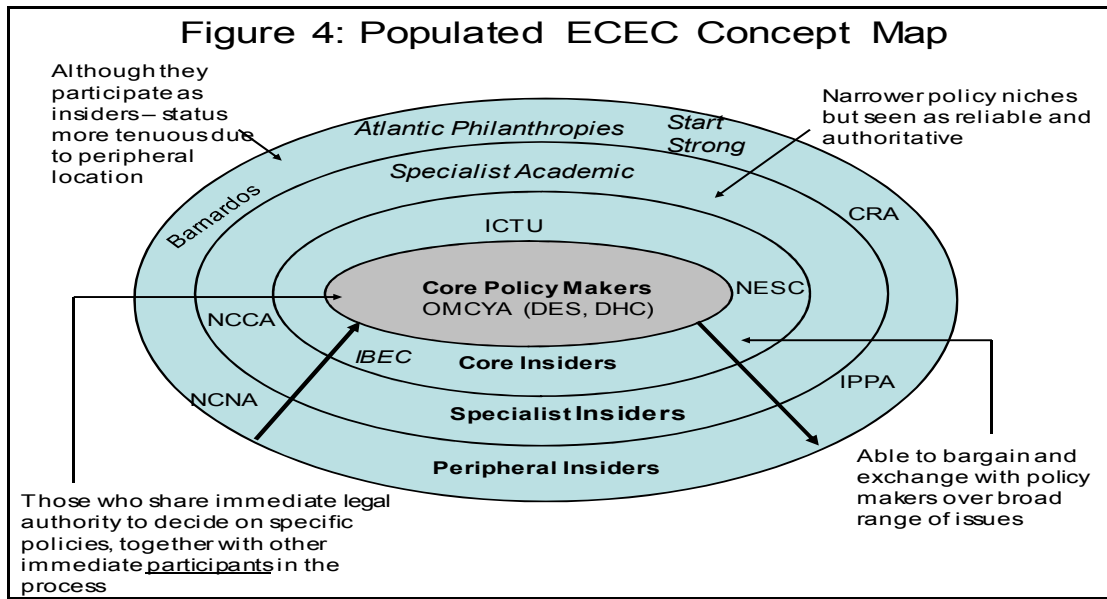
and associated insecurity) and implementation responsibilities (on-the-ground operational responsibilities), differentiate their advisory/negotiative role from that of core and specialist insiders, a point returned to later in this research.

Figure 3 presents the final layers that comprise the concept map.



***Stage II: Populating the Final Version of the Concept Map.***

Senior civil servants in the OMCYA and the DES’s Early Years Unit, located within the OMCYA, were firstly invited to participate in the study as insider status of those additional actors on the concept map was contingent upon government granted legitimacy ascribed by core policy makers. During these interviews, the original draft concept map was presented to core policy makers to elicit their perspectives on insiders identified for inclusion. Following these interviews, one specialist insider was removed from the concept map as core policy makers reported a lack of engagement with this actor in their policy development work and four additional insiders, identified in italics (Figure 4), were added to the concept map at the request of core policy makers. The final version of the populated concept map is illustrated in Figure 4.



Upon completion of the final version of the populated concept map, insiders were then invited to participate in the study and their views on the revised concept map were also sought during interviews. A brief rationale for each of the included actors in the concept map follows (detailed profiles of actor institutions are available in Appendix D).

***Core Policy Makers:***

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) within the Department of Health and Children and the Early Years Education Policy Unit, which is co-located within the OMCYA and DES have special responsibility for the development of ECEC policy. It is senior officials within these units who consult with insiders on the outer layers of the map regarding ECEC policy design and development and prepare policy proposals for submission to government Ministers.

***Core Insiders:***

Given their role in the development of national partnership agreements and their extensive engagement with a wide range of core policy makers on economic and social policy matters through the social partnership process, NESC, ICTU and IBEC were allocated to the core insider layer. Their economic resources, extensive membership bases and wide ranging access to core policy makers across multiple departments

(including the Department of An Taoiseach who chairs the Partnership talks) formed important determinants in their core insider status. NESC forms the advisory council in the social partnership process and is charged with analysing and reporting to the Taoiseach on strategic issues concerning social and economic policy development. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is ‘the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland representing and campaigning on behalf of more 832,000 working people’ through its ‘55 affiliated unions’ (ICTU, 2011). The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) is an umbrella organisation with a base of over 7,000 organisations that ‘works to influence government, regulatory bodies and others to maintain a positive climate for business and employers in Ireland’ (IBEC, 2011). IBEC was added to the concept map based on core policy maker feedback.

### ***Specialist Insiders:***

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory agency whose role is to advise the Minister for Education and Science (through the DES) on curriculum and assessment issues in ECEC (as well as primary and secondary education). Their inclusion as specialist insiders rather than core policy makers is based on the fact that they are a statutory agency who support government but are located *outside* the formal government department offices. The inclusion of a specific specialist academic within this group was recommended by core policy makers who *all* stated ongoing contact with this actor to secure expert advice regarding ECEC policy development<sup>67</sup>.

### ***Peripheral Insiders:***

This layer consists of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who possess a key role in on-the-ground policy implementation<sup>68</sup> but also incorporate a policy advocacy role into their institution’s objectives. The Irish Preschool and Playgroup Associations (IPPA) and the National Children’s Nursery Association (NCNA) are the two largest

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<sup>67</sup> While these actors could arguably have been included as specialist advisors under the core policy maker model, it was decided to locate them within the insider typology to explore how their position outside of government affects their interaction with senior civil servants inside of government.

<sup>68</sup> StartStrong provides the exception in this regard. As an exclusive advocacy based organization, they are not engaged in ECEC at a direct implementation level.

National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs)<sup>69</sup>. Both organisations receive operational grant aid from government towards running costs. The IPPA has 2,400 members from playgroups, parent and toddler groups, full day care groups, after-school and out-of-school groups (IPPA, 2011). The NCNA has a membership base of 800 (NCNA, 2011). Both organisations provide on-the-ground training and advice to their members in addition to their policy advocacy work. Barnardos is an international charity that ‘provides a range of services to children and families to increase their emotional well-being and improve learning and development’ (Barnardos, 2008: 5). The Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA) is a coalition of over 90 non-governmental organisations that works to secure the rights and needs of children in Ireland by campaigning for the full implementation of the UNCRC (CRA, 2011). Atlantic Philanthropies and Start Strong (formerly the Irish Childcare Policy Network) were ascribed status by core policy makers and subsequently added to the final version of the concept map. Through its *Children and Youth Programme*, Atlantic Philanthropies seeks to ‘support advocacy for widespread adoption of evidence-based practices that focus on early intervention and equal access for disadvantaged children to timely, high-quality provision’ (Atlantic Philanthropies Ireland, 2011). Along with the OMCYA, they have co-funded three early intervention projects (€18m of total €36m) in areas of severe disadvantage for an initial five year period (2006 – 2011) (OMCYA, 2009). Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals committed to progressing childcare and early learning policies in Ireland (Start Strong, 2011).

In total, fifteen actors were included in the final version of the concept map, illustrated in Table 2.

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<sup>69</sup> On 7 December 2010, the IPPA and NCNA announced plans to merge both organizations into a single institution, named the ‘Early Childhood Institution’ during 2011. At the time of interview, both organizations operated independently of each other and accordingly, are represented independently for the purposes of this study.

**Table 2: Final Research Sample**

Layer	Actor Institution	Final Sample (N)
Core Policy Makers	OMCYA Early Years Policy Unit (2) OMCYA Senior Staff (2)	4
Core Insiders	IBEC ICTU NESC	3
Specialist Insiders	NCCA Specialist Academic	2
Peripheral Insiders	Atlantic Philanthropies Barnardos CRA IPPA NCNA Start Strong	6
Final Sample Total		15

**Sample Recruitment and Data Collection**

A letter was sent to the director of each institution and senior civil servants within the identified government departments explaining the context and objectives of the research and inviting them to participate directly in the interview (Appendix E). All core policy makers invited to participate agreed to interview. Interviews took place with core policy makers in June 2009.

Once core policy maker interviews had been completed and insider status of those actors within the concept map received the ascribed government granted legitimacy, all insiders identified in the final version of the concept map were then invited to participate in the study. Letters were sent to the directors of each of these institutions on a staged basis (and individually to the specialist academic) and interviews took place between July and December 2009. With the exception of the NESF (which was subsequently removed from the concept map), all actor institutions agreed to participate in the study. With the exception of three instances, the interview took place with the



director (or one of the directors) of each institution. In instances where the director was unavailable, a senior representative in the organisation, with responsibility for the ECEC policy domain, was appointed by the director to participate in the interview on their behalf. The seniority of the actors involved and their associated busy schedules meant that in certain instances there was a time lag of up to three months between receipt of letter and the undertaking of the interview.

The interview time varied somewhat. The longest interview lasted two hours and forty six minutes and the shortest interview lasted fifty minutes. The average interview time was 1 hour and 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the actor's permission and transcribed by the researcher upon interview completion. The final word count for all completed interviews amounted to 114,640.

### **Data Analysis: Thematic Network Analysis**

The fact that there are few agreed-on standards or guidelines for interpretative analysis, in terms of shared ground rules or models for drawing conclusions and verifications, heightens the importance of a systematic and rigorous methodology and skilful interpretation and handling of data (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rowlands, 2005; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

The analytical process aimed 'to make sense of what was going on, to reach for understanding or explanation ...' in the data (Wolcott, 2001: 574 cited in Te One, 2008: 132). As the research aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the more nuanced components of policy making, methodological analysis sought to identify major themes to assist in disentangling the complexities and murkiness which cloud the process by shedding light over important but frequently concealed and tacit dimensions integral to policy development. Given the interpretative nature of the research and the extensive data generated through interviews, thematic analysis was identified as the most appropriate mechanism to systematically order and analyse interview findings. Boyatis (1998: 5) highlights how 'thematic analysis enables researchers and analysts to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations and organisations.' As with many other qualitative analysis techniques, it requires one to 'immerse' oneself in the data and to excavate ideas

through a self-reflexive process developed largely through ‘a continuing conversation with the data’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1994: 280).

To organise themes and ensure systematic thematic analysis, this research utilised Attride-Stirling’s (2001) ‘thematic network analysis’ approach. The thematic network analysis process can be divided into three broad stages. The first involves the reduction or the breaking down of the text, the second stage then explores the text and the final stages bring these aspects of the exploration process together. While all stages involve interpretation, a more abstract level of analysis is accomplished in each stage of process (Ibid., 2001). The objective of the process ‘is to summarize particular themes in order to create larger, unifying themes that condense the concepts and ideas mentioned at a lower level’ (Ibid., 2001: 393), a widely used procedure in qualitative analysis, which has parallels, with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) open, axial and selective coding in grounded theory.

The construction of a network and the analysis of the data it contains is based on a number of systematic stages which are now outlined.

### **The Organisation of Themes**

The development of a coding framework through data reduction is accomplished by dissecting the text into manageable and meaningful segments and identifying the salient and recurrent issues arising in the text (Step 1). Once initial coding is complete, the salient and significant themes are abstracted from the coded text segments and refined further to ensure themes are specific enough to be discrete (non-repetitive) yet broad enough to capture a set of recurrent ideas in multiple text segments (Step 2) (Ibid., 2001). The development and clustering of similar themes is an iterative concept that requires significant interpretative work to ensure similar coherent groupings on the basis of content which then provide the well spring for the thematic networks. Specifically ‘thematic networks systematise the extraction of:

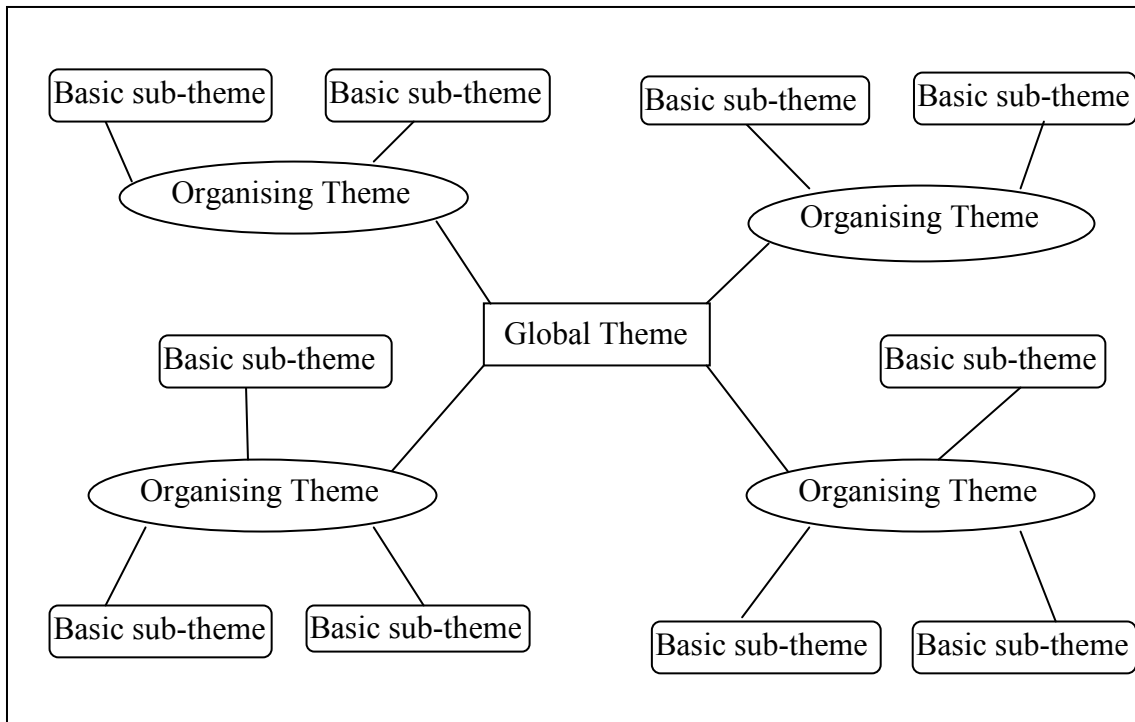
- (i) *Basic sub-themes*: the lowest-order premises evident in the text;
- (ii) *Organising Themes*: categories of basic sub-themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles of basic sub-themes; and

- (iii) *Global Themes*: super-ordinate or macro themes that summarise clusters of lower order themes and encapsulate the principal metaphors in the text as a whole.’

(Attride-Stirling, 2001: 388)

Once themes have been finalised, networks are created by working from the periphery (basic sub-themes) inwards (global theme) and are presented ‘graphically as web-like nets to remove any notion of hierarchy, giving fluidity to the themes and emphasizing the interconnectivity throughout the network’ (Ibid., 2007: 389), as depicted in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Structure of Thematic Network**



Source: Attride-Stirling, (2001: 38)

### The Analytic Steps

Once a thematic network has been constructed, it serves as an organizing framework and illustrative tool in interpretation. Analysis involves a further level of abstraction where each network and its content are described and supported by text segments. Underlying patterns begin to emerge as the description is *being* woven together (Step 4). Once a network has been described and explored in full, emergent themes and patterns characterizing the exploration are summarised. Deductions emanating from network summaries are collated with deductions from relevant theory, to explore the

significant themes, concepts, patterns and structures emerging in the text (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The aim is to ‘return to the original research questions and theoretical interests underpinning them, and address these with arguments derived from patterns which emerged through exploration of the texts’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 394).

A summary of the various steps and processes involved in thematic analysis is provided in Box 1.

**Box 1: Thematic Network Development Stages**

<p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE A: REDUCTION OR BREAKDOWN OF TEXT</b></p> <p><b>Step 1. Code Material</b> (a) Devise a coding framework (b) Dissect text into text segments using the coding framework</p> <p><b>Step 2. Identify Themes</b> (a) Abstract themes from coded text segments (b) Refine themes</p> <p><b>Step 3. Construct Thematic Networks</b> (a) Arrange themes (b) Select Basic sub-themes (c) Rearrange into Organizing Themes (d) Deduce Global Theme(s) (e) Illustrate as thematic network(s) (f) Verify and refine the network(s)</p> <p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE B: EXPLORATION OF TEXT</b></p> <p><b>Step 4. Describe and Explore Thematic Networks</b> (a) Describe the network (b) Explore the network</p> <p><b>Step 5. Summarize Thematic Networks</b></p> <p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE C: INTEGRATION OF EXPLORATION</b></p> <p><b>Step 6. Interpret Patterns</b></p>
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Source: Attride-Stirling (2001: 391)

Data was coded using NVIVO, a software program designed to manage qualitative data which allows the user to categorise and code large amounts of data and then retrieve these together in coding reports. As Pandit (1996) emphasises, the principal advantage of programmes, such as NVIVO, is that they simplify and expedite ‘mechanical aspects of data analysis without sacrificing flexibility’ thus ‘freeing the researcher to concentrate on the more creative’, interpretative and reflective aspects of data analysis.

### **Robustness, Rigour and Consistency**

For qualitative researchers, the ultimate challenge is to produce a report that demonstrates rigour and robustness in a systematic, disciplined and scholarly way (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatis, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Te One, 2008). To ensure a systematic and rigorous approach during this study, an ‘audit trail’ of all research activity throughout the process was maintained (Robson, 2002: 175). Using a researcher’s journal three sets of memos were maintained. The first detailed the developmental stages of the coding process; the second detailed the theoretical process (merging of findings, integration of theories); and the final set of memos recorded transactions and developments relating to the operational procedures and evolving research design. Given the extensive bodies of literature informing the research and the substantial data generated during interviews, maintenance of memos provided a systematic tool to track ideas and findings as they developed, to trace the analytic processes informing code development and to generate questions and findings during the analytical process.

Interpretative research, by its nature implies the actors’ own subjective interpretations of their actions and wider events and processes and represents a personal viewpoint rather than indisputable or scientific evidence (Finlayson, 2004; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Prasad, 2005; Rowlands, 2005). Reliability issues are compounded by ‘researcher effects’ where the presence of the researcher may influence data collection and the narratives of the actor. Dowding (2004: 137 - 138) emphasises the dangers of agency-centred approaches where actors might ‘deliberately deceive interviewers’ by placing a ‘gloss on their own actions ... not only for personal but also political or organisational purposes’. Researchers therefore need to weigh actors’ perspectives along with other evidence and *interpret* evidence within a broader framework rather than relying on a single dimensional mode of analysis. In order to minimise researcher effects and maximise data reliability and validity in this research, a number of approaches were adopted. Firstly, an ongoing self examination, regarding possible personal assumptions, biases and motivations throughout the research process was consistently undertaken by the researcher (Trauth, 1997). An ongoing utilisation of iterative analysis using cross-comparisons of multiple actors’ perspectives, rather than reliance on individual narratives was adopted to minimise problems regarding accuracy and trustworthiness of data.

Data analysis focused on *consistent* themes emerging in the data to ensure adherence to multiple perspective analysis and to maximise validity and minimise researcher effects. Klein & Meyers (1999) highlight how documenting and analysing multiple viewpoints facilitates the researcher in understanding conflicts such as those related to power, economics, or values and provides a useful tool to confront contradictions potentially inherent in the multiple perspectives and revise understanding accordingly. All recurrent themes incorporated into analysis were deliberately compared and contrasted with other actors' interpretations and experiences of the same processes, to ensure comprehensive and non-biased reporting of events and circumstances.

Several analysts emphasise the importance of multiple analytical techniques and multiple data sources to ameliorate researcher effects (Atkinson, 2005; Trauth, 2001). Hayward & Sparks (1975: 254, cited in Andrade, 2009: 48) suggest interpretive researchers should prefer and feel more comfortable with the term corroboration as a replacement for the word triangulation which denotes 'the act of strengthening [an argument] by additional evidence'. Analysis of multiple data sources, through cross-comparison of actor narratives formed one corroborative technique. The combined theoretical framework (social construction and theories of the policy process) enabled the data to be analysed from different theoretical positions. A literature control stage following data collection and analysis facilitated a comparison of primary findings with inter-related studies and literature. Given that findings rested on a limited number of cases, tying emergent findings to existing theory and literature enhanced internal validity (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003) and facilitated further cross comparison of data to a wider context outside the identified research sample thus strengthening research findings.

Combined then, the iterative and reflective process in thematic network analysis, ongoing cross-comparison of data from multiple perspectives, employment of a literature control review to corroborate findings *via* external documentary sources, and analysis within the context of two broad theoretical frameworks all served to ensure robustness and rigour of the data generated for the purpose of this study.

### **Limitations**

To gain access to quality in-depth data, compromise in relation to the scale of the research sample was required. One could arguably perceive the sample to represent some form of ‘elite bias’, where a researcher interviews only certain people of high status or more articulate informants and fails to gain an understanding of the broader situation (Myers & Newman, 2007). However, the reality of the policy-making process is that decisions and consultation are confined to a relatively small and select elite, variously described as ‘whirlpools’, ‘subsystems’ or ‘iron triangles’ in the policy literature (Sabatier, 2007a; Wilson, 2000). The relatively nascent stage of ECEC policy development in Ireland and the as of yet, limited pool of actors that comprise the policy community testifies to the relatively small and select elite ‘whirlpools’ within the inner spheres of this particularly policy domain. Accordingly, these structures of limited participation minimise the available pool of actors from which the researcher can draw upon in analysing of the specific policy domain under exploration. Gaining access to this elite presented a unique opportunity to access primary data on what is often considered a closed ‘black box’ of policy making and as such the elite sample identified for the study was warranted, beneficial and reflective of the reality of Irish ECEC policy making processes. While the concept map does not claim to represent an immutable sample of policy actors engaged in Irish ECEC policy making, it does represent a key and vital group of actors, *all* of whom were ascribed insider status by core policy makers who acknowledged their ongoing and regular consultation with these actors regarding ECEC policy development.

While the range of core policy makers identified in Irish policy making (Chubb, 1992) extends beyond that of senior civil servants, this study undertook interviews only with this group of core policy makers. This category of core policy makers was primarily selected because of their consultative, negotiative and deliberative role with insiders *and* other core policy makers inside of government, a dual engagement, which makes its members particularly well-placed to understand and reveal the interactive implications of increasingly complex actor structures in governance and policy making. However, given the subjective nature of interpretative research and the authoritative decision-making power of politicians in final decision-making, an exploration of politicians (and other categories of core policy makers) would likely add greater depth and reveal additional complexities and challenges to future ECEC policy making analysis studies.

Notwithstanding the potential contribution their inclusion may have offered to the overall study, the incorporation of additional core policy makers was beyond the parameters of this research given study time constraints, access difficulties, the broad range of actors already incorporated and the scale and depth of data elicited from the four categories alone. Given the complexities of the policy process and the limited research pertaining to behind the scenes actor behaviour, this preliminary study necessitated a compromise between scale of data over depth of data in order to provide a reliable and balanced account of the less visible arenas of policy making from four diverse and important categories of actors.

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was sought and received from the DIT Ethics Committee for the overall research study prior to the commencement of the study. At the request of the Ethics Committee, details of the research instrument, the research sample, actor consent forms and the methodological process for data collection were submitted to the DIT Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork commencement. Upon submission of these documents, ethical approval was also granted to conduct the field work stage of the research.

The interviews took place at a time and location convenient to the respondents. All actors expressed a preference for interviews to be conducted in their workplaces. Prior to interview commencement, a description of the research and the objectives of the interview were outlined to each participant to ensure the respondent had sufficient detail and understanding of the purpose of the research and their participation role within the study. The proposed use of data garnered through the interview was clearly outlined to the respondents prior to interview commencement. Actors were informed that they would be categorised within a broader group of similar actors and personal anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Given the small and select number of participants who could participate in the study, protection of anonymity and confidentiality formed a core consideration during data analysis and reporting of findings. Accordingly, a number of text components were excluded from the analysis, given the extensive personal information contained within, which could arguably have supported actor identification. Actors were not assigned a numeric correlation (e.g. Core Policy Maker 1, Peripheral Insider 4) as an ethical procedure to maximize protection of anonymity



given the small sample size and the increased opportunity for personal identification a numerical labelling strategy potentially implied.

All interviews were recorded with the interviewee's consent. Upon completion of the interview, respondents were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix F), which again provided detail on the intended use of information gathered during the interview process. The data were transcribed by the researcher and stored in password protected files created by the researcher. The names of participants were not stored or saved in any interview files or related research documents.

The next three chapters of this thesis discuss the three thematic networks which contain the research findings which emerged from interview narratives prior to the final chapter which presents the research discussion and conclusions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

#### ACTION OF THE ACTORS

##### **Introduction**

This Chapter presents the findings emerging from the first of three thematic networks. The design of the chapter and the themes incorporated are drawn directly from interview narratives and are based on key themes derived through thematic network analysis<sup>70</sup>.

Thematic Network 1 [Figure 6]<sup>71</sup> illustrates the basic and organising themes contained within the global theme: *'The Policy-Making Process - Action of the Actors'* which focuses on actors' perspectives of the typical action and activity within and across different spheres of the policy-making process<sup>72</sup>. The three key organising themes which emerged from basic sub-theme categorisations form the basis of this chapter's discussion and relate to:

- Pre-decision making processes;
- The decision-making environment; and
- Modus operandi patterns

The first organising theme describes key processes and behaviours actors engage in prior to policy decision making. It primarily centres of the various means through which actors acquire knowledge, or 'policy-oriented learning' (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) which they then utilise in their efforts to influence final policy decisions. The 'decision-making environment' organising theme focuses on actors' perspectives of the action and activity that occurs at the policy decision stage of policy making. The final

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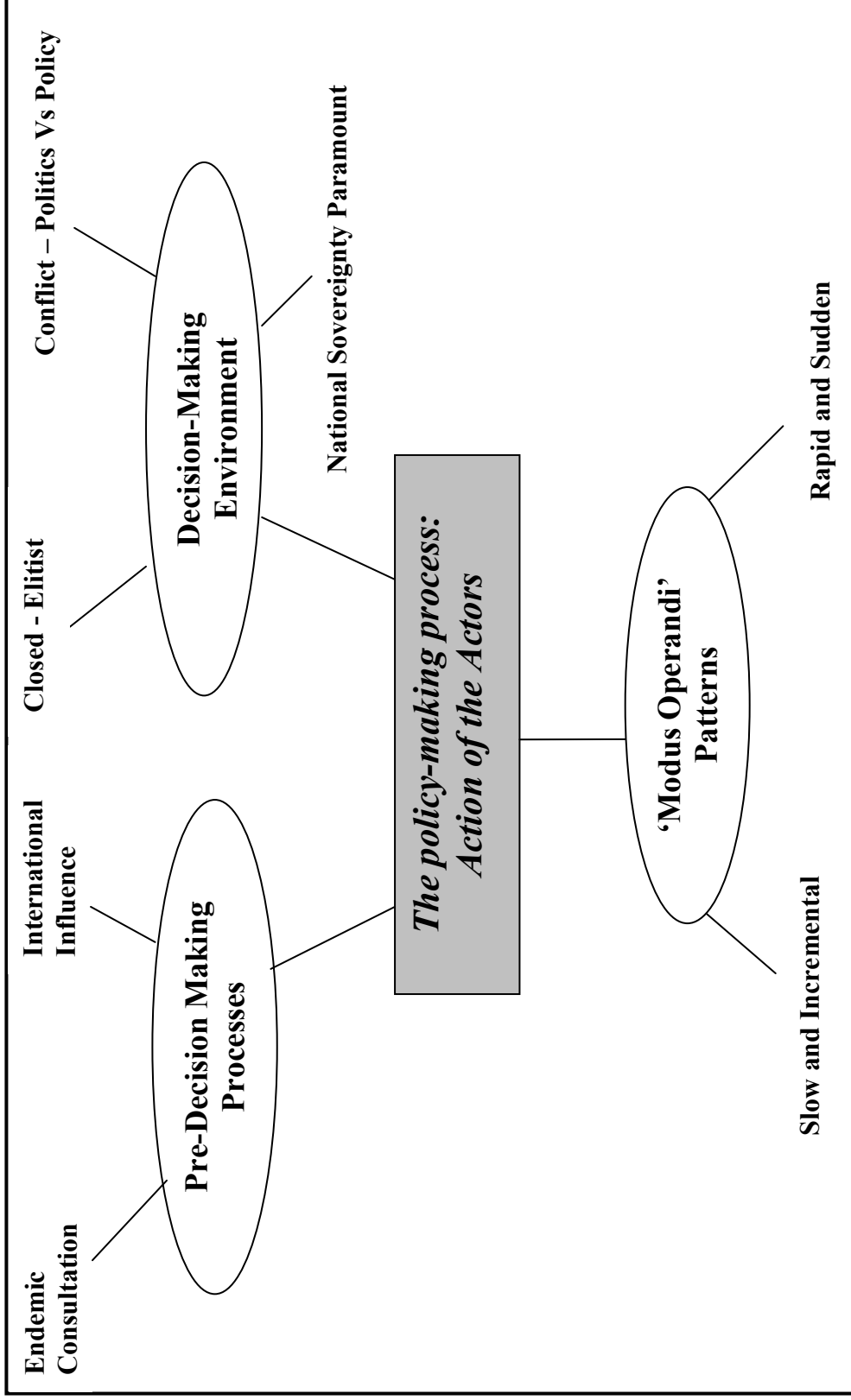
<sup>70</sup> All direct quotations from actors which are not directly referenced in the main body of text are referenced in footnotes throughout the chapter.

<sup>71</sup> Further elaboration on the development of Thematic Network 1 is included in Appendix G.

<sup>72</sup> For the purposes of the findings chapters, the term 'actors' incorporates core policy makers and core specialist and peripheral insiders. The term 'insiders' is used to refer to core, specialist and peripheral insiders only and excludes core policy makers.

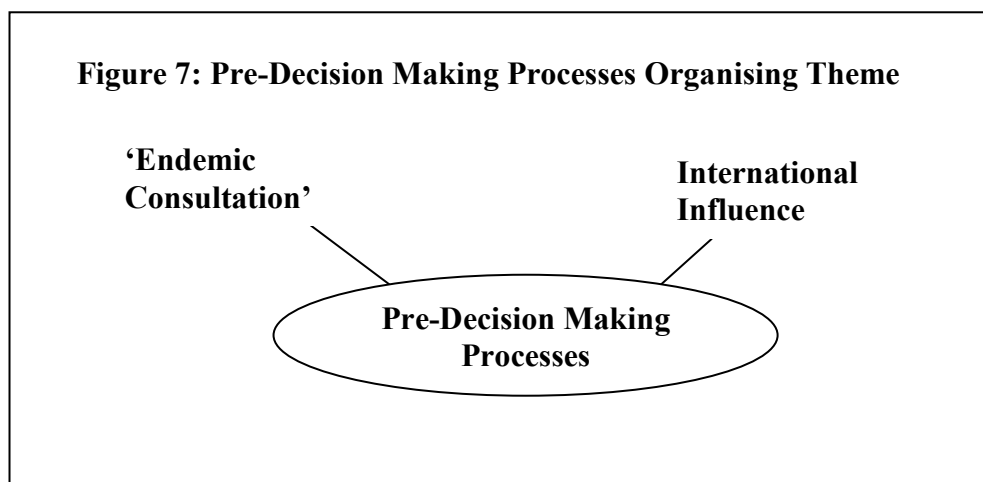
organising theme discusses the dominant modus operandi or policy making patterns which characterise the overall ways of functioning and approaches to policy development in the Irish context.

**Figure 6: The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors [Thematic Network 1]**



### **Pre-Decision Making Processes**

The pre-decision organising theme describes the means and processes through which core policy makers acquire knowledge by observing policy activity across a diversity of sites (institutions, countries, organisations) and engaging with relevant actors who possess key resources (e.g. technical expertise, representative bases etc) that maximise policy-oriented learning. This learning is subsequently used to support and rationalise the policy proposals senior civil servants prepare for government ministers. Knowledge acquisition usually ‘entails the collection and appraisal of data, analysis of problems, defining of issues, and identification and evaluation of possible courses of action’ (Chubb, 1992: 159). Given that this research depicts policy making as a recursive and iterative, rather than a linear process, the acquisition of knowledge represents an ongoing process which supports actors in their framing of policy issues and identification of policy responses and may impact on the construction, reconstruction or adaption of policy decisions. The basic sub-themes within the pre-decision making organising theme are presented in Figure 7.



The two basic sub-sets of findings emerging within this organising theme relate to the ‘endemic [levels of national] consultation’<sup>73</sup> and the incorporation of international influences within knowledge acquisition processes during the pre-decision stage of policy making.

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<sup>73</sup> Core policy marker narrative

### **Endemic Consultation**

Consultation refers to core policy makers' engagement with actors inside and outside of government through a variety of processes [formal and informal] which support policy-oriented learning on matters or constructs of potential importance in the development of ECEC policy.

In deciding who to consult, core policy makers emphasised how resources formed fundamental determinants in their attribution of insider status and identified four particularly important resources that they seek prior to engaging groups in ongoing consultation. These related to:

- Knowledge/technical expertise: those who have developed a profile and expertise in the area, in particular, those who have undertaken applied or evidence-based research beneficial to government purposes;
- History/track record: those with a strong performance history and a reliable track record and good reputation within the policy domain of relevance;
- Representative base: the membership base of the group and the representational support it attracts from its own members and wider organisations within the field. Core policy makers highlighted how engagement with larger/powerful groups may ease policy implementation; and
- Implementation capacity: those on the ground organisations who oversee the implementation of policy initiatives and support its member's in meeting policy targets and policy implementation requirements.

A group's resources thus form fundamental determinants in status allocation as it is these that attract policy makers to groups. Core policy makers emphasised how ongoing engagement with actors in possession of (at least one of) these resources supports their policy development work, potentially maximises 'buy in' amongst key actors 'outside of government' and potentially eases policy implementation once policy initiatives have been announced. Thus all insiders in this study, having been ascribed legitimate insider status by core policy makers, are accordingly deemed to be in possession of (at least one of) these key resources and are accordingly incorporated into the consultation process as insiders on that basis.

There was unanimous agreement amongst *all* actors regarding the endemic levels of consultation in Irish policy making processes. While extensive consultation mirrors an increasingly embedded policy making approach in post-parliamentary democracies (Rhodes, 1997; Radin, 2000; Howard, 2005), actors believed the *open and informal*<sup>74</sup> mechanisms through which the majority of consultation occurred represented a unique feature of Irish policy making that contrasts to the more formalised international policy-making processes in, for instance *Downing Street, which is much more a pinnacle of structure*<sup>75</sup>. Actors attributed this extensive informal consultation to Ireland's small population which lends itself to a *parochial*<sup>76</sup> style of consultation as familiarity amongst the comparatively small pool of actors creates a *unique interpersonal dynamic typical of a small state*<sup>77</sup>. While formal structures, such as the *National Childcare Coordinating Committee* were referenced by a number of actors, much greater emphasis was placed on the importance of the supplementary dynamic contributions through 'informal' consultation processes:

*There are formal structures set up as well – there is the National Childcare Coordinating Committee which bring all the players together maybe four times a year... but the amount of informal contact is incredible. ... There is a constant interchange of ideas. I would have thought, it is not about a formal consultation, it is about constant dialogue ...and there would be different people throughout the OMCYA who are linking in, in different ways.*

Core Policy Maker

### ***Ease of Access: Multi-directional Relationships***

Consultation was identified as a *multi-directional*<sup>78</sup> process in which *all* actors across the various layers of the concept map both respond to (i.e. requests from other actors to engage) and initiate (i.e. self initiated consultation activity with other actors). Insiders emphasised a freedom to contact core policy makers in the relevant government departments (and in certain instances politicians themselves) on their own initiative to discuss issues of concern and to contribute to policy discussions on an ongoing basis.

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<sup>74</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>75</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>76</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>77</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>78</sup> Specialist insider narrative

Insiders reported frequent utilisation of such mechanisms to voice concern around policy proposals or implementation issues as they arose. A specialist insider, for example, reported feeling *absolutely free to go in and speak to them* (core policy makers) regarding their concerns. Similarly, one peripheral insider described *no trouble* in accessing core policy makers, whilst another, in reflecting on access patterns to core policy makers, contended that *there are very few in here [core policy makers], who won't meet one of us if we want to meet them*<sup>79</sup>.

Core policy makers, across the various policy subsystems and policy venues (i.e. DES and OMCYA) corroborated insiders' descriptions of free and fluid access to government departments and also emphasised the extensive consultation they (core policy makers) initiate with insiders at key moments during their policy development work or as issues arise that require consultation to support their preparation of policy advice. One peripheral insider, in reflecting on the means and extent of core policy makers' contact initiation stated:

*We have quite a lot of access – with the Department of An Taoiseach, [Department of] Finance and the OMCYA. We are a social partner, but I don't think it is just because we are a social partner. ... Let me give you an example. When Barry Andrews<sup>80</sup> came in as Minister for Children, within 24 hours we got a phone call from his Office, to try and arrange to meet us. I hadn't gotten around to writing the letter to introduce us. He was obviously told by his official to meet [organisation's name].*

Peripheral Insider

A second peripheral insider's statement regarding access patterns and types of interaction is revealing of the informal and dynamic means through which consultation occurs and illuminates the intricate and differential approaches employed by different policy actors during the consultation process:

*We would tend to look for meetings with Ministers – and you would always know if you are getting a proper meeting with them or not, by whether they come with a*

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<sup>79</sup> The primary mechanisms used to initiate engagement by insiders were phone, email or written submissions, which on a number of occasions resulted in personal meetings with core policy makers to discuss concerns highlighted through initial contact.

<sup>80</sup> Barry Andrews, a Fianna Fail party member, was Minister for Children from May 2008 to March 2011.



*civil servant or not. If they come on their own, then you are just having a chat with them. If a senior civil servant is there – you are having a policy discussion.*

Peripheral Insider

### ***The Rules of Access: Consultation Costs***

While the pre-decision stage of the policy-making process is depicted by *all* actors as an ‘open’ and amenable process, a generally tacit set of behavioural codes emerged as fundamental to maintaining fluid access privileges and ease of consultation with core policy makers. While discussion on rules and codes of conduct was not always overt in interview narratives, there was nonetheless significant evidence of such processes, through insider elaboration on their consultation experiences and the strategies and approaches they adopted and adhered to as part of this process. Several insiders’ narratives revealed an inherent awareness that a failure to adhere to certain rules jeopardises their access privileges, a perspective corroborated by core policy makers’ statements regarding expected behavioural codes during consultation processes:

*One of the problems with these organisations [actors outside of government] is that sometimes, by looking to engage with the state, they also need to be seen to keep their constituency together by slagging off the state [sic]. Now there is a difficulty with that approach but that is a line that they have to walk themselves. It is hard because they can lose their people [member support] but I don’t think there is much to be gained in that public stuff.*

Core Policy Maker

Maloney *et al* (1994: 29 - 37) characterise the codes which ‘shapes participants’ behaviour’ within such ‘policy community style politics’ as ‘bargainable incrementalism’ where insiders accept that policy claims will be addressed in a bargainable and incremental manner. They attribute insiders’ adherence to ‘the rules of the game’ to their ‘interest in the long term picture’ whereby insiders are ‘realistically interested in obtaining some of what they want most of the time, rather than the less realistic process of one big pay day’ that outsiders aspire to (Ibid., 1994: 37). Thus insiders’ expectations of the enhanced longer-term rewards that result from their

increased access opportunities curtails their use of controversial or aggressive tactics which may result in political exclusion and a loss of insider status. The *cordial* and *courteous*<sup>81</sup> consultative exchanges described in the pre-decision making processes provide supportive evidence of these arguments:

*The [peripheral insider name] could go out and get fabulous headlines in the paper, but if all the doors slam, we are not going to bring about change. So I try to play the critical friend approach and be very open in the approach that ...we take. ... . If we have something on which to criticise the Minister, we will give as much advance notice as we can, not to blackmail the Minister, but to allow him as much time as possible to respond.*

Peripheral Insider

### ***The Constraints of Insider Funding Dependencies***

The fact that several peripheral insiders' organisations received at least a proportion of their operational funding from government departments was also identified as a constraint that limited their advocacy options. These insiders acknowledged that these funding dependencies curtailed their advocacy strategies to cordial exchange-based consultation and subtle persuasive strategies of influence given the inherent threat of funding withdrawal:

*I remember ... we were putting out a press release, I think it may have been about the capital funding and private targeting. ... They told us not to dare to put it out. So yeah, there was a relationship, and courtesy was a big part of it. You could never embarrass them. You would feel that punch back with the funding ...*

Peripheral Insider

Another insider reflected on the *many examples*, particularly within social partnership, where organisations that *would have been trenchantly critical of government ... suffered in terms of funding* and emphasised how, these events, exogenous to the ECEC policy subsystem, reinforce an awareness amongst *all* groups regarding the potential negative repercussions of public criticism on group/government relationships. A core policy

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<sup>81</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

maker, in discussing potential objections from insiders in receipt of government funding corroborated these perspectives by emphasising how *they [funded groups] can't choose to go off and start decrying the ECCE [sic] decisions, even if they thought it was the worst scheme in the world* as pursuit of such a strategy would lead to funded organisations being *shut down because they are employed to deliver or engage in the delivery of a programme*. Findings therefore clearly illuminate an ever present awareness that, should groups fail to adhere to the rules of bargainable incrementalism that *government could decide in the morning that if they are not interested in delivering the programme from the ground with us, ... let them go off and do what they like doing*<sup>82</sup>.

Critically however, those financially independent insiders within this study generally utilised the same cordial advocacy strategies as funded insider groups and differential advocacy approaches were not discerned from interview narratives according to groups' funding status. Interview narratives revealed an overwhelming adherence to cordial consultation processes amongst *all* insiders in ECEC policy discussions and deliberations regardless of funding status. For instance, one (independently funded) core insider's acceptance (and lack of dissent) of a failed advocacy strategy provides evidence of the widespread tolerance and general acceptance of the rules of bargainable incrementalism amongst independently funded insiders within this policy domain:

*We had a major social partner childcare group ... to come up with an agreed way forward ... and the Childcare Directorate were very helpful to us in terms of our putting it together, but that was, it was never launched as a document ... . It is an agreed social partner approach to the delivery of childcare in Ireland. ... It just never got any attention. The government clearly had other arrangements in mind and proceeded to do those which was mainly a continuation of subsidising private childcare providers.*

### **International Influence**

The second basic set of findings within the pre-decision organising theme describes the extent to which actors believe international influences are incorporated into policy

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<sup>82</sup> Core policy maker narrative

deliberations and impact on policy-oriented learning and the design of policy solutions. Similar to national consultation processes, actors described international policy making venues (e.g. countries, supra-national organisations/institutions) as important sources of policy learning that national actors can draw upon to influence and inform their perspectives regarding ECEC policy development. The fact *that Ireland was very much lagging behind other EU countries in the participation of young children in education*<sup>83</sup> was deemed a significant contributory factor influencing the national tendency to explore international developments as potential models of learning and was generally regarded as a *positive* feature of a *more globalised society*<sup>84</sup>. Importantly, all actors highlighted the national tendency to explore *like-minded*<sup>85</sup> countries with similar socio-cultural contexts and policy regimes rather than those where significant contextual and systematic differences exist:

*You've got to look at it, I think, in the terms of which countries or states are most similar to us, in terms of the design of their systems, in terms of how their societies behave ... It is not that we don't look at the Scandinavian countries ..., but they have much different taxation systems and much different value systems, much different wage structures and it is very hard to pick that out, to say we will take their early childhood system, that looks great.*

Core Policy Maker

In discussing like-minded states, all actors identified the English-speaking countries of the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand as particularly influential comparative models that Irish policy makers draw upon as potential sites for policy-oriented learning:

*I think government is particularly influenced by models of English speaking countries, not just because it is most accessible, and maybe they are most intense contacts but also because in many ways, if you look at the US and UK, particularly over the last 20 years or so..., the context of policy is quite similar, the overall approach to social and family policies, to the role of the state within society and so on. ... And that is true to some extent, in terms of New Zealand and*

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<sup>83</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>84</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>85</sup> Core policy maker narrative

*Australia as well, so in a way, it just coincides that English speaking countries provide, if you like, more fitting contexts for Irish policy makers to learn from.*

Core Policy Maker

Core policy makers' and insiders' prioritisation of these reference models (e.g. New Zealand, Australia, the US and the UK) in their discussions illuminates the national tendency to focus on neo-liberal regimes states whose ideological principles and value systems are similar to those of the Irish political culture. Deacon (2007: 18) highlights how selective policy borrowing reveals how 'choices' are being made by some countries 'to borrow the policy of another because it is in conformity with its particular ideological goals, or better fits its set of national cultural assumptions'. Ireland – along with the like-minded states which it draws upon for policy-oriented learning – are typically categorised as neo-liberal (Esping-Anderson, 1990)<sup>86</sup> or 'low investment' states (Bennett, 2005)<sup>87</sup> where policy approaches are usually structured around the government distancing processes outlined in Chapter Four (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Bevir *et al*, 2003b; Geoghegan & Powell, 2008; Newman, 2007; Rhodes, 1997). While reference was occasionally made to the Scandinavian countries, such references were rare and core policy makers generally emphasised how their *different legislative systems, different taxation systems and different value systems* undermined the feasibility of their transportation into the Irish policy system. These differences also led several insiders to concede to avoiding reference to these models in their policy discussions and instead focusing on the English-speaking states whose policy contexts and administrative systems are similar to those of Ireland. Interviews also revealed an inherent tendency to borrow from policy models that conceptualise childhood and ECEC within the economic rationale investment models rather than the paradigm of the

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<sup>86</sup> Esping-Anderson's (1990) *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* disaggregated countries according to three categorizations of welfare regime systems. In the (Neo)Liberal Regime which typically incorporates the English speaking countries, the market is the key institution and the social aspect of the state is contained, needs-based and selective. The Conservative Regime places the family at the centre of welfare provision and collective schemes are financed by compulsory contributions while private provisions play a marginal role. France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy are included in this categorization. The Social Democratic Regime is found in most Nordic States and offers high levels of collective provision and the state plays a central role in welfare provision.

