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## The Discursive Construction of Irish Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: a Critical Discourse Analysis

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# **The discursive construction of Irish early childhood education and care policy: A critical discourse analysis**

by  
**Rachel A. Kiersey BSocSc**



**A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

**College of Arts and Tourism  
School of Social Sciences and Law  
Dublin Institute of Technology**

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Advisory supervisor: Dr. Brian O'Neill**

**30<sup>th</sup> November 2011**



## **Abstract**

Conceptual distinctions between care and early childhood education have influenced and reinforced the construction of knowledge about the early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy area. Discursive constructions in policy texts permeate wider society and become embodied in the broad social domain as “truths”, establishing the status quo about how social issues are perceived. Close scrutiny of the knowledge constructed about key concepts within Irish ECEC policy texts between 1998 and 2008 can shed some light on the ideological perspectives shaping the truths about ECEC in Irish society. This research used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology to investigate policy texts; involving the undertaking of a thorough linguistic textual analysis, while also considering the wider political and social context of these texts. Using the CDA method this thesis aimed to understand the conceptual construction of ECEC policy, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy. Recent ECEC policy in Ireland has developed in a reactive fashion, paying lip service to the rights of children while more often serving the needs of others. Findings show that the key knowledge constructions within Irish ECEC policy shape early education as subordinate to childcare; thus within this notion of childcare, the provision of places is more urgent than reconceptualising the ECEC sector. The concept of parental choice, and meeting parent’s needs and rights, influences policy more so than the rights or needs of children; children are predominantly constructed as in need of early education as preparation for formal schooling. The concept of rights is subordinated to that of needs; targeting has been the favoured policy action as opposed to the provision of universal services. While language of rights, universality and more joined-up policy approaches have permeated the linguistic construction of policy texts, there has been no significant shift within

understandings of ECEC or children's rights in the wider policy realm. Without a shift in the conceptual understanding of ECEC policy, a children's rights focus will remain underdeveloped.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the Dublin Institute of Technology and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other institution.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the Institute's guidelines for ethics in research.

The Institute has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations as used in this Thesis**

### **Agenda**

References to the Agenda document are shorthand for the policy document *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook*.

### **CAQDAS**

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software

### **CDA**

Critical discourse analysis

### **CECDE**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

### **Childcare**

Childcare predominantly refers to care services, which are often private and market based, tailored towards the needs of working parents covering children aged from birth to twelve years.

### **Childcare Strategy**

References to the Childcare Strategy are shorthand for the policy document the *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare*.

### **Children's Strategy**

References to the Children's Strategy are shorthand for the policy document the *National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives*.

### **Collocation**

A linguistic term used in critical discourse analyses which means the regular or habitual pattern of co-occurrence between particular words in a text (Fairclough, 2001, 2003).

### **Commission Report**

References to the Commission Report are shorthand for the policy document *Strengthening Families for Life: The Report of the Commission on the Family*.



**Convention**

Refers to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

**CRC**

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

**CRA**

Children's Rights Alliance

**Critical discourse analysis**

A research method which is predominantly concerned with exploring the language of discourses; CDA has a particular focus on how social relations, identity and power are constructed through written and spoken texts. Critical discourse analyses investigate the language of texts while also considering the wider political and social context of these texts.

**DCYA**

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs which formally became a full ministry and government department on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2011 under a new government; any texts published post March 2011 are referred to as authored by the DCYA accordingly.

**DEIS**

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Programme

**Early Education**

In Irish social policy early education predominantly refers to services which provide educational interventions for children, often from backgrounds of social disadvantage, deemed at risk of future educational failure.

**ECCE**

Early childhood care and education: A term often used by the Irish government interchangeably with the term childcare.

**ECE**

Early childhood education

**ECEA**

Early Childhood Education Agency

**ECEC**

Early childhood education and care; in this thesis early childhood education and care policy in Ireland refers to the provision of services for the birth to four years age group which is outside of any provision through formal primary schooling.

**ECS**

Early Childcare Supplement

**EOCP**

Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme

**EYDU**

Early Years Development Unit

**Intertextuality**

Intertextuality within critical discourse analyses refers to consideration of the incidence of aspects of other texts within a text.

**NCCA**

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

**NCIP**

National Childcare Investment Programme

**NCO**

National Children's Office

**NESC**

National Economic and Social Council

**NESF**

National Economic and Social Forum

**OECD**

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

## **OMCYA**

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the abbreviation OMCYA is used throughout the thesis to refer to texts published under the auspices of the OMCYA pre March 2011.

## **Pedagogy**

A concept used in ECEC discourse originating from social democratic countries understandings of early childhood education and care, where care is seen as an integral aspect of all education work; pedagogy has been defined as treating “care as an inseparable part of any work with people” (Moss, 2006, p. 160).

## **SFL**

Systemic functional linguistics

## **UNCRC**

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## **White Paper**

References to the White paper are shorthand for the policy document *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education*

## **Young children**

The concept of young children refers to children aged between birth and six years of age; however where it is used in relation to the Irish ECEC policy context that this thesis is concerned with, it refers specifically to children aged between birth and four years of age, outside of the formal primary school system.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Declaration .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations as used in this Thesis .....	vi
Table of Contents .....	x
List of Figures and Tables .....	xiv
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Early childhood education and care policy in Ireland .....	1
1.2 Rationale for this thesis .....	3
1.3 Towards a framework for a Policy Analysis .....	6
1.3.1 Irish ECEC Policy texts for the Policy Analysis .....	10
1.4 Outline of the Thesis .....	13
1.5 Conclusion .....	15
<b>2. THEORISING A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH TO SOCIAL POLICY ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	16
2.2 A social constructionist research paradigm .....	17
2.3 Discourses of Discourse .....	20
2.3.1 Discourse Analysis .....	22
2.4 Foucauldian Perspectives .....	23
2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis .....	28
2.5.1 The dimensions of a discourse analysis .....	30
2.5.2 The importance of intertextuality .....	32
2.5.3 Discourse and Policy Texts.....	33
2.6 The rationale for using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach .....	35
2.6.1 Constructions, construals and the policy cycle .....	38
2.6.2 Power, knowledge, language and (Irish ECEC) policy .....	39
2.7 An Analytical Model .....	43
2.8 The dimensions of this critical discourse analysis thesis.....	46
2.9 Conclusion .....	47
<b>3. CONCEPTUALISING DISCOURSES OF CHILDHOOD AND RIGHTS.....</b>	<b>49</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	49
3.2 Developmental perspectives .....	50
3.2.1 The evolution of a developmental perspective, Bronfenbrenner's model(s) .....	53
3.3 Sociology of Childhood.....	55
3.4 The socially constructed Child within the new Sociology of Childhood.....	63
3.4.1 Challenging a Needs discourse .....	64
3.4.2 The Child as Social Actor/Agent .....	67
3.5 Children's Rights.....	71
3.5.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.....	72
3.5.1.1 <i>How the Convention Operates</i> .....	73
3.5.2 Impact of the Convention .....	74
3.5.3 Alternative rights-based discourses .....	75
3.5.4 The turn to a Children's Rights discourse in the Sociology of Childhood ...	77
3.5.5 Children's Participation Rights.....	80
3.5.5.1 <i>Children, Participation Rights, and ECEC</i> .....	85
3.6 Understandings and discourses of Early Childhood Education and Care .....	87
3.6.1 Good quality ECEC and Pedagogy.....	90
3.7 Theoretical and conceptual discourse framework of ECEC .....	94

3.8	Conclusion.....	95
<b>4.</b>	<b>THE IRISH POLICY LANDSCAPE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN .....</b>	<b>97</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	97
4.2	The Irish Policy Context.....	98
4.3	Development of Irish social policy: Church/State “partnership” to “social partnership”.....	101
4.4	The treatment of children within Irish social policy .....	107
4.4.1	Children’s appearance on the social policy agenda .....	110
4.5	Early Childhood Education and Care policy in Ireland.....	113
4.6	The development of Early Childhood Education and Care policy in Ireland ..	115
4.7	Review of ECEC policy developments: 1998-2003.....	117
4.7.1	Commission on the Family .....	118
4.7.2	Consultation for the early childhood education policy document .....	119
4.7.3	Publication of the early childhood education policy document.....	121
4.7.4	Consultation for and publication of a childcare strategy .....	122
4.7.5	Additional policy developments .....	125
4.8	Review of ECEC policy developments: 2004-2008.....	126
4.8.1	OECD Review .....	128
4.8.2	NESF Report.....	129
4.8.3	Ireland’s 2 <sup>nd</sup> Periodic Report on implementation of the UNCRC .....	131
4.8.4	NESC Report .....	132
4.8.5	Social Partnership – Towards 2016 .....	134
4.8.6	The Agenda for Children’s Services.....	136
4.8.7	The State of the Nation’s Children and subsequent policy developments .	137
4.8.8	Constitutional Referendum on the Rights of the Child in Ireland .....	139
4.9	Research Needs within Irish ECEC Policy .....	140
4.10	Conclusion.....	142
<b>5.</b>	<b>METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: THE ANALYSIS PROCESS .....</b>	<b>145</b>
5.1	Introduction.....	145
5.2	Establishing quality through trustworthiness in a CDA research study .....	146
5.3	The Critical Discourse Analysis Approach .....	149
5.3.1	Reiterating the textual element of a critical discourse analysis .....	151
5.4	The Research Sample .....	153
5.5	Data Collection.....	159
5.5.1	Accessing Dáil Debates .....	161
5.6	Framework for Analysis.....	166
5.7	The Analysis Process.....	168
5.7.1	Phase 1 - Coding with NVivo .....	170
5.7.2	Phase 2 - Micro Analysis .....	173
5.7.3	Phase 3 - Linguistic Textual Analysis .....	175
5.8	Strengths and limitations of the study .....	178
5.9	Conclusion.....	179
<b>6.</b>	<b>CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT OF POLICY TEXT PRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>181</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	181
6.2	The physical representation of the policy documents .....	181
6.2.1	Strengthening Families for Life: The Report of the Commission on the Family	182
6.2.2	Ready to Learn.....	183
6.2.3	National Childcare Strategy.....	186
6.2.4	National Children’s Strategy .....	188
6.2.5	Social Partnership .....	190

6.2.6	Agenda for Children's Services .....	192
6.2.7	Ireland's 2 <sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.....	193
6.2.8	Summary of the physical representation of the policy documents .....	195
6.3	Genre Chains .....	196
6.3.1	Genre chains accompanying the publication of the policy texts .....	197
6.3.2	Summary of genre chains accompanying the publication of the policy texts 203	
6.4	Discussion .....	203
6.5	Conclusion.....	205
<b>7. DISCOURSES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRISH ECEC POLICY DOCUMENTS.....</b>		<b>206</b>
7.1	Introduction .....	206
7.2	What is Early Education in Irish ECEC policy? .....	206
7.2.1	Early Education as a High Quality service .....	207
7.2.2	Age related: for over 3's and under 6's - PRE-SCHOOL .....	209
7.2.3	In need of a Coordinated approach to develop .....	211
7.2.4	Targeted Service .....	214
7.2.5	Further conceptualisations of Early Education in Irish ECEC policy .....	215
7.2.6	Summary of the construction of Early Education in Irish ECEC policy ....	219
7.3	What is childcare? .....	220
7.3.1	In need of a more coordinated approach to develop.....	220
7.3.2	Childcare as both Care and Education .....	222
7.3.3	A sector which is not seen as professional .....	225
7.3.4	Fulfilling an Equality Agenda.....	227
7.3.5	Childcare as a Social Support .....	229
7.3.6	'High Quality' Childcare in Irish ECEC policy discourse .....	231
7.3.7	Summary of the construction of Childcare in Irish ECEC policy .....	232
7.4	Discourses of "the Child" in the policy texts .....	233
7.4.1	Knowledge constructed about the Age of the Child in Early Childhood ...	234
7.4.2	In need of support to have a 'Good Childhood' .....	236
7.4.3	Dependant on others, particularly Parents .....	238
7.4.4	In need of Interventions .....	239
7.4.5	Valued Members of Society .....	241
7.4.6	Need to be Prepared for formal schooling.....	242
7.4.7	Summary of discourses of "The Child" in the policy texts .....	242
7.5	Discourses of the role of "Parents" in the policy texts.....	243
7.5.1	Parents and families as important Stakeholders in ECEC .....	244
7.5.2	ECEC as beneficial for parents.....	246
7.5.3	Importance of parental choice.....	248
7.5.4	Parents as principle educators and primary caregivers.....	250
7.5.5	Summary of discourses of the role of "parents" in the policy texts .....	251
7.6	Chapter Summary and Conclusion.....	251
<b>8. DISCOURSES OF RIGHTS AND NEEDS IN IRISH ECEC POLICY TEXTS</b>		<b>255</b>
8.1	Introduction .....	255
8.2	Linguistic Textual Analysis of the CRC Reporting Guidelines .....	256
8.2.1	Discussion of the analysis of the CRC Reporting Guideline Documents ..	257
8.3	Findings from Linguistic Textual Analysis of Ireland's 2 <sup>nd</sup> Report to the CRC	258
8.3.1	Well-presented Positives.....	258
8.3.2	Incomplete Policy Actions.....	259
8.3.3	Recurring Ambiguity .....	261
8.3.4	Weak Policy Commitments .....	263

8.3.5	Discussion of the CDA of Ireland's 2 <sup>nd</sup> Report to the CRC .....	264
8.4	A comment on the analysis of the UNCRC related documents .....	265
8.5	Discourses of Rights and Needs in Irish ECEC policy .....	267
8.5.1	Frequency of use of the terms rights and needs .....	270
8.5.2	The multiplicity of children's needs .....	272
8.5.3	A community focus on needs: particularly targeting disadvantage .....	274
8.5.4	Developmental needs: care and education .....	276
8.5.5	Rights as referencing the UNCRC .....	278
8.5.6	Rights: hearing children's voices and participation .....	280
8.5.7	Rights to quality services: meeting needs .....	283
8.5.8	Summary of discourses of rights and needs .....	285
8.6	Targeting vs. Universal service provision .....	286
8.6.1	Targeting: addressing disadvantage and responding to needs .....	287
8.6.2	A dearth of universality .....	290
8.6.3	Summary of Targeting vs. Universal service provision .....	293
8.7	Addendum: Recent Developments - The Free Pre-School Year .....	293
8.8	Conclusion .....	301
<b>9.</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR IRISH ECEC POLICY .....</b>	<b>303</b>
	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>316</b>
	<b>APPENDIX A .....</b>	<b>333</b>
	<b>APPENDIX B .....</b>	<b>334</b>

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1:	The interests of the critical discourse analysis approach in this thesis	10
Figure 2.1:	Fairclough's Dimensions of Discourse	31
Figure 2.2:	Diagrammatic representation of CDA framework for this thesis	46
Figure 4.1:	Diagrammatical representation of the administration of children's policy in Ireland	115
Figure 4.2:	Working methods of Expert Working Group on Childcare	124
Figure 5.1:	Screenshot of Dáil debates archive web page for March 4 <sup>th</sup> 1998	162
Figure 5.2:	Screenshot of Dáil debates archive website search facility	164
Figure 5.3:	Diagrammatic representation of CDA framework for this thesis	168
Figure 5.4:	Screenshot of NVivo Free Node codes for National Children's Strategy coding	171
Figure 5.5:	Screenshot of NVivo Tree Node codes for National Children's Strategy coding	172
Figure 5.6:	Screenshot of Adobe Reader advanced search results of the National Childcare Strategy using the search term rights	177
Figure 6.1:	Example of bulleted list of policy objectives	186
Figure 6.2:	The 'whole child' perspective diagram	189
Figure 6.3:	A cupped model of family support from The Agenda on Children's Services	192
Figure 8.1:	Screenshot of DCYA website from August 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2011-menu heading Childcare	296
Figure 8.2:	Screenshot of DCYA website from August 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2011-menu heading Early Years Education	297



Table 4.1:	Early 1990s ECEC policy developments	117
Table 8.1:	Word frequency of the terms ‘rights’ and ‘needs’ across the policy documents sampled	271

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

Discourse provides a particular and pertinent way of understanding policy formation, for policies are, pre-eminently, statements about practice – the way things could or should be – which rest upon, derive from statements about the world – about the way things are. They are intended to bring about idealised solutions to diagnosed problems (Ball, 1990b, p. 22).

The dominant discourses within a policy area shape how knowledge is understood and interpreted about that policy area. Dominant policy discourses produce ‘truths’ that serve to shape, reinforce, and essentially govern, the underlying ideology and operation of that policy area. Diverse change, and subsequently progress, can be faltered by the existence and persistence of these truths and the formulation of policy can, in some cases, become stuck in a never ending cycle of replication. This thesis uses critical discourse analysis to explore the truths known about early childhood education and care policy in Ireland.

## **1.1 Early childhood education and care policy in Ireland**

The understanding of early childhood education and care (ECEC) which is employed within this thesis is derived from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) understanding, within which:

“care” and “education” are inseparable concepts and quality services for children necessarily provide both ... This approach recognizes that such arrangements may fulfill a wide range of objectives including care, learning and social support (OECD, 2001, p. 14).

The OECD reviewed their member countries approaches to ECEC, in the Starting Strong Reports, looking at provision of ECEC services for the age range from birth to six years of age; six is commonly understood as the compulsory school starting age across member states. Ireland’s OECD thematic review was published in 2004, the OECD commended Ireland for having a well-established early education system within primary school provision for children aged between four and six years old. However

they were critical of the weaker and unequal provision for younger children. This thesis is explicitly concerned with ECEC policy as it relates to younger children who are not attending primary school; the birth to four years preschool age group. One of the key policy documents that is analysed for this study is Ready to Learn: the White Paper on Early Childhood Education which was published by the Department of Education and Skills. However, while it does include a chapter which discusses existing provision for 4-6 year olds in primary schools, it is more explicitly concerned with developing the ECEC policy area for younger children; hence its relevance for this study.

Describing ECEC policy for younger children in Ireland, Hayes and Bradley have told of how the policy direction of a targeted investment “in the creation of childcare places for children of working parents has proved both divisive and insufficient” (2006, p. 178). They positioned this targeted policy approach as having “not led to the resolution of problems of accessibility and affordability” (ibid.) and further described how it has “not contributed to the development of a sustainable, high quality childcare sector nor the growth of a trained workforce to provide and maintain quality” (ibid.). Later, Hayes and Bradley referred to discourse about Irish ECEC policy which “despite increased referencing to children’s rights and the inter-twined political promise to prioritise children in all related policy matters” (2009, pp. 5-6) has, on the implementation side, contradictorily pursued a trajectory of market based approaches and solutions (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). This is a reflection of wider neoliberal influences both in Ireland, and in society in general (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Millei, 2008; Millei & Imre, 2009; O'Donoghue Hynes & Hayes, 2011; Ruffolo, 2008).

Ball (1990b) has described the process of policy formulation within policymaking, particularly in education, as “clearly a matter of the ‘authoritative allocation of values’

... but values do not float free of their social context. We need to ask whose values are validated in policy, and whose are not” (p. 3). Following this notion from Ball, this thesis focuses on the analysis of Irish ECEC policy texts using a critical discourse analysis methodology. The aim of the thesis is to discover, and attempt to understand, the dominant policy discourses and construction of knowledge about central concepts which shape the ECEC policy area in Ireland, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy.

## **1.2 Rationale for this thesis**

The right to knowledge must not be restricted to certain stages in life or to certain categories of individuals (Foucault, 1989, p. 200).

This study sets out to respond to a research need in the Irish context of early childhood education and care policy, as identified by a number of commentators, specifically Hayes and Bradley (2006, 2009). This thesis ultimately strives to contribute to the knowledge base of a rights-based approach to ECEC policy making, knowledge and practice, as an individual study that is also one strand of a wider IRCHSS funded project on ECEC in Ireland, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Towards a Rights Based Policy Approach*. The other research strands in the project consider Irish ECEC policy through investigation of the inner sphere of ECEC policy making<sup>2</sup> and also through a review and analysis of policy implementation tools used in Irish ECEC policy<sup>3</sup>. This research strand is concerned with investigating the language used in ECEC policy texts. It has been noted that analysing the dominant discourses within ECEC policy “that determine what can be said and by whom” (Bown, Sumsion, & Press, 2009,

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<sup>2</sup> PhD Thesis: *Inside the Black Box: An Exploration of the Impact of Action and Activity in the Inner Spheres of Policy Making on ECEC Policy* by Siobhan Bradley.

<sup>3</sup> PhD Thesis: *A review of Irish Early Childhood Education and Care Policy using Policy Design Theory* (working title) by Bernie O’Donoghue Hynes.

p. 208) can assist us in trying to understand “why some discourses or constructs are taken up by politicians to inform policy in ECEC while others are not” (ibid.). The research need has emerged from a noted shift in discourse towards using the language of children’s rights within ECEC policy discourse, influenced by Ireland’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. This shift is exemplified through the use of language which theoretically locates policy in a rights related discourse without positioning policy as rights based. This conceptual idea of relating children’s policy to the language of children’s rights has not successfully translated into implementation. This is in no doubt reinforced by the lack of explicit children’s rights in the Irish Constitution, within which children are characterised as subordinate to the greater social structure of the family which is afforded special protection therein. This allows children to be constructed as the passive dependants of their parents. Early childhood education and care policy in this regard has also been influenced by wider neo-liberal ideology where “an increased statutory commitment to childcare through exchequer funded policy initiatives” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 26) has tended to privately<sup>4</sup> deliver the provision of ECEC services following market based policy pursuits, leaving care firmly in the domain of the family. Moloney (2010) has described the conceptual chasm which exists between policy discourse and implementation as a situation where “children are located at the heart of policy development at a macro level” (p. 183) while conversely “policy implementation at a micro level as manifest through the provision of children’s services is firmly embedded within a mercantile paradigm” (ibid.).

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<sup>4</sup>Through a combination of targeted private sector growth and privately managed community sector development (Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

There has been some progress within the ECEC policy area in more recent times, chiefly due to the State investing considerably in the broader ECEC sector; predominantly funding the childcare aspect. From 1981 to 1999, prior to the more recent focus on investment in the ECEC area, Fine-Davis noted that despite “a plethora of government reports on childcare, all of which made similar recommendations” (2007, p. 3) there were no significant initiatives emerging from government until the introduction of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) in 1999 (ibid.). Nevertheless throughout this more recent period of investment, a dichotomous distinction has remained and persisted between childcare and early education within Irish policy, both structurally and conceptually (Hayes, 2007a). These conceptual distinctions have reflected, influenced and reinforced the construction of knowledge about central concepts in the ECEC policy area. It is necessary thus to examine these prevailing knowledge constructions in order to understand the ideology driving the policy process. Moloney (2010) has highlighted the importance of analysing dominant constructions of knowledge within the realm of childhood:

Constructions of childhood fulfil a dual purpose. At one end of a continuum, they influence early childhood pedagogy and policy and are strongly linked to perspectives about the purpose and nature of early childhood education. At the other end, they shape discourses about the roles and responsibilities of families, communities, government and society as a whole. In analysing these constructions, we begin to understand the manner in which they are enmeshed in a myriad of social, political, historical and economic trajectories. Ultimately, we understand why policy and practice are the way they are (Moloney, 2010, pp. 183-184).

Concurring with Moloney’s perspective on constructions of childhood, this research is conducted as an analysis of Irish ECEC policy texts, using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to aid investigation of the construction of knowledge about the key concepts that shape ECEC policy. The aim of the thesis is to understand the conceptual construction of ECEC policy, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights

based construction of policy. This study is thus focused on answering the key research question, which is:

Does the knowledge constructed within Irish ECEC policy discourse hinder the development and implementation of early childhood education and care policy from a rights basis?

To answer this research question, the CDA framework is applied to a carefully selected sample of Irish ECEC policy documents published by the government between 1998 and 2008, including a selection of relevant documents looking at children's rights, specifically with regard to implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup>.

A significant policy development occurred halfway through this research study; in April 2009 the State introduced a Free Pre-School Year, for 3-4 year olds, as a direct replacement for a former cash benefit<sup>6</sup> to the parents of young children. While there has not been a great deal of published material issued about this programme, its introduction has been highly relevant to this study. Therefore some electronic material and Dáil debates about the Free Pre-School Year have also been analysed, using the same methodological approach as for the other ECEC policy documents in order to answer the research question. Analysis of the Free Pre-School Year texts was particularly interested in ascertaining if there had been any recent notable conceptual shift in policy discourses to accompany the introduction of the programme.

### **1.3 Towards a framework for a Policy Analysis**

Policy as text is the element of policy that can be worked on, interpreted and contextualised, and stands in contradiction to assumptions that policy works in a

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<sup>5</sup> These are comprised of the government published Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> report to the CRC on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child United Nations and the Committee on the Rights of the Child's (CRC) revised Guidelines for periodic reports.

<sup>6</sup> The Free Pre-School Year was announced as a direct replacement to the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) which had been introduced in 2006 as a cash benefit paid out quarterly to assist the parents of young children (under 6 years of age) with the costs of their children's care.

straight line from formulation to implementation. Policy as discourse understands policy as part of the dominant system of social relations; policy as discourse frames what can be said or thought. Policy as text addresses agency, policy as discourse addresses structure (Ozga, 2000, p. 94).

In this excerpt, Ozga explains Ball's policy analysis approach where he positions himself as inhabiting "two very different conceptualisations of policy" (Ball, 1993, p. 11), the notions of policy as discourse and policy as text, which represent consideration of both structure and agency. Within these conceptualisations, Ball (1993) has advocated a diversity of approaches to the analysis of policy, proposing the use of a virtual toolbox which contains a variety of concepts and theories, in order to make sense of the policy process.

Previously, Bowe, Ball and Gold described the process of policymaking in education using the notion of the "policy cycle" (1992, p. 13) within which education policy is made, consumed and interpreted. This policy cycle has three contexts. The first is the *context of influence*; this is where policy begins, where "policy discourses are constructed" (1992, p. 19), within this "interested parties struggle to influence the definition and social purposes of education, what it means to be educated" (ibid.). The second is the *context of policy text production*; this context epitomizes those who are attempting "to control the meaning of policy through its representation" (1992, p. 21). The outcome of the context of policy text production is the official representation of the policy, where it is most often published as policy documents. The third context is the *context of practice*, within which the documents or other policy texts are responded to, with the key point being "that policy is not simply received and implemented within this arena rather it is subject to interpretation and then *recreated*" (1992, p. 22, emphasis added). Each of these three contexts "have public and private arenas of action and each involves compromise and in some cases even the repression or ignoring of certain



interest groups altogether” (Lall, 2007, p. 5). There can be a palpable conceptual disparity between the *context of influence*, *context of policy text production*, and the *context of practice* stages of the policy formation process, and Irish ECEC policy has consistently shown evidence of this. Such a characterisation of the policy cycle is exemplified in Irish ECEC policymaking, as Hayes (2010) has discussed, whereby:

Among policy-makers the care and education dichotomy has led to a situation where the care element in early childhood care and education is regarded as the childcare dimension. The dichotomy allows care to be characterised within a child development framework whilst de-emphasising the educational nature of the work (p. 69).

This is particularly evident in the *context of practice* in the Irish ECEC policy cycle where interpretations of the policy texts on the ground, have appeared to be persistently contextualising childcare as a crisis situation targeted towards the children of working parents which requires urgent investment in the context of supplying places, alongside contextualising early education as an interventionist concern for disadvantaged and ‘at risk’ children.

This study uses a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology to conduct an analysis of the linguistic construction of Irish ECEC policy. The CDA approach is largely anchored within Fairclough’s dimensions of discourse model (1995); the analysis follows a course based on this model, starting first with analysis of sociocultural practice, secondly with analysis of discourse practice and thirdly with analysis of the texts themselves. This model complements Bowe, Ball and Gold’s (1992) notion of the policy cycle. Thus, the sociocultural practice level is related to the context of influence, the discourse practice level is related to the context of practice, while the text level is related to the context of policy text production. The CDA method is predominantly concerned with exploring the language of discourses with a particular focus on how social relations, identity and power are constructed through written and spoken texts. This method is executed through undertaking a comprehensive linguistic textual

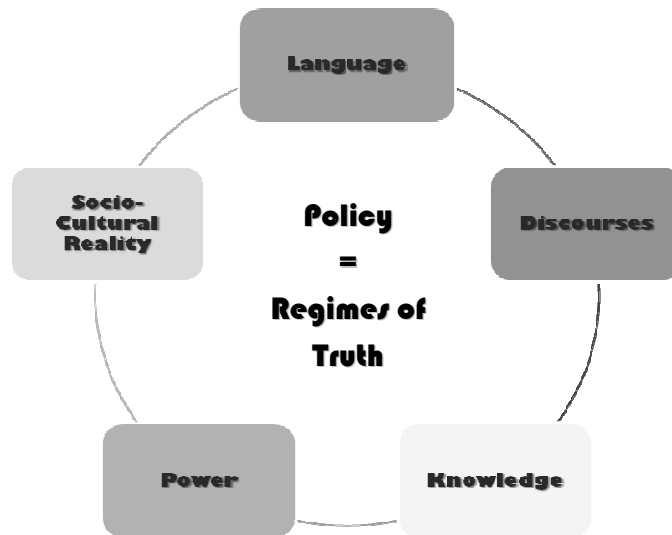
analysis of policy texts, while also considering the wider dominant political and social context at the time of publication and dissemination. The CDA method is explicitly interested in how texts construct representations of the world and is used to explore the relationship between policy texts and their historical, social, political and cultural contexts. It examines how these representations are embedded in and reproduced through the use of language and other semiotic incidences. Through the CDA method, this thesis focuses on exploring the persistent knowledge constructions within Irish ECEC policy, to understand how specific realities have come into being; to investigate how they are reproduced through policy literature, and how this shapes meaning about ECEC, and children's rights in wider Irish society. Chapter 2 discusses and develops the critical discourse analysis approach as it is used in this study.

MacNaughton (2005) advocates establishing “knowledge(s) in early childhood studies that sustain ethical democratic lives with children every day and that recognise the political processes and effects of privileging one form of knowledge of children over another” (p. 1). This thesis is coming from a perspective that holds with Hayes (2010) contention that the notion of care, as understood in Irish policy, de-emphasises the educational nature of childcare work thus privileging education over care in professional and conceptual terms<sup>7</sup>, while privileging care over education in policy investment terms within Irish ECEC policy. In order to investigate, analyse and challenge this contention alongside other dominant knowledge constructed about Irish ECEC policy and children's rights, it is necessary to investigate both the notions of policy as discourse and policy as text. Therefore a theoretical and conceptual framework has been developed for this thesis which utilises a suitable critical discourse analysis

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<sup>7</sup> This dichotomy between education and care is clearly reflected within “aspects of education, pay, conditions of service and influence” (Hayes, 2010, p. 69) with work in educational settings holding higher professional weight than work in childcare settings.

methodology allowing for a deeper analysis into policy texts. These policy texts include parliamentary debates and media reports alongside the corpus of official published policy documents; subsequently allowing for mediation between both the policy as discourse and policy as text arenas.



**Figure 1.1: The interests of the critical discourse analysis approach in this thesis**

### ***1.3.1 Irish ECEC Policy texts for the Policy Analysis***

The published ECEC policy documents and the relevant children's rights documents which constitute the corpus for the research sample for this study are as follows:

- *Strengthening Families for Life: The Report of the Commission on the Family* (1998)
- *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999)
- *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare* (1999)
- *National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives* (2000)
- *Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (2005)
- UNCRC Reporting Mechanisms/Structures:
  - *General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)* (2003)
  - *General guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports to be submitted by states parties under Article 44, paragraph 1(b), of the Convention* (2005)
- *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook* (2007)
- Social Partnership Agreements – relevant sections

- *Partnership 2000* (1998)
- *Towards 2016* (2006)
- *Free Pre-School Year*: Dáil debates and electronic information

In order to make a thorough critical analysis of ECEC policy, the research sample is comprised of the policy texts - that is, the policy documents themselves as listed above and related documents. In the case of the Report of the Commission on the Family and the two social partnership documents only the sections that were relevant to issues of childcare and early education were analysed. The sample also includes related documents such as published consultation reports, related Dáil debates, speeches, press releases and electronic information about them on the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) website and other relevant websites. Those texts which are related to each of the specific policy documents, press releases, speeches, websites, and so on, form what Fairclough refers to as a genre chain (Fairclough, 2003). The notion of a genre chain is understood as the ways in which each of the individual texts are influenced or informed by each other but represent individual genres at the same time, which can have a filtering effect with regard to the selection of discourses (Fairclough, 2003). This analysis will use evidence of the constructions of knowledge about the policy area to analyse the extent to which they consider children and are rights-based from a linguistic perspective.

The research sample is specifically considered across three different chapters within the thesis. Firstly in chapter 4 the research sample is presented in its contextual setting; each document is discussed as a part of the overall ECEC policy development which occurred throughout 1998-2008. Secondly, the rationale for the choice of the specific documents used in the corpus for this study is discussed within the methodology chapter. The research sample is then discussed in relation to the findings from analysis

of the context of policy text production in chapter 6, within that each separate document is described in terms of its physical presentation and related genre chains. Due to a lack of published material about the Free Pre-School Year, at this stage, the discussion of the analysis and presentation of findings about it is included in an addendum to chapter 8.

For the purposes of a pilot experiment, and in preparation for a conference presentation, a less refined CDA method was used early on in the study in advance of the further refinement of the framework for analysis. Thus a slightly different approach was taken for the analysis of the documents relating to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that is Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UNCRC Reporting guidelines documents. The analysis of these documents was undertaken using a framework developed by Fairclough (2001), and the results were subsequently organised across discourse themes rather than constructions of knowledge. An account of this preliminary study was published as a journal article: *Reporting the Rhetoric, Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as Represented in Ireland's Second Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: A Critical Discourse Analysis* (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010) which was published in the *Child Care in Practice* journal. The documents analysed for the pilot part of this study are list style report documents, they follow prescribed guidelines and structures. The remainder of the Irish ECEC policy documents on the other hand do not necessarily follow such prescribed guidelines and structures; hence a decision was made to refine the analytical framework to be more suited to analysis of such policy documents. The generic and prescribed structure of the UNCRC reports tends to restrain such documents from impacting greatly on the construction of knowledge about the ECEC policy area. Consequently the refined framework was developed to take account of the need to look specifically at the construction of knowledge about the policy area within the

documents. Both frameworks are described in detail in the methodology chapter. The description of the findings from the pilot study forms a part of Chapter 8 which discusses discourses of rights and needs across the policy documents.

#### **1.4 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis is organised in to nine chapters. **Chapter two** locates the study in its overall theoretical frame. Chapter two serves a dual purpose; on the one hand it elucidates the framework and theoretical context for the critical discourse analysis approach used for this study. On the other hand, it positions the theoretical and conceptual frame for the methodological approach in the model of critical discourse analysis envisaged by Fairclough (1995) and situates the remaining chapters in the thesis into Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model.

Chapters three and four comprise the main literature review for the thesis. **Chapter three** discusses the main conceptual understandings of childhoods and rights. The chapter reviews discourses around developmental perspectives on children, which developed into a more socio-cultural theoretical influence as espoused by Bronfenbrenner. The chapter then reviews theories inherent within the wider sociology of childhood particularly focusing on the needs discourse understanding of children, and discourse of children as social agents. This leads on to discussion of children's rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and views on children's participation in social and political life. Theories of early childhood education and care are also considered particularly as they relate to rights; the chapter also elaborates the conceptual framework informing the thesis. **Chapter four** looks specifically at the Irish social policy context. It considers the social, cultural and political influences on Irish social policy in general then it looks more specifically at the treatment of children

within that. The chapter then focuses in on early childhood education and care policy in Ireland, tracking the major developments, both within ECEC policy and pertaining to children's rights, throughout the 1998-2008 period that this thesis is concerned with. The chapter concludes with discussion of the research need within Irish ECEC policy and identification of the key concepts that are relevant to this study.

**Chapter five** tells the story of the methodology in action, describing the research process and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the CDA approach. Chapters six, seven and eight present the findings of this study. **Chapter six** describes and discusses the findings from consideration of the context of policy text production which focused on the physical presentation of the policy texts and the genre chains which they form a part of. **Chapter seven** describes and discusses the knowledge constructed within Irish ECEC policy discourses about four of the key concepts shaping the development of policy: early education, childcare, children, and parents. **Chapter eight** describes and discusses the knowledge constructed within Irish ECEC policy discourses about rights and needs, including the findings from the CDA of the UNCRC related documents; it also considers discourses of rights and needs in relation to their resultant influence on the construction of targeted and universal services. Chapter 8 also includes an addendum which presents the findings of the analysis of the small amount of available texts considering the Free Pre-School Year programme. **Chapter nine** concludes the thesis with a summary and discussion of the knowledge constructions in ECEC discourses including their implications for policy and possibilities for further research in this area.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the main aim of this thesis, giving a brief background to the research problem, the rationale for the study and subsequently stating the research question which drives the study. This chapter explained and linked together the key areas that the thesis is concerned with: policy analysis, ECEC policy in Ireland and critical discourse analysis. This chapter introduced the theoretical and methodological approach to the study and presented the research sample for the thesis. Chapter two explains the theoretical and methodological critical discourse analysis approach which guides this thesis in greater detail.



## **2. THEORISING A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH TO SOCIAL POLICY ANALYSIS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is an overview of the theoretical considerations underpinning the critical discourse analysis methodology used for this research study. It positions the research in the wider qualitative paradigm. More specifically, it introduces the social constructionist paradigm within which this research approach exists and explores the critical discourse analysis framework that has been used for this study.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the social constructionist paradigm as it applies to discourse analysis approaches, followed by a general discussion of a number of underlying discourses of discourse analysis. It then goes on to discuss the Foucauldian perspectives of discourse that inspire and apply to this study. The exploration of Foucault's concept of discourse forms, and leads further on to, the discussion of the theoretical background of critical discourse analysis. The critical discourse analysis approach is explained and discussed, and the levels of Fairclough's (1995) dimensions of discourse model are elaborated. Further discussion occurs that positions the usefulness of CDA in policy analysis, which ties in with the explication of the rationale for using CDA to undertake an analysis of Irish ECEC policy texts in this research study. This is followed by a discussion on the development of the analytical framework within which this research sits alongside elucidating the development of the specific analytical model used for this study. The thesis is anchored within Fairclough's (1995) dimensions of discourse model, hence this chapter concludes by setting out and explaining the content of the remaining thesis chapters as they are structured within that model.

## **2.2 A social constructionist research paradigm**

Qualitative research methods are concerned with comprehensively exploring and explaining research problems to try and acquire a deeper understanding of social issues. Writing about approaches to qualitative research, Holliday (2002) reiterates a widely held opinion that research coming from a qualitative perspective necessitates tackling the research problem as if it is wholly unfamiliar, in order to discover the mystery surrounding the problem. This perception allows us to “explore, catch glimpses of, illuminate” (ibid., p. 5) and ultimately attempt to interpret elements of the social reality. The use of qualitative data thus is also helpful for the contextual positioning of the research problem and in terms of probing deeper into issues relating to human behaviour and social reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the research paradigm as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator” (p. 105) in terms of ontology, epistemology and choice of methods. Within their viewpoint, there are three fundamental questions which define inquiry paradigms, related to ontology, epistemology and methodology. The ontological question is concerned with what “the form and nature of reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) is and consequently what “can be known about it” (ibid.) The epistemological question is concerned with what the “nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower” (ibid.) is and also with “what can be known?” (ibid.). The methodological question is then concerned with how the enquirer can go “about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (ibid.). These three questions underline the paradigmatic location of a social constructionist approach to research using a critical discourse analysis methodology.

A methodological approach to qualitative inquiry using critical discourse analysis is a part of a social constructionist paradigm which sits somewhere between Guba and Lincoln's (1994) explanations of critical theory and constructivism. It combines critical theory's ontological view of historical realism, where reality has been shaped by social, political, cultural and economic factors over time, with the ontological view of reality in constructivism where realities are "dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions" (pp. 110-111). This methodological approach is also a combination of Guba and Lincoln's epistemological views on the accepted subjective nature of both critical theory and constructivism, where critical theory is seen as both incorporating, and dependent on, the values of the investigator, and constructivism is seen as creating knowledge through interaction between the investigator and the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This CDA method also appropriates a combination of the critique aspect of the critical theory paradigm, which strives for some kind of ultimate transformation while working alongside the constructivist paradigms' aim of understanding; the aim then is to use the outcomes of this research to endeavour to lead to the reconstruction of the dominant constructions in society, toward a new progressive consensus (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Blaikie (1993) sees constructivism and social constructionism as individual ontological perspectives within the overarching ontological stance of constructionism. Within this overarching conception of constructionism, constructivism refers to the individual cognitive process of meaning making, while social constructionism refers to the shared production and communication of social knowledge or realities. Burr (1995, pp. 2-5) proffers a model for consideration which indicates key assumptions inherent in a social constructionist approach while recognising the "manifold and diverse" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5) nature of such approaches; the four elements of this model are:

- *A critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge*

A critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge enables the social constructionist researcher to question their own assumptions about how the world works and to accept a more subjective construction of knowledge about the social reality which is primed for investigation.

- *Historical and cultural specificity*

The social constructionist researcher accepts the historically and culturally specific nature of knowledge constructions and ‘truths’ in society.

- *Knowledge is sustained by social processes*

The social constructionist researcher acknowledges that we construct our social knowledge through our everyday interactions with each other and through our use of language.

- *Knowledge and social action go together*

The social constructionist researcher recognises the fact that “descriptions or constructions of the world sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others” (Burr, 1995, p. 4) thus there are social consequences to the social construction of knowledge and truth (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Burr sees social constructionist theory and research as a focus on the “micro structures of language use” (2003, p. 24) on one hand, and on the other as a focus on the “more macro linguistic and social structures framing” our social life (ibid.). This view of social constructionism, among others, has essentially led to the development of a range of methods of analysis emanating from this theoretical approach which can be seen as types of discourse analysis (Burr, 2003).

Blaikie's vision, in tandem with Burr's ideas make it possible to see social constructionism, especially in relation to discourse analysis approaches, as a combination of both constructivism and constructionism. Hastings (1998) also understands that discourse analytical approaches, with their increased concentration on the use of language, and the social outcomes of language use, are a part of the "increasing currency of the social constructionist perspective within social science" (p. 191). Discourse analysis thus is the most commonly applied method of a social constructionist approach (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

### **2.3 Discourses of Discourse**

Discourses can be seen in straightforward terms as sites of meaning-making within society in which a version of social reality is constructed. While discourses are constructed by the social context in which they exist, they too construct reality within this. Language is the dominant, yet not exclusive, tool used to construct and create knowledge and meaning within discourses (Pennycook, 1994). The Concise Oxford English Dictionary definition of language refers to language as "the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way" (OED, 2002). Within discourse theory, most analysts see language as the central domain where "people's knowledge of the social world is actively shaped" (Tonkiss, 2004, p. 373). Foucault viewed discourses as systematised ways of seeing, speaking, thinking, feeling and acting in relation to a topic through specific language and concepts (MacNaughton, 2005). The Foucauldian perspective of discourses is concerned with the way that "language works to organise fields of knowledge and practice" (Tonkiss, 2004, p. 374), thus Foucault saw language, power and knowledge as fundamentally interconnected at the level of discourses.

Bearing Foucault's philosophy in mind, Tonkiss (2004) uses the example of "expert languages" (p. 375) to articulate a clearer understanding of how language, power and knowledge connect at discourse level. She uses the example of medical discourse to demonstrate how the expert language of medicine constructs a specific discourse for use in the medical domain. Within this example of medical discourses, Tonkiss (2004) highlights the important elements of the "expert language": where it defines the extent of and limits to knowledge through medical terminology used to describe diseases; where it "confers membership" (p. 375) by having its own specific means of communication and subsequently trains prospective medical practitioners into the means of communication, enabling them to communicate and operate effectively within the system; and finally, where it "bestows authority" (ibid.) through empowering medical practitioners to communicate in a language which their patients do not have knowledge of or access to, and which also disregards alternative discourses contrary to the expert medical discourse inherent in the profession.

Discourse analysis however is not limited just to discourses which are realised through expert languages; analysis can study any type of discourse. Language, how it is used, where it is situated, and subsequently the meaning that it engenders, is the fundamental element for discourse analysis in the context of this study. In the case of this thesis, this study of language is concerned with Irish government discourses about early childhood education and care policy, particularly those that are realised primarily in published policy documents, and within that focusing in on the knowledge which is constructed within and produced through these discourses.

### 2.3.1 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a research tool used to locate and understand deeper meaning from discourses. Discourse analysis as it is defined by *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, is a:

detailed exploration of political, personal, media or academic ‘talk’ and ‘writing’ about a subject, designed to reveal how knowledges are organized, carried and reproduced in particular ways and through particular institutional practices (Jupp, p. 74).

As a research activity, discourse analysis looks closely at language and how it is used to construct meaning and knowledge, it does this through the “systematic study of texts to find evidence of their meaning and how this meaning translates into a social reality” (Hardy, Harley, & Phillips, 2004, p. 20). Hardy, Harley, and Phillips have positioned the application of a discourse analysis as an endeavour which is “qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist” (2004, p. 19). The qualitative<sup>8</sup> nature of discourse analysis research lies in its motivation to go beyond the familiar by delving deeper into accepted discourses, to explore and uncover the meanings behind them; within which the researcher can then attempt to make sense of or interpret what she finds, while coming from a perspective that sees reality as socially constructed. It is also important to note the context dependent nature of discourse analysis. Hardy, Harley, and Phillips (2004) emphasise the importance of locating discourses in their social and historical contexts. As texts<sup>9</sup> are the level at which we begin to analyse discourse, it is thus essential to recognise the contextual nature of these texts by paying close attention to their social environment while also rigorously analysing the language therein. At the text level, analysing discourse involves investigation of who the author(s) of a text are;

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<sup>8</sup> Discourse analysis can be, and has been, used in quantitative studies as part of a mixed methods approach to analysing data. Nevertheless, quantitative methodologies are often more likely to include a content analysis of a text, which analyses texts through the counting of the frequency of use of words, phrases, terms or concepts.

<sup>9</sup> In more recent years texts used within critical discourse analysis have encompassed practically all modes of communication, for instance, policy documents, newspaper articles, political speeches, advertisements, television programmes, websites, even computer games.

under whose authority the textual communication was ordered; who the intended audience of the text is; what the subject of the text is; and what its intended purpose is (Foucault, 1984b).

As a tool for social policy research, Hastings (1998) encourages the use of discourse analysis, to explore how the linguistic resources of key policy documents are involved with reproducing and sustaining particular knowledge within the policy area. She believes that if discourse analysis can be used to identify the kinds of knowledge constructed in policy texts, and how they are promoted through language use, then this provides the opportunity for these discourses to be both scrutinised and challenged:

a discursive approach to social policy analysis can help to uncover how the use of language is connected to broader processes and practices, such as the reproduction of social relations or the construction of knowledge (Hastings, 1998, p. 192).

Hastings further refers to Foucault's assertion that discourses, as in "linguistic practices", are the sites where knowledge is constructed about "social reality" (1998, p. 195). The Foucauldian understanding of discourse, locates meaning as produced "through a range of power/knowledge systems that organise texts, create the conditions of possibility for different language acts and are embedded in social institutions" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 128); this Foucauldian understanding of discourse is central to the theoretical framework of this thesis.

## **2.4 Foucauldian Perspectives**

It would be rather disingenuous to theorise the methods used in a thesis which is so concerned with the concept of discourse, without acknowledging Foucault's contribution to discourse theory, particularly how his influence has shaped the theoretical context of Fairclough's (1995, 2001, 2009) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) CDA approaches. Foucault's discourse theory reflects his particular interest in



the way language works to organise domains of knowledge and practice, where a text may be analysed in terms of “its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form and the play of its internal relationships” (Foucault, 1984b, p. 103). The Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis is concerned with investigating where meaning comes from, and what kind of knowledge it then constructs. This view of discourse theory and analysis allows us to ask questions of a text in relation to where it has come from, who the author of the text is, when it was constructed, and under what social conditions it has emerged. Foucault’s understanding of discourse analysis is expressly concerned with the issue of “why, at a given time, out of all the possible things that could be said, only certain things were said” (Ball, 1990a, p. 3). Foucault’s study of discourse used a genealogical approach to investigate and uncover the relationship(s) interlinking knowledge, power and truth (MacNaughton, 2005). Foucault contended “that power and knowledge imply each other, that discourses only have meaning within a specific context and that power should be seen as simultaneously productive and repressive” (Marston, 2004, p. 24); the critical discourse analysis approach acknowledges and concurs with Foucault’s view of power. MacNaughton (2005) refers to Foucault’s understanding of “discourse as a body of thinking and writing that used shared language for talking about a topic, shared concepts for understanding it and shared methods for examining it” (p. 20), such as how particular knowledge constructions dominate within ECEC policy discourses. Within this Foucault saw such discourses as structuring “how we think, feel, understand and practise in specific areas of our lives” (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 20).

In his lecture the *Order of Discourse*, Foucault (1981) referred to discursive practices as a historically and culturally specific set of rules for organising and producing different forms of knowledge. Discursive practices operate through a combination of “a

delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories” (Foucault, 1981, p. 48), as exemplified in Tonkiss’s (2004) example of expert languages. Consequently, they create a situation where it becomes difficult “to think outside them” (ibid.). These discursive practices then produce discourses which are “controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number ... of procedures of exclusion” (Foucault, 1981, p. 52). There are three aspects to the procedures of exclusion; first, is “the prohibition”, which Foucault (1981) describes as the control over who can speak, what they can speak about and when they can speak. Second, is “the opposition between reason and madness” (ibid., p. 53) which can be interpreted as what society has deemed to be the difference between reasoned or authoritative discourse versus “mad”, unsanctioned or unreliable discourse. In other words, it is the difference between who has the authority to speak with reason, versus those in opposition to this “reasoned” view, who may merely be seen as mad or unreasonable. Third is “the opposition between true and false” (1981, p. 54) where Foucault sees the producers of discourse as constructing “truths” which are subsequently reproduced through discourses. These truths are embedded in institutions and reinforced and renewed through a whole strata of social practices, but these truths, this “will to truth” is “renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorised, distributed and in a sense attributed, in a society” (1981, p. 55).

The Foucauldian view of truth sees it as interlinked in a reciprocal relationship with “systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it” (Foucault, 1984a, p. 74); Foucault calls this a “regime of truth” (ibid.). These systems of power within the regime of truth are not to be seen as

merely a negative thing; Foucault also sheds light on the necessary and productive nature of power:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 61).

Ball (1990a) also contemplates this Foucauldian view whereby meaning arises from the power relations that are tied up in institutional practice, and is then translated into a social reality by way of the knowledge constructed through discourses. These discourses do this meaning-making work through language use as they “order and combine words in particular ways”, while simultaneously working to “exclude or displace other combinations” (Ball, 1990a, p. 2).

Foucauldian discourse theory perceives language as “connected intimately with the politics of knowledge” (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 4). MacNaughton argues that Foucault’s perception of knowledge and truth sees that “no knowledge is ‘true’ knowledge free from ideology”, and that “all knowledge is ‘culturally prejudiced’ and is thus partial, situated and local” (2005, p. 23). This does not detract from the fact that we can ask questions of this knowledge and truth; the nature of this discourse analysis is not to accept that these truths are impenetrable but to investigate and attempt to establish how these “orderly constructions” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 119) have been built. MacNaughton describes this as the “tactical use of knowledge” (2005, p. 43) where through this questioning of truths we can produce new “spaces for progressive social and political change in our truths” (ibid.) which can ultimately lead to a shift in the “knowledge/power relationships embedded in specific regimes of truth” (ibid.).

Interpretations of Foucault's work by the likes of Ball (1990a), MacNaughton (2005) and O'Farrell (2005) are helpful in understanding his theories of discourse, and within that his theories of language, knowledge, power and truth. Nevertheless, they cannot overlook the fact that there is no one stated methodology, as such, of a Foucauldian discourse analysis. Despite Foucault's aim to "avoid subjective bias" (Barrett, 1991, p. 164) by purposefully not developing a prescriptive method for analysis of discourses, his discourse theory was critiqued by Habermas. Foucault's lack of a methodological framework or "hermeneutic", for analysing the discourse was viewed by Habermas as one of "the worst excesses of subjectivism" (Barrett, 1991, p. 164). Rather than having developed a specific framework or model for carrying out a discourse analysis, Foucault suggested that for those concerned with carrying out investigations which are attempting to effect social change, that he would like his works to be used as "a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area" (Foucault, 1974)<sup>10</sup>. Thus Foucault was not concerned with further developing his own "tool-box" to attend to the linguistic specifics of discourses in his analyses. He did not develop a framework for the general analysis of discourses, nor did he devise a method to connect, what Hastings (1998) describes as, the micro analysis of linguistic properties of discourses with the macro analysis of sociocultural practices. This is where the critical component of discourse analyses has stepped up; applying theories of linguistics to social analyses of discourses thereby allowing the researcher to "bridge the gap between the micro and the macro" (ibid., p. 195). Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes (2008) have described Fairclough's development of critical discourse analysis "as a response to earlier analytical approaches" (p. 771), including Foucault's, "which either focused too narrowly on the micro-linguistic aspects of discourses while

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<sup>10</sup> This quote was translated by Clare O'Farrell. Retrieved online May 6<sup>th</sup> 2010, from Clare O'Farrell's Foucault website: [www.michel-foucault.com/quote/2004q.html](http://www.michel-foucault.com/quote/2004q.html)

neglecting its more macro social aspects or vice versa” (ibid.). Critical discourse analysis approaches have thus offered the discourse researcher specific frameworks and tools, which provide a method of insight into probing the underlying ideology behind linguistic choices which are made.

## **2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis is predominantly a qualitative methodology which has its philosophical and epistemological roots in both social constructionism<sup>11</sup> and social constructivism<sup>12</sup>. In the same spirit, Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) have characterised this type of research methodology as embracing the concept of “constructivist structuralism” or “structuralist constructivism” (p. 11); this is where social life is both seen as and researched as that which is “constrained by social structures, and an active process of production which transforms social structures” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 3). The “critical” element adds another dimension to the research and necessitates investigation of the structures, strategies and/or other properties of text(s) that play a role in the social reproduction of dominance (van Dijk, 2001). Habermas (1972) has described the “critical” element in critical research as having an “emancipatory knowledge interest” (p. 316), which in Fairclough’s understanding of CDA means that the research is “committed to progressive social change” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 230). Consequently, researchers using critical discourse analysis are specifically concerned with studying the language of discourses, focusing on how social relations, identity and power are constructed through written and spoken texts (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) view discourse as:

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<sup>11</sup> Social constructionism views meaning making as a product of human relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Social constructivism views meaning making and knowledge as personal, learned through the way society is constructed, understood through a ‘socio-historical context’ (Costantino, 2008, p. 117).

socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it (p. 258).

As a method, CDA aims to investigate the language of discourses in order to illustrate the less transparent means in which language constructs particular social realities and thus assists in sustaining and reproducing the “social status quo” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

The theory and methods inherent in the critical discourse analysis approach used by Fairclough (1995, 2001, 2003), and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) combine the discourse theory developed by Foucault (1972, 1981, 1984a) with the theory and practice of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978, 1994). Foucault’s theory of discourse analysis was very much concentrated in the level of structure rather than practice. He contended that a discursive practice is “a body of anonymous historical rules” (Foucault, 1972, p. 117), and his analyses were often concerned with the “matter of discerning the rules which ‘govern’ bodies of texts and utterances” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 123), rather than with the detailed analyses of texts. This was problematic in the eyes of Fairclough (1992) as it meant that Foucault’s work, while theoretically useful, was not offering an analytical path to get from structure to practice. Thus, Fairclough (1992) saw the potential to combine the useful aspects of Foucault’s discourse theory, with aspects from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in order to develop a theory and mode of analysis appropriate for investigating language use at discourse level.

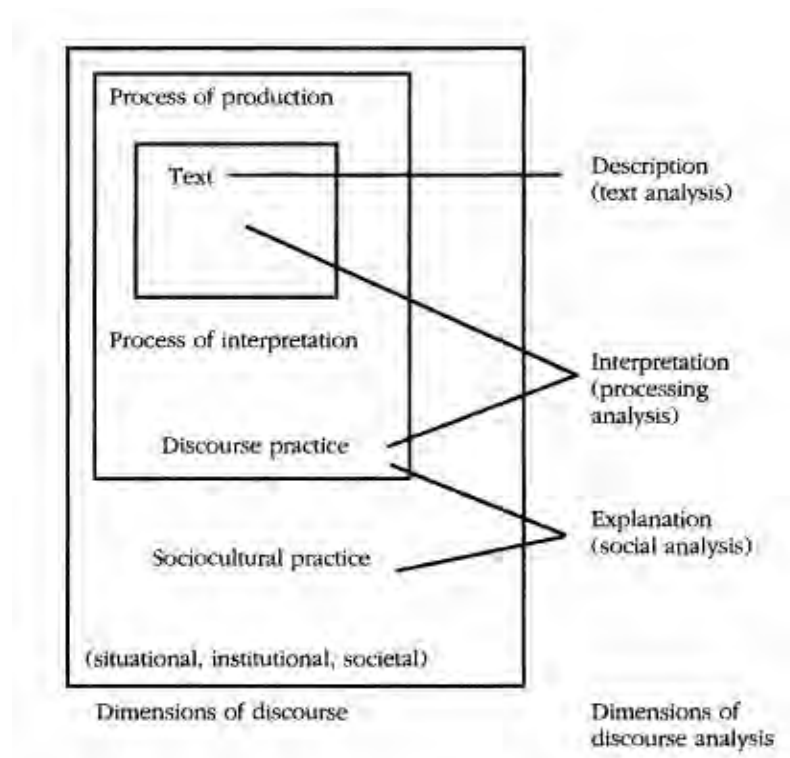
Systemic functional linguistics is a theory of language in which the function of language is the central concern; particularly, what language does and how it does it. The

researcher who employs SFL in their analysis is “concerned with the relationship between language and other elements and aspects of social life” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 5). Accordingly, SFL is used to analyse “authentic products of social interactions (texts)” (Eggins, 1994, p. 1) while considering the sociocultural context in which they exist, in order “to understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is” (Halliday, 1994, p. xxix). The “four main theoretical claims about language” (Eggins, 1994, p. 2) inherent in SFL underpin the CDA methodology, with the idea that “language use is functional, that its function is to make meanings” (Eggins, 1994, p. 2). Such meanings are subsequently influenced by the sociocultural context in which they are used and within which the use of language process involves semiotic and linguistic choices in order to make this meaning (Eggins, 1994).

### ***2.5.1 The dimensions of a discourse analysis***

Fairclough (1995, p. 98) developed a three level model of critical discourse analysis which involves seeing discourse simultaneously as “(i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice” (p.97). There are three different levels involved in a critical discourse analysis using Fairclough’s dimensions of discourse model which is the framework for the overall approach to the structure and content of this thesis, see figure 2.1. The levels are explained in the order of which they are approached in this study. The first level is the *sociocultural practice* level of the critical discourse analysis of a text, which involves analysis of the social conditions in which the text is produced, disseminated, consumed and interpreted. This level of analysis is the context level, an explanatory analysis of the social norms, relations of power and ideology within which the text exists; thus analysis here focuses on the dominant discourses and conceptual understandings that prevail within the existing policy discourses. Secondly, the

*discourse practice* level of the analysis looks at the way in which the text is created, for example, looking at government policy documents. The analysis aims to investigate the way in which policy documents are created, to understand if certain rules govern the use of language within these policy documents. This level of analysis is the interpretative level and aims to interpret the “relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97). Thirdly, the *text* level involves analysis of the text using linguistic tools, such as investigating structure, clauses, grammar and vocabulary. This is the descriptive level of the analysis which aims to describe the linguistic contents of the text. Paying attention to all of the three levels of analysis is essential for the successful execution of this approach as they are all interrelated and interdependent, as illustrated in the diagram. For this study each of the three levels of analysis are undertaken in the order presented above, with a combination of all three levels informing the discussion and conclusions at the end of the thesis.



**Figure 2.1: Fairclough's Dimensions of Discourse (1995, p. 98)**



### 2.5.2 *The importance of intertextuality*

Luke (1995) and Fairclough (2003), cite the turn to the use of critical discourse analysis methodologies as a response, somewhat, to the saturation of texts in modern capitalist society. This is within the context of viewing texts as “language in use” (Luke, 1995; Fairclough, 2003), in other words, as any instance of communication “that has coherence and coded meanings” (Luke, 1995, p. 13). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) emphasise the socially contingent nature of the meaning of a text within CDA:

CDA takes the view that any text can be understood in different ways — a text does not uniquely determine a meaning, though there is a limit to what a text can mean: different understandings of the text result from different combinations of the properties of the text and the properties (social positioning, knowledges, values, etc.) of the interpreter. (p. 67).

In Fairclough’s (1995) work he discussed the importance of “intertextuality” in bridging the gaps between “language and social contexts” and “texts and contexts” (p. 189). Both Fairclough (2003) and Luke (1995) iterated the importance of this intertextuality which is how “texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualise and dialogue with other texts” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). Ball (1993) has also highlighted the significance of paying attention to intertextuality. As he sees it, “sometimes when we focus analytically on one policy or on one text we forget that other policies and texts are in circulation and the enactment of one may inhibit or contradict or influence the possibility of the enactment of others” (Ball, 1993, p. 46). Thus intertextuality refers to the incidence of aspects of other texts within a text. Examples of intertextuality include quotations from other texts worked into a text, and reported speech in both its direct state (verbatim) and its indirect state (summarised). This concept of intertextuality is of importance in recognising the ways in which all texts rely on the establishment of cultural categories. These cultural categories are hierarchical meanings of “normality”, which are taught, learned and reproduced through the consumption of these texts (Luke, 1995; MacNaughton, 2005).

### 2.5.3 *Discourse and Policy Texts*

Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes (2008) have argued that the nature of official text production means that it always serves as a platform for the expounding of bias and subjectivity:

Engaging in discursive practices such as creating and disseminating texts is a highly political act: a struggle for power in and around organisations that seeks to determine the nature of concept and subject positions and to control how the resulting objects are treated and understood (2008, p. 773).

Discourse is purposefully hegemonic, in that it aims to inculcate consensual understandings of things, which then become accepted as norms with regard to how those things are talked or written about in the public domain. Discourse thus strives to naturalise itself as the status quo, by becoming the norm through the sets of categories and linguistic functions it ensconces within texts, in order to characterise the way information about a particular concept is communicated. This manner in which discourses operate, particularly through policy texts, the way they work to represent the world and how it works, is considered to be the “ideational” function of language (Fairclough, 1992; Marston, 2004). Taylor (2004) has reiterated this point by reminding us of how “rhetoric and metaphor” are used in policy texts “to persuade and influence the reader” (p. 437) .

Taylor has discussed critical social research in great detail, however she prefers to use the concept of “critical policy analysis” (1997, 2004), within this she highlights the usefulness of discourse analytical approaches. The usefulness of discourse analysis approaches to critical policy analysis, according to Taylor (1997), is enhanced by its ability to conceptualise the social, cultural and political state, and thus to “highlight the political nature of policy making” (Taylor, 1997, p. 25) and to “take account of policy making at all levels” (ibid.). Taylor also sees the emergent interest in the positioning of policy documents as texts for discourse analysis, as an enhancement of the potential for

critical policy analysis. Taylor sees this approach, and the use of these discourse theories, as particularly positive because “they enable fine-grained analyses to be undertaken within a broader structural analysis” (1997, pp. 25-26). The reading of a policy text is a question of subjective interpretation, nevertheless, the use of critical discourse analytical approaches enables the use of a linguistic textual analysis alongside the employment of “ideology critique or deconstruction to highlight the constitutive practices texts use” (p. 27). Thus CDA consists of a combination of the social and contextual analysis of the text with a thorough linguistic analysis allowing for a “detailed investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and of how language *works* within power relations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 436). The results of the detailed analysis of contextual and linguistic processes at work in policy texts, is indicative of how and why social policy works as it does. Thus using discursive approaches to analyse policy documents enriches “our understanding of the systems of belief or discourses underpinning the policy process” (Hastings, 1998, p. 209). A concentrated detailed examination of the linguistic properties of policy documents can aid in the understanding of how knowledge constructions are reproduced and perpetuated within discourses and how these discourses are then replicated throughout policy texts with the knowledge constructions thus becoming a kind of “truth”. As Hastings puts it:

if discourse analysis can identify what kind of knowledge is promoted through policy and how it is promoted through language use, then it provides the opportunity for discourses to be both scrutinised and challenged (1998, p. 209).

Within the wider policy area, policy texts enter and often sustain, “rather than simply change power relations” (Ball, 1993, p. 47). Therefore critical discourse analysis is a useful method to employ in the examination of policy texts in order to determine, and subsequently challenge, the knowledge which has been constructed and perpetuated within the policy discourses. Ball (1990b) identifies the work that policy texts do in

perpetuating specific discourses: “policies embody claims to speak with authority, they legitimate and initiate practices in the world, and they privilege certain visions and interests. They are power/knowledge configurations par excellence” (p. 22).

## **2.6 The rationale for using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach**

In order to highlight the usefulness of the critical discourse analysis method for social research, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) have previously set out eight foundational principles for CDA:

- 1) CDA addresses social problems
- 2) Power relations are discursive
- 3) Discourse constitutes society and culture
- 4) Discourse does ideological work
- 5) Discourse is historical
- 6) The link between text and society is mediated
- 7) Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory
- 8) Discourse is a form of social action (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271-280)

These eight foundational principles assist in rationalising the use of the CDA method for social research, since discourse analysis has been positioned by many experts (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003; Hastings, 1998) as a fruitful way of doing social research, particularly using the critical discourse analysis method to focus on language, combined with engaging with social theoretical issues (Fairclough, 2003). Thus CDA is seen to address social problems, through its analysis of how language is used in social processes to make meaning and to produce and perpetuate truths. These truths arise from the exercising of power relations which are tied up in social and institutional practice. Truths are then translated into a social reality by way of the knowledge which is constructed through discursive practices; these discursive practices then reproduce and maintain the power relations and associated regimes of truth.

Consequently, CDA investigates power relations and ideology through ascertaining what the nuances of the society and culture under investigation are, and how these assist in maintaining the status quo; it is not enough just to analyse texts alone, it is also necessary “to consider how texts are interpreted and received and what social effects they have” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 275). This idea reinforces the significance of the contextual nature of texts and discourses within CDA; it is imperative to recognise that “discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking the context into consideration” (ibid., p. 276). In the sixth of their eight principles, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) state that “the link between text and society is mediated” (p. 277). This is their introduction to the interdiscursive level of CDA, which encompasses the rules which structure the production of official discourses. Taylor (2004) further highlights the importance of the “interdiscursive level” (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2009) which she situates as mediating between the social and contextual analysis of the text. The interdiscursive level is interested in identifying the order of discourse, “the way in which diverse genres and discourses are networked together” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 235). Fairclough’s understanding of genres is that they relate to “semiotic ways of acting and interacting” (2009, p. 164), such as the rules which structure the production of government reports or policy documents. Genres then are essentially ways of representing or “producing social life” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 235). Discourses relate to issues of representation, or as Fairclough (2009) puts it “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world” (p. 164). These representations differ depending on who is making them; for example a social problem such as early childhood education and care can be construed through differing and potentially competing discourses, within the government, the social sciences, the media, the education community and the childcare community. The interdiscursive analysis therefore is concerned with the identification of what genres and discourses are chosen

for use in the text, and subsequently aims to analyse how they are established within the text (Taylor, 2004). Thus the CDA approach aims to be always cognisant of the contextual and subjective nature of texts and discourses. To analyse then from this critical perspective differs greatly from an analysis without a critical lens because, as Fairclough and Wodak put it,

critical readings differ from reading by an uncritical audience: they differ in their systematic approach to inherent meanings, they rely on scientific procedures, and they naturally and necessarily require self-reflection of the researchers themselves (1997, p. 279).

Within this, they also highlight the point that “interpretations are never finished and authoritative; they are dynamic and open, open to new contexts and new information” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 279), asserting as such that CDA is a valuable tool for a thorough analysis of a social research problem, but not definitive, as there can be no definitive interpretation of anything. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) go on to describe CDA as a “socially committed scientific paradigm” (pp. 279-280); it is a specific methodology that follows clearly signposted steps to reach its conclusions, and thus the scrupulous application of a CDA is exceedingly suitable for the analysis of policy texts.

The diligence inherent in the CDA methodology facilitates an intricate analysis of the linguistic and semiotic organization of ECEC policy discourses in Ireland. In this case looking at what knowledge is constructed about ECEC throughout the discourse of the policy texts, how this knowledge is constructed, and how language has been used accordingly to express power and to pursue a particular ideological trajectory throughout this policy area in the ten year period studied. Researchers who use CDA believe that “detailed aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, metaphor and idioms can be ideologically significant” (Hastings, 1998, p. 196). Bearing this in mind, the analysis of the knowledge constructed, and language used, within ECEC policy

documents can “help to reveal how social policy is implicated in constructing and sustaining a ‘system of belief’ or ‘ideational knowledge’ about the nature of social reality” (ibid., p. 193). When CDA is applied to an official document, it can expose the political agenda, the hegemony behind the text, the inclusion of particular voices versus the exclusion of others, and the way(s) in which values are expressed and realised. A rigorous analysis of the narrative, grammar and language used can uncover how discourses are reproduced in, and permeated through, Irish ECEC policy documents.

### ***2.6.1 Constructions, construals and the policy cycle***

A caveat is necessary at this stage, with regard to Fairclough’s (2003) later thinking on texts as social constructions. In his later work, Fairclough insists on highlighting the difference between the notion of a “construction” and a “construal”, whereby,

we may textually construe (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether our representations or construals have the effect of changing its construction depends upon various contextual factors (2003, p. 8).

Fairclough goes on to give examples of these contextual factors including the way in which the social reality currently exists, and who is construing the social reality; he advocates accepting “a moderate version of the claim that the social world is textually constructed” (ibid.), which accepts the notion of the subjective construal of social reality to a sensible extent rather than an extreme view.

A focus on how policy discourses are construed, both textually and socially, complements the three contexts of the policy cycle as iterated by Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992). There is a salience attached to how dominant construals shape all three of the policy cycle contexts, influence, policy text production and practice. What this means for the research is that how policy discourses may be interpreted at all levels of the policy process, can be equally as relevant as what is constructed and/or construed within

them. Within the policy cycle Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) see the context of influence as the place where policy concepts originate and “acquire currency and credence” (p. 20) providing a “discourse of and lexicon for policy initiation” (ibid.). This context of influence would include what is already known about the policy area, expert opinion, and input into consultations for policy. This discourse is then open to being construed within the wider arena in ways which can either lend support to or challenge the emerging policy discourses. The context of text production is described by Bowe, Ball and Gold, as leading to an ever evolving construal of the policy. They highlight the fact that policy texts “have to be read in relation to the time and particular site of their production” (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 21), they also reiterate the importance of engaging with intertextuality, paying attention to how the texts are interacting with other policy texts. Their view is that policy texts are constrained by the struggles for control of the meaning and representation of policy and that how they are construed has very “*real* consequences” (ibid., emphasis added). Within the context of practice further importance is attributed to how the policy is construed, as it is here that “policy is not simply received and implemented ... rather it is subject to interpretation and then *recreated*” (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 22, emphasis added). The importance of understanding the relevance of how texts are construed and how this affects policy in terms of their construction of knowledge is summed up by the authors when they remind us that:

The simple point is that policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts. Parts of text will be rejected, selected out, ignored, deliberately misunderstood, responses may be frivolous etc. Furthermore, yet again, interpretation is a matter of struggle. Different interpretations will be in contest, as they relate to different interests, one or other interpretation will predominate (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 22).

### **2.6.2 *Power, knowledge, language and (Irish ECEC) policy***

The theoretical approach used in this study of Irish ECEC policy is driven by Foucault’s notion that language, power and knowledge are fundamentally interconnected at the



level of discourses (Foucault, 1977; Hastings, 1998). In terms of the policy formulation process, Foucault's understandings of discourse as being governed by rules, principles and procedures of exclusion, particularly the notion of "the privileged right to speak" (Cannella, 1999, p. 38) and "the appeal to reason" (ibid.), are also key considerations. Such rules and principles of exclusion are of significance, for example, where the knowledge constructed within discourses of ECEC policy are used as a tool to dictate the types of services that are provided, which can lead to the construction of particular definitions of what ECEC stands for within that society. Foucault was concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning, not just through language, but through discourse; he had a particular interest in how knowledge was put to work through discursive practices in specific institutional settings in order to regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2001). Policy documents and strategies are a way for a government to regulate the lives of the population somewhat, through setting out what services are to be provided, how they will be delivered and determining who has the right to access them. Policies within ECEC in Ireland, "driven by a neo-liberal framework of choice and market based solutions" (O'Donoghue Hynes & Hayes, 2011, p. 286), have tended to shape a mind-set whereby 'care' has predominantly been positioned as a private good to be dealt with within the family and/or paid for in the market. Meanwhile 'education' has been positioned as a public good to be accessed for free in more formal school settings, typically beginning at primary level. Early childhood education has conversely being positioned as an interventionist strategy targeted towards 'at risk' children (Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Moss, 2007). In order to challenge the dominant ideologies within Irish early childhood education and care policy, the CDA framework was applied to the research problem, comprising a corpus of the policy documents and related texts, all situated within Fairclough's (1995) overarching dimensions of discourse model. Thus, the analysis pays great heed to the knowledge constructions within and

consequent linguistic structure of the documents while also considering the wider dominant political and social context at the time of publication.

Critical reflection that is informed by ideology critique can create social change because as we become inquisitive and sceptical about power in our daily lives, we weaken the dominant ideologies that hide powers support for the interests of those who oppress and discriminate (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 8).

Fairclough's method of, and framework for, critical discourse analysis is based on the hypothesis that "language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language" (2003, p. 2). Thus, taking language as the basis to begin the analysis of discourses in this thesis, makes it necessary to focus on the recurrence of certain instances of uses of language that perpetuate certain constructions of knowledge within these ECEC policy documents. For example, the persistent use of terminology where the term "childcare", which has generally been positioned as "a means to facilitating labour force participation by women" (NESF, 2005, p. 1), is preferred over early childhood education and care (ECEC), early education or early year's education, as an all-encompassing concept for early years services. A critical researcher can perceive this use of language as not merely trivial or coincidental, but as part of an underlying doctrine which guides the way in which ECEC policy has been formulated and continues to be so. In the Irish case this has meant that policy formulation has predominantly centred on responding to the labour force needs of the parents from a particular section of society, and the subordinate needs of their children, alongside responding to the perceived urgent educational needs of those from more greatly disadvantaged areas. This is rather than policy formulation which centres on the provision of early years education to all children as a right in Irish society. Thus, it becomes apparent that the application of a very specific methodology like critical discourse analysis is required in order to undertake a rigorous analysis of policy

documents. Particularly one which has the ultimate aim of deconstructing the accepted truths about the policy area and consequently revealing any ideology entrenched within the texts.

The technical specifics inherent in the CDA methodology are a welcome companion to Foucault's notions about language, power and knowledge. The critical discourse analysis approach to research is explicitly interested in relations of power and dominance within societies and cultures, and how these are embedded in and reproduced through the use of language and other semiotic incidences. This study works from this view, that language both shapes and is shaped by societal practices (Fairclough, 1992). Thus an underlying motivation behind applying a critical discourse analysis to a policy text is to explore within it "how power may operate, rather than to demonstrate its existence" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 81). Taking Irish ECEC policy documents into consideration, they serve as an example of how the reciprocal nature between language and societal practices does truly exist. This then is of great significance, in terms of the choice of language constructing knowledge about and within the policy area thereby creating truths about ECEC, and how these regimes of truth filter back into the public domain in terms of the government selling their policies, and consequently reinforcing dominant truths about ECEC. It is thus notable how policy is linguistically framed in response to a particular social need within the policy realm; for example, responses to educational disadvantage have been administered through the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) social inclusion programme, while a former response to the 'greater' childcare needs created by the increased labour force participation of mothers, was the introduction of the *Early Childcare Supplement* which was positioned as a subsidy for the parents of young children to purchase the care services of their choosing in the private market (Ireland, 2006a). A thorough analysis of

this official knowledge construction and perpetuation of truths about ECEC in policy texts is of the utmost importance as “it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 219). The critical discourse analysis as it is applied in this study, is concerned with how knowledge, ideology and power are constructed within discourses and relayed into society through language and truths that serve to reinforce this knowledge, ideology and power. The use of this CDA methodology gives the researcher a closer insight into the text, combining analysis of the social, cultural, and political context of the social problem with an in-depth analysis of the language. This CDA method serves to paint a clearer picture of what the text really means and where it is ideologically located as opposed to the use of a less involved documentary analysis method.

## **2.7 An Analytical Model**

To approach this research using a critical discourse analysis, it is necessary thus to devise an analytical framework for conducting the analysis within the realm of the theoretical framework discussed in this chapter. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) devised a suitable analytical framework which incorporates many of the theoretical perspectives involved in this chapter. They see CDA as a form of explanatory critique, within which there is a problem, for example an unmet need; obstacles to the problem being tackled; where there is a function of the problem in sustaining existing social arrangements; and potentially some ways of moving beyond or removing these obstacles (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 60). Fairclough (2009) later formulated this framework into four stages:

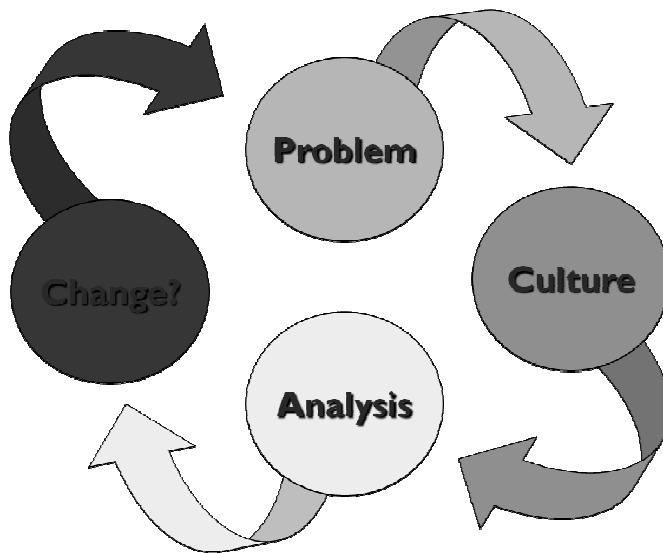
- Stage 1: Focus upon a social wrong in its semiotic aspect
- Stage 2: Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong
- Stage 3: Consider whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles (Fairclough, 2009, p. 167).

The first stage involves the selection of a topic for research which relates to some form of social wrong, in this case Irish ECEC policy, and subsequently the theorising and description of the social problem and identification of the problem in its semiotic aspect. The semiotic aspect of a social problem is the site where it makes meaning, for example in policy texts such as published policy documents. The second stage involves the undertaking of the interdiscursive analysis, identifying the dominant genres, styles and discourses (Fairclough, 2009) and within this the dominant constructions of knowledge about the policy area. This stage also involves undertaking the micro analysis of language, which necessitates investigating the linguistic structure of the text including: narrative, sentence structure, clause combination, grammar and semantics of clauses, and the vocabulary, particularly the meaning of, location of and collocation of the words used (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2001, 2003, 2009). The third stage of the framework involves consideration of whether the social problem is inherent in the social culture, or not, in order to ascertain if it is the ideological construction of the social order, or the social order itself which needs to be changed (Fairclough, 2009). Finally, the fourth stage involves identifying ways in which the social problem can be addressed within the social order, looking for “gaps and contradictions that exist” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 231) in order to seek out “unrealised potential for change” (ibid.). Wodak and Meyer (2009) have summarised Fairclough’s steps for analysis further, into a three-part analysis. Part one of this three-part analysis involves the “structural analysis of the context”, part two is “an interactional analysis” which includes the linguistic textual analysis and part three is “an analysis of interdiscursivity, which tries to compare the dominant and resistant strands of discourse” (p. 30).

Foucault's wider discourse theory (1972, 1977, 1981, 1984a, 1984b) in conjunction with Fairclough's wider CDA theory (1995) and subsequently his more refined and specific analytical framework (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2009) for a CDA underpins the theoretical framework of this thesis. The analytical approach to this study is influenced by Bowe, Ball and Gold's (1992) policy cycle model insofar as it acknowledges the process of the three different contexts involved and their importance to a policy analysis therein. Nevertheless, this research study is overarchingly located within Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model (1995) and the analysis has followed a trajectory based on it, starting first with the analysis of sociocultural practice, secondly with analysis of the discourse practice and thirdly with the analysis of texts themselves. Within the overarching dimensions of discourse model (Fairclough, 1995) an analytical framework has been developed taking elements from both of the frameworks proposed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), and Fairclough (2009). This framework for analysis follows four stages, illustrated in Figure 2.2:

- 1) Identifying and locating a social problem
- 2) Investigating the social construction of the society in which the problem exists to ascertain if it is innate in the culture
- 3) Undertaking the actual linguistic textual analysis of the document paying close attention to narrative, grammar, sentence structure, semantics, and the meaning of, location and collocation of words
- 4) Revealing the main findings and ascertaining any possible ways to overcome them and strive for change



**Figure 2.2: Diagrammatic representation of CDA framework for this thesis**

## **2.8 The dimensions of this critical discourse analysis thesis**

Taking inspiration from Fairclough's (1995) *Dimensions of Discourse* diagram, this thesis is thus subsequently set out to reflect a similar trajectory by situating the remaining chapters within the three levels of his model. Accordingly, *Chapter three* looks at the *sociocultural practice level* and within that it is concerned with framing the theoretical context of the social problem. Thus chapter three reviews the dominant discourses of childhoods, from developmental perspectives to children's rights, and also examines the dominant discourses within the construction of early childhood education and care. *Chapter four* is a combination of both the *sociocultural practice level* and the *discourse practice level*. At the *sociocultural practice level* it reviews dominant discourses of childhoods and children's early childhood education and care in Ireland. While at the *discourse practice level* it examines how these discourses are interpreted in and through policy for children, specifically as it relates to ECEC services and children's rights therein. Chapter four also reviews the main policy developments relevant to the ECEC area throughout the time period 1998-2008. The story of how the analytical model was applied and thus how the research was carried out is told in

*Chapter five*, which is the methodology chapter. Chapter five combines both the *discourse practice level* and the *text level* of Fairclough's model. At the *discourse practice level* it discusses the development and application of a framework to use to interpret the dominant knowledge constructions within policy discourses as realised in Irish ECEC policy texts. While at the *text level* chapter five discusses the application of the micro analysis and strengths and weaknesses of this approach. The *text level* of Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model (1995) is further explored within the penultimate *Chapters six, seven and eight*. Chapters six, seven, and eight share the findings, revealing the dominant knowledge constructions and discourses within Irish ECEC policy which shape and perpetuate policy formulation, thus fulfilling the descriptive aspect of the *text level*. The thesis concludes with *Chapter nine* which offers both discussion and recommendations based on the findings in the previous chapters, ascertaining any possible ways to overcome them and strive for change.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has laid out the theoretical foundation for the methodological approach to this thesis. These theoretical perspectives have influenced the research design for the study, how the study has been conducted, and how the data has been interpreted and analysed. Critical discourse analysis was located as a qualitative approach to research which is mostly situated in the social constructionist paradigm, while also being influenced by elements of the critical theory paradigm.

A key factor underpinning this theoretical framework is the philosophical approach to discourses expounded by Foucault. Foucault's concepts of language, power and knowledge and how they fundamentally interconnect at discourse level is an integral factor influencing the critical discourse analysis method used in this research study.



Foucault's theories of discourse combined with Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2009), and Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) theories, and development of a critical discourse analysis framework are the major conceptual understandings of CDA driving the methodology of this research. The dimensions of discourse model developed by Fairclough (1995) has been used as an overarching model in which to situate this research study and also as a structure for the presentation of the subsequent thesis chapters.

### **3. CONCEPTUALISING DISCOURSES OF CHILDHOOD AND RIGHTS**

“Children are human beings, not only *human becomings*” (Qvortrup, 1994, p. 18, emphasis added).

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Childhood has been described as a universal and “permanent structural form or category that never disappears even though its members change continuously and it’s nature and conception vary historically” (Corsaro, 1997, p. 3). Theories of developmental psychology have been a dominant framework for understanding childhood and children’s development. However, more modern childhood theory builds on the biological reality of childhood to view it as a social construction (Hayes, 2002; James & Prout, 1990; Woodhead, 2005). This chapter begins the exploration and explanation of the sociocultural practice level of Fairclough’s dimensions of discourse (1995) as it relates to this study. It does this through the review of relevant literature that constructs concepts of childhood, children’s rights and early childhood education. Exploring these dominant discourses and how they operate within society is a necessary step to take, in advance of the application of the micro aspect of the critical discourse analysis of the Irish policy literature related to early childhood education and care.

This chapter reviews the relevant literature which explores the constructions of childhoods, children’s rights and ECEC. Thus it begins with the discussion of developmental perspectives, a dominant childhood discourse. It then goes on to explore the shift from developmental understandings of children to a sociology of childhood. The sociology of childhood discourses highlight the shift from a dominant needs discourse of children, to the discourse of children as social agents or actors. The relationship between the ‘children as social actors’ discourse and the construction of

children's rights, as conceived of in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is discussed. Discourses of children's rights are subsequently considered with regard to children's rights to participation, which then leads to consideration of the participation rights of young children in ECEC. This is followed by a review of some of the relevant discourses within the construction of early childhood education and care, particularly the concept of pedagogy. The main points from this literature review that inform the theoretical and conceptual discourse framework used in this thesis are elaborated before the chapter concludes with a summary of the key points of the overall literature review.

### **3.2 Developmental perspectives**

The discourse of child development has dominated not only the oral communications of those who are concerned for children, but also our professional publications, the research organisations that we have constructed, and the advice that we give to parents and teachers regarding their children (Cannella, 2008, p. 45).

Theories of childhood, particularly in the past century, have been heavily influenced by the field of developmental psychology; this has created the child development discipline under which dominant knowledge and truths about "the child" have emerged. This child development discourse as related to the broader early childhood education discourse has been criticised (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007 ; James & Prout, 1990; Smith, 2002) for constructing a narrow definition of what Mayall refers to as a "universal decontextualised child" (Mayall, 1994, p. 2). It is relevant thus to consider the broad implications underlying the dominance of such developmental theories (Cannella, 2008), in terms of the dominant construction of the child within early childhood. The influential developmentalist work that this thesis explores is the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner and how their theories have evolved throughout time.