<sup>87</sup> Bennett's (2005) *Typology of Early Childhood Systems* distinguishes between three types of investment model. The high investment public provision model is primarily found in the Nordic states where children's rights to resources are widely recognized. The Low to Mid-Investment Pre-primary model is found in most European countries where government provide large scale educational services for children from aged three to compulsory school age. The Low Public Investment, Mixed Market Model is predominantly found in English speaking countries where national early childhood policies have been traditionally weak and high value is placed on individual family responsibility.

new sociology of childhood which is grounded in children's rights and more typical of social democratic states as discussed in Chapter Two. All actors emphasised the *significance* and *strength* of evidence-based cost-benefit analysis studies, such as the *Perry Preschool study*, and the work of Heckman and the OECD<sup>88</sup> as important political motivators for ECEC investment. Insiders also emphasised the usefulness of these economic studies as a policy tool which enhances their influential capacity during consultations with core policy makers. For instance, one peripheral insider described the contribution they felt their advocacy work promoting evidence-based studies had had on the growing Ministerial favour towards ECEC:

*I think in more recent times, right up to the announcement of the free year ... If you look at ... what Andrews would have said at the time [former Minister for Children], he put it very much in the context of, early childhood investment is good for the child and also good for the economy in terms of the famous \$40. ... Now I am pleased with that, I think we had some role in peddling that. We brought Heckman over [to Ireland for discussions]*

Insiders also acknowledge the influential capacity of international research undertaken by supra-national policy organisations such as the OECD, although perspectives varied amongst actors regarding the scale of impact of this type of research on policy development. Some insiders felt that it enhanced the policy-oriented learning amongst the policy community rather than forming a source of direct influence on core policy makers' decisions:

*I do think, you might say, in thinking terms, the OECD work has been important. I think that research has been influential – but more on the policy community rather than the actual policy. ... Certainly the people in this policy community, certainly are all very literate on that OECD work.*

Core Insider

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<sup>88</sup> Core Insider narrative

### **Summary: Pre Decision-Making Processes**

The multi-directional relationships and free and fluid consultation between all groups of actors within the study was highlighted in discussions of the pre-decision stage of policy making. Core policy makers acknowledged how particular groups outside of government possess certain resources that are valuable to them and enhance their policy development work. The primary resources core policy makers highlighted related to technical knowledge and expertise, positive track record and reputation of the group, the membership base/representative base of groups and the policy implementation role of certain actors. Each of these resources were highlighted as particularly useful in policy development work and accordingly those groups in possession of these resources were ascribed insider status and engaged in consultation at the pre-decision stage of policy development on an ongoing basis to enhance this stage of policy work.

The endemic consultation processes were acknowledged by all actors for the ‘open’ and ‘fluid’ access it provides for insiders to collaboratively engage with core policy makers in discussions regarding policy development. However, a more detailed exploration revealed the critical trade-offs insiders concede to in exchange for privileged access and elite insider status. Findings reveal how a subtle but powerful set of behavioural codes stipulate ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ advocacy activity within and outside the policy subsystem and restrict and curtail insiders’ public criticism of policy decisions. Failure to adhere to these codes risks their alienation and exclusion from the much heralded collaborative consultation policy processes. Interview narratives emphasised the particularly powerful implications of behavioural codes for financially dependent insiders given the inherent threat of government funding withdrawal, although critically, no discernable difference emerged between the advocacy strategies of funded and non-funded groups within this policy domain as all adhered to cordial engagement and the rules of bargainable incrementalism. While insiders did not acknowledge specific ‘returns’ or privileges as part of this trade-off, the fact that all adhered to the rule of bargainable incrementalism and abstained from public criticism provides anecdotal evidence regarding the potential longer-term rewards as all insiders remained engaged within consultation processes rather than adopting alternative [controversial] advocacy strategies that an outsider status allows (Casey, 1998; Grant, 2004; Maloney *et al*, 1994). The group-government consultation relationships and the behavioural codes it enshrines therefore emerged as a significant benefit for core policy makers, as much

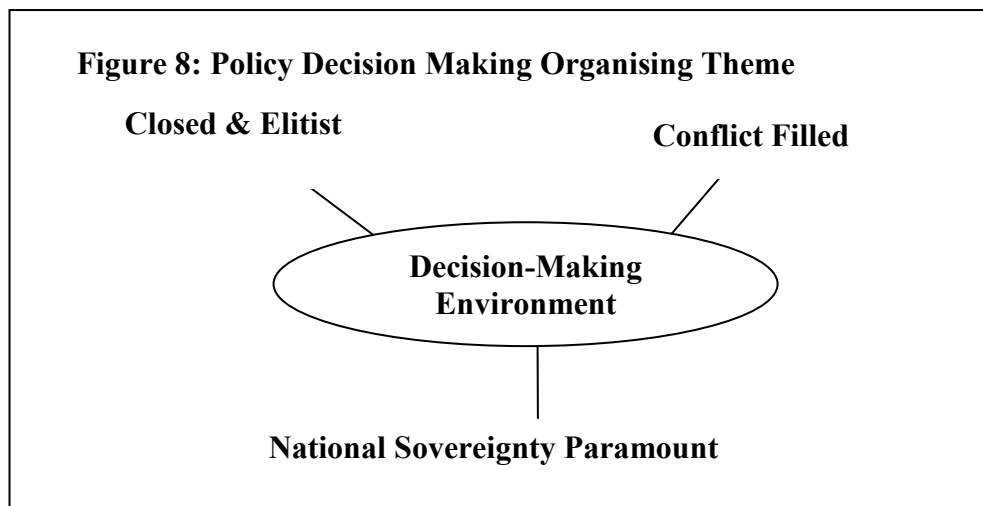
public debate and potential criticisms of policy decisions are silenced thus creating a favourable policy environment for the incremental policy development favoured by politicians (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Pierson, 2003; Zaharidias, 2007). This leads to fundamental questions regarding the ‘real’ beneficiaries of endemic consultation, a point returned to throughout this chapter.

Just as with national consultation, all actors emphasised the important policy-oriented learning that occurs through international consultation and the significant contribution exploration of international models provides in the pre-decision stage of policy development. Like-minded countries whose administrative, taxation and value systems parallel or converge with those of the Irish state were noted as especially important models for learning. The tendency to ‘select’ these states is highly revealing of the policy frame within which ECEC policy is considered and constructed in the Irish context and highlights a persistent loyalty to neo-liberal approaches that prioritise market-based responses and conceptualise ECEC within the economic-based rationale models already outlined in Chapter Two. These findings – and their implications – are returned to in succeeding chapters.

### **Decision-Making Environment**

This section discusses findings from the ‘policy decision-making’ organising theme and describes actor’s perspectives on the action and activity at the core policy maker or macro-political institutional level where decision-making occurs. Basic sub-themes of findings within this organising theme are illustrated in Figure 8.





Findings which emerged within this organising theme cluster around three subsets of findings: the first describes the ‘closed and elitist’ nature of the decision making stage of the policy process; the second describes a ‘conflict-filled’ policy sphere where battles and contests are at their most intense as actors vie to secure their favoured policy outcome at the final stages of decision making; and the final sub-theme describes actors’ constructions of an inherently nationalist decision making sphere where decisions are guided by national rather than international forces and considerations.

### **Closed & Elitist Decision Sphere**

In contrast to the *open and cordial*<sup>89</sup> policy environment depicted at the pre-decision stage of policy making, insiders emphasised how they *did not feel included or embedded*<sup>90</sup> in policy decision-making processes and instead described a closed and elitist policy sphere, shrouded in secrecy from which all but an inner elite of core policy makers are excluded. One specialist insider, who described an ongoing and consistent role in the provision of advice expressed difficulty in determining whether *what they said was thrown in the bin or read* at the decision-making stage of policy development. Consistent with this, most insider narratives revealed a persistent ambiguity regarding the impact of their ongoing advocacy and consultation work when it came to policy decisions. The closed and elitist processes which permeate the decision-making sphere

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<sup>89</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>90</sup> Specialist insider narrative

led insiders to question the authenticity and veracity of the ‘collaborative’ consultation processes which many felt represented a *cloak for collaboration*<sup>91</sup> rather than an authentic opportunity to influence policy decisions. Insiders consistently voiced their frustration at their limited capacity in this regard and emphasised how core policy makers incorporate them at certain stages of policy development and exclude them – and the advice they offer – at other stages:

*They [core policy makers] want your views. They want you to sit on expert working groups to design the policy. Then they take it off into another place, where it gets refined in such a way, where you don't recognise it. ... Then you end up on the outside, sort of sniping at it, and then the process begins all over again.*

Peripheral Insider

The exclusivity and private nature of decision making was illuminated by the fact that *all* insiders expressed their complete lack of knowledge of either the EOCP (2000), the ECS (2006) or the preschool initiative (2009) prior to their public announcement. This is despite the fact that all these same insiders admitted an ongoing role in policy consultation prior to *and* after these policy announcements. In particular, *all* insiders expressed their *amazement*<sup>92</sup> and *shock*<sup>93</sup> upon public announcement of the more recent ECS and preschool initiative:

*It was through the budget we learned about them [the ECS and Preschool Year]. Now I happen to know that very few people knew about the preschool year .... I don't even think people internally knew very much about it until the day beforehand or the morning of the budget. Just as some of the agencies who had kind of been ear-marked for budgets knew nothing about it until they were taken back into the Departments. That is how things get done. It is not a healthy way to work.*

Peripheral Insider

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<sup>91</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>92</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>93</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

Rather than representing a distinct or rare feature of policy making specific to ECEC, one core insider used their experiences of the partnership process to highlight how wide-spread and typically elitist Irish decision making processes are. Drawing upon the social partnership experiences, this core insider emphasised how the elitism and exclusionary practices which typify Irish policy decision-making processes exacerbate the tenuous influential capacity of insiders:

*... social partnership provides a surplus of access and a deficit of influence, because if we were really to look back over the past number of years and look at all the things and see what happens despite all the social partnership agreements, it is quite depressing, in terms of the changes that we have sought, which have never come about.*

Core Insider

Insiders argued that their exclusion from the final stages of policy decision-making represented a critical limitation that impedes effective and well thought out policy design as it minimises effective utilisation of existent national expertise and insider knowledge. It also severs a vital link between policy design and policy implementation as the technical feasibility of policy proposals are insufficiently explored or *teased out*<sup>94</sup> at the decision-making stage of policy. That those responsible for implementing policy *are pushed out* and excluded from the final stages of policy design which are *taken over centrally* was described *as one of the things that goes wrong in policy*, given how policy implementers represent those *people who can see what is wrong with it* and what the likely difficulties and issues may be<sup>95</sup>.

### **Conflict-Filled**

As the key arena, where the outcomes of policy battles are decided, all actors emphasised the competitive, disharmonious and conflict-filled nature of the decision-making sphere, where competing actors from competing policy subsystems fight and battle for their favoured policy solutions in a constant contest with others who vie and battle for alternatives. As one core policy maker emphasised, *when there are competing*

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<sup>94</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>95</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*policy demands, you rarely get anything without fighting for it, because governments just have these endless competing demands.* Three main sources and types of conflict were identified in interview narratives and were deemed significantly influential in terms of decision making processes, behaviours and outcomes. These differential forms of conflict distinguished between policy actors according to their role and status within the policy arena and related to the conflict between politicians' personal [career] and public [policy] agendas; the impact of the differential status and authority of civil servants and politicians in policy decision making processes; and the differential structures and competing agendas of different government departments and their impact on deliberations and policy decision-making. Each of these is now discussed.

### ***The Political Conflict of Public and Private Agendas***

Insiders discussed what they perceived of as an inherent conflict between politicians' personal [career] goals and the wider public policy agenda. Importantly, this conflict was expressed by insiders rather than core policy makers, a point which may be partly attributable to the behavioural codes which govern civil servants' relationships with politicians, a core component of which requires a civil servant's loyalty to the administration and abstention from public criticism of political decision making and behaviour (Page, 2003; Richards & Smyth, 2004; Slessor, 2002), a point elaborated on later in this chapter.

Given how politicians are ultimately concerned with re-election (Chubb, 1992; Niskanen, 1986), insiders argued that politicians prefer to take policy decisions which are least likely to *upset*<sup>96</sup> majority cohorts of their electoral bases and instead opt for safe, incremental and non-controversial policy decisions in order to minimise electoral attrition risks and maximise personal career stability and progression:

*I think a lot of policy in Ireland is driven by the local TDs<sup>97</sup> in their clinics. It depresses me you know, but I really do. I think if enough people put influence on enough of their TDs then the policy would shift. I think that the electoral system drives a lot of policy making, in actual fact ... most policy making. I think a civil*

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<sup>96</sup> Peripheral insider narrative and core insider narrative

<sup>97</sup> Teachta Dála (Irish Gaelic: member of the Irish parliament).

*servant can be devastated on any given day by the need to free up money in Laois because somebody is going to lose their seat in Offaly.*

Peripheral Insider

Insiders argued that this political preoccupation with electorate blandishment implies senior civil servants' advice is consistently at risk of political rejection because of political anxiety regarding potential electoral discontent despite the greater good or longer-term benefits that may result from some of the more controversial policy proposals they may suggest. One core insider emphasised how core policy makers *do not operate in a political vacuum* and despite potentially *coming up with a fantastic range of reasons to do something in a certain way*, the likelihood of such proposals being adopted dramatically reduces *if it upsets someone [politicians] who has the power to do something about it*. Insiders felt that these constraints and a political fixation with conflict aversion narrowed the boundaries or parameters within which policy proposals are considered and debated. This conflict and its associated restrictions were generally accepted by insiders as *the reality of the policy making world we live in*<sup>98</sup>. In elaborating on the implications of this public-private conflict, the decision to introduce the ECS was consistently highlighted as *a perfect example of politics running away with an area*<sup>99</sup>. All insiders emphasised how the decision to introduce the ECS in Budget 2006 *contravened all expert policy advice and prescription* at the time, much of it government commissioned (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005), which recommended and highlighted the rationale and benefits of universal ECEC over additional cash-based provisions to families with young children. The introduction of the ECS was consequentially described as *'purely political'*,<sup>100</sup> *'a political decision about securing votes'*<sup>101</sup>, *'a key objective ... to win the election'*<sup>102</sup>, *'a vote getter'*<sup>103</sup> and *a 'voters ploy to make sure the growing movement there was of mothers in the home, didn't grow any more than it was'*<sup>104</sup>. This *blatant appeal to the electorate*<sup>105</sup> was

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<sup>98</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>99</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>100</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>101</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>102</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>103</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>104</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>105</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

described as *a terrible result after all that policy advice*<sup>106</sup> and was representative of a political decision that *did nothing for children*<sup>107</sup>.

### ***Politicians and Civil Servants***

Findings reveal how the differential status of different categories of core policy makers impact on relations of power and were deemed highly influential by insiders – core policy makers again abstained from critique - in governing the behaviour of different sets of actors at the macro-political institutional level. Just as in the case of insider/core-policy maker relationships, findings reveal a subtle, yet powerful set of behavioural codes which regulate and control civil servant interaction with politicians. The construction of these roles mirrored the traditional conceptualisations of politicians and civil servants, where the latter's role is primarily regarded as advisory in nature and the former's is conceived of as authoritative and conclusive in terms of decision-making (Chubb, 1992; Richards & Smyth, 2004). While commending *the sterling job* of OMCYA civil servants, insiders nonetheless highlighted how the impact of behavioural codes limit the influential capacity of civil servants and a small number acknowledged that senior civil servants sometimes concede *off the record that they would like to do things in another way, but they don't get to choose that*<sup>108</sup>. Where disagreements emerge between Ministers and civil servants regarding competing policy solutions, insiders argued that the differential status and associated role restrictions mean civil servants ultimately accept the Ministerial decision as final and *implement the policy they are given*, regardless of their personal perspective<sup>109</sup>.

Similar to insider-core policy maker relationships, narratives reveal the operation of similar silencing mechanisms that curtails and suppresses civil servant public criticism of policy decisions once a ministerial decision has been taken. In the case of civil servants, however, it is not driven by a trade-off for privileged access, but rather by the constitutional codes which demand civil servant loyalty to the Minister once policy rulings have occurred, a behavioural pattern that is consistent with the policy literature regarding Westminster models of governance (Richards & Smyth, 2004; Chubb, 1992).

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<sup>106</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>107</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>108</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>109</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

Indeed, one core policy maker described their role [civil servant] as *responsible on behalf of the Irish government* for policy thus emphasising their integrated relationship with politicians. Using the ECS to illustrate how the differential status of core policy makers restricts senior civil servants' criticisms of policies they oppose, one core insider emphasised how:

*This gang in here (core policy makers) is itself divided – a) Department against Department to some extent and b) even Ministers against Departments and the agenda of Departments. I honestly don't think we would have gotten the ECS if Departments ran the country.*

Nonetheless, despite these constraints, narratives still highlighted the potential influential capacity of *entrepreneurial* civil servants, whose *job* it is *to make sure they have the politicians with them by putting pressure on the politicians whose area of expertise this is not*<sup>110</sup>. These findings are characteristic of the difficulties in securing policy change outlined in the MST and corroborate the theory's arguments regarding the essentiality of policy entrepreneurialism through effective stream coupling during windows of opportunity to increase the likelihood of acquiring political favour for policy proposals (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Zahariadis, 2003, 3007). Yet insiders still highlighted how the final policy decision remains vested in politicians by virtue of the fact that they *are the elected representatives* and emphasised how their openness to policy suggestions primarily *depends on the electoral point of view*<sup>111</sup>. The entrepreneurial nature of the civil servants and their potential influential capacity in policy decisions is nonetheless an important finding and is elaborated upon in the *modus-operandi* organising theme.

### ***Cross Departmental Relationships***

The third source of conflict which emerged from interview narratives relates to the differential roles and influential powers of different government departments engaged in and responsible for (different aspects of) ECEC policy, outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis. In particular, insiders discussed the contrasting approaches and operational structures of the OMCYA, the DES and the Department of Finance, the three

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<sup>110</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>111</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

government departments they perceived as most pertinent to ECEC policy development. Insiders were especially critical of the organisational structures and what they perceived of, as high levels of resistance within the Department of Finance and the DES which they felt created additional challenges and difficulties to the development of cohesive ECEC policy.

The Department of Finance was characterised as the ultimate power-house in policy decisions and the possessor of critical persuasive sway given its status as holder of the ‘purse strings’. Specialist and peripheral insiders, in particular, described this institution as an exclusive and highly influential Department *who you never get to meet*<sup>112</sup> and expressed frustration at the difficulties they encounter in accessing the Department, given the pivotal and powerful role, they feel it possesses in policy decisions:

*I think they [Department of Finance] are really conditioned, I mean even if they agree with it [ECEC investment], they would never say it. It's a big problem. ... We saw it played out with the talks [partnership discussions], the relative power of these [core insiders]. I mean when things are reasonably good in the economy, these people here [core insiders] are in the ascendancy and Finance go along with it but when that stops there is no middle way on it. So it's either the lunatics running the asylum, if you take a Finance view of it, like the Taoiseachs running around the place, [X] in [Government Department] talking to [Peripheral Insider] ... or it is Finance ...*

Peripheral Insider

A number of insiders criticised what they conceived of as the long-standing, conservative Departmental approach and an embedded resistance to ECEC which they primarily attributed to the Department's anxiety regarding the potential exchequer costs greater engagement within the ECEC policy domain might imply. They emphasised how the Department's preoccupation and near solitary concern with cost alone – above all else – imposes critical barricades to securing policy support for ECEC. While conceding that the cost issue inevitably creates certain levels of anxiety, insiders nonetheless felt that an exclusive preoccupation with costs restricts the ‘space’ for

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<sup>112</sup> Peripheral insider narrative



policy debate and policy innovation:

*Government is not always a unitary actor – there is a Department of Finance view which will always be to take the least costly road. Particularly if they don't want, for example, combining the industrial relations and the cost concerns, they wouldn't want a future permanent set of employees of the state, the long-term costs of adding pensions, sick pay and all the other things that go with it. So government can be, departments and ministers can be non unitary, they can be pulling in quite different directions and therefore it can be a while before we find out which department view had its way.*

Core Insider

The perceived resistance of the DES to greater involvement in ECEC was also highlighted by specialist and peripheral insiders who described the Department's approach as a *we do what we have to do* strategy and contrasted it with the OMCYA's [and its parent Department of Health & Children] *more can do, less constrained and more proactive and courageous* approach in terms of policy development and innovation<sup>113</sup>. The more *formal and conservative* approach of the DES was partly attributed to the *institutionalised* structures and modes of operation within the Department (e.g. school boards of management, teacher union organisations, formalised schooling systems) which led one peripheral insider to concede that it is *not always their fault*, given how they are *frozen by the role of the so-called partners in education to an extent*<sup>114</sup>. This argument is synonymous with the historical institutionalist arguments described in Chapter Three regarding path dependencies once certain processes or structures become embedded in the policy landscape. There was a general consensus amongst peripheral and specialist insiders that these institutional constraints and *ties into teaching and institutional education and so forth* made the DES the *wrong Department to go to for change in this area*<sup>115</sup> as existing structures narrow the boundaries for policy construction and conceptualisation and constrain the department's openness to innovative policy suggestions. Bearing these restrictions in mind, these same insiders argued that the *newer, more open and innovative*<sup>116</sup> ways of the OMCYA

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<sup>113</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>114</sup> Partners in education referred to included the teachers unions, school boards of management etc

<sup>115</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>116</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

better positioned it as the lead department for ECEC policy.

### **National Autonomy Paramount**

This final set of findings within the policy decision-making organising theme describe actors' perspectives on the extent to which international influences discussed within the pre-decision organising theme penetrate the decision making sphere and impact on final policy decisions in ECEC.

While all actors emphasised the key role of international influences in the pre-decision stage of policy making and acknowledged the importance of the considerable *early childhood research in the international field that has been available to us*<sup>117</sup>, discussions revealed greater ambiguity regarding the extent to which these influences directly impact on national policy decisions. Instead, *all* actors contended that *ultimately* international policy-oriented learning sources are *not the main driver* in Irish ECEC policy decisions<sup>118</sup> and that policy is *still predominantly nationally developed*<sup>119</sup>. Even the EU, whose Equal Initiative funding provided for the establishment of the EOCP, was regarded as having minimal impact in terms of ECEC policy decisions, given the EU's *lack of jurisdiction*<sup>120</sup> in matters relating to children:

*The EU does not have competence [in ECEC]. That is why the Department of Health and Children could never have accessed money from Europe for childcare services, because under the principal of EU subsidiarity, welfare issues are a matter for national government and the EU doesn't have competence in the area. People talk ... as if it does and again I am talking, legally ... but it doesn't have any competence.*

Core Policy Maker

In reflecting on the limited power of the EU to steer national decisions in the ECEC policy domain, one core insider emphasised how *we might have done things differently or been forced to do things differently* if Europe had a direct role in the *whole area of*

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<sup>117</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>118</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>119</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>120</sup> Core policy maker narrative

*children.*

Just as with national consultation processes, actors emphasised the influential capacity of international influences as a pre-decision means of policy-oriented learning *rather* than a direct influence in the decision-making stage, where perspectives regarding the impact of international influences weakened or dissipated. There was a general consensus amongst *all* actors that *international models of good practice are not something we have taken on* and that Irish ECEC policy is still *predominantly nationally developed*<sup>121</sup>. One peripheral insider emphasised how *decisions are influenced* rather than *determined* by engagement and learning from *what other countries are doing* and by *seeing examples of good practice*. Thus, despite the learning acquired from various models, the Irish approach lends itself to *picking bits [of international models] from here and there*, which ultimately *ends in quite incoherent [national] policy*<sup>122</sup>.

### **Summary: Decision-Making Environment**

Insiders highlighted the sharp contrast between the open and cordial policy environment that characterised the pre-decision stage of policy development and the closed and elitist environment that characterised the decision making sphere of policy making. They described an exclusive and highly restricted decision-making policy environment from which they all felt excluded and emphasised the considerable difficulties these restrictive processes impose on their capacity to influence policy development at the most pivotal decision-making stage. Their exclusion from this sphere of policy development emerged as a source of considerable frustration given their commitment and extensive contributions during the pre-decision stages of policy development. There was unanimous agreement amongst all insiders that the elitist policy decision making environment resulted in a limited capitalisation of national expertise and an ineffective ‘teasing out’ of potential policy implementation issues. The implications of these exclusive processes are partly caused by and further compounded by the conflict-filled policy environment where the diverse objectives and differential relations of

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<sup>121</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>122</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

power (of the different sets) of core policy makers constrain collaborative and cohesive policy development.

Insiders depicted extensive conflict and disharmony as key characteristics of the decision-making sphere of policy making. They highlighted the inherent risks of the conflict between politicians' personal and private agendas and illuminated how politicians' personal goals potentially drive policy decisions that contravene expert policy advice regarding the public good because of politician's perceived anxieties regarding the public palatability to these proposals. The importance of the public palatability of policy proposals at the macro political institutional level is also emphasised in the MST (Zaharidias, 2003; 2007) and its constraining impact on Irish policy development has been elaborated upon in Chapter Three and is returned to in succeeding chapters of this thesis. This conflict between politicians' private and public goals is exacerbated by the differential powers and authority of politicians and civil servants. The relationship between civil servants and politicians was characterised as particularly constraining for civil servants who are obliged, once again by a set of behavioural codes, to accept and implement the Minister's final policy decisions and refrain from public dissent or criticism, even in instances where decisions contradict with expert policy advice. Although entrepreneurial civil servants sometimes identify alternative paths and means through which to influence policy decisions, their subordinate status was noted as key in structuring their interactive relationships and behaviour in policy making processes.

The compounding impact of differential departmental agendas, coupled with their differential levels of power and influence, adds a further layer of complexity and contention to decision-making processes and represents another feature that severs collaborative and consensual policy development and instead exacerbates the disjointed 'pull and stretch' of policy depending on which Minister, Department or civil servant wins the battle. Hardiman (2010: 12) similarly describes how fragmentation within the public service militates against opportunities for policy co-ordination as the 'stove pipes' of government change little over time and continue to operate in relative isolation from one another. The impact of department's competing agendas and conflictive relationships is amplified through analysis of the policy making behaviour in this chapter's final organising theme, the *modus operandi*.

Finally, just as in the case of insiders who are widely engaged in pre-decision consultation processes but fail to penetrate the decision-making sphere of policy making, the fate of international influences was subject to the same vulnerability in the final stage of policy decision-making. Insiders and core policy makers emphasised the predominantly nationally driven premise of ECEC policy making, and emphasised how, despite policy-oriented learning from international models, decisions are very much shaped and structured by national conceptualisations and interpretations of the purpose of ECEC rather than international policy-oriented learning acquired in the pre-decision stage of policy making. This finding – and the role of power of national conceptualisations of policy issues on policy design - is elaborated on in the next chapter of this thesis.

### **Modus Operandi**

The final set of findings within the global network, *The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors*, describes actors’ perspectives on the overall ways of functioning and the predominant patterns of policy making prevalent within Irish policy making processes.

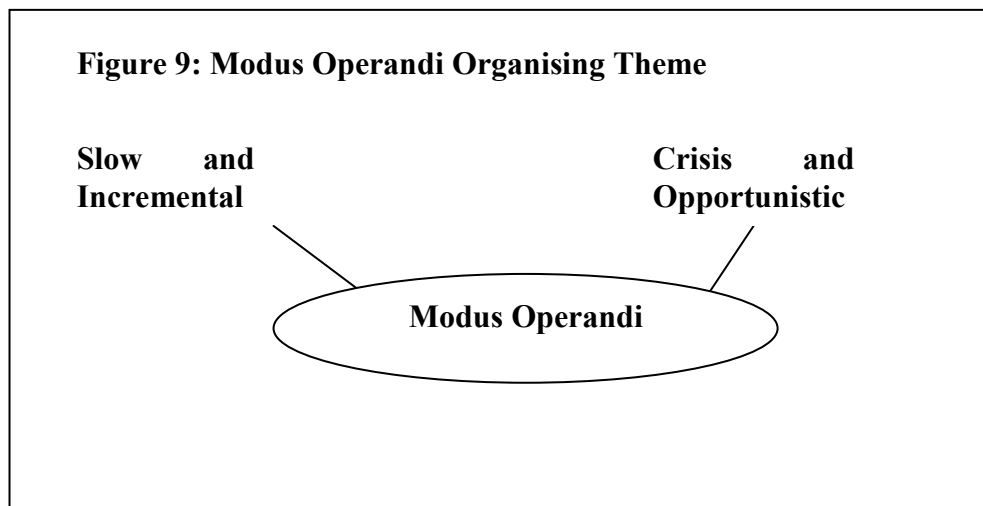


Figure 9 reveals the two dominant and converse modus operandi that all actors referred to in their descriptions of policy making processes and patterns. These two trends mirror those described in Baumgartner and Jones’s (1991) Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, discussed in Chapter Two. The patterns of decisions in PET are characterised

by long periods of gradual and incremental policy change, primarily within policy subsystems and away from public visibility which are punctuated by sudden periods of major policy change as various forces (e.g. exogenous events, media attention etc) collide and undermine existing policy approaches and expand the conflict from its usual subsystem location to the macro-political level where rapid and radical change is possible (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; 1993). Actors in this study also reported a predominant modus operandi of long periods of policy continuity, where gradual and incremental adjustments to existing policy approaches formed the prevailing policy approach. They also similarly described a second policy pattern at *the other end of the spectrum*<sup>123</sup> where periods of abrupt and episodic change trigger *sudden* and *crisis*<sup>124</sup> policy decisions in response to exogenous catalysts as policy makers come under increasing pressure to rectify and ameliorate high attention, urgent and pressing policy problems.

### **Slow & Incremental Policy Development**

The first modus operandi depicts a slow, lethargic policy process and has antecedents in Lindblom's (1959) description of policy making as 'incremental and piecemeal' and the historic institutionalist arguments which emphasise the preferential tendency to lean on pre-existing policy frames by making small and incremental adjustments wherever feasible once a particular policy path has been chosen (Pierson, 1994; 2001).

*All* actors emphasised the resistance of the Irish policy making system to change and argued that government's embedded preference for incremental policy development created a fundamental impediment that constrained opportunity for policy innovation and change. Despite the apparent openness to multiple perspectives through *all of that engagement* in the pre-decision stage of policy making, there was unanimous consensus that ... *the system was very reluctant to change*<sup>125</sup>. One core insider drew on their experiences of the partnership process to highlight the system-wide resistance to policy change by arguing that *partnership [similar to other consultation and network processes] can only operate within the parameters set by government* and conceded that *if the government does not want to change things, social partners aren't going to force*

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<sup>123</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>124</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>125</sup> Core insider narrative

*it to change.* While acknowledging the *positive developments in the area of childcare and in social policy generally*, another core insider also emphasised the *very difficult struggle* in bringing these policy developments about. While insiders were generally critical of the protracted and incremental nature of policy development, core policy makers defended the slow policy process as a natural and often inevitable component of policy development:

*... My experience has been it takes ten years, to do what I call best practice, from the time you start to the time you get there .... ... And whoever's here [insiders] will have forgotten all about the fact that this had to start [the preschool year] incrementally, and of course, we will be getting attacked [core policy makers] ... And that is the life of a policy maker and that is the way it works and you know that when you set out in it .... I would say in ten years time, we will look and say well have we done it, in the way, with the vision that we had.*

Core Policy Maker

In justifying this incremental approach, this same core policy maker highlighted how policies generally require time to accumulate sufficient levels of government support and to build towards their vision of a complete and finalised policy product:

*We can't end up with a state of the art quality that you don't gradually achieve. What we will do, is what we have always done. This is where we are, this is where we want to go, and this, this and this are the middle. Then we will take all the battering we get along the way.*

This emphasis on elongated time periods with reference to policy development is consistent with concepts articulated within the ACF which also emphasises the elongated time periods required for alteration to core beliefs and core policy beliefs (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and the resultant slow and gradual nature of policy change in the absence of particular crisis events. It is this point which leads to the ACF's primary focus on policy development over ten year time periods (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

In a policy environment infused with multiple actors' intersecting and dissecting policy

agendas, a core insider corroborated the core policy maker's assertion regarding the inevitability of incremental decision-making particularly where powerful historically institutionalised structures predominate and exacerbate the challenges core policy makers encounter in securing consensus for policy change:

*I think, to be fair to the state, they do find it hard to get change, you know change in work practices, change in anything out of the teacher unions and if they were to create a new sector, an early childhood development sector, which was to be attached to the education system or an adjunct to it, they feel they would be providing another field of operations to them [unions].*

Core Insider

The conflict between political objectives and policy agendas and the preference for *consensus-oriented* decisions in policy making was highlighted as a core contributory factor that reinforces incremental policy development. One core insider emphasised how *positive and negative results* emanate from processes in which *none of the actors like conflict*:

*When there is a national strategic paper published, it is almost always, nearly already agreed by all the actors, so you don't get big show downs, but equally, it means you are very unlikely to get a radical policy switch, because there is a lot of bargaining, a lot of veto points, a lot of tugging and dragging involved. So the negative side of that way of doing policy is the centre of gravity is the dominant force and the extremes are muted.*

This statement is thus revealing of how, the consensus-oriented nature of the policy making system, and its preoccupation with bargaining and negotiations, reinforces slow and incremental design and delimits possibilities of radical change, unless extreme circumstances demand it, arguments which are particularly pertinent to value based policy domains such as ECEC and conflate with the analysis of policy development patterns described in Chapter Three.



## **Rapid & Swift Policy Development**

The second theme within the modus operandi organising theme describes the converse pattern of rapid and sudden policy development, when the dominant and preferred modus operandi of slow and incremental policy design becomes increasingly unfeasible as exogenous crisis events or perturbations (e.g. economic recession, changing labour market demands) arise that demand new or radically altered policy initiatives to ameliorate or respond to that given crisis. The emphasis on the importance of exogenous focusing events in triggering rapid policy action is consistent with those concepts articulated in all three theories of the policy process (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; True *et al*, 2007). Findings relating to this modus operandi centred on two key aspects which provide the catalysts that increase the likelihood of rapid and sudden policy change: the first factor relates to the impact of trigger events in the wider environment on policy development within the ECEC subsystem; and the second factor relates to core policy makers' ability to exploit the 'windows of opportunity' these events create to bring about policy change.

### ***Trigger Events***

Both PET and MST highlight how abrupt policy change primarily occurs in response to trigger event moments that disrupt periods of policy stability and emphasise how the inter-related policy response is largely dependent on the capacity of entrepreneurial policy actors to exploit the windows of opportunity these dilemmas create to push through their alternative and favoured policy solutions (Baumgartner, 2001, 2009; Kingdon, 1995; Wilson, 2000). Findings from this study mirror and corroborate these arguments. For instance, *all* actors identified Ireland's economic crisis as a policy 'opportunity' due to its reverberating impact on politicians' behaviour as they encountered a 'dilemma' which required rapid, intensive and more open reflection and assessment of alternative policy options than that which might typically be considered in periods of stability. As one core insider stated:

*One of the things you hear bandied about at the moment, is never miss an opportunity and the current crisis ... I think has changed mindsets in that sense. I mean people are now looking at this [ECEC] differently. I think people are looking at the opportunity of the crisis to push through changes that might never*

*have taken place before because during the good times money wasn't an option and it was just a question of giving it a few more bob.*

In contrast to times of economic stability, where an incremental build on already existing cash-based supplements, such as child benefit payments, formed the dominant modus operandi, all actors highlighted the more intense and radical pace and extent of policy change during the economic crisis. The 2009 preschool initiative announcement which *came out of nowhere*, a decision *that happened literally in two or three days*, following years of government resistance, was cited by several actors as a key example of the opportunity crisis trigger events provide to initiate radical policy change<sup>126</sup>.

### ***Actor Exploitation of Trigger Events***

The MST suggests that 'policy initiators' exploit trigger events to 'shepherd their proposed policy solutions through government and bring about the abrupt policy change' (Wilson, 2000: 248). Consistent with this, all actors emphasised the importance of *availing of opportunities*<sup>127</sup> by constantly *finding the policy answer*, so when trigger or stochastic events occur, *the solutions are ready because there are very few times where there is a planned policy change*<sup>128</sup>. In seeking to bring about policy change, one core policy maker reflected on their usage of a variety of entrepreneurial strategies over a decade-long period. These ranged from identifying *alternative policy routes* by accessing external funds *to get money invested in the childcare sector* during a time of policy paralysis (i.e. the EOCP) to maintaining up-to-date policy proposals in preparation for key trigger event moments. The sequential manner in which this policy entrepreneur prepared for and availed of opportunities to progress towards their self-professed end goal of the 'preschool year' is consistent with the Multiple Stream's 'salami tactics' technique described by Zahariadis (2007). This tactic posits that entrepreneurs divide policy proposals into distinct stages to be introduced at opportune moments to promote agreement in steps, at instances where they believe their final policy goal is less likely to be adopted because of various perceived risks (e.g. technical feasibility; value acceptability). For instance, this core policy maker reflected on the opportunity EU funds provided to initiate policy action where 'political deadlock' and

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<sup>126</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>127</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>128</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

associated anxiety had long impeded political intervention in the ECEC field. While conceding to the narrow parameters of the initial programme, this actor emphasised how *you couldn't get any services, if you don't have this money*, and described the EOCP as a long awaited opportunity to break into a sector that had long been surrounded by impassable barriers:

*You know, we took on the EU money, where I said, God, we have no staff, we have no systems, the government didn't know anything about this until learning accumulates. ... But we went for it ... I am a great believer in when you get the money, it makes policy making easy.*

Core Policy Maker

All actors across all layers agreed that the EOCP represented an entrepreneurial move from *clever* core policy makers from which positive and enhanced ECEC policy developments could eventually occur. While actors acknowledged that these opportunities sometimes carried negative implications, particularly in terms of the narrow parameters the 'break through' moment provided, a general acceptance of the necessity of these windows to commence or initiate policy change emerged strongly from narratives. One peripheral insider described the *battle* for the EOCP *money* as *insightful* of key civil servants *to actually grab the money and turn it into something good, even though at the core of it, the policy is not driven by the rights of the child*, they still contended that *it is better to have taken that money and developed up to this point [where ECEC stood on EOCP Programme completion], rather than not take the money.*

All insiders also emphasised the importance of entrepreneurial civil servants, *who have inside wisdom and know how the system works to at least move policy forward*<sup>129</sup>. Integral to this entrepreneurial capacity was the capacity of civil servants to recognise key moments *and just move like that ... at the speed of lightening, to take an opportunity as they see it arising, jump with it and move it along and maybe make that whole thing happen*<sup>130</sup>. The importance of seizing the window of opportunity was corroborated by a core policy maker, who described the recent preschool initiative as a policy they *had*

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<sup>129</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>130</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*always wanted, and noted how, when the day came we were ready, despite the very little time, because it was an emergency budget, when the government wanted to jump, the policy work was already done.*<sup>131</sup> In spotting the opportunity to make the switch from the ECS to the pre-school year, one peripheral insider described the *clever piece of opportunism by a small group of insiders to pull some fat out of the fire.*

## **Conclusion**

The first of the three thematic networks to emerge from this research study and the grounding frame for this chapter focused on *'The Policy Environment: Action and Activity of the Actors'* and described actors' perspectives on action and activity across the spheres and stages of policy making. The thematic network consisted of three key organisational themes: pre-decision policy processes; policy decision-making processes; and dominant modus operandi or patterns in policy development. A number of strong parallels emerged between findings from this research and common behavioural patterns and strategies in MST and PET. The generally slow and incremental nature of ECEC policy development punctuated by periods of rapid and sudden change in response to heightened policy attention where incremental policy change proves an unfeasible response to the scale of attention generated by certain crisis or trigger events is consistent with those concepts articulated in the PET (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; True *et al*, 2007). The entrepreneurial nature of civil servants and their employment of a series of manipulative strategic tactics, including effective stream coupling during windows of opportunity and salami tactics to gain increased policy support in the absence of such windows is consistent with those concepts articulated in the MST (Kingdon, 1995; Zaharidias, 2003; 2007).

The pre-decision policy making processes depicted an 'open', consultative environment comprising numerous multi-directional relationships where all actors expressed a freedom to engage and contribute to policy discussions on an ongoing basis. The purpose and benefits of consultation are manifold and explain its now established usage in contemporary policy making processes (Davis, 1997; Howard, 2005; Mc Kinney & Halpin, 2007). Narratives revealed its use as a pre-emptive step which not only supports core policy makers in resolving potential issues and identifying potentially

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<sup>131</sup> Core policy maker

workable policy solutions but also in potentially minimising conflict and associated disputes by maximising policy ‘buy in’ amongst insiders from the initial stages of policy development. However, findings underline fundamental discrepancies regarding the unbalanced trade-offs and limited returns insiders accrue in return for their adherence to the behavioural codes that insider status demands. The ‘taming’ of groups and the ‘silencing’ of public dissent or criticism emerged as two fundamental findings which provoke critical questions regarding their curtailing impact on advocacy behaviour which could potentially encourage public debate that challenges the appropriateness of adopted government approaches. Likewise, in an increasingly globalised society, exploration of international policy approaches for plausible models of learning and potential justification for selection of certain policy approaches also emerges as a natural and inevitable policy making procedure in the pre-decision stage of policy development. The tendency to selectively focus on English speaking countries whose ideological goals and administrative systems mirror those of the Irish system is revealing of the narrow frame within which ECEC policy is primarily contextualised and conceptualised within policy development and decision making structures. The fact that these like-minded countries primarily ground their ECEC systems within the economic rationale based models and government distancing approaches typically characteristic of neo-liberal states is also revealing of the boundaries and parameters within which much policy conceptualisation occurs. These points and their implications in the structuring of ECEC policy are elaborated upon in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Critically, in contrast to the ‘open’ and ‘amenable’ pre-decision making stage, findings reveal a ‘closed’, ‘exclusive’ and ‘elitist’ decision-making sphere from which all but a select inner elite of core policy makers are excluded. Several insiders attribute their failure to influence at the decision-making stage of policy making to the hierarchical and authoritative decision making structures which curtail access to a select elite of competing core policy makers who privately battle and vie for their favoured policy solution behind closed doors. This finding is consistent with international literature which emphasises how access to policy makers does not guarantee influence in policy decisions (Broscheid & Cohen, 2007; Eising, 2007; Gale, 2007; Maloney *et al*, 1994). International influences are susceptible to the same tenuous status as national consultation in terms of decision making impact. While globalisation and the impact of

supra-national policy oriented learning infiltrate the knowledge acquisition stage of policy making, there was broad consensus regarding its limited and selective incorporation into national policy decisions. Consistent with this, Coakley (2005: 107) warns how Ireland's 'a history of vigorous nationalist agitation' and 'a long-standing emphasis on national sovereignty have been outstandingly characteristic of Irish political culture' thus emphasising how Ireland's 'enduring attachment to nationalist values' should not be under-estimated. Findings thus highlight the vulnerability and tenuous influential capacity of knowledge acquired through both national consultation and international learning and illuminate the authoritative decision making powers of those actors within the core policy maker sphere at the final stage of decision making.