In the twentieth century the work of Piaget, on children's cognition within learning environments, and in early childhood in particular, was extremely influential in constructing the child within early childhood. In Piaget's theory of cognitive development each child is viewed as an individual learner who progresses incrementally through four different developmental stages between infancy and the end of adolescence, where they accrue more advanced levels of learning ability. Each of Piaget's stages; sensori-motor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational, are characterised by a general cognitive structure that affects all of the child's thinking; he "proposed that children individually construct their worlds from the inside out, a process that is described as both self-directed and self-regulated" (Cannella, 2008, p. 7). Piaget's interest was deeply located in epistemology, how knowledge is acquired, thus he was concerned with how children inherently acquire their knowledge as related to their stage of development (Penn, 2008).

Piagetian theories are strongly associated with the notion of developmentally appropriate<sup>13</sup> practice in early childhood education. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is explained by Woodhead as echoing traditional child-centred values, which are reinforced by Piagetian theory, "emphasising: respect for universal stages of development; young children's natural play, exploration and activity-based learning; and the guiding, supportive role of the skilled practitioner" (2007, p. 29). From the early childhood education perspective, Piaget's theory constructs children who need to find things out for themselves. The role of the early childhood educator then, is to provide a well resourced learning environment where children can have opportunities to learn for themselves, with guidance and suggestions from the teacher. It has been suggested that

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<sup>13</sup> Woodhead references Bredekamp and Copple's text *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (1997) as the origin for the understanding of the term developmentally appropriate practice

Piaget laid the theoretical foundations for the notion of learning through play (Saracho & Spodek, 2006; Wood & Bennett, 1999), particularly in terms of how his work has been appropriated within theories of DAP. Piaget accepted the view that social influences played some part in affecting children's cognitive development "but considered that social interaction could only complete children's development, not create it" (Wood & Bennett, 1999, p. 7). Piaget's theory of developmental stages, while heavily influencing early childhood education, particularly from a curriculum development perspective, has been exposed to criticism for failing to take the "variation and complexity in children's learning" (ibid., p. 8) into account.

Vygotsky, on the other hand "viewed social interaction as central to the developmental process" (Edwards, 2003, p. 255); the work of Vygotsky thus has been credited with introducing concepts acknowledging a more socio-cultural influence on children's development. Vygotsky understood cognitive development as occurring as a result of children's interaction with more knowledgeable and competent others who are willing to provide guidance and support on problem-solving situations, where they can sensitively adjust their level of assistance in such a way that the child is challenged to participate in activities just beyond his or her current level of understanding. He saw the importance of adult's roles in children's learning, especially in terms of their imparting of knowledge and guidance to children. Vygotsky moved beyond Piaget's homogenous notion of age and stage development to the idea of a socio-cultural conception of childhood development, where children have inherent learning ability that excels when guided by more knowledgeable adults (Schaffer, 2006). Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is still widely regarded today; the ZPD is explained as "the gap between the child's level of actual development and the level of potential development that might be achieved through interactions with a more knowledgeable

other” (Wood & Bennett, 1999, p. 8). In other words the region between what children already know and what they are capable of learning under guidance. Wood and Bennett (1999) explain Vygotsky’s theory as focusing more on the “interdependence of teaching and learning” (p. 8) than Piagetian developmental theory does; Vygotsky’s theory conceives the adult as an instructor rather than as a guide. It is also a contextual theory, unlike Piaget’s notion of a universal stage based theory of development, Vygotsky’s theory acknowledged the contextual socio-cultural factors which affect individual development (Edwards, 2003).

### ***3.2.1 The evolution of a developmental perspective, Bronfenbrenner’s model(s)***

Traditional developmental perspectives on childhood have often been criticised for constructing children as ‘incomplete’ beings. This view of children as incomplete beings sees children as needing to be socialised appropriately into a superior adult end state; within this, they are seen as “potential outcomes rather than as social actors” (Matthews, 2007, p. 323) in their own right. This perspective also evades valuing the child in the here and now as a person, as Mayall has articulated:

The supremacy of developmentalists’ ideas of children and childhood has allowed us to bask in the comfortable view that children are the same children wherever they are. Their emotional, relational and cognitive competences and incompetences, relate to their age and their stage. In this vision, children can be observed and described as having attained a certain level of development and competence whatever the social context, rather than perceived as people whose competence, confidence, knowledge and interactions vary according to the social context ... to find universal truths about ‘the child’, blinds us to the personhood of children, viewed both as individuals and as groups and their exposure to the same social forces as anyone else. (Mayall, 1994, p. 118).

The tenets of Piaget’s age and stage model and Vygotsky’s socio-cultural model of early childhood development converge to some extent in Bronfenbrenner’s model of the ecology of human development (1979), which provides a more agentic conceptualisation of childhood. Bronfenbrenner’s model certainly was a new departure from Piaget and Vygotsky and other developmental psychologists’ visions of childhood.

While previously, psychologists, sociologists, educators, anthropologists and so on, were all believed to have studied narrow singular versions of children's worlds, Bronfenbrenner attempted to tie more of these concepts together with his ecology of human development, using a systems theory approach "which underscores the interactions of (ever-changing) individuals within the context of their (ever-changing) environments" (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008, p. 23). He noted the importance of influences from children's surroundings, how they shape a child's personality and learning ability, and developed his model which outlines the different "layers of influence" (Penn, 2008, p. 46) affecting development. Bronfenbrenner identified five layers:

1. the microsystem – seen as "the immediate environments of children" (Onchwari, Onchwari, & Keengwe, 2008, p. 271)
2. the mesosystem –the relationship between the different microsystems
3. the exosystem –the environments which indirectly affect the child, such as a parents work environment
4. the macrosystem –representing wider society, for example the government, culture, legal system
5. the chronosystem – "which refers to events that occur within the life of the child" (Onchwari et al., 2008, p. 271).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological environment is "conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3), each taking into account the different levels in society, from the home environment, a microsystem, right up to the cultural organisation of the wider society, the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's model is seen as influential and important in relation to children's development, particularly in terms of accentuating the importance of studying children in context (Smith, 2002; Hayes & Kernan, 2008); and also in accepting the impact of reciprocal environmental influences on the child, particularly the notion that the child can actively change their environments as well as be influenced by them (Vogler et al., 2008). Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) theories highlighted the need to view the child as a part of and as an actor in the whole world

around her, emphasizing the significance of considering all the systems involved in a child's life: the family, school, work, culture and the patterning of events and transitions over the course of life. The underlying theory behind his model is "that individuals both shape, and are shaped by, their environment" (Saracho & Spodek, 2006, p. 709) and that it is necessary to examine as many levels of children's social systems as possible in order to truly understand the processes of human development (Meadows, 2010). Thus Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) has been credited with helping to put a physical presence on the social agent that is, the developing child (Meadows, 2010). The appreciation of the child as a social agent is the key tenet of the principles underlying the sociology of childhood.

### **3.3 Sociology of Childhood**

'Childhood' is the structural site that is occupied by 'children' as a collectivity. And it is within this collective and institutional space of 'childhood' as a member of the category 'children' that any individual 'child' comes to exercise his or her unique agency. (James & James, 2004, p. 14)

French historian Phillip Aries was credited with being one of the first to lay the foundations for the new social studies of childhood, as he emphasised the concept of childhood as being socially constructed through his historical research (James & James, 2001). Aries identified where the conceptual separation between adult life and childhood began, back between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, when a new attitude towards children was first fostered through the growth "of 'coddling' towards children, which stressed their special nature and needs" (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 16-17). This was soon followed by the introduction of formal education for children which constructed the need for "long periods of schooling as a prerequisite for children before they assumed adult responsibilities" (ibid.). The beginning of formalising the state of childhood has been viewed as a "particular social status within specially constituted



institutional frames” (Alanen, 1988, p. 64), an accomplishment of the bourgeoisie to ensure social reproduction of an educated class; as James and Prout elucidate:

Initially only economically and practically possible for the upper classes, who alone had time and money for ‘childhood’, these trends diffused downwards through society. Childhood became institutionalised for all (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 16-17).

In the 1980s the discipline of childhood studies as related to a new paradigm (James & Prout, 1990) came to prominence, created by a collective of interdisciplinary social researchers who were particularly interested in the study of childhood and children (James, 2010); within this field, social scientists came to recognise children as active social agents who construct and interpret their own worlds (Corsaro, 1992, 1997; Freeman, 1998; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1990; Matthews, 2007).

According to Cannella, previous social constructions of childhood managed to create “the ultimate ‘other’” (2008, p. 19) who whilst inhabiting the status of childhood are seen to be “a group of human beings not considered able or mature enough to create themselves” (ibid.). Modern theorists tend to understand children differently, as social actors in their own right, and from this idea the recognition of childhood being socially constructed has emerged. This social construction recognition has led to a theorisation of the sociology of childhood, as a new paradigm of childhood (James & Prout, 1990), also further conceptualised by the likes of Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), James and James (2004), James, Jenks and Prout (1998), James and Prout (2006) and Mayall (1994, 2002). Features of this new paradigm include recognition that childhood is socially constructed; that childhood is contextualised in relation to time, place, culture and so on; that children are active social actors with agency; that children’s relationships and cultures are important in their own right and worthy of study; that children have their own voice and should be listened to and

allowed to participate actively in a democracy; that children are valuable resources not just cost burdens; and finally, that relationships between adults and children have a power dynamic involved from both sides which should always be taken into consideration (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Prior to this consensus however, Alanen (1988) had called for a rethinking of sociology, children and childhood in order “to bring children into sociology” (p. 53) as active subjects. She compared the treatment of children to that previously of women, within macrosociological perspectives, “seen as peripheral to the global systems under study” (ibid.), or in respect of childhood, simply understood as adults in waiting, inhabiting their “proper place” (ibid.) in deference to the more important sociological beings, namely men; or in the case of modern childhood, in deference to the more important sociological structure of the family. This reference to the family is a salient point in relation to the specifics of the Irish perspective, due to the primacy attributed to the social structure of the family in the Constitution where it is recognised as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society” (Article 41.1.1, Ireland, 1937).

Alanen has situated the construction of children within socialisation, as representing childhood as “a period of lack of responsibility, with rights to protection and training but not to autonomy” (p. 54). She critiqued both the theory of socialisation and the social construction of the family, and children within it, as the main factors hindering children’s appearance within sociology. Alanen stated that the socialisation viewpoint models “children as passive objects and victims of influences external to them” (p. 58) and instead called for a sociology of childhood which views children as active participants in and co-constructors of themselves, their own social world, and the broader social world in general.

Further developing the emerging concept of a sociology of childhood, Lee (1998) has argued in support of the importance of the sociology of childhood being taken seriously within sociological theory; he did this by proposing the development of the alternative characterisation of an “immature sociology” (p. 459). Lee saw theories of socialisation and dominant sociologies of childhood as having:

one feature in common - both privilege the ‘finished’. They share this feature because they both operate by making children fit for sociological theory, rather than by making sociological theory fit for children (ibid., p. 463).

Lee went on to describe the dichotomy between conceptions of children as ‘beings’ and conceptions of children as ‘becomings’ as personifying the “ontological ambiguity” (p. 464) of childhood. Traditionally, in socialisation theories of childhood, the child’s trajectory through life was “understood as a process of ‘becoming’ complete” (Lee, 1998, p. 461) with the completed state of adulthood afforded more importance in sociology. These depictions of children as ‘becomings’ have been objected to by sociologists of childhood who see this representation as contributing to the marginalization of children; as Lee puts it “not only does ‘socialization’ relegate children to being of only passing theoretical interest, but it also understands them as voiceless” (Lee, 1998, p. 461). The socialisation concept of childhood renders the young in society unable to “figure in their own right in sociological theory unless they are understood as ‘mature’ in their possession of agency” (Lee, 1998, p. 460); this outlook has led to the marginalisation of children within sociology, rendering them to be viewed as lacking in agency and as the passive dependants of adults. Lee further explains the reasoning behind sociology’s treatment of children within the traditional socialization model:

At a fundamental level, sociology requires that children be understood as incomplete and as in a state of becoming. This understanding of children ensures that sociological interest in them is a passing interest, the real focus being to account for the completed state of adulthood. Social order is understood as a finished product, since if it were itself incomplete it would be unable to bring children to adult completeness” (Lee, 1998, p. 460).

Lee concluded with a caveat, warning that if sociological structures are to be continually “approached in a ‘mature’ fashion, not only will sociological theory continue to require children to be conformed to meet its needs, but the same conformity will be demanded of the social world in general” (Lee, 1998, p. 477), particularly since sociological theory has a tendency to privilege “the mature and the complete over the immature and the unfinished” (Lee, 1998, p. 477). Nevertheless, at the same time “the sociology of childhood has ‘matured’ itself as a sub-discipline by forging an image of children as *beings*” (Lee, 1998, p. 477) as a response to sociological theory’s privileging of the “mature and complete” (ibid.). To shift from the view of children as ‘becomings’ to view them rather as ‘beings’, has allowed sociology to recognise children in their own right. As a result of this, there is a tendency now to speak of ‘childhoods’ rather than one universal ‘childhood’ which reflects the “variability of the experience of the young” (Lee, 1999, p. 467).

In 1990 James and Prout first theorised this new paradigm of a sociology of childhood:

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8).

James and Prout viewed the sociology of childhood as very much an integral part of mainstream sociology and sociological debate, within this they saw their new paradigm of the sociology of childhood as allowing children to be studied in their own right (1990). The previously dominant theory of socialisation depicted children as “becomings” who are of transient interest and are “passive objects” (Lee, 1998, p. 461). In the new paradigm of the social studies of childhood, children are theorized by James and Prout as “causal and/or interpretative agents” (Lee, 1998, p. 459), independent ‘beings’ capable of playing an active role in their own lives and in the wider social order. The main principle of the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood is the

recognition that “children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults” (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8). Within this new paradigm, they further elucidated on how “different discursive practices produce different childhoods, each and all of which are ‘real’ within their own regime of truth” (James & Prout, 1997, p. 26); this gives further esteem to the concept of characterising children as ‘beings’ rather than ‘becomings’. Such a conception opens up a space for children’s voices to “be heard independently of the perspectives and concerns of adults” (Lee, 1998, p. 462) thus providing them with more agency in studies of their own worlds.

Qvortrup has characterised childhood as a social phenomenon, a permanent “structural form” (1994, p.6) which is defined by the fact that the child is not yet an adult. Qvortrup theorised the institutionalisation of childhood in society describing it as “adults’ way of confining them in particular ‘islands’ and ‘buildings’, and thus a way of marginalizing or excluding childhood from adult society” (ibid., p. 9). He saw children as marginalized within sociology because of their subordinate positions in society:

I would suggest characterizing childhood as a minority category, the members of which are marginalized in relation to adult society and exposed to paternalistic treatment while their constructive ability is slighted (Qvortrup, 2002, p. 71).

James and James further highlighted the “deep rooted ambivalence about the nature of childhood” (2004, p. 11) which still persists particularly, in their view, through laws, policies and the way(s) in which children’s lives are governed throughout society (ibid.). James and James construct childhood as a universal term which is also characterised by being a deeply personal and individualised experience (2004). They also highlight the culturally contingent nature of childhood, and draw attention to Woodhead’s suggestion that the conceptualisation of what children’s needs are, for example, varies between cultures. Woodhead (1996) has argued that most of the

“cherished beliefs about what is best for children are cultural constructions” (p. 5), an important consideration for the undertaking of a CDA looking at dominant discourses within ECEC policy. He contended that it is of importance to recognise that children’s needs, outside of universal fundamental needs, for instance food, clothes, shelter, water, and so on, are situational and culture-bound, that they are “as much about the culture and society into which the child is growing as they are about the child” (p. 37). Concurring with this view, James and James have commented on childhood as being very much “constructed by adults” (2004, p. 75), through their actions and attitudes towards children. James and James (2004) concur with Qvortrup (1994) and Mayall (1994, 2002) in relation to the acknowledgment of the marginalisation of children, and raise awareness of the institutionalisation of childhood which is perpetuated for example, through the education system and rights to work, amongst other social structures. The outcome of this institutionalisation of childhood thus leads to the “exclusion of children from full community membership” (p.36) which further enhances the “imbalances of power that exist between adults and children” (p.35) and creates a scenario where children struggle both to have their agency recognised and to exercise their agency.

Jenks has thus questioned the evolution of these conceptualisations of children and a sociology of childhood. He asks:

In what ways can we possibly begin to make sense of children? ... after centuries of debate and practice we have still not achieved any consensus over the issue of childhood. Despite a long cultural commitment to the good of the child and a more recent intellectual engagement with the topic of childhood, what remains perpetually diffuse and ambiguous is the basic conceptualization of childhood as a social practice (Jenks, 2005, p. 2)

The conceptualization of children put forward by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) sees children as living in childhoods which are constructed by adult understandings of

children and childhoods, and furthermore as living through cultures and experiences that are constructed for them by these adults. Writing about the construction of early childhood, they discuss what they perceive to be the dominant discourses constructing the child within sociology and social research, particularly in the Western world. There is the construction of “the child as knowledge, identity and culture reproducer” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 44), which sees the child as an empty vessel requiring education in order to be ready for formal schooling; this construction is a key tenet of the wider neoliberal discourse which permeates ECEC policies (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005), particularly in Ireland. The education required for this child includes the imbuing of cultural values among other tools of socialisation, with the ultimate goal being to create a fully functioning contributing adult member of society, an element of human capital; the child is a ‘becoming’. Another dominant discourse constructing the child is “the scientific child of biological stages” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 46). This construction relies heavily on approaches from developmental psychology to characterise different age related stages of childhood; this child is also referred to as “*Piaget’s child*” (ibid.). The authors see this child as being characterised without acknowledgement of the complexity of the social processes involved in everyday life. This subsequently means that the child is “reduced to separate and measurable categories, such as social development, intellectual development, motor development” (ibid.), lacking a more holistic view. The authors also discuss the establishment of the view of “the child as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 48). In this construction the child is seen to be a unique, complex and individual being who actively co-constructs their social worlds through learning experiences. This child is also seen to be a citizen, with rights and responsibilities. These views are also shared by the construction of the “rich child” as developed in the

pedagogical practice of Reggio Emilia<sup>14</sup>. In Reggio they understand the young child as a social being who wholly benefits from mixing with their peers in an early childhood education environment, they believe in the concept of the “rich child”. This discourse of the “rich child”, as described by Malaguzzi, is a child who “is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children” (Moss, Dillon, & Statham, 2000, p. 250).

### **3.4 The socially constructed Child within the new Sociology of Childhood**

The notion of viewing children as the “rich child”, as ‘beings’, ties in with the work of the sociologist William Corsaro and his position that “the future of childhood is the present” (1997, p. 310). In his *Sociology of Childhood*, Corsaro identified how young pre-school aged children demonstrate their agency and construct their own peer cultures (1997). Corsaro was one of the first sociologists to study children and childhood so comprehensively (Qvortrup, 1998) and he approaches the study of children from an all encompassing perspective. Thus Corsaro’s work is concerned with the development of childhood rather than the development of the individual child; his research predominantly concentrates on studying how children interact with each other in their peer groups and provides “evidence that children actively construct” (Matthews, 2007, p. 323) their worlds. His ethnographic research witnessed how children in early childhood education and care situations, for example children attending nursery or kindergarten, develop a strong desire to do things with one another. Through this they “creatively appropriate information from the adult world” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 168) and naturally produce their own “unique peer cultures” (ibid.). Corsaro developed the concept of interpretive reproduction, within which:

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<sup>14</sup> Reggio Emilia is an Italian city which is famous for its pioneering pedagogical work in early childhood services.



the term interpretive captures the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. Reproduction captures the idea that children are not simply internalising society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction. (1997, p. 18).

Recognition of children actively creating their own peer cultures, has paved the way for theories within social science that view childhood as socially constructed, thus in Corsaro's view, "the notion of interpretive reproduction challenges sociology to take children seriously and to appreciate children's contributions to social reproduction and change" (1997, p. 44). The work of sociologists such as Corsaro, and others, has contributed to the modern depiction of children as capable 'beings', who are important actors in their own social worlds.

#### ***3.4.1 Challenging a Needs discourse***

Notwithstanding the more progressive views of the likes of Corsaro, Qvortrup, Lee and so on, this review of the literature has also observed that there is still a struggle for recognition between the child as social actor principle and the traditional needs discourse of children as constructed in the socialisation model. An ambiguity surrounding the recognition of children's formal participation in social life has been contextualised in the differentiation between a model of children's needs and a model of children's interests (Wyness, 2001; Wyness, Harrison, & Buchanan, 2004). A model of children's needs is associated with the welfare principle and rests on the concept of adults providing care, education and guidance in children's best interests. The needs discourse around children is derived from the socialisation perspective of the sociology of childhood. It favours viewing children as "social dependants" (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 83) who are also seen to be "apprentice citizens rather than fully constituted members of the social world" (ibid., p. 84). Wyness (2001) identifies two deficit models implied in

the children's needs discourse. The first deficit model looks at children who are seen to be as 'in need' due to suffering negligence, abuse, poverty, and so on; and within this, the discourse of children's needs is a "discursive means through which various adult groups struggle for resources and professional expansion" (p. 194). The second deficit model implied by the children's needs discourse embodies the socialisation approach, this is used to view children as 'becomings' who are expected to move through various stages of development before realising their full potential as complete adults; this deficit model refers to the whole population of children, not just children who are suffering in some particular way as the first deficit model implies (Wyness, 2001). This socialisation based needs discourse was previously the dominant view of children within society. Children were seen to have a "*trainee* status" (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 85, emphasis added), within which "their exclusion on the grounds of 'irresponsibility' are predicated on the notion that children are socially and morally incompetent" (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 85). To view children as innocents in society allows for a construction of children where "innocence equates with vulnerability which legitimates children's political exclusion and adults' right to talk on behalf of children" (ibid.). The needs discourse allows others, namely adults, to speak for children; children are consequently silenced and voiceless.

Within the needs discourse children are persistently constructed as innocent and incompetent; the child is seen "as a vulnerable, weak and dependant creature, bereft of those capacities that entitle adults to be regarded as full members of our society" (Archard, 2006, p. 6). This view could be perceived as having some foundations in the main tenets of Piaget's theory, in terms of the use of language that characterises children in terms of what they can and cannot do; for example, what is seen as developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education. The period of

childhood is thus positioned as the period in which “the young acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to become competent members of society” (Matthews, 2007, p. 323), consequently, “the view that children are not full-fledged members of society is entrenched in cultures and in situations” (ibid., p. 331). This perception homogenises children and childhood, rejecting the variability of individual lives and experiences (Matthews, 2007). Cannella argues that “the discourse of child needs implies that certain human beings can actually identify the needs of others, creating an authoritative knowledge that is controlled by a particular group and is imposed on another” (2008, p. 35). Hence, the children’s needs discourse puts children firmly in the hands of “adult caretakers” (Wyness, 2001, p. 195) who become responsible for “the physical, moral and social needs of children” (ibid.) rather than them being afforded their own responsibilities. Consequently, the discourse of children’s needs demands that “adults always mediate children’s worlds” (Wyness, 2001, p. 195).

This dominant needs discourse of childhood “has constituted childhood as located within the private domain. It has constructed the child as dependent and individualized, with a recognised and necessary place in the family but not in society’ (Moss et al., 2000, p. 240). The subsequent perception of children as subordinate to adults has enabled society to control and regulate childhood through policies that withhold individual autonomy from children, citing their immaturity as the rationale for their societal oppression. Children thus struggle to be defined in an ambiguous culture that personifies children dichotomously, as both dangerous and in danger (Prout, 2001). Policy actions react to this ambiguity by oscillating “within a child-centred paradigm between children’s ‘interests’ and children’s ‘needs’” (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 83). This causes further tension because children remain constructed on one hand as “social dependants” (ibid.) in need of care and control. While on the other hand, they can also

be constructed as “social agents” (ibid.) who are capable of participation in social and political life.

### ***3.4.2 The Child as Social Actor/Agent***

The academic world within childhood studies has widely rejected constructing children within a needs discourse, and has conversely embraced the concept of the child as ‘social agent’. King attributes the rise of this concept to the changed dynamic between structure and agency within sociology (2007). Theories of structure formerly dominated sociological theory, these theories of structure centred on the operation of institutions within society and their effects on its members. However modern sociology has shifted focus, to be more concerned with the behaviour of people within society, and how they “understand the world and affect changes in society” (King, 2007, p. 205). Subsequently this view of people as social agents is now the dominant concern within sociological theory; hence its prominence also within the sociology of childhood.

Discourses of childhood which construct a way of looking at children from a ‘children’s interests’ perspective, “suggests agency in that children are viewed as active and involved, a group or body in a position to make claims on the state at various levels” (Wyness, 2001, p. 196). There is a political element to the children’s interests discourse according to Wyness et al (2004) which affords children the status of a minority group. Wyness also concurs with Lee (1998) to some extent in terms of acknowledging a contextual element to children’s ability to exercise their agency, by recognising that: “children and adults are more or less agentic depending on context and experience” (Wyness, 2001, p. 210). Matthews (2007) further highlights how the new sociology of childhood allows children to be recognised as “social actors who are capable of making sense of and affecting their societies” (p. 324). Viewing children as competent actors

allows them to be seen as having the capabilities to interpret their own social worlds and act on them accordingly (Matthews, 2007). It also recognises that both peer relationships between children themselves and the relationships between children and adults are vitally important elements of children's social lives.

MacNaughton and Evans (2008) consider the child as a social actor model to be a construction wherein the child is seen "as shaping her or his own identities, creating and communicating valid views about the social world and having a right to participate in it" (p. 161). The child as social actor is recognised as a person with "valid ideas, values and understandings of her or himself and of the world" (MacNaughton & Evans, 2008, p. 161) and the authors also see this child as having the capacity to work in partnership with adults in order to "develop new policies and practices" (ibid.). They see the construction of the child as a social actor as having three important ideas that are relevant for undertaking research with children:

1. young children construct valid meanings about the world and their place in it
2. children's knowledge of the world is different (not inferior) to adults knowledge
3. children's insights and perspectives on the world can inform and improve adults understandings of children's experiences (MacNaughton & Evans, 2008, p. 161).

They go on to identify "listening" as an important "ethical and political encounter" (ibid., p. 163) with children which is also seen as "a practice of children's participatory rights" (ibid.). The authors use examples of research work undertaken with children in developing an early childhood curriculum, which allowed children to participate as social actors and to have their voices heard in order to create a curriculum which suited children as well as practitioners. Within this, "the child's ideas and perspectives on their relationships and experiences become the starting point for a curriculum" (MacNaughton & Evans, 2008, p. 166) which intends to embody the spirit of human rights.

Critiquing the child as a social actor construction, King (2007) refutes the claims by the new paradigms' sociologists of childhood that children are responsible for creating any changes through their own actions. As King sees it, the concept of the child as social agent who is a "rational, competent, self-controlled child" (2007, p. 208) is an idealised perception. He views this image of the child as one favoured by the new sociologists of childhood, rather than as a truth emanating from any evidence that things change "as the direct result of children's concerted actions" (ibid., pp. 208-209) or that any changes truly "reflect what the children wanted or intended" (King, 2007, p. 209). Approaching his research from a systems theory perspective King argues that the influence of children in relation to affecting how the realms of "politics, law, economics and education communicate about children" (2007, p. 208) is "only indirect and whether or not it occurs depends on the operations of these systems and not on the actions of children themselves" (King, 2007, p. 208).

King's standpoint within the debate about the social construction of children and childhood is of great relevance. The advent of the new paradigm of childhood studies has seen the academic world largely construct and accept the view that children are social actors. This has lead to the introduction of the use of language within policy which popularizes the notion that children are accepted as social actors who can participate in and affect their own lives at a social and/or political level. However, in reality children's social action or agency is recognised quite differently as exemplified by Kylie Valentine's (2009) exploration of the notion of children's agency.

Valentine (2009) criticises the dominant view of children as social agents within the new sociology of childhood. She sees the broader social agents construct as reinforcing "the relatively rigid identity categories available" (p. 9) to children and also

incorporating “the social norms and rules that make up these categories” (ibid.). Consequently, she understands the social agents construct as operating to protect “the status quo rather than transforming social relationships” (Valentine, 2009, p. 9). What Valentine suggests alternatively, is to begin to view children’s agency as an entirely different concept from that of adult’s agency. She describes the agency that is attributed to and attained by adults as requiring “rationality, self-awareness and a sense of futurity” (2009, p. 3). She further cautions that to attribute this same concept of agency towards children is to perpetuate the view that children are adults in waiting, and instead, she advocates for valuing children’s differences from adults in their own right, rather than classing their differences as deficiencies (Valentine, 2009). She goes on further to point out that how we understand children’s agency should not be confused with how we understand adult agency; we should not require children “to have the social privileges that have been traditionally understood as bestowing adult agency” (Valentine, 2009, p. 9). Valentine concludes by iterating that “agency is not the same as competence or capability” (p. 10); she believes that childhood studies has a tendency to treat the concept of agency as providing proof that children “are entitled to greater participation or rights” (p. 10). Valentine disagrees with this view and instead suggests that the prominence of the recognition of the childhood studies understanding of children’s agency has resulted in an emphasis “on process not outcomes” (p. 8). Thus implying that fulfilling the concept of facilitating children’s agency, requires paying lip service to the notion of consultation with children but does not persist to effect change, a hypothesis shared by King (2007) when he suggested that change does not come about as a direct result of children’s own actions. In fact Valentine goes so far as to suggest that in consultative procedures, children’s “views may be considered and then discarded, because adults are closer to liberal criteria of rationality and competence, and so are entitled to overrule them” (2009, p. 8). She also posits that the idea of hearing

children's views then subsequently ignoring them, may well be the "mechanism by which children are often consulted now" (Valentine, 2009, p. 8)

Despite these criticisms of the concept of children as social agents, advocates of the main perspectives incorporated in the new paradigm of childhood still promote the understanding of children as capable social agents. This view of children as social agents has been broadly appropriated across children's theory and research. The social construction of childhood, which views children as social agents, remains inextricably intertwined with the concept of realising children's rights; this perspective requires engaging with the realities of children's lived experiences, their lives in context (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004; Roche, 1999; Smith, 2007b). Thus the sociology of childhood unites somewhat with children's rights advocacy, in the sense that both perspectives construct children as subjects not objects of control or concern, where they are accepted as individual beings, not a homogenous class (Freeman, 1998; Smith, 2002).

### **3.5 Children's Rights**

Children are among the most powerless of social groups and often have very limited opportunities to be involved in key decisions which affect them. Recognising their competence and valuing their potential contribution – individually and collectively – is a crucial prerequisite for creating a dynamic participative society. This means respecting the individuality of children who are not merely dependant on adults, but also social actors in their own right (Ruxton, 1998, p. 7)

Discourses of children's rights have been abundant throughout the past 20 years, since the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The majority of discussions about children's rights are generally in relation to the context of rights as they are constructed by the Convention. This in turn has created a shift toward the wider use of children's rights principles, particularly the language of children's rights, in discourse about children.



Onora O'Neill defended the concept of ascribing rights to children based on the fact that through their youth and related dependency they can "easily become victims" (O'Neill, 1992, p. 24). O'Neill's view was reiterated by Freeman (2007), when he referred to her opinion that if we value children's lives at any level, we "should identify what obligations parents, teachers and indeed the wider community have towards children" (Freeman, 2007, p. 10). O'Neill further argues that to begin to accept children as holders of rights is to allow them the opportunity for redress:

Rather than being powerless in the face of neglect, abuse, molestation and mere ignorance they (like other oppressed groups) would have legitimate and (in principle) enforceable claims against others. Although they (unlike many other oppressed groups) cannot claim their rights for themselves, this is no reason for denying them rights. Rather it is reason for setting up institutions that can monitor those who have children in their charge and intervene to enforce rights (O'Neill, 1992, p. 24).

Thus O'Neill's argument can be construed to purport a view that the development of a framework such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a necessity to protect what rights children do, or can, have.

### ***3.5.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child***

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came into being in 1989, "ten years after the Polish government proposed a convention for children's rights" (Hammarberg, 1990, p. 99), which was followed by the appointment of a "special working group to draft the convention" (ibid.) by the Commission on Human Rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been described as "an international treaty adopted by the 159 Members of the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and subsequently ratified by all but two UN member nations (the US and Somalia)" (Daiute, 2008, p. 702).

Hammarberg (1990) saw the advantage of the Convention as a tool to be used to hold “society legally accountable for meeting the obligations which give meaning” (p. 99) to children’s rights. The rights in the convention are commonly classified as representing the “Three P’s”, provision rights, protection rights and participation rights. Provision rights refer to those articles in the convention which are concerned with meeting basic needs; protection rights refer to those articles which are concerned with shielding children “from harmful acts or practices” (ibid., p. 100); and participation rights are concerned with children’s rights to be involved with decisions affecting them.

Writing shortly after the adoption of the Convention, Hammarberg (1990) optimistically viewed the adoption of the convention as “the start of radically renewed efforts to put right the wrongs we do to children with our short-sighted economic policies, political blunders and wars” (p. 104). In ratifying the Convention, States have agreed to uphold its provisions to the extent that it does not interfere with national law and cultural norms. States upholding of the Convention is subsequently monitored by their agreement to report on their progress to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), initially two years following ratification and subsequently every five years, as stated in Article 44 (CRC, 1989, 1996, 2003, 2005b).

### ***3.5.1.1 How the Convention Operates***

The monitoring process for the Convention is a relatively robust procedure which is overseen by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a panel of ten leading experts in the field of children’s rights from around the world. This Committee examines states parties reports while also considering submissions from non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) and other interested parties who are concerned with children’s rights and welfare. When the reports are being reviewed by the

Committee, a pre-sessional meeting takes place, which is where NGO's and other national and international organisations present further information on the situation regarding children's rights in the state under scrutiny. A plenary hearing then takes place. This is where the Committee formally examines the states party report through questions and discussion in order to analyse the "progress achieved", "factors and difficulties encountered", "implementation priorities" and "future goals" in relation to the Convention (CRC, 1994, p. 3). Following this, the Committee responds to the States party with their Concluding Observations, which include suggestions and recommendations for action in further implementing the provisions of the Convention.

### ***3.5.2 Impact of the Convention***

The widespread ratification of the UNCRC has positioned the children's rights debate on the wider political agenda (Hammarberg, 2007), however this does not mean that children's rights have been accepted and adopted without question by signatory states. Freeman (2007) refers to King, who has criticised the nature of the rights for children within the Convention, by highlighting the fact that:

the peculiar property of rights invocations in non-legal settings is that they create the expectation of law, that is the expectation of the eventual reconstruction of the right as a legal communication. In other words, if you believe that you have a right to be treated in a certain way, the expectation is that the law will support that right by declaring infringements to be illegal, even if no such legal provisions as yet exist (King, 1994, p. 393).

This interpretation obviously leads to space for ambiguity, and a lack of consensus in how the rights of the Convention are understood. This has led to the suggestion that in many cases, implementation of the rights in the Convention is seen as a merely moral obligation for state parties, because they are not actually "legally enforceable rights" (Lyon, 2007, p. 149). Hence, contrary to Hammarberg's (1990) aforementioned optimistic claims to legal accountability, as it stands the accountability inherent in ratifying the Convention is actually of a moral nature not a legal one. As a result, there

are no certainties to how individual states will choose to incorporate the Conventions' rights for children. This point is exemplified by Lyon (2007) when she explains that the term "ratification" only implies that the government has committed itself to treating the Convention seriously. The act of ratification signifies an intention to comply, but there is also scope for the protection of existing, and potentially conflicting, cultural, political and legislative norms. Even so, the existence and widespread adoption of the Convention has generated much debate, and brought some consensus on issues relating to children into wider social and political debates. This is bolstered by a large school of thought within the sociology of childhood, some of which is nevertheless critical of the Convention, which largely views children as social actors/agents capable of having a say in and a view on how their worlds operate.

### ***3.5.3 Alternative rights-based discourses***

Despite its marked influence, the rights that are enshrined within the Convention have been open to criticism. Freeman (1998) has perceived the Convention as encoding a set of rights that "takes an image of childhood from the perspective of the adult world looking in almost as an external observer on the world(s) of children" (p. 439). Critics of the concepts of rights constructed within the Convention see such rights as a deficit model of childhood (Freeman, 2007) which undervalues children's maturity and their abilities to speak and act in their own interests.

Within the new paradigm of childhood studies, the accepted view shared by many children's advocates and academics sees social "realities" about children and childhoods as socially constructed truths which "are always the products of human meaning-making" (Stainton Rogers, 2008, p. 142). Stainton Rogers (2008) discusses three

different discourses of child concern, a needs discourse, a rights discourse and a 'quality of life' discourse (p. 143).

The needs discourse is concerned with meeting children's basic needs and is influenced by needs theories based on the work of Kellmer-Pringle (1986). Contextualising children within this needs discourse, Kellmer-Pringle proposed a four-fold classification for the needs of children; "the need for love and security, for new experiences, for praise and recognition, and, for responsibility" (1986, p. 34). In Stainton Rogers view, the needs which Kellmer-Pringle categorises, and those embedded in the Convention, respond to children's psychological and developmental needs and are "culturally contingent" (Stainton Rogers, 2008, p. 149). The rights discourse to which Stainton Rogers refers is one which views children as social actors who are "able to act on their own behalf and both capable of and entitled to have a say in what is done to and for them" (2008, p. 150). This rights discourse is bolstered by the presence of the Convention, and the rights inherent within it. Stainton Rogers is opposed to the contextualisation of children within both the needs discourses and the rights discourses, preferring instead a less taxonomic, "quality of life" discourse (2008). This quality of life discourse "acknowledges ... that children's welfare is always contextual" (Stainton Rogers, 2008, p. 153) thus it is concerned with recognition of the "more culturally mediated factors" (ibid., p. 154) of children's lives. The central concepts within this quality of life discourse are "promoting resilience" and "seeking children's views". The concept of promoting resilience, involves encouraging children to demonstrate autonomy, responsibility, empathy and independence, whilst also encouraging them to understand their own feelings and behaviours (Stainton Rogers, 2008). Alongside this the concept of seeking children's views speaks for itself, insofar that it aims to foster a culture of consultation with children, hearing their voices in matters that affect them in

order to “be seen as unequivocally in children’s best interests” (ibid., p. 155). Stainton Rogers advocates this “quality of life” discourse for children rather than that of the needs or rights discourses as she believes that it is suitably holistic and emphasises the strengths and capabilities of children by concentrating on the individual child and his/her life experiences.

Within the new paradigm of childhood studies, the alternative views of Stainton Rogers’ are a welcome addition to this debate and worthy of serious consideration. Nevertheless, the broader debate in modern childhood theory has still concentrated on the actual existence of children’s rights and the nature of such rights for children. As such, many theorists within the new paradigm of childhood studies concur with Freeman, who believes that “to accord rights is to respect dignity: to deny rights is to cast doubt on humanity and on integrity” (2007, p. 7).

#### ***3.5.4 The turn to a Children’s Rights discourse in the Sociology of Childhood***

When Moss and colleagues (2000) wrote about different constructions of “the child” within early childhood policy discourses, they advocated a shift from an approach that centres on children’s needs to an approach that focuses “on rights, potential and competence (the ‘rich’ child)” (p. 251), recognising children as subjects of rights, rather than objects of rights. The shift to a children’s rights discourse has been influenced by the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, the shift to the new paradigm of childhood studies, and the resulting focus on children as active social agents, alongside the relatively widespread acceptance of the Convention (Freeman, 1998; Smith, 2002).

Nevertheless this standpoint has not been universally accepted, there are those, such as Purdy (1994), who disagree with the notion of children having rights. This is often

because they interpret children's rights, and their resulting agency and responsibilities, to be quite comparable to the rights afforded to adults. Those who are in opposition, cite children's immaturity, developmental differences and their perceived inability to cope with too much freedom at a young age as vital reasons not to grant them such rights. Such reasons, in Purdy's view, serve as evidence that too much responsibility for the young child can lead to "the failure to develop the kinds of character traits that ease the transition to adulthood" (Purdy, 1994, p. 236).

Purdy (1994) further develops her argument, against the granting of equal rights for children, when she refers to "evidence" which suggests that "an optimum environment" for children "includes relatively high limits and demands on young children, followed by a carefully graduated expansion of both freedom and responsibility as they grow older" (p. 240). Purdy (1994) concludes by recommending that the debate about children's position in society should continue in greater depth, and that it also should be complemented by debates on all those in society who do not have equal rights, including some adults, particularly women.

Responding to Purdy's article and her corresponding views on the granting of rights to children, McGillivray (1994) believes that the problem within Purdy's argument is that she views "rights as results" (p. 244). In contrast, McGillivray prefers to see "rights as the beginning" (ibid.). She expands further on the problem of seeing "rights as results", noting it as a view that damages the meaning of rights in the first place. Coming from a legal perspective, McGillivray thinks about rights "in terms of notional equality, equal moral worth, the social and legal recognition of human dignity and the redress of wrongs" (ibid.). She explains how the constructs of childhood in society can vary, which makes it difficult to achieve a consensus on the issue of how children should be

treated. However, she sees children as always being entitled to some rights although these rights may often be subordinated to those of others within society. McGillivray believes that “rights is the language of equality”(1994, p. 252), which makes it important for children to be able to make claims to rights, since “rights claims are about dignity, respect, liberty, opportunity, access to and protection from the law and participation in one’s own fate” (McGillivray, 1994, p. 252). In her opinion, the denial of claims to rights by children is akin to treating them as slaves, and also is to treat them as outsider “others” who are not worthy of the rights afforded to adults “insiders”; she believes that “to exempt children from human rights is to designate them as less than human” (McGillivray, 1994, p. 256).

An understanding of the concept of children’s rights has been put forward by Freeman, where:

rights are invisible and inter-dependent. Human rights - for that is what children’s rights are - include the whole range of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Denying certain rights undermines other rights (Freeman, 2007, p. 7).

Taking this understanding into consideration, thus to view children’s rights in light of human rights should appear to be the accepted view. Nevertheless, there is a reticence by some towards this notion, and many commentators have chosen to separate children’s rights from human rights, perhaps to make the point that there is a marked difference between adults and children’s rights. Nevertheless, many authors have positioned children’s rights as part of a universal understanding of human rights, a perspective with which the spirit of this thesis concurs.

Striving towards an appreciation of children’s rights in light of human rights, Freeman (1998), takes a position which urges us to truly understand the concept of rights to which we are referring in our discussions of children’s rights; as he puts it:



Rights of 'being' need not, as most argue rights of 'having' must, be tied to competence or capacity. Rights of 'being' are much more concerned with dignity and decency, two much neglected concepts, towards the understanding of which sociologists (as well as philosophers) can usefully and constructively contribute (p. 442).

Children's rights debates have evolved throughout the years of the late twentieth, and early twenty first centuries, as exemplified by the contents of this review. The debate has developed from one which considers whether children have or should have rights at all, and if so what these rights entail, towards a more inclusive accord which does view children as holders of rights. Within this more recent and widely accepted view of children as rights holders the debate has now begun to shift further, from one that tended to concentrate on provision and protection rights as the most important concern, towards a more specific discourse about children's rights to participation (Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

### ***3.5.5 Children's Participation Rights***

More recent contemporary discussions have shifted from conceptual debates about the nature of rights and whether they do or do not exist for children, towards the issue of children's rights to participation. This shift tends to view children in the context that they are "persons, not property; subjects, not objects of social concern or control" (Freeman, 1998, p. 436) and most importantly that they are and should be seen as "participants in social processes, not social problems" (ibid.). As these contemporary debates have developed, the importance of understanding and realising children's participation rights, even for very young children, has emerged. Advocates of children's rights, such as Smith (2002) espouse a notion of viewing:

children as articulate and competent enough to express their views in a way which respects their agency and participation rights, recognises the central importance of cultural and social contexts, but does not regard children as the passive subjects of social processes (p. 74).