The conflicts, contests and competing agendas of those select elite of core policy makers engaged in the most exclusive stage of policy development led all actors, including core policy makers, to characterise the decision-making sphere as tension-filled, conflictive and disharmonious. It is within this sphere that the most intense deliberations take place as core policy makers vie to secure their favoured policy decision against competing policy actors. The characterisations of policy battles and strategic activity of competing groups of policy actors within this sphere are synonymous with the conflictive and disharmonious policy environment depicted in this study's introductory chapter (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Bridgman & Davis, 2003; Edwards, 2005; Ozga, 2000; Schattschneider, 1960). The three key forms of conflict identified centred on the conflict politicians' private [career goals] and public responsibilities, the civil servant/politician relationship and the conflict between different government department agendas which led different groups of actors to prioritise different policy concerns and adopt a variety of strategies in securing favour for their policy decisions.

Consistent with Baumgartner and Jones's (1991; 1993) punctuated theory of equilibrium, two dominant and conflicting patterns of policy making emerged prominently from narratives. The first modus operandi depicts a slow, lethargic policy process and has antecedents with Lindblom's (1959) description of policy making as 'incremental and piecemeal', a 'science of muddling through' where policy makers usually 'make minor alterations to pre-existing policy design' (Rigby *et al*, 2007). Given the fundamental impact of conflict and political anxiety within the policy

environment, a slow and incremental policy build emerges as an almost inevitable and preferred policy approach that facilitates conflict aversion and increases political stability. Wilson (2000: 259) discusses the ‘compelling appeal’ of incremental policy development given its propensity to reduce major errors as ‘decision makers make small tentative decisions ... to reduce the anxiety, uncertainty and the unpleasantness of conflict’. The opportunity to initiate policy development, particularly innovative policy, in these moments is remarkably limited and emerges as a source of frustration amongst all actors, whose windows of opportunity to bring about change are therefore infrequent and rare.

The alternative and again contrasting *modus operandi* relates to swift and sudden policy change. Findings reveal two key and inter-related triggers which potentially generate abrupt policy change. The first relates to wider contextual triggers (e.g. public scandals, recessions) which ‘raise the visibility of an issue’ and ‘precipitate public awareness’ (Cobb & Elder, 1983) thereby disrupting periods of stability. The second relates to policy makers’ ability to exploit these stressors by defining the situation as a problem requiring government action to bring about policy change (Wilson, 2000). This approach has antecedents in what Habermas (1975) describes as a ‘legitimacy crisis’ where entrepreneurial policy makers challenge the rationality of existing regimes and promote alternative paradigms by offering a different set of solutions in these critical moments. Given the various constraints and challenges identified in ECEC policy making, it is these moments that actors highlight as most vital in securing radical policy change. The entrepreneurial nature of core policy makers in exploiting these stressors was identified as vital to succeeding in this regard, a point most visibly emphasised in the MST (Kingdon, 1995; Zaharidias, 2007).

Having presented findings on the broader policy environment in this chapter, the next chapter explores contextual environmental components directly related to ECEC policy and considers how key constructs within the policy environment interact and integrate with the action and activity of policy actors in the inner spheres of policy making. It is through such exploration the real impact of actors’ behaviour and strategies on ECEC policy development in terms of consequences and outcomes for young children can be illuminated.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE ECEC POLICY CONTEXT

#### CONSTRUCTIONS, CATALYSTS AND CONSTRAINTS

##### **Introduction**

This Chapter presents the findings emerging from Thematic Network 2 [Figure 10] ‘*The ECEC Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts and Constraints*’<sup>132</sup> which focuses on the role of the contextual environment in shaping actors’ conceptualisations of ECEC policy issues and responses. Three key organising themes emanated from families of basic sub-themes and describe:

- Constructions of Childhood;
- Policy Catalysts; and
- Policy Constraints.

The variable constructions of childhood discussed in Chapter Two reveal how situated understandings and interpretations of childhood comprise a significant and powerful influence in the construction of ECEC paradigms (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Grounded in a social constructionist framework, the ‘constructions of childhood’ organising theme, explores how actors’ interpret and construct ‘childhood’ and describes how these constructions impact on their perspectives of ECEC policy and practice purposes. The organising theme ‘policy catalysts’ describes key stimuli or important trigger events which actors believe have escalated issue attention to ECEC and considers how these catalysts have influenced the conceptualisation of policy issues and the types of policy responses pursued. The final organising theme within this network, ‘policy constraints’ describes key factors or

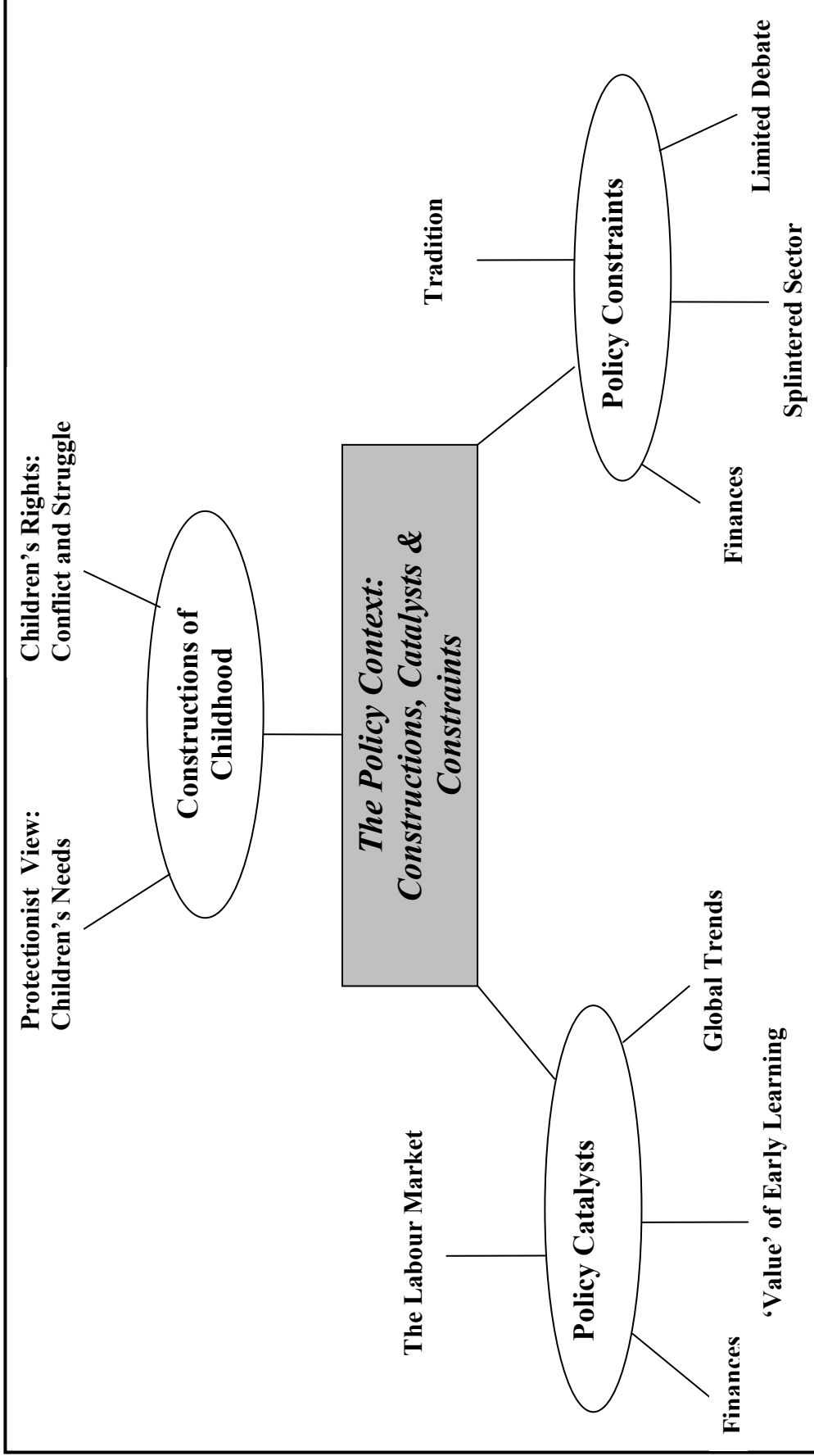
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<sup>132</sup> Further elaboration on the development of Thematic Network 2 is provided in Appendix H.



processes within the wider policy environment which actors believe have inhibited and constrained conceptualisations of ECEC policy and discusses the implications of these constraints on policy development and adopted approaches.

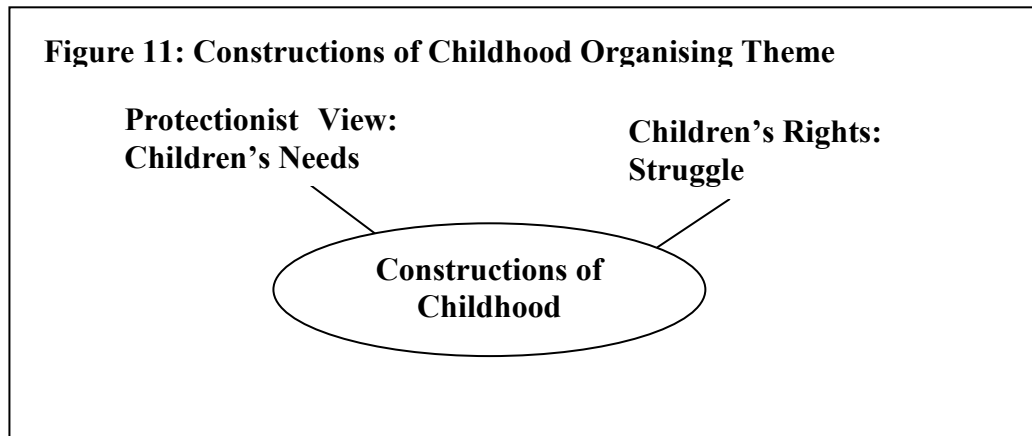
**Figure 10: The Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts and Constraints [Thematic Network 2]**



## **Constructions of Childhood**

Childhood is not only a biological condition but it is also a socially constructed condition (James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997). Chapter Two described how constructions of childhood reveal intentions of social policy and vary according to time, place and space and differing societal needs, resources, political systems, cultures and ideologies (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; Fler, 2003; Mac Naughton, 2005; Rigby *et al*, 2007).

The first organising theme [Figure 11] within this chapter describes the policy frame within which ECEC is conceptualised and contextualised by exploring actors' constructions of childhood and their inter-linked perspectives of the value and purpose of ECEC.



The two basic subsets of findings within this organising theme relate to the predominant construction of childhood within a protectionist, needs-based framework and the less prominent and more contested construction of childhood from within a rights-based framework.

### **Protectionist View: Children's Needs**

This study's findings highlight how the majority of actors construct and interpret childhood from within a needs-based framework where the child is situated as a dependent of the family. Accordingly, most actors believe that child-related policy should be structured

around the child *within* the family rather than children as a collective group of citizens in their own independent right. For instance, one core policy maker expressed a preference *to have a discussion about children's policy, rather than children's rights in policy* and to *even go a step further and ... add children and families [emphasis added]* to the discussion. The narratives of several insiders also emphasised the overwhelming sensitivity to the relationship between family and child in Irish policy development and most actors framed their discussions of children within the familial context rather than focusing on children as an independent group of citizens who also exist separate to the family:

*From where I sit, you know children's rights don't matter that much to me, because I see them as citizens at a certain stage of their lives, who as citizens of this country, need and should be given certain policies and certain services. And the only limitation that is there, as I see it, is about the inalienable rights of the family and that gets mediated through the courts.*

Core Policy Maker

Most actors repeatedly drew upon the Irish Constitution's positioning of children within the familial context to explain and justify their constructions of childhood and described the constitution as their *guiding* framework for their recommendations around child-related policy because it is *in this constitutional context that we live*<sup>133</sup>. Article 41.1 of the Constitution, which gives primacy to the family as the 'fundamental unit group of Society'<sup>134</sup> was described as highly influential in *political developments and schemes that have been introduced* and illustrative of the symbolic *bar one has to go over before you can interfere in the family*<sup>135</sup>. Given how *the rights of the family are regarded as paramount*<sup>136</sup> in the Constitution, several actors, particularly core policy makers and core insiders argued that increasing statutory intervention in young children's lives was conceptualised as a form of *state interference* and a *notion that the state struggles with*<sup>137</sup>. Specialist and

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<sup>133</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>134</sup> *The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and inprescriptable rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law (Bunreacht na hEireann, Article 41.1.1).*

<sup>135</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>136</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>137</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

peripheral insiders, in particular, argued that this context clearly situates *children as private commodities within the family rather than a common good*<sup>138</sup>. All actors felt that the constitutional provisions provided the grounding frame for government responsibility and clearly articulated its subsidiary and supportive role, targeted towards provisions which assist families in meeting *their* [rather than the state's] child-rearing responsibilities. Instances where the state holds primary [rather than secondary] responsibility is restricted to those families who fail to meet the most fundamental physical, social and emotional needs of their children:

*We would see the child in the context of the family, because you actually can't offer anything to children outside the context of the family. And when they don't have the family that is when all your problems start, so because of the space we occupy, we tend to see the world in a different way.*

Core Policy Maker

The majority of actors' acceptance of the authoritative supremacy accorded to legislative frameworks emerged prominently in narratives, as did a widespread and inter-linked resistance to question these interpretations of the Constitution or to explore alternatives which may challenge the state's already institutionalised role and responsibilities for young children. The emphasis placed on the resilient constraints *Bunrecht na h'Eireann* imposes on political space for ECEC policy decisions and the majority of actors' manifest acceptance of this illuminates how regimes of truths can become so ingrained that actors fail to question their beliefs and the veracity of the constructions which inform them. Pivotal and revealingly, *only one* actor argued that the accepted and promulgated interpretation of the constitution represents just one of many possible interpretations of the Constitutional article:

*..to some extent we fall back on the Constitution, I wouldn't say as our 'get out clause', but we fall back and we use it. You can interpret legislation in the*

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<sup>138</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*Constitution in different ways... but I think to some extent maybe we fall back on it a little bit [the Constitution], to validate where we are at.*

Specialist Insider

This specialist insider was the only actor, who questioned the ‘truth’ of the promulgated interpretation of the constitution and emphasised how alternative interpretations of this *same* article could potentially elicit different understandings which increase the state’s role in young children’s lives. This common and accepted interpretation of the constitution therefore allowed policy actors and the state to *fall back on the Constitution ... to validate* its restrictive approach to ECEC policy development in Ireland. This argument is consistent with Foucault’s concept of a ‘violence’, where a singular homogenous interpretation dominates and alternatives to the homogeneous view are marginalised and constructed as ‘false’ or ‘incorrect’. While core policy makers and core insiders generally accepted the constitutional interpretation of the article *as the constitutional context in which we live*, a number of peripheral insiders criticised its restrictive impact<sup>139</sup>. However, rather than questioning the ‘truth’ of the dominant interpretation of the state’s subsidiary role in family life, they clearly grounded their interpretations within this same view and emphasised how a constitutional amendment to explicitly acknowledge children’s rights represented the sole route to redefine and re-evaluate statutory responsibility for young children:

*I never quite got the argument behind needing a specific children’s right within the constitution and then suddenly [I did]. ... It will have to be tightly written, you are never quite sure when you are writing how it will be interpreted ... We need something that puts it up, in big, bold and clear letters that children have rights. And I don’t think legally, that children would be gaining particularly significant rights under a constitutional amendment that are not there at the moment, but I think politically, what it says, is enormous and would have huge impact.*

Peripheral Insider

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<sup>139</sup> Core policy maker narrative

Critically, while all actors emphasised a perceived political resistance to an altered statutory role in families' and children's lives, what also emerged from narratives was a similar and paralleled resistance amongst several actors *within* this study to interrogate *their* personal constructions of childhood by exploring and considering alternatives viewpoints which may require shifts in their core beliefs and core policy beliefs towards a more agentic view of childhood. Indeed, some core policy makers refused to speak about children as an independent collective at all during interview discussions:

*Because of the space we occupy we tend to see the world in a different way. I would talk about children within families and within communities, and therefore the policies I am interested in, are around that holistic approach and what children need are good families (emphasis added)*

Findings from interview narratives reveal two key repercussions from the dominant familial and needs-based approaches to policy making pertaining to young children. The first relates to the relegation of children in child-related policy making as a 'gravitational pull' (Bown *et. al*, 2011) towards familial, particularly maternal, needs persists; and the second relates to the primarily needs-based, deficit-driven framework these perspectives elicit in ECEC policy development and decisions.

### ***Relegation of Children: The Invisible Child***

Mayall (2000: 243) discusses how the historical conflation of children's welfare with women's welfare and social conditions has culminated in their embodiment under the composite concept of 'women-and children' which exacerbates difficulties in peering 'beyond the tangle of adults who pronounce children's needs in the context of mother-child relations to look clearly at children themselves'. Constructions of children and childhood within this study's interview narratives corroborate a persistent conflation of children's needs with mothers' rights and highlight how this conflation detracts attention from children as a distinct and separate group of citizens. All actors acknowledged that the accelerated policy attention childcare attracted from the mid 1990s, was driven by maternal needs rather a focus on children's developmental rights *or* needs. They argued that the

persistent contemporary salience of maternalist discourses in ECEC policy, reinforced through constitutional provisions relating to *the mother's right to work in the home set the tone of the child within the home* in policy development and detracted from a focus *on the child as an individual in themselves*<sup>140</sup>. All actors emphasised how *the major thing leading to any focus on childcare was women in the work force*<sup>141</sup> which was gradually followed by a *slow political realisation that if women are going to be in work*, alternative structures are required *to mind the children*<sup>142</sup>. Clearly then, when the *workplace started screaming for childcare* and escalated and expanded issue attention *converged to say we had to do something about childcare as opposed to ECEC*, the political responses *always focused on the needs of the parent rather than the child*<sup>143</sup>. Resultant *policy measures* responding to the childcare crisis centred on the role the state should play in *supporting parents* (primarily mothers) in balancing employment and caring responsibilities, rather than *coming from a focus on the child*<sup>144</sup>. The focus on children was thus secondary and *reactive* and primarily emerged in response to the changing behaviour of mothers. Some specialist and peripheral insiders emphasised how *it is only in the last few years that we as a sector have stood back and actually said, 'hold on', the child has rights and how do we articulate those rights*<sup>145</sup>. As one peripheral insider contended, *had childcare been driven by the needs and rights of children, it would have been very different*.

### ***Needs Based Frameworks and ECEC Policy***

The dominance of the concepts from the developmental psychology paradigm which differentiate children from adults by focusing on the *developing* child and their subsequent needs as opposed to the newer paradigm of the sociology of childhood which recognises children's agency and inherent capacities (Mayall, 2002; James & James, 2004; Moss & Dahlberg, 2005) emerged strongly in core policy maker and core insider narratives. Core policy makers and core insiders primarily characterised childhood as a *dependent* and

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<sup>140</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>141</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>142</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>143</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>144</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>145</sup> Peripheral insider narrative



*vulnerable*<sup>146</sup> life stage and differentiated children from adults *because they are incapable of surviving on their own* and therefore *need support and appropriate policies and services*<sup>147</sup>. This emphasis on children's limited competence and rationality firmly locates children within a deficit, needs-driven framework (Mc Gillivray, 1994; Smith, 2007; Te One, 2008) and hinders more progressive and nuanced understandings of childhood, where alternative policy responses which embrace the agentic nature of the child may emerge as highlighted by one peripheral insider's statement:

*I think for some, we still have a belief that children need to be protected and even some of the advocates within our own sector talk in a language of welfare and protection and it does not promote children's rights. ... It is quite natural to try and protect someone who is weaker than you are, that is a human instinct, but again and again, when we do give children rights, we have seen that they live up to the responsibility. They are able to deal with those rights ...*

Peripheral Insider

Mayall (2000: 246) emphasises how a focus on children's perceived incompetence and vulnerability delimits a focus on children's rights by enshrining those characteristics which are very 'opposite virtues' to those associated with rights. The prominence of the needs-based discourse in these actors' discussions essentially eviscerated discussions on rights and highlighted what one peripheral insider described as *an inner conflict between the active learning child and the needy child*<sup>148</sup> among several core policy makers and core insiders included in this study. Specialist and peripheral insiders were critical of the hegemonic impact of needs-based discourses in policy approaches and highlighted the ongoing struggle they encounter in their attempts to convince the policy community and wider society to broaden their interpretations and constructions of childhood and embrace the concept of the agentic, capable and competent child. One peripheral insider's reflection on their involvement in a collaborative project with actors across all the concept map's policy layers illustrates this struggle:

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<sup>146</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>147</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>148</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*At the end of the day, [project name] reflects a struggle with that concept of the able child. The end result would be an embracing of the wonderful ideas of the agentive child, but the practicalities of trying to work it out, don't quite get there. ... There is still resistance. ... People had to grapple with it and work their way through it, and it was very difficult for them. And I think it still is very hard for people to envisage a child as anything other than needy, dependent, under developed...*

Peripheral Insider

### **Children's Rights: Struggle**

Findings highlight how Irish policy is *very much driven from a needs-based rather than rights-based [policy] approach*<sup>149</sup>. In distinguishing between needs and rights, one peripheral insider emphasised how *needs represent a more paternalistic model that allows government or state to target measures at certain categories through an interpretive discretionary process which decides whether that need is good enough or great enough* and contrasts to *a right that is guaranteed and cannot be taken away*. The precedence of needs-based approaches was therefore deemed to facilitate government's subjective determination of its role in policy while simultaneously prohibiting or rendering alternative roles and levels of intervention as unwarranted *interference*<sup>150</sup>. The selectivity which the dominant needs-based construction allows therefore emerged as a contributory tenet which reinforces traditional constructions of childhood and exacerbates political resistance to the children's rights movement. This perceived political resistance to a shift towards rights-based frameworks was primarily attributed to two key policy barriers which constrain a greater receptiveness to children's rights in policy debates. The first barrier emerges as a result of a reliance on legislative frameworks to determine statutory responsibility in young children's lives; and the second results from core policy makers', particularly politicians' anxiety regarding the financial connotations a constitutional acknowledgement of children's rights might imply.

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<sup>149</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>150</sup> Core policy maker narrative

### ***Scaffolding Rights within Legislative Frameworks***

All core policy makers and core insiders conceded to a difficulty in understanding children's rights and frequently requested definitions and elaborations regarding the meaning of the concept prior to discussion of children's rights during interviews. Core policy makers expressed resistance to any discussion of children's rights outside of the Constitutional framework and described the legislative interpretations of the constitution as the boundary governing their work and constructions of statutory responsibility for children:

*When you don't work for the government, you can stand out there and look for children's rights and it can mean anything ... and I actually don't know what it means, when people talk about it. I'm over here working for the government who are constrained by law and Constitution and therefore, for me, children's rights are what is in the Constitution.*

Core Policy Maker

Specialist and peripheral insiders felt core policy makers' reliance on constitutional and legislative frameworks to determine the state's perspective and responsibilities in terms of children's rights acted as a constraining limitation in child-related policy development. So powerful was the perceived resistance to rights-based discourse that a number of peripheral insiders conceded to entirely avoiding the discourse of rights in their discussions with core policy makers:

*I think the difficulty with children's rights – Ireland just isn't there yet. ... Children's rights underpin all of our advocacy work and we would argue very strongly for children's rights in the Constitution. ... But we may not always talk the language of children's rights when we are trying to persuade. ... I am not suggesting that the end justifies the means, I am not saying that at all, but sometimes when you go in to talk to policy makers, in particular the politicians, their eyes glaze over.*

Peripheral Insider

Specialist and peripheral insiders emphasised how this resistance to dialogue and debate exacerbates ambiguity and anxieties about children's rights, as oppositional arguments evade challenge and thus reinforce the dominant needs-based discourse as public resistance – fuelled through uncertainty – that public debate may resolve instead intensifies. Given these constraints, specialist and peripheral insiders welcomed the opportunities the proposed referendum provides to open up *public debate* beyond the preoccupation with *legalistic constraints that exist in policy maker's minds*<sup>151</sup> and to potentially reduce anxiety and uncertainty for *people and parents particularly* so they can *understand that children's rights are not oppositional to their rights*<sup>152</sup>:

*I think if we were to have a referendum it would give us a chance to be more specific and clearer about what it is, at a national level that we mean when we talk about children's rights. I think at the moment, what we have got can be open to multiple interpretations and unfortunately the courts are coming in and they are making decisions which are leaning [sic] us in particular directions. It is important to clarify what we mean by children's rights and what we are striving for and maybe if we had that to some extent, it might make the policy setting a little more coherent and easier.*

Specialist Insider

### ***Referendum on Children's Rights: Costs Superseding Benefits?***

The second factor that impeded a greater receptiveness to children's rights centred on the possible financial ramifications of an explicit constitutional acknowledgement of children's rights *because with rights comes entitlements and that is not an area they [politicians] want to give*<sup>153</sup>. This view was expressed most pertinently by core policy makers although most insiders also felt that the litigious nature of Irish society and its long history of constitutional court challenges which have resulted in substantial financial awards against

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<sup>151</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>152</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>153</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

the state (Callanan, 2006; Nolan, 2007) exacerbate political anxiety regarding the financial implications of a further social group with explicit constitutional rights:

*... Here [Ireland] if you give someone a right, they can vindicate it through the courts and the state is obliged. ... The state cannot give rights, where the tax payer has not provided the money to pay for it. ... So if you give someone a right to everything, you are obliged in our system to provide this, whereas, if you were in another jurisdiction where they have different administrative systems ... things are actually quite different.*

Core Policy Maker

Specialist and peripheral insiders emphasised how this financial preoccupation constrains a more holistic embrace of *the true spirit of democratic instruments* such as the UNCRC for a population of citizens whose voices haven't been heretofore heard and curtails the capacity to recognise children for who and what they are and acknowledge their strengths and their contribution to society<sup>154</sup>. They thus argued that while we [the policy community] may appreciate rights, a refusal to use [the discourse] of rights because ... of the courts and ... the settlements<sup>155</sup> detracts from the moral importance and democratic value of children's rights and provides critical evidence of how we think of rights in too small a frame ... in legal terms only and are not yet at that level where rights and the values and principles they enshrine for children and society are recognised and valued.

There were mixed levels of support amongst policy actors for a constitutional referendum to explicitly acknowledge children's rights. Five of the fifteen actors interviewed in this study expressed direct opposition to a constitutional referendum to institute explicit rights for children and the remaining proponents, while supportive of a referendum, nonetheless expressed uncertainty regarding a positive outcome should such a referendum occur. For instance, one core policy maker suggested that *if you were to ask me what the people would say [i.e. referendum outcome], I would think they would say no*. Similarly, one core insider expressed uncertainty regarding a positive referendum outcome and grounded their

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<sup>154</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>155</sup> Specialist insider narrative

ambiguity in past experiences, arguing that *anyone who lived through five or six abortion referendums should be given the chance for these things to produce unintended consequences, in fact the reverse consequences to what the people responsible for them intend is quite strong.*

A number of insiders who expressed ambivalence regarding the value of a referendum, contextualised their concerns by reference to the potential limitations of rights-based policies, given the *complexities* and *ambiguities*<sup>156</sup> associated with rights. These insiders warned of the considerable leeway for interpretation even in instances where rights are legislated for and questioned the value the legislative institutionalisation of rights may have when they are not enforced by accompanying high quality administrative systems which guide and ensure their attainment:

*I think a reflection of the difficulty with rights. If you view them in purely legal terms ... they are quite capricious, sort of unjust things can get done.... I think there can be a tendency in some movements to think a rights-based approach will take away all these complexities and ambiguities in one fell swoop. I think you have to be careful about that and that you do come back into the quality of these systems. Childcare would be a perfect example of – what would constitute good child development – and that is ongoing, it won't be defined. That itself is a moving target.*

Core Insider

This core insider thus argued that clearly defined high and low level principles administered through high quality administrative systems are more likely to guarantee quality ECEC experiences for children, rather than a constitutional change which gives explicit – but broad and unclearly defined – rights to children. However, a number of peripheral insiders strongly opposed this and drew on the long legacy of state failures to bring about *change through administrative systems*. One peripheral insider emphasised how *nothing administratively* occurred over the lengthy time period *from the 1908 [Childcare Act] up until the 1991 [Childcare Act] was introduced* and argued that the

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<sup>156</sup> Core insider narrative

historic reliance on *'quality administrative systems rather than legislative frameworks has proved to be appalling* [referring to the revelations of the Ryan Report<sup>157</sup>] and stressed how ... *the Constitution is the biggest bit of our legislation and I think for this [children's rights] we need the constitutional change.*

One peripheral insider described *the whole constitutional debate in Ireland as a huge issue* and argued that embedded traditional values and ideologies make it *very hard to know how it is going to be resolved because as a country, politician's think we [the Irish electorate] are not ready to do anything about Article 41.* This reluctance and ambiguity is evident in public debates regarding a children's rights referendum and feeds the already palpable uncertainty and anxiety thus further undermining any *will in Ireland to address the real change which needs to happen – the redefinition of family*<sup>158</sup>.

### **Summary: Constructions of Childhood**

The 'constructions of childhood' organising theme revealed the generally high and favourable levels of support for the predominant and institutionalised needs-based framework which all actors agreed currently dominates in child-related policy development work. The navigational and directive power of the Constitution and the courts emerged prominently in interview discussions and most actors drew upon the dominant interpretation of constitutional articles which emphasise the primacy of the family and the subsidiary role of the state in family life as the primary framework governing statutory responsibility in young children's lives.

A key and fundamental implication of the dominance of needs-based constructions was that of the palpable and powerful levels of resistance to rights-based constructions of childhood. Core policy makers and core insiders in particular expressed ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the value and benefits of rights-based frameworks and argued that quality administrative systems and policies that targeted and supported children's needs could

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<sup>157</sup> The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009: xi), collectively known as the Ryan report, was the result of a 10-year inquiry which revealed the extensive 'litany of terrible wrongs inflicted on our children, who were placed by the state in residential institutions run by religious orders'.

<sup>158</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

provide a sufficiently effective frame within which to develop child-related policies. Several of these actors were resistant to discussions on children's rights during interviews and emphasised a preference to discuss children within the context of families rather than an individual group of citizens independent of family. The dominance of the concepts from the developmental psychology paradigm which differentiate children from adults by focusing on the *developing* child and their subsequent needs as opposed to the newer paradigm of the sociology of childhood which recognises children's agency and inherent capacities was particularly prominent in core policy maker and core insider narratives (Mayall, 2002; James & James, 2004; Moss & Dahlberg, 2005).

Two key barriers emerged as fundamental constraints that copper-fasten a resistance to rights-based frameworks. The first related to the reliance on legislative frameworks to determine statutory responsibilities in young children's lives. Core policy makers admitted to being guided and governed in their policy approach by these legislative frameworks and to conceptualising policy issues and constructing policy responses within the boundaries that these Constitutional interpretations impose. The second barrier restricting greater 'openness to rights' centred on a perceived political anxiety regarding the financial ramifications rights-based frameworks potentially imply. The litigious nature of Irish society and the potential costs of a further social group with explicit constitutional rights were perceived to exacerbate resistance to broader debate regarding the moral aspects and democratic value of children's rights and discussions of rights were accordingly contextualised within the dominant and narrow legislative frame. These discussions illuminated how uncertainty and anxiety about children's rights have inhibited important and necessary ideological debate on constructions of childhood as debate on rights is silenced and suppressed wherever possible and the dominant discourse of needs is given excessive uncritical space.

Constructions of children and childhood within this study's interview narratives corroborate a persistent conflation of children's needs with mothers' rights and highlight how this conflation detracts attention from children as a distinct and separate group of citizens. In discussing the role and value of ECEC institutions, several actors, particularly core policy makers and core insiders framed ECEC within a deficit-driven, needs-based

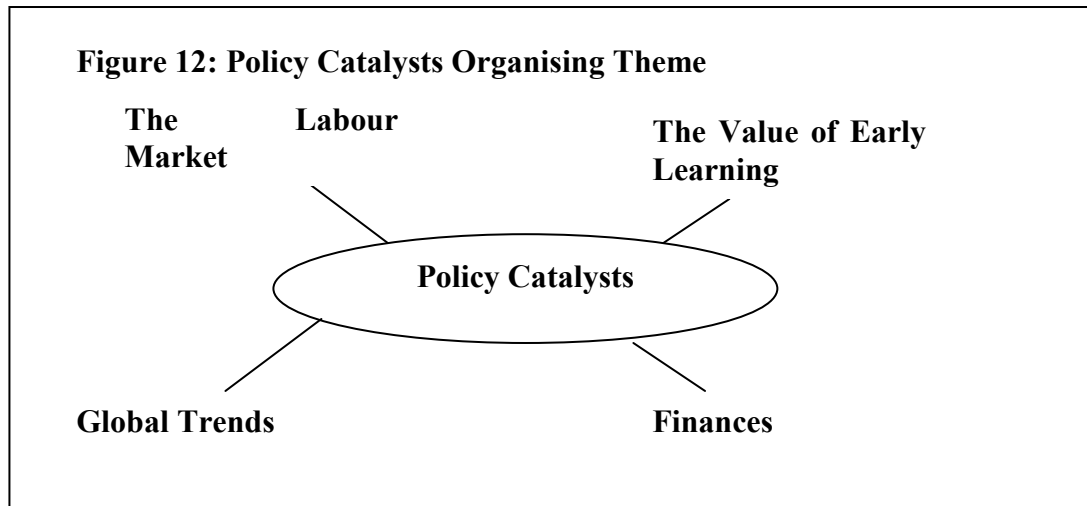


framework where they emphasised and focused on its role as a poverty prevention measure and the ‘developmental’ benefits it elicits as a preparatory support for later schooling and life-long learning.

Given this study’s illumination of the penetrative struggle in opening up the policy environment to alternative constructions of childhood and the associated widespread reluctance and resistance to frame child related policies in any context other than the prevailing needs-based framework, it is somewhat inevitable that child-related policies manifest themselves in protectionist paradigms rather than the newer paradigm of childhood which celebrates children as citizens with strengths, agency and capacities. The largely unquestioned acceptance of the dominant constitutional interpretation of the subsidiary role of the state in children’s lives is revealing of the hegemonic influence of inherited traditions and the general resistance amongst the majorities within the policy domain to question or reflect on their prevailing beliefs in response to new ‘policy dilemmas’ is highly revealing of the power of social constructions and the capacity of regimes of truths to become so ingrained that they function as the *only* truth and become the entire territory of a policy domain itself (Bevir, 2004; Dahlberg *et al*, 2007; Schneider *et al*, 2007). The findings also mirrors those arguments within the ACF regarding the difficulties in dislodging core beliefs and core policy beliefs and corroborates the general stability of belief systems even in the face of change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

### **Policy Catalysts**

The previous chapter highlighted the important role of exogenous triggers as an initiator to policy activity. The organising theme policy catalysts, contextualises and explores actors’ perspectives on the specific trigger events which have stimulated ECEC policy development in the Irish context. It also includes findings regarding how each of these specific events/triggers has impacted on the structuring and shaping of ECEC policy. Key policy catalysts emerging from interview narratives are illustrated in Figure 12.



The four basic sub-sets of findings which emerged within the ‘policy catalysts’ organising theme relate to the impact of changing ‘labour market’ trends on ECEC policy; the impact of the increased political acceptance of the ‘value of early learning’ on policy development; the role of ‘finances’ as a catalyst for policy action; and the impact of comparative ‘global trends’ on policy progression.

### **The Labour Market**

Findings highlight the unanimous consensus amongst all actors that the primary *drivers* leading to the long awaited national policy action in the ECEC domain *were mainly economic*<sup>159</sup> in nature. The *huge growth in the economy* and the *shortage of labour* required to sustain economic buoyancy, created an urgent need *to attract women into the labour force* and it was this exogenous trigger that led to *childcare becoming more of an issue*<sup>160</sup>. Political attention and the development of ECEC policy was therefore deemed to emerge as a *response* to changing societal patterns when public attention to the issue intensified and political inaction was no longer tenable *and so, in consequence, two programmes [EOCP and NCIP] then emerged, one after the other*<sup>161</sup>.

<sup>159</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>160</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>161</sup> Core insider narrative

Core policy makers described how in *reacting to these changes* they availed of the opportunity to access EU funding *under labour market criteria* which provided them with an *avenue to ... put mechanisms in place to support the changes in the labour market*<sup>162</sup>. Despite acknowledging the *opportunity*<sup>163</sup> this funding provided in a time of *policy paralysis and political deadlock*<sup>164</sup>, the narrow parameters of the programme emerged as a source of considerable criticism amongst insiders. The gender equality focus of the funding awarded required that programme delivery and by implication, the development of the childcare sector in Ireland, function *via* the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, where the economic activity of parents (affordable, accessible childcare) was prioritised over the needs and rights of children:

*One of the problems is the funding for childminding places and capital expenditure has been focused on the Equal Initiative, so that has been from the gender focus ... I think that may not have been the best funding line for us to direct money to early education. ... It made childcare a gendered issue, which plays into Ireland's traditional view of child-rearing. ... I don't think it was purposely done by anybody, I just think it was an avenue or vehicle through which to access funds.*

Peripheral Insider

All insiders agreed that the construction of the Programme as an equality initiative (in the absence of an equally paralleled child focused initiative) led to the prioritisation of *custodial* elements of care *while parents work*<sup>165</sup> at the expense of a focus on children. Peripheral insiders engaged in EOCP implementation emphasised the very narrow constructions and parameters in the early days of the programme, and the difficulties they encountered in their attempt to broaden the focus from childcare to ECEC:

*The weakness was, it was very much considered, a work place measure. It was childcare. I was a member of some [county advisory boards]. ... Many of the*

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<sup>162</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>163</sup> Specialist insider, core insider, peripheral insider, core policy maker – all used term referring to EOCP

<sup>164</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>165</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*stakeholders around the table were childcare. It literally was childcare. You could be talking until you were 'blue in the face' about what ECEC was.*

However and importantly, all actors conceded that the EOCP provided an essential and long-awaited opportunity to break the existent barriers of inaction by chiselling an opening to initiate highly sought after and long overdue policy action. While the break-through catalyst was narrow in focus, actors argued that the *well spring*<sup>166</sup> opportunity it provided to bring childcare under the policy microscope had a *knock-on effect*<sup>167</sup> in facilitating the development of additional and more advanced goals within the ECEC policy domain:

*I think that the changing role of women ... has clearly contributed to a changing view of the child and has clearly impacted on the development of childcare policies – initially in quite a limited way. ... In order to support women realising their own ambitions and so on ... ways had to be found to look after the children... But as limited as that was in terms of children's needs and children's rights, I still think it contributed to the rapid development of policy in that area.*

Core Policy Maker

Thus labour market needs initiated and facilitated the growth of the early childhood education discipline in Ireland by providing that long-sought after trigger to secure political agreement to facilitate development of the sector. As a consequence, this initial development of the sector through the EOCP, gradually contributed to expanding issue attention to the inter-related aspects of ECEC, a point elaborated upon in the next chapter.

### **The Value of Early Learning**

All actors emphasised how the increased policy-oriented learning from the growing plethora of evidence-based ECEC studies highlighting the 'value' of early learning provided an appealing stimulus that attracted policy makers' attention and increased political commitment to the policy domain:

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<sup>166</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>167</sup> Core insider narrative

*I think there are two things coming together here – there is the growing interest amongst politicians and policy makers in evidence-based stuff and then when you look at where the evidence is strongest in the social sector, well early childhood is actually one of the areas which has a stronger evidence base. Put the two together and you get a bit of a wave effect.*

Peripheral Insider

A number of actors highlighted how evidence-based studies which position ECEC as *an investment that is good for the child and good for the economy* attract political attention because the quantifiable economic and social returns provide an appealing political tool to justify and substantiate statutory investment. These arguments converge with those of the Multiple Streams Theory which emphasise the importance of the perceived public acceptability of policy proposals as a key motivator at the macro political institutional level (Zaharidias, 2007). In particular, insiders emphasised the impact of evidence-based cost-benefit analysis studies, such as the Perry Preschool Programme (Schweinhart, 1990) and more recent research conducted by Heckman (2000; 2006) and highlighted how the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs situated the *preschool initiative decision in the context of early childhood investment ... in terms of the famous \$40*<sup>168</sup>.

That these studies highlight the particularly beneficial effect *for disadvantaged children... in surmounting the barriers that they face at an early age* and demonstrate how *ECEC improves their [disadvantaged children's] life-long prospects and pay dividends in the life of the individual and for society at large as well*<sup>169</sup> proved particularly important and palatable political motivators, according to core policy makers. While the 'value of early learning' was highlighted by all actors as a catalyst and effective trigger to secure increased political attention in ECEC, its impact was regarded as *more gradual and seeping*<sup>170</sup> in terms of the pace and scale of policy development by contrast to the 'labour market' and government 'finances' catalysts which generated more immediate policy action. The fact

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<sup>168</sup> Peripheral insider narrative referring to Perry Preschool longitudinal findings

<sup>169</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>170</sup> Core policy maker narrative

that such policy-oriented learning accumulates over time and leads to gradual shift in beliefs regarding the value and purpose of ECEC – which was formerly contextualised by the majority of actors within the policy community as a ‘childcare’ issue – is consistent with those concepts articulated in the ACF, which emphasise the elongated time periods required for shifts in core beliefs and core policy beliefs to effect policy change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

### **Finances**

The third policy catalyst which emerged from interview narratives describes actors’ perspectives on the powerful role finances play as a generator of policy action. Focusing on the potential catalytic impact of finances, one core insider described *money* as *a very powerful force* and emphasised *how government certainly responds* to any opportunities to *get money*. Two key themes dominated discussions regarding the catalytic impact of finances in ECEC policy development: the first relates to the motivation the availability of a pool of funding such as the EOCP provides for policy innovation and action; and the second relates to the possibilities crisis shifts in a nation’s finances (i.e. the economic recession) provide for policy reflection and revisions.

#### ***The Pot of Gold: Funding Opportunities***

The opportunity to access EU funding to develop the EOCP was highlighted by all actors as a key and crucial catalyst which triggered development of the ECEC sector. The international contribution of funding was deemed especially important given endogenous policy paralysis and the resolve exogenous finances offered to overcome *political deadlock* and ambiguity regarding the most palatable ECEC solutions<sup>171</sup>:

*If the state was deadlocked, part of the politico is deadlocked, the [social] partners are somewhat deadlocked, I think policy entrepreneurs ... say OK we are deadlocked from a real development view of this ... we will develop the EOCP and they [core*

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<sup>171</sup> Core insider narrative

*policy makers] will find it very hard to say no to that and the money is available from the EU. ... So oddly enough, the EOCP was perfectly tailored to get a chance to go – because even those politicians who are petrified, would find it very hard to say ... that this is not needed. ... I would be very surprised if [core policy makers] didn't really see it as a thin-edged wedge – that they would start by developing this, because it was the line of least resistance.*

Core Insider

Several actors suggested that the successful attainment of *external funds* by *policy entrepreneurs* within government maximised policy buy-in and shifted the focus to the opportunities the new funding stream provided to resolve *policy paralysis* and *develop the childcare sector*<sup>172</sup>. Indeed, core policy makers conceded that the *main aim was to get money into Ireland, into this sector [ECEC]* and to accomplish that *you had to go up this policy route* [the equality-employment objective] and then they *could bring all these others* [the ECEC providers] *into our world ... to avail of the funds we had actually gotten*. Accessing these exogenous funds therefore provided an essential gateway to erode political resistance and initiate and progress policy development where previous attempts by *childcare lobby groups* to initiate action had failed<sup>173</sup> and is consistent with the ‘salami tactics’ articulated in the MST, where policy entrepreneurs secure agreement to policy proposals in stages that support their movement towards a longer term policy goal (Zaharidias, 2007).

### ***A Depleting Pot of Gold: Restructuring Funds in Times of Crisis***

Findings also highlighted the catalytic *opportunity the economic crisis* provided to reflect on and restructure ECEC policy approaches as politicians were required to respond to the ‘dilemma’ (Bevir, 2004) through *changed mindsets* and by *looking at things differently*<sup>174</sup>. Efforts to resolve the severe financial circumstances Ireland encountered from 2008 required critical reflection on a wider range of policy instruments than would be considered

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<sup>172</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>173</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>174</sup> Core insider narrative

during the good times<sup>175</sup> of economic stability. Actors emphasised how this extensive financial review of public finances and the radical need for swift and cheaper policy alternatives ‘opened up’ previously blocked policy pathways and led to substantial policy restructuring. This review resulted in the withdrawal of €480 million from children and families through removal of the much criticised ECS and its replacement with the less costly alternative of a €170 million preschool year, which had the capacity to appease if there was an outcry over withdrawal of the supplement<sup>176</sup>. The wider financial repercussions of the recession, in terms of the financial risks it posed to the sustainability of ‘childcare services’ developed through both the part nationally funded EOCP and fully nationally funded NCIP, were also identified as contributory triggers to the introduction of the preschool initiative:

*If you take the recent decision around the free primary [sic] year – it was a programme for government commitment, it is an EU objective, but in actual fact, the actual factors that have determined the introduction of a preschool year, especially in a time of economic downturn are much more complex. ... They [government] would have taken an awful lot of factors into account including issues such as the number of people employed in the sector, the danger of services actually going to the wall...*

Core Policy Maker

Corroborating this core policy maker’s argument, peripheral insiders also emphasised how they had warned core policy makers of *the real possibilities of services closing down* and the gradual dissipation of a sector, whose establishment had been supported *through millions of Euros of capital funding across the country*, arguments these insiders felt triggered government *to provide a shot in the arm to those services* through the preschool initiative<sup>177</sup>. In this altered context, the introduction of a free preschool year, which had long been resisted by government, proved a palatable and feasible solution given its capacity to resolve many of the intersecting ills permeating the early years sector during the

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<sup>175</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>176</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>177</sup> Peripheral insider narrative



economic crisis<sup>178</sup>. Actors highlighted how the preschool initiative's capacity potentially to pacify the business strata of ECEC [i.e. by reducing service closure risks] and parents of young children and the general electorate, through a replacement provision for some losses incurred through the ECS all contributed to its political appeal. While the *dismantling* of the ECS *may have been down to cost primarily*, its simultaneous replacement with the preschool year provided a *dividend for government while saving heaps of money*, a scenario a core insider described as *unfortunately the way policy tends to get done around here*<sup>179</sup>. Zaharidias's (2007) emphasis on the importance of perceived public acceptability to policy proposals is illuminated through this example, as actors' emphasis on the key benefits and wide appeal of the policy solution emerged as key factors driving the pre-school initiative's introduction.

### **Comparative Global Trends**

Despite all actors' contentions that supra-national policy developments do not directly influence national policy decisions, several actors, nonetheless acknowledged the *influence of the international environment on the Irish government* and the political motivation comparative international developments potentially provide to inspire national political action. Specifically, international comparator reports that are widely available within the public domain and bring Ireland's *performance in terms of education very much to the fore* and *get media attention and attention by educationalists and by the DES* were perceived to intensify political pressures for action in neglected or weaker policy domains<sup>180</sup>. In particular, actors made reference to the impact of the comparative OECD *Starting Strong Reviews*<sup>181</sup> and the UNICEF (2008) report which ranked Ireland *bottom out of 25 countries* in early childhood services<sup>182</sup>. Insiders highlighted the usefulness of such reports as a policy advocacy *tool to bring about policy change* given their capacity to heighten attention to policy issues and increase public policy debate<sup>183</sup>. In elaborating on the usefulness of these reports as advocacy tools, this same peripheral insider described how *it is worth a lot*

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<sup>178</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>179</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>180</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>181</sup> Core and peripheral insider narratives

<sup>182</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>183</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

to be able to highlight Ireland's trailing comparative position as it elevates awareness to policy issues that have been more effectively addressed elsewhere<sup>184</sup>. A specialist insider similarly highlighted how an intensified awareness of Ireland's comparative position generates motivation for policy action:

*In terms of the national agenda ... if you were to look at Ireland in terms of the rest of Europe, we really are doing catch up and have been for quite a while. I think it was probably getting to a point, I won't say where there was pressure, but where there was probably a greater openness ... where we knew we had neglected this area and that it was time to do something.*

The UNCRC and the monitoring procedures which form part of its ratification process were also noted as a potential catalyst for policy action in ECEC by specialist insiders and most peripheral insiders partly due, once again, to the public availability of the Committee's findings critiquing Ireland's overall performance of the implementation of the Convention. Some peripheral insiders also described how the monitoring procedures, particularly the consultation and review processes prior to the submission of country reports creates a critical and reflective policy environment where policy deficiencies and weaknesses are highlighted and analysed:

*I suppose having external monitoring bodies like the UN, the fact that we have to document clearly ... The fact that we have to do a shadow report and the fact that the state has to do a state report on what they are doing. I think this has helped us understand because we have to articulate what we do – it is being crystallised.*

Peripheral Insider

### **Summary: Policy Catalysts**

This policy catalyst organising theme described actors' perspectives on key events and processes which actors believe have provided important stimuli or triggers that have

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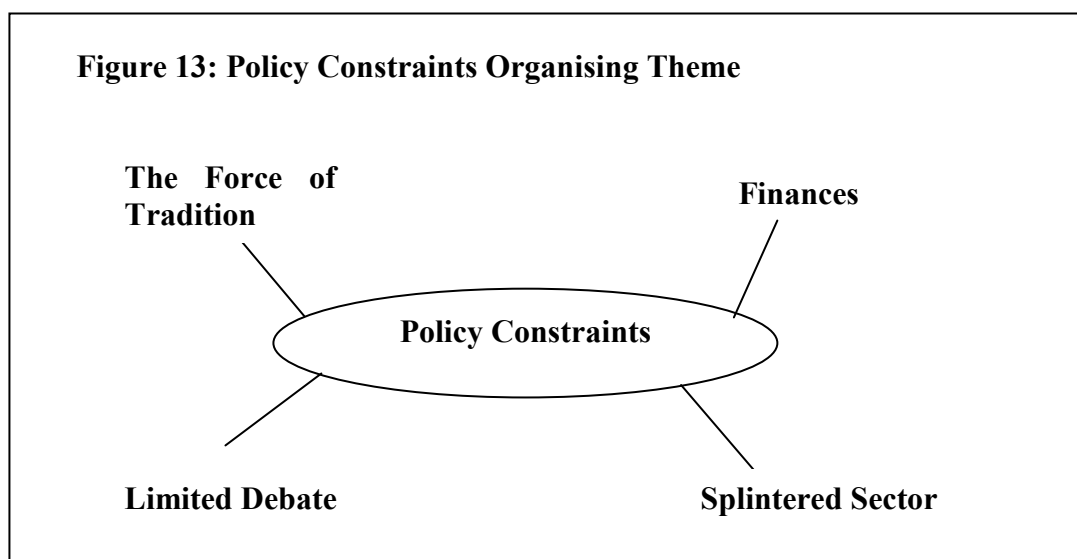
<sup>184</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

initiated or accelerated policy action within the ECEC policy domain. As all three theories of the policy process highlight, these ‘focusing’ events and the context that surround them provide vital opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to augment attention to the ECEC policy domain and increase the probability of securing policy changes (Zaharidias, 2007; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; True *et al*, 2007), a point that is corroborated by the findings of this research. Four key catalysts were identified from interview narratives and relate to the catalysing impact of the labour market; the value of early learning; financial opportunities; and comparative global trends on Irish ECEC policy development. Each of these catalysts opened ‘windows of opportunity’ for policy entrepreneurs and ECEC advocates to progress or intensify pressure for ECEC policy action (Kingdon, 1995). The constraints ECEC capacity shortages imposed for female labour market participation generated escalating public criticism as various advocacy coalitions joined forces (e.g. unions, employers, childcare providers) and demanded political responses to ‘the childcare crisis’. The force of the increased issue attention coupled with the entrepreneurial activity of core policy makers who successfully secured exogenous funding thus provided the long-awaited catalyst to generate government agreement on a course of policy action in a heretofore largely invisible, below the radar policy domain. While several actors criticised the initially narrow focus of the EOCP framework, all conceded to its usefulness in securing issue attention by shifting ECEC from its usual location within the subsystem shadows to the fore of the macro political policy agenda. The EOCP illuminates how financial opportunities provide a critical catalyst to which politicians are highly responsive. The opportunity to seize EU funds to develop the ECEC sector emerged as the pivotal trigger that secured political agreement and initiated policy action after protracted periods of policy paralysis and political deadlock. Conversely the economic crisis and the ‘window of opportunity’ the dilemma provided to review government funded initiatives ‘opened up’ the policy solution stream to a range of policy alternatives that would not have been considered in times of economic stability and culminated in the long sought after preschool initiative. The ‘value of early learning’ highlighted through the growth in evidence-based studies regarding the economic returns from ECEC investment and the series of publicly available global comparator reports on ECEC which persistently highlighted Ireland’s trailing international position supported policy-oriented learning and strengthened the advocacy campaigns of insiders calling for enhanced government intervention in ECEC.

In Ireland's case, the economic related catalysts of the labour market and finances were deemed to have a more rapid influence than the 'value of early learning' and 'global trends' which all actors felt had a more 'gradual effect' by providing 'evidence' and 'advocacy tools' for insiders in their policy advocacy work that may encourage policy-oriented learning and changes in policy beliefs over elongated time periods. This point is consistent with the hypothesis of the ACF which emphasises the need to explore the impact of policy-oriented learning over elongated time periods, given the general resistance of core beliefs and core policy beliefs to change and the resultant more gradual transformative effect of this learning on conceptualisations of policy issues and resultant policy responses (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). The variable impact of these different catalysts on the framing of policy issues and the subsequent structuring and shaping of ECEC policy responses is a point returned to and elaborated on in the next chapter.

### **Policy Constraints**

The organising theme 'policy constraints' contains findings relating to key factors which actors believe inhibit, impede or restrict ECEC policy development or progression.



Four basic sub-sets of findings, illustrated in Figure 13, emerged within the policy constraint organising theme and relate to the powerful and constraining impact of the

construct of ‘tradition’ in policy development; the encumbering effect of ‘limited debate’ which detracts political attention from the area; the constraining impact of the perceived financial costs on policy progression; and the fragmentations and ‘splinters’ within the ECEC policy subsystems which hinders and reduces collaborative pressure for strategic policy action.

### **The Constraining Force of Tradition**

Chapter Three and Chapter Six discussed the powerful and resistant force of inherited traditions in the Irish policy landscape and the difficult and challenging struggle those proponents of change encounter given the predominant political and public preference for policy persistence and continuity, particularly in policy domains that challenge traditional values and social moral order. This section elaborates on the key traditional constraints that actors believe are particularly pertinent within the ECEC policy domain and highlights how certain core beliefs and core policy beliefs (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) have constrained and buttressed ECEC policy within narrow and contracted conceptualisation boundaries. Compared to other policy spheres where it *very hard to find a value in sight*, actors highlighted how *in this particular policy scope [ECEC], more than in lots of others, a very strong value position about women and work and home represents a sort of node of value which is ...a hegemony on the actors*<sup>185</sup>. The resistance to challenge traditional constitutional interpretations regarding the subsidiary role of the state in family life has already been highlighted in the ‘constructions of childhood’ organising theme. Findings within this section further substantiate these claims by elaborating on the broader impact of traditional value and belief systems on actors’ conceptualisations of policy issues and the subsequent impact of these in policy debates and deliberations.

While all actors emphasised a very gradual erosion of the once deeply embedded patriarchal values, contending that these may not be *as strong as ten years ago*, all actors still emphasised how *despite the major change that has happened socially and economically in this country, traditional values that act as inhibitors are still quite active and are still very very strong, and still inhibit policy development in favour of young*

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<sup>185</sup> Core insider narrative

*children*<sup>186</sup>. The persistence of the socially constructed patriarchal paradigm and the resistance of policy actors to challenge the beliefs and values it enshrines emerged as a key constraint which reinforces and justifies the dominant non-interventionist policy approaches and the subsidiary role of the state in *the ECEC value-based*<sup>187</sup> domain. This shared hesitance amongst core policy makers is consistent with those arguments of historic institutionalists which emphasise the political preference to make marginal adjustments to existing policy frameworks once certain policy approaches and mechanisms have become institutionalised within the policy landscape. The reliance on cash-based policy instruments to support families rearing children and a political resistance to deviate from this long-standing traditional policy approach towards more direct forms of intervention in young children's lives frequently emerged in interview discussions on the powerful role tradition plays in policy structuring:

*I'm not sure whether politicians believe they can influence voters to understand the difference between getting your child benefit and maybe having that money directed into preschool. People may prefer to see the payment, because it has been part of our culture for so long, and it has been so generous over the last ten years and to actually try and change that is a very difficult task, so I am not sure about the political system, I think they understand it but I am not sure they are convinced that that is the direction in which to go.*

Core Insider

In part, the political tendency to respond to emerging dilemmas in staggered and conservative ways that deviated little from established policy approaches was attributed to the prevailing public attachment to old style values and policy mechanisms, such as those cash-based supports which enable private parental choice regarding child-rearing options. Thus the identification and promotion of alternative policy mechanisms emerged as a key political challenge. Institutionalised and formalised educational structures within the DES were also identified as examples of constraining traditional policy structures that impede and compound challenges in securing favour for new 'branching points' in policy

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<sup>186</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>187</sup> Core insider narrative

development that shift future courses of action onto new policy paths, given the significant disruptions such changes potentially imply (Pierson, 2003; Neuman, 2007). Past examples of failed referenda were also cited as illustrative of the difficulties politicians encounter in securing electorate support to adapt legislation and policy in response to evolving societal needs. Thus the recourse to cash payments and similarly institutionalised and accepted policy instruments (e.g. targeted additional support instruments) frequently emerged as more feasible and palatable policy responses.

Critically and importantly, while actors generally tended to attribute the constraining limitation of traditional values to sources exogenous of themselves (i.e. politicians and the public), this study's findings reveals an embedded attachment to traditional values amongst many of those policy actors included in this research study. For instance, actors' already outlined manifest acceptance of the resilient constraints of *Bunreacht na h'Eireann* illuminates the powerful adherence to and acceptance of tradition within the policy arena. The fact that only *one of fifteen* actors questioned the validity and truth of the supposed hegemonic impact of constitutional constraints as a rationale and justification for the staggered pace of ECEC policy development is also highly revealing of actors' unquestioning acceptance of the power of socially constructed traditions. Fundamentally, most actors' acceptance and lack of challenge in these instances is revealing of the extent to which tradition is embedded in actors' own personal beliefs regarding the *milk and cookies mum*<sup>188</sup> and highlights *some* actors' resistance to promote alternative forms of discourse which may challenge or undermine traditional forms of parenting. In other words, the realm of actors within the policy community who '*cannot and won't distinguish between ... the woman who minds her own child ... and the woman who chooses to go out to work and pay someone else...*'<sup>189</sup> extends beyond politicians and incorporates a much wider range of policy makers themselves (core policy makers and insiders). One core policy maker's own reflections of the changing nature of childhood illuminates the 'the gravitational pull' (Bown *et al*, 2011) of tradition and its powerful force and potential influential capacity to structure and shape *all* actors' behaviour in policy development work regardless of their categorisation (e.g. core policy maker, core insider, politician) within policy making:

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<sup>188</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>189</sup> Core policy maker narrative

*... we lived in a time when children were seen and not heard, but we had a glorious childhood. The country was our oyster. We had freedom ... Children nowadays have lost what we had ... the amount of personal space and unorganised space in children's life nowadays is very minimal. I think in lots of areas, children have lost a lot. ... If kids get handed from here to here to here, the amount of free space is so small.*

### **The Implications of Limited Finances**

Interview narratives reveal how in the absence of explicit legislative rights to ECEC, political commitment to the domain is highly vulnerable to economic fluctuations, which either accentuate or minimise its perceived importance (depending on its status on the political agenda) and in turn, the financial investment it receives. As a non-legislated entitlement, ECEC and inter-related government resourcing responsibilities are subject to interpretation, a political liberty, which several actors felt impeded proper resourcing and progressive policy developments as competing interests debate to reinforce or contest its value and location in policy priorities. For instance, interview findings have already highlighted the *resistant* nature of the Department of Finance to publicly financing ECEC, and likened calls for subsidisation and resourcing to *a red rag to a bull* in the Department *because of economics and costs*<sup>190</sup>. The Department was regarded as particularly influential and powerful in times of economic crisis thus rapidly diminishing *the prospects of a big win [enhanced resourcing] in this area*<sup>191</sup>. In highlighting how financial anxieties deter political commitment to policy domains, one specialist insider described how one of *the first reports ... to put a cost on childcare* [Report of the Commission of the Family, 1995] caused *absolute panic because they were talking about hundreds of millions* and argued that this *scared* politicians and reinforced their resistance to engagement within this *very new* policy sphere. Anxieties regarding the potential financial ramifications a children's rights referendum might incur for the state, as discussed previously, provides

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<sup>190</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>191</sup> Peripheral insider narrative



another example of the constraining impact of financial resourcing concerns in policy deliberation and development.

Somewhat ironically, it was the economic crisis which provided the first operational subsidy to *all* ECEC providers *via* funding provisions under the preschool initiative<sup>192</sup>. However, insiders expressed concern regarding the increasing reliance of the ECEC sector on dwindling exchequer resources, particularly in the context of its vulnerable policy status (i.e. provision is not legislated for). One peripheral insider highlighted how the pre-school initiative *is part of the proposed McCarthy cuts*<sup>193</sup> as part of the growing numbers of government funded services which are susceptible to reduced resourcing and cut-backs. Even where existing provisions are *left in place* (e.g. preschool initiative), a number of insiders expressed concern that *their budgets may be reduced so much that they have no meaning*<sup>194</sup>.

The implications of resourcing deficiencies on ECEC quality were highlighted by all insiders during interviews. For instance, one peripheral insider emphasised how *the lack of investment in community childcare escaped under the radar because FAS provided CE Schemes across the country* thus providing a *cheap* response to high remuneration costs. These insiders emphasised how the majority of women availing of CE schemes comprise *more or less pretty disadvantaged women with poor education* and emphasised the negative implications of this resourcing strategy in terms of quality ECEC. *All* insiders emphasised how government prioritisation of cost curtailment in policy development guided the structuring of policies in ways which prioritised the minimisation of costs and contributed to the prevailing quality problems and variable standards within the sector, a point elaborated on in the next chapter.

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<sup>192</sup> Previous funding initiatives had provided operational funding towards staffing costs in community settings but private ECEC institutions were excluded from accessing these financial aids.

<sup>193</sup> The Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (also known as *An Bord Snip Nua*) was an advisory committee, headed by economist Colm McCarthy, established by the Irish government in 2008 to recommend cuts in public spending. It issued its findings, commonly known as the McCarthy report, on 16 July 2009.

<sup>194</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

### **Limited Debate Limits Action**

A small number of narratives, primarily those of core policy makers and specialist insiders, highlighted the *very important location* of public debate in policy making and emphasised how the limited public debate on ECEC in Ireland consistently constrained the level of attention the ECEC issue received at a political level, which in turn constrained the pace of policy action within the policy domain. One core policy maker contended that *public debate* superseded debate within *government departments* as a means to attract political attention and policy action, a point they attributed to the highly *reactive* nature of Irish policy making where *politics [and politicians] follow* and are guided by *the public debate*<sup>195</sup>. These narratives reveal a perceived negative correlation between the poor levels of public debate and the pace of policy change or progression. Another core policy maker emphasised how *while there has been change, in many ways, the pace of change has not been as fast as you would see in other countries... and the public debate is not of an equally high quality*. While the pre-decision stage of policy making revealed extensive and ongoing discussions and deliberations, findings highlight how most of this debate takes place ‘behind closed doors’ away from the public eye, meaning policy attention to and debate of ECEC and its inter-related issues most consistently occurs within the policy subsystem and below the political attention radar. These narratives emphasise how the very limited public debate reinforces ECEC’s vulnerable and tenuous status as a policy agenda item and are revealing of a possible contributory factor to ECEC’s ever-shifting issue attention status in political and policy making fora. Given how *politics follow people*, in the absence of sufficient public salience to a policy concern, politicians will avoid action and focus on those more pressing concerns above the policy radar where high levels of public attention demand policy responses, as illuminated by one core policy maker’s statement:

*The childcare sector was always there and lobbying, but they never got any money. ... The climate wasn’t right, nobody was engaging in the debate and there was no pressure in the system to engage in the debate .... Women were at home minding their children and we weren’t aware of the importance of the preschool year. ...*

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<sup>195</sup> Core policy maker narrative

*Governments follow the people, governments don't necessarily tend to lead, so it is only when there is a gradual build up of evidence and lobbying and all that, that action takes place.*

Corroborating these arguments, all three theories of the policy process emphasise issue attention as a crucial condition for policy change as the complexity of the environment and the cognitive limitations of the decision maker impose selective bias on the flow of information and the attention different policy issues attract (Wildavsky, 1964).

Fundamentally, core policy makers noted how limited debate impeded public understanding, particularly parental understanding regarding the value of ECEC and fuelled *a very strong view that childcare was one thing and early education another*. Some core policy makers contended that, while shifts in understanding regarding the integrated nature of care and education have *occurred in government buildings*, this same shift had not occurred *in public debate* and consequentially suggested that *maybe the real location for change has to be with public debate and the understanding of parents*. Increased parental understanding, which occurs through increased public salience of an issue, therefore emerged as an important component of policy making which raises awareness levels, results in more informed debate and generates pressure for action *as the people* demand more from the politicians.

The framing of debate and its capacity to fortress policy responses was clearly illuminated through actor discussions on the 'childcare crisis'. Highlighting how the childcare debate was very much framed as an 'employment' and 'woman's' issue, several actors emphasised the resulting and inter-linked policy responses which centred on solutions to both of these high attention issues. Several insiders claimed that the *lack of focus on the child* within these debates led to children *slipping under the radar* and as a consequence, the policy responses which ensued focused on the needs of the highly visible and debated components (women and work). Such arguments crystallise the importance of structured public debate, not only to ensure ongoing attention to ECEC as a policy issue, but to ensure attention to *all* the integrated components which ECEC encompasses.

### **Splintered ECEC Policy Community**

The final policy constraint that emerged from interview narratives centred on the splinters and divisions within the ECEC policy community and the impact of different advocacy coalitions' competing perspectives and strategy approaches on ECEC policy development. Two key 'splinters' or fractures within the policy community emerged prominently from interview narratives. The first relates to the differential resources of different policy actors which fortify advantage for some actors (and their policy agendas) over others in policy deliberations and the second relates to the lack of cohesiveness and variable levels of engagement of different sets of policy actors within the policy community which exacerbates the frailties and capacities of certain advocacy coalitions. Findings in this section have a strong resonance with those issues highlighted within the ACF which emphasise how differential resources of different advocacy coalitions effect relations of power and fortify advantage for better resourced advocacy coalitions in policy deliberations and outcomes (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

### ***Conflicting Perspectives: The Role and Purpose of ECEC***

As with many social policies, ECEC involves numerous actors across many intersecting policy domains [education, economics, psychology, gender equality etc] which in this instance, contributes to substantial variation in perspectives and opinions regarding the perceived role, purpose and priorities of ECEC policy. The implications of this competition and conflict across the policy subsystem emerged prominently in *all* actor narratives. Variations in perspectives were primarily influenced by actor prioritisation of policy paradigms most relevant to their own institutional objectives and the simultaneous relegation and suppression of those least relevant to their institution's goals. For instance, core insiders and core policy makers focused most pertinently on quality ECEC which supported parental employment and children's educational development while the majority of specialist and peripheral insiders focused most pertinently on children's rights and the development of policy which encapsulates and supports the agentic nature of the child. Thus the conceptualisations of core policy makers and core insiders primarily mirror the

typical neoliberal conceptualisation of ECEC whilst the conceptualisations of specialist and peripheral insiders mirror those constructs incorporated within the new sociology of childhood, as outlined in Chapter Two.

The penetrative impact of competing actor agendas was most clearly illuminated through actors' own personal reflections on *the early stages, when ECEC was becoming an issue*. One peripheral insider described how debate and attention at that time was *flip-flopping between an ECEC issue focus and a childcare issue focus* where the final political decision and selected policy approach rested on *whichever lobby group could shout the loudest*. As the childcare crisis escalated and secured sufficient public salience to demand political action, narratives highlight how existing sectoral divisions, resultant from differential actor resources and competing agendas formed fundamental determinants in the outcome of the battle. The entrance of employers and unions to the debate at this time was deemed fundamental in the framing of the policy issue and the responding courses of action adopted by government. In reflecting on the impact of competing agendas during the 'childcare crisis debate', one specialist insider highlighted how government aimed to appease as many actor demands as possible through selection of the least contentious and most neutral solution for all:

*... They [government] certainly, they threw a lot of money at it [childcare], but they threw it in a way that suggested just get the voters off our backs. Get the unions off our back – create the places, give the money to buy the places and they assumed that there was this kind of ability out there to deliver because I think there was a very poor understanding of what ECEC really is. ...*

The *reactive* nature of the government response augmented by the absence of a coherent and consensual underpinning policy framework and the absence of in-depth levels of public debate resulted in a haphazard political focus which sought to maximise consensus and appease as many actors as possible, particularly those with greatest resources [representative base, economic power] who had become increasingly vocal and active in the debate. One insider argued that government's response to *IBEC and ICTU* demands, despite their *rather limited understanding around why ECEC is important* and their failure

to take the specialist academics and practitioners into account ultimately led to the failure of the EOCP as an effective policy response. As policy solutions prioritised the *minding of kids* through the accelerated development of *places and numbers*, it failed to consider the many important aspects of ECEC that related experts, rather than employers and unions, understood<sup>196</sup>.

These findings reveal anecdotal but important evidence regarding the power of insider resources and the variable strategies of actors in influencing policy decisions. The cascading interest of groups and the unidimensional ‘care’ focus of core insider advocates during this ‘window of opportunity’ matched politicians’ goals and agendas, which coupled with these actors’ economic resources and representative strength was perceived by some specialist and peripheral insiders to result in a political over-weighting of their (core insider) policy demands. After all, prior to this, peripheral insiders had *always* been *there and lobbying, but they never got any money because the climate wasn’t right, nobody was engaging in the debate and there was no pressure in the system to engage in the debate*<sup>197</sup>.

Government’s failure to fully capitalise on existent national expertise repeatedly emerged as a core criticism in interview narratives and one which has had fundamental implications in terms of policy design and outcomes:

*There has been a lack of expertise and ... informed policy development. ... For example, there should be academics involved in policy making, there should be economists involved, and that should be part of the culture, whereas that doesn’t exist and then at the political level what you have is career politicians ... You don’t have this broad spectrum of people at political level and it becomes very difficult to do any kind of innovative policy because of that structure. ... And I am not sure, whether because of that ... the decisions made are made with all of the facts behind them.*

Core Insider

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<sup>196</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>197</sup> Core policy maker narrative

### ***Frailties in Sector Cohesion – Differential Resources and Variable Commitment***

The dominance of economic and employment imperatives rather than child imperatives in early policy discussions and the greater resources of those actors advocating for ECEC as an employment support reveals how competition and divisions and the variable influential strength of different advocacy coalitions affect the focus and attention accorded to different aspects of the policy domain. Findings highlight how competing agendas, variable levels of resources and differences in advocacy approaches, particularly those relating to time investment and representative power create splinters within the policy community thus weakening its cohesive strength and collaborative power to create and maintain ‘pressure in the system’. The fact that the *sector hasn’t come together coherently* was highlighted as one of *the biggest restrictions*, and one which some insiders felt they *themselves have to answer for*<sup>198</sup>.

In particular, a number of peripheral insiders described specialist academics as a potentially powerful resource in policy advocacy – due to their technical expertise - and criticised their *limited* engagement in policy debates. Some peripheral insiders described academics’ approach to advocacy work as inflexible and *elitist* and argued that their *esoteric* engagement in policy advocacy delimited and weakened the advocacy powers of peripheral insiders whose advocacy campaigns could potentially gain from their contributions and greater involvement:

*They [academics] do not make good advocates. They like to debate in specialist academic forums and often there isn’t anybody from policy there. ... I think they can still be extremely important for people like us - in terms of getting people to think outside the box on different issues - but I think they must offer solutions as well as categorise where the problem is, critiquing it in theory ... that makes no difference to policy makers who want a broad thrust of an argument. ... Their work is often too esoteric and too far removed from what the reality of policy making is.*

Peripheral Insider

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<sup>198</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

While there was some acknowledgement of *individual academic figures ploughing that furrow [the value of ECEC] when nobody much was listening*<sup>199</sup>, peripheral insiders argued that their fractured engagement in policy debates and lack of synchronicity and assimilation with the policy community reduced the sector's capacity to *raise the necessary intellectual arguments*<sup>200</sup> thus weakening the collaborative advocacy strength of the policy community.

Integrated with these arguments regarding variable strategies and policy community frailties was the lack of *clear leadership amongst those who could be agents of change* which was also perceived as a weakness limiting the sectoral cohesion required to *lift and improve the quality of public debate*<sup>201</sup>. The *weakness* of certain advocacy coalitions' *ability to influence policy debate* was emphasised by a number of peripheral insiders and the role effective leadership could play in this regard was highlighted by a small number of actors<sup>202</sup>:

*I think that there is no clear leadership among those who could be agents of change, and who could lift and improve the quality of that public debate. I think that all of us who try to do that are quite weak ... You know it is quite difficult to identify leadership amongst them*

Specialist Insider

### **Summary: Policy Constraints**

Policy constraints describe those factors or processes which policy actors believe inhibit or impede policy development by creating traps and barriers which actors struggle to surmount in their efforts to progress ECEC policy development. Given Ireland's historic lack of intervention in ECEC and its ongoing 'trailing' position in international comparator reports, actor perspectives on the various constraining structures and processes which impede policy action reveal important challenges and battles for the policy community.

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<sup>199</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>200</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>201</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>202</sup> Peripheral insider narrative



The power of established cultural and policy traditions emerged as an especially authoritative and prohibitive policy constraint and actor resistance and reluctance to challenge or deviate from the dominant socially constructed traditional values and institutionalised policy approaches reinforced its constraining influence in policy development. The persistence of the socially constructed patriarchal paradigm and the resistance of policy actors to challenge the beliefs and values it enshrines emerged as a key factor which constrained policy development particularly in the early days of the EOCP, until sufficient policy-oriented learning had accumulated for a shift in ECEC conceptualisations to emerge. Descriptions of ECEC as a traditional ‘value-based’ policy domain and several actors own reluctance to challenge these traditional values reveal similar perspectives to those expressed regarding ‘constructions of childhood’ and a persistent awareness of the values and traditions inherent within the policy domain reinforce caution and incremental policy development. Once again, the powerful role finances play in policy development was highlighted by actors who believe the potential cost of direct delivery of ECEC deterred government and the Department of Finance in particular from greater engagement within the policy domain. The narrowing and delimiting impact of poor and inadequate resourcing within the sector emerged as a constraint impeding quality ECEC provision, a point elaborated upon in the next chapter. The limited public debate also emerged as a key constraint which inhibits and reduces policy attention to ECEC. Given how ‘politics follow people’, core policy makers emphasised how the general paucity of public debate detracted political attention from the policy area as pressure for action rarely reached the necessary attention levels to compel political responses. The final constraint and one which interlinks and suppresses amelioration of the other three constraints relates to that of the fragmentation and divisions within the policy community. Competing agendas, alternative priorities and differential levels of actor engagement in policy advocacy work emerged as key within this theme. Findings reveal how the various splinters these divisions create weaken the collective strength and voice of the policy community and dissipate and erode the potential source of power that collaboration, consensus and cohesion provide. Splinters within the policy community emerged as a particular source of frustration for peripheral insiders, who emphasised how increased engagement from specialist insiders, particularly those within

the academic community, could potentially strengthen their advocacy work and increase their influential potential on policy deliberations and debates.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the second thematic network of this study *Shaping ECEC Policy: Constructions, Catalysts & Constraints* and considered how dominant constructions of childhood coupled with wider environmental catalysts and constraints impact on the construction of ECEC policy and the adopted courses of policy action. James and James (2004) contend that it is primarily through the framing of social policy and the regulatory arm of the law that culturally prescribed differences and particularities come to be given a solid grounding in society. The dominant structuring of a policy concern and its target population and the associated images it elicits influences the way a problem is defined, the types of solutions offered and the policy responses proposed (Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Schneider *et al*, 2007). Constructions of childhood are therefore revealing of the perceived value and purpose of ECEC policy in the lives of young children and accordingly drive and justify policy approaches selected. The persistent construction of children *within* the family – rather than as an entity in their own right – protects and reinforces the predominant needs-based framework and the subsidiary role adopted by the state in ECEC policy. The reliance on legislative frameworks to guide and govern the state's roles in the lives of children is illustrative of a statutory resistance to consider counter discourses and alternative values which may require expansion of their role beyond the current subsidiary one enshrined within legislative interpretations of the Constitution. This narrow and delimiting construction of childhood and children not only drives, but also justifies, the predominantly paternalistic approaches in child-related policy and intersects with persistent traditional socio-cultural values discussed in the policy constraints organising theme. This context suppresses space for critical thinking and alternative voices (beyond the needs-based discourse) as the singular dominant discourse remains largely uncontested and becomes further ingrained and institutionalised within political and policy systems. Moss (2007b: 18) highlights how in the absence of dialogue and debate ‘mainstream’ policy and practice are isolated from an important source of new and different thought with policy makers having little or no awareness of a growing movement that questions much of what

they take (or have been advised to take) for granted'. The will to silence voices opposing the dominant paradigm and discourse emerged consistently throughout interviews. Rights are therefore denied crucial 'space' in policy debate – they are resisted and opposed – thus strengthening and reinforcing the institutionalisation of the needs-based paradigm and its inter-linked policy approaches.

The policy catalysts organising theme explored actors perspectives on the impact of key policy events and processes which they believe have triggered and stimulated ECEC policy development. All actors agreed that four catalysts, the labour market, the 'value' of ECEC, exchequer finances and comparative global trends acted as key stimuli or triggers to secure policy action in ECEC by raising issue attention to ECEC and providing important 'windows of opportunity' to develop and advance ECEC policy. However and critically, the stimuli or trigger leading to policy action proved vital in the framing of the policy issue and to a large extent, set the parameters of the policy debate within which the policy issues was conceptualised and associated policy options were considered and debated. Thus policy catalysts have an inherent capacity to lead to the prioritisation of certain aspects of a policy issue, usually the more urgent and pressing concerns that drove the issue attention in the first place whilst simultaneously effacing alternative, but equally important aspects of the policy domain. For instance, all actors agreed that the 'labour market' catalyst stimulated the rapid growth of 'childcare' capacity but primarily concentrated on the labour market needs of mothers and failed to given due attention to children's needs and rights in the construction of policy responses. The EOCP was also highlighted as a highly powerful resource which generated policy action in a previously deadlocked policy area, although once again, the narrow parameters of the Programme resulted in a very specific framing of the policy issue and a relatively unidimensional capacity focused policy initiative developed. While the 'value of early learning' and comparative 'global trends' catalysts were also identified as important in generating policy activity, their effect was considered to be more gradual and seeping than those of the 'labour market' and 'finances'. This is consistent with concepts articulated in the ACF which stipulated the elongated time periods required for policy-oriented learning to effect policy change as transformation in the generally resistant core beliefs and core policy beliefs are required as part of the process.

Ultimately though, these two catalysts were deemed important in increasing political and public support for ECEC.

Conversely, narratives also revealed a number of ‘policy constraints’ which actors believe inhibit and restrict ECEC policy development and pose fundamental challenges to innovative policy design or deviations from already institutionalised policy approaches. Policy constraints – which have exacerbated political deadlock and policy paralysis - emerge as one of the primary motivators for a political preference towards ‘slow and incremental’ policy making, already highlighted in the ‘modus operandi’ organising theme. Chapter Three’s identification of policy persistence and continuity as the dominant and preferred policy approach in Irish policy making was corroborated by actor’s discussions of the powerful impact of tradition in policy development. The fact that inherited traditions were defended and reinforced by several actors’ shared viewpoints regarding the primacy of the family and the subsidiary role of the state in family life further reinforced the tendency towards incremental policy design. A failure of the policy community to challenge long established traditions – either through public debate or cohesive policy advocacy – reinforces the political tendency towards ‘safe’ and ‘neutral’ policy solutions. Core policy makers’ emphasis on the importance of public debate to generate policy action is highly revealing of the conflicts and contradictions within the policy environment given the limitations the already discussed behavioural codes of privileged access impose on actors’ capacities to challenge or publicly criticise adopted policy responses. The policy community’s failure to challenge these silencing codes by engaging in public debate that escalates issue attention to ECEC also results from fractures and splinters within the policy community which erode the potentially cohesive strength and power of a unified and integrated policy community. A number of insiders argued that the splintered policy community, comprised of divisive advocacy coalitions with competing aims and objectives and variable levels of technical expertise, resources and commitment to the policy area exacerbates conflict and competition thus weakening and eroding the overall strength and power of the collective to bring about policy change.

Combined, these constraints and the challenges and barriers they create, weaken the likelihood of altering policy paths as conflict, uncertainty and competition predominate and

reduce political will to engage in a conflict-filled domain where inconsistent issue attention exacerbates its vulnerable status on the policy agenda. Given the contentious and ambiguous status of the ECEC policy domain, slow and incremental policy design, primarily concentrating on aspects of the policy domain where issue attention and consensus are greatest (e.g. childcare capacity, educational supports for disadvantaged children) are thus favoured and prioritised.

The final findings chapter discusses the implications of findings from this and the preceding chapter in greater detail.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CRITIQUING ECEC POLICY

#### THE IMPACT OF THE POLICY PROCESS & POLICY CONTEXT

##### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the final thematic network of this study, *Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Context*<sup>203</sup>. It explores actors' perspectives on how the policy making process [Thematic Network 1] and the environmental context [Thematic Network 2] have impacted on the shaping and structuring of ECEC policy issues and adopted policy responses. An exploration of the actors' perspectives on final ECEC policy decisions is revealing of the longer term social and political consequences of policy making processes and contextual environmental features as they institutionalise contexts for future policy debates and decisions and reveal immediate and longer term consequences for children.

Thematic Network 3 [Figure 14] illustrates the basic and organising themes which emerged from interview narratives pertaining to '*Critiquing ECEC Policy – The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Contexts*'. Two key organising themes emerged from thematic network analysis and relate to:

- Positive Policy Results; and
- Outstanding Policy Weaknesses.

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<sup>203</sup> Further elaboration on the development of Thematic Network Three is provided in Appendix I.

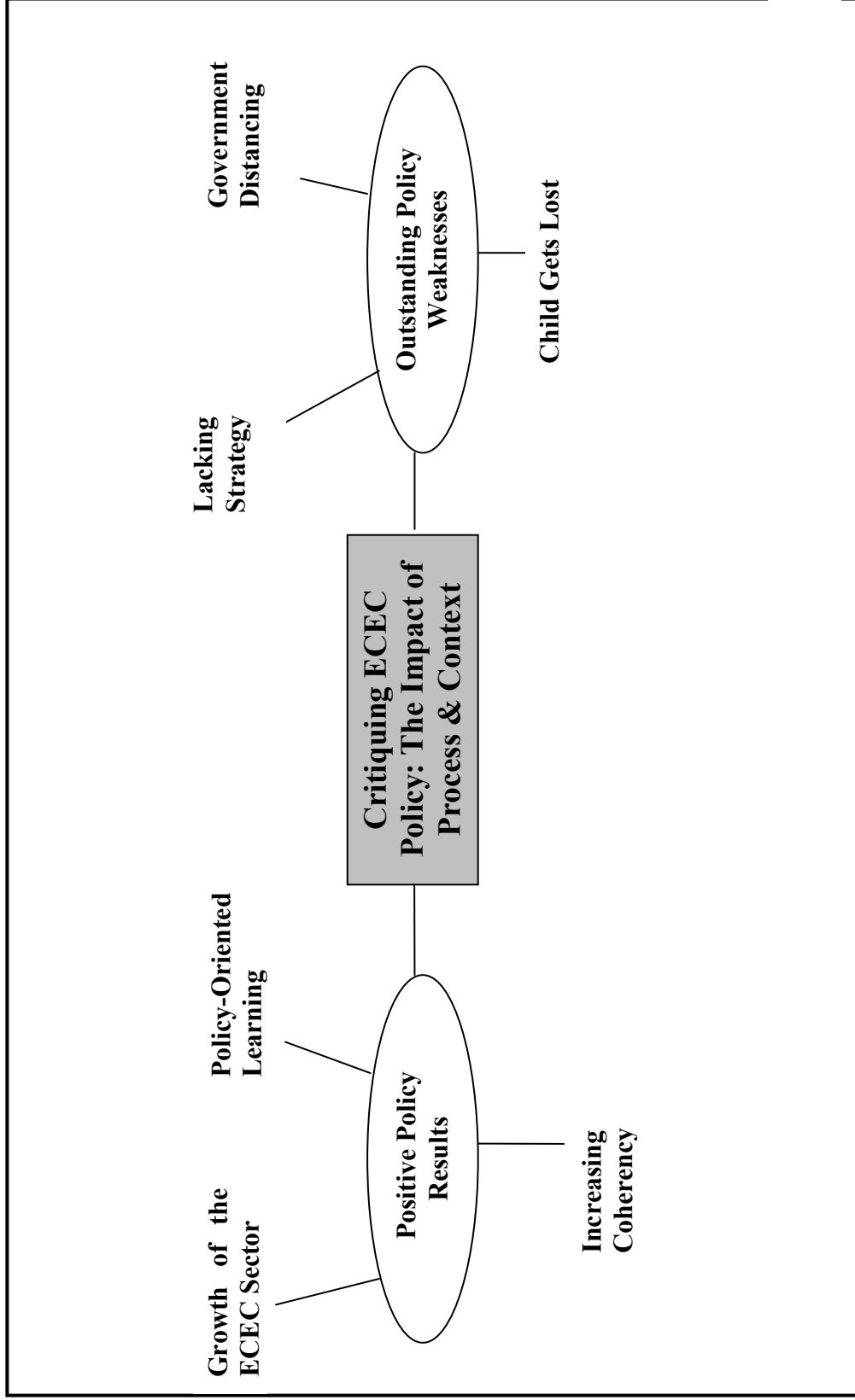
The first organising theme, ‘positive policy results’ describes actors’ perspectives on the positive ECEC policy and practice developments that have occurred as a result of key policy decisions between 2000 and 2010. Basic sub-themes emerging within this organising theme relate to the ‘growth of the ECEC sector’, ‘policy-oriented learning’ and ‘increasing [sectoral] coherency’. Conversely, the second organising theme, ‘outstanding policy weaknesses’ discusses actors’ perspectives on persistent challenges which as of yet, have been inadequately addressed by policy decisions and initiatives and therefore represent issues in need of redress or resolve. Basic sub-themes within this organising theme relate to the ‘lack of strategy’, ‘government distancing’ and the ‘child getting lost’ in ECEC policy.

All positive and negative aspects of policy approaches are inextricably linked to and affected by the broader policy making process [Thematic Network 1] and the wider environmental context [Thematic Network 2]. Positive policy results and outstanding policy weaknesses are therefore considered and discussed within this broader holistic context to illuminate the inter-twined and cumulative effect of policy making processes and environmental contexts on policy design and outcome. In exploring the strengths and outstanding weaknesses in policy design, these sections also incorporate actors’ perspectives on various strategies and approaches which they deem essential to the design of policies which position children as *central* rather than *peripheral*<sup>204</sup> in policy development.