The debate concerning children's participation rights is directly related to the interpretation of Article 12 of the Convention which contends that:

1. States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law (CRC, 1989).

Additional rights in the Convention which can be understood as participation rights, are also included in Articles 13 through to 17 (Hayes & Bradley, 2009) dealing with the areas of freedom of expression (13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (14), freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly (15), rights to privacy (16) and rights of access to appropriate information and media (17). Widespread discussion about participation rights often emerges in terms of issues surrounding the fundamental divergence between Article 12, and its tentative affording of agentic participation to children, and Article 3 which is concerned with the protection of children by the means of others, mostly adults, making decisions in their 'best' interests:

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration
2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.
3. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision (CRC, 1989).

Archard and Skivenes (2009) have positioned the debate within children's rights to participation as having progressed to one where the main issue is to determine how to find a balance between "the child's right to be heard with the child's right to be protected" (p. 391). In their view, it is inappropriate to allow both children's perceived best interests, and rights to participate to have their voices heard, to be determined by

adults alone, because “adults generally lack a perspicuous sense of why, when and how children should participate in proceedings affecting their interests” (Archard & Skivenes, 2009, p. 391). They suggest that the best way to develop children’s skills to participate, in procedures relating to their best interests, is by allowing them to have proper opportunities to participate, which will enhance their abilities in further proceedings. On the one hand, Archard and Skivenes come from a pragmatic perspective, which views children’s participation as integral in gaining information about their lives and in the understanding of their experiences, in order to make informed decisions in their best interests. On the other hand, they also perceive that to hear children’s voices and allow them to participate fully in matters that affect them, is a moral issue which sees “children as having a basic entitlement to express a view and to be involved, as the source of a view about their own interests, in the decision-making process” (Archard & Skivenes, 2009, p. 398).

Previously, Smith (2002) had argued that her propensity to link children’s rights thinking with sociocultural theory is partially to highlight the necessity of appropriate support for children, in order for their acts of participation particularly in terms of being able to “formulate and express a view” (p. 75), to be wholly thorough and effective. In the same vein, Pufall and Unsworth (2004) put forth the case that “as social beings, children are inherently agentive” (p. 9), they have considered children thus as attempting to have their voices heard in order to air their views, persuade in their favour, and move others to action. They see this agentive behaviour, where “children act and ask to be heard” (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004, p. 9), as the process of children actively “building and experiencing their social reality and constructing their identity in the process” (ibid.).

Considering perspectives on children's participation, Smith has referred to Shier's model of children's participation which has five levels:

1. Children are listened to
2. Children are supported in expressing their views
3. Children's views are taken into account
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making (Smith, 2002, p. 76)

Shier's model of participation is dependent on adult facilitation and adult's perceptions of children's capabilities, particularly in relation to what level of participation children are permitted to engage in. This need for adult facilitation can, in Smith's view, be linked to Vygotsky's theory of children's zone of proximal development (ZPD), wherein children can be given appropriate support and encouragement from adults and "capable peers" (Smith, 2002, p. 84), "enough, but not too much" (ibid., p. 85), to aid the progression of their participation.

Supported by a wealth of information collated through research with children and young people, Smith believes that "children's role as citizens and understanding and awareness of democracy, is determined by the extent to which their participation rights are respected" (2007b, p. 149). Further to this she suggests that to view children as the holders of participation rights necessitates "incorporating the concept of children as agents and social actors" (Smith, 2007b, p. 152). This should include hearing children's views on how they perceive their own lives, alongside allowing them to share their own experiences, in order to contribute "towards creating better conditions of childhood" (ibid.). A related issue which can be overlooked within the debate about children's rights, and their participation rights particularly, is the fact that "citizenship is not the exclusive territory of adults" (ibid., p. 161). Children are citizens too and they are thus "entitled to recognition, respect, and participation" (Smith, 2010, p. 103).

Smith (2007b) has warned that we must not lose sight of the innate dependency of children which is directly related to their youth. She suggests balancing children's dependency with their individual agency (2007b), so that they participate cooperatively with adults and others at appropriate levels related to Shier's model of participation. This approach will ultimately result in allowing children to share in the power and responsibility of decision making on reaching level five of Shier's model. Considering children's rights to participation in education, Smith sees that where children are afforded respect and the space and opportunities to participate, it "enhances their confidence and well being, and empowers them to be active agents in their lives and learning, and within the network of social relationships which links their lives with others" (Smith, 2007b, p. 161). Smith's research has suggested "that both rights and responsibilities are part of children's thinking and that most children want to participate alongside others in their communities" (2010, p. 107).

The language of children's rights is the beginning not the end, it is about respecting and valuing the contribution children make and have to make to the world children and adults share: A world hitherto defined and imagined primarily in adult terms - it is about power (Roche, 1999, p. 487).

Roche (1999) had previously positioned the discourse about children's participation rights within the wider discourse around the concept of citizenship. He advocated that both the concepts of citizenship and children undergo some theoretical investigation, in order to rethink the concept of citizenship so that it includes children, where they will be "seen as members of society too, with a legitimate and valuable voice and perspective" (Roche, 1999, p. 479). He suggested that the first principle necessary to reconstruct the concept of citizenship in order to embrace children as an integral part of it, is to move away from the concept of viewing children as problematic or troublesome (Roche, 1999). Alongside this he proposed that we start seeing children as in the here and now,

as opposed to viewing them in terms of their future possibilities. In order to achieve this reconceptualisation of children, Roche's second phase suggestion for the recasting of citizenship advocated employing practices of listening to children properly. He also reiterated the importance of consultation with children in matters that affect them.

MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith argue that to afford children the opportunity to participate and to have their voice heard and listened to seriously in policy making is to acknowledge them as "people with human rights ... that, in turn, can strengthen their communities" (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007b, p. 461). The participation debate is particularly pertinent when positioned in the context of the rights of children within wider ECEC discourse. MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith attribute this to the development of the model which views young children as social actors, and also to "an increasing interest by government agencies in creating and sustaining child-centred policies and practices" (2007a, p. 162). In their view, both of these developments reinforce the arguments for children's rights in both the Convention, and in the CRC's General Comment No. 7, *Implementing child rights in early childhood*.

#### ***3.5.5.1 Children, Participation Rights, and ECEC***

In 2005 the CRC published its *General Comment No. 7, Implementing child rights in early childhood*; the main tenet of this general comment is "to encourage recognition that young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention (UNCRC) and that early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights" (CRC, 2005a, p. 1). *General Comment No. 7* particularly reiterates the point that even very young children should be consulted with and have their voices heard within the process of developing policies and services. Woodhead drew attention to "three participatory

principles” (2007, p. 29) that are developed in General Comment 7, and which have implications for both policy and practice, they are:

- (a) the child’s right to be consulted in matters that affect them should be implemented from the earliest stage in ways appropriate to the child’s capacities, best interests, and rights to protection from harmful experiences;
- (b) the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child’s daily life at home, within early childhood health, care and education facilities, in legal proceedings, and in the development of policies and services; and
- (c) that all appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that all those with responsibilities towards young children listen to their views and respect their dignity (Woodhead, 2007, p. 29).

With regard to principles of participation, both Article 5 and Article 14 of the convention refer to children’s evolving capacities, which the CRC explain as:

processes of maturation and learning whereby children progressively acquire knowledge, competencies and understanding, including acquiring understanding about their rights and about how they can best be realized. Respecting young children’s evolving capacities is crucial for the realization of their rights, and especially significant during early childhood, because of the rapid transformations in children’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional functioning, from earliest infancy to the beginnings of schooling (CRC, 2005a, p. 8).

The CRC wish for the concept of evolving capacities to be understood as an enabling principle within which “parents (and others) should be encouraged to offer *direction and guidance* in a child-centred way” (CRC, 2005a, p. 8, emphasis added). Woodhead (2007) highlighted the similarities between the concept of evolving capacities, and the socio-cultural approach which Smith (2002, 2007a, 2007b) and others have championed. He advocates consultation with young children “on their own unique early childhood” as the “most crucial starting point for policy and practice” (Woodhead, 2007, p. 34). He has further suggested also that “framing early childhood policy in terms of child rights departs radically from a conventional, instrumental paradigm, notably through the insistence on every young child’s entitlement to quality of life, to respect and to well being” (2007, p. 27).

While it is both worthy and opportune to consider children's rights in early childhood and their participation rights to and within ECEC, it is important, nonetheless, to further identify and analyse the dominant discourses of early childhood education and care with which this thesis is concerned. Woodhead has suggested that "social and cultural perspectives on early childhood have liberated early childhood research and policy from over reliance on normative developmental accounts" (2007, p. 23) which has paved the way for wider discourses of ECEC. In Ireland, early childhood education and care remains conceptualised in a dichotomous position between contrasting discourses of care and education as separate entities (Hayes, 2007b).

### **3.6 Understandings and discourses of Early Childhood Education and Care**

The understanding of early childhood education and care which is employed within this thesis is derived from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) understanding of ECEC, as a concept where:

"care" and "education" are inseparable concepts and quality services for children necessarily provide both ... The use of the term ECEC supports an integrated and coherent approach to policy and provision which is inclusive of all children and all parents regardless of their employment status or socioeconomic status. This approach recognizes that such arrangements may fulfill a wide range of objectives including care, learning and social support (OECD, 2001, p. 14).

In *General Comment No. 7*, the CRC articulate the crucial importance of early childhood programmes for the sound development of children; the Committee calls on States parties to ensure that all children are guaranteed access to these programmes, especially the youngest and most vulnerable. This is in terms of ensuring that all young children can receive

education in the broadest sense, which acknowledges a key role for parents, wider family and community, as well as the contribution of organized programmes of early childhood education provided by the State, the community or civil society institutions (CRC, 2005a, p. 14).



The discourses that dominate within the wider understanding of what early childhood education and care is have broadly centred on two contrasting perspectives. Rogers (2010) has identified these contrasting perspectives as:

a liberal romantic philosophy of education, exemplified in so-called child-centred methodologies for educating children, and an empirical-scientific approach to the observation and measurement of the child (p. 135).

Another way of seeing this dichotomy, is that one perspective sees childhood as a special period of life which requires care and nurturing and subsequently requires education that is child-centred and develops in a caring and nurturing way; while the other perspective channels neoliberal philosophy and is concerned with children's future possibilities, thus concentrating on making them "ready for school" through specially tailored educational programmes.

Moss (2007) has referred to long standing and deep seated problems within the development of ECEC services in English speaking countries, exemplified by a structural and conceptual split between "childcare" and "early education". Within this "split system" (Moss, 2006, p. 156), childcare services are "usually located in the welfare system" (ibid.), and early education services are "usually located in the education system" (ibid.). The traditional understanding of the term childcare, thus, is as a private service tailored towards the needs of working parents, which may incorporate some developmentally appropriate educational elements, but is predominantly charged with the provision of substitute parental care during working hours.

Childcare services, particularly in Ireland, have developed rapidly and reactively throughout the late twentieth century, as a response to the increased female labour force participation of mothers returning to work (Hayes, 2010); reflecting the effects of wider neoliberal capitalism (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2009; O'Donoghue

Hynes & Hayes, 2011). In Ireland, Hayes has pointed out that the concept of childcare further refers to two different types of services:

1. For younger children childcare has come to mean early childhood care and education and refers to the wide variety of settings, public and private, in which the raising of children is shared with the family including childminding and various forms of centre-based provision.
2. For older children, generally up to about the age of 12 years, childcare refers to the variety of afterschool arrangements that exist to meet differing needs at different times (2010, p. 69).

General childcare provisions in Ireland throughout the time span of this study have been mostly delivered by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, under the auspices of the Department of Health and Children.

Conversely, the dominant discourse of early education usually refers to services which provide educational interventions for children deemed at risk of future educational failure most often due to their socio-economic status. In Irish social policy, the term childcare, as illustrated by the previous quote from Hayes, tends to be broadly used and defined as a general concept which can also comprise some form of early education. Therefore, within the general concept of childcare in Irish policy there are two separate dimensions, childcare and early education. Early education has tended to refer to intervention based pre-school services delivered under the auspices of the Department of Education. These services are usually sessional services, as opposed to all-day care, and are conceptually targeted towards the 3-4 years age bracket; areas of social disadvantage have predominantly been given priority for such services. Six years of age is the mandatory school starting age for a child in Ireland, children generally start

primary school from the age of four in Ireland<sup>15</sup>. Adshead and Neylon have argued that Ireland's 'split system' can be summed up as one:

where 'education' is more narrowly defined and understood as an activity that largely begins in school and where 'pre-school care' is just as likely to be understood as the activity of 'child-minding' and 'baby-sitting' as it is to be conceived of as education in its broadest (social and developmental) sense. (2008, p. 29)

Bennett (2008) has criticised such split systems as being generally characterised by a weakly regulated sector, a preparation for formal schooling approach to early education, fragmented services and a lack of balance in the policy approach to education and care.

Justification for investment in early childhood education and care throughout the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries has centred on the notion of conceptualising children as 'becomings' alongside contextualising the benefits from ECEC in terms of positive returns to society, often in terms of economic returns. This neoliberal notion of a social investment model of early education policy can be viewed as being organised by a government or state who, to paraphrase a quote from *The Observer* newspaper, "want to turn the children into bright little units of production and consumption" (Smith, 2003).

### ***3.6.1 Good quality ECEC and Pedagogy***

The OECD has recommended a policy approach to ECEC which is supported by a "strong and equal partnership" (OECD, 2001, p. 129) in which "early childhood is viewed not only as preparation for the next stage of education (or even adulthood), but also as a distinctive period where children live out their lives" (OECD, 2001, p. 129). Within this understanding of early childhood, governments have widely positioned quality ECEC services, controlled through regulations and adherence to prescribed

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<sup>15</sup> The recent policy development of the introduction of a Free Pre-School Year has targeted sessional services to children within the age group of between three years and three months, and four years and six months, thereby continuing to facilitate the common school starting age of four years old.

standards, “as essential to economic and social objectives, in particular, employment, health and educational outcomes” (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007, p. 264). However, it has been suggested that such government constructions of quality ECEC, which are permeated by “risk and performativity discourses” (ibid., p. 279) serve to “narrow the parameters of how quality is perceived” (ibid.), and thus remain limited in their “capacity to effect quality standards in ECEC services” (ibid.). There is also a variety of competing discourses within the notion of quality ECEC services to contend with, which range from similar government discourses of regulation and standards to a more alternative, holistic quality discourse.

The sociologist Corsaro is an active defender of the potential imbued in quality ECEC services. He sees that “the extensiveness and quality of early education institutions and programs are a reflection of social policies which affect the distribution of resources to and the quality of life of different age groups” (Corsaro, 2000, p. 91). He sees the importance of quality ECEC institutions which actively support children to interact with each other and develop their own peer cultures “which contribute to reproduction and change in the wider adult culture or society” (ibid.). He espouses an alternative social investment discourse which proposes that the continued investment in ECEC programmes for young children will provide them “with rich and valuable experiences that will prepare them to be caring and productive citizens” (Corsaro, 2000, p. 100).

Corsaro believes that “quality early education ... enriches the lives of children's childhoods” (2000, p. 101); in his view, not only is the investment in good quality ECEC a boon to society in terms of the well rounded children it will prepare for the future, but it is also a valuable tool to bridge the generational gap. Corsaro also believes

that the interaction between adults and children is of much benefit to adults, as children are enriching to the lives of adults too:

Enriching the lives of all our children will produce better adults and will enable our children to participate actively and fully in their own childhoods and to contribute to the quality of our adult lives. Cultures that appreciate and celebrate their children for who they are as well as who they will become are the cultures that will lead us most successfully into a new century (Corsaro, 2000, p. 101).

Other educationalists and early childhood advocates have attempted to redirect the focus from a social investment model of ECEC provision to a more pedagogical discourse, which can be seen as “a more egalitarian concept which provides services for all parents and young children regardless of employment status” where the provision of places in centres can be seen as “children’s spaces” and thus “holistic” (Moss, 2006, p. 154).

This notion of pedagogy “treats care as an inseparable part of any work with people” (Moss, 2006, p. 160). Pedagogical discourses around early childhood education and care are more widespread today and are often concerned with reconceptualising both the notion of early education and the notion of care. Countries that have adopted the principles of the pedagogical discourse have mostly integrated the responsibility for all early childhood services within education as opposed to welfare (Moss, 2006). The pedagogical discourse espoused by its advocates, typically the Northern European social democratic countries, views “early childhood services as a universal public entitlement for children and their families” (Moss, 2006, p. 169). Within this wider pedagogical discourse attention has turned to reconceptualising the understandings of both education and care.

Brostrom (2006), writing about the relationship between care and furthering children’s development has suggested understanding care in ECEC services as

a kind of existence, a relation where one person is considerate toward and attends to another person: Acting, participating, and focusing on the other individual in order to support and serve the other's well-being, learning, and development. When the child-care worker does this, he or she expresses a caring attitude and establishes a special relation to the child (p. 400).

Hayes (2008c) has also suggested a reconceptualising of care, this time as nurture which gives a “responsibility to the teacher to provide nurturance and foster learning as well as teach” (p. 434). Hayes suggests that the reconceptualisation of care as nurture, would strengthen “the educative value of care and allow for a more appropriate “nurturing pedagogy” to emerge in early learning environments” (2008c, p. 436). This concept of nurture involves an engaged level of interaction with the child which requires the adult “to actively nourish, rear, foster ... and educate the child through his or her practice” (Hayes, 2008c, p. 437).

Fleer (2003), on the other hand, writing about the dichotomy between dominant discourses of ECEC and cultural sensitivity and understanding, has called for the introduction of a concept of child-embeddedness in ECEC services. The concept of child-embeddedness emerges from the model of the ecology of human development developed by Bronfenbrenner, which sees children as nested within their social environments. Fleer's proposed concept of child-embeddedness considers “the child as part of the cultural and community context” (2003, p. 67) and views learning in early childhood settings as:

a shared responsibility located within real community contexts featuring real situations. Children are a part of the adult world – spaces and places are not created, but, rather, learning is viewed as embedded in everyday activity (Fleer, 2003, p. 67).

These reconceptualisations of key concepts shaping our understanding of ECEC can all be used generally to look at the principle of the provision of good quality services. The employment of such reconceptualized discourses of ECEC and the notion of pedagogy

can truly open up spaces for the delivery of good quality services; ECEC services that value children in their own right, see them as people in the here and now, foster a culture of nurturing children to learn in their own individual ways and are concerned with respecting children's own individual contexts while also viewing them as part of the wider community. In this light, Moss supports the reconceptualization of all ECEC services so they can be "viewed as a public good and a public responsibility, an expression of a community taking responsibility for the education and upbringing of its young children" (Moss, 2007, p. 23).

### **3.7 Theoretical and conceptual discourse framework of ECEC**

To summarise, it is apt now to reiterate the main principles underlining the theoretical framework within which this thesis sits. This thesis is not coming from a psychology perspective or a developmental perspective. Therefore the issues of developmental perspectives on children which were discussed in this review were used principally to set the stage for the discussion of the theoretical development of the new paradigm of childhood studies.

This thesis is coming from a social constructionist perspective, thus it sits firmly in the view of childhood as both a biological reality and a social construction. The research undertaken for this thesis notes the contextual nature of childhood and is sensitive to how both the child and childhood are culturally constructed in their contextual environments.

While this study is in appreciation of the notion of the child as a social actor in principle, the work is sensitive to the context, and is somewhat sceptical of truly seeing this as a concept in action, particularly in the Irish context. This study is cognisant of an

official notion of paying lip service to the concept of viewing the child as a social actor and thus facilitating the notional participation of children, but is yet to be convinced that it is a part of a mindset which views children as active citizens in all facets of social life. This study strongly believes in children's rights, both as based in the Convention and also in terms of the wider progressive debates surrounding concepts of rights and children's rights to participation. This study is inspired and energised by the theory inherent in the pedagogical discourse of early childhood education and care, but notes again the context, and understands the debate to be at a more immature stage in Irish policy. The minutiae of the Irish ECEC policy context will be considered further in the following chapter which expounds the Irish ECEC policy landscape.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has begun the exploration and explanation of the sociocultural practice level of a discourse analysis as developed by Fairclough (1995). Thus, it reviewed the literature considered to be of importance in laying the theoretical foundations for the construction of the child and subsequently the construction of early childhood education and care. The sociocultural practice level of this analysis is concerned with the operation of the dominant discourses of ECEC within society. Therefore, developmental perspectives, once the foremost theoretical framework within studies of children, were discussed. Criticism of these developmental perspectives paved the way for a rethinking of childhood thus leading to the theories underpinning the new paradigm of childhood studies. From this, the theory has developed to a consideration of the dichotomy between a needs discourse of children and a children's interest discourse resulting in a common perception now of seeing children as social actors and active agents in their development and in their lives. Nevertheless, the common construction of children as widely accepted social actors/agents is not without its criticisms and these were also



explored. The social actor principle is intertwined with a children's rights discourse; literature concerning discourses of children's rights were reviewed and the development of the debate towards a children's participation discourse was also discussed. Debates about participation rights lead to debates about participation in ECEC, both reflecting the wider debates on children's agency, and thus theoretical debates underpinning early childhood education and care were expounded further. The review concluded with an explication of the theoretical and conceptual framework which evolved from the literature.

The next chapter will consider the social policy landscape for young children in Ireland; within the relevant dimensions of the discourse analysis, it combines investigation of both the sociocultural practice level and the discourse practice level of the research problem.

## **4. THE IRISH POLICY LANDSCAPE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the policy environment within which Irish early childhood education and care policy exists, the analysis combines aspects of both the sociocultural practice level and the discourse practice level of the dimensions of discourse model (Fairclough, 1995). At the sociocultural practice level this chapter examines the dominant discourses of childhoods and children's early childhood education and care in Ireland. While at the discourse practice level it investigates how these discourses are interpreted in and through policy for children, particularly in terms of ECEC services and children's rights within.

Knowledge that is sanctioned institutionally can produce such an authoritative consensus about how to 'be' that it is difficult to imagine how to think, act and feel in any other way ... officially sanctioned 'truths' discipline and regulate us, i.e. they govern us (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 32).

A CDA of policy needs to take into account the historical background of the accepted construction(s) of knowledge about the policy area that exist within society. Thus this chapter begins by looking at the overall context of Irish social policy particularly how it has been shaped by the dominant ideology contained within the Constitution and reflected through a lengthy partnership between church and state. It explores the different partnership approaches that have dominated Irish social policy, the partnership of church and state, and the advent of social partnership. The treatment of children within social policy generally is explored, before moving on to a discussion of the context of Irish early childhood education and care policy. The early childhood education and care policy area in Ireland only really began to develop in the late 1990s. The publication of the Report of the Commission on the Family in 1998 marked this shift within the policy process, thus policy developments in Irish early childhood

education and care are subsequently tracked throughout the period from 1998 to 2008, in order to highlight the research need within Irish ECEC policy and to lay the foundations for the research goals of this thesis.

## **4.2 The Irish Policy Context**

Ireland is significant in its socio-cultural composition for the way that social policy has been greatly shaped by the dominant influence of the Catholic Church through its direct influence on the ideology of the Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (1937). The influence of this church and state partnership has continued through to the social policy of today, as it is very much enshrined in and reproduced through the principles of the Constitution, which apart from a number of changes made through referendum throughout the years, has never been thoroughly revised and updated. The influence of the church is particularly apparent in relation to how the Constitution positions the family as the most important social structure in Irish society, as stated in Article 41.1.1:

The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law (Ireland, 1937).

Article 42.1 further provides parents with rights over their children, which give them the duty, “to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children” (Ireland, 1937). As a consequence, the State is positioned to intervene within the domain of the family only in “exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children” (Article 42.5, Ireland, 1937).

The general esteem in which the Catholic hierarchy was held in Irish society led to the Constitution of Ireland and all other aspects of governance becoming largely influenced by Catholic social teaching (Whyte, 1980). The impact of the Constitution was that it

“formalised and institutionalised many of the core values associated with a society which was catholic, traditional, nationalist and rural” (Girvin, 1996, p. 599). Moran (2010) has suggested that in the Catholic Church, the Irish State “had a natural ally, born of the same historical cloth as the political, administrative and economic elites of the new state” (p. 1). Thus its legacy remains, particularly regarding the institution of the family, with the lasting view reflected in Article 42.5 of the Constitution, which perpetuates the notion that “the State should only intervene as a last resort in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity” (Fanning, 1999, p. 53). The principle of subsidiarity<sup>16</sup> was bolstered by the Catholic social teaching of the church, which aimed to maintain a traditional Irish society through resistance to any state intervention seen as encroaching on the facets of society which the church controlled. Inglis has explained how “the vast majority of Irish politicians and civil servants were socialised within and educated by the Catholic Church and, sometimes unwillingly and sometimes unconsciously, limited legislation and policies to within the general ethos of the church’s teachings” (1998, p. 77) . Hence, the Catholic Church generally dominated the provision of services in the education, health and other voluntary sectors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still does, albeit to a lesser extent, today.

The story of the Mother and Child Scheme is a useful way to illustrate the Catholic Church’s dominance over social policy in Ireland. It is oft cited as a pivotal event in the formation of Irish social policy, not just in relation to health policy and children’s policy, but also in relation to the advent of and adherence to the concept of targeting welfare through means testing alongside a strong reluctance to distribute welfare benefits in a universal manner. The Mother and Child Scheme story also serves as hard

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<sup>16</sup> For a broader discussion on the principle of subsidiarity as an element of Irish social policy see Fanning (2004)

evidence of the Catholic Church's influence on and interference in policy decisions. In 1950, the Minister for Health Noel Browne attempted to introduce what would be a free, state run health service for mothers and children. Health services were to be available to all mothers before, during and after childbirth and for children up until the age of sixteen. In Browne's own words, the mother and child scheme would have "introduced a genuinely socialist redistribution, paid for out of general taxation" (Browne, 1986, p. 150). Nevertheless, his proposal was vehemently opposed to by the Irish Medical Association (IMA) and the Catholic Church hierarchy. The IMA saw Browne's scheme as potentially jeopardising their income and autonomy<sup>17</sup> whilst the bishops in charge of the Catholic Church did not want the State to intervene in the domain of the family. The Catholic Church hierarchy were fearful of the scheme contravening their social and moral teaching, their health education system, and potentially allowing for the advocating of contraception use.

A letter, reproduced in *Against the Tide* (Browne, 1986), written by the archbishops and bishops of Ireland on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1950 in opposition to the Mother and Child scheme, sums up the location of the family, and children, in church dominated Irish social policy at the time and is illustrated in this extract:

*the powers taken by the State in the proposed Mother and Child Health Scheme are in direct opposition to the rights of the family and of the individual and are liable to very great abuse. Their character is such that no assurance that they would be used in moderation could justify their enactment. If adopted in law they would constitute a readymade instrument for future totalitarian aggression.*

*The right to provide for the health of children belongs to parents, not to the State. The State has the right to intervene only in a subsidiary capacity, to supplement, not to supplant.*

*It may help indigent or neglectful parents; it may not deprive 90% of parents of their rights because of 10% necessitous or negligent parents* (Browne, 1986, p. 158, emphasis in original).

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<sup>17</sup> This may imply that the Irish Medical Association's opposition was very much coming from a class perspective position where they wished to protect the economic advantages inherent in private practice, as suggested by Ferriter (2003) and Kennedy (2001).

The government thus came under pressure from both organisations, the church and the IMA, and endeavoured to convince Browne to agree to a revised means tested version of his proposal. Browne refused. The government thus refused to introduce the scheme, so Browne subsequently resigned as Minister for Health (Burke, 2002). One of the main outcomes of the failure to implement the Mother and Child scheme, as noted by Conroy (2002), is evident through a general timidity within Irish governance and policy making which continues to manifest itself as a reticence towards “introducing radical social changes, however well researched or required” (p. 34).

#### **4.3 Development of Irish social policy: Church/State “partnership” to “social partnership”**

While church domination persisted, particularly in the realms of health, education and the family; from the late 1950s/60s onwards economic necessity had forced Ireland to look to foreign direct investment to bolster the economy, and this in turn impacted on society with a slow modernisation beginning to creep in. However, up until that time, as Kiely (2002b) has explained, social policies had generally developed “on a piecemeal basis with no comprehensive or integrated plan. The state responded to specific needs often only in response to political pressure to do so, and reluctantly.” (p. 4).

Mapping the Irish state’s attitude to social policies Smith (2006), has set out some of the assumptions underlying explanations of Irish state intervention. These are, that the Irish state during the period from 1921-1958 has been characterised as “the auxiliary state” (p. 523) due to the non-intervention mostly pursued in terms of social policies, and thus that the period following this, from 1958-1987, has been characterised as “the activist state” (ibid., p. 525) due to concerted government attempts to expand the economy and their preparations for and subsequent achievement of membership of the European

Economic Community (EEC). Smith (2006) points out that neither period was wholly defined by simply auxiliary or activist tendencies, due to the more complex and contradictory nature of how the Irish State has evolved and existed over time. Fanning thus has referred to the Irish “tendency to introduce schemes as an ad hoc response to social problems rather than coherent planning” (1999, p. 55), sitting alongside the “balance of welfare provision ... between the public, private, voluntary and informal sectors” (ibid., p. 51), as evidence of Irish social policy existing within a “mixed economy of welfare” (ibid.).

Fanning positions the mixed economy of welfare as the product of “historical, ideological and political factors which have shaped how welfare is paid for and provided” (1999, p. 67). Hence, apart from the aforementioned church dominance, social policy in Ireland since the 1970s has also been greatly shaped and influenced by membership of the EEC, and the advent of social partnership, alongside the effects of wider global neoliberalism. David Donnison defined the understanding of social policy, as it is used in the Irish context, in a 1975 National Economic and Social Council (NESC) Report; he described social policy as the actions of government:

which deliberately or accidentally effect the distribution of resources, status, opportunities and life chances among social groups and categories within the country and thus help to shape the general character and equity of its social relations (NESC, 1975).

Ireland joined the EEC in the 1970s, and the subsequent consequences of membership were felt through a number of recommendations, directives and funding initiatives (Hayes, 2002). This in turn affected changes in legislation particularly in terms of equality for women, thus affecting and modernising notions of the family and the welfare of children. Nevertheless, Hayes and Bradley (2009) point out that “the state’s role in facilitating women’s labour market activation” (p. 23) was born out of a drive

from external pressures to “implement legislative changes rather than domestic initiatives to support equality between the sexes” (ibid.). Within those decades there was some economic stabilisation, but that all changed in the 1980s when “social gains which had been slowly achieved over thirty years were dealt a severe blow with the implementation of cutbacks in public services in order to prevent a public fiscal crisis and economic meltdown” (Moran, 2010, p. 4). O’Donnell and Thomas have previously described Ireland’s economic problems of the 1980s as a reflection of “structural adjustment to free trade, increased need for social services, a turbulent international economy and recourse to foreign borrowing to fund both capital and current spending” (2006, p. 110). The attempts made in the late 1980s to recover from this stagnation, resulted in the implementation of a negotiated social partnership model of governance (O’Donnell & Thomas, 2006).

The development and practice of Irish social policy thus evolved into a bargaining method affected through social partnership from the late 1980s onwards. Social partnership as explained by Smith involved:

a series of negotiations between government and key economic and social interests in the form of a series of three-year programmes. Broadly similar in form, these agreements have been characterised by a trade-off between moderation in wage demands with social benefit improvement and income tax reduction (2006, p. 528).

Meade (2005) further described social partnership as a form of corporatism in Ireland and, in the Irish context, the way in which the state “secured the participation of divergent interest groups in a cyclical process of negotiating, agreeing and obeying agreements that determine the development agenda for the nation as a whole” (2005, p. 350). Adshead and Neylon (2008) have located the interests served by the social partnership model at national and local level. At national level, social partnership represents:



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 with government to deliberate about economic and social policy (Adshead & Neylon, 2008, p. 20).

While at local level, partnership structures are more mixed:

some are community-driven, some are motivated by funding opportunities provided by various EU programmes and initiatives related to local development, and other community activities have been fostered by government initiatives such as the creation of County Enterprise Boards and County Strategy Teams (ibid., pp. 20-21).

Whilst social partnership was seen as a boon to the rapidly developing economy during the days of economic expansion, it has since been criticised by many, including Moran (2010), who believe that it persisted in placing “economic policy to the forefront” (p. 11), to the detriment of wider social strategising. Moran has also listed a number of the flaws inherent in the social partnership approach to policymaking, these are:

- government social policy lacked a sustainable funding base
- the partnership process lacked a coherent view of social policy objectives
- the partnership process lacked the support of government to commit to fundamental changes in social policy
- there was a lack of a cogent alternative voice to challenge the direction of the policy agenda (Moran, 2010, p. 8).

Moran has also explained how one of the main consequences of the social partnership approach in Ireland, which was influenced by wider neoliberalism, has been “the move towards the depoliticisation of critical opposition through co-option of civil society groups” (Moran, 2010, p. 10). The implication of this statement is, that by making interested groups part of the policy process it weakened their ability to protest against anything that they believed to be unfair or outside of their interests, as any opposition to wider government plans for the economy or social policy had the potential to jeopardise their perceived insider stakeholder role. The potential results of exclusion from the partnership process, particularly in the case of the “withdrawal or absence of key community interests for national social partnership” (Adshead & Neylon, 2008, p. 22), have left the negotiation of social policy arrangements “situated within a policy-making

environment where economic growth and competition are the key drivers for change” (ibid.). Adshead and Neylon have thus positioned the social partnership mode of governance as one that “clearly works for those amongst whom there is a shared vision and a shared understanding of the process and its objectives” (2008, p. 21) whilst for those “who do not enjoy this same synergy of perspectives but who see participation in partnership processes as important, the tangible benefits are less immediate” (Adshead & Neylon, 2008, p. 21).

Analysis of the aftermath of the social partnership dominance of more than two decades in Irish economic and social policymaking, is offered by Kirby and Murphy (2009) who describe the general conclusions regarding this period as “a missed opportunity when the state, despite enjoying the greatest resources ever, generally pursued a relatively inegalitarian fiscal policy” (Kirby & Murphy, 2009, p. 6). They suggest that this understanding of the impact of Irish social partnership

highlights just how little influence social actors in many fora of social partnership have really had on key state policy. Rather social partnership was used to establish and maintain an elite-driven consensus that failed to achieve a fair balance between goals of efficiency and equity in the Irish political economy” (ibid.).

As a final point on the reign of social partnership and its subsequent consequences, Kirby (2010) has summarised the general feeling surrounding it today. Once seen as a tool that was a foremost contributing factor to the economic success during the Celtic Tiger boom time era, social partnership is now widely viewed “as having fostered a dangerous complacency among policy makers who failed to appreciate the vulnerabilities facing the Irish model” (Kirby, 2010).

The aftermath, from both the previous conservative Catholic insularity in Irish society and policy, and the capitalist hedonism of the Celtic Tiger social partnership dominated

days have left us with what is still a dichotomous situation. The Catholic Church lost its strong grip over morals and social policy throughout the years, from both a cultural perspective, and a policy making perspective, through the combined influences of clerical child abuse scandals, rapid economic development, and general modernisation. Within this, Ireland shifted from being a very insular state to a much more outward looking nation and as Moran has stated “although the Catholic Church retained a predominant position into the boom years in the provision of education, health and to a lesser extent in welfare provision its direct influence on the population and policy making declined” (2010, p. 4). Inglis (2008) has dubbed this cultural shift as Ireland making the switch from “Catholic to consumer capitalism ... the shift from a culture of self-denial and self-surrender to one of self-realization and self-indulgence” (p. 33). Despite having written about legislation and the development of Irish society back in 2004, what Bacik (2004) had to say about the existing situation in Ireland then is still relevant today, regardless of any economic crisis. To quote from Bacik; on the one hand we have an Ireland which is “capable of being a force for progress, for betterment” (Bacik, 2004, p. 16) while simultaneously we also have “an Ireland that is deeply polarised between rich and poor” (ibid.) which in the aggressive pursuit and maintenance of capitalism has “created an appallingly unbalanced society in which different classes lead separate and vastly different lives: gross affluence on one side and desperate poverty on the other” (Bacik, 2004, p. 16). This unbalanced society has thus affected children both positively and negatively. From a positive perspective the social partnership era helped to push children’s issues to the fore and is reflected in the large amount of policy strategy work undertaken from the late 1990’s onwards. Nevertheless, the increased attention towards children was largely driven by a combination of widely publicised failures in respect of children’s policy and the increased need for childcare services as a direct result of the increase in female labour force participation. At the

same time, poorer children remain inequitably treated, as illustrated in the Children's Rights Alliance *Report Card 2009* where they awarded the government a C- grade for children's material wellbeing. While acknowledging "marked increases in child income support" (CRA, 2009, p. 18) they also lamented "the lack of access to essential public services, such as childcare, education, health and housing" (ibid.) which disproportionately affect poorer children. The situation has worsened since then, with the government being awarded an E grade for children's material wellbeing in the Children's Rights Alliance *Report Card 2010*, rising marginally to an E+ grade in *Report Card 2011*.

#### **4.4 The treatment of children within Irish social policy**

Policy for children in Ireland has traditionally remained subordinate to family policy. The subordination of children's policy to family policy has, over time, reinforced the understanding of the state of childhood in Ireland as clearly being "peripheral to the global systems under study" (Alanen, 1988, p. 53), wherein children are treated as a less significant by-product of the more important social structure of the family. This traditional view of dealing with children's issues within family policy has tended to focus on their vulnerability (Kiely, 2002a). In this respect, children are seen as becomings rather than beings and as dependant on adults. Richardson has used the term "familialization" to describe the conceptualisation of children within Irish social policy; familialization is defined as "the fusion of childhood into the institution of the family defining children only as an extension of their parents" (Richardson, 1999, p. 188). The danger implicit in conceptualising children's policy in terms of wider family policy, in Ireland, is that the constitutional understanding of the family, upon which legislation and policy is based, views the family as based on marriage between a man and a woman only; it does not recognise the diversity of different family types of which society is

constituted nowadays (Hayes, 2002). Within this then policy does not address the diverse needs and rights of the individual members of families, particularly those of children (Hayes, 2002).

The lack of explicit rights for children in the constitution have been exposed and criticised throughout the past two decades. This criticism was brought to the fore when an influential report<sup>18</sup>, in terms of both child protection and children's rights, by Justice Catherine McGuinness (1993), noted that the "high emphasis on the rights of the family in the Constitution may consciously or unconsciously be interpreted as giving higher value to the rights of parents than to the rights of children" (p. 56).

The attitude towards children in Irish social policy has been exemplified by an adherence to traditional legislative principles which Hayes (2002) has described as being "protectionist in nature, aiming to protect children and to meet their needs with respect to access to health and education" (p. 39). An example of this is the legislative act governing children's policy for most of the twentieth century, which was the *1908 Children's Act*, which remained in law until elements of this act were replaced by the *Child Care Act 1991*. The subsequent introduction of the *Children Act 2001* was finally heralded as a full replacement for the 1908 act (Hayes, 2002), but there were delays in implementing the act fully. As Hayes (2002) puts it, children in Ireland are often either "perceived as dependants in need of protection or as problems in need of solutions" (p. 73); such constructions of children can be traced back to their constitutional position and children's lack of individual rights enshrined therein.

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<sup>18</sup> The Report of the Kilkenny Incest investigation was the first major inquiry into child abuse in Ireland and also the first Report to note children's rights appearing as subordinate to parent's rights in the Irish Constitution, thus it became the first Report to officially recommend Constitutional change in respect of children as rights holders.

Children are thus hindered in their treatment within social policy in Ireland, particularly through this lack of explicit individual rights, despite Ireland's ratification without reservation of the UNCRC in 1992. Subsequently, Kilkelly (2008) has highlighted the fact that "Ireland's progress in realising children's rights is hampered by the terms of the constitution through its *strong provision for the family*" (p. 2, emphasis added). Further discussing the issues about children's rights in the Constitution, Nolan (2007) explores the views of those who are opposed to children as rights holders, for example parents and others, who believe that to provide for the rights of children "would be harmful due to the negative impact this will have on the parental authority over, and responsibility for, children" (p. 496). The position of those who see children's rights as harmful to parents authority and autonomy, is in keeping with a more traditional view that the relative immaturity of children, particularly younger children, renders them unable to be legitimate holders of rights (Purdy, 1994). This ambivalence about the role of children in society, their rights to be rights-holders and their rights to participation is strengthened by a belief that taking children into consideration seriously as individuals can pose "a fundamental challenge to power issues" (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001, p. 12) not just within the family alone but also with implications for the wider community at large.

In the case of Ireland the social construction of Irish society, particularly, the constitutional primacy of the family (Kilkelly, 2008), the adherence to the principle of subsidiarity, and how these concepts are addressed and interpreted within the legal system (Nolan, 2007; O'Brien, 2009), have been continued barriers to social policy change that would view and accept children as rights holders and be generally in favour of comprehensive children's rights. Nolan has iterated that if a serious move to improve children's lives in Ireland is to be made, that "it is crucial that the Constitution serves as a framework for that commitment" (2007, p. 513).

#### ***4.4.1 Children's appearance on the social policy agenda***

Notwithstanding the issues related to the rights aspect of policy and the invisibility of explicit children's rights in Irish society, a number of changes within the policy environment throughout the past two decades have managed to put children more directly in the policy focus. The social partnership era made an impact in increasing children's visibility in social and economic policy debates, although this was initially related to the need for increased female participation in the labour force and their resulting childcare requirements. Prior to the direct participation of the social, community and voluntary pillar in the partnership discussions, which was a boon to the recognition of children within policy, the *Child Care Act 1991* had its part to play as it had "clarified and extended the role of the state in child welfare and protection" (Hayes, 2002, p. 52). The role of the state, as set out in the *Child Care Act 1991*, was repositioned to be more accountable and development oriented, particularly in relation to child protection issues but nonetheless reaching further than before in order to include all children (Hayes, 2002). Section 7 of the *Child Care Act 1991* provided for the *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* which gave greater "responsibility to the State in the regulation and supervision of pre-school services for all children" (ibid., p. 52), whereas previously their responsibility had extended only to early education services for those children considered to be 'at risk'. In spite of this, it took until 1997 for the relevant section of the act which dealt with the pre-school regulations to be enacted (Hayes & Bradley, 2006). In the meantime, within the realm of childcare, and as a direct result of the increasing amount of mothers returning to the workforce, "there was an *ad hoc* growth in service provision, which gave rise to varied quality, distribution and costs" (ibid., p. 167, emphasis in original). This also led to trade unions and employer organizations becoming more involved in the issue of childcare by calling for the improved provision of services to facilitate working parents.

In order to expand the reach of the social partnership approach, to include measures that considered tackling social exclusion, poverty and increasing equality, *Partnership 2000* was the first social partnership agreement to include representatives of the social, community and voluntary pillar. While children only feature minimally in the *Partnership 2000* report as “an adjunct to other policy issues rather than as a group in their own right” (Hayes, 2002, p. 54), the inclusion of these representatives was seen to be significant in terms of the inclusion of children in future partnership discussions.

Concurrently, the groundwork for the *National Children’s Strategy* was being undertaken. The *National Children’s Strategy* was born out of a direct response to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) concluding observations on Ireland’s 1<sup>st</sup> periodic report on the progress of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRA, 2006). The *National Children’s Strategy* purported to have a vision of creating 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; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential (Ireland, 2000, p. 4).

The strategy was hailed to be a new and innovative direction for children’s policy in Ireland and it “marked the beginning of a shift towards using rights-based language in policy development and implementation by strongly reflecting the UNCRC” (Hayes, 2002, pp. 61-62). However while based on the guiding principles of the Convention, the strategy itself did not “incorporate the principles and provisions of the UNCRC directly” (ibid., p. 62). Consequently, it was not a rights-based strategy, nor was it a commitment to offer supports and services to all children as a right (CRA, 2006). Despite this the strategy was nevertheless lauded by the government as “the most significant initiative in Ireland to implement the UNCRC and to promote knowledge



and understanding of the UN convention” (OMCYA, 2005, p. 2). The aim for the strategy was for its implementation to be guided by six operational principles that “reflect” the Convention: that all actions taken will be child centred, family oriented, equitable, inclusive, action oriented, and integrated (Ireland, 2000, p. 10). The strategy then had three national goals, each of which was to be achieved through fulfilling a number of related objectives; the three goals were:

Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters which affect them

Goal 2: Children’s lives will be better understood

Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services (Ireland, 2000, p. 11).

The third goal, children will receive quality supports and services, had fourteen related objectives and was explicit in its goal to address children’s needs:

A key aim of this National Goal of the Strategy is to refocus the supports and services provided to children so that they address children’s basic needs, provide for the additional needs of some children and support families and communities in supporting children. This will be achieved by ensuring that supports and services address the full range of children’s needs, that they are provided in child friendly settings and delivered in ways which make them accessible to all children, removing the barriers which prevent access for some children (Ireland, 2000, p. 44).

The specific objective from Goal number 3 that is of the most relevance to this thesis, is that “children’s early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures” (Ireland, 2000, p. 50). The Strategy proposed to support the development of early education and child development programmes based on the *Ready to Learn* White Paper, and to support the development of childcare provision based on the *National Childcare Strategy*.

The *National Children’s Strategy* covered the ten year period from 2000 to 2010. As of yet there has been no direct review of its impact, published by the State, since the time period of the strategy has elapsed. Nevertheless, the Children’s Rights Alliance did conduct a review of the Strategy, *Ten Years On: Did the National Children’s Strategy deliver on its promises?*, it is a review of the whole ten year period encompassing the

Strategy and has assessed whether it has been successful or not in delivering on its objectives. This review was published on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2011. Essentially, the Children's Rights Alliance have described the review as "a face-value assessment of delivery on specific commitments" (CRA, 2011, p. 2) and they are broadly satisfied with the progress made. Out of 136 listed actions from the Strategy, the Alliance have assessed 60 as achieved, 53 as having had some progress made, 13 as having not been achieved and 10 which were unable to be assessed. They have positioned the *National Children's Strategy* as a strategy of two halves, citing the period from 2000-2006 as encompassing the "development of infrastructure relating to children" (CRA, 2011, p. 3). While conversely citing the period from 2007-2010 as encompassing a "slow-down in progress" (ibid.) and a reduction in investment for children. The Children Right's Alliance has not used this review as a forum to issue recommendations<sup>19</sup>, instead the review just concentrated on the assessment of the achievement of the key highlights promised in the National Children's Strategy.

#### **4.5 Early Childhood Education and Care policy in Ireland**

Early childhood education and care policy in Ireland, which considers the age group from birth to four years of age, has been generally contextualised as a reactive and economically driven childcare concern. It became a focal policy issue on the agenda throughout the 1990s, related to the needs arising from women's increased labour force participation, and resulting in a policy landscape which has favoured the prioritisation of 'care spaces' over 'quality provision'. The government took on the role of managing the capital funding of providers of childcare alongside facilitating statutory inspection

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<sup>19</sup> The Children Right's Alliance will engage in a second phase of strategy work in due course, where they plan to liaise with their own members in order to provide them with "an opportunity to comment on what they would like to see included" (CRA, 2011, p. 1) in a second National Children's Strategy.

of services which were registered or ‘notified’ to ensure their adherence to basic minimum standards (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). The government thus operated on a neoliberal trajectory following the notion that increased supply “would lead to a rebalancing of market forces (through greater competition), thus improving quality and costs, as ‘businesses’ (i.e. childcare settings) competed to win ‘customers’ (i.e. children)” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 26). A structural and conceptual distinction (Hayes, 2007a) between early education and childcare persists within Irish policy, with childcare being seen predominantly as day-care services for the children of working parents and early education predominantly being seen as an interventionist service for children viewed as ‘at risk’ through social disadvantage. These distinctions between care and early education in Irish ECEC policy have been widely criticised (Bennett, 2006, 2008; CRA, 2009; Hayes, 2002, 2007a, 2008b; OECD, 2006b). There is also an issue with the cross departmental and dispersed responsibility for children’s policy within the governance structures, where there has been a noted lack of coordination. This lack of coordination was one of the key issues addressed by the *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education, Policy and Care in Ireland* (OECD, 2004).

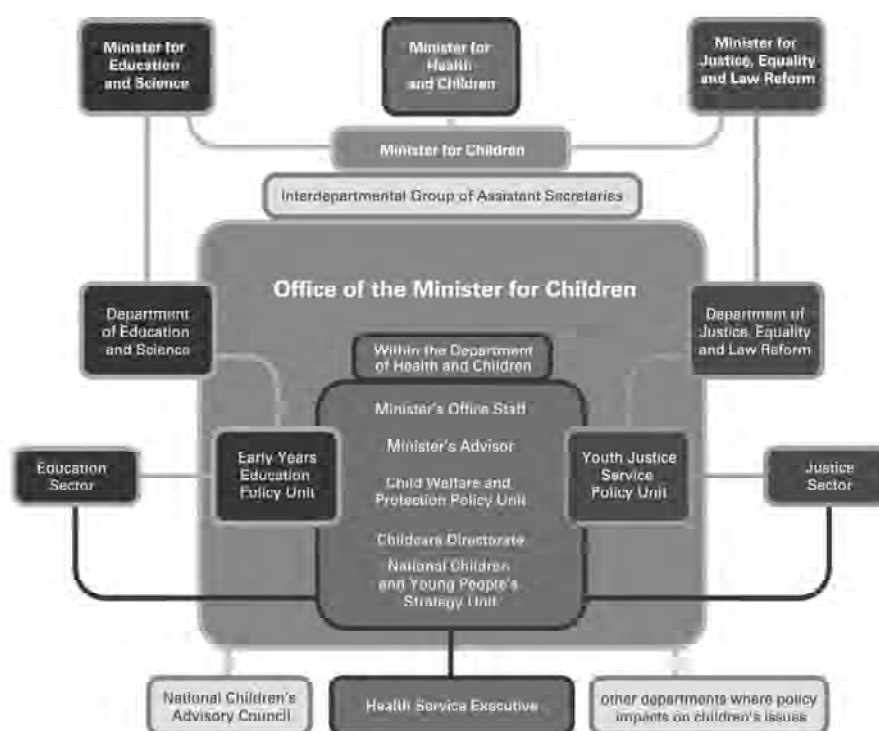
Since 2005, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA)<sup>20</sup>, now called the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), has been charged with the coordination of children’s policy making in Ireland. The OMCYA was a subsidiary office of the Department of Health and Children, and some DCYA units still remain as subsidiaries of the Department of Health and Children<sup>21</sup>. The responsibility for policy relating to early childhood education and care has been dispersed across a number of government departments in Ireland (Hayes, 2002). An example of this is the Early

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<sup>20</sup> Known as the National Children’s Office (NCO) from 2001-2005

<sup>21</sup> These include: the Child Welfare and Protection Policy Unit, the Childcare Directorate and the National Children and Young People’s Strategy Unit.

Years Education Policy Unit, which is co-located between the Department of Education and Skills<sup>22</sup> and the DCYA; another example is the Childcare Directorate which was formerly part of the Department of Justice and Law Reform<sup>23</sup> and is now a unit of the Department of Health and Children. Figure 4.1 is a diagrammatical representation of the co-location and dispersal of the administrative structures of children's policy in Ireland from 2006.



**Figure 4.1: Diagrammatical representation of the administration of children's policy in Ireland, taken from (Bennett, 2006, p. 26).**

#### **4.6 The development of Early Childhood Education and Care policy in Ireland**

Within the time frame that this thesis is focusing on, 1998-2008, the Irish government have, broadly speaking, been policy active in the development of early childhood education and care; predominantly the 'childcare' element. As a result of this activity in policy drafting and publication, there has been a mixture of funding initiatives for

<sup>22</sup> The Department was renamed as Education and Skills from Education and Science in 2010.

<sup>23</sup> This Department was renamed from Justice, Equality and Law Reform also in 2010

childcare on the implementation side<sup>24</sup>, alongside targeted programmes for early intervention education services<sup>25</sup>. Most of these funding initiatives were influenced by the pervasive neoliberal ideology which favours market based provision of ECEC services (Hayes & Bradley, 2009) and thus focused on the increased provision of places, with “little evidence of sustained policy commitment” (CRA, 2009, p. 10). There has been no integrated national early childhood education and care programme or strategy, thus early childhood services have predominantly remained, until recently, “fractured across the welfare (childcare) and educational (early education) domains and ... targeted in nature” (Hayes, 2008b, p. 33).

In order to discuss the development of the policy landscape as relevant to early childhood education and care policy in Ireland, throughout this time period, it is necessary to review the array of developments, particularly the large collection of documents that were published throughout the years in question. These policy developments have been separated into two time periods, firstly the years 1998-2003, which saw a lot of national policy publishing activity in general and specific terms in relation to ECEC; secondly the years 2004-2008 where a more refined ECEC strategising, with less new development, took place. These developments are reviewed in chronological order for each time period.

The 1998-2003 era is represented by the following major developments: The publication of the report of the Commission on the Family; the inception of the consultation processes for childcare and early childhood policy documents; and the

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<sup>24</sup> For example, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP).

<sup>25</sup> For example, the Delivering Equality of Education in Schools Programme (DEIS) and the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme for Children.

publication of the childcare and early childhood policy documents. While the 2004-2008 era saw major policy developments including the inception of the consultative processes for a curriculum framework, and a quality framework for ECEC; the OECD reviews of Irish ECEC policy; the publication of the NESF report; Ireland delivering the 2<sup>nd</sup> periodic report to the United Nations Committee in the Rights of the Child; the publication of the Developmental Welfare Report by NESC; the publication of the *Towards 2016* social partnership strategy; the publication of the Agenda for Children's Services; and finally consideration of the State of the Nation's Children.

#### **4.7 Review of ECEC policy developments: 1998-2003**

Prior to the well documented developments within ECEC policy which began with the publication of the Report of the Commission on the Family in 1998, the early 1990s had also witnessed the dawn of a number of other developments that would be relevant to the later advancement of ECEC policy. These earlier policy developments encompass both rights relevant as well as specific ECEC related changes, and are set out in table 4.1.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT	YEAR
<b>Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</b>	<b>1992</b>
<b>Appointment of the first Minister of State for Children</b>	<b>1994</b>
<b>Beginning of the Early Start pilot project</b>	<b>1994</b>
<b>Formation of the Children's Rights Alliance</b>	<b>1995</b>
<b>Publication of the Child Care (Preschool) Regulations</b>	<b>1996</b>

**Table 4.1: Early 1990s ECEC policy developments**

Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC and the publication of the *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* have been discussed previously. Other relevant developments in the 1990s included the appointment of the first Minister of State for Children in 1994; a junior

ministry co-located across the Departments of Health, Education and Justice which “had special responsibility for aspects of policy impacting on children at risk or in need of protection and care” (Hayes, 2002, p. 49). The Early Start pilot project in primary schools which provided early childhood education services for children in disadvantaged areas was also introduced in 1994. In 1995, a number of interested NGOs came together to form the Children’s Rights Alliance, with their mission statement being to “to realise the rights of children in Ireland through securing the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” (CRA, 2008).

#### ***4.7.1 Commission on the Family***

The first important ECEC related policy document, in the relevant period from 1998 to 2008, was the publication in 1998 of the Report of the Commission on the Family, *Strengthening Families for Life*. This document reported on the work of the Commission, established in 1995 in order to:

to examine the effects of legislation and policies on families and make recommendations to the Government on proposals which would strengthen the capacity of families to carry out their functions in a changing economic and social environment (Ireland, 1998b, p. 2).

The report was concerned with achieving desirable outcomes for families, and endeavoured to pursue this goal through recommending policy targets within four themes, they were:

1. Building strengths in families
2. Supporting families in carrying out their functions - the care and nurturing of Children
3. Promoting continuity and stability in family life
4. Protecting and enhancing the position of children and vulnerable dependent family members (Ireland, 1998b, p. 9).

This report was influential in terms of ECEC policy for a number of reasons. It was, and still is, very relevant due to children’s continued contextualisation in respect of the definition of the family in the Constitution. Family policy directly impacts on children.

Coolahan (1998) has stated that 46% of all the submissions to the Commission on the Family “related to educational concerns” (p. 2); the report had two specific sections dedicated to issues surrounding the care and early education of children. The Report of the Commission on the Family was published in the same year as the Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. It influenced the content of the White Paper *Ready to Learn*, particularly in terms of the results of research that had already been carried out. The White Paper supported and reinforced many of the recommendations that were originally published in the report of the Commission on the Family. A great deal of esteem was particularly given to the fact that the Commission had undertaken “some original and significant research work which details the factual situation as regards childcare in the under twelve age group on a national basis” (Ireland, 1998b, p. v). The recommendations relating to childcare were seen as relatively comprehensive (Hayes, 2010) and the report was seen as valuable to the childcare debate because it looked at “the needs of families to additional support in the care of their children” (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 168).

#### ***4.7.2 Consultation for the early childhood education policy document***

As the Report of the Commission on the Family was being launched, the consultation processes for the White Paper on Early Childhood Education and the National Childcare Strategy were well underway. The National Forum for Early Childhood Education assembled in early 1998 for a week long consultative meeting. The rationale for hosting the Forum was related to the number of associated policy developments which had taken place since the early 1990s, and also as iterated in the background paper to the Forum, the governments stated commitment to “developing a national framework for early childhood education” (Coolahan, 1998, p. 156). It was also an attempt to counteract previous public policy advances in relation to early childhood education (ECE),



which had been reactive, “inadequate and piece-meal” (Coolahan, 1998, p. 229). There was widespread acknowledgment of the lack of research that had been undertaken in relation to young children and their educational development, alongside a general consensus on the “underestimation of both the significance and the complexity of early education issues” (ibid., p. 7). The Minister for Education, Micheál Martin, in his opening address to the forum stated that the main objective was to develop the policy area through consultation with interested groups and provide them with the opportunity to:

engage in a full exchange of views, to put forward their own particular concerns and objectives while, at the same time, taking account of the objectives and concerns of the other partners in the process (Coolahan, 1998, p. 210).

The Forum thus was coming from a perspective of consensus about the good of ECE while also acknowledging a necessity for further discussion, in order to understand how best to provide ECE appropriately. The business of the Forum was organised to follow five structured stages of consultation, based around these key components:

1. Submissions from invited organizations in advance of the Forum taking place, followed by the drawing up and circulation of a Background Report which set out the order of business for the Forum.
2. Plenary sessions at the Forum, with presentations by invited organizations followed by structured questioning by the Forum Secretariat<sup>26</sup>.
3. Focused discussions on analysis of issues relating to nine key areas of concern.
4. Reports of the analyses of issues discussions which included a synthesis of their conclusions.
5. Preparation of the Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Coolahan, 1998, p. 3).

The publication of the Forum Report was an important event in the Irish ECEC policy process because of its recognition and acknowledgment of the piecemeal development of the area at the time; however it was not directly used to effect change. The main findings of the Report were subsequently used to inform the White Paper, which was published the following year.

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<sup>26</sup> The forum Secretariat was comprised of a number of education and early education experts: Professor Dervilla Donnelly (chairperson), Professor John Coolahan (Secretary General), Dr John Bennett, Dr Tom Kellaghan, Dr Maeve Martin, Ms Ann McGough, Dr Anne McKenna, Mr Peter Moss, Dr Máire NicGhiolla Phádraig.

#### **4.7.3 Publication of the early childhood education policy document**

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* was published in December 1999, with the bulk of the research work in advance of it emanating from both the background work for the *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* and the Report of the Commission on the Family.

The traditional process of policy making, with regard to published documentation, often involves the government publishing a green paper which is a discussion based document on a policy area. A green paper is typically followed by a white paper which sets out the government's proposed policy action. There was no green paper preceding this White Paper; the consultative process which took place resulted in the publication of the *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education*. The purpose of the White Paper was "to set out Government policy on all issues relating to early childhood education" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 3) for children from birth to six years of age. It remains the first and only policy document which deals with early childhood education as a distinct and separate entity while acknowledging that education and care in the early childhood years, birth to six, are "closely intertwined" (ibid., p. 3). *Ready to Learn* is interesting as a policy document, mostly due to the fact that despite it having had a consultation process with a published report, it is still structured to read more like a discussion document or a literature review, rather than as a more standardised bullet pointed, objective oriented, policy document. Its eleven chapters thus look at the broad spectrum of ECE policy themes. Despite setting out a range of policy priorities, the White Paper was directly concerned with meeting the educational needs of children who are socio-economically disadvantaged through the increased targeting of services. Nevertheless, *Ready to Learn* is of importance because it had set out a specific policy agenda in the area of ECE that was charged with considerably developing the sector:

The objective of this White Paper is to facilitate the development of a high quality system of early childhood education. Achieving this objective requires progress across a wide spectrum of areas, including curriculum, training and qualifications and the quality and quantity of inputs (staff, equipment, premises) (Ireland, 1999b, p. 43).

Of the key policy developments that were produced as a result of recommendations and objectives from the White Paper, the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was significant. The role of the CECDE was to coordinate and implement the recommendations of the White Paper. First and foremost this required the CECDE to oversee the consultation process and drafting of “a quality framework for the early years sector” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 32), which was subsequently published as *Síolta* in 2006. Throughout their tenure the CECDE were also involved in developing research and projects within disadvantaged areas, curriculum development for ECE, and developing work practices and training within the ECE sector. The CECDE was closed down in late 2008 due to economic cutbacks but its legacy remains in the work that was undertaken to develop the sector from the quality, curriculum and work practices perspectives (Hayes, 2010).

#### ***4.7.4 Consultation for and publication of a childcare strategy***

The *National Childcare Strategy* became the main policy document guiding tangible funding developments in the childcare aspect of the ECEC arena. This has been chiefly orchestrated through the EOCP and NCIP investment schemes that have subsidised both childcare facilities, and parents, separately. The Childcare Strategy originated from the *Partnership 2000* report which made a commitment to undertaking necessary steps to facilitate the growth of the childcare sector:

In order to develop a strategy which integrates the different strands of the current arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services, an Expert Working Group involving the relevant interests chaired by the Department of Equality and Law Reform, will be established under this Partnership to devise a National Framework for the Development of the Childcare Sector (Ireland, 1998a, p. 24).

The Expert Working Group on Childcare was established in July 1997 with eighty representatives from all the relevant stakeholders within the childcare arena, including representatives from the associated government departments<sup>27</sup>, social partners, statutory bodies, non-governmental organizations and parents (Ireland, 1999a). The expert working group were influenced by “the need to develop a childcare strategy to meet European Employment Guidelines and Structural Fund criteria” (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxv) particularly in order to meet European Employment Guidelines from 1999 which had called on member states “to design, implement and promote family friendly policies, including affordable, accessible and high quality care services for children as well as parental and other leave schemes” (ibid.).

The *National Childcare Strategy* was published by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in 1999, and was created in the context of gender equality; mostly due to Ireland’s economic expansion which had led to a requirement to increase the labour force, particularly the amount of women in the workplace. A lack of childcare infrastructure was seen as a barrier to equality of access to the labour market. *Partnership 2000* acknowledged that “childcare is clearly an important issue in promoting equality for women, and especially in promoting equal opportunities in employment” (Ireland, 1998a, p. 23). Thus the Expert Working Group was formed and the Childcare Strategy was produced in order to consider, and ultimately try to meet “the childcare needs of working parents” (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 168). In the Childcare Strategy’s terms of reference it was agreed that childcare would refer to the broad spectrum of services for children from birth to age twelve, encompassing the range of services that provide pre-school and out of school care arrangements:

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<sup>27</sup> Department of Education and Science; Department of Finance; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of the Taoiseach; Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs; and the Department of Health and Children.

It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí, daycare services, crèches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxiii).

The working process for the Expert Working Group consisted of three operational levels, as illustrated in Figure 4.2; there was a plenary session attended by all members, eight subgroups each focusing on a specific aspect of policy and also a Steering Group.



**Figure 4.2: Working methods of Expert Working Group on Childcare (Ireland, 1999a, p. 99)**

There were also a number of research reports commissioned by the Expert Working Group which informed the strategy. All this information was brought together for consideration and ultimately the *National Childcare Strategy* was published, presenting “a seven year strategy for the development of the childcare sector, including policy

recommendations and the structures and mechanisms for a needs-led planning approach at county level, within a national framework” (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxvi).

Partly funded by the EU Structural Fund, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006 which was followed by the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP) facilitated the distribution of the subsidies and childcare supports that were the main policy implementation tools of the *National Childcare Strategy*.

#### **4.7.5 Additional policy developments**

The year 2000 saw a number of policy developments taking place; the *National Children’s Strategy* was published, the National Children’s Office (NCO) was established and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) was rolled out. The following few years in the early 2000s also saw a number of advancements in children’s policy, many of which were related to ECEC policy. The *Children Act 2001* was enshrined into legislation. Also in 2001, the National Children’s Advisory Council was established based on recommendations in the *National Children’s Strategy*. A development arising from the *National Childcare Strategy*, was “the establishment of the National Coordinating Childcare Committee and a network of thirty-three City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) in 2001-2002” (CECDE, 2007, p. 16). The year 2002 also witnessed the publication of *Quality Childcare and Life Long Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) and the establishment and opening of the CECDE. Advancements in 2003 included the establishment of the position of an Ombudsman for Children, and the foundation of the Family Support Agency.

#### **4.8 Review of ECEC policy developments: 2004-2008**

In terms of significant policy texts, the next important event was the publication of *Towards a Framework for Early Learning - a Consultative Document* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2004. It was created in order to inform the consultation process for developing a framework which aimed to assist adults in supporting young children's learning and development. *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* was directed towards parents, childcare workers from all settings, childminders and families, and was designed to complement other guidelines, particularly the quality framework set out in *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006b). Following its launch in 2004, a newspaper report described the *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* document as seeking "to promote early childhood learning, both formal and informal, around key themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring, and thinking" (Donnelly, 2004). The aims of *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* were to provide "advice, information and tools to help adults develop their practice particularly in the areas of curriculum, partnership with parents and families, interactions, and play" (NCCA, 2004), and through this help early years facilities meet some of the standards that are set out in *Síolta*. Both *Síolta* and *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* were formulated in response to the central objective of the White Paper which is concerned with achieving the "development of a high quality system of early childhood education" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 43). Throughout the consultation process, the NCCA worked in partnership with the CECDE, as well as "children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, and relevant agencies, organisations and government departments" (NCCA, 2009a, p. 19). This was in order to "draw upon and build on the expertise and commitment within the early years sector" (ibid.) and to develop "a curriculum framework that will help all children under age six to reach their full potential as young learners" (ibid.). The findings from

the *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* consultative process were used to inform the development of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, published in 2009. The curriculum framework that is set out in *Aistear*:

- identifies what and how children should learn, and describes the types of experiences that can support this
- makes connections in children's learning throughout the early childhood years and as they move from one setting to another
- supports parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and practitioners
- complements and extends existing curriculums and materials
- informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work (NCCA, 2009b, p. 6).

*Síolta*<sup>28</sup>, the national Quality Framework for ECEC was launched in 2006, following a three year consultation process. *Síolta* works to “assist all those concerned with the provision of quality early education in Ireland to participate in a developmental journey towards the improvement and enrichment of young children's early, and arguably most critical, life experiences” (CECDE, 2006a). *Síolta* has been described by Adshead and Neylon (2008) as having “a reflective and contemporary educational philosophy” (ibid., pp. 25-26) and as providing “aspirational quality standards” (ibid.). It is positioned to work as a quality assurance tool for all aspects of ECEC services, and its aim is to support practitioners in developing high quality services for children in ECEC settings. *Síolta* was developed as a direct objective of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, which the CECDE was successful in achieving and implementing before it had to close down.

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<sup>28</sup> *Síolta* is the Irish word for seeds, this word was used to express the potential of childhood and also the potential of the quality Framework to grow and succeed (CECDE, 2006c).



#### 4.8.1 OECD Review

Between 1998 and 2004, the OECD conducted reviews of the national early childhood education and care policies of participating countries<sup>29</sup>. Expert teams from the OECD evaluated policy, programmes and provision for children from birth to compulsory school age, 0-6 years, in each country. Prior to each review, participating countries published a *Background Report* describing current policy and practice, and future challenges within ECEC policy. The OECD then expertly reviewed each country, and published a *Country Note* noting the issues observed. The *Country Note* offered suggestions of solutions and recommendations for ways to improve ECEC policy and services (OECD, 2006c). The *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education, Policy and Care in Ireland* was published by the OECD in 2004. It was an important review which was quite critical of “the fragmented and dispersed responsibility across the early childhood sector in Ireland” (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 170). The *Thematic Review* identified some strengths in Ireland’s ECEC policy organization, namely that there was a well-established early education network within the primary school system for children aged between four and six years old, that there was the presence of an active voluntary and community sector, and also that there was a strong spirit of partnership at local level (OECD, 2004, p. 6). However it was also critical of the structural and conceptual split between education and care, the weak provision of and access to services for young children, the shortage of quality services, low funding, and in particular, the lack of coordination and integration within policy:

Part of the reason for the dispersion of responsibilities in Ireland is that early childhood policy has traditionally been subsumed under larger issues, such as family policy, primary schooling, general health or other policy. The age group 0-6 years has not been considered as a defined age group with its own specific health, developmental and cognitive traits. Many small, specialised agencies and sub-structures attached to all the above ministries do exist, some important at national level, such as the National

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<sup>29</sup> The participating countries were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United States.

Children's Office, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, the Family Support Agency, or the National Framework Committee on Family Friendly Policies. As these bodies are not major ministries and do not control major funding, they are not in a position to take in charge the large-scale policy renewal and integration that the early childhood and the family policy field in Ireland will require in the coming years (OECD, 2004, p. 22).

The information gathered from the *Thematic Review* was used to inform Ireland's position in a comparative study of ECEC policy and provision with other OECD member states, which was published as *Starting Strong II* in 2006. The *Starting Strong II* review describes "the social, economic, conceptual and research factors that influence early childhood policy" (OECD, 2006a); through its policy recommendations it acts as a benchmark for what good ECEC policy should be. The OECD review work on Ireland's ECEC policy "presented comprehensive and nuanced arguments encouraging the government to develop a coordinated and integrated policy response" (Hayes, 2010, p. 75) to ECEC and advocates developing a climate "where there is excellence in both care and education, for all children" (ibid.).

#### **4.8.2 NESF Report**

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) was established in 1993 as a government-appointed consultative body involved in the social partnership process, its function to provide "advice on economic and social policies, especially those that seek to achieve greater equality and social inclusion in our society" (NESF, 2010). Meade states that the formation of the NESF was "applauded as a significant innovation in Irish policy making" (2005, p. 363), particularly in relation to the representation of the community and voluntary sector within it. Nevertheless, the work of the NESF has "tended to be overshadowed by that of the National Economic and Social Council" (Meade, 2005, p. 363) who operate as "a more influential contributor to macro-economic debate" (ibid.).

The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) had been established in 1973 with its function being to:

analyse and report to the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) on strategic issues relating to the efficient development of the economy and the achievement of social justice and the development of a strategic framework for the conduct of relations and negotiation of agreements between the government and the social partners (NESC, 2010).

The NESC “has been instrumental in the promotion of social partnership in Ireland since 1987” (Meade, p. 370). Meade also cites the NESC as having had “a particular influence over the content and focus of national social partnership agreements by publishing in advance of those negotiations reports on relevant themes” (ibid.).

With regard to both organizations involvement in and influence on policy formulation, the NESC have played a key role in the strategic formulation of policy, while the NESF has “monitored the effectiveness of the implementation of policies agreed within the strategic framework set by NESC” (Connolly, 2008, p. 21). Thus the relationship between the NESC and the NESF<sup>30</sup> has essentially been a hierarchical one, with the NESC afforded more power in relation to influencing how policy is made (Connolly, 2008).

Contributing to the ECEC policy landscape, the NESF published their *Report no. 31: Early Childhood Care and Education* in 2005. The NESF report articulated the necessity for this report due to “the very inadequate implementation of policy which has occurred and the very insufficient financial investment in the education and care of our younger citizens” (NESF, 2005, p. ix). A project team was assembled at the NESF for the specific purpose of evaluating the implementation of ECEC policy in Ireland. They thus aimed to formulate “an action plan for more effective implementation of policy in

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<sup>30</sup> The NESF has since been subsumed into the offices of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), in March 2010 as a result of economic cutbacks; both are part of the overarching National Economic and Social Development Office (NESDO).

the ECEC area” (NESF, 2005, p. 1). Consequently the terms of reference of the report included identifying what progress had been made in implementation of recommendations from previous reports, alongside developing a coherent policy framework and setting out an achievable implementation process (NESF, 2005). One of the key recommendations was the provision, enhancement and development of ECEC services that are:

available through full-day, sessional and family day care (childminding) settings ... so that they can provide quality services for those children from 1 year up to when they are eligible for a free pre-school place. Moving in a seamless way from the younger age groups to the older cohort, a free, State-funded ECCE session should be made available to each child (NESF, 2005, p. 78).

Despite a positive response to the NESF report within the general policy arena<sup>31</sup>, it was not directly used to inform any future policy developments at the time<sup>32</sup>. The lack of any direct policy development arising from this report is in keeping with the role of the NESF as a policy advisor rather than a policy influencer.

#### ***4.8.3 Ireland’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Periodic Report on implementation of the UNCRC***

In 2005 Ireland submitted its 2<sup>nd</sup> report on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Report was submitted two years late, seven years after the Concluding Observations of the first report were returned to the Irish government. Ireland’s first National Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) had been submitted in 1996 by the Department of Foreign Affairs, with the concluding observations of the committee received in 1998. Ireland’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Report, prepared and submitted by the OMCYA, was structured to both follow specific guidelines published by the CRC and also to respond on progress made with regard to

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<sup>31</sup> It was particularly welcomed in light of considering the lack of implementation of any robust and integrated ECEC policy actions following the 1999 publication of the White paper on Early Childhood Education.

<sup>32</sup> The recent introduction of the Free Pre-school Year, announced in April 2009 (OMCYA, 2009b), however, was welcomed by the NESF as it follows on from one of the key recommendations in the 2005 NESF Report.

specific issues highlighted in the CRC's "concluding observations" on Ireland's first report. The responses to the concluding observations of the CRC to Ireland's first National Report did lead to some significant changes in policy for children. These changes included the establishment of the National Children's Office, which became the OMCYA; the consultation process for, drafting and publication of the ten year National Children's Strategy in 2000, and the appointment of the Ombudsman for Children. The amount of time that had passed between Reports allowed for plenty of time to make changes and to take steps forward in relation to developing policy for children and implementing more provisions in line with the principles of the Convention.

The Report is significant because it is a record of policy advancements achieved throughout a seven year period which is relevant to the time frame of this thesis, and because it is a report of progress on children's policy as a whole. The significance of this report on Ireland's implementation of the Convention is elevated because many policy texts had begun to use the language of rights in their policy discourses, particularly following ratification of the Convention and the subsequent publication of the *National Children's Strategy*.

#### **4.8.4 NESC Report**

The *Developmental Welfare State* (DWS) became an important background document when it was published by the NESC in 2005, as it was positioned to become an informing framework for future social partnership agreements and policy action in Ireland. It was published at a time when Ireland's economy still looked healthy, and the concept of developing policy approaches and spending money wisely within a welfare context was on the policy agenda. The fundamental argument of the report "is that the welfare state should be seen as consisting of three overlapping spheres ... and that these

should be integrated to form a *developmental welfare state*” (NESC, 2005, pp., emphasis added). Thus the main principle underlying the *DWS* report was that Ireland should design future welfare provisions to support a core structure to Ireland’s welfare state, which:

would consist of three overlapping areas of welfare state activity - services, income supports and activist or innovative measures. Its essential character derives from the approaches taken within each sphere and the integration of the three in ways that are developmental for individuals, families, communities and the economy (NESC, 2005, p. xviii).

O’Donnell and Thomas (2006) stated that the analysis for the report showed “that the radical development of services is the single most important route to improving social protection in Ireland over the coming years” (p. 125).

At the time of its publication the *Developmental Welfare State* had the potential to drive approaches to future ECEC policy advancement. The social partners, while they were in a position of influence, had the ability to shape developments within policy areas such as early childhood education and care. The report is of significance as it did highlight children as “a priority because of the greater awareness of the later problems that result from a poor start in life for individuals” (p. xx). The NESC stated that they view the *DWS* report as more of a “discussion document rather than a focussed study grounding detailed policy recommendations” (2005, p. 214). However, they did make a series of recommendations within an achievable time frame which they saw as necessary for “accelerating and reinforcing the required transformation of Ireland’s welfare state” (ibid.). With this in mind, the overall goal of the *DWS* report was to advocate a life cycle approach to developing future social policy:

A quite fundamental standpoint, therefore, from which to judge the adequacy and effectiveness of overall social protection is to assess the risks and hazards which the individual person in Irish society faces and the supports available to them at different stages in the life cycle. It provides a simple but comprehensive framework to ensure no population group is overlooked, and facilitates a more reasoned adjudication between competing priorities (NESC, 2005, p. 226, emphasis in original).

The recommendations address the three separate areas of the life cycle; children, people of working age, and older people. Within that, the report made seven recommendations related to policy delivery for children which are predominantly focused on “considering the needs of young children” (NESC, 2005, p. 215) during the early childhood years. The *Towards 2016* social partnership agreement document, published in 2006, was greatly influenced by the life cycle approach advocated in the *Developmental Welfare State*.

#### ***4.8.5 Social Partnership – Towards 2016***

The *Towards 2016* report “adopts a lifecycle approach in relation to its social inclusion measures, with children identified as a key component” (Langford, 2007, p. 253). The programme set out in *Towards 2016* has been described as committing “the government and partners to building a new social policy approach. At the heart of this lies the life cycle approach and strategies to re-cast key services, income supports and activation measures requiring new and innovative responses” (O'Donnell & Thomas, 2006, p. 129). The OMCYA stated that their approach to childcare policy is strongly influenced by the *Developmental Welfare State* report, particularly in relation to childcare provision and the introduction of the concept of “tailored universalism” (NESC, 2005, p. 203). Programmes delivered through the OMCYA’s interpretation of tailored universalism are charged with “the provision of quality services available to all, but with additional supports provided to enable disadvantaged groups to access them” (Langford, 2007, p. 258).

Since the *Partnership 2000* document, Irish social partnership agreements began to acknowledge the need for the inclusion of children's policy issues to some extent<sup>33</sup>, chiefly childcare and early education, to be considered as part of the discussions for economic progress. This was mainly in terms of encouraging parents, particularly mothers, into the workforce. The social partnership agreements, while acknowledging the needs for development of ECEC services for children have had a tendency to perpetuate the distinction between childcare and early education in ECEC. Thus they predominantly consider childcare under the wider areas of gender equality, family friendly policies and social inclusion; and early education under the wider areas of educational disadvantage, lifelong learning and social inclusion (Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Hayes, 2002; Ireland, 1998a, 2006b), furthering the conceptual separation of early childhood education and childcare. An example of the perpetuation of the conceptual split within ECEC policy as delivered through the social partnership agreements is where *Towards 2016* makes provisions for the 'care' of the children of working parents aspect of early childhood services:

A review of the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 will be undertaken prior to its conclusion in consultation with the social partners. This will assess the progress made to date to address childcare needs with a view to developing new policy responses and successor programme(s) appropriate to emerging needs in childcare (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

Then separately sets out the targeting of services towards disadvantaged children, for example:

Relevant departments and agencies will work together to complement and add value to childcare programmes in disadvantaged communities with a view to ensuring that the overall care and education needs of the children concerned are met in an integrated manner. This will also involve the provision of education related professional support and training to existing providers, together with a curriculum and quality framework for early childhood education aspects (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

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<sup>33</sup> Issues related to children have been included in policy issues in the partnership agreements but this has not given children a direct voice of their own nor a forum for hearing their own views within the social partnership arena (Hayes, 2002)



The social partners were an integral component in the influencing of Irish economic and social policy throughout the time frame with which this thesis is mostly concerned, 1998-2008. So, it is of importance to recognise these agreement strategies and their subsequent influence in terms of locating policy directions within ECEC; particularly *Partnership 2000* and *Towards 2016* since they bookend the period of this research.

#### **4.8.6 *The Agenda for Children's Services***

*Towards 2016* goes on to list three innovative measures which are poised to “respond to emerging needs and provide an opportunity for learning about new, more integrated ways of designing and delivering services” (Ireland, 2006b, p. 47). One of these is listed as “Integrated Services and Interventions for Children at Local Level” (ibid.) and it aims to target children who are suffering multiple disadvantage, and also vulnerable families. Realisation of this innovative measure is achieved, in part, through the publication of *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook* by the OMCYA in 2007:

The inclusion of the needs of children as part of the lifecycle approach adopted in the current national agreement, *Towards 2016*, is an indication of the heightened policy profile now accorded to children by both Government and the social partners. The challenge now is to ensure that this significant policy advance at national level is translated into good outcomes that can be seen in the day-to-day lives of children themselves. The *Agenda for Children's Services* is a tool to assist in that task (Ireland, 2007a, p. 8).

The aim of this document is to be used as a tool to build “on existing policies” (Ireland, 2007a, p. v) and to place them “in a framework to assist policy-makers, service managers and front-line staff in meeting the needs of children and their families” (ibid.). The main objective of the *Agenda* document then is to “to set out the strategic direction and key goals of public policy in relation to children's health and social services in Ireland” (Ireland, 2007a, p. 2). When launching the Report, the Minister For Children, said that “the core principle of the policy was the provision of health and social services,

based on the child being supported within the family and within the local community” (Smith, 2007).

The *Agenda* document is not expressly committed to achieving specific goals related to the early childhood education and care needs of children, which often come under the term “childcare”. The actual concern of the *Agenda* document is more related to achieving goals under the child protection/child welfare understanding of “child care” as opposed to “childcare” for young children. Thus this policy handbook is related to the provisions of the *Child Care Act 1991* and more so the *Children Act 2001*, and is concerned with the following seven “National Service Outcomes for Children in Ireland” (Ireland, 2007a, p. 12), that children should be:

- Healthy, both physically and mentally
- Supported in active learning
- Safe from accidental and intentional harm
- Economically secure
- Secure in the immediate and wider physical environment
- Part of positive networks of family, friends, neighbours and the community and
- Included and participating in society (Ireland, 2007a, p. 12).

#### ***4.8.7 The State of the Nation’s Children and subsequent policy developments***

Since a commitment to improve data about children had been promised in both the *National Children’s Strategy and Towards 2016*, the OMCYA began to publish biennial State of the Nations Children reports, starting with the *State of the Nation’s Children: Ireland 2006* which was published in February 2007. The reports fulfil a “commitment in the National Children’s Strategy to the publication of a regularly updated statement of key indicators of children’s well-being” (OMCYA, 2007d, p. v). The Reports thus present information on children looking at four overarching areas: Socio-demographics of children in Ireland, Children’s relationships with their parents and peers, Outcomes of children’s lives, Formal and informal supports for children (OMCYA, 2007d, p. 3).

The aim of such reporting is to establish a benchmark against which future policy can be measured and also to attempt to provide a general snapshot of how children are at a moment in time. With regard to early childhood education and care provision, the *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2006* is interesting as it reflects the fragmentation of Irish ECEC policy at the time. This is manifested through a “total absence of data” (OMCYA, 2007d, p. 4) on indicators for ECEC, which led to the OMCYA’s inability to provide details on them for the Report.

The *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2008* measured enrolment in “early childhood care and education” (OMCYA, 2008c, p. 74) as “the percentage of children under 13 in various early childhood care and education arrangements” (OMCYA, 2008c, p. 74). In 2010 this changed slightly to measuring “the percentage of children under 13 years of age who avail of non-parental childcare” (OMCYA, 2010b, p. 64). The 2010 Report also included some measurement for quality in ECEC<sup>34</sup>. Hayes (2010) points out that the definition of ECEC which the Reports use reflects the “complex and entangled” (p. 69) coordination and organization of ECEC policy in Ireland, and also reveals what is “a continued confusion about what exactly is being considered under the headings of early childhood care and education and childcare” (Hayes, 2010, p. 69). Nevertheless, for the most part the publication of such State of the Nations Children reports are valuable tools to have in order to both monitor implementation of policies, and the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and to reflect “a more global effort to measure and monitor child well-being” (Langford, 2007, p. 255).

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<sup>34</sup> The indicators for measuring quality in ECEC were “The percentage of households with children under 13 years of age who report they have *access to high-quality, affordable childcare in the community*” (OMCYA, 2010b, p. 66) and “The percentage of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services under contract to deliver the Free Pre-School Year Scheme that meet basic and higher capitation criteria” (ibid., p. 68).

Between 2005 and 2008, a number of other policy developments occurred that were relevant within the ECEC policy sphere. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) strategy which had a specific strand relating to early childhood education provision was introduced in 2005, and the Early Years Education Policy Unit, co-located between the Department of Education and Skills and the OMCYA was established in 2006. The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010, succeeded the EOCP as the funding initiative originating from the *National Childcare Strategy* recommendations. Also in 2006, the revised *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* were published. In 2007, the Department of Education and Skills established a National Childcare Training Strategy. Also in that year planning got underway for a Constitutional Referendum on the Rights of the Child in Ireland.

#### ***4.8.8 Constitutional Referendum on the Rights of the Child in Ireland***

An All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution had been established in 1996 charged with identifying where amendments were necessary within the Constitution (Ireland, 1937). They reported for the first time in 1996 and recommended that the Constitution be amended to expressly include the unenumerated rights of the child (Constitution Review Group, 1996). Despite this report and a number of other calls for the express inclusion of children's rights in to the Constitution (CRA, 2005, 2006; CRC, 1998, 2006; Hayes, 2002; McGuinness, 1993), no developments were made until 2006. The Taoiseach stated in a public speech in late 2006 that a referendum was both imminent and necessary, in order to "explicitly set out the rights of the child in our Constitution" and "to put the rights of children in a central place in our Constitution" (Ahern, 2006b). Consequently the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children was established in November 2007. The final report of this Joint Committee was published on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, and recommended specifically-worded changes to

the Constitution in respect of children's rights. Despite ongoing publicity for this matter, there remains no commitment, from either the previous or current governments, in relation to naming a date for when to have a constitutional referendum on children's rights.

#### **4.9 Research Needs within Irish ECEC Policy**

Despite the progression of the Irish ECEC policy sector in terms of financial investment, a dichotomous distinction has persisted between early education and childcare at both a structural and conceptual level (Hayes, 2007a). Hayes and Bradley (2006) noted that the cross-departmental conceptualisation and delivery of ECEC policy in Ireland has "hindered the development of an integrated policy for the support of high quality early childhood services for all young children" (p. 171). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued their *General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood*, in 2005, which "interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development (Article 6.2)" (Moss, 2008, p. 224). Research has identified that "high quality childcare that is affordable, accessible and stable has a beneficial social and psychological impact on young children and a direct positive economic impact on society" (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 174). Nevertheless, in Ireland the development of ECEC policy for young children remains embryonic and "predominantly economic" (Hayes, 2008a, p. 1) and has emerged as contrary to other "rights-based" policy trends pursued elsewhere in Europe, which position ECEC as a public good and responsibility" (ibid. emphasis added). Hayes and Bradley (2009) noted that "the threat that the lack of childcare posed to economic growth from the latter part of the 1990s fuelled a shift from policy rhetoric to action" (p. 5). However, while increased funding, originating with the partially EU-funded EOCP, buoyed the sector in

terms of provision “the needs and rights of children did not feature as a policy objective of the Programme which failed to address issues of quality and equality of access” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 5).