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<sup>204</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

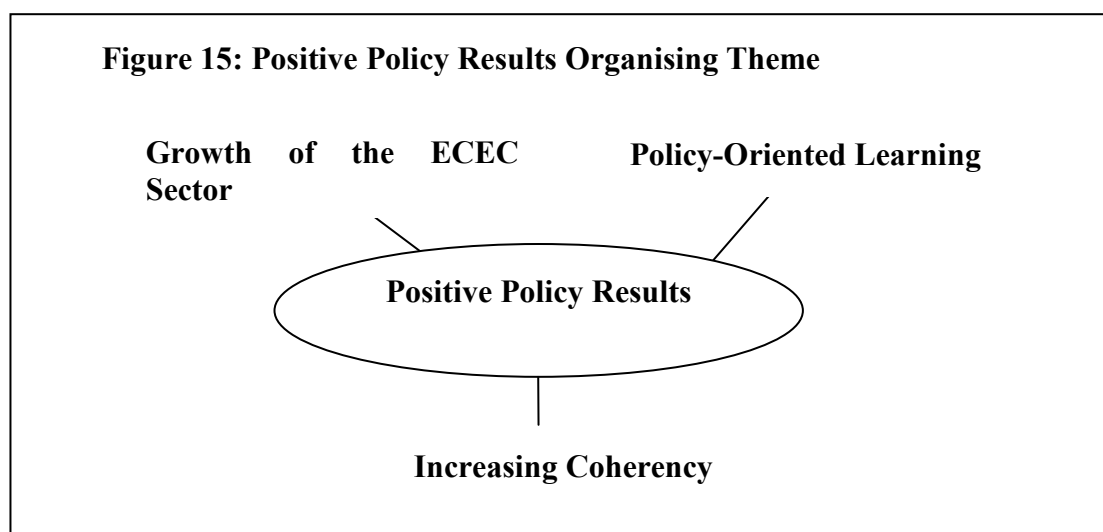
**Figure 14: Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of Policy Process and Policy Context [Thematic Network 3]**





### **Positive Policy Results**

During interview discussions, all actors acknowledged a number of positive policy developments which they believe have improved and enhanced ECEC policy and practice, particularly in the 2000 – 2010 period. These are illustrated in Figure 15.



The three basic ‘positive’ themes which dominated discussions relate to the growth and development of the ECEC sector at a policy and practice level; the development of policy-oriented learning and its impact on ECEC policy construction; and the increasing coherency amongst certain cohorts of the ECEC policy subsystem that has facilitated more cohesive approaches to ECEC policy development.

#### **Growth of the ECEC Sector**

All actors emphasised how increased infrastructural development and capacity growth within the sector initiated through the EOCP and progressed through the NCIP led to the *increasing visibility*<sup>205</sup> of the ECEC sector in the Irish political and policy landscape and as a consequence, contributed to the increased professionalization and improved advocacy strength of the NCVO sector as its membership base grew in scale.

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<sup>205</sup> Peripheral Insider Narrative

Up to the initiation of the EOCP, actors described an *informal cloak and dagger [ECEC] world*<sup>206</sup> where the majority of provision was small scale, part-time, not-for-profit, with a small commercial presence and a number of community based services. Actors described the *fragmented* nature of the sector, characterised by variable costs and standards and geographically uneven levels of provision. An image of a highly neglected, largely invisible sector which had failed to attract political interest and policy attention emerged from narratives and is consistent with the ECEC policy literature relating to that time (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005, NWCI, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Bradley & Hayes, 2009). The opportunity to resolve many of these sectoral ills came through the EOCP in 2000 which provided the largest-ever investment in the sector and triggered substantial and significant development. A core policy maker described the EOCP as being ... *about a service*. It aimed to improve *childcare provision*, particularly *in certain parts of the country where there had been no childcare provision at all*<sup>207</sup>. All actors highlighted the impact of the EOCP in developing a childcare sector which finally began to *resemble a collection, if not a system of scale*<sup>208</sup> and acknowledged the Programme's influence in transforming the previously sparse and barren childcare landscape.

Despite the Programme's necessarily narrow focus on gender equality initiatives and the resultant narrow parameters within which ECEC was conceptualised, actors still acknowledged the *very important platform* the EOCP provided *to get childcare up off the ground*<sup>209</sup> and the many positive developments, direct and indirect which occurred as a result of the Programme. All actors emphasised the impact of the Programme *in building a base or a system of scale*<sup>210</sup> which subsequently attracted wider political and policy attention. Most actors highlighted how systems of scale generate opportunities for learning through the intensified attention developing policy spheres accumulate as more *sophisticated* understandings of various *aspects of ECEC* are brought out of the shadows and *to the fore*<sup>211</sup>. As ECEC moved out of the *cloak and dagger* and largely invisible terrain it had long occupied, services became *more open and transparent* as those providing services *did not want to go back* to the informal world they formerly

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<sup>206</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>207</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>208</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>209</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>210</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>211</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

inhabited<sup>212</sup>. This mirrors those arguments of the PET, which emphasise how new policy images attract increased attention as a growing range of previously excluded actors seek to become involved (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008).

The importance of the additional funding streams under the programme<sup>213</sup> were also highlighted by a number of actors for their contribution to *improving quality through better buildings, equipment and staffing grants to community providers*. The improvements in co-ordinated provision elicited through the Programme *via* the establishment of the County and City Childcare Committees was also highlighted as was the opportunity the creation of these committees structures provided to enhance quality and development work through the provision of localised advisory supports and training opportunities. The fact that both the EOCP and the NCIP provided operational grant aid to key NCVOs to sustain and expand their development and support work was highlighted as a further dimension supporting quality improvements within the sector. Direct funding to NCVOs was deemed particularly important to facilitate their development of in-house expertise through the up-skilling of their staff, many of whom availed of *degrees and further education* which facilitated their role in wider sectoral training and advanced the *quality agenda* at local and national level<sup>214</sup>.

### **Policy-Oriented Learning**

The policy-oriented learning that developed across the policy community as the ECEC sector developed was highlighted by all actors as a key positive development. As highlighted by one core policy maker – and corroborated by others – prior to the onset of the EOCP, *the government didn't know anything about this [ECEC] until learning accumulated*. Several insiders also emphasised how a *sophisticated understanding of ECEC was lacking* prior to the intensified policy attention to the sector from 2000<sup>215</sup>. The significant work undertaken by government and other key policy actors within the field to acquire these more sophisticated levels of knowledge was deemed pivotal to supporting and enhancing a more co-ordinated and informed approach to ECEC policy development. For instance, government established agencies, such as the *CECDE*

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<sup>212</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>213</sup> EOCP funding streams are outlined in Appendix A.

<sup>214</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>215</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*whose remit incorporated research and development* were highlighted by actors for the positive role they played in *opening up* the policy arena to alternative and *broader influences* and for *generating expertise* which could then be used to *influence nationally* at the political level<sup>216</sup>. These arguments are synonymous with those of the Advocacy Coalition Framework that highlight the influential capacity of policy-oriented learning within and across policy subsystems to gradually instigate policy change and development as reflection and revision of core beliefs and core policy beliefs accumulate and contribute to the reconceptualisation of policy issues (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

The positive influence of government partnerships with exogenous agencies, such as *Atlantic Philanthropies* was also highlighted by insiders for its potential to illuminate alternative policy approaches *by bringing a certain international perspective to the relationship* in their work with government<sup>217</sup>. Exposure to alternative knowledges and visions was important in supporting a more nuanced understanding of the myriad components which comprise ECEC, and potentially opening up space for debate and consideration of alternative policy approaches and responses. While many of the findings from this study highlight a general resistance to the erosion of the dominant and embedded policy paradigms, discussions on the impact of knowledge highlighted a key, albeit select, number of areas where progress has been made. In reflecting on the positive gains from enhanced knowledge development, a number of actors highlighted how increasingly progressive understandings and conceptualisations of ECEC amongst the policy community have, in turn, supported a more cohesive and learned policy approach in ECEC:

*We have, over the last decade, increasingly seen a change in the way early education and childcare are conceptualised, much less, as two different concepts, but more as one and the same, thereby realising the multiple objectives that can be achieved through policy and practice in that area. ... I see an accelerating shift in understanding, rather than something that supports economic development and gender equality, towards a service for children. ... This is a new objective that is now being realised by the government.*

Core Policy Maker

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<sup>216</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>217</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

Interview narratives reveal how the traditional prominence of ‘childcare’ in policy discourse and its associated focus on custodial care has largely receded in favour of more sophisticated discussions regarding the intertwined nature of care and education and the *impossibility of separating*<sup>218</sup> these constructs which collaboratively lead to developmental gains in the lives of young children. Insiders emphasised how policy-oriented learning and associated shifts in discourses form key enablers in significant transformations such as these, where original and more confined constructions of policy issues erode as new understandings and a redefinition of policy issues takes place.

The plethora of government commissioned reports on various aspects of ECEC, endogenous and exogenous government consultation and government partnerships with a range of outside bodies (e.g. the CECDE and Atlantic Philanthropies) coupled with international research and global policy instruments, such as the UNCRC, were all deemed fruitful in facilitating a richer and more learned environment to draw upon in policy discussions and development. One specialist insider in reflecting on *how policy development has changed in the last couple of decades*, emphasised *just some of the many contemporary sources we can now draw on*, such as *the National Children’s Strategy* and *the UNCRC*, all of which contribute to an *increasingly rich knowledge sphere* and potentially support better informed and more comprehensive policy reflection and development.

At a practice level too peripheral insiders whose role incorporates training, emphasised how increasing flexibility and diversity of training programmes available to up-skill the sector maximise on-the-ground exposure to new knowledge development and enhance ECEC at practice level:

*We found it very hard to get into mainstream training, back around ten years ago. It was hard knocking on the door and to be told ‘no you can’t do it’. But we ... have worked very hard at trying to support and upskill the sector.... When you show the way of flexibility, the training sector became more flexible. We ... would feel that in many ways at this stage we are kind of a conduit between research and practice. Most of our staff have grown over the years ...*

Peripheral Insider

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<sup>218</sup> Core policy maker narrative

### **Increasing Coherency**

The third basic sub-set of findings within the ‘positive policy results’ organising theme relate to actors’ perspectives on the growing coherency, particularly at the macro political level, in what was once considered a highly *fragmented* and disjointed policy domain. At a macro political institutional level, core policy makers acknowledged *government recognition that something better needed to be done in order to get different parts of different departments to work together*<sup>219</sup> and described the establishment of the OMCYA as a key government response to resolve these issues:

*I certainly think it [the OMCYA] has worked fairly well and I think it certainly can be a real challenge getting different parts of different departments to work together .... Getting [the Department of] Health, Justice [DJELR] and Education [DES] to work together seems to be working relatively well*

Core Policy Maker

The improved system cohesion resulting from the establishment of the OMCYA structure was highlighted as a key strength and significant policy development of relevance to ECEC by all core policy makers who unanimously agreed that co-location facilitates the development of collaborative, strategic cross-departmental, joined-up policy in ECEC:

*So we [OMCYA] are responsible on behalf of the Irish government – basically we hold that policy area [ECEC] in relation to our own Department [DHC] in particular and in relation to the Department of Education, the Early Years Unit is now here with us, but it is still Education but in order to get us working more strategically together, they are up the corridor here with us. ... So part of the task we are doing ... is to sort of corral all the bits that are out there, in outer space and make them all relevant to the needs of children at the end of the day.*

Core Policy Maker

The facilitative capacity of co-location to enhance greater and collaborative strategic development was also acknowledged by several insiders. For instance, one peripheral

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<sup>219</sup> Core policy maker narrative

insider discussed how the OMCYA is *now beginning to bear fruit in terms of the potential co-location can deliver* and suggested a greater clarity in terms of the *threading together of the various threads in relation to what appears might be a good, well formed, well backed ... early years sector in Ireland that has a validation framework, that has a curriculum, that rewards expertise and training that has universal access for children*. Several insiders corroborated this point and emphasised how co-location had added greater depth and cross-departmental cohesion to policy development work which coupled with the *inclusion of a research division within the Office* had proved *important in focusing government* and accentuating issue attention to child-related policy areas<sup>220</sup>.

Improved cohesion and enhanced strategic collaboration *outside* of government was also emphasised by a number of actors. A specialist insider described *an incremental change* which led to *a lot of steps being taken by a lot of different people* within the wider policy community in *increasing harmony as a whole lot of individual pieces began to be laid down and the policy message began to become the same*. Prior to these developments, this specialist insider emphasised how *all of the players were very disparate on the ground* due to the scarce and limited *funding out there* which caused a *lot of divisiveness and fighting* across the ECEC sector.

Combined with enhanced NCVO professionalization and national policy-oriented learning, increasingly collaborative consultative structures linking policy and practice, initiated through EU projects, such as OMNA<sup>221</sup> and more latterly the EOCP and NCIP, were deemed influential in strengthening the synchronicity and advocacy strength of the policy community:

*... The OMNA project brought in this huge consultative group nationally and that was a great forum and ... important to...a sector that had no money really. ... We became involved in the NCCS<sup>222</sup> ... which had a huge consultative group and that*

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<sup>220</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>221</sup> OMNA (1995 – 1999) was an EU [New Opportunities for Women] funded early childhood training project established in the Dublin Institute of Technology which ‘offered an opportunity for the [ECEC] sector to come together and review childcare services, identify training requirements and develop ultimately a model framework for training and education for early years staff’ (Hayes, 2006: 4).

<sup>222</sup> National Childcare Strategy

*notion of the consultative group also fed into the CECDE<sup>223</sup> and ... the NCCA<sup>224</sup>.  
... So the sector if you like as a cohesive whole ... happened as a consequence of  
the funding from the EU in many ways.*

Specialist Insider

While these positive steps towards collaboration and cohesion were acknowledged by all actors and deemed important in strengthening ECEC policy advocacy, the majority of actors nonetheless highlighted ongoing splinters and cohesive weaknesses and frailties that continue to permeate the policy community. These have been addressed in the ‘conflict-filled’ findings within the ‘decision-making’ organising themes and in the ‘splintered sector’ theme in the preceding chapter. However, given this section’s particular emphasis on the improved cohesiveness at macro political level as a result of the establishment of the OMCYA, it is important to acknowledge the simultaneous reservations a number of these same insiders expressed regarding outstanding fragmentations and divisions that are in need of resolve to solidify cohesion within the Office:

*There are so many departments and units feeding into it. Now I would ... imagine that the OMCYA in time will play a role in mapping that policy but it goes back to my point about trying to work out the interface between the Department and Units. I think until that is done, I am not sure that we can have a very clear, coherent, national policy. I think that as long as you continue to have multiple Departments and Units, it will fragment and add complexity to the job of developing definitive policy around the early years.*

Specialist Insider

### **Summary: Positive Policy Developments**

Despite the complexities of the policy environment and the ongoing contestations, competition, challenges and struggles highlighted in the previous chapters, this organising theme reveals a number of areas where actors believe positive policy developments have occurred which have enhanced and improved ECEC policy and

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<sup>223</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

<sup>224</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

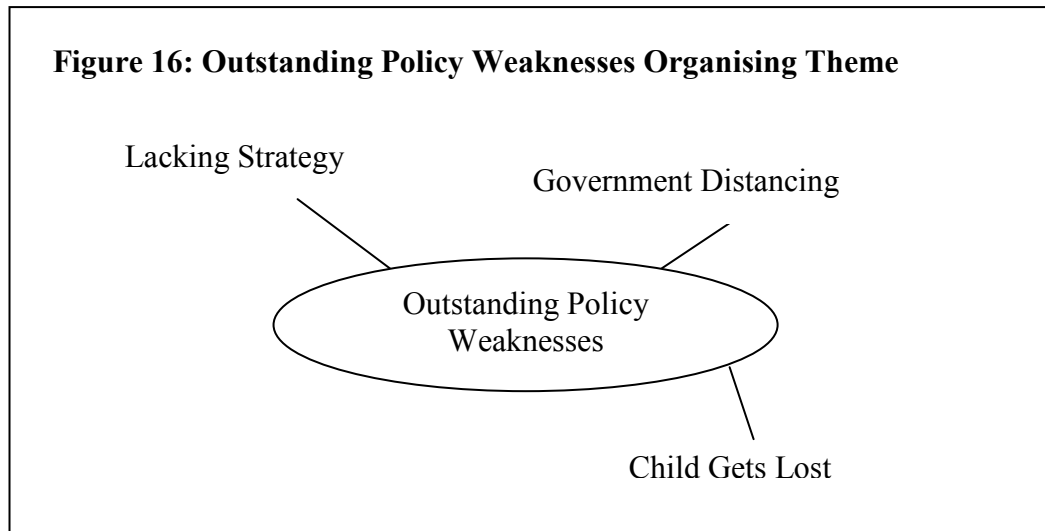


practice. Positive developments primarily clustered around the increasing visibility of the sector and the resultant developments and progress which has occurred as a sector of scale has developed. Cumulative positive developments emerging from the development of a ‘sector of scale’ primarily related to the increased political and policy attention to ECEC and the springboard sectoral expansion provided to focus on and progress other inter-related aspects of ECEC which were insufficiently addressed through the EOCP’s capacity driven focus (e.g. quality, curriculum etc).

Actors highlighted the significant policy-oriented learning which has occurred and emphasised how the resultant enhanced national expertise provided a key resource to support progressive policy and practice developments. This policy-oriented learning was deemed central in increasing the attention given to more comprehensive analysis of ECEC (e.g. quality and curriculum rather than capacity) which contributed to the initiation of various initiatives (e.g. quality and curriculum frameworks) that progress and enhance ECEC policy and practice, although all actors acknowledged ongoing and outstanding challenges in this area. Its role in mobilising a redefinition from ‘childcare’ to ‘ECEC’ and the ‘more sophisticated understanding’ of the interlinked nature of education and care were also highlighted as a key positive development resulting from policy-oriented learning. Improved co-ordination structures such as the OMCYA at national level and increasing cohesion amongst the on-the-ground NCVOs was also noted as important in strengthening insider relationships with core policy makers and the advocacy strength of NCVOs. Thus all actors acknowledged key areas where significant policy developments had occurred over the decade from 2000 to 2010 which strengthened and enhanced certain aspects of the ECEC sector. However, despite these positive developments and bearing in mind Ireland’s laggard and ‘trailing’ ECEC position at the onset of these developments, actors still highlighted a number of substantial and ongoing concerns and outstanding challenges, which are discussed in the succeeding ‘outstanding policy weaknesses’ organising theme.

### **Outstanding Policy Weaknesses**

Interview narratives revealed a number of persistent and critical outstanding policy weaknesses which continue to present policy challenges and inhibit the development of a quality ECEC system. These themes are illustrated in Figure 16.



Three basic sub-themes pertaining to ‘outstanding policy weaknesses’ emerged from interview narratives and relate to the overall lack of a cohesive national strategic plan debated and agreed by all actors across the different policy subsystems to underpin ECEC policy development; the negative connotations that result from ‘government distancing’ at a policy and practice level; and the cumulative impact of these outstanding weaknesses coupled with the implications from broader policy making processes and contextual organising themes which results in the ‘the child getting lost’ in ECEC policy development and decisions.

### **Policy Lacking Strategy**

All insiders described the absence of a nationally agreed and adhered to strategic plan which incorporates clear objectives and matching ‘action plans’ in policy development as an outstanding policy weakness that exacerbates the highly reactive and expedient nature of policy making processes in ECEC. Actors emphasised the critical importance of such a strategy to provide a firm grounding and underpin ECEC policy. While certain strategic plans have been produced (e.g. *The National Children’s Strategy*; *The National Childcare Strategy*), insiders expressed ambivalence regarding the extent to which these plans are followed and highlighted the national tendency to *cherry pick*<sup>225</sup> the least contentious recommendations and proposals within strategy documents and

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<sup>225</sup> Core insider narrative

sideline those which are likely to cause conflict or difficulty. One core policy maker described how:

*We are actually very good at drafting policy but I think we have an idea that policy is more like literature. ... You cannot really expect that policy is necessarily implemented – it is enough to make the policy and it is itself admired as a piece of literature. ... You can list hundreds ... of pieces of policy in this country that are just not implemented ... and after ten years or so another piece of policy comes on top of it. It's just, if you like, a dishonest way of making policy.*

This lack of a grounding strategy led insiders to characterise the overall approach to policy development and decisions as *expedient*<sup>226</sup>, *capricious*<sup>227</sup>, *pragmatic*<sup>228</sup>, *opportunistic*<sup>229</sup>, *patchy*<sup>230</sup> and *ambivalent*<sup>231</sup>. For instance, one specialist insider argued that when *there was a need to develop childcare infrastructure*, opportunities to accomplish this *presented themselves* through the EOCP which *were taken, then a rationale was spun around it later on, rather than the other way round*. Narratives thus highlight how the predominant reliance on opportune moments to secure policy change frequently results in poorly thought-out and disconnected policy decisions where resolved issues are swiftly replaced by new ones. For instance, while the EOCP may have provided an effective solution to the capacity shortages, its prioritisation of provision elements, *without parallel embedded initiatives to train staff to work in those places to ensure quality of service for children and families* reflected a *very utilitarian, mechanistic view of policy*<sup>232</sup>.

While core policy makers argued that the lack of policy debate constrained policy action, specialist insiders argued that the lack of *theoretically founded debate about early childhood policy* inhibited the development of a *good conceptually led* strategy that encapsulated *all* the multi-dimensional components integral to quality ECEC. Consistent with this, Press & Skattebol (2007: 186) highlight how a pragmatic

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<sup>226</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>227</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>228</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>229</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>230</sup> Core and peripheral insider narrative

<sup>231</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>232</sup> Specialist Insider narrative

environment which fails to debate pivotal questions around what ‘we regard as a good world for children’ and ‘how this might be played out in early childhood settings’ impedes the development of a clear political framework for policy action and renders children vulnerable. The second specialist insider corroborated the concerns of the first regarding the negative impact of the absence of a coherent and good conceptually led strategy on policy development:

*We don't have a clear sense of where we are going in policy for young children. I think it all stems from there. I mean, I think even the free preschool year, while it really is great ... I think there is still a lot of working out to be done around that. ... I'm not sure that we have gotten to a point where we are very clear on what it is that we as a nation want for young children and why we want it. We are still reacting as opposed to pro-acting. And in saying that, you seize opportunities when they are there.*

Specialist Insider

In the absence of an adhered to national strategy, availing of *opportunities when they are there*, most often in crisis moments and voids of uncertainty, reinforces the established pattern of *ad hoc* and pragmatic policy-making. A second example of opportunistic policy which emerged prominently during interviews relates to the expedient introduction of the preschool year at a time of severe economic crisis. The drive to claw-back exchequer costs triggered the sudden introduction of the *cheaper preschool year*, yet the sudden and rapid pace at which it was introduced, and the predominant focus on the economic savings the initiative promised, once again resulted in failure adequately to address all the multi-dimensional components pertinent to quality preschool policy initiatives prior to its introduction. Even a core policy maker conceded to *dipping our toe in the water of something that we really are not 100% sure of how it will go* and highlighted the many related *challenges that may need to be addressed over the years to come* in response to the preschool initiative.

Discussions on the lack of strategy and possible mechanisms to resolve the difficulties the lack of a coherent strategy creates clustered around three subsets of findings. The first relates to the impact of the elitist policy decision making processes which exclude those responsible for implementation from policy decisions and thus exacerbate

difficulties in effectively translating policy to practice; the second relates to the general paucity of policy evaluation work to examine the effectiveness of policy initiatives in meeting their proposed policy goals; and the final subset of findings relates to the importance of the development of a policy framework comprised of high and low level principles to enhance the development of a coherent ECEC strategy.

### ***Difficulties Translating Policy to Practice***

Insiders highlighted how the lack of an agreed and adhered to underpinning strategy, coupled with elitist decision-making systems (from which insiders are excluded) exacerbates fragmented policy responses which fail adequately to capture, address and respond to implementation issues and concerns prior to policy decision announcements. As one peripheral insider stated:

*They [core policy makers] pull these [peripheral insiders] in to help design the policy. Then they push you out and someone takes it over centrally but you are the people having to implement it and you are the people who can see what is wrong with it.*

Insiders, particularly peripheral insiders, whose role usually incorporates policy implementation, highlighted the frequency with which implementation difficulties arise in response to national policy initiatives. They attributed this to core policy makers' failures to collaboratively engage with insiders during the decision-making stages where they could *tease out*<sup>233</sup> the various challenges by assessing the feasibility of different aspects of proposals prior to their introduction. In reflecting on the preschool policy initiative, several actors emphasised the significant outstanding issues in need of redress (e.g. curriculum, staffing and resourcing requirements) at the time of the public announcement of the preschool initiative. In exploring the *way it has happened*, insiders argued that various structures and processes, such as *Siolta* and *Aistear*<sup>234</sup> should have been in place *first, because there are going to be the children attending centres where there isn't a curriculum*<sup>235</sup>. One peripheral insider described *Siolta* as a

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<sup>233</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>234</sup> *Siolta* is the National Quality Framework and *Aistear* is the National Curriculum Framework in early childhood education and care (see Chapter Three).

<sup>235</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*terrific document, a bit of a Rolls Royce of a document* but highlighted how *it has never been piloted on the ground*, and emphasised how despite the lack of piloting and assessment of on-the-ground effectiveness, implementation of *Siolta* is a prerequisite to receipt of statutory subsidisation under the preschool initiative. Peripheral insiders expressed their frustration at the consistent production of policy documents and proposals that exist *literally only at policy level, they are not implemented and they have never been piloted on the ground*<sup>236</sup>. The CCSS provided another example of the implications and difficulties posed by the disconnect between policy and practice. One peripheral insider described the initial implementation phase of this initiative as a ‘*complete disaster*’ and highlighted how it ‘*was introduced without being thought out in terms of link ups between databases – who’s on social welfare and who’s not – and caused a lot of anxiety ... hysteria at the time*’. More effective consultation, *even confidential meetings with the key players* in the implementation sphere *to thrash out potential problems* was highlighted as a possible mechanism to curtail the implementation issues the omnipresent *ad hoc* and disjointed system currently generates<sup>237</sup>.

### ***Poor Evaluative Structures***

The majority of insiders criticised the general absence of evaluative and monitoring structures that examine and assess whether policies the government *are setting are effective or not*<sup>238</sup>. One core insider described the lack of evaluative structures within the preschool initiative as *deeply flawed* and representative of a fundamental lacuna in policy planning. This insider questioned whether the absence of evaluative structures was *a deliberate decision or just how policy is made in Ireland* and emphasised the importance of *tracking policy to see whether it has any benefits or not*. There was a consensus that reactive based policies introduced in opportune moments, which are not subsequently tracked or monitored, reinforce and intensify ineffective policy planning and development. In certain instances specific policy instruments particularly cash-based payments to parents were deemed to exacerbate difficulties in implementing monitoring or evaluative techniques. The ECS was frequently highlighted as an example in this regard:

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<sup>236</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>237</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>238</sup> Core insider narrative

*I thought as a policy initiative it was devoid of strategy. Its objective was to do more of the same, to throw money where money wasn't necessary. Its strength was that it gave families money – but ... its outcomes had nothing to do with childcare or early years. ... There was no thought to let's see how people are using this, what the outcomes will be. It cost a fortune and nobody cared. As a policy initiative it was an appalling waste of money.*

Peripheral Insider

The preschool initiative was also criticised for its lack of inter-linked evaluative criteria. Several insiders emphasised how the preschool funding *should be contingent on the fact that say within five years ... if your facility doesn't have these education standards, the appropriate professional staff, you will no longer get the funding*<sup>239</sup>. While conceding to longer time frames than ideally optimal, there was consensus that it is integral to start moving policy *in this direction* by establishing conditional criteria and monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective use of exchequer funding and to maximise the likely attainment of policy goals. One peripheral insider also highlighted the importance of such structures for parents *who want to know ... they are leaving their child in a good place*, and argued that this was where *the politicians haven't plugged in*<sup>240</sup>.

### ***Resolving Lack of Strategy: Clear, Agreed High & Low Level Principles***

Several insiders proposed a number of possible solutions to remedy the issues arising from the current absence of a strategic plan. These proposals primarily clustered around the construction of a two-tier policy framework to support policy planning and implementation. The first or higher level tier centred on the construction of a set of high level principles that support an *educated, thoughtful* conceptually led policy frame where the resultant stipulated values and overarching goals provide a foundation which could underpin *the whole of a policy rather than bits of a policy*<sup>241</sup>. The second tier of the framework relates to *low level, or micro principles* which enable attainment of the high level principles through identification of clear implementation and operational structures including stipulated evaluative components which *orients the work* of

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<sup>239</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>240</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>241</sup> Specialist insider narrative

practitioners in settings<sup>242</sup>.

In discussing high level principles, the need for a clear, robust, democratically agreed framework of national values, expectations and objectives was highlighted as pivotal. This requires extensive reflection and debate regarding how ECEC policy and practice should be constructed and the values and principles which should inform it. As highlighted by one peripheral insider, the considerations in its construction are manifold:

*It would be essential to have the policy ... You have to spell out what a child's right to education is. In an ideal world, what is that? Is that supports from my parents when I am born as a child? That I have rights through my parents to be supported and stimulated? That there is some kind of a service for me, as a child in my home? I mean it is a very tricky one, the parents are the primary educators – but what supports the parents to support you? And what age then? And you can only go by scientific research, around what age is good for a child to start preschool or ECEC, maybe three, maybe you can push it down.*

Peripheral Insider

Critically, insiders' opinions on composite components required in the high level framework were diverse and conflicted as much as they conflated. For instance, some stipulated a statutory *right to ECEC* as the essential starting point, while others focused on appropriate developmental supports *after* children access ECEC. Some contended that there should *absolutely be a right to [access] ECEC*<sup>243</sup> while others contended that they were not that *strong about rights in that sense* [i.e. a legislated right of access] and instead focused on children's rights *to have their developmental requirements met once they are in ECEC services*<sup>244</sup>. One peripheral insider suggested that this variation in perspectives regarding a legislated right of access resulted from anxiety amongst certain actors regarding the *resourcing implications* such a stipulation might imply. They argued that *government are afraid of saying every child has the right to early education because that means you have to have the resources and you have to say what is this*

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<sup>242</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>243</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>244</sup> Specialist insider narrative



*education? What age? When does it happen? What level or support? etc.*<sup>245</sup>

These variations in perspectives regarding high level principles illuminates the need for ideological debate across intersecting policy domains and in the wider public arena so that clear articulation of the purpose and objectives of early childhood institutions is attained. The most frequently cited principles for inclusion in the ideological framework related to: an integrated framework that recognises the *strengths of both education and care and brings these together*<sup>246</sup>; the valuing of ECEC as a *public good rather than a private commodity*<sup>247</sup>; clearly *structured departmental responsibilities*<sup>248</sup>; a curriculum that defines *broad values and goals*<sup>249</sup>; and a *well qualified and remunerated* work force<sup>250</sup>.

Low level principles were highlighted as essential criteria to ensue the attainment of high level principles, as it is these that provide operational and implementation guidelines to ensure synchronicity between policy and practice. Without sufficient guidelines and depth of detail, a number of insiders argued that the fractured, disjointed relationship between policy (theory) and practice (implementation) persists. One peripheral insider emphasised the need to set standards through exploration and identification of structures and processes that *would give expression to children's rights in early years education and care* in terms of *what a child needs to see in front of him and around him to vindicate that right [staff, standards, inspections etc], to have that right as distinct from it just being in language.*

The contextually dynamic nature of high and low level principles and the associated need to review such principles and ensure they *evolve* in tandem with knowledge and practice was also emphasised by a number of insiders. Interlinked with this was the need for in-built monitoring systems to encourage evaluation and reflection so that frameworks and principles evolve as knowledge and learning accumulate:

*I would think that in a sense, high level principles ...wouldn't be that difficult to*

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<sup>245</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>246</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>247</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>248</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>249</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>250</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

*agree ... things like person-centred services, autonomy are relatively easy to state. ...The principle of most importance in my view, once the high level principles don't really stunt us - is this principle of deep monitoring... The goal of that is at the very minimum an assurance thing ... that there is continuous improvement, so the service that is ECD<sup>251</sup> is continuously refreshed and revived upwards... It is much more dynamic ... so I think that principle of freedom to innovate combined with a duty to measure and report would be absolutely fundamental.*

Core Insider

### **Governance and Government 'Distancing': Mixed Provision Model Challenges**

The 'government distancing' theme describes actors' perspectives on government's use of and dependence on private sector actors to assume responsibility for the provision and delivery of ECEC on behalf of government, a policy approach that is typically synonymous with the neoliberal governance approaches discussed earlier in this thesis (Bennett, 2006; Goodfellow, 2005; Moss, 2009; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005).

One core insider expressed *grave concern with the way policy has gone in the area [ECEC] and criticised how government's sub-contracting out of ECEC to the private sector has effectively privatised the whole area and represents a way to try and do it [deliver ECEC] on the cheap* which has resulted in *all sorts of standards, and a confused policy approach with questionable monitoring* of services. The majority of insiders expressed concerns regarding the *very variable standards*<sup>252</sup> in settings. The minimal regulations imposed on settings combined with the *huge underdevelopment of the whole employment and career structure which has a knock-on effect on quality of service* consistently emerged as a source of concern and a primary criticism of government distancing<sup>253</sup>. A second core insider argued that *we really weren't going to address quality without addressing the whole issue of careers structures and terms and conditions and so on in the industry per se* and expressed concerns regarding the limited government regulation around recruitment, remuneration and retention policies:

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<sup>251</sup> Early Childhood Development

<sup>252</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>253</sup> Core insider narrative

*The staffing ... is a mess. The rate of leakage ... into other areas of employment is huge. Because why would you stay if you have no prospect of promotion or better terms and conditions. ... You have people providing it, whose main objective is to make a profit ... but I don't think we should treat ECEC as a business. ... It is a public good. ... I'm sure there are plenty of good private providers, but ultimately they have to look at the bottom line and decide if it is worth their while to do it.*

The difficulties in sustaining quality services in the context of inadequate government resourcing was emphasised by a number of actors. For instance, government's usage of the CE schemes as a policy mechanism to resolve staffing shortages and curtail costs was criticised for its negative implications on quality within ECEC settings:

*There was this drive, purely for economic reasons, where we need more people working in childcare ... These people have no jobs [CE Scheme participants]. Put them into childcare. And these are the people who are now going to be rolling out a pre-school curriculum. Now this is a generalisation again but they are not teachers, to begin with they had poor employment prospects ... and I don't think that the preschool curriculum is workable if that is the basis on which it is going to be rolled out. ... You know if you are going to do something properly in relation to education, they ... must have the qualifications.*

The criticisms emerging from narratives regarding the impact of government distancing in this study are consistent with key concerns reported by countries where market-based approaches predominate and primarily centre on the incompatibility of market-based principles and their profit-oriented imperatives and quality of experiences for children (Moss, 2007; OECD, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). For instance, a study by Osgood (2004: 16) on the impact of entrepreneurial approaches in UK ECEC settings reported how 'the insular and competitive behaviour [providers] felt compelled to adhere to sat uncomfortably with the commitment to nurturing children' and noted

how setting managers 'were resistant to viewing children as financial commodities but this became inevitable when seeking to make a profit'<sup>254</sup>.

### ***An Extra Layer of Bargaining***

Narratives reveal how government distancing produces an extra layer of bargaining and negotiations as an inter-dependent relationship is created between government actors and private providers. Anecdotal evidence emerged from core policy maker and peripheral insider narratives regarding the negotiation and compromise group-government dependencies sometimes elicit in the policy implementation (rather than development) stage. In certain instances, core policy makers conceded to a downward dilution of administrative and regulatory requirements to curtail provider costs and ensure their ongoing participation in service delivery. This was most evident in discussions regarding the preschool initiative. One core policy maker's statement illustrates their initial perceived power in these negotiations given their capacity to withdraw funding provisions if providers fail to adhere to the various stipulations core policy makers set as criteria for receipt of funding:

*We know that New Zealand has a similar scheme in ECCE [sic]... and we don't want to end up where they have ended up, where they didn't manage to hold the line on the supplement and the whole scheme got diluted. ... We are saying if we don't hold the line [core policy makers], parents will no longer get a free year, and providers ...will pocket the subsidy and charge parents what they were going to charge them in the first place and parents are back in a worse place than where they started.*

Core Policy Maker

Yet despite this core policy maker's assertion regarding the lack of leeway for negotiation on subsidy rates and the threatened withdrawal of the scheme if providers fail to adhere to the criteria, the power of a disenfranchised sector and government desire to keep providers on board to deliver ECEC on their behalf illustrates how outside-party dependency forces by-directional flexibility and compromise to maintain the symbiotic relationship:

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<sup>254</sup> Core insider narrative

*What we are trying to do is find a way and manage it [the preschool scheme]. You have to start from where you are, and if someone is paying €120 per week for a preschool ... We are saying this is what you get €64 for [the agreed flat rate]. If you have an additional dance class and swimming, and you give them three meals a day, where we are only asking that they give a snack, so as long as parents have a choice, of just availing of the preschool bit ... We are trying to find solutions like that. ... but ... New Zealand would say they ... diluted the scheme and have no control over it as far as they are concerned, and they ended up where they did not want to go, because they gave in to the people who were charging.*

Core Policy Maker

This same core policy maker's elaboration on the outcome of negotiations with private providers contrasts with the authoritative tone of their former statement regarding their capacity to *hold the line* and dictate the terms of subsidisation. It is revealing of the reality of bargaining in government distancing relationships and illuminates how pressure from the implementing party can dilute quality criteria and standards as services battle for compromise to ensure service sustainability and profit margins. Indeed one core policy maker, while arguing that these *groups [peripheral insiders] lack any defined role in policy making* reflected on the *many examples where recipients of policy resist the implementation* and acknowledged how it can be quite a successful strategy and at times *very influential*. Further evidence of negotiation and bargaining is illuminated through one peripheral insider's discussions of how *they [core policy makers] would have liked a Level 6 for the leaders [of preschools]*, who then elaborated to emphasise how *you can't go in looking for that straight away, so now it is a Level 5*<sup>255</sup>.

Critically, these discussions with a small number of peripheral insiders and core policy makers provide some anecdotal evidence regarding the possible 'longer term carrot' peripheral insiders accrue as a result of their insider relationships with core policy makers. Importantly, these same insiders, just like all the others in this study, felt they lacked any influential capacity in policy development and decision-making processes, but their narratives reveal some bargaining strengths *post* policy decisions. This

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<sup>255</sup> The National Qualifications Framework, distinguishing qualification levels is provided in Appendix J.

bargaining strength was in evidence in instances where policy proposals had not been *teased out* with providers at the policy decision making stage and where government subsequently relied upon these same actors to ensure policy delivery on their behalf. Critically, this negotiative capacity was confined to those insiders who represented policy providers [i.e. policy implementers] and was only in evidence *post* policy decisions when their implementation support was required. This finding intertwines with the discussion of the power of actor resources outlined in the pre-decision organising theme and illuminates why core policy makers identify ‘implementation power’ as a valuable resource they seek when ascribing actors with insider status. It is also revealing of the implications of the growth in ‘contract culture’ as group/government bargaining and negotiation results in the prioritisation of members’ demands [i.e. private providers] and relegates attention from children.

### **Child Gets Lost**

The most fundamental cumulative policy weakness that emerged from interview narratives relates to the persistent subjugation of children in ECEC policy decisions as many *indirect factors drive the focus and result in ECEC policy decisions that are not always coming from a perspective of what is good for children*<sup>256</sup>. Mayall (2000) highlights how a failure to assess how policy proposals directly impact on children silences the child’s voice in policy design and leads to questions regarding whose voices are heard and prioritised in policy making. This study’s narratives corroborate these arguments and reveal how the amalgamation of competing catalysts, widespread conflict at the decision-making sphere of policy making and the impact of the dominant *modus operandi* in the absence of a clearly agreed high and low level framework frequently result in the child *‘getting lost’*<sup>257</sup> in policy design. Discussions on the constructions of childhood revealed how the penetrative resistance to challenges to the dominant needs-based constructions of childhood which permeate the policy arena entrap policy actors within a prohibitively narrow and restrictive policy frame when conceptualising and constructing child-related policy proposals. These findings highlighted how a legislative and policy failure to extricate children, conceptually, from parents and family relegates the focus from children as the competing needs of ‘the

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<sup>256</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>257</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

other' competently vocal citizens take precedence. As one peripheral insider highlights:

*In an ideal world we would be saying there should be a right to this and that should be set down. I think we are light years from that. . . . Obviously, there are issues around quality, there are issues around access, there are issues that it needs to be from the perspective of the child and what is beneficial to the child rather than the broader issues.*

Peripheral Insider

The fact that ECEC policy has been primarily driven through exogenous catalysts (e.g. labour market need, economic crisis) relegates children, and their needs and rights in policy solutions to the periphery as the competing drivers which pushed the policy issue above the policy radar are prioritised in issue attention processing. Actors acknowledged how competing drivers frequently render children invisible as policy responses centre on identification of appropriate responses to resolve immediate pressures in the public system created through adult demands and adult needs. For instance, catalysts triggering the initial political focus on childcare *were labour market driven and centred on the needs of the workforce and not particularly the needs of children*<sup>258</sup>. While improved sectoral visibility through the EOCP may have generated attention to the operational (rather than provision) components of ECEC (e.g. equitable access and quality), this emerged as a *knock-on* effect of sectoral developments, rather than a primary policy focus in its own right. For instance, one specialist insider described how, *from a rights perspective, the EOCP initiative may have meant that more children had access to those opportunities in early years but in terms of the quality of what they were accessing ... there was much less focus on it*<sup>259</sup>.

While insiders criticised government failure to forefront the needs of children – as opposed to the labour market - in policy design, core policy makers defended the approach as an essential incremental step in obtaining political approval to initiate policy action at a time of policy paralysis. Corroborating Zahardias's (2007) 'salami tactics' approach with the MST, the opportunity to seize funding and develop the sector provided a long-awaited inroad which policy makers could then utilise to gradually

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<sup>258</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>259</sup> Core policy maker narrative

develop quality services in ECEC:

*That was the driver [employment] ... but we were doing it for the best interests of children because if mothers are working, you have to put the best interests of children first. ... But then we spent the time getting attacked that we had no interest in children. I mean that is the way life works, it is absolute rubbish, but if we had put in a proposal [to the EU Equality Funding Initiative] based around the best interests of children, we would have disqualified ourselves ... Basically we took a long term view, better have money in the sector than no money.*

Core Policy Maker

Government distancing reduces government responsibility and authority in policy delivery and emerged as an austere barrier to positioning the child to the fore in policy making. Profit-making imperatives and private sector providers' focus on cost curtailment to sustain service viability prove highly incompatible and contradictory to child-centred imperatives, where children's needs and rights, rather than profit, are centre-most in service design and delivery. Operating on the private market implies that providers *ultimately have to look at the bottom line and decide if it is worth their while to do it [deliver ECEC]*<sup>260</sup>. One core insider described government distancing as *a mistake in that we would have very much preferred a publicly provided service that had children at the centre rather than sub-contracting it out to the private sphere.*

The emphasis on the primacy of market forces is reflective of neoliberal approaches to policy making, 'where commitment to consumer choice, competitiveness, profit maximization, and a downsizing of government's role' are 'favoured as the bases for policy decisions' (Sumsion, 2006: 101). Interviews highlighted the many negative implications a reliance on private sector delivery implies in terms of lost benefits to children. It reinforces the bargaining and brokerage role of the state, as government seeks to appease competing actors' agendas while upholding market principles to sustain its sub-contraction of ECEC delivery to the private sector. It also reinforces the construction of ECEC as a 'business' as profit-imperatives are prioritised, as illuminated through once peripheral insider's reflection on the replacement of the staffing grant to community providers with the means-tested CCSS:

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<sup>260</sup> Core insider narrative



*I mean what was introduced for example, did not suit services – the amount of administrative issues it brought up was enormous ... and I think that was a huge change and I think it was interesting to see that all of the opposition that was being voiced was from service providers who weren't voicing their opposition on the basis of the impact it would have on children, it was the impact it would have on services.*

Peripheral Insider

Crouch (2000: 16) highlights how a consequence of a disenfranchised not-for-profit sector is the tendency for politicians to 'respond primarily to the concerns of a handful of business leaders whose special interests are allowed to be translated into public policy'. In the case of the pre-school initiative, providers objections to government's initial training Level 6 requirement and the resultant deliberation which followed resulted in a downgrading to a Level 5 requirement. Similarly, government's initial objection to any supplementary cost (even for additional services) to the capitation rate of €64 has also resulted in the adjustment of funding criteria, where providers are now entitled to charge additional fees for extra or addition programme aspects, such as a *dance class* or *swimming classes* despite the tiered market provision and social stratification alternative fees for alternative services imply.