The *National Children’s Strategy* marked “the beginning of a shift towards using rights-based language in policy development ... by strongly reflecting the UNCRC” (Hayes, 2002, p. 62); subsequently rights related language use has become more widespread in policy discourse. Nevertheless, “economic factors continue to dominate in policy decisions” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 6) thus exposing the rights related language of Irish ECEC policy discourses to be perceived as ambitious and as paying lip service only. This then leads to a tendency towards the rhetorical construction of policy texts. Within these policy texts, the persistence of the use of the term “childcare” has also proved problematic. Childcare, as it is used in Irish ECEC policy terms, has been described by Hayes and Bradley (2009) as “a particularly ‘empty’ concept focusing primarily on the provision of ‘spaces’ for children whilst their parents work” (p. 4) which “fails to encapsulate the potential of resource-rich early childhood settings in supporting the learning and development of children in their early years” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 4).

The thesis aim is to understand the conceptual construction of ECEC policy, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy. Consequently, a large element of this research study is a look at the extent to which the policy documents themselves consider children and are rights-based from a linguistic perspective. This is explored by finding “ways into texts” (Pennycook, 2008) through the critical discourse analysis methodology, with considerable emphasis on language

choices, in order to locate the construction of knowledge about Irish ECEC policy. This research thus considers the problematic of the language used in ECEC policy by investigating the knowledge that is constructed about key concepts. The understandings of key concepts serve to shape the meaning inherent in discourses of Irish ECEC policy; these concepts are: the child; needs; rights; early education; childcare; universal provision and targeted provision in the Irish policy texts, alongside the general approach to 'rights' in terms of language and ideology.

The Irish government have previously been criticised for their “unacceptable performance” (CRA, 2009, p. 11) within ECEC policy, earning an E grade<sup>35</sup> for ECEC provision in the Children’s Rights Alliance *Report Card 2009*. This was chiefly in relation to a lack of action on the recommendations of previous policy documents, lack of actual implementation of policies in this area, and the dearth of investment in real rights-based strategic planning (CRA, 2009). An integrated rights-based early childhood education and care policy would be recognised “as a service of potential value to all children rather than simply an intervention strategy for the disadvantaged” (Hayes, 2002, p. 71). Such an understanding of ECEC would also include the concept of pedagogy, “education in its broadest sense” (Moss, 2008, p. 228), where “care” is recognised as an integral part of education.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed and reviewed the sociocultural and discourse practice levels of the dimensions of discourse as they relate to this policy study. At the sociocultural

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<sup>35</sup> In the subsequent years since the 2009 Report Card, the Children’s Rights Alliance grading for ECEC has risen to a B- in 2010 and a B in 2011; this is directly due to the introduction of the universal Free Pre-School Year in April 2009. The Free Pre-School Year as a policy intervention has yet to be properly evaluated at official level.

practice level this chapter has explored some of the ideological origins of Irish social policy. Social policy in Ireland has been largely shaped by the traditional and conservative approach to policy development which reflects the dominance of the church and state partnership, particularly in the areas of health, education and moral conduct, throughout the twentieth century. The church's moral monopoly (Inglis, 1998) and regulation of the structure of the family was so influential that it remains, through the legacy of the principle of subsidiarity, as well as having been embedded within the Constitution. Irish social policy slowly modernised throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, related to a need for economic expansion, particularly realised when Ireland joined the EEC. While the advent of the social partnership model of development was also an important and distinctive characteristic of modern Irish social and economic policy, the persistent and continuing deep polarity between the rich and poor in Irish society has also been identified.

This chapter went on to explore children's treatment within Irish social life in general and identified their constitutional subordination to the family and their lack of explicit individual rights. However, the more recent increasing visibility of children within the social sphere was also acknowledged, particularly in terms of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC and the subsequent development of a *National Children's Strategy*.

At the discourse practice level this chapter has looked at the dominant discourses of childhood and child policy, specifically ECEC policy, as they exist in Ireland. This was further highlighted through a review of policy developments within the ECEC area. This review looked at ECEC policy developments generally from the 1990s then more specifically concentrating on developments between the years of 1998 and 2008. Through the review, a case was made for the gaps in policy which led to the research



need with which this thesis is focused on addressing. That is, to analyse policy texts using critical discourse analysis in order to explore the construction of knowledge about ECEC, focusing on how children's rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC, and how it has shaped the ideological development of Irish policy therein.

## **5. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: THE ANALYSIS PROCESS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapters have marked out the theoretical background of this study, locating the research in terms of the contextual policy area and in terms of the theoretical influences underpinning the study and the analysis. The previous chapters have explored the first two levels of Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model, the sociocultural practice level and the discourse level. This chapter moves on from discussion of theory to a more detailed look at the methodology in action, and begins to examine the third and final level of Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model (1995), the text level. Nevertheless, aspects of this chapter will be located at the discourse practice level, insofar as the development and application of the framework used to interpret the dominant knowledge constructions within discourses as realised in Irish ECEC policy texts. At the text level of the dimensions of discourse model, this chapter describes the analytical approach in more detail, discusses the approach to and application of the micro analysis and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

A consensual understanding exists among discourse analysts that "all discourse is organised to make itself persuasive" (Gill, 1996, p. 143). The methodology used in this thesis is firmly rooted in text oriented discourse analysis, specifically critical discourse analysis (CDA). The CDA framework used here, involved comprehensive textual analysis of Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy documents. This analysis is generally influenced by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework for studying discourse, which combines the analysis of written language texts; analysis

of discourse practice (including processes of text production, distribution and consumption); and analysis of discursive events as instances of socio-cultural/socio-political practice (Fairclough, 1995).

This chapter begins by explicating the framework used to reinforce the trustworthiness of the study. This chapter then reaffirms important aspects of the CDA approach, drawing on aspects of the theoretical perspectives reviewed in the previous chapters, and the principles of CDA theory which it adheres to. This is followed by a discussion of the research sample involved in the study, the rationale for its use and the process of data collection. The CDA framework for analysis is then elucidated. Firstly through discussion of the researcher's development and application of an appropriate methodological framework and analytical model; secondly, through the explication of the framework devised to code the data; and thirdly through description of the minutiae of the analysis process. Finally the chapter concludes with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of the methodological approach.

## **5.2 Establishing quality through trustworthiness in a CDA research study**

It is surely a simple recognition of the salience and validity of everyday epistemic devices that gives legitimacy to qualitative research, and to any local conclusions which might be drawn from it. Qualitative research is valid only in the sense that one's own judgments and interpretation are valid (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

Rolfe (2006) has argued that “the quality of a research study is not only *revealed* in the writing-up of that research, but also that it somehow *resides* in the research report, and is therefore ... subject to the wise judgment and keen insight of the reader” (p. 309, emphasis in original). If all research perspectives, both quantitative and qualitative, were to take a step away from persistently competing to prove the scientific worth of its actions then there would be a much clearer space in which to recognise the inherently

subjective nature of all research. Since there must be a catalyst or natural starting point which causes each piece of research to happen, then there is also an inherent subjectivity driving the decision to undertake the research in the first place. Subjectivity in research is habitually regarded as an unscientific and biased perspective hence the competition, particularly within the qualitative paradigm, to achieve objectivity through demonstrating the scientific application of the research methods and adherence to the accepted and sacrosanct theory. The notion of fielding accusations of subjectivity can be endemic within qualitative research, and particularly when using critical discourse analysis. It seems that depending on the paradigmatic provenance of the audience, the question of subjectivity versus objectivity will always have the potential to raise its ugly head.

A starting point in doing qualitative inquiry is in accepting the personal and idiosyncratic nature of interpretation. The problem is with the assumption that some correct interpretation is discernible which will underpin any 'theory' ultimately developed. (Thomas, 2002, p. 432).

Sandelowski (1993) proffers the notion of trustworthiness to counter criticisms and strengthen the quality of qualitative research. Trustworthiness is “a matter of persuasion whereby the scientist is viewed as having made those practices visible and therefore auditable” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 2). Nevertheless, regardless of whatever great lengths the researcher goes to in order to confirm the credibility of their research methods, the research study will only be considered trustworthy if the reader, or readers, judge it to be so (Rolfe, 2006).

In terms of ensuring quality in qualitative research which uses discourse analytical methods, Nixon and Power (2007, p. 76) have proposed a framework for establishing

rigour in discourse analysis studies which abides by adherence to the following six steps:

- 1) Clear research question: Is it appropriate for DA?
- 2) Clear definition of discourse and species of DA
- 3) Effective use of theoretical framework
- 4) Transparency in analysis methods and application of theory to the analysis
- 5) Clarity in selection of texts
- 6) Concepts/criteria/strategies to guide analysis.

Following Nixon and Power's (2007) framework entails being certain that discourse analysis is the correct methodology to use; clearly understanding and explaining the type of discourse analysis being used; understanding and using the theoretical framework effectively; openly explicating the methods for analysis and application of theory in the analysis; being clear about the choice of and rationale for texts chosen for the research sample; and explicating clearly the concepts, criteria and strategies that are used to guide the analysis. Other suggestions for ensuring the trustworthiness of research which uses discourse analysis approaches come from Jacobs (2006), who recommends being "explicit about the criteria for selecting discursive evidence and advancing a mode of analysis" (p. 47); he also counsels that researchers should write up their research in an accessible way that recognises both the strength and the limitations of the method.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness and quality of this critical discourse analysis study, a framework for trustworthiness has been applied, which has been informed by much CDA literature (Cheek, 2004; Fairclough, 2001; Meyer, 2001; Nixon & Power, 2007; Prins & Toso, 2008; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, 2005). This framework involves ensuring that all of the following criteria were adhered to throughout the overall research process, they are:

- 1) the explication and rationalisation of the
  - a. methodological choices

- b. theoretical framework
  - c. methods involved in the actual linguistic textual analysis
- 2) the provision of text based examples to demonstrate the analysis process and to support any claims
  - 3) transparency of the analysis methods and in the application of theory to the analysis
  - 4) reflexive evaluation of the assumptions and position of the researcher.

The fact that the corpus for this research is formed by published policy texts also serves to enhance the trustworthiness of this study; their existence serves to minimise the scope for any researcher intervention, as using pre-existing published documents is seen to be an unobtrusive mode of data collection (Marston, 2004).

### **5.3 The Critical Discourse Analysis Approach**

The main principles of the application of a critical discourse analysis involve a focus on studying the use of language alongside close consideration of how social relations, identity and power are constructed through written and spoken texts (Fairclough, 1995). This CDA research is “committed to progressive social change” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 230); insofar as it aims to understand how ECEC policy discourse exists as it does in Ireland through the means of analysing the use of language and construction of knowledge within ECEC policy texts. This research has been interested in attempting to understand and thus find the means to move beyond the policy status quo within Irish ECEC policy. The thesis aim is to discover, and attempt to understand, the dominant policy discourses and construction of knowledge about central concepts which shape the ECEC policy area in Ireland, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy. Through the wider analysis, discussion and exploration of the knowledge constructions and dominant discourses in the policy area, this research

will seek to find a space to consider what might enhance a rights-based approach to ECEC policy making. Thus employing the use of CDA methods in qualitative research from this perspective, has necessitated answering the ‘how’ questions in relation to understanding how specific realities have come into being; how they are reproduced through the policy literature and how language has figured “as an element in social processes” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229).

The qualitative and critical discourse analysis methods used to gather evidence in this study have consisted of a broad documentary analysis of the informing and background documents which attended to the sociocultural practice and discourse practice levels of Fairclough’s dimensions of discourse model (1995), and the application of the CDA framework to the selected Irish early childhood education and care policy documents and their related genre chains<sup>36</sup> which attended to the discourse practice and text levels of the model.

The CDA methodology used in this study has paid considerable attention to the sociocultural and socio-political climate in which these Irish ECEC policy documents were created, alongside a meticulous textual analysis of the language choices and linguistic properties of each individual text, in order to discern what work the language is doing in terms of ideology perpetuation and knowledge construction. This analysis has also aimed to track any distinctive shifts in policy actions or policy thinking perpetrated through the language of policy documents throughout the ten year research sample, which encompasses the period from 1998 to 2008.

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<sup>36</sup> Genre chains in this instance refer to interrelated documents: published consultation documentation, Dáil debates, press releases and speeches

An important factor that the research has focused on is to ascertain what knowledge has been constructed about the policy area, within the discourses of ECEC policy, and thus to consider how these knowledge constructions have subsequently become recognised as the accepted truths about ECEC in wider discourse. The tools inherent in the wider CDA approach, where discourses are analysed in relation to their constructions as texts within the wider sociocultural realm, and at the levels of discursive practice, are of the utmost importance. This is emphasised by O'Farrell (2005) where she explains that in Foucault's discourse theory "knowledge is always shaped by political, social and historical factors – by 'power' – in human societies" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 54) thus it is not enough merely to identify the knowledge constructions themselves as "it is absolutely essential to examine the relationship between knowledge and the factors that produce and constrain it" (ibid.). Consequently, the goal of this research has been to analyse, discuss and evaluate critically the knowledge that is constructed about ECEC within the policy texts, noting any changes or developments within the language of the ECEC policy landscape, in order to reveal the dominant ideological climate within Irish ECEC policy. The research aim being to understand the conceptual construction of ECEC policy, focusing in on how children's rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy.

### ***5.3.1 Reiterating the textual element of a critical discourse analysis***

The textual element of the CDA, the textual analysis, has involved the use of linguistic analysis, semiotic analysis<sup>37</sup> and interdiscursive analysis<sup>38</sup>. Fairclough (2009) has

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<sup>37</sup> In the case of this research study, semiotic analysis refers to analysis of the design and presentation of policy texts and related genre chains within the context of policy text production.

<sup>38</sup> Interdiscursive analysis means "analysis of which genres, discourses and styles are drawn upon, and how they are articulated together" (Fairclough, 2009, p. 170)



identified the three important semiotic aspects of social life which are addressed within a textual analysis, they are *genres*, “semiotic ways of acting and interacting” (ibid., p. 170); *discourses*, “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world” (Fairclough, 2009, p. 170) and *styles*, “identities or ‘ways of being’, in their semiotic aspect” (ibid.). When conducting the language analysis aspect of the CDA, a thorough textual analysis is required to identify linguistic properties that possess an ideological basis. Thus this CDA has aimed to look at the following linguistic properties within the texts:

- The way a dialogue is structured, the narrative
- The way sentences are linked together, known as clause combination
- The grammar and semantics of clauses including: transitivity, action verbs, voice and modality.
- Words, including: choice of vocabulary, meaning, collocation of, and metaphorical uses of words (Luke, 1997).

This linguistic textual analysis has been, and is always within CDA, conducted alongside a wider and comprehensive “analysis of the discourse practices that produce and interpret the text and an analysis of the social practices that surround text production” (Marston, 2004, p. 47). The point then of the textual analysis is not merely to be concerned with revealing what is ‘in’ a text, because, “what is absent from a text is often just as significant from the perspective of sociocultural analysis” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 5). As texts are the points of entry for investigation of any social problem, the interpretation of texts can be very much a subjective activity; it is also important to note nonetheless that they are also often constituted in ways that espouse the favoured principles of the author or authors, reflecting Knapp and Michaels (1982, 1987) contention that the meaning of a text is always what its author intends it to be.

The *policy texts* which are of relevance to this study encompassed the ECEC policy documents themselves and published consultation reports, and their related genre chains: Dáil debates, speeches, press releases, and also other information about them

accessed electronically on the DCYA website and other websites of interest within the sector and wider policy area. The textual analysis, as it has been employed in this thesis, has served to assess the intricate language choices and linguistic properties of the policy texts paying heed to a number of specific areas. This is in order to uncover the knowledge constructed about ECEC policy and the dominant discourses and truths inherent in that text; which are subsequently permeated back into society through wider discourse about the policy area. This is in keeping with the view of Fairclough, where he cites texts as being “sensitive barometers of social processes” (1995, p. 209), within which social control and domination are exercised. He sees the textual analysis aspect of a CDA as an “important political resource” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 209) which can chronicle social change as it is filtered through official texts. This is also in keeping with Foucault’s discourse theory, where he maintained that “it is only in the present that one can make changes. In order to be free, one needs to continually expose what remains alive of the past in the present and relegate it to the past” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 72). In the realm of a critical discourse analysis, this involves treating language as more than what it seems to be, believing in the need to delve further in order “to reveal the precise mechanisms and modalities of the social and ideological work of language” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 209). Hence a main objective of employing the textual analysis is to assume that there is more to the language of texts than meets the eye. This view has thus positioned critical discourse analysis as a significant tool to investigate the ethos behind ECEC policymaking in Ireland and to assist in considering the development of a rights-based framework for the future.

#### **5.4 The Research Sample**

The research sample comprises the following Irish ECEC policy documents and their related policy texts the genre chains, which in this instance refer to related documents

including published consultation documentation, Dáil debates, press releases, speeches and associated electronic media on the World Wide Web:

1. *Strengthening Families for Life, Commission on the Family (1998)*
2. *Ready to Learn - White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)*
3. *National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999)*
4. *National Children's Strategy (2000)*
5. *Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child; UNCRC Reporting Mechanisms/Structures*
6. *UNCRC Reporting Mechanisms/Structures*
  - *General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6) (2003)*
  - *General guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports to be submitted by states parties under Article 44, paragraph 1(b), of the Convention (2005)*
7. *Irish Social Partnership Agreements Strategy Documents (sections dealing with ECEC/Childcare/Early Education)*
  - *Partnership 2000 (1998);*
  - *Towards 2016 (2006)*
8. *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook (2007)*
9. *Free Pre-School Year: Dáil debates and electronic information*

All the documents of relevance to this policy area have been located and reviewed in the wider policy context<sup>39</sup>. A large number of documents were published within the time frame of 1998-2008, comprising a mixture of strategy documents, policy proposals, reports and framework documents. The choice of these particular documents for the research sample comes after lengthy consideration of the broad Irish ECEC policy climate. This sample has been selected to facilitate the inclusion of the most influential published policy documents that also represent the most significant discourses that are pertinent for this research. These documents also adequately represent the cross departmental influence on ECEC policy. The sample also includes a small amount of texts related to the Free Pre-School Year which was introduced in 2009.

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<sup>39</sup> See sections 4.7 and 4.8

A considerable amount of Irish social policy which affects children's lives has been formulated as a part of overall family policy, thus it is virtually impossible to consider children in the Irish context as entirely independent from the family (Kilkelly, 2008). Therefore it was important to analyse the significant strategy report *Strengthening Families for Life*, the Report of the Commission on the Family, published under the auspices of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs<sup>40</sup>. Policy actions arising from this report helped to mould subsequent family policy in Ireland; the report also made comprehensive recommendations with regard to the prioritising of investment in the care of young children (Hayes, 2010). It is a relatively long and comprehensive report dealing with a large number of areas and issues relating to the family; it is divided into ten themed parts each containing a number of chapters. The appropriate parts which focus on the issues of education, care and rights in early childhoods were reviewed for this CDA study, they are:

Part 3: Supporting families in carrying out their functions (the caring and nurturing of children)  
Part 5: Protecting and enhancing the position of children and vulnerable family members  
(Ireland, 1998b, p. 9)

*Ready to Learn*, the government White Paper on Early Childhood Education, published by the Department of Education and Science in 1999, was chosen for the sample as it is the first and only policy document, to date, which deals with early childhood education as a distinct and separate policy entity while acknowledging that education and care in the early years are "closely intertwined" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 3). *Ready to Learn* is of importance for this research study because it had set out a specific policy agenda in the area of ECE; thus it is the key early childhood education policy document.

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<sup>40</sup> The Department was renamed as the Department of Social Protection in March 2010.

The recommendations of the *National Childcare Strategy*, published under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform in 1999, have predominantly guided development and implementation in the ECEC arena, chiefly through the investment schemes that have subsidised both childcare facilities, and parents, separately. Thus the *National Childcare Strategy* was an important document to analyse in order to decipher the language and ideology behind tangible policy goals that have actually been implemented, and also to locate the prioritising of policy that was mainly concerned with the creation of care spaces rather than developing early childhood education provision.

The *National Children's Strategy*, aimed to develop all facets of policy affecting children in order to “enhance the status and further improve the quality of life of Ireland's children” (Ireland, 2000, p. 6). It is of relevance because the time period for the Children's Strategy almost overlaps with the time period of this study, since it encompassed the years 2000 until 2010. The Children's Strategy was published by the Department of Health and Children. It set out proposals to develop early education and child development programmes based on provisions already set out in the White Paper, and provisions for childcare based on the recommendations of the *National Childcare Strategy*. It is of particular relevance due to its incorporation of the principles of the UNCRC and strong use of rights related language.

In consideration of the use of the language of rights, it is also necessary to analyse documents relating to the Convention, in order to locate general policy discourses within a children's rights context. *Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> report to the UN committee on the rights of the child* (2005), published under the auspices of the OMCYA, remains the most recent report submitted to the CRC. This Report is relevant as it references the

publication and progress of implementation of all the pre-2005 policy documents included in the research sample. Analysis of *Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> report to the UNCRC* has highlighted a tendency towards rhetoric rather than demonstration of actual solid policy implementation within the report structure (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010). Analysis of the CRC guidelines for reporting structures and mechanisms, *General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)* and *General guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports to be submitted by states parties under Article 44, paragraph 1(b), of the Convention* proved necessary also, to discover if these structures and mechanisms are positioned in such a way as to allow for rhetoric and vagueness in states periodic progress reports.

Since the *Partnership 2000* document, Irish social partnership agreements have included acknowledgment of the need for childcare and early education, particularly childcare<sup>41</sup>, to be considered as part of the discussions for economic progress. The partnership agreements were published by the Department of the Taoiseach. Their chief goal initially, in respect of ECEC, was encouraging parents, particularly mothers, back into the workforce through recommendations relating to the development and expansion of the childcare infrastructure. These social partnership documents have tended to perpetuate the distinction between childcare and early education in ECEC. Nevertheless, the social partners had been an integral component in the influencing of Irish economic and social policy. So, it is of importance to analyse these agreement strategies, *Partnership 2000*, and *Towards 2016*, in terms of locating policy directions within ECEC. The partnership agreements are significant due to their tendency to lean more

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<sup>41</sup> The recognition of children within the partnership process was a result of a lack of childcare infrastructure, which was seen as a barrier to equality of access to the labour market, thus the initial priority was to address “the childcare needs of working parents” (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 168).

towards prioritising the development of ‘childcare’ in early childhood services, rather than the development of the ECE element, outside of targeted approaches.

The *Agenda for Children’s Services*, published under the auspices of the OMCYA, was born out of an ‘innovative measure’ proposed in the *Towards 2016* social partnership agreement. The Agenda is a policy handbook, with the purpose of assisting in the new and “integrated ways of designing and delivering services” (Ireland, 2006b, p. 47) and to help practitioners and service providers provide more effective services on the ground. The *Agenda* document was included in the sample for analysis as it was an indicator of future approaches to the provision of children’s services. Despite this, it does locate itself as more concerned with the concept ‘*child care*’ which refers to child protection and dealing with vulnerable children and families, as opposed to the concept ‘*childcare*’ as it is understood within ECEC policy. However since it references the *Child Care Act 1991* which provided for the pre-school regulations, it does have some relevance for this study. There is some inevitable crossover between ECEC and child health and social services<sup>42</sup>, particularly in the context of previous conceptualisations of childcare, specifically the notion of early education being targeted towards and prioritised for children ‘at risk’.

These policy documents have all been analysed alongside relevant Dáil debates, press releases, speeches, and background consultation documents. As the internet is a leading source of information and media nowadays, it was of importance for this thesis to also analyse the electronic representation of discourses within the ECEC policy arena. Thus analysis of these policy texts as represented on the World Wide Web was also a key

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<sup>42</sup> The OMCYA locate the *Agenda for Children’s Services* under the umbrella of Child Welfare and Protection and see the policy as having a core principle of “the provision of health and social services, based on the child being supported within the family and within the local community” (OMCYA, 2010a).

element of this critical discourse analysis. Following the announcement by the Minister for Children, in an emergency budget in April 2009, that the Early Childcare Supplement was to cease and be replaced with the provision of a universal Free Pre-School Year to young children, the sample also includes some texts concerning the Free Pre-School Year; comprised of Dáil debates, speeches and electronic material accessed on the DCYA website.

### **5.5 Data Collection**

This research study is concerned with the investigation of the rhetorical construction of Irish ECEC policy discourses as they are realised through the knowledge constructed within them and permeated through policy texts. The thesis aim is to understand the conceptual construction of ECEC policy, focusing in on how children's rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy. Thus from a data collection perspective the first step was to read widely around the policy area in order to identify the texts of the most relevance for the research sample. Consequently, the initial bout of data collection was straightforward as all of the published policy texts were widely available in hard copy. For coding and ease of use purposes, it was necessary to also have electronic format<sup>43</sup> and printed copies of the documents in order to facilitate manual coding by hand and the management and coding of the data using NVivo qualitative software.

Most of the documents included in the sample, particularly the more recent ones, were easily accessed online through the DCYA website, but electronic versions of two of the older documents, the *White Paper* and *Strengthening Families for Life* proved slightly more difficult to obtain. In the case of the *White Paper*, an electronic version of the

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<sup>43</sup> Such as a Microsoft Word document, RTF document or a Portable Document Format (PDF).



document was not found through any of the visible links or search facilities on the DCYA website or through the search facilities on the Department of Education website. Instead it was eventually accessed via a link from a Google search result, which used the search terms 'Ready to learn white paper on early childhood education', to the Department of Education website<sup>44</sup>. Accessing the *Strengthening Families for Life* document proved more difficult, it was published by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in 1998, however only the executive summary was available electronically<sup>45</sup>. A phone call to the Department yielded no results, as they insisted that there was no electronic record of the full report whatsoever. However, following some persistent autonomous internet searching, this eventually led to the discovery of the Health Services Executive (HSE) online repository Lenus<sup>46</sup>, via a Google search, within which a simple search finally located and allowed access to a PDF copy of the entire Report.

Sourcing some of the additional data related to the policy documents, what Fairclough (2001) refers to as the genre chains, also proved to be challenging in some cases. While the DCYA website generally has much of the necessary material available and accessible, there are issues with sourcing press releases and speeches for all of the relevant documents, as the DCYA online archive for speeches and press releases only goes back as far as 2005. This necessitated searching the archives of speeches/press releases on the individual department websites under whose auspices each document was published. The Department of Social Protection website was the only site without a searchable archive that goes back far enough to include the policy document in the sample which emerged from it; the Report of the Commission on the Family. However

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/contents.htm>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Policy/PolicyPublications/Pages/comfam.aspx>

<sup>46</sup> <http://hse.openrepository.com/hse/>

searches on the other department websites did not yield a great deal of results either, in terms of press releases and speeches relevant to the policy documents which were published under their auspices. The online archive<sup>47</sup> of the Irish Times newspaper, which was traditionally Ireland's newspaper of record, was also subsequently used to source relevant newspaper articles corresponding to each of the policy documents. Some of the other speeches and press releases were accessed through the relevant government department websites but accessed via Google search results rather than through that specific department website database; this highlights a notable issue with the organisation of retrievable information on official government department websites.

### ***5.5.1 Accessing Dáil Debates***

Records of Dáil debates corresponding to each of the policy documents specifically, and also generally to the policy area, are another important genre chain element of the research sample. Irish parliamentary business follows the Westminster system for the “purposes of overseeing and questioning government work” (MacCartaigh, 2005, p. 98), this involves “debate during the various stages of the legislative process; various forms of parliamentary questions; and deliberation over motions and resolutions” (ibid.). These Dáil debates are archived on the Oireachtas website <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/><sup>48</sup> which has archived all the Dáil debates since 21 January 1919 until 10 July 2009. On the historical debates website, there is a chronological list of all the debates by date which can be browsed. Following a number of fruitless trials using the search facility this browsing method was utilised; it was quite a time consuming

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/archive/>

<sup>48</sup> There is now a newer website hosting archived Oireachtas debates; it is updated daily and also houses the historical debates, at: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/>. For the purposes of amassing the corpus for this sample, the older website was mostly used because the data collection was undertaken before the newer website came online. The search facility on the newer website is less efficient than the historical website, it allows similar filtering of results, but it does not inform the user as to how many results it has retrieved and only displays 10 results at a time as opposed to 25 at a time on the older site.

process. Browsing by date entailed clicking on each date listed per month for the 1998-2008 time period; this seems rather excessive but given the manner in which the information is archived, it seemed like the most logical way to attempt to ensure that all relevant debates were included in the corpus. Within a day's debate listings, the page is organised into two halves, the top half of the page includes the oral debates, which consist of any legislation or bills which require debate followed by "priority questions", "other questions" and then any other resumed or adjourned debates which are ongoing. The lower half of the page is a record of the written answers; see Figure 5.1.

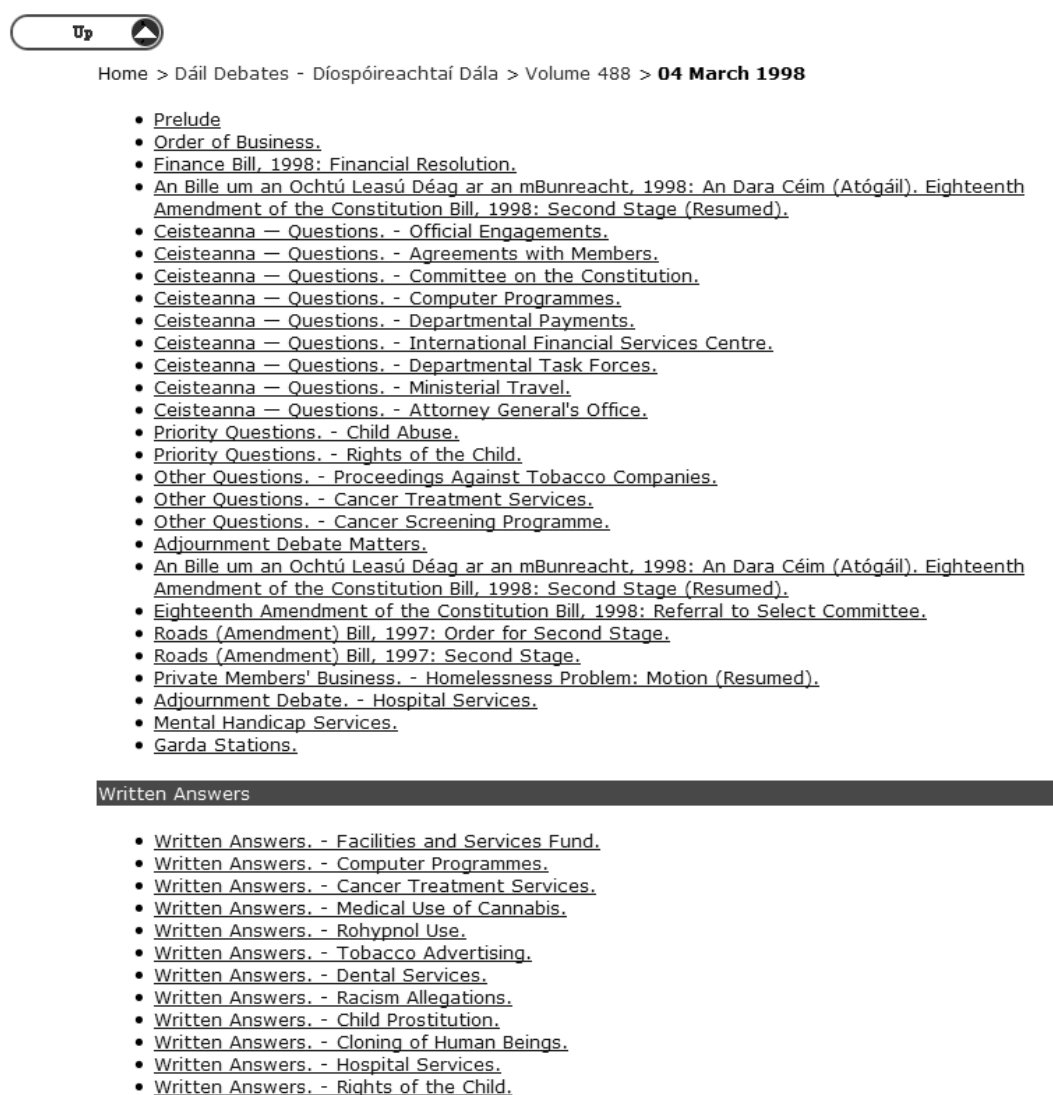


Figure 5.1: Screenshot of Dáil debates archive web page for March 4<sup>th</sup> 1998 from <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/en.toc.D.0488.19980304.html>

When the list of a day's debate proceedings was called up on to the screen, a simple page search conducted using the web browser's find function, in this case Mozilla Firefox, was used in order to look for links which included words from any of the following search terms: "children", "rights", "children's rights", "early childhood education", "childcare", "pre-school", as well as visually scanning the page for debates named with the policy document titles.

Following retrieval of relevant debates by title, through the browsing method, the search facility was then employed as an additional measure to ensure that all relevant debates, within the time period, were retrieved. The search facility on the website is supported by a searchable database, which can be somewhat hindered by the way the information is classified and organised within the database. Hence it is useful to utilise the combined use of both browsing and searching to ensure retrieval of all necessary results. A search of this database necessitates using a combination of search terms in one of two separate fields in order to yield the results. There is a field to search debates by words or phrases included in the title and another to search words or phrases included in the full text of debates; the search engine can also be limited by houses of the Oireachtas, that is the Dáil or Seanad, it can be limited by house business, separating debates and question time, then it can also be limited by date and by speaker. However the additional limits can negatively affect the retrieval of results so it appears to be safer to just limit the retrieval of results to Dáil only and then use either of the separate search boxes. The results must then be sorted through, literally by clicking on each one and verifying the pertinence of the actual text of the debate; there can generally be quite a large amount of results so this can be a long and arduous process. For example, in order to find debates around the White Paper it was necessary to use a combination of a number of different search terms; these were entered into the search field by surrounding them in single

quotation marks, which is the operator for phrase searching within that database. The phrase searches which were used to retrieve results pointing to relevant debates include: 'ready to learn', 'white paper on early childhood education', 'early childhood education', and 'early years education'. However, it was not enough just to search these terms in the title field, it was also necessary to search for relevant words or phrases included in the full text of debates also, so as not to eliminate a relevant debate that was named differently but actually had pertinent content. The subsequent verification of the content of these debates was necessary also to filter out irrelevant results.

**Figure 5.2: Screenshot of Dáil debates archive web page search facility: <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/plweb-cgi/fastweb?TemplateName=search.tmpl&view=oho-view>**

A significant issue which was encountered throughout this data collection process was to fully comprehend and evaluate the relevance of “written answers”<sup>49</sup> within the parliamentary debate system. Written answers are archived within the online historical Dáil debates repository. Rather than oral debates discussed openly on the floor, written

<sup>49</sup> Written Questions or ‘written answers’ are described on the Department of Justice and Law Reform website as “questions put to the Minister which are answered in a written reply on most days that the Dáil is sitting ... the questions and answers are published in the Official Report and within 24 hours on the Oireachtas website” (DJLR, 2011).

answers appear to be addressed in writing by the appropriate government cabinet TD in response to an opposition TD. They most often tend to be related to more local constituency based issues or general questions requesting clarification on or statements about the progress of policy implementation. Such questions tend to elicit rather generic and pedestrian “written answers”. The use of written answers, and in fact the entire parliamentary questions aspect of Dáil debates has been criticised, not least by Murphy (2006), who contends that:

despite placing supposedly more penetrating demands on Ministers, an examination of the content of parliamentary questions suggests that they are used more as a means of meeting constituency demands than they are a means of engaging in true scrutiny of government activity (p. 439).

Nevertheless since these ‘written answers’ are archived on the website, this necessitated paying them some attention in order to evaluate if the material was suitable for the corpus or not. After careful evaluation of the function of written answers, it was decided to exempt them from use in this research sample. This is due to their tendency to be a mechanism which provides government TD’s with the opportunity to extol the virtues of a particular policy, or publicize developments and investments to date, rather than serving as any kind of debating tool or challenge to the development of policy. They do not appear to be a function for debate about wider conceptual issues. For example, a typical ‘written answers’ question is often phrased as such:

Mrs. B. Moynihan-Cronin asked the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs the number of recommendations arising from the report by the Commission on the Family which have been implemented to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter (Moynihan-Cronin, 2001).

Hence for the purposes of this study, the corpus of Dáil debates includes oral debates and priority questions only<sup>50</sup>. The search results displayed tags which serve to identify if the retrieved result refers to a written answer or another type of parliamentary question,

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<sup>50</sup> Those which are found at the top half of the page if browsing the Oireachtas Dáil debates website by date, as evidenced in Figure 5.1

thus any search results that were identified as ‘written answers’ were subsequently discarded<sup>51</sup>.

## 5.6 Framework for Analysis

Qualitative research is often considered to be “contextual and subjective versus generalizable and objective” (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001, p. 524).

Furthermore, it is also Fairclough’s (2003) view, that:

there is no such thing as an ‘objective’ analysis of a text, if by that we mean an analysis which simply describes what is ‘there’ in the text without being biased by the ‘subjectivity’ of the analyst ... the questions we ask necessarily arise from particular motivations which go beyond what is ‘there’ (pp. 14-15).

With this in mind, this framework for analysis of Irish ECEC policy texts comes from the subjective critical perspective that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has influenced Irish ECEC policy documents in terms of their reference to the Convention and occasional use of rights-based language, but is not permeating the policy mindset in terms of policy texts being positioned from a rights-basis. The use of such language does not have an impact that would result in any subsequent implementation of services and supports being developed from a rights-basis. This subjective critical perspective views the dominant knowledge constructions in Irish ECEC policy to be hindering its development into a rights based frame. Thus the policy texts have been analysed with a critical lens in order to ascertain the level of accuracy of these hypotheses.

However, this study has not been closed to the possibilities of discovering something new or contrary to any subjective perspective, concurring with the view of Guba and Lincoln (1989) that “*both* discovery and verification are essential to the pursuit of conventional inquiry” (p. 166). Nonetheless, the point of using a specific discourse

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<sup>51</sup> The search engine on the newer website for the Oireachtas: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/> includes an option to filter out written answers or choose them only; however this filter is not entirely reliable and will retrieve written answers in some instances despite having the filter applied.

oriented methodology, such as CDA, is that it is not a conventional inquiry per se. That is, not a conventional inquiry in the traditional sense where the researcher is removed from the object of inquiry. In fact, the point of any form of discourse analysis is that the researcher is not removed from the object of inquiry whatsoever, particularly so in a study such as this with a corpus of purely documentary sources of data. As Harper puts it:

The theoretical goal of any discourse analysis is not to ensure the methodological conditions for the discovery of truth (e.g. through the perfection of sampling) but to understand the conditions under which differing accounts are produced and how meaning is assumed to be produced from them (1995, p. 350)

In order to bolster the strength of this type of research it is an important consideration to devise some method or strategy of ensuring that a modicum of quality control is applicable to the study. In this instance, as already discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the concept of trustworthiness is favoured, in terms of it meaning a rigorous application of the framework for analysis alongside a coherent explanation of all facets of the study. Evans (2002), also coming from this perspective, has recommended an explanation of the analysis process based on “full disclosure” (p. 155), communicating the specific steps of the analysis process alongside recognition of the shortcomings and limitations within that process.

For this analysis of Irish ECEC policy documents, Fairclough’s dimensions of discourse model (1995), Fairclough and Chouliaraki’s (1999) critical discourse analysis framework and Fairclough’s subsequent recasting of his CDA framework (2009) have all been used as a base from which to formulate an adapted framework applicable to the study. The specific framework used in this study has involved the following four stages, which sit in Fairclough’s (1995) overarching dimensions of discourse model:

- 1) Identifying, locating and explaining a social problem.

[Sociocultural Practice Level]



- 2) Investigating the social construction of the society in which the problem exists to ascertain if it is innate in the culture.

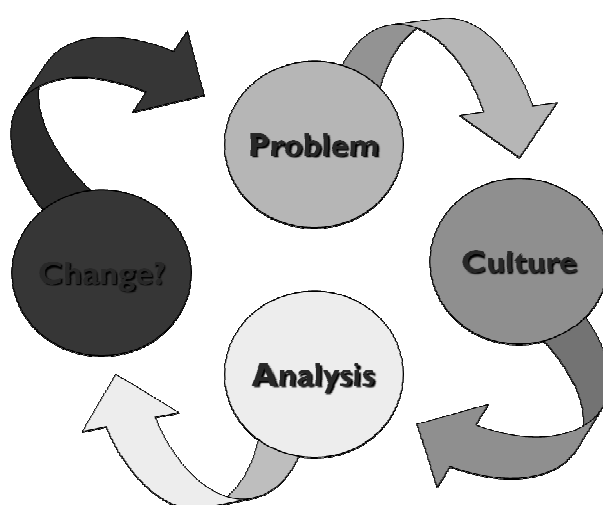
[Sociocultural Practice and Discourse Practice Levels]

- 3) Undertaking the actual linguistic textual analysis of the document paying close attention to narrative, grammar, sentence structure, semantics, and the meaning of, location and collocation of words.

[Discourse Practice Level and Text Level]

- 4) Describing the main findings and ascertaining any possible ways to overcome them and strive for change.

[Text Level]



**Figure 5.3: Diagrammatic representation of CDA framework for this thesis**

## **5.7 The Analysis Process**

It is important to reiterate at this juncture that a section of the analysis was undertaken as a pilot study before a more specific and refined framework for coding and analysis was developed within the overall framework for analysis. The analysis of the documents relating to the UNCRC, that is: *Ireland's 2nd Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child; General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6) (CRC, 2003)* and *General guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports to be submitted by states parties under Article 44, paragraph 1(b), of the Convention (CRC, 2005b)* was undertaken several months before the protracted analysis period, and prior to the

engagement with any training in computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). This analysis was undertaken separately, as a pilot task in order to test the usability of the embryonic main framework for analysis and the critical discourse methodology. Thus all the analysis for these three CRC related documents was embarked on in the manner of the manual coding for the micro-analysis of the other policy documents; it was manually coded under an emerging thematic framework, as opposed to organising and coding the analysis using a CAQDAS programme. The framework used for the analysis of the three Convention related documents followed Fairclough's (2001) framework which followed these five stages:

- Stage 1: A social problem in its semiotic aspect
- Stage 2: Obstacles to tackling the problem
  - *Linguistic Analysis of the Text*
  - *Whole Text Language Organization*
  - *Vocabulary*
- Stage 3: Does the social order 'need' the problem?
- Stage 4: Possible ways past the obstacles.
- Stage 5: Reflection on the analysis

As these three Convention related documents were the first documents with which the methodological approach was administered to, the analysis was carried out coding by hand and making notes. Periodic reports such as *Ireland's 2nd Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* are generic texts; their function is to report to the CRC on what progress has been made in implementing the Convention. The CRC are relatively detailed in their guidelines as to the information they require in periodic reports from state parties, so the content of such periodic reports has been somewhat prescribed. Thus throughout the analysis process it became evident that concentrating on the use of language would be the most useful analysis technique.

Focusing on the language used, the choice of words, and the positioning and collocation of the chosen words, can potentially highlight a government's *modus operandi* in

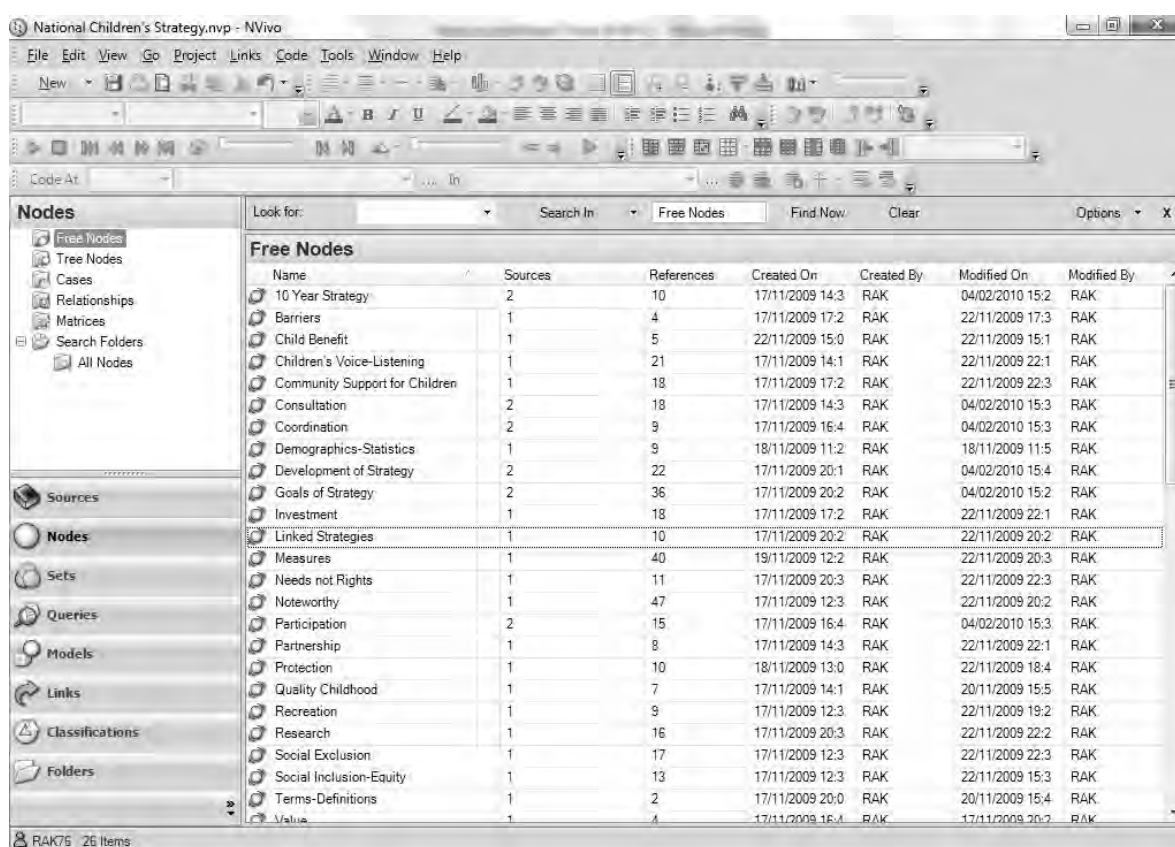
relation to how they wish to present themselves in their report (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010, p. 336).

Consequently, for an analysis subject such as a periodic report to the CRC, it is the language choices within the linguistic textual analysis that tends to reveal the most significant findings. Within this linguistic textual analysis a close scrutiny in terms of vocabulary, particularly the choice and positioning of words became the most significant facet of this analysis.

### ***5.7.1 Phase 1 - Coding with NVivo***

Having attended a training course in the CAQDAS programme, NVivo, early on in the doctoral research process, it was felt that it would be a necessary and helpful tool to employ for assistance with the coding and analysis process for the ECEC policy documents. Thus an NVivo project was created in order to be used to organise themes and coding categories. The process of analysis for these policy documents began with several preliminary readings of each policy document, in order to become familiar with the writing style of each of the documents and the main themes and issues within. This process of reading and identifying the main themes emerging from the data is often referred to as “open-coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). The open coding process, which was being used as a starting point, allowed for the documents to guide the thematic analysis rather than looking for specific preconceived themes within them. Thus the themes emerged from the texts as opposed to the themes/discourses being prescribed prior to the analysis process. Unfortunately, NVivo took a long time to import PDF documents into the programme, had difficulty in importing some documents at all and also lost some information from others during the import process. The issues encountered combined with the generation of a large amount of individual codes per document led to a situation where it began to make more sense to create a

separate NVivo project for each individual policy document, and their related genre chains.



**Figure 5.4: Screen shot of NVivo Free Node codes for the National Children's Strategy**

Coding categories, identified as nodes in NVivo, fall into two types, *free nodes* and *tree nodes*. *Free node* coding in NVivo was undertaken after the initial phase of open coding. Figure 5.4 is a screenshot showing an example of this free node coding. The next stage of analysis which involved a deeper reading of the texts and a review of the categories noting the main themes and sub themes within the text, was a more complex process, often known as “axial coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). Axial coding was undertaken through further reading and note-taking and was subsequently recorded in NVivo by adding a further level of coding using *tree nodes*. Each *tree node* was used as an overall coding category with more detailed and specific branches or sub-categories within; see figure 5.5. Following on from the open and axial coding process further

textual analysis of each document was conducted, paying close attention to the coded text, with the results of this textual analysis being ultimately used to illustrate the basis of the argument when writing up the findings. This final level of analysis relates to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) coding practice level of "selective coding" (p. 143). The framework that was developed for this coding process is explicated as follows:

1. Several initial read-throughs of documents
  - a. To familiarise with style and genres [open coding - NVivo free nodes]
2. Additional careful read through of documents
  - a. To generate key themes and discourses
  - b. To look for variation in the text
  - c. To pay attention to "silences in the text" (Marston, 2004, p. 125).
3. Deeper layer of coding by more refined themes and discourses [axial coding - NVivo tree nodes]
4. Analysis and selection of key areas for discussion from coded themes/discourses [selective coding - through NVivo and Word]
5. Breaking down paragraphs, sentences in the selected areas using linguistic textual analysis to understand how the linguistic properties construct 'knowledge' about the social reality [managed through Word documents]

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Childhood	1	4	17/11/2009 12:27	RAK	20/11/2009 16:17	RAK
Preparation for Adulthood	1	3	17/11/2009 16:45	RAK	18/11/2009 11:58	RAK
Theories	1	3	17/11/2009 12:28	RAK	18/11/2009 11:57	RAK
'Whole Child' Perspective	1	24	17/11/2009 12:28	RAK	22/11/2009 22:12	RAK
Children's Rights	1	1	17/11/2009 16:37	RAK	18/11/2009 13:03	RAK
Citizenship	1	6	17/11/2009 16:37	RAK	22/11/2009 22:14	RAK
Constitution	1	11	01/02/2010 16:04	RAK	04/02/2010 15:42	RAK
Debates	0	0	04/02/2010 12:33	RAK	04/02/2010 12:33	RAK
Rights	2	16	17/11/2009 16:38	RAK	04/02/2010 15:42	RAK
Debates	0	0	04/02/2010 12:32	RAK	04/02/2010 12:32	RAK
UNCRC	2	31	17/11/2009 16:38	RAK	04/02/2010 15:42	RAK
Debates	1	29	04/02/2010 12:32	RAK	04/02/2010 12:55	RAK
Implementation of	1	4	04/02/2010 12:58	RAK	04/02/2010 15:32	RAK
Education	1	6	17/11/2009 12:29	RAK	22/11/2009 19:22	RAK
Diversity	1	1	17/11/2009 12:30	RAK	22/11/2009 17:42	RAK
Early Education	2	3	17/11/2009 12:29	RAK	04/02/2010 12:53	RAK
Educational Disadvantage	1	3	17/11/2009 12:29	RAK	22/11/2009 15:29	RAK
Technology-ICTs	0	0	17/11/2009 12:31	RAK	17/11/2009 12:31	RAK
Government Provision	2	8	17/11/2009 12:33	RAK	04/02/2010 15:34	RAK
Commitment	2	14	17/11/2009 16:42	RAK	04/02/2010 15:31	RAK
Gaps-Weaknesses	1	22	17/11/2009 20:24	RAK	22/11/2009 20:22	RAK
Proposed provision	1	43	17/11/2009 12:34	RAK	22/11/2009 20:19	RAK
Structures	2	21	17/11/2009 12:34	RAK	04/02/2010 15:38	RAK
Training	1	4	19/11/2009 15:25	RAK	22/11/2009 17:41	RAK
The Family	1	2	17/11/2009 16:45	RAK	18/11/2009 12:01	RAK
Childcare	2	11	18/11/2009 11:37	RAK	04/02/2010 12:59	RAK

Figure 5.5: Screen shot of NVivo Tree Node codes for the National Children's Strategy

### 5.7.2 Phase 2 - Micro Analysis

Following the individual macro analysis of each policy document, cross document analysis, or micro-analysis, was then undertaken to identify the common themes and discourses within the documents. The micro-analysis was concerned with examining what kinds of knowledge about ECEC policy are constructed in the texts, and to show how knowledge about different concepts is constructed and represented through the language used in the policy documents. The micro-analysis was conducted through a combination of using the coding already entered into NVivo and also using Word documents to note and manage the further refinement of data.

The first phase of the micro-analysis involved trying to make sense of each individual NVivo project. Critics of the use of coding tools like NVivo, say that they often result in creating “distance by lifting discourse out of context” (MacMillan, 2005, p. 7) and have warned that to consider such “texts in isolation *would be the very antithesis* to approaches within the field” (ibid., emphasis added) of CDA. Attempting to make sense of this vast amount of data, spread across 6 separate projects, was difficult; the presentation of the coded data in NVivo fragmented it from its original context within the wider documents and resulted in sense-making of the data being a rather difficult process. Throughout the course of the study there had been a number of reasons to continuously attempt to interpret this data<sup>52</sup>; while this was often a difficult task, particularly in terms of trying to interpret the data across the six separate projects, eventually a pattern began to emerge. This pattern highlighted the main recurrent issues, or areas of notability, within the text which was ultimately the issue of how knowledge was constructed about key concepts which shape Irish ECEC policy.

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<sup>52</sup> It was necessary to attempt to interpret the data at different stages throughout the course of the study in order to prepare for conference papers, annual assessments and journal articles.

In order to carry out the second phase of the micro-analysis, a decision was made to modify the process of analysis; this was due to the disorderliness of the six separate NVivo projects and within that the resultant fragmentation and decontextualisation of the text. To keep things more orderly, transparent, and to aid general ease of use, particularly with regard to organising the data for the writing up of the findings, the decision was made to use Word documents to manage this final phase of analysis. The second phase of micro-analysis thus began with closely rereading all the documents; in their physical hands-on format, further highlighting any pertinent areas, if necessary, and making notes by hand in the margins. The most important themes that emerged from the data which necessitated further investigation were the constructions of knowledge about the concepts of: 'the child'; parents; needs; rights; early education; childcare; universal provision and targeted provision, alongside consideration of the general approach to 'rights', in terms of language and ideology. Handwritten notes made in the hard copies of the policy documents included noting all pertinent text in relation to the important knowledge construction/key concept with which it should be associated. Eight separate Word documents were then created corresponding to each of the key concepts, within which the knowledge constructed about them has helped to shape and formulate Irish ECEC policy. Using the handwritten notes in the hard copies of the policy documents, pertinent text was copied and pasted into the corresponding knowledge construction Word documents. Each Word document was organised using sub-headings to identify each of the separate policy documents from which the text had emerged. In order to aid the writing up process, further comments were made, using the insert comments function within MS Word; these comments were pertaining to more specific aspects of the linguistic textual analysis and any other noteworthy ideas. These comments also assisted in identifying the key discourses constructing knowledge within each of the identified key ECEC policy concepts.

### 5.7.3 Phase 3 - Linguistic Textual Analysis

The process involved in the linguistic textual analysis is elucidated in clearer detail in the later chapters that are more explicitly concerned with describing the text level of the analysis and presenting the findings. Nevertheless, some general points about the nuances of the linguistic textual analyses need to be pointed out here, particularly as the process differed slightly for the documents pertaining to the UNCRC.

The analysis of *Ireland's 2nd Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* was focused on the use and organisation of language, particularly the vocabulary; through this the linguistic analysis revealed four notable discourse trends within that Report:

1. Well-presented positives.
2. Incomplete policy actions.
3. Recurring ambiguity.
4. Weak policy commitments.

These discourse trends differ somewhat to the dominant knowledge constructions which the linguistic analysis of the other ECEC policy documents explored, but nevertheless still provided some worthwhile results and data for discussion. The CRC guideline documents are very much guidelines which outline all the necessary information which is required from states parties in their periodic reports. The guidelines set out the essential data which needs to be reported on in order for states parties to demonstrate their commitment to and success in implementation of all the principles of the Convention. The linguistic organisation of these Guideline documents was generally in terms of listing, and briefly describing in some cases, the requisite information for the reporting process. Thus the linguistic textual analysis concentrated on the recurrence of words, particularly those which could be potentially misconstrued, and also looked for any gaps, and “silences in the text” (Marston, 2004, p. 125).

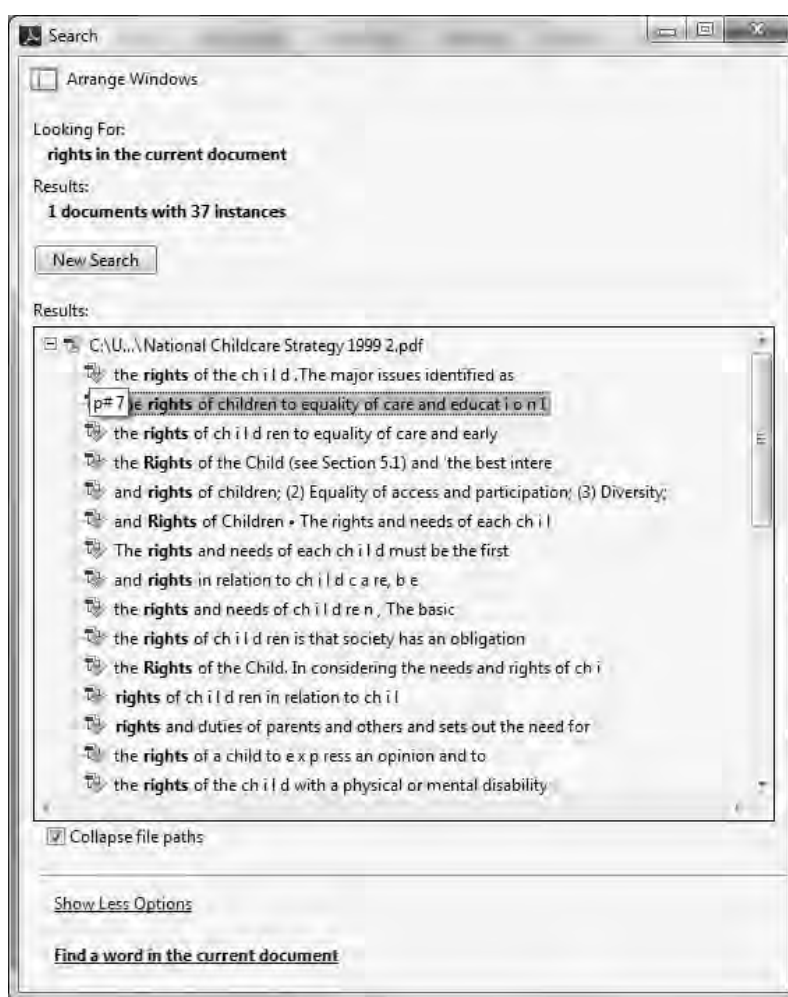


There was a more explicit process for the linguistic textual analysis for the remaining ECEC policy documents, which looked at the language choices and explored the construction of knowledge within them. The analysis also noted any gaps or silences in the text. The analysis worked through close reading of the selected text looking at the vocabulary, the choice of words, the position of words, the use of verbs and thus making an interpretation of the meaning within, using a CDA lens. An example follows in this excerpt from *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (Ireland, 1999b, p. 24); the discussion of the excerpt highlights aspects of the linguistic textual analysis at work:

1. The **Constitution** recognises that the primary and natural educator of the child is the **family**.
2. Much of a child's **development and education** in the earliest years takes place through **normal** experiences in the home, although many parents now **choose** to have their children cared for, from a very early age, outside of the home.
3. Other parents **choose** to provide their children's pre-school care inside the family home.

This excerpt refers to the constitutional protection and position of the family in relation to the education of children. Looking at **sentence 1** with a CDA lens can interpret the discourse of the policy text as setting out education and care as the business of the family rather than the State. Through the collocation of the words development and education alongside normal experiences in the home the **2<sup>nd</sup> sentence** is construed as positioning this type of parental only pre-school care as the norm. Conversely the second part of the sentence then uses the verb choose which infers that it is a choice of parents to have their children cared for outside the home, but not the norm. This sentence also separates out the concepts of education and care, collocating education with developmental progress which is facilitated by parents in the home. It then collocates care, which is not home based and by a family member, with an activity that exists outside the family and the home and is not the norm.

While the analytical approach to this research was not designed with the quantification of anything in mind, in certain instances the counting of word frequency also proved to be helpful. NVivo facilitates a word frequency search, in order to determine the rate of recurrence of usage of particular words; this was employed in a number of instances in order to look more closely at occurrences of uses of the words *needs* and *rights*. Most PDF documents can also be searched, using the advanced search function, within Adobe Reader, which presents the results in relation to the sentence they appear in, making it easier to count instances of uses of the words *needs* and *rights* in the correct context; see Figure 5.6. Thus NVivo was used for the initial count; this count was also verified through a search in Adobe reader to confirm the relevance of the search terms.



**Figure 5.6: Screenshot of Adobe Reader advanced search results of the National Childcare Strategy using the search term rights**

## **5.8 Strengths and limitations of the study**

The main strengths in using the CDA methodological approach, lie in the fact that both Fairclough (1995, 2001, 2009), and Fairclough and Chouliaraki (1999), have theorised and developed a well thought through, structured approach to critical social research. This is bolstered by Foucault's wider discourse theory (1972, 1977, 1981, 1984a, 1984b) which underpins the conceptual approach. It is further bolstered by the fact that the type of research they have developed their CDA methods for, includes research such as this which relies heavily or exclusively on the use of published documents for the research corpus. A further strength is the ongoing development and refinement of the CDA methodology (Fairclough, 2001, 2003, 2009). In addition, as "there is no consistent CDA methodology" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 31), although Fairclough's ongoing refinement has retained a good deal of consistency within his general approach, there is scope within it to adapt and refine existing methods and frameworks for use in individual research studies.

One of the limitations of using a CDA approach is the vulnerability of being open to accusations of subjectivity in the research, which have a negative connotation. CDA approaches are open about their critical and subjective starting point, and the reflexivity inherent in the method should be viewed as a positive stance. A further limiting aspect of this study, to some extent, was having a corpus which consisted of texts only. Nevertheless, any weaknesses inherent in using a corpus of policy texts only, were addressed through the inclusion of the genre chains related to each of the policy documents, and particularly the use of the Dáil debates. It is also important to note that the analysis of documents has been venerated for its "retrospectivity, accessibility, spontaneity, low costs, high quality, possibility of re-testing and non-reactivity" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 319).

Choosing to use the CAQDAS programme NVivo for this study also became a limitation. MacMillan has pointed out that:

Unrealistic expectations about what CAQDAS can do tend to contribute to a myth amongst researchers that the programmes are a “method” in itself, with little understanding shown of the multiplicity of disciplines within qualitative research (2005, pp. 3-4).

The problems encountered using NVivo for this study emerged from trusting the programme to be of greater assistance in the coding and analysis process than it actually was. NVivo was used with an express interest in its ability to effectively manage data and save time. The main problematic issues experienced were ones of compatibility, capability and time. With regard to compatibility, NVivo took a large amount of time to process the importation of PDF documents and subsequently sent a lot of text askew, losing or jumbling up some of the information. This made it visually difficult to work with. The retrieval of data through NVivo and subsequent contextualising and sense making combined with the visual restrictiveness of the interface, made the whole process incredibly time consuming and unappealing. Hence the decision was made to concede to the more accessible and accommodating methods of using the human brain and body, to both physically and cognitively organise the materials necessary for the deep micro-analysis and linguistic textual analysis necessary within the CDA.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has told the story of how the research process took place and addressed any resulting issues encountered along the way. This chapter positioned the analysis process in a framework for trustworthiness, clarified the textual element of a CDA, and discussed the rationale for the choice of the research sample and the resultant process of data collection.

A general consensus within qualitative research, reiterated by Holliday (2002), is that a significant aspect of the approach involves “the need for researchers to show their workings” (p. 47) and account for what they have done throughout the research process. Hence this chapter included an explanation of the procedures undertaken for the analysis and coding processes, and the strengths and limitations of this approach.

With regard to this chapter’s position in Fairclough’s overall dimensions of discourse model (1995), it explored aspects of the discourse practice level and began to elucidate aspects of the descriptive element of the text level. The discourse practice level was attended to through the explication of the frameworks for analysis and coding, which were used to interpret the prevailing knowledge constructions within Irish ECEC policy discourses as realised in the policy texts. The text level of the dimensions of discourse model was attended to through descriptions of the analytical approach, the approach to and application of the micro analysis and the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Description of the results and findings emerging from the linguistic textual analysis, within the text level, continues in the following chapters.

## **6. CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT OF POLICY TEXT PRODUCTION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter continues the descriptive text level of Fairclough's dimensions of discourse by presenting the findings from consideration of the context of policy text production; describing each of the published policy texts in detail in terms of their appearance and organisation, and also describing the genre chains which each of them form a part of. The findings of the linguistic textual analysis are presented in the succeeding chapters; focusing on the dominant discourses of Irish ECEC policy and the constructions of knowledge about ECEC within those dominant discourses<sup>53</sup>. This chapter is thus a precursor to the discussion of the dominant knowledge constructions and it focuses on each of the policy documents individually, discussing how the documents are physically constructed and presented, and also how they are linked together in a wider generic chain.

### **6.2 The physical representation of the policy documents**

This section presents the findings from consideration of the context of policy text production for each document in the corpus. These findings are a part of the overall critical discourse analysis; they look at the structure and content of the policy texts, how they are visually represented. The physical construction of policy texts can be important elements that assist in reinforcing the ideology behind the policy. Each document is described in terms of its visual presentation, design and layout. This includes examining the use of visual images to convey information. Each document is subsequently described in terms of other notable aspects, such as the type of voice that the document

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<sup>53</sup> These constructions of knowledge relate to constructions of the child; parents; needs; rights; early education; childcare; universal provision and targeted provision, alongside consideration of the general approach to 'rights', in terms of language and ideology.

represents. With regard to the notion of genre, all of the main documents are Reports thus tend to follow a similar generic structure, which usually begins with a foreword, typically written by the Minister who commissioned the report, the chairperson of the committee, or the Taoiseach. They generally also include a minimum of the use of imagery and follow a relatively generic presentation of text, typically black text on a white background with bullet points or coloured boxes used to emphasise important points.

The CRC authored guideline documents are generic CRC texts written in a report or listing style, which also feature the standard plain black text on a white background. The content of the CRC authored documents set out the prescribed content required for the individual states reports. Thus the State Report in the sample for this study, *Ireland's 2nd Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, follows a specific structure which is predominantly informed by the requisite content, as defined by the CRC guidelines.

### ***6.2.1 Strengthening Families for Life: The Report of the Commission on the Family***

The Report of the Commission on the Family is 650 pages in length and is divided into ten parts which each contain several chapters; there are 24 chapters altogether. Only some of the chapters were relevant to this study: the opening chapter; chapters in Part 3 which focus on 'Supporting families in carrying out their functions - the care and nurturing of children'; and chapters in Part 5 which focus on 'Protecting and enhancing the position of children and vulnerable dependent family members'. Part 3 begins with a cover page featuring a full page photograph of a toddler on a beach, locating it as concerned with the business of children. This is followed by the relatively standardised report layout of black text on a white background including a number of tables and one

picture. This Report favours bullet points, footnotes and appendices to enhance and provide further information. There are four chapters within Part 3, which concludes with a summary of all four chapters and of all the relevant recommendations contained therein. Part 5 is relatively identical in terms of presentation of the text and layout; however the cover page photograph features an image of an older child undertaking some gardening work with another child playing with a scooter in the background. Part 5 comprises three chapters and also concludes with a summary of the chapters and recommendations.

The Commission on the Family was comprised of members from different disciplines and areas of expertise with vested interests in the notion of supporting families; for example, social policy, family law, medical expertise, social work, community work and economics. Consequently, the focus on children within the Report is centred on children as a part of families and within this it also alludes to children's needs and rights as individuals within their families. The Report, published in July 1998, made a number of detailed recommendations and suggestions for the area of childcare and subsequently influenced the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, the National Childcare Strategy and the National Children's Strategy. The intertextuality between these texts is clearly evident and openly acknowledged and referenced within each of the three documents.

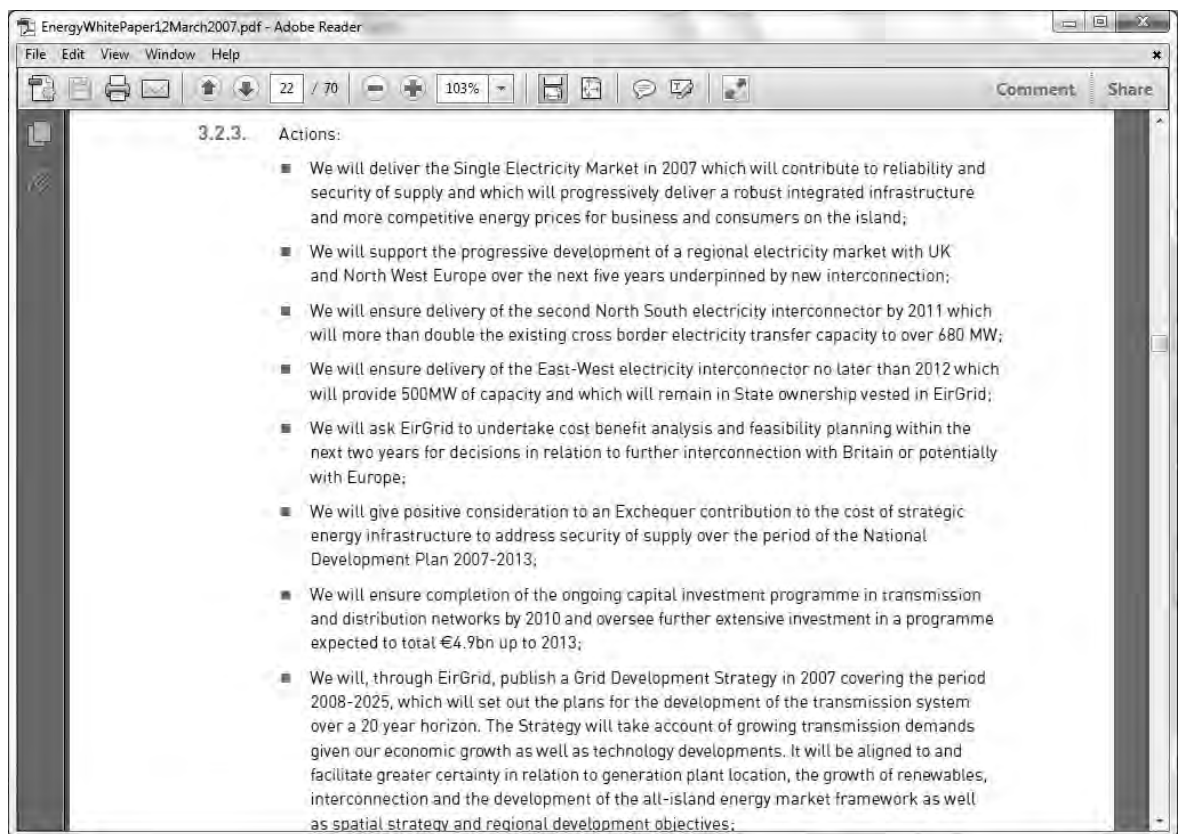
### **6.2.2 *Ready to Learn***

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, is 135 pages long and contains eleven chapters. It begins with a foreword from the Minister for Education and Science. The chapters are subdivided into numbered sections and look at a broad spectrum of early childhood education policy themes: the context of early childhood



education; existing provision; areas of specific focus which include: quality, disadvantaged children, special needs children, and the role of parents in ECEC; and finally, structures for inspection, standardisation and implementation. With regard to physical appearance, the front cover of the White Paper is an image of an adult guiding a child in learning through play with alphabet learning blocks. There is a watermark style image on many of the subsequent pages which is a picture of one of the learning blocks from the cover image. The text is straightforward black text on a white background, using a larger font size in blue for headings and subheadings, with quoted text from other informing documents appearing in italics. Each chapter cover page has a large heading, and a one paragraph synopsis of the content of the chapter, while the reverse of the page presents a variation of the cover image, where in some cases the child is drawing a picture, and in others playing with the alphabet learning blocks. The constant factor in these images is that the adults hand is always there guiding the child's hand, implying that the understanding of young children's learning in the White Paper is as an adult-led activity.

There is an expectation, in terms of physical presentation of information, for a White Paper policy document to set out the objectives that the government is intent on achieving in a style consistent with the business of setting and meeting goals. This is predominantly achieved through the use of some kind of design feature to highlight the key objectives of the policy; the use of bullet pointed lists, coloured boxes, and so on. An example, in Figure 6.1, from the government *White Paper on Energy* from 2007, demonstrates the use of bullet pointed lists in White Paper documents.



**Figure 6.1: Example of bulleted list of policy objectives (Ireland, 2007b)**

*Ready to Learn* is interesting in this respect as reads like a descriptive document. The style of the document is more consistent with a literature review rather than a policy document; it is discursive and explanatory rather than objective oriented in its presentation. The White Paper thus reads as a consultative document, rather than a standardised, bullet pointed, objective oriented policy document. This is unusual considering that the report of the main consultation process for the White Paper, *The National Forum on Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998) also contains relatively similar descriptive information about early childhood education in Ireland. Nevertheless, the White Paper was perceived to be in the business of setting out policy in the early childhood education area. While the White Paper details issues within ECEC and recommends some policy goals, it spends more time on the seemingly unnecessary descriptive discussion of issues, as opposed to setting out a clear, focused

and comprehensive policy strategy. In fact, this issue was raised in a Dáil debate, where an exchange occurred with regard to what the purpose of the White Paper actually was:

**Dr. Woods:** I recently announced a process of consultation on the White Paper. I expect that this process will commence shortly. Details of expenditure on the White Paper proposals, including the direct and indirect provision of places, must await the completion of the consultation and planning process.

**Mr. R. Bruton:** Forgive me if I got it wrong. Is a White Paper not a decision on what will be done rather than a prelude to consultation?

**Dr. Woods:** A White Paper is a proposal on policy.

**Mr. R. Bruton:** I thought it represented policy.

**Dr. Woods:** No, I will tell the Deputy about that

**Mr. R. Bruton:** Had the Minister any input at the start of these consultations on, for example, how many extra children should be brought in to early start – the Department's initiative for pre-school children?

**Dr. Woods:** Yes. A Green Paper is generally a discussion document, a White Paper contains proposals for policy or for legislation or for development. After that comes the actual decisions (Dáil-Éireann, 2000).

As is evidenced from this excerpt, this exchange did little to resolve the confusion.

### **6.2.3 *National Childcare Strategy***

The Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, published as the *National Childcare Strategy*, is physically represented as a much more business style report. The cover is slightly misleading in this respect; it features a red background with a number of photographs of children and families in different child and family scenarios, for example a family playing with a ball, walking the dog, children hugging each other, and so on. The cover is also scattered with words related to the Strategy: children, traveller, urban, rural, partnership, diversity, disability, equal opportunities, and family. The word Family has the biggest font size, followed by the word children, the remainder of the words are in smaller font sizes. The cover hints that families are the target audience for the Report. However, this is the limit to the appearance of appealing imagery in the overall Report; the remaining visual structure of the content of the

Report is businesslike and professionally presented. There are eight chapters, preceded by a foreword by the chairperson of the expert working group on childcare; an executive summary including a summary of the recommendations of the Report; and a general introduction. The Report is 120 pages long, and the chapters are divided between four sections. The first section considers the Background Information relative to the report; the second section looks at Identified Issues and Concerns; the third section looks at the Principles guiding and Rationale for the Strategy; and the fourth and final section sets out the plans for structuring and implementation of the *National Childcare Strategy*.

The colour scheme and organisation is rather uniformly businesslike, there is a minimum of use of colour, a couple of shades of red for each chapter cover page, with the rest of the text in black on a white background. Bulleted lists are used to emphasise the key points in a summary at the end of each chapter. Tables are used to provide additional representation of information, and there are also some graphical representations used to represent organizational structures. In comparison to the White Paper, it makes for slightly easier report reading, particularly given the summaries of main points at the end of each chapter. The appendices to the Report explain how the expert working group went about its work and lists the committee members involved in drafting the work which informed the strategy.

The Report was commissioned under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform as part of the Partnership 2000 agreement. The main objective of the working group was to devise policy solutions for the children of working parents in response to a perceived crisis in childcare supply; the Report succeeds in clearly representing this. The voice of the expert working group's diverse membership is represented to some extent in this report, particularly in terms of the

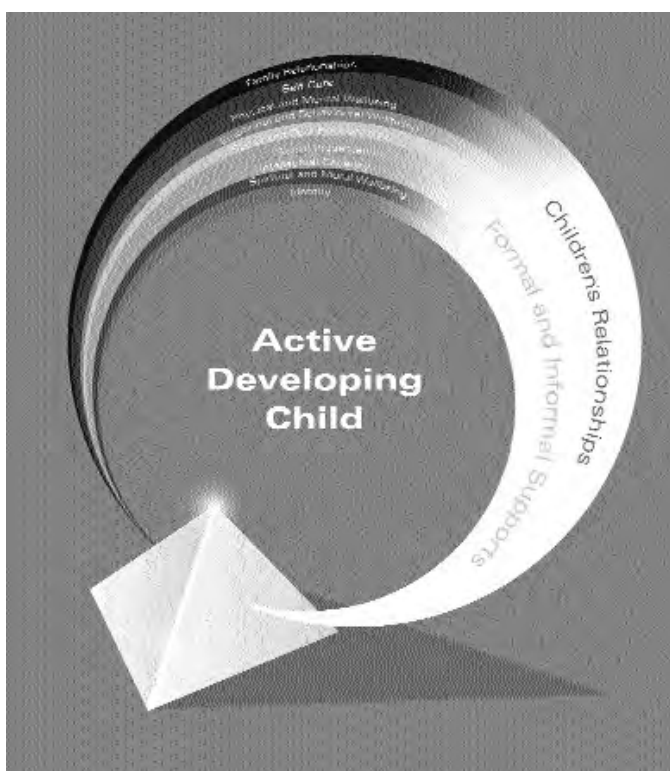
context of the more explanatory chapters. Conversely, the policy objectives are very much framed in terms of achievable outcomes for the government, thus the influence of government representatives in the expert working group is strongly felt.

#### **6.2.4 *National Children's Strategy***

The cover design of the National Children's Strategy features a blue background with the title appearing in white text, with an inexplicable green circle, which looks hand drawn around the title. The back cover features an enlarged picture of the Strategy logo. The document is 130 pages long; beginning with three forewords: from the Taoiseach; the Minister for Health and Children; and the Minister of State with responsibility for Children. The main text of the Report is preceded by a 2 page list of the advisory members for the consultation process of the Strategy. There are seven chapters within the Strategy Report, which initially rationalise the developments of the strategy, including the background and main objective. This is followed by the introduction of the 'whole child' perspective concept and a general rationale for a Children's Strategy in Ireland. The subsequent three chapters discuss each of the National Goals of the Strategy separately, including a discussion of the fourteen objectives which are set out to ensure that "children will receive quality supports and services" (Ireland, 2000, p. 11). The Report concludes with a final two chapters which set out the structures and procedures necessary to implement the strategy.

The cover page at the beginning of each chapter features white text on a differently coloured background, featuring quotes from the public consultation process. The text within the Report is black on a white background but is peppered throughout with quotes which are italicised and in different coloured text. These quotes include excerpts from the consultation process and reiterations of the vision of the Strategy. The Report

is also interspersed with photographs of children, and copies of pictures which have been drawn by children. There is a good deal of use of other visual imagery; tables, diagrams, and also graphical representations of different concepts, such as the ‘whole child’ perspective, as shown in Figure 6.2. The design of the National Children’s Strategy document combines the conventional style of all Irish ECEC policy documents with an increased use of colour and imagery, which subsequently works to contextualise the document as related to the subject of children.



**Figure 6.2: The ‘whole child’ perspective diagram (Ireland, 2000, p. 26).**

There is continuous referencing of the consultation process which informed the Strategy throughout the document; for example: “a total of 2,488 children and young people took part in the consultation process” (Ireland, 2000, p. 99). Further information relating to the consultation process is provided in the appendices. The appendices also include the full text of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the National Children’s Strategy document does adequately represent the voices of those

included in the consultation process, when it comes to the outcomes and objectives, it very much represents the voice of the government with regard to their construction of achievable goals.

### **6.2.5 Social Partnership**

The first social partnership agreement text of relevance for this study was *Partnership 2000*, which was concerned with “the three essential economic and social challenges facing the economy and society” (Ireland, 1998a, p. 3) with the main areas of focus being:

maintaining an effective and consistent policy approach in a period of high economic growth; significantly reducing social disparities and exclusion, especially by reducing long-term unemployment; and responding effectively, at both national, sectoral and enterprise level, to global competition and the information society (Ireland, 1998a, p. 3).

The document was an entirely plain text document, the electronic PDF version has no cover page, and thus just featured standard black text on a white background. Bullet points are used to break down key points. The consideration of children in *Partnership 2000* is as an adjunct to other areas (Hayes, 2002); the tentative child related issues dealt with in the report come under the overarching heading of ‘Reducing Social Disparities’. Childcare is contextualised in terms of the needs of working parents, specifically mothers, and features within a section entitled ‘Action Towards a New Focus on Equality’ within a subsection entitled ‘Gender Equality’. The other relevant area of this document is in relation to child benefit which appears in a section entitled ‘Action for Greater Social Inclusion’ under the heading ‘Reform of Child Benefit and Family Income Supplement’. All of these matters are discussed in a relatively brief and businesslike manner, representing the voice of government, as realised following the outcomes of some collective bargaining with the other social partners.

Conversely, from a design perspective, the *Towards 2016* document, published in 2006, opts for the more modern, colourful and sober design favoured in more recent years for certain important reports<sup>54</sup>. It provides straightforward text based information, using bullet points and coloured text boxes for further emphasis. One of the key goals of *Towards 2016* was to re-invent and reposition Ireland's social policies (Ireland, 2006b). The approach to children is informed by the lifecycle approach which was developed within the NESC *Developmental Welfare State* report. Due to *Towards 2016* being informed by the lifecycle approach, there is more emphasis given to a myriad of issues which affect social life, hence the inclusion of standalone sections on education and children. The section on education is located within the wider chapter dealing with 'Enhancing Ireland's Competitive Advantage in a Changing World Economy and Building Sustainable Social and Economic Development', the aspects relevant to this study, pertaining to ECEC, are contextualised in relation to targeting educational disadvantage. The section on children, is one of four<sup>55</sup> sections within the lifecycle framework, developed in order "to address key social challenges by assessing the risks and hazards which the individual person faces and the supports available to them at each stage in the life cycle" (Ireland, 2006b, p. 40). *Towards 2016* also represents the voice and vision of the government, as realised following the outcomes of the procedures of negotiated governance which were undertaken with the other social partners.

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<sup>54</sup> See also *Sustaining Progress Social Partnership Agreement 2003-2005* - 2003: [http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications\\_Archive/Publications\\_2006/Publications\\_for\\_2003/SustainingProgressSocialPartnershipAgreement2003-20051.pdf](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_Archive/Publications_2006/Publications_for_2003/SustainingProgressSocialPartnershipAgreement2003-20051.pdf)  
*Learning to Innovate: Reperceiving the global information society* - 2005: [http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications\\_Archive/Publications\\_2006/Publications\\_for\\_2005/Learning\\_to\\_Innovate.pdf](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_Archive/Publications_2006/Publications_for_2005/Learning_to_Innovate.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> The other lifecycle stages which the Report considers are: People of Working Age, Older People and People with Disabilities.



### 6.2.6 *Agenda for Children's Services*

This document is unusual amidst the policy texts reviewed and analysed for this study, as it employs what seems like an actual design concept throughout. The *Agenda for Children's Services* is 44 pages long; the cover features a spiral design in what looks like a globe being held up by three people-like figures. Elements of this cover design then carry through as header and footer designs on many of the pages, full page spiral designs illustrate interleaf pages. Each chapter also has its own colour scheme, for example chapter 1 uses green, chapter 3 uses orange, and so on. While more visually interesting than other policy documents due to the increased use of imagery and design, the design features do little to locate the work as related to children.



**Figure 6.3: A cupped model of family support from The Agenda on Children's Services (Ireland, 2007a, p. 17).**

The Report is clear on positioning its objectives as building on existing policies rather than the introduction of any radical innovations. As a consequence it is peppered

throughout with quotes from other reports, the *National Children's Strategy* being a key influence. In the first section it uses a series of text boxes to present information related to the different documents which have influenced the *Agenda*, whose recommendations it is purported to build on through a new vision for children's policy. Each section tends to include a diagram which illustrates a key point, as shown in the example in Figure 6.3.

Section 3 comprises the key driver of the new policy approach which is the introduction of reflective questions for policy makers, managers and service providers to ask of themselves to assist them in delivering high quality policy and services for children. There are five subsections within section 3 which each correspond to characteristics that must be strived for in order to meet the service delivery outcomes for children. Each subsection thus finishes with a table of relevant reflective questions.

Visually the *Agenda* document is quite a departure from the traditional physical presentation of government documents, particularly those that relate to ECEC or children. Its use of graphics makes for a much more attractive report; nevertheless with regard to content, it is more representative of other government reports in the ECEC policy area. While it does proffer discourses of a new way of looking at and thinking about service delivery through the new framework which it introduces, it is less than radical in its stated approach which is to continue to build on existing policies.

#### **6.2.7 Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**

*Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* was submitted in 2005, seven years after receiving the Concluding Observations of the first report from

the CRC. Given the large gap of time between reports, the government had ample time to address many of the issues highlighted and to attempt to make some truly positive steps towards recasting policy for children in respect of their rights as enshrined within the Convention. From the perspective of the Irish government the submission of the Report fulfilled two objectives; firstly fulfilling their commitment to Report periodically to the CRC to adhere to the CRC's monitoring role in terms of implementation of the principles of the Convention. Secondly it served as a promotional exercise for the government to highlight their commitment to implementation of the convention in Ireland through providing "evidence" of the increased and enhanced development of policies and services for children, through significant resources, investment and new legislation, particularly the publication of the *National Children's Strategy*.

The Report itself is 175 pages long and is presented as an official summary of progress in implementing the Convention. The document is written in a reportage style responding to the CRC's specific information requirements, as set out in the guideline documents. There are no images; it uses fifteen tables and one graphical representation for further information. The cover design is simple; the title text is presented on a background design which uses a couple of different shades of blue and green. The Report concentrates on the provision of requisite information. There are eight chapters which contain information relating to each of the main clusters of the Convention:

- general measures of implementation;
- definition of the child;
- general principles;
- civil rights and freedoms;
- family environment and alternative care;
- basic health and welfare;
- education, leisure and cultural activities; and
- special protection measures.