Actors emphasised how a resistance to resolve conflict through debating 'what we as a nation want for our children' hinders a focused, coherent and strategic policy approach in ECEC. As policy attention shifts and changes, the lack of strategy and an *ad hoc*, opportunistic approach to policy making contribute to an inconsistent focus on children as ECEC is pulled and stretched in several directions without it having a firm grounding (Press & Skattebol, 2007). The reliance on opportunistic moments to initiate policy development creates uncertainty and confusion and means in certain instances, children fade completely from the policy agenda, despite substantial financial investments which supposedly target children, such as the ECS:

*The drivers were totally political [ECS]. Effect on ECEC – I mean I haven't seen any evidence that it had any impact, positive or negative on demand. It wasn't linked in any way to quality. I mean I think it set things back ... but then we got*

*the preschool year. I would have said if that had not happened ... 'My God, what are we doing?'. That [the ECS] combined with the abolition of the CECDE and all that. I mean it's hard to believe that is only a short time ago.*

Peripheral Insider

The dominant modus operandi of slow and incremental development, usually only interrupted by exploitation of trigger event moments to seek alternative policy action, overshadows the real issues in need of debate. It fails to encompass or address the necessary depth of reflection and debate required to remove ambiguity and articulate a national ideology underpinned by a clear conceptualisation of what we as a nation want for our young children. The implications of the absence of a grounded theoretical framework underpinning policy decisions exacerbates uncertainty and wavering attention to children in policy design:

*The NCIP was meant to be an absolute improvement on it [the EOCP], because they put the child at the centre, but it was very hard to see where the actual shifts were. It really was in reality. And now in turn this payment [the preschool initiative], is supposedly based on this notion, it is to enable all children irrespective to have a free preschool year, but when you look at some of the details, that we know about. Say the child must attend five days, some people are finding that a little bit didactic.*

Peripheral Insider

### ***Considering the Child in Policy Frameworks***

Much of the discussion in interviews focused, by necessity, on how conflict, competition and anxiety in the policy arena restrict consensus and coherency in ECEC policy design and result in *ad hoc*, expedient and pragmatic policy making which lack a clear structure and subsequently pay insufficient attention to children. The dominance of needs-based constructions of childhood and ECEC in the majority of interviews implied that children's rights and the possibilities for ECEC policy and practice to encapsulate those principles enshrined in the new sociology of childhood were largely invisible from a significant number of interviews, especially those of core policy makers and core insiders. However, a small number of insiders [primarily specialist

and peripheral] discussed an alternative perspective to the dominant needs-based deficit-driven model and a democratic depiction of ECEC which embraces components of the new sociology of childhood and children's rights discourse, as illustrated by one specialist insider's statement:

*From our perspective, there are multiple aspects to it [ECEC]... it goes much beyond access. It is about all children being able to participate. It is about what they get out of it as well and that is where it becomes much more difficult in terms of trying to allow indicators or descriptors. ... We want children to develop to the best of their own potential, but that then means your indicators have to be broad enough, to basically allow you to focus in on the breadth of capacity across children, but at the same time, not so broad that it becomes unhelpful to anybody. ...I think it is about being descriptive rather than prescriptive, because when you get into levels of prescription, you really are in danger of losing the rich diversity of children as a group in society and that is the real challenge.*

These discussions centred on children within settings [rather than broader policy and operational structures], and the creation of services which prioritise interaction and play that values and supports enhance children's lives in the present as citizens with rights and needs in the 'here and now':

*That we look at what it is we know from children, from their development, from the importance of the day to day, that we draw out from that, the processes that are necessary for ... well-being in children and so we look at things like the importance of inter-relationships, the importance of interaction, the critical role of play and we stop looking at it in terms of will they be better at school, will they make better employees, or will parents have enough time to get to work while somebody is minding the kids*

Specialist Insider

Similarly, one peripheral insider discussed the many quality components they believed essential in the design of child-centred ECEC setting:

*Ideally, we would have services that are not working off minimum standards. You would have buildings that are aesthetically created for children, that children have time to have reflective practice, non contact time ... that people are trained, it would be terrific if it was graduate led ... well staffed ... well remunerated. That ... reflective practice is ... in action ... praxiology. ... That children recognised that the service is for them, that they can say and shape their day, in ways that they can manage.*

Peripheral Insider

### **Summary: Outstanding Policy Weaknesses**

The organising theme ‘outstanding policy weaknesses’ discussed actors’ perspectives on the key and persistent problems which they feel continue to permeate the policy environment despite the positive policy developments since 2000. These represent critical issues in need of redress and resolve within the ECEC policy and practice domain. The first subset of findings within this organising theme related to the critical connotations that result from the lack of a coherent and adhered to ECEC policy strategy and supporting implementation plan. In the absence of a strategic high and low level principle underpinning framework, interview findings highlight how opportunistic policy decisions are frequently introduced into a strategic vacuum, where thoughtful, conceptually-led policy design is compromised in favour of expedient and pragmatic policy development in response to the opening of policy windows, usually during crisis moments. All actors emphasised the pragmatic, expedient and disjointed nature of policy development and the resultant inadequate attention the multi-dimensional components of ECEC receive, when a reliance on opportune moments to secure agreement for policy decisions provides the primary path to the ECEC policy development.

Frustration amongst peripheral insiders regarding their lack of opportunity to engage more comprehensively with core policy makers to debate and tease out implementation issues prior to policy initiative announcement emerged prominently in interview narratives. Occasionally – and only in instances where core policy makers relied upon peripheral insiders to implement the policy on their behalf – these insiders, also seized their ‘window of opportunity’ and engaged in policy negotiations with core policy

makers which, in the instance of the preschool initiative, resulted in the downward dilution of core policy maker's original implementation criteria. This finding is illuminative of the implications of government distancing and highlights how competing agendas of actors frequently render children vulnerable or peripheral within policy deliberations pertaining to ECEC. The lack of evaluative and monitoring structures to assess the impact of policy initiatives was also strongly criticised by the majority of insiders for its failure to support effective policy planning and review. All insiders emphasised the importance of tracking policy effectiveness through evaluation and monitoring and emphasised how such processes form part of, what they deem, an effective policy framework. They also emphasised the need to debate and tackle ongoing challenges and anxieties to clearly articulate what 'we as a nation want for our children', a process they deemed essential to support the development of a conceptually led underpinning strategic framework to support all future ECEC policy decisions. The variation in perspective regarding the high and low level principles within such a framework clearly illuminates the imperative need for such a process to support better structuring of policy development and implementation. Without such processes and structures, narratives highlight the likely persistence of disjointed, disconnected and opportunistic policies which fail adequately to respond to core issues and exacerbate effective policy implementation and the attainment of proposed policy goals.

Government distancing, the process whereby government sub-contract provision and delivery responsibility for policy domains to outside parties received substantial criticism for its negative implications on ECEC. Despite some positive policy developments, narratives illuminate the embedded and persistent policy concerns which permeate the policy environment and impede the delivery of quality ECEC. To maintain relations with the business sector, the state is pressured to compromise regulatory and quality criteria to facilitate service sustainability at the expense of quality of experience for children. Variable quality and the inadequacy of regulatory criteria were frequently criticised by insiders. The incompatibility of private sector profit orientated imperatives and quality, child-centred initiatives were highlighted as a key challenge in this regard. This conflict between business oriented imperatives and children's needs and rights and its embedded implications, exacerbated through persistent government distancing, was identified as highly problematic and an exceedingly difficult challenge to effectively tackle, particularly in the absence of a

clearly agreed conceptual framework.

Policy concerns raised within the government distancing organising theme and the lack of policy strategy theme combine with the implications of those themes discussed in Thematic Network 1 [*The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors*] and Thematic Network 2 [*The Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts & Constraints*] and cumulatively render the child invisible or secondary in much policy making. This was highlighted by all insiders as the most critical and fundamental limitation of ECEC policy making in Ireland. Whether it is the implications of the competing drivers which push issue attention to the ‘other’ more urgent issue [i.e. labour market demands, equality and economic agendas], or the resistance to open up debate regarding ‘what we as a nation want for our children’, or the embedded persistence of needs-based frameworks and the palpable levels of resistance to challenge or sway from these, children – and their situation – in child-related policy development emerged as highly precarious and vulnerable. Despite the possibilities ECEC potentially offers as a resource to support and enhance children’s early years experiences, existent policy making processes, social and environmental factors and outstanding policy weaknesses impede the full realisation of these possibilities for children, who instead form just one of many competing drivers in the construction and implementation of ECEC policy.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the findings within the final thematic network of this study, *Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Context* and considered the positive and negative impact of the policy process and policy context on the shaping and structuring of ECEC policy. Despite the complexities and intricacies of the contextual environment and its myriad intricate constraints and challenges, all actors acknowledged a number of ‘positive policy developments’ which have enhanced ECEC policy and practice since the policy domain gained increasing issue attention from 2000. Primary positive developments related to the growth of the ECEC sector, policy-oriented learning and the increasing coherency within the ECEC sector, which have individually and collectively enhanced and improved various aspects of ECEC policy and practice.

Substantial infrastructural developments facilitated through the EOCP and NCIP programmes increased the issue attention to ECEC, as it shifted ECEC from its previously, largely invisible terrain towards greater public visibility as a system of scale developed. The policy oriented-learning accumulated across the policy community supported more sophisticated and progressive understandings and conceptualisations of ECEC which in turn, supported a more cohesive and learned policy approach. The positive developments resulting from policy-oriented learning derive from the improved knowledge resources acquired by actors through their exposure to alternative knowledges which in turn supported enhanced reflection and redefinitions of various aspects of ECEC policy. The shift away from ‘childcare’ as a workplace measure towards ECEC as a service for children was highlighted as key in this regard. In the case of those proponents of the new paradigm of early childhood (primarily specialist and peripheral insiders), policy-oriented learning enhances their agentic capacity to contest and challenge the dominant discourses and inter-linked policy paradigms and advocate alternative visions and new possibilities for ECEC. Structural advances at core policy maker level, particularly the establishment of the OMCYA were also highlighted for the collaborative opportunities and the improved system cohesion they facilitate. Increasing collaboration and consultation amongst key policy actors outside of government was also noted as important in strengthening the advocacy strength of the NCVO policy community. While important, these advances were nonetheless, overshadowed by outstanding policy weaknesses and the associated negative connotations a closed and resistant policy environment implies for ECEC policy and practice.

In the absence of a coherent strategy, opportunities to progress or alter existing policy are primarily driven by random exogenous opportunities which exacerbate expediency and encourage disconnected, *ad hoc* and capricious policy decisions. The lack of a clear, articulate framework underpinned by clearly defined, consensual high and low level principles was considered to fundamentally impede strategic, focused and well-thought out policy design. Several insiders highlighted the frequency with which implementation issues emerge and attribute this to a failure of the policy community to identify consensual goals and collaboratively engage and ‘tease’ out the various challenges involved in translating policy to action.

In its continued effort to retain ‘distance’ from direct responsibility for policy delivery, reliance on the market place has formed the cornerstone of Irish government’s response to childcare and ECEC policy. An environment where ‘future directions for early childhood policy are often dominated by considerations regarding the economic viability of small and large businesses’ (Press & Skattebol, 2007: 188) detracts from envisioning possibilities for children. Findings in this study are synonymous with those of other countries where a reliance on private sector delivery dominates and consistently results in endemic levels of poor pay and conditions within the sector (Lyons, 2003; Meyers & Durfee, 2006; Osgood, 2004). The absence of regulatory detail regarding operational requirements within settings rendered excessive freedom to private providers (again motivated – necessarily – by profit) to self-determine recruitment and remuneration policies. Concerns regarding minimal regulations, staff qualifications and perceived status of those working in ECEC emerged as grave concerns in research findings and create an austere barrier to positioning the child at the centre of policy making. These outstanding policy weaknesses when combined with the competing agendas, conflicts, policy constraints and implications of a dominant modus operandi that relies on crisis moments of opportunity to secure policy change exacerbate and reinforce the ever vulnerable status of the child in policy development.

The final chapter discusses and elaborates on the implications of these findings and those from the preceding two thematic networks in greater detail.



## CHAPTER NINE

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

*Through policy, the individual is categorised and given such status and roles as 'subject', 'citizen', 'professional', 'national', 'criminal' and 'deviant'. From the cradle to the grave, people are classified, shaped and ordered according to policies, but they may have little consciousness of or control over the processes at work*

(Shore & Wright, 1997: 4)

*To isolate for attention the authoritative roles that people play in the shaping and penetration of paradigms is to recognise that individuals have the capacity to advance, extend, defend, justify, modify, recruit, proselytise etc in a manner that acknowledges them as more than 'carriers' of the paradigm or publicists for their texts.*

(O'Sullivan, 2005: 63 - 64)

These two introductory quotes from Shore & Wright (1997) and O'Sullivan (2005) describe the very essence and objective of this research study. By accessing and exploring the perspectives of an elite group of actors with privileged access to the 'black box' of policy making, this interpretative-based study aimed to provide a deeper and more complex understanding of the more tacit and less disclosed behind the scenes features and processes which impact on ECEC policy design and outcomes. Existing ECEC policy studies note the general absence of research in this area, despite its pivotal and fundamental importance in the structuring and shaping of policy and the subsequent experiences of children attending ECEC settings (Bown *et al*, 2009; Moss & Pence, 1994; Neuman, 2007). This research contributes new and important knowledge to this

under-researched area of ECEC policy through the provision of empirical data that reveals how conceptualisations of ECEC and relations of power inside the ‘black box’ of policy making catalyse and constrain the strategies of actors and the resultant courses of ECEC policy action.

By shifting the focus of policy analysis from the reified product of policy decisions (e.g. subsidies, curriculums) to the ‘behind the scenes’ processes of policy production, this research adds an extra layer of depth and understanding to the complexities and intricacies that structure and shape final policy decisions. Not only do these findings contribute to the policy literature by providing unique insight into the complex world of policy making from the perspective of those who directly engage within it, but findings also provide policy advocates with new and important information regarding the challenges – and possible solutions – to developing an integrated ECEC policy. While the study focuses on ECEC, its findings are also of relevance to the broader policy context impacting on children’s lives. While the research is focused on the typicality and peculiarity of the Irish system, findings are likely to have relevance elsewhere given the increasing ubiquity of governance structures across western democracies and its transformative impact on nation states’ policy development processes (Bevir *et al* 2003a; Deacon, 2007; Rhodes, 1997; Wilson, 2000). Findings regarding the prevailing dominance of the developmental psychology paradigm in ECEC and the inter-linked difficulties in ‘opening up’ the policy environment to alternative conceptualisations of childhood reflect a common phenomenon in neo-liberal states and may also shed light on possible constraints impeding the dominant paradigm’s disruption elsewhere (Bown *et al*, 2011; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; James & James, 2004; Mayall, 2002; Wall, 2008).

Given the complexity of the policy process, this chapter synthesises key findings to heighten the visibility of the most pivotal and pertinent findings and to maximise research clarity on a process that is typically characterised as murky, muddled and disordered (Edwards, 2005; Everett, 2003; Lindblom, 1959; Ozga, 2000; Sabatier, 2007a; Schlager, 2007; Wilson, 2000). Accordingly, this chapter is structured around the three organising themes from Thematic Network One, *The Policy Making Process: Action of the Actors*. Identification of this thematic network as the framework in which to situate all other research findings is based on its focus on key stages of policy development (i.e. pre-decision and decision making stages) and its elaboration of the

overall patterns and trends which prove pivotal in catalysing or constraining policy decisions across time and context. Actors' interpretations and conceptualisations of policy issues [Thematic Network 2] and the inter-related policy responses [Thematic Network 3] are always incorporated into and influence their behaviour within the policy environment [Thematic Network 1] where policy debate, deliberations and decisions occur (Bevir, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Ingram *et al*, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2005). Thus the three organising themes provide a solid framework to explore how conceptualisations of ECEC and relations of power affect actors' behaviour and influential capacity at the 'pre-decision' and 'decision-making' stage of policy development and impact on the 'modus operandi' of the policy making system. Discussion of key findings is followed by an elaboration of the research implications and the identification of future research possibilities which may further strengthen and intensify the possibilities for change that this study highlights.

### **Pre-Decision Making Processes**

Chapter Three discussed how inherited belief systems and social structures always form the initial background to policy development work against which policy actors may exercise their always present agentive capacity by acting in novel ways that allow them to destabilise these inherited traditions and creatively transform that background (Bevir, 2004; Foucault, 1989). While policy actors always have the capacity to question and bring about change, this chapter highlighted how Irish policy actors predominantly choose to protect and replicate prevailing traditions in their successive policy choices (Girvin, 2008; 2010). O'Sullivan (2005) also emphasises the importance of exploring the initial background as context inevitably enhances or diminishes actors' capacity to act as agents to bring about change. Thus, prior to analysis of specific aspects of the policy-making process, an exploration of the dominant constructions of childhood that comprise the initial background to this research provides an important contextual framework that explains how childhood and ECEC are experienced, debated and, at least initially understood. Contextualising this background forms an important introductory point that enhances understanding and facilitates subsequent analysis of actors' behaviours in policy development by revealing key characteristics and already existent influences within the policy domain under examination.

## **The Contextual Background**

Findings in Chapter Two and Seven reveal how dominant constructions of childhood interact with and influence actors' conceptualisations of the value and purpose they attach to ECEC institutions. These conceptualisations form key and integral influences in the framing of ECEC policy issues and the subsequent structuring and shaping of policy responses.

Findings amplify how the dominant needs-based constructions of childhood and the affiliated resistance to children's rights form the robust and resilient boundaries within which ECEC policy is debated and considered. The high levels of resistance to any deconstruction or extension of these prevailing boundaries was particularly palpable in the narratives of core policy makers and core insiders. By contrast, specialist and peripheral insiders incorporated the discourse of the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood and children's rights into their constructions of childhood and ECEC. Both specialist insiders and most peripheral insiders criticised the limited capacity of the narrow, needs-based constructions of childhood to encapsulate the less tangible but pivotal aspects of childhood, particularly the agentive nature of the child and children's rights into its conceptual frame. These insiders spoke of the extreme challenges they had encountered in securing any openness to these constructions of childhood in their deliberations with core policy makers. These findings are synonymous with established trends in Irish policy making, where a historic reluctance to deviate from the embedded principal of subsidiarity which nests children within families, constructing them as a private – rather than public – responsibility have long predominated in policy development frameworks (All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, 2006; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Nolan, 2007). Accordingly, rather than conceptualising ECEC institutions as public spaces where adults and children collaboratively engage in projects of social, cultural, political, and economic significance (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999; Moss & Pence, 2002), ECEC was primarily conceptualised as a supportive measure which enhances the life-long learning and career prospects of children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus in both the pre-decision and decision making stage of policy making, these constructions dominated conceptualisations of ECEC and the resultant prescribed courses of policy action correlated with the

predominant features of these conceptualisations, a point returned to and elaborated upon later in this chapter.

A reliance on existent legislative frameworks that situate children within the private family sphere and a political preoccupation regarding the cost implications rights-based frameworks potentially impose emerged as two key barriers fuelling resistance to rights-based policy frameworks. Despite the agentic capacity of policy actors to revisit and reconceptualise their constructions of childhood and extend the parameters which currently frame their predominant and prevailing conceptualisation of ECEC, interview findings reveal palpable and powerful levels of resistance to such activity. Chapter Seven revealed how peripheral insiders abstained from using the discourse of rights to prevent politician's eyes from *glazing over* and also highlighted the struggles these same advocates encountered in the introductory stages of the EOCP where many of those around the table *would talk and think in childcare terms only*. These findings shed light on the politics of power that infiltrate the policy battleground and create structural inequalities and underlying tensions between dominant elites whose power and influence supersedes that of minority advocacy coalitions who propose alternatives to the dominant regimes of truth (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Schattschneider, 1960). It reinforces the importance of those arguments in Chapter One which emphasise the critical need for diligence in analysing the less visible and more subtle silencing strategies powerful actors use to keep alternative, counter images off the policy agenda, particularly where they conflict with or contradict the ideologies and proposals of the dominant political elite (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963; Hill, 1997; Moss & Pence, 2002). Findings from this research found that those actors advocating alternatives to the dominant needs-based policy paradigms were consistently silenced and regularly experienced suppression in policy debates as their viewpoints were rendered subordinate to those of the dominant elites who advocated solutions within the confines of the existent mainstream conceptualisations of childhood and ECEC.

Bearing in mind this initial background, analysis of the pre-decision stage of policy making, pays particular attention to relations of power within the policy arena and considers how differences in role and status impact on actor behaviour and influential capacity during policy development.

### **Gaining Access to Pre-Decision Spheres of Policy Development**

The pre-decision stage of policy making refers to an ongoing process in which core policy makers observe policy activity across a diversity of sites (institutions, countries, organisations) and engage with relevant actors who possess key resources (e.g. expertise, representative bases etc) to maximise policy-oriented learning which they may draw upon in the decision-making stage of policy making. Findings reveal two key and dominant forms of policy oriented-learning. The first relates to the endemic levels of national consultation that incorporates a diverse range of policy actors across a range of policy venues within and outside of government and are synonymous with the new modes of governance discussed in Chapter Four (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Gaynor, 2009; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Larragy & Bartley, 2007; Rhodes, 1997). The second form of policy-oriented learning describes transnational policy learning processes where domestic policy actors observe policy activity and engage with actors outside the state to enhance their knowledge of international ECEC policy approaches which they may subsequently draw upon in the structuring of national policy proposals. Again, this form of policy learning is reflective of a wider global trend where nation states increasingly draw upon select international states to support domestic policy-oriented learning (Dale, 1999; Deacon, 2007).

One of the most prominent and universally agreed findings of this study relates to the endemic and extensive levels of national consultation that permeate the pre-decision policy stage. These multi-directional and fluid consultations processes (across all policy layers) formed an integral cornerstone and key means through which all actors attempted to exercise influential capacity and gain support for their policy proposals. While actors argued that the informal nature of much of the policy consultation is a particularly unique feature of the Irish process, given its small demographic and the consequential smaller pool of actors, Grant (2004) also emphasises the importance and greater significance of informal consultations in British policy making systems. However, the emphasis on informal consultation as a more important means of influence than the formal consultative policy structures is indicative of the importance of maintaining good relations with policy actors across subsystems and various coalitions to ensure consistent inclusion and thus, insider knowledge of the various processes and procedures as they develop.

Findings highlight how core policy makers use consultation as a pre-emptive means to acquire knowledge, to identify and discuss potential issues and concerns, to identify potentially workable policy solutions and to test for and maximise policy ‘buy-in’ and support prior to and post policy decisions. These findings mirror and replicate those benefits driving the wide-scale international usage of consultation within policy making processes (Davis, 1997; Grant, 2004; Maloney, 1994), discussed in Chapter Four. For instance, Wilson (1990) describes how UK policy makers engage in consultation because of its capacity to test ‘nerve ends’ and secure technical feedback regarding policy proposals and for its capacity to alert policy makers to potential dangers regarding certain courses of action.

Given how systematic variation in access patterns can result in biased politics, a critical feature of policy analysis centres on the means through which core policy makers identify those actors to whom they grant privileged insider status (Davis, 1997; Eising, 2007; Maloney *et al*, 1994; Meade, 2005). A group’s resources ultimately form the fundamental determinant in securing insider status as it is these that attract government to the group (Grant, 2000; Maloney *et al*, 1994). This study’s findings highlight how core policy makers prioritised consultation with those actors who: possess specialised knowledge and technical expertise relevant to the policy domain; have a strong performance history and good reputation/track record; have sizeable membership bases where incorporation of the group as ‘insider’ may increase ‘buy-in’ to government proposals; and those on-the-ground organisations who oversee the implementation of policy initiatives and support its member’s in meeting policy targets and implementation requirements. All three theories of the policy process highlight how an actor’s role, status and performance history *and* resources fortify advantage for some actors over others in policy deliberations and debates (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008; Casey, 1998). This research corroborates these arguments, as all those actors included in this study were ascribed insider status and granted privileged access to core policy makers on the basis of their possession of valuable resources deemed beneficial to government’s policy development work.

Findings highlight how those who secure insider status use their resultant ‘privileges’ to engage in formally established consultation structures (e.g. as committees and task forces) and informal consultation processes as a basis for influence. Thus this study’s

findings are corroborative of the policy literature's characterisations of 'symbiotic', 'dependent' and 'exchange-based' relations where core policy makers and insiders rely on the resources of the other to realise certain benefits relevant to their organisational goals (Maloney *et al*, 1994; Pierson, 1993; Casey, 1998; Rhodes, 1997). In illuminating the intricacies and politics behind these relationships, one core policy maker highlighted the importance of maintaining certain groups 'onside' as a means of reducing conflict and disharmony within the policy making system:

*I think government would look at, who are the main interests – the people who have vested interests in that area for two reasons. One is to get their expertise, but also to get their support for implementation – to anticipate the future roll-out and implementation of the policy. ... Sometimes government offers special structures of public consultation where these kind of organisations can have strong influence within those set aside structures. They can put direct pressure on politicians – if those politicians see them as representing constituents and voters and so on, even Ministers – which potentially gives them quite a strong role and opportunity of influencing. ... They have no defined role in policy drafting as such. ... But they can at times be very influential.*

### ***The Costs of Maintaining Insider Status***

A major and fundamental finding of this research relates to the 'trade-off' insiders concede to in return for privileged access which provoked fundamental questions regarding the mythical symbiosis of collaborative consultation and the guise it represents for government control. Findings highlight how insiders accept and adhere to a subtle and tacit set of behavioural codes which critically constrain their advocacy capacities and have grave implications in terms of actor behaviour within – and outside – official policy making structures. Analysis of narratives relating to group/government relationships and exchanges correlates with Maloney *et al*'s (1994) typification of group-government relations where insiders, primarily motivated by the longer term 'carrot' or 'reward' access privileges promise adhere to the rules of bargainable incrementalism. While, admission to this trade-off was not explicitly acknowledged during interviews, insider adherence to the rules of the game, their ongoing engagement in consultation processes and their general resistance to opt out of



insider consultation processes and pursue alternative outsider strategies suggests expected benefits outweigh the trade-off costs of privileged access.

One of the most fundamental findings to emerge from adherence to this set of behavioural codes, which works to core policy makers advantage relates to the silencing of public debate by effectively muzzling insiders. By agreeing to the rules of bargainable incrementalism, insiders accept the outcomes of incremental policy decisions and fundamentally resist any public criticism or protest regarding these decisions. In Chapter Six, one peripheral insider discussed the importance of *courtesy* in group-government relationships rather than *playing out battles in the media* which ultimately threatens group-government relations and risks insiders' political exclusion from collaborative engagement in further rounds of policy deliberations. The rules and behavioural codes highlighted in this research are representative of the typical behavioural constraints imposed in government-insider relationships outlined in similar research studies (Grant & Halpin, 2003; Grant, 2005; Maloney *et al*, 1994; Mc Kinney & Halpin, 2007). Grant (1989: 21) describes how groups are 'tamed' and 'domesticated' throughout the consultation process as they are required not only to develop resources, but also appropriate, non-controversial goals, 'with only the ideological rejectionists remaining outside the system'. Similarly, Jensen's (2007: 219) study on *Influence Tactics Used in Group Decision-making Settings* highlights how a 'mismatch between choice of influence tactic (e.g. those outside the accepted behavioural codes) and institutional setting diminishes the effectiveness of the tactic (and vice versa) and that tactic success is related to social acceptability of the tactic used.'

These findings illuminate how relations of power and regimes of truth are reinforced thus invoking what Foucault (1977) termed a 'violence' where counter arguments or alternative beliefs which challenge or contest dominant paradigms and inter-related policy decisions are marginalised and rendered silent. As discussed in Chapter Three, each of these actors always possesses the free will and agentive capacity to step outside these regimes of truth and bring about change by questioning and challenging prevailing regimes of truth and exposing alternative truths which are denied official status within the current regime. Critically, this research provided no evidence of actors' willingness to do so with all instead, choosing to adhere to the rules of the game by containing their

advocacy strategies within those acceptable parameters deemed appropriate to their role and status in order to maintain their insider relationships with government. The strategies employed by core policy makers to maintain control of insiders' advocacy behaviour are in stark contrast to the calls from core policy makers in Chapter Seven for increased public debate as a key and vital means to provoke or initiate policy change. The fact that those very actors who emphasise how *politics follow people* and *how the real location for change has to be public debate*<sup>261</sup> engage in ongoing strategies that curtail and impede insiders' freedom to initiate or participate in public debate is highly revealing of the contradictory nature and murkiness of the policy environment.

While all actors always have the capacity to question and challenge others, findings outlined in Chapter Five highlight the particular vulnerability of those insiders who are financially dependent on government. This financial dependency creates an additional source of political control as the omnipresent threat of funding withdrawal further constrains their behavioural freedom and advocacy capacities. Grant (1989) originally described these insiders as 'prisoner groups' because of the difficulties they may experience in breaking away from an insider relationship. However and imperatively, this study found no discernable difference between the advocacy strategies of funded and non-funded government groups. All groups adhered to cordial and non-confrontational forms of policy advocacy within this particular policy domain, a mode of behaviour that is synonymous with the preference for conflict aversion that typically characterises the Irish policy making process (Chubb, 1992; Girvin, 2008, 2010; Hardiman, 2010; Kirby & Murphy, 2007). In fact, the only indication of potentially conflictive advocacy was from one government-funded insider organisation, which was warned by core policy makers *not to dare put out* a press release criticising the private targeting of capital funding in the EOCP or they *would feel the punch back with the funding*.

Combining analysis on the growth of public/private partnerships under new modes of governance with the various silencing techniques core policy makers adopt to ensure adherence to the rules of bargainable incrementalism highlights an inherent danger to future advocacy, research and campaigning as more groups are brought under government control through contract arrangements. Wilson (1999: 254) argues that

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<sup>261</sup> Core policy maker narrative

organisations operating ‘under contract’ are increasingly likely to recognise the dangers of publicly criticising the state (i.e. their funders) which constrains ‘the nature of public participation in a way that may be considered unhealthy’. Thus, instead of forming an independent oversight and pressure block, the perspectives of collaborating NGOs are increasingly compromised by the promise of privileged access and funding (Baggot, 1995). A key illustration of the intensification of the ‘contract culture’ highlighted in the present study is the introduction of the 2009 pre-school initiative where government becomes the primary financial provider in the majority of ECEC settings. This development has potentially serious implications for future policy campaigning and advocacy work as the ‘contract culture’ becomes institutionalised within the ECEC policy domain.

All three theories of the policy process emphasise the importance of escalated issue attention in securing the attention of the macro political institutional level given the boundedly rational limitations of policy actors which implies the most urgent, critical and visible policy issues receive the prioritised attention of decision makers (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Zahariadis, 2007). However, insider acceptance of the outcomes of bargainable incrementalism suppresses the necessary levels of public contestation and criticism through a basis of exchange that reinforces stable policy making conditions and incremental policy change (Grant & Halpin, 2003). These findings thus provoke critical questions regarding the veracity of the espoused benefits of these exchange-based relationships given the compromise involved in maintaining insider status and the overall levels of dissatisfaction with policy decisions, a concern which is echoed in the policy consultation literature (Casey, 1998; Meade, 2005; Gaynor, 2009; Wilson, 1990). For instance, Casey (1998: 61) highlights how governments create, regulate, and provide the resources for the work of liaison bodies and questions whether this enables ‘*government to create a meaningful dialogue between actors, or ... simply "sell" predetermined policies and stifle criticism*’. Similarly, Wilson (1990) emphasises the importance of assessing not only the way interest groups attempt to influence states but also the ways in which states influence interest groups through their power in determining access privileges and influence of extra-governmental actors.

### **International Influence**

The second form of policy-oriented learning that emerged in the pre-decision stages of policy making is that of transnational learning from ‘*like-minded*’ English-speaking states with similar socio-cultural and administrative contexts. The UK, the US and New Zealand were most frequently cited as example models for learning. The concentrated focus on these states is highly revealing of a selective tendency to ‘borrow’ from international policy models whose policies are easily transferable because of their conformity and alignment with dominant national ideological goals and cultural assumptions (Dale, 1999; Deacon, 2007).

The like-minded countries most frequently referred to in this study have two common features of particular relevance to Irish ECEC policy. Firstly, all primarily focus on the economic return of investment in young children as the primary rationale for statutory subsidisation of ECEC thus integrating Irish policy approaches with the technical and measurable longer-term educational returns that are characteristic of the developmental psychology paradigm pursued in neoliberal states; and secondly, all primarily adopt and prioritise market-based approaches over direct public provision thus integrating Irish policy approaches within those typical features of the neoliberal shift from government to governance discussed in Chapter Four.

### ***The Economic Rationale Investment Model***

Chapter Two discussed how ECEC economic rationale models frame the child within needs-based discourses that promote early investment as a means of enhancing long-term educational and career performance (Heckman, 2006, 2000; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Schweinhart, 2000). *All* actors within this study emphasised the long-term educational benefits of ECEC and the resultant economic returns to the state that emanate from ECEC investment. Core policy makers and core insiders predominantly constrained their analysis of ECEC benefits within this primarily economic-based, future-focused paradigm. By contrast, specialist and peripheral insiders criticised the current preoccupation with the prescribed and measurable school-based performance indicators and also emphasised the opportunities ECEC provides to support the less prescribed elements of children’s overall well-being including their inter-relations and interactions with adults and peers. With the exception of specialist insiders and some

peripheral insiders, the myriad implications of the narrow future-focused constructions of childhood driving and informing this paradigm were not expressed in interview narratives. This mirrors the characteristics of prevailing ECEC paradigms in like-minded neo-liberal states who promote the future-focused developmental psychology paradigm seemingly unaware of or unconcerned with the widely available critiques regarding the limitations of these future-focused models (Cannella, 1999; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Te One, 2008; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Instead of considering the implications of the ‘schoolification<sup>262</sup>’ of childhood (Moss & Bennett, 2006) and ‘human capital investment’ models (Lister, 2003, 2006a), core policy makers and core insider emphasised these features as key benefits and primary rationale for ECEC investment. Such an approach is clearly grounded in needs-based, protectionist constructions of childhood, discussed in Chapter Two and Seven and illuminates how conceptualisations and constructions of social groups impact on the framing of a policy issue and the construction of policy responses. Thus, the needs-based, rather than rights-based constructions of childhood and the supporting courses of policy action that reinforce this regime of truth determines the experiences of the children and ‘sends implicit messages’ (Ingram *et al*, 2007) about government’s perceived importance and responsibility in relation to ECEC. Thus the narrow parameters within which the issues are conceptualised and the suppression and resistance of those voices that contest these delimiting constructions abdicates the incorporation of rights-based frameworks into policy deliberations. Accordingly policy responses are structured within institutionalised paradigms favoured by those dominant elites within the policy environment.

### ***Government Distancing: Mixed Models of Delivery***

The second feature of commonality which emerged between Ireland and these ‘like-minded’ states relates to their predominant reliance on sources outside of government (i.e. the market place) to deliver ECEC services on behalf of government. Chapter Three discussed how market-based ECEC allows the state to promote and ‘support’ early education from a distance thus minimising and curtailing their direct responsibility

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<sup>262</sup> Globally, there is a tendency to treat early childhood services as junior partners, preparing children for the demands of formal schooling; this threatens what the Swedes call schoolification’, the school imposing its demands and practices on other services, making them school-like (Moss & Bennett, 2006: 2).

within the policy domain. All insiders were overtly critical of the Irish government's market-based approach as the primary means of ECEC delivery. Criticisms centred on the variable levels of quality; the inequitable levels of access; the often deficient staff qualifications; the lack of curriculum structures; and the general vulnerability of children attending settings delivered within a weakly regulated policy and practice framework. These criticisms are synonymous with those critical and persistent ECEC policy issues identified in this study's introductory chapter (Bennett, 2006; Bown *et al*, 2009; Cheeseman, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Mayall, 2001; OECD, 2001, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). These deficiencies and their critical impact on children's experiences within ECEC settings primarily emerge as a consequence of the incompatibility of market-based principles which prioritise profit-oriented imperatives over democratic value-based services grounded in children's citizenry rights (Leseman, 2002; Meyers & Durfee, 2006; Moss & Pence, 1994; OECD, 2001, 2004, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006).

A major finding regarding the consequences of the state's reliance on third party ECEC delivery relates to the statutory conflict this 'contract culture' creates as core policy makers enter and engage in an additional layer of bargaining with the business sector on whom they increasingly rely to deliver services on their behalf. Chapter Eight's discussion on the bargaining and trade-offs prior to implementation of the preschool initiative provides clear evidence of the quality compromises and downward negotiations this contract culture implies. For instance, one peripheral insider highlighted how government *would have liked a Level 6<sup>263</sup> [qualification] for the leaders* in charge of ECEC settings but negotiations with private provider resulted in a downward alteration to *Level 5<sup>264</sup>*. Similarly, original assertions from core policy makers resisting any *dilution* to the flat fee rate were negated by this core policy maker's later admission, that by working with the sector, they had subsequently agreed that additional fees can be charged *for additional trimmings so long as parents have a choice of just availing of the preschool bit<sup>265</sup>*, despite the risks this compromise implies in terms of tiered or stratified ECEC services.

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<sup>263</sup> Elaboration on qualification levels are provided in Appendix J.

<sup>264</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>265</sup> Core policy maker narrative

These negotiations regarding delivery criteria also illuminate the business-focused nature of private providers whose priority clearly – and by necessity given the nature of businesses - centres on the reduction of delivery costs and maintenance of profit margins in negotiation discussions at the expense of quality services. This tendency to negotiate away the problem despite the implications is supported by Boyle’s argument regarding the ‘pragmatic populist streak in Irish politics’ which tends to deal with symptoms while neglecting the deeper roots of problems, offering ‘cheap, flexible solutions that avoid long-term commitments’ (Boyle, 2005: 113-14, cited in Kirby & Murphy, 2007: 7). Similarly, Hardiman (2009a: 20) highlights how Irish governments, being notoriously conflict averse, have ‘a tendency to back off hard choices and to end up with suboptimal and easier outcomes’.

### **The Decision-Making Environment**

Findings reveal a transformative shift in the policy environment at the critical juncture between the pre-decision and decision-making stages of policy-making. Insider’s ‘surplus of access’ described during the pre-decision stage was accompanied by a ‘deficit of influence’ at the decision making stage. These findings are supportive of policy analysis literature which depicts consultation merely as a sign of being treated as insiders rather than outsiders but does not indicate the ability to influence strongly policy outcomes (Hill & Tisdall, 1997; Eising, 2007; Grant, 2000; 2004; Broscheid & Cohen, 2004)<sup>266</sup>. The exclusivity and autonomy of the decision-making sphere was illuminated by *all* insiders’ admission of no prior knowledge of *any* of the three key policy initiatives discussed during interview findings. All insiders expressed their ‘shock’ and ‘amazement’ upon public announcement of the EOCP, ECS and pre-school initiative. Findings expose the mirage and fallacy of *collaborative* policy making espoused at the pre-decision stage of the process and reinforce critical questions regarding the trade-offs insiders relinquish in these supposedly symbiotic core policy maker-insider relationships. These findings are not unique to this policy domain but reflective of a wider trend in Irish policy making where final policy decisions are commonly debated and decided behind closed doors. At the macro-political level, Murphy (2006: 445) describes parliamentary party meetings as ‘private affairs’ where

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<sup>266</sup> For instance, Casey (1998) contends that groups are often more successful in influencing public opinion and in bringing problems to the public agenda than in determining the form of public policies or specific policy actions.

‘serious and constructive policy debate takes place between TDs ... negating the need for any form of public party dissension’. Insider frustration regarding their limited capacity to influence, and the significant evidence relating to the lack of insider knowledge regarding final decision-making processes is revealing of the persistence of authoritarianism in Irish policy making despite the growth in governance processes which emphasise less centralised modes of decision making and greater involvement and collaboration in policy development. Findings corroborate Rhode’s (1997) warning regarding the need for caution in interpreting the extent to which new modes of governance have reduced or altered government’s authority.

Insiders partly attribute their exclusion from the decision-making sphere to the political desire to remove the clandestine nature of the *fighting*<sup>267</sup>, *battles* and *bean counting*<sup>268</sup> from public visibility. The conflictive, disharmonious and tension filled decision-making sphere that all insiders described was corroborated by core policy makers’ descriptions of the *endless competing demands* and the need *to fight* for everything within this policy sphere<sup>269</sup>. These depictions of the inner most sphere of policy making match the typical depictions of battles and games described in this study’s introductory chapter and are illuminative of the relations of power which dominate in the final stages of policy decisions (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Everett, 2003; Gaynor, 2009; Howard, 2005; Liu, 2001; O’Sullivan, 2005; Ozga, 2000; Schattschneider, 1960). Mouffe (2005: 9) describes ‘the political’ sphere as a ‘space of power, conflict and antagonism’ and argues that ‘antagonisms are a result of the multiplicity of subject positions of politicians, the subject constituting a decentred, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject-positions’ (Mouffe & Holdengraber, 1989: 35 cited in Bown *et al*, 2009: 200). Similarly, Baumgartner *et al* (2009) emphasise how proponents and opponents of policy change engage in highly structured conflicts where neither side typically mobilizes strongly without a counteraction from the other side and draw on Schattschneider’s (1960) warning to watch the crowd, when a fight breaks out as the resultant outcome is likely to be determined by the number of members involved.

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<sup>267</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>268</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>269</sup> Core policy maker narrative



### **Competition and Conflict in the Core Policy Maker Sphere**

Findings highlight how, similar to insider/core policy maker relationships, a set of behavioural codes govern civil servant relationships with politicians. A fundamental aspect of this code relates to civil servant loyalty to their superiors and their consequential abstinence from public criticism of final Ministerial decisions. Slessor (2002: 288) describes this process as the ‘infallibility syndrome’ where decision-making is couched in secrecy and remains ‘correct’ even when subsequently shown to be wrong. He argues that the ‘infallibility syndrome’ derives from a belief that to admit to errors would diminish the authority and credibility of government administration meaning ‘if a choice has to be made, departmental loyalty will win over objective truth’ (Ibid, 2002: 288). This behavioural restriction was evident during interviews and limited discussion and elaboration of the various intricacies of policy deliberations and processes at the macro-political institutional level. Throughout interviews, core policy makers abstained from criticism of the policy system and political decision making and emphasised their inter-connected relationship with politicians describing themselves as *responsible on behalf of the Irish government*<sup>270</sup> for policy development. Civil servants’ reluctance to discuss their perspectives on children’s rights and their emphasis on how they are bound by constitutional interpretations of rights in any related discussions is indicative of the impact of behavioural codes. These restrictions sever some aspects and nuances of the inner mechanics of policy decisions from public visibility and create methodological difficulties in detailed exploration of all aspects of final policy decisions which are rarely revealed for critical analysis and interpretation (Richards & Smyth, 2004; Slessor, 2002; Page, 2003).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the amalgamated processes in this study supported a cursory peering behind the decision-making scenes. While core policy makers abstained from criticising policy decisions and policy-making processes, their narratives provided important data on their perspectives of *their* role and the strategies *they* employ to influence politicians’ decision-making. This combined with insider knowledge acquired through their ongoing consultative role and engagement with civil servants and politicians revealed anecdotal insight into some of the ordinarily less visible challenges and struggles permeating the decision layer of policy making. An exploration of other groups of core policy makers discussed in Chapter Four,

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<sup>270</sup> Core policy maker narrative

particularly politicians and a broader range of civil servants would likely heighten insight of the complexities and nuances within this sphere, a point already highlighted in the methodology chapter.

Three different groupings or typologies of actors, the politician, the civil servant, and government departments, were identified within the decision making sphere. Each of these categories of actors was perceived to possess a different status in policy decision making processes and resultant inequities in relations of power emerged between the three groupings. The differential relations of power and the competing agendas of the different categories of actors were deemed to contribute to and exacerbate competition and conflict amongst the inner-most elite of actors in the policy-making process and critically impact on ECEC policy decisions. These conflicts related to politicians' private [career] agendas and public policy agendas; the impact of governing codes on civil servant behaviour in policy making; and the competing agendas and differential status and strategies of different government departments.

### ***Politicians' Private and Public Agendas***

Findings in Chapter Six highlight how policy development in 'value-based' policy domains such as ECEC is characterised by a cautious treading and the avoidance of responses which risk alienation of significant voting cohorts (e.g. women in the home). This political preoccupation with electoral blandishment and its curtailing impact on politician's framing of and reflection on policy issues was particularly emphasised by all insiders. Descriptions of politicians '*psychological deadlock*' and '*policy paralysis*' were used to explain the high levels of political anxiety and ambiguity regarding the potential repercussions decisions might incur as the childcare crisis gained increased public salience from the late 1990s. The ECS was repeatedly cited as an example of how political anxiety impedes policy innovation and drives neutral and incremental policy responses and a recourse to institutionalised policy mechanisms, particularly cash-based policy instruments, such as the universal child benefit payment. The distinctive features of the political system discussed in Chapter Three, particularly the PRSTV were highlighted by a small number of insiders as contributory factors which drives political hesitance in contentious value-based policy domains as politician's instead favour neutral, safer and incremental decisions that do not tackle or undermine

prevailing core beliefs (Adshead & Neylan, 2008; Callanan, 2006; Chubb, 1992; Kirby *et al*, 2002). As one core policy maker emphasised:

*All children have to be looked after and politicians cannot see the difference between a woman who gives up her job to look after her own child and a woman who stays at work, and takes her salary and pays someone else. They cannot distinguish, and won't distinguish between that.*

Some insiders also argued that the lack of a '*political advocate for ECEC*' exacerbates its frail and tenuous status on the policy agenda and makes it especially vulnerable to fluctuations in political attention, in the absence of a political advocate to ensure ongoing attention and commitment to the policy issue. Consistent with this, Hardiman & MacCarthaigh (2011) emphasise the difficulties of driving change in the Irish policy making system without an effective political sponsor even where civil servants develop good ideas about administrative reform. The potential of a political advocate is evidenced through the reform of the UK's adoption system following Blair's appointment as Prime Minister 'who committed himself to personally taking the issue forward' born, as he said later, of his own family experience (Page, 2003: 658). As a policy advocate for the adoption issue, Blair's contribution was considered a major function in reviving political interest and raising the importance and profile of the issue which led to accelerated reforms within the area during his time in government (Ibid, 2003).

### ***The Civil Servant as Policy Entrepreneur***

Findings emphasise the especially critical role of 'entrepreneurial' civil servants in value-based policy domains where political ambiguity and hesitance predominate and constrain issue attention and commitment to the policy area. This emphasis on policy entrepreneurialism is consistent with concepts articulated in the MST which emphasise the vital role of policy entrepreneurs in successfully coupling policy streams during key windows of opportunity to secure favour for policy change (Cohen-Vogel, 2009; Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2003, 2007). Chapter Six discussed the various policy tactics entrepreneurial civil servants utilised in their bid to secure approval for their favoured policy solutions. Securing the policy decision of the preschool initiative in

2009 provides a prime example of successful stream coupling. The *problem stream* of the economic crisis created a persistent high attention issue from 2008 thus providing the necessary precondition for radical policy change (Baumgartner, 2009; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Zahariadis, 2003, 2007). The trigger event the economic crisis provided compelled government to open up the policy space beyond the usual subsystem parameters as they desperately sought to contain the country's expenditure. The high cost of the ECS created a 'window of opportunity' as politicians demonstrated a greater openness to policy solutions within the *policy stream* than those which it would have ordinarily considered in times of economic stability (Zahariadis, 2007). The two key selection criteria, that of the technical feasibility (i.e. implementation power) of the proposal and the perceived public acceptability of the proposal strengthened the appeal of the preschool initiative in this crisis moment (Ibid, 2007). The growth of the sector's capacity, a result of the increased infrastructural development under the EOCP and NCIP and the substantial expenditure savings (in excess of €300 million) ensured the technical feasibility of the proposal. In addition, the policy-oriented learning regarding the benefits of ECEC for children enhanced the public acceptability appeal thus adding to the macro political allure of the proposal. The successful 'coupling' of these streams into a single package during this 'policy window' increased the probability that the specific policy would be adopted (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007), a point acknowledged by core policy makers engaged in the policy deliberations at this time. Thus entrepreneurial strategising illuminates the potential influential capacity of actors within the policy-making process, a key finding returned to later in this chapter.

Consistent with concepts articulated in the MST, core policy makers also employed 'salami tactics' by dividing their desired end policy goal (i.e. preschool year) into distinct phases which they presented periodically at opportune moments (e.g. EOCP) to promote agreement in stages (Zahariadis, 2007). They emphasised the necessity of this strategy in the early days of policy development and prior to the EOCP, given the contentiousness, ambiguity and policy paralysis that permeated the macro political level and intensified the resistance of policy makers to choose a 'path' in ECEC . These findings have considerable resonance with historic institutionalist and social constructivist arguments which emphasise the often constraining force tradition plays in policy development framing, a trend which Chapter Three highlighted as particularly

pertinent to and characteristic of dominant Irish policy making patterns (Girvin, 2008, 2010; Ingram *et al*, 2007; Pierson, 1993).

Notwithstanding the influence entrepreneurial civil servants can potentially exert on policy decisions, political authority regarding final policy decisions clearly emerged in *all* interview findings. This finding is consistent with several other studies exploring power and influence in policy-making processes (Edwards, 2005; Chubb, 1992; Page, 2003; Niskanen, 1986; Rhodes, 1997). An important constraint emerged in analysis of the behavioural processes of entrepreneurial civil servants which illuminates the omnipresent power of dominant social constructions, even during crisis moments of policy development. To increase the likelihood of favourable support for their policy proposals, this research found that entrepreneurial civil servants frame their policy proposals within the parameters of politicians' 'safety zones' and avoid penetrating barriers which exacerbate anxiety or potentially reinforce policy paralysis and inaction. Thus adherence to the rules of bargainable incrementalism and avoidance of radical or potentially contentious proposals that conflict within the inherited and institutionalised traditions, discussed in Chapter Seven, predominates in their behavioural approach to policy development. Their general resistance to discussion on children's rights and their defining of children's rights within the dominant constitutional interpretative framework is illuminative of the subtle barriers within which they conceptualise policy issues and construct policy proposals thus maximising their likely palatability with politicians:

*I don't actually know what the debate on children's rights is. ... If we lived in a different constitutional context, I would answer your question in a different way, but because we live in this constitutional context, I have to, as a civil servant, be very careful about rights, because the rights are defined within the constitution, and then whatever the government signs up to. ... That for me is what children's rights means ...*

Core Policy Maker

### *Differential Department Agendas*

The final category or grouping of actors at the macro political level was that of government departments and similar to politicians and civil servants, perceived differences in the status and power of different government departments emerged in interview discussions and was deemed to contribute to conflict and competition and differential strategies and approaches across government departments. Despite co-location of the inter-related government departments within the OMCYA from 2006, findings highlight the persistence of a conceptual split between education and care. These findings are reflected at policy level through, for example, the continued existence of a separate childcare directorate and early years policy unit within the OMCYA and by the fact that the recently announced preschool year is funded by the OMCYA, while the DES has funded the development of two practice frameworks, *Siolta* and *Aisteor*.

The differential power of government departments, the differential agendas and the perceived differential prioritisation of ECEC across government departments emerged as a key source of conflict and powerful constraint which curtails ECEC policy progression. Insiders characterised the Department of Finance as the ultimate power house within government, given its holding of the purse strings and the most elite of government departments which they *could never get to*. Consistent with this, Hardiman (2010: 11 - 12) emphasises the extensive discretionary powers of the Department of Finance and highlights how the Ministerial office-holder is 'relatively unconstrained by parliamentary scrutiny' evidenced by the fact that even the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) is 'said to know relatively little of the detail of what the budget contains until it is revealed in public'. This Department was depicted as particularly resistant to any increased government involvement within ECEC, a resistance that was primarily attributed to an inherent anxiety regarding the potential costs escalated engagement within ECEC might imply. For instance, in Chapter Six, one core insider attributed the Department's resistance to ECEC to its concerns regarding the potential costs of a future set of employees and the resultant increased union engagement and emphasised the Department's prioritisation of long-term cost containment.

The perceived resistance of the Department of Education and Science was also emphasised. In this instance, resistance was partly attributed to its institutionalised

structures [e.g. school boards and unions] which some insiders felt constrained the Department's flexibility and reinforced its more formalised and conservative policy approach. Thus conflict, competition and disharmony emerged prominently in narratives regarding cross-departmental engagement within ECEC. In discussing divisions across Irish government departments, Hardiman (2010) similarly emphasises how interdepartmental structures typically provide only partial remedy to the 'traditional complaints' regarding the relative isolation of the 'stovepipes' of government which have not significantly altered structural divisions once temporary coordinating apparatus lapse. Even within the OMCYA, where interdepartmental structures are permanent in nature, similar criticisms regarding persistent departmental divisions consistently emerged and were criticized for their curtailing impact on cross-departmental partnership in policy development. As one specialist insider emphasized:

*I think it is fair to say that in this field people have been overwhelmed by the number of actors and efforts have been made through the establishment of the OMCYA to put that under one sort of umbrella. But even within that, they are not conceptually linked. There isn't an integrated concept of ECEC in this country still. You are still having people say that is health and care and that is education, you still have that ...*

These sources of conflict, competition and tension and the interlinked authority and suppression of actors within these realms represent a form of 'dark matter' (Bown *et al* 2011) which, combined with the constraints imposed on insider-core policy maker relationships, reinforce predominant paradigms and impose critical barricades for those minorities seeking to exercise parrhesia by contesting and exposing these subtle operations of power. The battles and conflicts and subtle behavioural undercurrents that permeate the decision-making sphere are generally shielded from public visibility despite their powerful and prevailing impact on policy outcomes for citizens. They fundamentally impact on ECEC policy development, and strengthen and reinforce the already invisible barriers and blockages identified in the decision making stage of policy making. Examination of activity within the decision making sphere illuminates how the murkiness of the decision-making process exacerbates the *ad hoc*, expedient and patchwork approach to policy development, the implications of which are elaborated upon further in the *modus operandi* section.

### **Modus Operandi: Ripples and Waves in Policy Making**

Consistent with the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, findings reveal two patterns of policy making. The first and predominant pattern relates to slow and incremental policy development and integrates with the arguments of historic institutionalists where policy makers make marginal adjustments to the pre-existing policy frames to accommodate new situations (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Pierson, 1993; Weir, 1992). Chapter Two's discussion on the theories of the policy process highlighted how policy continuity and persistence maximise conflict aversion and political stability and accordingly form the preferred policy approach wherever feasible (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Lindblom, 1959; Weir, 1992). Similarly, this study reveals the extreme difficulties proponents of change encounter in altering already embedded and institutionalised paths of policy action. The second and contrasting policy making pattern is that of sudden and rapid policy development which occurs during episodic interruptions to periods of stability as stochastic events in the wider policy environment (e.g. financial crisis) culminate in a 'legitimacy crisis' that threatens and undermines prevailing policy paths (Habermas, 1975). The culmination of these processes create issue attention surges that shift policy issues from their usual subsystem locations into the macro-political institutional level where radical policy change becomes possible (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Habermas, 1975; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Both of these patterns are now discussed and their impact on ECEC policy development reflected upon.

#### **Slow and Incremental Policy Action**

A major finding of this research is that of the predominant preference for slow and incremental policy development and the difficulties this creates for proponents of policy change. Ireland is not unique in this regard. Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 326) emphasise how 'the notion that decision makers introduce incremental course corrections from the status quo has dominated thinking about policy change since the late 1950s'. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the problems they confront, incremental policy design affords policy makers a safety net, within which they can gradually make small tentative decisions reducing the possibility of major errors, uncertainty and the unpleasantness of conflict (Girvin, 2008, 2010; Pierson, 1993; Wilson, 2000).



Chapters Six and Seven highlight how most actors within this study predominantly conceptualise policy issues and construct policy responses within the prevailing and institutionalised policy frameworks. The perceived public preference for the maintenance of inherited traditions and the political aversion to challenge the core beliefs and core policy beliefs that comprise these traditions – particularly those regarding maternal care decisions – were identified as contributory factors for the political hesitance to directly engage in ECEC until the late 1990s when sufficient public pressure accumulated and policy inaction was no longer a feasible option. O’Sullivan (2005) similarly emphasises the potent psychological restraints to the rupturing of dominant paradigms given how people are sustained and affirmed by the continuity of their beliefs and even though the intensity of these commitments might wane, conversion to competing systems of thought, that require a dramatic recantation of beliefs is unlikely. The ACF similarly emphasises the difficulties in disrupting core beliefs and core policy beliefs, which are remarkably resistant to change and rarely provide an impetus for paradigm reconstruction in the absence of external event triggers or elongated periods of policy-oriented learning (Meijerink, 2005; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

*All* core policy makers made reference to the ten year gestation period in which ECEC policy gradually ‘evolved’ from the establishment of Expert Forums and Strategy Groups in the late 1990s, to exogenous catalyst (e.g. economic boom and recession) effects and policy-oriented learning that eventually culminated in the 2009 ‘revolution’ of the preschool initiative. The emphasis placed on a *ten year period, from the time you start to the time you get to best practice*<sup>271</sup> affirms the slow and incremental nature of policy development and senior civil servants’ acceptance of these processes and patterns as standard and a typical features of policy development. This research highlights how limited public debate, tacit behavioural silencing codes within the policy arena and fragmentations and divisions within the policy community weaken those outside forces which could potentially generate pressure points for policy reflection, review and change. Findings provide important insight into the many tacit features which fortify paralysing periods of policy inaction and maintain ECEC issue attention

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<sup>271</sup> Core policy maker narrative

*'below the policy radar'*<sup>272</sup> where incremental policy development dominates. An elaboration of these constraints and their impact on policy approaches is now provided.

### ***Reliance on Legislative Frameworks and Limited Reflection on Social Constructions***

The narrow and delimiting needs-based constructions of childhood and the supremacy accorded to legislative frameworks to determine the state's role in the lives of children emerged as fundamental limitations which constrain endogenous initiated debate regarding the aptness of the current constitutional interpretation of our national vision for children. The resistance of core policy makers and several insiders within this study to question, challenge, or undermine the constitutional conceptualisations of children and family reinforces the tendency towards gradual and incremental policy development and confines constructions of childhood and ECEC within the prevailing, narrow legislative parameters. These constraining parameters not only serve to limit public responsibility for children but also, in the absence of external pressures, justify the predominantly paternalistic approaches by eliding challenges to deeply rooted ideological beliefs regarding maternal labour market and care options. Indeed, one core policy maker highlighted the recent preschool initiative's appeal because of its capacity to evade disruption or undermining of inherited patriarchal beliefs:

*You see, they [government] were also dealing with the value of not distinguishing between the woman in the home and the woman outside the home and they have been consistent on that. This [the preschool initiative] is for everybody. It is free for everybody and they didn't make any distinction between the woman in the home and women outside the home.*

Political adherence to the protection of these values, given the potential electoral attrition risks challenges or contestation might imply is well documented in the policy literature (Ahearn, 1990; Chubb, 1992; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; O'Connor, 2006, 2008). However and importantly, Chapter Seven also revealed a lack of openness amongst several actors within this study (as well as politicians) to consider alternatives to the embedded constructions of privatised families. These actors' hesitance and ambiguity regarding the importance of rights-based frameworks in

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<sup>272</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

ECEC and their persistent reversion to needs-based frameworks in interview discussions is revealing of the power of social constructions and the political nature of policy development. Actors' failure to understand or embrace these themes as valid elements of the discourse is illuminative of an 'inevitable failure of sealed cultural systems to interpenetrate' (O'Sullivan, 2005: 57). The influential role of the dominant elite of actors and the interests which they aim to safeguard are thus reinforced and further protected through the behavioural codes which suppress and silence those insiders who advocate 'other' ways of thinking that require expansion of political responsibility, beyond the current subsidiary role. Political anxiety regarding the financial ramifications of rights-based as opposed to needs-based constructions of childhood was amplified as a weapon fuelling the existent barricades that curtail public criticisms regarding the shortcomings of the dominant and narrow conceptualisations of childhood and ECEC. Yet a financial preoccupation with the 'costs' of rights fails to pay due regard to the democratic values and benefits of wider debate and conceptualisations of citizenship for society as a whole. These findings reinforce arguments regarding the interlinked relationship between the dominant preferences of the social interests involved and illuminate how social interests within the policy making arena operate to protect those concepts most vital to their institutions objectives and goals (O'Sullivan, 2005; Schenider & Ingram, 1997; Rigby *et al*, 2007; Penn, 2007).

Given the powerful impact of the dominant elite's behaviour in policy making, the role of advocacy coalitions (in addition to the already discussed policy entrepreneurs) becomes increasingly vital to securing policy change. Yet this study identified a number of constraints which curtail the advocacy strength of the ECEC policy community thus weakening the 'policy windows' through which change could potentially be initiated. The following section explores behaviour within the policy community – outside of government – and considers how fractures or frailties within the community weaken and erode the necessary force or strength required to destabilise the dominant elite's paradigm from its position of primacy and open up the policy environment to alternative ways of thinking.

### ***Mobilising a Fragmented Policy Community***

Baumgartner (2009) emphasises how groups are required to expand an issue, or shift it to a new institutional venue or onto the front pages of national newspapers to achieve greater public salience. Private needs usually become public issues when a concerned sector is able to communicate and articulate policy concerns in a manner that expands the conflict to the macro political institutional level where power and capacity to initiate change is greatest (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Casey, 1998; Kingdon, 1995; Baumgartner, 2001, 2009; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Findings from this research are consistent with this argument and highlight the importance of maintaining *pressure in the system*<sup>273</sup> to attract the attention of the macro political institutional systems. Yet findings also highlight the difficulties groups encounter, particularly minority advocacy coalitions, in securing sufficient public salience, given how subtle undercurrents permeate the policy environment and constantly work to suppress such surges or cascades from occurring. The threat of political exclusion and insiders' lack of willingness to break from the group-government relationship base consistently weakens exogenous threats of conflict expansion and reinforces an environment where stable and incremental policy development is feasible.

Findings in Chapter Seven highlight how the addition of the union and employer voice to the childcare debate during the 1990s amplified demands for public action and strengthened the voice of existent NCVOs who, despite *pushing for quality standards ... for many, many years had remained largely under the radar until the push came from the EU and the trade unions to do something about childcare*<sup>274</sup>. Cobb and Elder (1983: 152) describe the 'issue expansion' process as a key element in the destruction of 'systems of limited participation' as policy monopolies are weakened and destabilised when competing advocacy coalitions mobilise around and issue and grow in strength. The lack of attention to ECEC until the childcare crisis accumulated the additional voices of employers, unions and parents is corroborative of the impact of group mobilisation.

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<sup>273</sup> Core policy maker narrative

<sup>274</sup> Core policy maker narrative

The advocacy strategies and mobilisation of groups are therefore imperative in either attracting political attention to a domain, or if advocacy efforts prove insufficient, to maintaining the issue below the necessary radar levels that demands policy action (Maloney *et al*, 1994; Grant, 2000, 2004; Grant & Halpin, 2003). Key strategy variables in this study related to time investment, campaign approaches (policy images and portrayals), advocacy tools, access privileges and the overall engagement patterns of actors within the policy community. The lack of clear and effective leadership was identified as a particularly constraining limitation which impedes the development of the necessary structures and processes required to build collective sectoral strength as different actors instead persist in battling for their competing policy agendas. For instance, in Chapter Seven, one specialist insider highlighted how this lack of leadership detracts from the agentive capacity of those members within the policy community to bring about change:

*I also think that there is no clear leadership amongst those who could be agents of change, and who could lift and improve the quality of that public debate. I think that all of us who try to do that are quite weak and have not, and you know it is quite difficult to identify leadership amongst them*

Wilson (2000) highlights how clear leadership contributes to a sector's ability to amalgamate resources (representative bases, technical strength, finances etc), establish goals, articulate ideas, gain access to the media, influence public opinion, mobilize supporters, build coalitions and create political momentum towards the attainment of collaborative goals and targets.

A further constraint that hinders policy community cohesion and the potential force of collective voice to bring about change related to the differential level of engagement of different actors within the policy subsystem. In Chapter Seven, those peripheral insiders advocating rights-based frameworks contended that the limited engagement of specialist insiders, particularly the academic community weakens their capacity to convince the more conservative actors of the importance and validity of their arguments, particularly those relating to children's rights, which emerged as the point of highest resistance in this study's findings. A number of these peripheral insiders criticised the *esoteric* nature of academic research and argued that it is often *too far*

*removed from the reality of what policy making is* thus stripping them of a valuable resource (technical knowledge and expertise) to strengthen their persuasive powers and influential capacity. This point is corroborated by O'Sullivan (2005), who highlights how contributions from these experts can intensify the density and substance of competing or struggling paradigms thus enabling its proponents to refute its critics by drawing on the paradigm's increased depth and robustness. He argues (2005: 92) that such 'intensification is more visibly produced by a more specialised set of agents than those who fuel the expansion and contraction of a paradigm' as its currency lies in 'its conceptualisation, research findings and theoretical developments.'

### **The Window of Opportunity: Rapid Policy Development**

Despite the numerous constraints within the policy environment which enable a predominantly slow and incremental approach to policy making, findings also revealed a number of key catalysts which converged in moments of crisis and created policy windows where *changes can be pushed through that might never have taken place before*<sup>275</sup>. These findings intertwine with those arguments of the MST and PET which emphasise the importance of actor entrepreneurialism during crises to push through radical policy change. Baumgartner *et al.* (2006) describe how the complexity of the policy environment, with its multiple competing policy demands, creates a process of 'attention shifting', where individuals and governments are likely to distribute their attention in 'fits and starts' when major problems arise within an issue and creates a 'policy window' where official attention is called for and change becomes possible. Similarly, Kingdon (1999) describes how effective stream coupling by policy entrepreneurs during 'windows of opportunity' increases the likelihood of rapid policy change.

These punctuated moments in policy equilibrium primarily occur as a host of inter-related events converge and created extreme system pressures where slow and incremental policy responses prove insufficient to resolve the scale of the policy crisis (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Wilson, 2000). Consistent with the three theories of the policy process outlined in Chapter Two (Baumgartner *et al.*, 1991, 1993; Kindon, 1995; Zaharidias, 2003; 2007), this study identified how a number of collaborative features

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<sup>275</sup> Core insider narrative

during windows of policy opportunity created branching points favourable to policy change. Findings reveal how the interaction of exogenous policy events with policy entrepreneurialism (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007); an increasing mobilisation amongst interest groups and converging of competing advocacy coalitions during crisis moments (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963; Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993); and policy redefinition, new policy images and changes in policy venue draw increased attention to the moving policy issue as a growing range of previously excluded actors become involved (Baumgartner, 2009; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008) culminating in new ECEC policy initiatives. Each of these processes raised the public visibility of an issue shifting it upwards from the subsystem level to the macro political level, a requirement for radical policy change (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; Zahariadis, 2003). While these stressors or enablers did not automatically result in policy regimes changes in their own right, they created conditions favourable for change, by illuminating inconsistencies and problems within the existent regimes which enhanced the possibility of a policy paradigm shift once coupled with policy actors' entrepreneurialism.

The two most palpable stressors or triggers identified by actors were that of significant changes in female labour market behaviour during the economic boom and conversely the rapidly intensifying depletion of exchequer resources during the economic recession. Chapter Seven discussed how the 'labour market' catalyst resulted in substantial infrastructural growth through the EOCP and the 'financial recession' catalyst resulted in the replacement of the ECS, with the 'cheaper' free preschool year. Each of these exogenous catalysts [outside of the policy subsystem] generated stress on existing institutional and organizational arrangements and illuminated anomalies by exposing deficiencies within the prevailing policy paradigms. As deficiencies and problems within existent paradigms were highlighted, the advocacy coalitions within the subsystem (e.g. unions, employers, ECEC providers, government actors) mobilised around the issues, intensifying its public salience and political pressure for new and alternative policy responses. This integrates with the PET, where power shifts occur as actors within the policy subsystem witness a 'moving' issue which has some 'chance of passage' and engage in and intensify their policy advocacy campaigns, the collective behaviour of which produces 'cascade effects where tremendous surges occur' as large numbers of lobbyists mobilize on a small number of issues (Baumgartner, 2009: 527).

The previously discussed role of entrepreneurial civil servants in securing policy change during these key windows also forms an important feature of these processes of change.

### ***Policy Framing and Policy Focus***

Critically, this research found that, in the absence of a clear, consensual strategy regarding ‘*what we as a nation want for our children*<sup>276</sup>’, the catalyst triggering the attention shift, coupled with the policy images and strategies employed by actors engaging in the episodic bouts of intensified policy deliberation form vital determinants shaping the policy outcome. Because all policies are multi-dimensional, different policy actors focus their attention on different aspects of the policy as they seek to build support for their positions (Baumgartner, 2009; Everett, 2003; Gains, 2003; O’Sullivan, 2005, Stone, 2002). Importantly and very much evidenced through this research, the range of actors involved in the issue creates its own source of conflict, as competing actors’ agendas and their differential manipulative skills (resource and strategy influenced) and influential capacities prove fundamental determinants in determining the successes and failures of competing advocacy coalitions in these intensified moments of deliberation.

While NCVOs had failed to attract political attention despite years of advocacy, the momentum added by increased union and employer involvement increased the public salience of the childcare issue. These groups, who portrayed childcare as a gender equality measure required to sustain economic growth achieved the necessary government support to elicit policy action, illuminating the powerful capacity of policy framing to maximise favour and support for specific courses of policy action. The entrepreneurial civil servants seized this window of opportunity by securing EU funding to develop childcare infrastructure, meaning the EOCP ‘*was perfectly tailored to get a chance to go*’ because it provided the ‘*line of least resistance*<sup>277</sup>’, ultimately culminating in the largest sector investment in the state’s history to date. Lindblom’s (1977) discussion of the ‘privileged position of business’ in the political system certainly has particular resonance here and highlights how relations of power serve to reinforce those actors’ viewpoints that coincide with already existent dominant elites

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<sup>276</sup> Specialist insider narrative

<sup>277</sup> Core insider narrative



within the policy environment. The focus on capacity increases to support female employment, rather than public/private responsibility for children, posed little threat to core beliefs or core policy beliefs and instead emphasised labour market requirements and gender equality issues, relatively uncontroversial topics that required minimal changes to prevailing institutional and administrative structures. Despite the fact that these demands encapsulated only minor aspects of the NCVO's agenda, NCVO's nonetheless supported the advocacy campaigns, conceding to the 'opportunity' the EOCP provided to grow and strengthen the ECEC sector. The various constraints outlined throughout this chapter, particularly the high levels of political resistance and resistance from the Department Finance was also likely to have contributed to the NCVO's availing of this 'opportunity' to increase political favour for the policy domain. Chapter Eight discussed how *all* actors across all layers perceived the EOCP as a 'spring board' or platform from which they could lobby for enhanced developments and initiatives to strengthen the aspects of ECEC, which the EOCP failed to encapsulate.

Fundamentally, these findings highlight how decisions taken in episodic bursts of policy attention frequently involve substantial policy change made with limited knowledge, a form of 'speculative augmentation' (Jones, 1974), particularly in the absence of comprehensive and holistic strategic planning. Findings highlight the pervasive impact of these rapid and unbalanced policy decisions. For instance, the introduction of the capacity focused EOCP in the absence of an equally measured quality focus exacerbated high costs and variable quality across Ireland's rapidly expanding ECEC sector (OECD, 2004; 2006; Bennett, 2006; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005; Urban, 2006; Bradley & Hayes, 2009). This was a source of considerable criticism during interviews and is emblematic of the uni-dimensional focus rapid and pragmatic policy decisions frequently produce. The fact that the childcare issue was pushed above the policy radar, rather than the role such institutions can play in young children's (rather than parents') lives, fundamentally influenced the shaping and structuring of the policy response.

Similarly, the policy dilemma Ireland's recessionary crisis created, forced government to claw back expenditure costs, which led to the policy decision to replace the costly ECS with the 'cheaper' alternative of a free pre-school year. Deteriorating public finances coupled with escalating unanimity among policy actors regarding the benefits

of ECEC (the ‘value of early learning’ catalyst) provided the ‘window of opportunity’ entrepreneurial civil servants required to secure political approval for the initiative. However, the urgency with which the final decision was taken and the short implementation time frame (7 months from budget announcement) illuminates once again how rapid and crisis policy decisions weaken holistic consideration of the multi-dimensional components of ECEC and fail to pay due attention to strategic requirements to optimise positive experiences for children. The requirement to utilise the unpiloted Siolta programme, discussed in Chapter Seven, to secure preschool funding aid, is illustrative of the policy lacuna in which ‘crisis’ policy decisions are frequently implemented.

In the absence of a consensual underpinning strategy to guide and structure ECEC policy development, the decisions taken during high-salience periods have potentially long-lasting and critical implications, when contextualised within the historic institutionalism framework. The historic institutionalist literature argues that the ‘institutional stickiness’ of policy designs means choices taken during crisis moments create legacies for subsequent politics as ‘path dependencies’ develop and make it difficult to deviate from certain courses once particular institutional arrangement has been adopted (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002; Baumgarnter and Jones, 2001; Neuman, 2007). Thus the decision to support mixed market delivery of ECEC through the EOCP, a decision taken during a crisis opportunistic moment because it represented the *line of least resistance*<sup>278</sup> institutionalised a market-based model where succeeding ECEC policy decisions are likely to add momentum to this, the now ‘locked-in’ dominant paradigm for ECEC delivery in Ireland. The critical implications of this decision is illuminated by the fact that *all* actors within this study conceded that the initial springboard for the development of ECEC policy in Ireland was not *coming from a perspective of what is good for children*, but from a *lot of indirect factors* which were *driving the focus*<sup>279</sup>. Chapter Eight illuminated the many consequences and resultant outstanding weaknesses within the policy system which strategies and measures adopted to date have failed to adequately resolve. The concluding section of this chapter elaborates upon these and synthesises the implications of this research study.

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<sup>278</sup> Core insider narrative

<sup>279</sup> Specialist insider narrative

### **Research Implications: Considering Children within the Policy Environment**

While analysis of the impact of ECEC policy decisions has received considerable critique in the ECEC literature (OECD, 2001; 2004; 2006; NESF, 2005; Bennett, 2006; Bradley & Hayes, 2009), an exploration of ‘behind the scenes’ action and activity which structure and shape these decisions is remarkably less explored (Bown *et al.*, 2009; Moss & Pence, 1994; Neuman, 2007). The development of ECEC policy is fundamentally a political issue (Canella, 2004; Mayall, 2002; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). The failure to explore and analyse the politics behind policy decisions represents a fundamental oversight and one which delimits the necessary levels of reflection and analysis to capture the intricate processes and influences which determine ECEC policy outcomes. This study responds to this research vacuum by ‘zooming out’ from the analysis of final policy decisions to explore the impact of the more nuanced and less disclosed action and activity which catalyse or constrain certain courses of policy action. Its findings illuminate the value of interpretative research with elite groups of actors engaged inside the ‘black box’ of policy making and contributes to enhanced understandings of how the role and status of actors impact on behaviour and influential capacity in ECEC policy decisions. The study also illuminates the value of interpretative research in deconstructing how actors’ constructions and conceptualisations of childhood and ECEC drive and motivate their pursuit of certain courses of action and the evasion and suppression of others which conflict with their core beliefs and value systems.

The murkiness of the policy environment emerges clearly and prominently from this study’s findings. Competition, conflict and disharmony penetrate the inner layers of policy making and result in intense, strategic and manipulative battles amongst the actors as each vie for their favoured policy response. The inner layers represent a battle ground for power where rules, codes and institutionally inscribed, yet tacit parameters govern and dictate order and activity and the likely winners and losers of the policy battle. Subtle and covert forces constantly permeate the environment and suppress and overshadow the action and activity of those actors whose activity and perspectives contravene the voice and preferences of the majority. These processes reveal how relations of power protect and reinforce the prevailing and preferred constructions of ECEC thus protecting the interests of those dominant elites within the policy

environment and the regimes of truth that enshrine them. The inequitable relations of power illuminated in this research highlight how some aspects of ECEC are unmonitored and unattended to, despite their importance, whilst others are prioritised and incorporated into the decision process beyond their intrinsic merit, thus exacerbating issues and frailties within the ECEC sector. These complexities, contestations, uncertainties and the overall murkiness which pervade the policy process (Bridgman & Davis, 2003; Early, 1999; Edwards, 2005; Lindblom, 1959; Osgood, 2004) expose the partiality of rationality and consensus in policy production and draw attention to the importance of uncovering what occurs below the surface.

The most fundamental and pervasive negative impact to emerge from this study's findings relates to the cumulative negative impact of action and activity within the policy making environment on policy outcomes for children. So complex, competitive and conflict filled are the processes which permeate the policy spheres that children are frequently rendered invisible as *indirect factors drive the policy focus* resulting in policy decisions which rarely *come from a perspective of what is good for children*<sup>280</sup>. Findings in Chapter Eight clearly illuminate how the amalgamation of conflict, competition, oppressive behavioural codes, fluctuating issue attention and the alternative agendas and beliefs underlying them culminate in *ad hoc, pragmatic, disconnected* and *expedient* policy decisions in which the child consistently *gets lost*<sup>281</sup>.

Actors' acceptance of the resultant deficiencies of these processes and their tendency to work within and around the boundaries they impose rather than resisting them through the exercise of parrhesia exacerbates the *ad hoc, pragmatic* and contextually insensitive policy approaches which characterise the process. The absence of a clear consensual strategy regarding what we as a nation want for our children and the lack of willingness to 'open up' the necessary levels of debate to develop one, emerged as a core constraint impeding strategic policy design in favour of young children. This is despite the fact that throughout all stages of analysis, unequal relations of power, competition, shifting actor agendas, subtle and oppressive behavioural codes and fluctuating levels of support were criticised for their constraining impact on policy construction and their exacerbating effect on disjointed and panic policy decisions. The inadequacies of these

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<sup>280</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

<sup>281</sup> Peripheral insider narrative

processes consistently led to the rapid replacement of resolved crisis issues with new ones, a not uncommon feature resultant from crisis policy decision making processes (Zahariadis, 2007). The fact that all actors criticised the lack of strategy behind decisions taken in these crisis moments (e.g. limited focus on quality in the EOCP, launch of preschool initiative before curriculum framework piloting) yet conceded to the importance of *seizing opportunities as they arise* illuminates the embedded extent of contradictory and conflictive behaviours within the environment. While all three theories of the policy process illuminate the integral role of opportunism in securing policy progression, this research illuminates how opportunism on its own, in the absence of reflection, debate and analysis of the impact of decisions for young children is palpably inefficient. Similarly, this research illuminates how exploration of social constructions without a conjoined exploration of the role of actors in reinforcing or contesting dominant constructions elides and evades crucial analysis of the integral role of actors and institutions in reinforcing and eviscerating particular constructions of policy issues in policy development. The integrated exploration of these components within this study thus corroborates the arguments of policy analysts who call for the conflation of different families of theories in policy analysis studies (Ball, 2006; Parsons, 2000; Radaelli, 2000; Schlager, 2007).

Policy's failure to tackle the multi-dimensional concerns relating to ECEC (e.g. variable quality had been highlighted as an issue prior to Programme introduction) aggravates and compounds existing policy ills and renders children increasingly vulnerable to variable and uncertain experiences within settings (Cannella, 1999; Dahlberg, 2005, James & Prout 1997; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Even the very welcomed preschool initiative, which, once again, emerged out of crisis was criticised for its failure to tackle the necessary detail and criteria to ensure an optimal implementation environment (the EOCP represented another). Implementation issues frequently emerged in response to national policy initiatives due to the core policy maker's failure collaboratively to engage with peripheral insiders and 'tease out' the various challenges involved in translating policy into action. Osgood (2004) emphasises the importance of 'action oriented bottom-up perspective' which incorporates the views and experiences of practitioners and warns that practitioners' resistance to accepting policy should be not interpreted as pathological or irrational but based upon their knowledge and expertise regarding how certain policy decisions may detrimentally affect professional practice.

Findings highlight how economic concerns provided the most ‘rapid’ catalysts for policy action, a dominant driver that typically provokes much Irish policy development and one which receives considerable criticism for its delimited, narrow and short-term focus (Fanning, 2003; Kirby & Murphy, 2007; Kirby *et al*, 2002; O’Cinneide, 1999). Conversely, the educational and social benefits of ECEC emerged as a more ‘gradual’ influence as policy-oriented learning and global trends amongst like-minded countries gradually inspired increased political acknowledgement of the ‘value’ of ECEC. The slow pace of policy-oriented learning has resonance with the ACF which emphasises the elongated time periods required to discern any palpable shift in the highly resistant core beliefs and core policy beliefs within policy systems (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Thus the more immediately tangible responses to economic triggers clearly amplifies how the voice of the child is at constant risk of relegation as competing adult demands take precedence. These findings once again illuminate the political nature of childhood and the critical importance of the exercise of parrhesia to destabilise dominant regimes and expand policy debate to incorporate the moral and social dimensions of citizenship and democracy.

Government adherence to the classical neo-liberal, low investment model through its ‘sub-contracting’ out of ECEC to the private sector which is characterised by *very variable standards*<sup>282</sup>, minimal regulations and a *huge underdevelopment of the whole employment and career structure* highlights how, despite ‘revolutions’ and ‘positive developments’, the child is still subject to uncertain and potentially negative experiences within settings. Yet, government distancing and the opportunistic and crisis moments which supported its adoption (i.e. the EOCP) have formed a cornerstone of ECEC policy since 2000 and have been further institutionalised through the sub-contracting out of the preschool initiative to the mixed market model developed through the EOCP. Thus, decisions taken in crisis moments frequently carry longer term consequences as the ‘institutional stickiness’ of policy designs creates difficulties in altering policy pathways once certain courses of policy action have been adopted (Pierson, 1993, 2001). Government distancing reinforces the bargaining and brokerage role of the state, as government seeks to appease competing actors’ agendas by upholding market principles to sustain its sub-contraction of ECEC delivery to the

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<sup>282</sup> Core insider narrative

private sector. The profit-focused imperative which this supports ultimately infers a prioritised focus on *how* various aspects of delivery *are going to affect their bottom line* rather than the prioritisation of services structures which maximise *benefits to the child*, a finding that is replicated in international states where private sector provision predominates (Goodfellow, 2005; Moss & Petrie, 2002; OECD, 2006; Osgood, 2004; Penn, 2007; Sumsion, 2006).

Core policy makers insist the ECEC policy is driven by children's needs and policy and provisions are structured around what children need and what is best for children, yet the 'murkiness', 'dark matter' and conflicting 'gravitational pull' which penetrate and pervade all aspects and spheres of the policy environment gravely undermine such a proposition. The oppressive dominance of traditional needs-based constructions of childhood and a palpable resistance to 'open up' the policy space to alternative paradigms amplifies the improbability of such an occurrence in the Irish context in the absence of radical change at both a subsystem, macro political and public level.

Cumulatively this research study's findings highlight: how a legislative and policy failure to extricate children conceptually from parents and family constrains policy actors' constructions and conceptualisations of childhood and ECEC within a prohibitively narrow space; how a reliance on exogenous catalysts (rarely directly related to children) to initiate policy action relegates children and their needs and rights to the periphery as competing drivers pushing attention to the issue receive policy priority; how political anxiety and government distancing reduce government power and responsibility for children and intensify bargaining and negotiation among adult actors (policy makers and providers) thus creating an austere barrier to positioning the child at the core of policy making; and how a resistance to resolve conflict through debate on 'what we as a nation want for our children' hinders a consensual and strategic policy embrace in ECEC. Thus, in the absence of significant change that exposes and disrupts dominant structures and processes within the present policy making environment, policy development will most likely continue to protect majority interests and reinforce children's peripheral and highly vulnerable location within the complex maze of competing interests and forces.

## **Future Research**

As a preliminary study in a relatively unexplored and highly complex area this initial study focused on one of a possible five categories of core policy makers and three categories of insiders to ensure sufficient richness and depth of data to provide a reliable and authentic account of the behind the scenes nuances and intricacies which structure, shape and determine the policy outcome. As with any preliminary study, its findings highlighted further areas of potential analysis which could enhance and expand comprehension of the policy process even further and thus aid those policy advocates seeking to disrupt dominant policy paradigms from their position of primacy and ‘open up’ the policy environment to the currently marginalised paradigms of the new sociology of childhood and children’s rights. Two key further areas of research emerged in this regard.

The first emanates from this study’s findings regarding the highly elitist yet critically important decision-making sphere of policy making where access is confined to a select elite of core policy makers. Insiders were frequently unable to determine why the advice they prepared and offered to core policy makers was excluded or disregarded once policy proposals entered this sphere of policy making and largely attributed their limited influence to the differential relations of power which dominate within this policy making sphere. Two groups of core policy makers – politicians and senior civil servants within the Department of Finance - were consistently identified as particularly powerful within this sphere of policy making, an important finding, which could be duly explored through an interpretative research study which explores these actors’ perspectives and experiences of the policy process. Such a study could potentially shed further light on key forces, drivers and activities within the decision making sphere and thus further illuminate how the activities of core policy makers – at the macro political institutional level - drive and influence final policy decisions in this, the most secretive sphere of policy making.

## **Conclusion**

This research study germinated from a wider research project, *ECEC in Ireland: Towards a Rights-Based Policy Approach* which aimed to identify explanatory causes for the Irish government’s persistent resistance to the development of a rights-based



universal ECEC system. This research study aimed to contribute to this broader research project by exploring how the action and activity of policy actors within the less visible and exclusive inner-spheres of policy making influences ECEC policy development. The study's findings identify fundamental weaknesses within the policy making system which constrain cohesive policy design in favour of young children. It is intended that this study's findings, combined with those of the additional three research strands will provide a robust and reliable data source to enhance policy-oriented learning and aid policy actors ameliorate and resolve the current ills and frailties that permeate the policy system and thus progress towards a rights-based policy approach where children are prioritised in ECEC policy development.

Moss & Pence (1994) emphasise how the complexity of an early childhood education and care system in a modern society can only be developed within an open framework, which sets values and overall goals and describes the purpose of early childhood institutions in a social and cultural context. This research highlights the many overt and covert processes rippling through the policy environment which work to impede and block such 'open' policy development. By shedding light behind the scenes of policy development and revealing these previously covert blockages, barriers and constraints, this research 'opens up' the policy environment and creates possibilities for change. The introductory chapter highlighted how policy making effectively represents a play for power - a battle to determine how gets what – where the policy outcome depends on how competing actors within the collectivity behave and what deals are possible within the given context (Everett, 2003). Understanding how and why policy develops in the manner that it does, and why some actors have more success than others in policy deliberations and debates enables those marginalised and silenced actors to disrupt the prevailing regimes of power by contesting and undermining the very forces which currently suppress them. By creating pressure and convincing those conservers of the dominant paradigm that there are alternatives, that better serve our children, possibilities are created to 'open up' the currently barricaded framework to pivotal ideological debate about what it is that 'we as a nation want for our children'.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A:

### EOCP, NCIP & PRESCHOOL INITIATIVE

#### **The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000 – 2006)**

The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 – 2006 was launched as an element of the National Development Plan 2000 – 2006 (NDP) and is largely funded through the two Regional Operational Programmes for the Border, Midlands and Western Region (BMW) and the Southern and Eastern Region (S&E) respectively. The main objectives of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme are:

- To improve the quality of childcare;
- To maintain and increase the number of childcare facilities and places; and
- To introduce a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services.

Under the Programme financial provision was made available under three sub-measures:

***Sub-measure One:*** Capital assistance for community/not-for-profit organizations and self-employed/private providers towards the cost of building, renovation, upgrading or equipping childcare facilities;

- *Capital Grant Scheme for Community/Not for profit organisations*

This capital scheme applies to community based/not-for-profit groups or organisations or to a community/not-for-profit consortium of private and community groups, providing support towards the building, renovation, upgrading or equipping of community based childcare facilities. Grant assistance of up to 100 per cent of development costs can be provided.

- *Capital Grant Scheme for Self-employed Childcare Providers.*

This capital scheme applies to self-employed providers catering for not more than 20 children at any one time, providing support of up to 65 per cent of costs towards the building, renovation, upgrading or equipping of childcare facilities with a maximum available grant of €50,790.

- *Capital Grant Scheme for Private Childcare Providers*

This capital scheme applies to commercial providers of more than 20 childcare places and provides support towards building, renovation, upgrading or equipping of childcare facilities with a maximum available grant of €50,790.

***Sub-measure Two:*** Staffing grants for community/not-for-profit organizations or a not-for-profit consortium of community organizations and private providers towards the cost of staff for community-based provision in disadvantaged areas;

This scheme applies to a community based/not-for-profit group or organisation or a community/not-for-profit consortium of private and community groups, providing support towards staffing costs for community based childcare in disadvantaged areas. Staffing grant assistance contributes towards the cost of a number of posts of childcare worker within a facility. Staffing grant assistance is most usually awarded for a period of three years and it was intended that projects receiving staffing support would move towards sustainability at the end of the three year period when this is possible. However given that disadvantage is a key criterion, it is likely that many facilities will require ongoing supports at the end of the initial three year period.

***Sub-measure Three:*** Improving quality through:

- (i) The provision of finance to support National Childcare & Voluntary Organisations
- (ii) Developing local childcare networks through County/City Childcare Committees
- (iii) Funding innovative projects with the capacity to be replicated and
- (iv) The development of a range of supports for childminders through County/City Childcare Committees.

[Source: Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2004, *A Review of Progress to End 2003 on the Implementation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 – 2006*, DJELR: Dublin.]

## **National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 - 2010**

The Programme aims to provide a proactive response to the development of quality childcare supports and services, which are grounded in an understanding of local needs.

### **Key Objectives**

- Increase the supply and improve the quality of early childhood care and education services, part-time and full day care, school age childcare and childminding.
- Support families to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.
- Support a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare, which is centred on the needs of the child.

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has responsibility of all aspects of policy concerning children including childcare, child protection and welfare, juvenile justice and early years education.

Key provisions under the National Childcare Strategy included:

- Tax relief for childminding and for investment in childcare facilities;
- The provision of an Early Childcare Supplement worth EUR 1,000 per annum for parents of children under six years of age;
- Increase in Child Benefit payments;
- Increase in the duration of paid and unpaid maternity leave
- The establishment of a new *National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP)* to support the creation of 50,000 new childcare places, including 10,000 pre-school places and 5,000 afterschool places;
- Development of a National Childcare Training Strategy which will aim to provide 17,000 childcare training places during 2006-10, and include quality and training provisions of the NCIP;
- Targeting the early childhood education needs of children from areas of acute economic and social disadvantage through DEIS (the action plan for educational inclusion);
- Relevant departments and agencies working together to complement and add value to childcare programmes in disadvantaged communities with a view to ensuring overall care and education needs are met in an integrated manner. This includes the

provision of education related professional support and training to existing providers, together with a curriculum and quality framework for early childhood education;

- Steps to standardise and improve inspections under the Child Care (Pre School) Regulations by publishing amended 2006 regulations and providing training for inspectors across the HSE, establishing improved administrative systems to facilitate a national standardised inspection service and ensuring that standardised inspection reports are publicly available, and;
- Support and encouragement of school facilities being made available for childcare provision as a key addition to the utilisation, development and support of local community facilities

[Source: Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants (2007), *Value for Money Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*. Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.]



### **The PreSchool Initiative (2009)**

In the Supplementary Budget of April 2009, the government announced the phasing out of the Early Childcare Supplement<sup>283</sup> and its replacement with a year's free preschool for all children between the ages of 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months from January 2010. A capitation grant will be payable to all settings participating in the Programme. Under the Scheme:

- All participating services must be notified to the HSE as a pre-school service and have a satisfactory level of compliance with the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006<sup>284</sup>.
- Exceptions (relating to eligible age bracket) will be allowed where children have been assessed by the HSE as having special needs which will delay their entry to school or it is appropriate to accept children at an older age due to the enrolment policy of the local primary school.
- Services are required to have a minimum enrolment of 8 children in their pre-school year<sup>285</sup>.
- Participating services must agree to provide an appropriate educational programme, which adheres to the principles of Síolta<sup>286</sup>.
- A pre-school year catering for 16 to 20 children, as appropriate to the setting, must be delivered by a Pre-school year Leader assisted by a childcare worker. Where a pre-school year caters for not more than 8 or 10 children, as appropriate, it must be delivered by a Pre-school year Leader.

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<sup>283</sup> The monthly supplement payment is to be halved to €41.50 per child from 1 May 2009 and abolished at end May 2009.

<sup>284</sup> During the period January 2010 – August 2010, services registered with the Irish Montessori Educational Board (IMEB) will be considered to meet this requirement.

<sup>285</sup> Exceptions will be considered in the case of services which have an enrolment of at least 8 children but, for good reason, only 3 or more are in their pre-school year and the remainder will be eligible for a pre-school year in the following year, and smaller services which are considered appropriate but, who for good reason, have an enrolment of not less than 5 children in their pre-school year ([http://OMCYA.gov.ie/documents/childcare/ecce\\_scheme\\_pack/Final\\_ECCE\\_General\\_Terms\\_and\\_Conditions.doc](http://OMCYA.gov.ie/documents/childcare/ecce_scheme_pack/Final_ECCE_General_Terms_and_Conditions.doc)).

<sup>286</sup> Services will be supported in meeting this requirement through the assistance of Síolta Co-ordinators, funded for this purpose, and by their local county childcare committee.

- Pre-school year Leaders must hold a certification for a major award in childcare/early education at a minimum of level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland (NFQ) or an equivalent nationally recognised qualification or a higher award in the childcare/early education field. During the first 2 full years of the scheme, the qualification requirement will be considered to be met where a person can demonstrate that he or she has achieved a certification for an award in ECCE that includes significant content relating to early childhood education/early learning and child development and has at least 2 years experience of working in a position of responsibility with children in the 0-6 age range.
- Services will be paid in a capitation grant for eligible children enrolled and attending its service, at the start of each term or quarter, as applicable. They can participate in the scheme on the basis of a number of options.

A playschool sessional service will be required to provide a pre-school service for 3 hours per day, five days a week for 38 weeks (183 days) per year, in return for a capitation fee of €64.50 per week. (During January/June 2010, the capitation grant will be payable in respect of 23 weeks). Where for good reason a sessional service is unable to operate over 5 days, consideration will be given to allowing it to participate in the scheme on the basis of providing the pre-school year for 3 hours 30 minutes per day for 4 days per week. In such cases, a service will be required to provide the pre-school year over 41 weeks (157 days) and references to 38 week services should be taken as applicable to these services.

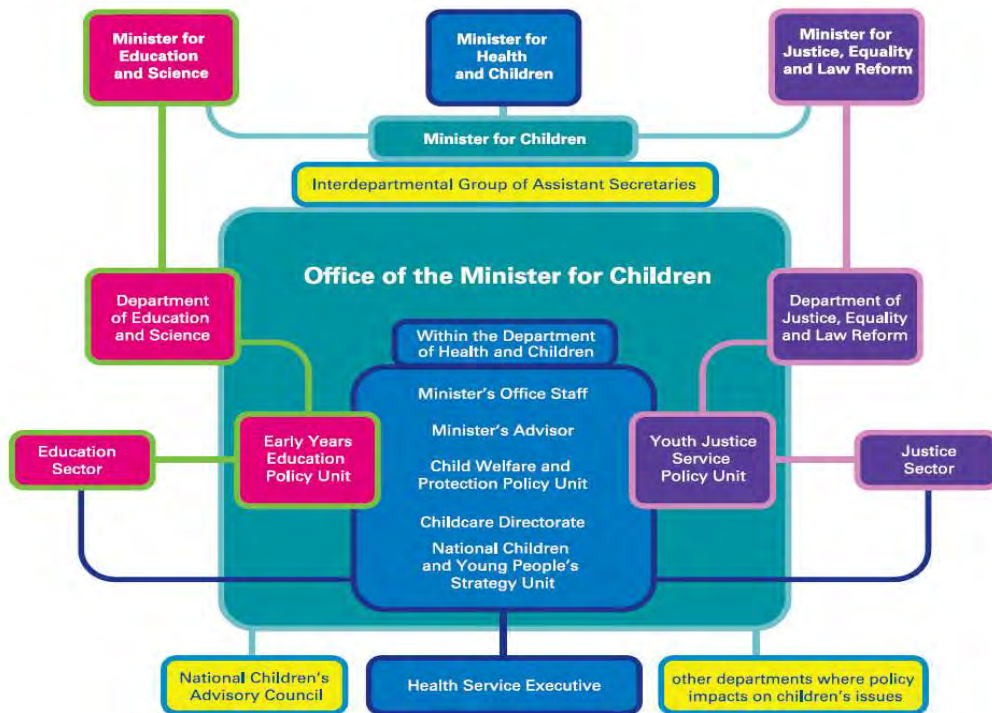
A full or part-time daycare service will be required to provide a pre-school service for 2 hours 15 minutes per day, five days a week for 50 weeks (241 days) per year, in return for the capitation fee of €48.50 per week. (During January/August 2010, the capitation grant will be payable in respect of 35 weeks.) Where for good reason one or more children attend a full or part-time daycare service for 3 days a week only, consideration will be given to allowing it to participate in the scheme on the basis of providing the pre-school year to those children for 3 hours 45 minutes per day for 3 days per week. In

such cases, a service will be required to provide the pre-school year over 50 weeks (145 days) and references to 50 week services should be taken as applicable to these services.

[Source: Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs (2011). Retrieved from: [http://OMCYA.gov.ie/documents/childcare/ecce\\_scheme\\_pack/Final\\_ECCE\\_General\\_Terms\\_and\\_Conditions.doc](http://OMCYA.gov.ie/documents/childcare/ecce_scheme_pack/Final_ECCE_General_Terms_and_Conditions.doc), (Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011)]

## APPENDIX B

### STRUCTURE OF THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH AFFAIRS



Source: Langford, S. (2008). *Children's Services Policy Context*. Researching Children's Worlds, Sharing Knowledge to Improve Action, Galway 26<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> February

**APPENDIX C  
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: QUESTION GUIDE**

<b>THEME</b>	<b>INDICATOR</b>	<b>DATA OBJECTIVES</b>
<b>ACTOR CONTEXT</b>	<p>Role and objectives of the actor &amp; institution                      Role &amp; duties relating to children &amp; children's rights                      Experience/Background in terms of working with children/understandings of children's rights/ECEC                      Role in ECEC policy design</p>	<p><b>Location of actor in concept map</b>  <b>Actor's role in policy development</b>  <b>Potential influential factors informing perspectives</b></p>
<b>TRADITIONS, VALUES &amp; INCREMENTAL POLICY MAKING</b>	<p>What do you believe are the core contextual factors which led to policy focus on (1) ECEC (2) children's rights                       Do you think there are core values/traditions which impact on policy approaches in ECEC? Elaborate</p>	<p><b>Factors/events driving the policy focus and design</b>   <b>Evolving perspectives which may restrict policy evolution/change</b></p>

(Continued)

THEME	INDICATOR	DATA OBJECTIVES
<p><b>INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES &amp; GLOBAL INFLUENCES ON NATIONAL POLICY DESIGN</b></p>	<p>To what extent do you think national policy decisions are influenced by global policy approaches? Do you think there are specific countries, actors/agencies which influence Irish policy design?</p> <p>What effect do you think EU membership has had on space for national policy decisions? How do you think EU policy has influenced Irish policy design? Elaborate.</p>	<p><b>Measuring global influences on national policy design. Interpreting preferential policy approaches based on international comparison.</b></p> <p><b>Measuring European influence on national policy design. Interpretation of EU policy</b></p>
<p><b>NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING PROCESSES &amp; INSIDER/OUTSIDER INFLUENCES ON POLICY DESIGN</b></p>	<p>Informed through political and policy modelling processes, a model of the layers of policy development has been devised (show model). Do you think this model an appropriate representation of policy making structures in Irish policy design? (Elaborate). Where would you locate yourself in the model? (Elaborate). When thinking of ECEC policy, who from your experience would be the key actors across the other layers?</p> <p>What are the key determinants in deciding whom to consult around policy decisions? How are contributions of actors – insiders/outsideers weighted? What are key drivers/considerations in policy decisions?</p> <p>How would you describe Ireland’s approach to ECEC policy? What do you think are the implications of this approach to ECEC?</p>	<p><b>Perspectives on comprehensiveness of concept map. Actors perspective on their and other actors location within the concept map.</b></p> <p><b>Analysis of policy decision-making structures, assessment of key determinants in policy making decisions</b></p> <p><b>Identification of challenges within the policy making system which inhibit structural and committed focus to ECEC policy.</b></p>

(Continued)

THEME	INDICATOR	DATA OBJECTIVES
<p><b>PERSPECTIVES ON ECEC &amp; IRISH POLICY DESIGN</b></p>	<p>How would you describe government's approach to ECEC policy? Do you think there are clear objectives/purposes? (Elaborate)</p> <p>In your opinion, what form the key components of a quality ECE system? How effective do you think government policy has been in ensuring a quality system?</p> <p>Do you think there his political support for ECEC?</p> <p><b>Interrogating ECEC Policy</b></p> <p>I'm going to list a number of key EC funding initiatives from 2000.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. EOCP &amp; NCIP (2000 – 2010)</li> <li>2. ECS</li> <li>3. ECEC Initiative (Budget 2009)</li> </ol> <p>Can you tell me:</p> <p>What do you think were key drivers leading to introduction of each of these policies?</p> <p>Key objectives of these policies?</p> <p>What effect do you think each of these has had on ECEC?</p> <p>Their strengths/weaknesses in supporting children's rights? (do they represent approaches towards meeting children's rights?)</p> <p>In the majority of EU – and a growing number of international countries – ECEC is regarded as a citizenship right for all young children. Why do you think Irish government was so resistant to introduction of universal ECEC for so long?</p> <p>What do you see as key strengths and challenges in the introduction of universal ECEC?</p>	<p><b>Perspectives on current ECEC Policy. Strengths/Weaknesses.</b></p> <p><b>Actors Perspectives on ideal ECEC system</b></p> <p><b>Perspectives on political system and ECEC</b></p> <p><b>Perspectives on Key ECEC Initiatives (Selected to explore perspectives on 3 key approaches, market based, universal payment systems and move towards universal ECEC)</b></p> <p><b>Perspectives on factors causing government resistance to ECEC</b></p>

THEME	INDICATOR	DATA OBJECTIVES
<p><b>CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD &amp; CHILDREN'S</b></p>	<p><b><i>Contextualising Childhood</i></b>  Much of the global debate and most contested arguments ultimately rest on whether children are viewed as fellow citizens or citizens in the making? What is your opinion on this?</p> <p>There has been much debate about the need for a Constitutional Referendum on Children's Rights in Ireland. What do you think are the key factors which have led to this debate? Do you feel such a referendum is needed? (Elaborate). Under current Constitutional Framework, how would you interpret the state's responsibility towards children?</p> <p>Developing indicators for monitoring the implementation of a right to education is not an easy task. It is furthermore impossible if one does not start from a <i>clearly defined conceptual framework</i>? In your opinion, what are essential principles/requirements in the design of a rights-based framework in ECEC?</p> <p>What, in your opinion, are key challenges to achieving this (development of rights-based ECEC policies) in Ireland?</p>	<p><b>Assessment of constructions of childhood and perceptions on children's rights.</b></p> <p><b>Perspectives on current constitutional strengths and weaknesses for children's rights and the policy implications of these conceptualisations.</b></p> <p><b>Perspectives on features essential to design of rights-based framework and challenges to achieving these</b></p>



## **APPENDIX D**

### **PROFILE OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS**

#### **The National Economic and Social Council (NESC)**

Established in 1973, NESC is charged with analysing and reporting to the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) on strategic issues concerning economic and social development and plays an important role in analysing Ireland's social and economic development challenges in a way that has helped to inform, challenge and reframe how Government and civil society look at the issues and the available policy options (NESC, 2011).

The role of the Council is to try and build consensus among those social partners, that group of actors on strategic development of public policy and to advise the government, through the Taoiseach, on those matters (NESC, 2011).

The Council, which operates under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach, is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and includes representatives (five of each) of employers; trade unions; farmers' organizations; NGOs from the community, voluntary and environmental sectors; together with key government departments and eminent independent members with expertise across a range of economic and social science disciplines (NESC, 2011).

#### **Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC)**

The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) was formed in 1993 as a result of a merger between the Confederation of Irish Industry (CII) and the Federation of Irish Employers (FIE). The CII was originally founded in 1932 and the FIE in 1942 (IBEC, 2011).

IBEC is the national umbrella organisation for business and employers in Ireland. Its policies and procedures, set by a national council and a board, are implemented by an executive management group. At a practical level, IBEC provides its membership base of over 7000 organisations with knowledge, influence and connections. IBEC staff offer

practical employer services as well as the opportunity to network and lobby at an industry level through a web of over 60 business sector associations (IBEC, 2011).

IBEC work to influence the government, regulatory bodies and others to maintain a positive climate for business and employers in Ireland. IBEC represent employers at national level and are a member of the business/employers pillar of social partnership and centrally involved in negotiation and monitoring of partnership agreements and pay talks (IBEC, 2011).

IBEC executives and nominees from member organisations also represent the interests of employers on a range of committees and bodies that influence workplace policy the Equality Authority, The National Centre for Partnership and Performance, the National Employment Rights Authority and the National Disability Authority (IBEC, 2011).

### **Irish Congress for Trade Unions (ICTU)**

Congress is the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland, representing and campaigning on behalf of some 832,000 working people with 55 unions affiliated to Congress, north and south of the border. It engages with Government, employers, civil society organisations, voluntary groups and international bodies to promote its attainment to support unions in their efforts to secure a fairer distribution of the wealth their members create (ICTU, 2011).

ICTU is a representative of the trade union pillar of social partnership and aims to influence government action on key areas such as taxation, employment legislation, education and social policy. In general terms, the role of Congress is to:

- Represent and advance the economic and social interests of working people;
- Negotiate national agreements with government and employers, when mandated to do so by constituent and member unions;
- Promote the principles of trade unionism through campaigns and policy development.
- Provide information, advice and training to unions and their members;
- Assist with the resolution of disputes between unions and employers;
- Regulate relations between unions and ruling on inter-union disputes (ICTU, 2011).

### **The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)**

The NCCA was established on a statutory basis in 2001. The council is a representative structure, the membership of which is determined by the Minister for Education and Science. The 25 members come from the organizations representing teachers, school managers, parents, employers, trade unions, early childhood education, language interests and third level education. Other members include representatives from the Department of Education and Science, the State Examinations Commission and a Nominee of the Minister. The NCCA is funded by the Exchequer through the DES (NCCA, 2011a).

Its mission is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary<sup>287</sup> and post-primary schools. This advice is generated through engagement with schools and educational settings, with committees and working groups and is informed by research, evaluation and foresight (NCCA, 2011a).

In October 2009, the NCCA published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* the outcome of extensive research, consultation, planning, and development by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector. *Aistear* is for all children from birth to six years, designed for use in the range of early childhood settings including children's own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services and infant classes in primary schools. The Framework uses four interconnected themes to describe the content of children's learning and development: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. *Aistear* highlights the critical role of play, relationships and language for young children's learning. In doing this, it provides a guide to using play, interactions, partnerships with parents, and assessment to help children progress in their learning and development. The Framework has both implicit and explicit links with the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). With its focus on children from birth to six years, *Aistear* can play an important role in the NCCA's ongoing review of the Primary School

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<sup>287</sup> Early childhood refers to the period from birth to six years while primary education caters for the period from six to 12 years, although in reality most five-year-olds and about half of the country's four-year-olds attend primary school.

Curriculum (1999) and in supporting continuity and progression in children's learning<sup>288</sup> (NCCA, 2011b).

### **Children's Rights Alliance (CRA)**

Established in 1995, The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of over 90 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to secure the rights and needs of children in Ireland, by campaigning for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It aims to improve the lives of all children under 18, through securing the necessary changes in Ireland's laws, policies and services (CRA, 2011a).

Many of its member organisations are prominent in the children's sector- working directly with children on a daily basis across the country. The Alliance's policies, projects and activities are developed through ongoing collaboration and consultation with its member organisations (CRA, 2011a).

The Alliance policy team, along with the Chief Executive, represents the Alliance on the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partnership. As a designated Social Partner since 2003, the Alliance uses its position to advocate on behalf of children, which provides the organisation with more direct access to elements of the policy-making process (CRA, 2011b).

### **Barnardos**

Barnardos is an international charity that 'provides a range of services to children and families to increase their emotional well-being and improve learning and development'. In Ireland, the organization has more than 40 community based centres, national services and links with other partners organizations (Barnardos, 2008).

Barnardos seeks to change and improve Governmental laws, policies and procedures across all areas that affect children's lives by ensuring that the knowledge, experience and insights Barnardos has gained through working with children and families are heard at Governmental level. These experiences are wide ranging and can relate to education,

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<sup>288</sup> [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Early\\_Childhood\\_and\\_Primary\\_Education/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/)

health, child protection, poverty and housing. Barnardos believes it is vital for the child's voice to be heard in policy making as it will assist in creation of more child centred policies and laws (Barnardos, 2008).

Barnardos influence the political system through a range of mediums including public awareness - surveys, posters, billboards and campaign websites calling on for public support; media - TV, radio interviews and print media articles; political meetings with Government and opposition parties; meetings with key stakeholders and policy makers; compiling evidenced based policy submissions to influence work of Governmental committees and departments (Barnardos, 2011).

### **National Childrens & Nurseries Association (NCNA)**

NCNA is a membership organisation for providers of quality full day care and after school care for children and represents over 700 providers of childcare in Ireland today (NCNA, 2011a).

NCNA represents its members on the National Childcare Coordinating Body; by lobbying at local and government level on issues affecting the childcare sector; by being members of the Children's Rights Alliance; on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and On the Preschool Standardisation Report Writing Group (NCNA, 2011a).

NCNA provides a range of resources for its members developed in conjunction with childcare professionals including Preschool Officers, Environmental Health Officers and Fire Officers. Accident/Incident Book, Medical Records, Child Records, Staff Record Book, Child/Staff Attendance Register, Towards Quality Daycare-Minimum Quality Standards in a Nursery, plus many more. NCNA regularly update the resources and publications to ensure that they are current, relevant and take on board member suggestions (NCNA, 2011b).

### **Irish Preschool & Playgroups Association (IPPA)**

IPPA is the largest NCVO with 2,500 members and is committed to supporting its members in providing quality education, play and care for children. As part of its

support programme, the Association engages in the development of training to meet the needs of adult learners for accredited, flexible, supportive training courses and nationally and internationally acceptable qualifications (IPPA, 2011). For over thirty years, IPPA has participated in the development of early childhood education and care services and policy development and advocacy on behalf of children, parents and providers and regularly engages in intensive lobbying for resources to support childcare providers and parents. The IPPA are represented on County Childcare Committees, the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee, and includes regular submission to Government, Health Services Executives and the European Commission on a wide range of subjects from budget allocations to the National Children's Strategy to Child Protection Guidelines as part of its advocacy work (IPPA, 2011a).

The Association has participated in the development of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, The Working Group on the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 2006, the Expert Working Group on Childcare (1998 – 1999), the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998), the FAS Trainee Working Group and Task Forces and Committees concerned with services to young children and their families. It regularly collaborates with the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs), with international childcare organisation and Start Strong (IPPA, 2011b).

### **StartStrong**

Start Strong was originally founded in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) by a coalition of organisations and individuals with the dual aims of progressing the early care and education agenda in Ireland and advocating increased investment in supports and services. and evolved into Start Strong in 2009. Start Strong is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Katherine Howard Foundation and the Irish Youth Foundation. Start Strong's policies, projects, campaigns and activities are developed through ongoing collaboration with its members, drawing on research and evidence, and the views and experience of members (Start Strong 2011a).

Its Strategic Plan *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future* is based on five key principles: *Children come first* (Children's well-being and development should be the driving force in policies on early care and education), *High quality* (Government must

prioritise quality in services and supports for young children and their families), *All young children* (High quality services and supports should be universal - provided for all children, affordable and accessible - with additional supports for those who need them), *All families* (A wide range of mainstream supports should be readily available to all families) and *Linked services*. (Well-coordinated services and supports for young children and their families). The Strategic Plan forms the basis of their advocacy work with at local, national and international level (Start Strong, 2011b).

### **Atlantic Philanthropies Ireland**

The Atlantic Philanthropies is an international foundation dedicated to making lasting changes in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Its Children & Youth Programme in the Republic of Ireland has an ultimate goal of *keeping children engaged in learning and healthy through investments in prevention*. Its strategy for achieving this aim focuses on improving the service delivery system for children and youth by promoting services with evidence of effectiveness and prevention and early intervention strategies that foster healthy development<sup>289</sup> (Atlantic Philanthropies, 2011).

In February 2006, Atlantic Philanthropies launched its co-funded and co-partnered *Prevention and Early Intervention Investment Programme* (PEIP) program which aims to support and promote better outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas. The Programme targets three areas of severe disadvantage in which there is evidence of the need for early intervention (Tallaght, Ballymun and the Northside Communities of Belcamp, Darndale and Moatview). The Programme, planned for an initial five year period has a total budget of €36 million (€18 million from the OMCYA and €18 million from The Atlantic Philanthropies). The Government agreed that the best use of this funding would be to focus on a small number of projects in severely disadvantaged communities. A key element of the PEIPC will be the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of both the outcomes of the activities undertaken and learning from the individual projects, thus providing an important input to policy and service development (Department of Health & Children, 2009).

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<sup>289</sup> [www.atlanticphilanthropies.ie](http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.ie)

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## APPENDIX E: LETTER OF REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY



Date

[Address]

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

### **Re: Participation Request in IRCHSS Thematic Research Project**

I work as Senior Researcher within the Centre for Social & Educational Research (CSER) in DIT specialising in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy. In 2007, having completed a number of ECEC related studies with Professor Noirin Hayes, we developed a research proposal to respond to calls from the UNCRC ‘to develop national and local capacities for early childhood research, especially from a rights based perspective’. On the basis of this proposal we were awarded a three year research grant by the Irish Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) to undertake thematic research on *ECEC in Ireland: Towards a Rights Based Policy Approach*.

As part of this project, I am undertaking doctoral research on the topic, *Insider and Outsider Perspectives on Rights-Based Approaches to Policy Making in ECEC*. Informed through political and policy modelling, this research strand hierarchically maps key actors ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the policy-making process and seeks to gather important empirical data on how those involved think about, construct and practice ECEC policy. Given your experience and achievements within the area, I feel your contribution at this stage of the research could provide vital and invaluable data to support the project’s key objective: the design of a rights-based framework within which ECEC policy design could occur. To this end, I have designed a semi-structured interview which explores the following key themes: traditions, value bases and incremental policy making, international governance and global influences on policy design, national policy-making processes and influences on policy design, perspectives on ECEC and Irish policy approaches and perspectives on children’s rights. The interview will take about an hour to complete. All data you give will be confidential – you will be identified only as a ‘key policy actor’ on one of the four hierarchical policy layers.

I understand that you have a busy schedule, but I do hope that you would seriously consider my invitation. I believe your participation will assist in elevating awareness around the issues of children's rights and ECEC and will provide new and unique data to support advancing collaboration between academic knowledge and policy formation thus support us in achieving our aim; the design of a rights-based policy framework as advocated in the UNCRC and *National Children's Strategy*.

If you would like to discuss any of these matters further, or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me telephone (01 402 7609) or email ([siobhan.bradley@dit.ie](mailto:siobhan.bradley@dit.ie)). I am happy to conduct the interview at the most convenient time and location for you. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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Siobhan Bradley  
Senior Researcher, CSER, DIT  
Associate Investigator & Doctoral Student, *ECEC in Ireland: Towards a Rights-Based Policy Approach*

## **APPENDIX F:**

### **CONSENT FORM**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my PhD Study exploring insider and outsider perspectives on policy making processes in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Your time and input is greatly appreciated. The study seeks to gather important empirical data from those involved in ECEC policy making processes on their perspectives of the ECEC policy making process in Ireland. Key themes explored in the interview relate to the role of traditions and values in ECEC policy making, international governance and global influences on policy decision, national policy making processes and influences on policy design and perspectives on ECEC and Irish policy approaches and perspectives on childrens' rights.

All information obtained during the course of the interview will remain anonymous and confidential. You may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation from the study at any time. The results of the research will be included in my doctoral thesis and may also be presented at conferences and published in academic journals but no personal identifying information will be included in presentations or publications.

If you are happy to be included in the study, please sign below:

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX G:  
DEVELOPMENT OF THEMATIC NETWORK 1:**

**IDENTIFICATION OF THEMES**

<b>Codes (Step 1)</b>	<b>Issues Discussed</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
<p>Consultative endemic Free, fluid access Informal important</p>	<p>Wide engagement/consultation Myriad actors/domains/objectives Multi-directional relationships Informal, cordial and parochial engagement Exchange, resource-based relationships Subtle rules govern access and participation Ongoing consultation central to relationships</p>	<p>Open and cordial consultation forms an integral and embedded aspect of the policy process</p>
<p>International comparisons Rich learning environment Like minded countries</p>	<p>Like-minded countries (similar behaviour, customs, systems) prioritised. Usage of international learning to justify policy approach International comparison reports useful to advance action EU Funding important opportunity Difficulties in measuring the extent of international impact Supranational organisations provide useful advocacy support No direct transfer of policies Absorption of international thinking into national knowledge</p>	<p>The international environment provides a rich learning context for national ECEC policy development</p>

<b>Codes (Step 1)</b>	<b>Issues Discussed</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
<p>Conflict in decision-making</p> <p>Competition</p> <p>Different power/authority</p> <p>Strict status rules</p>	<p>Multiple actors with competing agendas</p> <p>Competition and battle to influence policy outcome</p> <p>Several layers and types of conflict:</p> <p>Politicians personal and private agendas</p> <p>Power of the voting system</p> <p>Different government department agendas</p> <p>Behavioural codes govern civil servant relationships with politicians</p> <p>Dept Finances – Separate/powerful – holds purse strings</p> <p>Subtle rules govern behaviours and manage conflict</p> <p>Secrecy and loyalty important</p>	<p>Internal government conflict and competition amongst actors exacerbates difficulty in policy decisions</p>
<p>Elitist decision-making</p> <p>Centrality of power</p> <p>Secretive decisions</p>	<p>Exclusion of insiders after consultation.</p> <p>Closed and private decision-making stage, limited access</p> <p>Secretive process – ‘black box’ of decision-making.</p> <p>Frustrating for insiders</p> <p>Exclusion impedes capacity to influence</p>	<p>Closed and elitist decision-making sphere with confined access to inner elite government actors</p>
<p>National autonomy</p>	<p>National autonomy in final policy decisions emphasised</p> <p>No guarantee international learning will be incorporated</p> <p>National ideologies, political culture most important</p> <p>No direct transfer of policies – Irish flavour in all</p>	<p>National influences and priorities more important than international and govern/dictate final decisions</p>
<p>Policy resistant to change</p> <p>Slow and incremental</p> <p>Developing existing provisions</p> <p>Maintain Stability</p>	<p>Normally very difficult to secure innovative change</p> <p>Policy usually developed in non-radical, incremental steps</p> <p>Uncertainty and policy paralysis</p> <p>Risk avoidance and conflict aversion slows down change</p> <p>Incremental policy development - safer and neutral policy framework</p>	<p>Incremental policy development is the preferred policy choice wherever feasible in policy decision-making.</p>
<p>Crisis events</p> <p>System shocks</p> <p>Radical and urgent policy change</p> <p>Policy entrepreneurs</p>	<p>Sudden, unexpected events and crisis produce radical policy decisions</p> <p>Exploitation of opportunities by policy entrepreneurs vital</p> <p>Rare but important moments that alter the course of policy action</p> <p>Uni-dimensional focus</p> <p>Long term change results from crisis moments</p>	<p>Exploitation of crisis moments generates rapid and radical policy change</p>

### THEMATIC NETWORK 1: CONSTRUCTION OF GLOBAL NETWORK

Themes as Basic sub-themes	Organising Themes	Global Themes
<p>Open and cordial consultation forms an integral and embedded aspect of the policy process [consultation endemic]</p> <p>The international environment provides a rich learning context for national ECEC policy development [international influences]</p>	<p>Consultation and international influences are vital components in knowledge acquisition sphere of policy making [knowledge acquisition]</p>	<p>The policy-making process: Action &amp; Activity of Actors</p>
<p>Closed and elitist decision-making sphere with confined access to inner elite government actors [closed and elitist]</p> <p>Internal government conflict and competition amongst actors exacerbates difficulty in policy decisions [conflict and competition]</p> <p>National influences and priorities more important than international and govern/dictate final decisions [national autonomy]</p>	<p>Depiction of key characteristics within the decision-making sphere of policy making [decision-making]</p>	
<p>The preferred and predominant modus operandi in policy making is slow and incremental policy development [slow and incremental]</p> <p>Exploitation of crisis moments generates rapid and radical policy change [crisis and opportunistic]</p>	<p>Depictions predominant operative ways of functioning of the policy process [modus operandi]</p>	

**APPENDIX H: DEVELOPMENT OF THEMATIC NETWORK 2**  
**THEME IDENTIFICATION**

Codes (Step 1)	Issues Discussed	Themes Identified
<p>Needs-based constructions                      Deficit-driven framework                      Child within family -                      Constitution                      Parental choice prioritised</p>	<p>Inalienable rights of family in Constitution                      Needs-based focus in policy development                      Children vulnerable and dependent                      Protection of children paramount                      Future focused view of children                      Children in development, not yet agentive</p>	<p>Traditional construction of child within family mean needs-based frameworks dominate in ECEC policy creation</p>
<p>More attention to rights in discourse                      Limited rights understanding                      Rights are costly                      Rights break tradition                      Politically divisive                      Uncertainty re: impact of rights                      Rights defined by Constitution</p>	<p>Rights not a driver in policy construction                      Govt discretion with needs not rights                      Uncertainty re: meaning of children's rights and implications                      Lack of ideological discussion hinders understanding                      Ambivalence and reluctance about embracing rights                      Conservative lobby groups, history of failed referendums                      Anxiety about financial implications of rights referendum                      Court challenges and state responsibility                      Quality of administration systems more important                      UNCRC some progress – some challenges</p>	<p>Uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the benefits of rights-based frameworks</p>
<p>Childcare crisis                      Women important to labour market                      Gender equality</p>	<p>Labour market change pivotal in ECEC gaining attention                      Employers, unions and public debate – media attention to 'childcare crisis' (high costs, limited places)                      Escalating electorate discontent                      Unaffordable childcare costs                      Huge public salience to issue                      Government under pressure to do something</p>	<p>Women's increasingly important role in labour market created a childcare crisis and public demands for action</p>

(Continued)



<b>Codes (Step 1)</b>	<b>Issues Discussed</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
<p>Long term importance of ECEC Opportunities for children Wise investment</p> <p>External Funding Opportunities Money helps win policy Changing national finances key</p>	<p>Evidence-based research regarding benefits of ECEC Growing understanding of ECEC benefits, especially as early intervention tool</p> <p>EU funding opportunity seized to develop sector. Funding increases political openness to ideas (EOCP) Funding created good entry point to 'break' policy inaction Economic growth and recessions impact on decisions Recession leads to funding reviews and opportunities</p> <p>Resistance to challenge tradition (patriarchal paradigm) Reluctance of state to intervene Political concern re: women in home and women at work Considered a private responsibility Tradition a hegemony on policy actors Culture of cash based payments Government have tried to remove ECEC from policy agenda</p>	<p>ECEC is a valuable resource that supports children's educational development and society.</p> <p>Positive finances and financial opportunities are key influences in winning favour for policy action</p> <p>There is significant anxiety about designing policy that challenges or contests embedded traditions and values</p>
<p>Patriarchal paradigm Powerful traditions Constitution: family private Government distancing Political anxiety: women at home/women at work</p>	<p>Anxiety regarding costs of government intervention Reluctance to develop childcare attached to national system Insufficient resources to sector Let the parents pay</p> <p>Limited debate Insufficient pressure in the system Remained below policy radar for extended time period Political avoidance in absence of pressure Politics follow people – limited debate, limited action</p>	<p>The financial cost of ECEC investment deters government from certain courses of action</p> <p>The limit public debate about ECEC draws policy attention away from the are and reduces pressure for action</p>
<p>Cost of public ECEC Poor resourcing Financial anxiety</p>	<p>Limited Debate Politics follow debate</p>	

(Continued)

<b>Codes (Step 1)</b>	<b>Issues Discussed</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
Fragmented actor engagement Leadership issues Competing actor agenda Different status of actors	Wide range of actors pushing competing agendas Lack of unanimity among policy community Fragmented levels of engagement Academic disengagement – not enough involvement Lack of leadership amongst agents for change Multiple Departments and Units in OMCYA - interface not always clear	The fragmentation and divisions amongst the ECEC policy community weaken their collective strength in policy advocacy and development work

## CONSTRUCTION OF GLOBAL NETWORK

Themes as Basic sub-themes	Organising Themes	Global Themes
<p>Traditional construction of child within family mean needs-based frameworks dominate in ECEC policy creation [needs-based]</p> <p>Uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the benefits of rights-based frameworks [rights struggle]</p>	<p>Actors' constructions and perspectives of childhood impact on construction of ECEC policy [constructions of childhood]</p>	<p>The ECEC Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts &amp; Constraints</p>
<p>Women's increasingly important role in labour market created a childcare crisis and public demands for action [labour market]</p> <p>Positive finances and financial opportunities are key influences in winning favour for policy action [finances]</p> <p>Ireland's ranking and status in terms of wider global trends catalyses improvements [global trends]</p> <p>ECEC is a valuable resource that supports children's educational development and society [value of early learning]</p>	<p>Key catalysts which have generated ECEC policy development and progression [catalysts]</p>	

(Continued)

Themes as Basic sub-themes	Organising Themes	Global Themes
<p>There is significant anxiety about designing policy that challenges or contests embedded traditions and values [tradition]</p> <p>The financial cost of ECEC investment deters government from certain courses of action [finances]</p> <p>The limit public debate about ECEC draws policy attention away from the are and reduces pressure for action [limited debate]</p> <p>The fragmentation and divisions amongst the ECEC policy community weaken their collective strength in policy advocacy and development work [splintered sector]</p>	<p>Key factors and processes which impede, hinder and constrain ECEC policy development and progression [constraints]</p>	<p>The ECEC Policy Context: Constructions, Catalysts &amp; Constraints</p>

**APPENDIX I: DEVELOPMENT OF THEMATIC NETWORK 3  
THEME IDENTIFICATION**

<b>Codes (Step 1)</b>	<b>Issues Discussed</b>	<b>Themes Identified</b>
Capacity growth Sector of scale Increasingly Visible	Increasingly visible sector, increased capacity Greater access for children but less quality focused Visibility increased attention – other aspects of ECEC brought to fore Number of actors involved increased	The growth in capacity resulting from the EOCP increased the visibility of ECEC as policy issue and supported policy progression.
Improved Expertise More informed decisions Better advocacy Growth in research	More sophisticated understanding Increasing professionalization of the sector Greater national expertise Improved on ground advisory supports More informed policy – richer learning environment, CECDE, international partnerships, conferences etc Plethora of government publications and research	Growth in ECEC knowledge and expertise supported more sophisticated and informed policy development
Improved government cohesion Increasing actor harmony Some shared objectives	Improved structures (OMC – focused govt agency) Growing unanimity amongst actors regarding certain aspects Increasing harmony amongst actors on certain aspects Less battles for funding, more cordial environment	Improved cohesion and coordination within ECEC helps structure policy development.
No clear strategy – <i>ad hoc</i> Policy too reactive Uni-dimensional focus Opportunism over strategy Clear strategy needed Ideological debate and principle definition important	Decisions taken with no clear pedagogical basis Limited capitalisation on growing national expertise Lacking rationale – opportunistic approach to decisions Limited debate – significant issues untackled Piecemeal and <i>ad hoc</i> approach to policy development Poor policy evaluation and reflection Many policy documents – poor implementation Need for debate and agreement on conceptually led strategy High and low level principles, articulated and constantly refreshed	ECEC policy has generally developed in the absence of a clear, consensual, conceptually led strategy

(Continued)

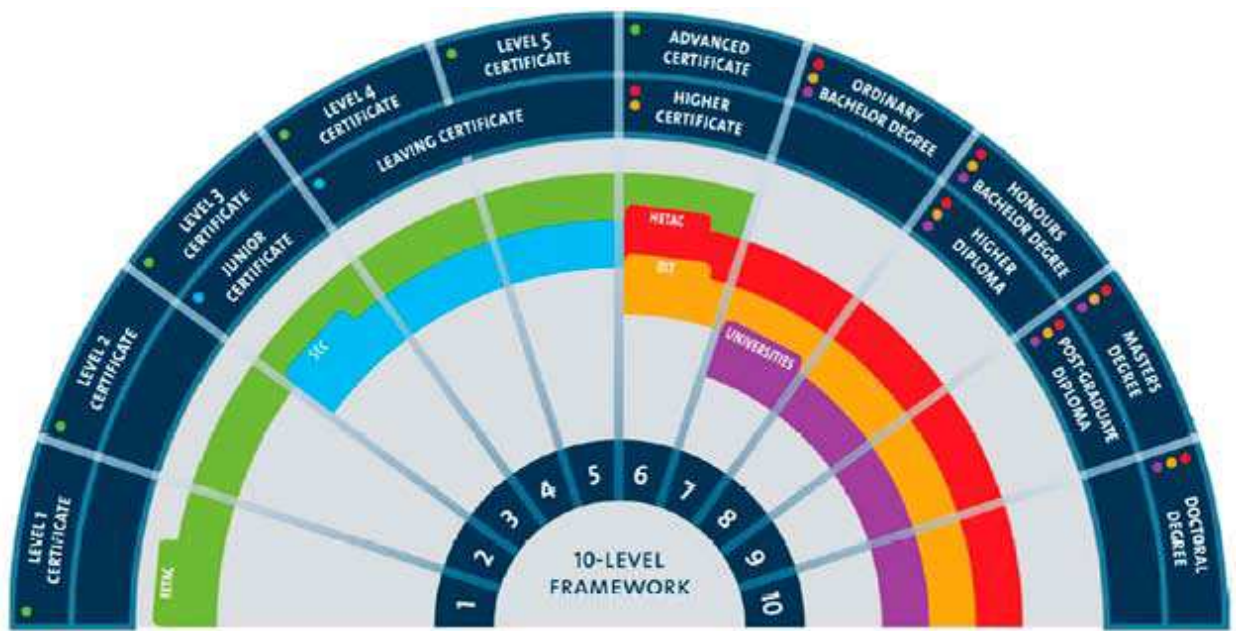
Codes (Step 1)	Issues Discussed	Themes Identified
<p>Mixed provision Private sector growth priority Government role minimal Variable quality</p>	<p>Subcontracting out responsibility to private sector Profits prioritised, Poorly resourced (use of FAS/CE) Fragmented delivery, poor implementation Market based models preferred Variable standards and quality on ground Minimal regulations Objective – keep costs down New role for government as negotiator with private sector Greater consensus on policy implementation to keep service providers engaged</p>	<p>Government’s ‘distant’ role in policy and provision leaves ECEC vulnerable to competitive market forces</p>
<p>Competing agendas – focus shifts Children nested in families Child relegated</p>	<p>Children nested within families – not centre focus of policies Competing (equality – employment) agendas mean children are relegated. Child not always lead agenda concern. Panic policy decisions mean children not always considered Deficit driven framework impeded agentive vision of child Policies adopted make children vulnerable, government distancing and profit focus Limited debate means children slip from agenda as other issues gain more public attention Politics drive decisions, wider electorate demands efface children as other, vocal groups prioritised (parents, employers) Lack of strategy means children vulnerable</p>	<p>The competing forces at play within the policy environment dissipates attention from children as they ‘get lost’ in policy decisions</p>

**THEMATIC NETWORK 3.  
Global Network Construction**

<b>Themes as Basic sub-themes</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>	<b>Global Themes</b>
<p>The growth in capacity resulting from the EOCP increased the visibility of ECEC as policy issue and supported policy progression.</p> <p>Growth in ECEC knowledge and expertise supported more sophisticated and informed policy development</p> <p>Improved cohesion and co-ordination within ECEC helps structure policy development.</p>	<p>Key policy strengths in ECEC policy approaches to date</p>	<p>Critiquing ECEC Policy: The Impact of the Policy Process and Policy Context</p>
<p>ECEC policy has generally developed in the absence of a clear, consensual, conceptually led strategy</p> <p>Government's 'distant' role in policy and provision leaves ECEC vulnerable to competitive market forces</p> <p>The competing forces at play within the policy environment dissipates attention from children as they 'get lost' in policy decisions</p>	<p>Outstanding weaknesses in Irish ECEC policy development</p>	

## APPENDIX J:

### NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK



[Source, Department of Education & Science. (2009). *Developing the Workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector, A Background Discussion Paper*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.]