Each chapter within the report is further divided into numbered paragraphs which are split into sections which cover specific actions and information. The introductory chapter is a summary of the main contents of the whole document, particularly summarising the actions that were taken in direct response to the Concluding Observations (CRC, 1998).

#### ***6.2.8 Summary of the physical representation of the policy documents***

With regard to Fairclough's understanding of genre as "semiotic ways of acting and interacting" (2009, p. 164), all of the policy texts in the corpus are promotional genres.

Taking *Ireland's 2nd Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* as an example of this promotional genre, the government uses it to promote the actions they have already taken in relation to implementation of the Convention, rather than offering a platform for discussion or proposing future actions. The document thus operates promotionally through presenting information which is bolstered by descriptions of existing legislation and any other policy initiatives that have specifically been enacted or established since the Concluding Observations (CRC, 1998), including those actions which were made in direct response to issues raised within the Concluding Observations. This promotional pattern exists for all of the ECEC policy documents in the sample; they are all promotional genres through which the government publicize their plans. Despite consultative processes having occurred in advance of the publication of most of the documents, the overwhelming voice remains that of government, thus the policy texts serve as nothing more than a promotion of the idealized proposed landscape for the policy area.

### 6.3 Genre Chains

In relation to the publication of official documents, Fairclough (2000, 2001) has highlighted the concept of generic chaining. A genre chain involves the linking of different genres in a regular sequence; for example, the consultation processes which inform official documents which are sometimes represented by a published report; official documents themselves; associated press releases and speeches; media reports in relation to the official documents or press releases; and in certain cases, any subsequent tailoring of genres from official channels in response to media reports. In terms of the documents used for this study, all of the documents, particularly the Report of the Commission on the Family, the White Paper, the National Childcare Strategy and the National Children's Strategy can also be seen to work as part of a genre chain, particularly given the level of intertextuality between them all and their direct concern with the ECEC policy area.

Discussing New Labour's welfare reform process, Fairclough demonstrated the generic chaining involved:

Speech < press release > - (media reports) - document < press release >  
- (media reports) - speech < press release > (Fairclough, 2001, p. 255).

The Irish mode of releasing official documents tends to differ slightly from Fairclough's regular sequence example; nevertheless most of the documents included in the corpus were informed by some kind of a consultation process where relevant, and launched in some official capacity, usually accompanied by a speech. Even so, there is a trend within Irish policy document launches, particularly those for children, notwithstanding the *National Children's Strategy*, to keep things relatively low-key, just ever so slightly under the radar; intimating to some degree that the consultation for and subsequent publication of the official document is seen as enough policy action.

### **6.3.1 *Genre chains accompanying the publication of the policy texts***

The White Paper on early childhood education, *Ready To Learn*, was published on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1999, the day after the Dáil had adjourned for the Christmas break until 26<sup>th</sup> January 2000. The Minister for Education's speech which accompanied the launch is not traceable on the Department of Education website, nor available online; however, other research work has noted that there was a launch speech (Deegan, 2002). The references to that speech that are made in Deegan's (2002) article appear to echo the Minister's speech at the closing of the consultation process for the White Paper, the *National Forum on Early Childhood Education*. The speech was published in the appendices of the Forum Report. There was a short article published in *The Irish Times* on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> December 1999 highlighting the publication of the White Paper (Oliver, 1999); it was subsequently reported on in more detail in the Education section of the newspaper on February 8<sup>th</sup> 2000 (Healy, 2000). The White Paper did not receive much more media attention outside of that. On 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2000, the Minister for Education made a speech on the subject of the White Paper at the 'Opening of the Joint Seminar on The White Paper on Early Childhood Education' at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. The issue of the White Paper had been raised in a Dáil debate on 'Pre-school education' in advance of its publication on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1999. Following its publication it was further brought up in debates on 'Early Childhood Education' on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2000 and 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2000; the White Paper itself was never the sole subject of a standalone debate in the Dáil and was never debated in any great detail when it was mentioned there.

The National Childcare Strategy published in January 1999 was granted a considerably larger amount of publicity than the White Paper, bolstered by the fact that it was published under an equality consideration, and also due to some recommendations

which proposed possible changes in taxation. The launch of the Report was met with some controversy within the media, as the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform immediately referred it to an interdepartmental committee for consideration. This controversy was mostly over the recommendations within the Report, specifically those which related to changes in taxation for families. Thus the Report was widely dissected within the media following its official launch (Editorial, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1999; O'Regan, 1999; The Irish Times, 1999a). The Report continued to garner media coverage throughout the rest of 1999. In April 2000, an investment package related to the Childcare Strategy was announced (Humphreys, 2000), which further developed the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme; this was afforded some media attention. While the contents of the Childcare Strategy Report featured widely in Dáil debates throughout its inception period, it was never debated as the sole topic for consideration. It appears that the preference was for any in-house deliberations surrounding the impact of the Report to be undertaken behind closed doors by the interdepartmental committee. Nevertheless, the Childcare Strategy laid the foundations for many subsequent childcare investment and development schemes which have subsequently been debated in the Dáil. The Dáil debates analysed for this study were debates which refer to childcare within the context of the Report of the Expert Group and/or the National Childcare Strategy specifically. It is of note that many subsequent childcare motions raised for debate in the Dáil involve TD's demonstrating clientelism<sup>56</sup>, arguing the case for the development and preservation of local provision in their own constituencies - local

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<sup>56</sup> Clientelism, a large feature of Irish political life, involves politicians acting as a mediator between their local constituents and the bureaucratic structures of the state, operating under the notion that their insider knowledge is more beneficial to the man on the street than dealing with such bureaucratic measures autonomously. Over the years, politicians have "exaggerated their influence to make themselves appear more instrumental or crucial" (Komito, 1985) in this guise than they actually were.

childcare places for local votes - rather than any conceptual or policy text specific debate<sup>57</sup>.

The National Children's Strategy, published in November 2000 was preceded by the publication of the *Report of the Public Consultation* in September 2000; the report of the consultation was accompanied by an official press release which welcomed its publication. Two press releases advertising participation in the consultation process had preceded this report earlier in 2000. The National Children's Strategy was publicised via a series of press releases throughout the following year, 2001, promoting the Minister for Children's tour of the country to publicise the Strategy further. The launch of this Strategy was almost the antithesis to typical policy launches in Ireland; it was launched to much fanfare, debated specifically in the Dáil, albeit in advance of its publication, and widely publicised within the media, particularly the print media. It was situated within the more traditional genre chain element laid out by Fairclough (2001). On October 8<sup>th</sup> 1998, a question was asked in the Dáil about whether a National Children's Strategy would be forthcoming. A further question was asked about the progress in drawing up a 'national strategy for children' prior to its publication in 1999. There appeared to be some confusion over what the Children's Strategy would focus on, as exemplified by this debate extract:

**Ms Shortall:** Does the Minister agree that the biggest problem in relation to services for children is fragmentation because responsibility is spread over a number of Departments? Does his strategy deal with this problem? Will he propose that all matters relating to children should come under the auspices of one Department? ... Although the Department of Education and Science has some involvement, nobody takes responsibility for pre-school services. There are all kinds of *ad hoc* arrangements in place for the small amount of funding the pre-school sector receives. Will these matters be addressed in the strategy? (Shortall, 1999).

It appears from this excerpt that both the White Paper and the National Childcare Strategy were not perceived as to be offering any real solutions to the problem of

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<sup>57</sup> For an example of this, see: <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0611/D.0611.200511290036.html>



coordination for ECEC services, hence the question with regard to whether the National Children's Strategy would locate responsibility for ECEC services or not. The Children's Strategy was not debated within the Dáil as a sole consideration again, but it was mentioned as an adjunct to wider children's rights and children's services debates. With regard to media reports, it was duly celebrated and welcomed rather than dissected and/or critiqued (Editorial, 2000; O'Morain, 2000; O'Regan, 2000). However a year after its publication, a more critical view was being taken of the rate of progress of the promises made within the Strategy (Ruane, 2001). The government did not directly respond to any criticism. The government subsequently published four "annual" progress reports throughout the ten year period of the National Children's Strategy. These progress reports took the form of a list of actions and a corresponding comment as to whether they had been achieved or not, rather than any inner critique or as any response to outside comments or criticism.

The submission of Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2005 appears to have not been reported on directly at that time, despite being mentioned as forthcoming in an Irish Independent editorial in May 2005 (Editorial, 2005) and also in two separate articles in the Irish Times in May and June (O'Brien, 2005a, 2005b). There were no press releases or speeches emerging from the government to accompany its submission. However, when the time came for the CRC to review the Report in 2006, it got widespread media coverage. Most of this media coverage was reporting on the critical responses from the CRC in relation to Ireland's progress on implementing the Convention, particularly with regard to the lack of explicit children's rights in the Constitution (Logan, 2006b; O'Brien, 2006a, 2006b, 2006d; van Turnhout, 2006). The government released a number of press releases at the time that the Minister for Children was facing the Committee to discuss the Report. The first press release was

promoting Ireland's progress since the Concluding Observations of the first report (OMCYA, 2006a) and the second was the Minister welcoming the Concluding Observations of the CRC on Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> report (OMCYA, 2006c); there is also a record of the Ministers opening address to the CRC (OMCYA, 2006e). Later that year the government formally responded to both the CRC and others criticisms with regard to children's rights in the Constitution; this was also discussed and reported in the print media (Logan, 2006a; O'Brien, 2006c). It appears that the international remit of the United Nations influenced the media in terms of the amount of attention that this Report received when it was being reviewed by the CRC, and also when the impact of the Concluding Observations was being considered. It seems that rather than responding to media criticism per se, the government were responding to the CRC's criticisms and concerns when the Taoiseach made an announcement later that year that a referendum should be held on the insertion of children's rights into the Constitution (Ahern, 2006b). The referendum is yet to take place.

The Agenda for Children's Services was published in December 2007 to a minimum of publicity; *The Irish Times* reported briefly on the forthcoming Report a week before it was published (O'Brien, 2007a) and again the day after it was published (O'Brien, 2007b). The OMCYA released a press release and a speech to launch the Agenda report on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2007. Fairclough (2000) has described the function of press releases and speeches as summarizing the policy documents to which they refer; such summarizing works to refine the breadth of the policy document into a more discrete representation of the policy for public consumption. The speech (OMCYA, 2007c), in this case, is a relatively comprehensive summary of the Report, and the press release (OMCYA, 2007a) is a further summary of the speech, both highlighting the key points

of the Agenda for Children's Services and emphasising the importance of the reflective questions aspect. This policy text was never specifically debated on in the Dáil.

The genre chains for the Social Partnership and Commission on the Family documents are a different consideration here. The relevant parts of each of these documents, dealing with ECEC issues, are considerably smaller in comparison. Nevertheless, when the Report of the Commission on the Family was published it received a small amount of media attention, which interestingly enough for this study was mostly in relation to its recommendations on childcare. In August 1998 *The Irish Times* reported on the provisions in the Report which recommended investment in the care of pre-school children (The Irish Times, 1998). The newspaper further discussed the recommendations of the Report in a series about the "Childcare Crisis" which was published in March 1999 (The Irish Times, 1999b). The Report was briefly discussed as a priority question in the Dáil on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1998; again with a focus on the Report's recommendations for childcare, which the Minister referenced as being considered by the Expert Working Group on Childcare who were drafting the National Childcare Strategy. Neither of the Social Partnership documents used in this study were debated on or discussed in the Dáil in respect of their relevance for ECEC issues; nor were they reported on in the media in relation to their considerations of children or ECEC. Nevertheless the Partnership 2000 document did lead to the convening of the Expert Working Group on Childcare, which served as the consultation and drafting process for their subsequent Report, the *National Childcare Strategy*. The focus on children in *Towards 2016*, which was influenced by the *Developmental Welfare State* (NESC, 2005), in turn influenced the rationale behind the publication of the *Agenda for Children's Services*. Both serve as further examples of intertextuality and are engaged in generic chains with their respective corresponding reports to some degree.

### **6.3.2 *Summary of genre chains accompanying the publication of the policy texts***

Examples of the way generic chaining has worked for the policy texts in this case have been provided here to illustrate the patterns that exist in relation to ECEC policy publications in Ireland. These examples highlight how the Irish print media do not really serve as an interrogator of or challenger to social policy. The tendency of the Irish print media is to report the existence of policy publications and sometimes one or two areas of interest from the publication. If the policy document is seen to be of greater public interest, as in the case of the Childcare or Children's strategies they may also be featured in a wider focus on the policy area and/or in an editorial comment. The print media do not tend to wholly engage in too much debate with the powers that be over any particular policy issue. The way that policy is debated in the Dáil does not truly impact on the delivery of policy. As is evident from the previous discussion, most of these policy texts are not even specifically debated on either prior to or following their publication. Discussions of policy documents in the Dáil tend to focus on questions in relation to timelines of implementation and resources as opposed to anything of greater substance. Dáil debates, as related to ECEC issues, are predominantly used as a promotional platform for the government to laud or defend the latest policy development; they do not serve to thrash out policy issues with a view to reconceptualising them or even towards making any real changes to the policy landscape.

## **6.4 Discussion**

The undertaking of this aspect of the CDA, in relation to consideration of the context of policy text production, is crucial in providing a clearer picture of the overall argument. Fairclough has stated that "the semiotic element or moment of a network of social practices is an 'order of discourse' – a particular articulation or configuration of genres,

discourses and styles” (Fairclough, 2004, p. 112). Thus to truly begin to understand how the ‘order of discourse’ works it is necessary to analyse all the elements configured together within it. This is why the physical presentation of a policy text is of significance alongside the actual language of the text. The analysis here has looked at the physical appearance of each of the policy documents, looking at the cover design, layout of text, use of colour, imagery and additional visual elements to present information. It has also considered the voice and genre of documents, particularly pertinent in terms of the documents which were preceded by some kind of official consultation process. Generic chaining is also of importance in understanding how the ‘order of discourse’ works. This analysis also looked at the concept of genre chains and the extent to which they impact on or reconceptualise new genres within Irish ECEC policy.

While most of the documents in this study had relatively widely publicised consultation processes, public ones in the case of the National Children’s Strategy and the Report of the Commission on the Family, these consultations do not serve to shape the genre which the finished product inhabits. Notwithstanding the more innovative use of design in both the National Children’s Strategy and the Agenda for Children’s Services, there is uniformity to both the presentation, and the language used, in official ECEC policy documents in Ireland. The lack of innovation in presentation and dialogue of drafting ECEC policy documents would lead a critical reader to come to the conclusion that there is a generic and conservative process behind the drafting of policy. Regardless of any consultation processes, the voice of the government is always overwhelmingly heard in the finished product. Despite being available for public consumption, the presentation of many of the policy texts are more indicative of having been designed to be consumed by a selected few of interested parties, who are most probably involved

with the writing of, if not the interpretation and/or implementation of, the finished product in the first place.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter continued to elaborate on the descriptive level of this CDA study as related to Fairclough's dimensions of discourse model. This chapter presented the findings from the consideration of the context of policy text production for each of the policy documents. These findings indicate a relatively detached attitude towards the drafting of policy for children. From a visual design perspective the presentation of children's policy documents has evolved, and the appearance has seemed to become more important. Both the National Children's Strategy and the Agenda for Children's Services showcase a shift in the approach to policy text design. Nevertheless, issues with the tone of the content of published ECEC policy texts have not evolved considerably, as of yet. The government is constantly the predominant voice heard in these policy documents and any impact of extensive consultation processes tend to fade into insignificance when read in the context of the finished official product. The finished article is predominantly contextualised in terms of achievable outcomes for the government, and few challenging or innovative steps are proposed to develop the policy area. Thus policy text production appears to be treated as a necessary evil.

The next chapter continues the descriptive text level of the dimension of discourse; it begins to present and consider the findings in relation to how knowledge is constructed about key concepts that serve to shape the understanding of ECEC within the policy area.

## **7. DISCOURSES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRISH ECEC POLICY DOCUMENTS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter continues the descriptive element of the text level of the dimensions of discourse model (Fairclough, 1995) by further relating and discussing the findings of this CDA study. The findings here are described generally in terms of observances on how knowledge is constructed about the key concepts within Irish ECEC policy. These constructions of knowledge are then described in deeper detail with respect to deconstructing their meaning, showing the linguistic textual analysis at work, and subsequently discussing the impact of these orders of discourse on the wider policy area. This chapter describes and discusses the constructions of knowledge about early education, childcare, the child, and parents within Irish ECEC policy text discourses.

### **7.2 What is Early Education in Irish ECEC policy?**

The knowledge constructed about the concept of early education is chiefly realised within the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*. The Report of the Commission on the Family also constructs the concept of early education, whereas the other documents tend to consider early education as just one element of early years services, contextualised under the catch-all concept of ‘childcare’. Early education is thus predominantly constructed as: a policy objective striving to deliver high quality services; an age related concern for the directly pre-school ages of 3-4, or already provided for in primary schools for 4-6 year olds; a policy area that requires a coordinated approach from all the relevant stakeholders to develop properly; an interventionist service targeted to children seen as most in need; and as a sector that is not characterised as professional.

### ***7.2.1 Early Education as a High Quality service***

Discourse of early education situates it as concerned with the delivery of high quality provision. The Minister for Education located government understandings of early education in June 1999:

It is important for everyone to recognise the distinction between education-driven interventions and the general child care debate. While both are intermingled, they are not exactly the same and the design of a comprehensive and effective early education framework in this country requires us to appreciate this. Because of these points, this Government has specifically set out to develop a policy on early education informed by best practice and reinforced by constructive consultation (Martin, 1999b).

This excerpt constructs early education and childcare as distinctive entities; it constructs early education as an area of importance which requires a professional and considered approach to its development.

The concept of ‘high quality early education’ remains underdeveloped and undetermined throughout the policy documents; it is presented as an ambiguous concern with no solid definition and no defined or tangible objectives. For example, high quality provision has been constructed in the White Paper as characterised by distinctively educational measures:

The benefits which high-quality early education interventions offer to children constitute the principal argument in favour of developing the early childhood education area, and the policy as set out in this White Paper will reflect that position. These include initial gains in IQ, enhanced capacity to learn, longer-term improvements in educational performance, private returns to individuals (both financial and developmental), economic returns and wider benefits to society (Ireland, 1999b, p. 14).

High-quality early education is situated as an intervention which will boost children’s IQ; their capacities for learning; and is also wholly beneficial to society in general. Using the word interventions constructs a picture of the provision of early education as something which was previously seen to be outside of the norm. This ties in with the wider societal understanding of the period of early childhood as spent in the care of the



private realm, mostly the family, and then followed by formal schooling with nothing else educational in between.

Throughout the White Paper, the definition of and ways to attain ‘high quality early education’ provision become more ambiguous and less tangible:

the State has a duty to promote best practice generally in provision; high standards must be promoted throughout the system, for the benefit of all children and their parents. In particular, where State support is provided, compliance with minimum standards must be ensured (Ireland, 1999b, p. 33).

This excerpt separates the State out from being seen as the providers of high quality early education, and instead positions the State as an overseer and promoter of said provision, whose role will be more in keeping with monitoring adherence to standards, chiefly so in cases where the State is directly funding the provision. In the White Paper, the State only proposes to directly fund the targeted provision of early education. The sentence construction in the above excerpt creates a situation whereby the State talks about what it must do without stating what it will do; it manages to construct its responsibilities in the third person, thus creating an ambiguity that weakens any notion of the construction of achieving ‘high quality’ standards as a policy objective.

Factors which are not currently covered by the Child Care Regulations, but which influence quality of provision and the scale and duration of benefits to children, include: curriculum and methodology, staff qualifications, training and retention, the extent to which parents are involved and the nature of the setting (non-physical aspects). Minimum standards will be recommended concerning some of these factors, while, in other cases, recommendations will be made concerning best practice. Providers who receive State funding for developmental/educational places will be required to meet these standards. Other providers who satisfy the required standards may obtain special recognition through the awarding of a Quality in Education (QE) mark (Ireland, 1999b, p. 54).

Further ambiguity surrounding State proposals for the provision of high quality early education services feature in the above excerpt. This passage describes a number of the factors involved in consideration of a high quality early education services. However, it then goes on to create confusion by proposing that minimum standards will only apply

to some of the factors, while recommendations for best practice will apply to others. It does not follow up this statement by mapping out clearly what the minimum standards will entail or what factors will be included in the recommendations for best practice. There is no further clarification of this throughout the White Paper; instead it refers to how research will further elucidate understanding of these concepts.

The ambiguous concept of the provision of high quality early education services remains prominent in policy discourse. In 2004 the Minister for Education outlined her priority areas for focusing ECE policy:

The third area on which I will focus is quality. It is not sufficient simply to provide funds for providers, be they in the education sector or in the child care sector, unless we can be sure quality control measures are in place. They will be my priorities rather than simply ensuring there will be a pre-school place for every child in the country (Hanafin, 2004).

The quality control measures are not elucidated here thus the understanding of what ‘high quality early education’ is, remains unclear.

### ***7.2.2 Age related: for over 3’s and under 6’s - PRE-SCHOOL***

Early education is constructed as an age related concern that is particularly suitable for, and thus directed towards, the older ages of early childhood. The Report of the Commission on the Family locates ECE as directed towards children aged over three: “there is clear evidence in support of the benefits to children on reaching age three of having opportunities to participate in quality early years services in nurseries, crèches and playgroups” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 65). This sentence constructs a notion that educational opportunities for young preschool children are seen only to be beneficial for the over 3’s. This idea is further reinforced throughout the Report where it includes recommendations specifically constructing ECE for the over three age group:

It is the Commission's view that the level of investment in children in infant classes in primary school should be matched by a similar level of investment in children in the earlier age-group from age three years until they start primary school (Ireland, 1998b, p. 243).

This sentiment is further echoed by the White Paper; it states that early education should “usually encompass both care and education, with the distinction between the two increasingly blurred as the age of the children decreases. Formal education, generally speaking, tends to become more important for older children” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 3).

The White Paper is somewhat contradictory about the age cohort the ECE policy encompasses; however where objectives are stated, they target the 3-4 year age group. Initially the White Paper refers to ECE policy as concerned with all ages of early childhood: “In line with national and international thinking, therefore, early childhood will be taken to mean children who have not yet reached their sixth birthday” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 4). Nevertheless, as the document develops, moving from discussion to the actual stating of objectives, there is much indecision and inconsistency regarding the age of early childhood. There are instances within which the importance of ECE from birth is recognised, whereas elsewhere in the document the consideration of age shifts from 0-6 years in favour of 3-6 years, whilst positioning 4-6 year olds as having early education provision available to them in the infant classes of primary school.

The rationale for lack of provision to the younger ages of early childhood is given in this excerpt where the White Paper begins to explicitly state its policy objectives as targeting 3-4 year olds:

Appropriate early childhood education programmes can be expensive to provide. Extending education provision generally to children aged less than four would have significant resource implications for other educational sectors. In this context, finance available for pre-school education is finite and must be allocated in areas of greatest inequity (Ireland, 1999b, p. 46).

This suggests that the State has no intention of investing in education for younger children, 0-3 years old, except in cases where they are funding specifically targeted interventions. The remit of the White Paper includes an aim to foster a readiness to learn in young children so that they are prepared for formal schooling “readiness to learn relates to the fact that children who begin schooling with solid foundations in place will be better placed to develop to their potential” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 15). That sentiment provides the White Paper with the rationale for the targeting of 3-4 year olds, which is the directly pre-school age for Irish children as there is a tendency for many to begin formal schooling from the age of 4: “If children have experienced quality early childhood education during the pre-school years, they will enter the early years of primary school with a disposition and in a state of readiness to learn” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 75). Despite the specific targeting of the 3-4 year age group as the age for ECE, and the importance attached to early education for preparing young children for school, the White Paper also persists in constructing the infant classes of primary school, for 4-6 year olds, as also being a part of the existing State provision of early childhood education in Ireland.

### ***7.2.3 In need of a Coordinated approach to develop***

There is a general acknowledgment of the previously uncoordinated and sometimes haphazard approach to ECE policy throughout the texts. The White Paper proposes to remedy this by advocating a more coordinated partnership approach that reflects the interests of all the relevant stakeholders in the ECE arena. The Commission Report acknowledged the existing problems and suggested a new more coordinated approach to organising ECEC policy, as contextualised under the catch all term of “childcare”:

No one government department can satisfactorily meet the care, socialisation, educational and equality requirements of a positive childcare service for children from 0-12 years. A comprehensive approach to the planning and development of childcare

provision to meet the needs of children and their parents requires greater co-ordination between all participants, the Government departments with a remit in childcare; their agencies; the voluntary and community sector interests; and the private sector (Ireland, 1998b, p. 246) .

In Dáil debates referring to the White Paper, the Minister for Education positioned the White Paper as the solution to the coordination problem: “There is a clear need, however, for co-ordination. That is the purpose of the White Paper on early childhood education” (Martin, 1999a). He further stated:

I am the first Minister for Education and Science to bring everybody involved in early education together under the one umbrella, the Forum on Early Childhood Education. There is a need for co-ordination. The Cabinet subcommittee, which is chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, is working with all the Departments involved in early childhood education provision (Martin, 1999a).

The White Paper develops the idea of better coordination with the policy objective of establishing an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) to further develop and coordinate the policy area, as well as the genesis of an Early Years Development Unit (EYDU) in the Department of Education. The coordinating role of the EYDU involves:

- coordination of policy and activities within the Department; in particular, ongoing liaison with the primary teacher, primary administration and special education sections will be necessary
- continuous contact with the ECEA; although policy and executive tasks will be split between the two organisations, ongoing exchange of information is essential to ensure that policy is adequately informed by reality “on the ground” and that implementation of policy is managed effectively by the Agency
- liaison with other Government Departments and agencies and others involved in the early childhood area (Ireland, 1999b, p. 133).

This excerpt shows the State’s continued inclusion of the infant classes of primary school as consideration of its existing provision of ECE. In fact if the list is situated in order of importance then this paragraph positions primary school provision as the foremost aspect of ECE, with others involved in the ECEC area being positioned as less important. Nevertheless, by setting out coordination tasks for the EYDU, the State does position itself as committed to achieving better synchronization within their approach to early childhood education policy.

The White Paper demonstrates a cycle of confusion with regard to considering the provision of ECE; it is caught between a discourse which locates the existing primary school provision for 4-6 year olds as evidence of State funded provision, and a discourse of developing the sector further with regard to a combination of private provision and targeted State funded provision for 3-4 year olds. The following excerpt from the White Paper is firmly situated within the latter discourse when it further rationalises the need for coordination, listing those who should be involved in such a coordinated approach:

coordination between the various stakeholders is essential to promote understanding, co-operation and effective provision and to avoid overlap and duplication of effort. An advisory expert group will therefore be established, drawn from parents, existing providers, trainers, researchers and academics, staff interests, national early childhood organisations, relevant Government Departments and agencies and other interested parties (Ireland, 1999b, p. 135).

The description of an advisory expert group and who may be included in it portrays a positive attitude towards developing the sector. However it does also pose the question as to why such a group was not in place prior to the publication of the White Paper.

Issues of coordination in the ECE sector were still very much apparent in 2004, as exemplified in this Dáil debate excerpt where the Minister for Education was asked:

if his attention has been drawn to the concerns expressed at a recent meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Science at the lack of co-ordination in the provision of pre-school education in view of the large number of Departments involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter (O'Sullivan, 2004a).

The Minister's response to this question was to provide some details of a committee, and a working group, which had both been established to consider coordination issues in the sector:

Recognising that responsibility for early childhood education and care is dispersed across many Departments and agencies, the Government established the Cabinet committee on children. To consider co-ordination issues in the child care and early education area, the Cabinet committee established an interdepartmental high level working group on child care and early childhood education in June 2003 (Dempsey, 2004).

There was no further explanation as to why this committee was only established four years following the publication of the White Paper; thus, the implication from this exchange is that previous discourse about prioritising the development of coordination in the sector had been relatively disingenuous.

#### **7.2.4 Targeted Service**

Prior to the publication of the documents in this sample, State provision of ECE had been delivered in the context of targeted services only, as described in The Commission Report:

To date, the role of the State in relation to the development of pre-school services in Ireland has been concentrated on provision for children of families who may be at risk of social, economic and educational disadvantage. There is a growing recognition of the significance of services for all children (Ireland, 1998b, p. 233).

This highlights the situation at that stage, where State organised and financed ECE was provided to children seen as at risk, usually in socially disadvantaged areas. Such a construction sees ECE as an interventionist strategy rather than as a necessary State provided service for all children. As policy developed, a more widespread acknowledgement of the benefits of early education for all young children was recognised. However, Irish policy objectives have continued to focus on targeting services. One of the key objectives of the White Paper is to “support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 14). The White Paper prioritises the targeting of services towards disadvantaged children and children with special needs in all contexts, including provisions for research, and evaluation:

particular emphasis will be given to longitudinal studies of early childhood education participants and to projects which focus on the disadvantaged and children with special needs (ibid., p. 61).

Evaluation will be undertaken at an aggregate level to assess the extent to which the White Paper objective – the attainment of lasting educational and developmental benefits for children, particularly the disadvantaged and those with special needs – is achieved (Ireland, 1999b, p. 124).

The social partnership documents also persist in contextualising ECE as an important ‘intervention’ for those children seen as having greater needs. Towards 2016 sets out policy actions under the heading of early childhood development and care stating that these goals will be achieved through:

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 will work together to complement and add value to childcare programmes in disadvantaged communities with a view to ensuring that the overall care and education needs of the children concerned are met in an integrated manner (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

Towards 2016 spells out quite literally that targeting is a focused and required policy action in order to achieve the early development and care goals it is concerned with. This excerpt also displays the collocation of the words care and education within an overall understanding of ECEC services as childcare, highlighting an understanding of the interlinked concepts of care and education but also collocating them with the targeting of disadvantaged communities.

#### ***7.2.5 Further conceptualisations of Early Education in Irish ECEC policy***

Early education is further constructed in the policy documents as a sector which is lacking in professional development and in need of a considered approach to issues of curriculum. It is constructed as a policy concern that responds to the needs of parents, and then further down the order of importance it is constructed as actually beneficial to children.



Early education is understood as a sector which is in need of professional development; “under the existing system, there are no minimum standards prescribed concerning the educational component of services or the training and qualifications of staff” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 22). The White Paper describes the status quo with regard to the training and qualifications of early education staff by describing the wide array of courses available:

The wide range of provision of pre-school services and the absence of regulation on training or qualifications has resulted in the development of “*a bewildering diversity of training courses and qualifications*”. Providers include the university sector, institutes of technology, PLC colleges, Montessori colleges and national representative organisations. Such a wide variety of provision facilitates greater choice and leads to competition, which in turn should ensure improvements in course quality. However, the ad hoc development of the area risks duplication of effort and inconsistency in standards (Ireland, 1999b, p. 30, emphasis in original).

On this matter, the White Paper engages in a cycle of contradiction by intimating that the wide availability of courses and choice within the sector is a positive, whilst also recognising the negatives and problems inherent in such a system which tends to lead to irregularity and a lack of coordination within the sector. Nevertheless with regard to this matter, the White Paper suggests that:

The State does not propose to introduce compulsory rationalisation of courses. Supply and demand, particularly in the context of the improved level of information which will be made available, should ensure the survival of the most effective courses (Ireland, 1999b, p. 59).

This implies that the White Paper is suggesting that the best of the available courses will naturally survive without any State intervention and that this will thus provide the sector with the well qualified early education staff that it requires. The State shifts the onus on to the course providers themselves to regulate the sector when they suggest that “dialogue and exchange of ideas between course providers will also be encouraged to improve coordination and quality” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 59).

With regard to the treatment of curriculum in the documents, the White Paper sets out its approach:

The aim of establishing curriculum standards, therefore, is to ensure that early childhood education provision is structured, developmental, of high quality and designed to create in young children a readiness to learn. Thus, curriculum guidelines, rather than prescribing specific curricular details, will outline the broad principles with which curricula should comply. Individual providers will have discretion to design and modify their particular curriculum within these guidelines (Ireland, 1999b, p. 56).

This excerpt is yet another example of the cycle of contradiction which permeates the White Paper; whilst highlighting the importance of structure and quality in early education, which should foster in young children a readiness to learn, the White Paper then goes on to recommend the development of guidelines for developing curricula, rather than one prescribed standardised ECE programme or curriculum. This seems to demonstrate a shying away from the development of a standardised basic approach to the provision of ECE services. Later the document suggests that:

the ECEA and the Department, in consultation with the various agencies, will also develop a recommended or “*specimen*” curriculum for pre-school children, which will provide more specific detail on content and methodology (Ireland, 1999b, p. 57, emphasis in original).

However, this specimen curriculum is positioned as something that “will develop over time in light of the outcome of research and development undertaken by or on behalf of the ECEA” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 57), rather than it being prioritised as a necessity to be delivered within a specific timeframe. Consequently, the curricular aspect of early education, particularly in relation to the development of some kind of standardised programme of ECE provision, has not been positioned as a priority in the development of policy for the sector<sup>58</sup>.

There is a much construction of early education as a service which is for the benefit of parents, positioning services as responding to parents needs and weighted in favour of providing parents with choice in this regard. The Commission Report begins in this vein by constructing childcare and early education as something that is necessary “to meet

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<sup>58</sup> The issue of an ECE curriculum is further discussed in the addendum to chapter 8 which explores the texts related to the Free Pre-School Year.

the common needs of all parents for social support and for quality early experiences for their young children” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 232), and as a service which is “needed throughout the country to support parents with their child-rearing responsibilities” (ibid.). This understanding of early education thus sees it as more in the business of the provision of care spaces as a support to parents, rather than as educational and developmental services for children. The White Paper is more specific in its construction of parent’s role in early education, citing parents as a necessary element of successful ECE programmes. Accordingly there is a whole chapter devoted to discussing the role of parents in early education: “The active involvement of parents at all stages of the policy formulation process is recognised as vital to the quality of education policy development and the effectiveness of its implementation” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 111). The White Paper subsequently sets out the enhancement of parental involvement in ECE as one of its key goals.

Despite the prioritising of the other concerns discussed in this chapter, there is also an acknowledgment within the policy texts that early education is beneficial to children, and to the wider society. The Commission Report constructs early education as a beneficial service: “there is a growing recognition that quality early years’ experiences are valuable and important to all children” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 232). The Commission Report further contextualises early education in terms of the benefits it presents to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds while also recognising the fact that the benefits are advantageous to all children:

The role of good quality early education in compensating for social and background disadvantage and in improving educational achievement and life chances is well documented. There is a growing recognition that these services are valuable and important to all children (Ireland, 1998b, p. 243).

In providing a rationale for the provision of ECE programmes the Commission Report highlights the long term advantages of the provision of early education:

good quality programmes have an impact on children's aspirations, motivation and school commitment, as well as long-term positive effects on the quality of life of the adult (Ireland, 1998b, p. 269).

The White Paper also constructs early education in terms of its long term advantages and overwhelming benefits to children, while still prioritising the targeting of services in its policy objectives. Nevertheless, the benefits to children which the White Paper highlights are chiefly in terms of educational benefits:

This White Paper seeks to ensure lasting benefits in terms of educational achievement for all children. In this context, it focuses on supporting and developing early childhood education which prepares children for the transition to school and creates in them a disposition and state of readiness to learn (Ireland, 1999b, p. 40).

#### ***7.2.6 Summary of the construction of Early Education in Irish ECEC policy***

The construction of key understandings of early education are mostly developed in the White Paper and the Commission Report; the remaining ECEC policy documents continue the tendency to characterise early education as a part of the catch all term of 'childcare' rather than as a distinct standalone entity. Early education is mostly constructed as a policy objective concerned with delivering high quality services; this concept of 'high quality' is a relatively ambiguous concept and has not been determined in any consensual tangible sense. Early education is also constructed as an age related concern which specifically targets the 3-4 year age group for 'pre-school services' as most Irish children start formal primary schooling from the age of 4. This pre-school, 3-4 years of age, understanding of early education is centred on producing children who are ready for school. This follows the overarching neoliberal view where the "underlying principle for the investment into early learning is based on human capital theory that seeks to produce a future productive citizenry" (Millei, 2008; Millei & Imre, 2009, p. 281). Early education has been recognised as an uncoordinated and unregulated

policy area, lacking in a standardised approach to training and professionalism, and also as in need of a drastic overhaul in relation to the approach to policy. It is agreed across most of the documents that this can be tackled by having a coordinated approach which includes inputs from all of the relevant stakeholders; however children are not included as relevant stakeholders. Despite widespread discussion about all the benefits of early education across the documents, for parents, children and the wider society in general, it remains constructed as a targeted policy approach. Early education in Irish policy discourse has predominantly been understood as an interventionist service for children who are perceived to be ‘at risk’ of educational failure due to socio-economic disadvantage.

### **7.3 What is childcare?**

The knowledge constructed about childcare is explicitly realised in the National Childcare Strategy, with similar discourses on childcare permeating the other policy texts. Childcare is thus predominantly understood amidst the following knowledge constructions: as a policy area that requires a coordinated approach from all relevant stakeholders to develop properly; as services which encapsulate both care and education as intertwined and interdependent concepts; as a sector that is not characterised by career professionalism or through an adequate infrastructure; as a service fulfilling an equality agenda which is predominately directed towards working parents; as a service which supports families and the local community; and as a policy objective striving to deliver high quality services.

#### ***7.3.1 In need of a more coordinated approach to develop***

Within the policy documents, there is an acknowledgment of the previously uncoordinated and sometimes haphazard approach to childcare policy, and a consensus

on tackling this issue. The Commission Report constructs the childcare policy area as being in need of a coordinated approach and refers to the establishment of the Expert Working Group on Childcare, following recommendations from Partnership 2000:

a comprehensive approach to the planning and development of childcare provision to meet the needs of children and their parents requires greater co-ordination between all participants, the Government departments with a remit in childcare; their agencies; the voluntary and community sector interests; and the private sector (Ireland, 1998b, p. 246).

The Commission Report further recommends that “the need for a co-ordinating mechanism at national level should be a priority in relation to the national framework for the development of the childcare sector being prepared by the Expert Working Group” (ibid., p. 246). The Childcare Strategy took the need for a coordinating mechanism on board, and the Expert Working Group recommended approaching the development of policy from a building on existing provision perspective. They also “agreed that harnessing and co-ordinating of the services which already exist in various Government Departments, State Agencies and the voluntary sector represented the best way forward for development of the sector” (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxv). The modus operandi of the Childcare Strategy was to elicit “a partnership approach at national and local level ... to ensure cohesion, co-ordination and effective collaboration at all levels: policy, planning and local implementation” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 50). This partnership structure would thus be imperative in “facilitating the development of multi-functional, accessible and quality childcare services” (ibid., p. 72). The National Childcare Strategy subsequently recommended “an enhanced role for the State” in the childcare sector which would be organised thus:

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, should be the designated Lead Department with respect to the National Strategy for Childcare. This remit would be to facilitate the coordination of the range of childcare services across departments, to strengthen and enhance the interface between all departments with a direct and indirect role in childcare. An Interdepartmental Policy Committee on Childcare be established which will operate as a link between Cabinet and the National Childcare Management Committee. The Interdepartmental Policy Committee should also consider the recommendations of other relevant reports including the Report of the Commission on

the Family (1998) and the Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998) (Ireland, 1999a, p. 76).

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform was designated as the lead department for the Childcare Strategy, because of its equality remit.

The National Childcare Strategy recommended the establishment of county childcare committees whose “primary focus would be the development, implementation and monitoring of a seven year County Childcare Plan” (ibid., p. 75). These committees would be monitored by the National Childcare Management Committee whose key objective would be to “support, appraise, resource and monitor County Childcare Plans in addition to the co-ordination of existing national developments in the childcare field, and informing national policy development” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 76). The National Childcare Strategy evidently had a very clear plan to attempt to develop, coordinate and monitor the delivery of policy whilst facilitating a partnership approach; however, plans on how to include the participation of both children and their parents in the partnership approach were less clear.

### ***7.3.2 Childcare as both Care and Education***

There is a tendency within most of the policy documents to separate out the concepts of care and education, as individual concepts, and then simultaneously integrate them again under the catch-all term of ‘childcare’. The National Childcare Strategy and the Social Partnership agreements have constructed ECE as part and parcel of the high quality childcare that they are concerned with developing. The National Childcare Strategy’s understanding of the term ‘childcare’ is as follows:

The Expert Working Group agreed that the term ‘childcare’, as used by the Group would refer to services providing care and education, which are viewed by the Expert Working Group as being complementary and inseparable. This is to distinguish the use of the term from its use within the wider health sector, where the term ‘Child Care

Services' refers to the variety of services for children up to the age of 18 years in need of the care and protection of the State (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxii).

The Strategy subsequently describes the services involved in its understanding of childcare, they are:

services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí, daycare services, crèches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, *but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded* (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxiii, emphasis added).

Taking young children's learning in to consideration, the Strategy takes a stance that it would be "neither possible nor useful to separate out the education and care elements of early childhood services ... All services should incorporate learning opportunities side by side with high quality care" (Ireland, 1999a, p. 45). Thus the Strategy creates an understanding of both care and education as integral aspects of quality childcare services. The White Paper constructs ECEC services in a similar vein while also conversely separating out the concepts of care and education, particularly so when it refers to the 0-3 years age group; "care is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years ... education is a more significant need of older children" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 4). A further example of the integration of both the concepts in the White Paper arises where it seems to suggest that the traditional perception of ECEC services as care services prevails, thus warning of the need to have both concepts complementing each other: "all early childhood services must encompass, not only childcare, but also education. Put simply, care without education cannot succeed in promoting educational objectives" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 11). Later the White Paper collocates early education and childcare as inextricably linked, when it warns of the need to continually recognise both in all service development and provision:

the need for seamless provision of both early education and childcare is a continuing theme of the White Paper. The structure devised must, therefore, facilitate provision of care and education in an integrated manner and must enable coordination of strategy and exchange of information between the main players (Ireland, 1999b, p. 131).



The construction of ‘childcare’ as embodying services which provide the seamless provision of both care and education to young children continues in the National Children’s Strategy. Objective A from the fourteen objectives which are set out to ensure that “children will receive quality supports and services” (Ireland, 2000, p. 11) states that “children’s early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures” (ibid., p. 50). It describes the aim of this objective as ensuring “that all children have access to quality support services offering early education, developmental and socialisation opportunities” (Ireland, 2000, p. 50). This understanding of ECEC reinforces the use of the catch-all concept of ‘childcare’, within which services are understood as encompassing both care and education. The Towards 2016 social partnership agreement locates childcare under the umbrella term of *Early Childhood Development and Care* and subsequently pledges the “creation of 50,000 new childcare places, including 10,000 pre-school places and 5,000 after-school places, as part of the €2.65 billion National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010” (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42); thus persisting in also locating early education within the overall concept of childcare.

During a Dáil debate on ECE in 2004, the Minister for Education continued to collocate the concepts of care and education for young children, within the ‘childcare’ iterated as ‘ECCE’ term, when she discussed future approaches to policy development:

I want to ensure that any future actions by my Department in the area of early childhood education are based on a collaborative approach with other Departments involved in the overall early childhood care and education sector. Meeting the overall objective of providing the best possible service to the communities and children involved requires that any educational provision by my Department take account of child care measures under the remit of other Departments (Hanafin, 2004).

This statement by the Minister highlighted the persistent multi-departmental approach to ECEC services and pointed to the continuing lack of coordination across the sector.

### **7.3.3 A sector which is not seen as professional**

Childcare is recognised as an underdeveloped sector in terms of professionalism, requiring ongoing development in terms of training and education, standards and regulations, infrastructure and wider development of the sector. The Childcare Strategy locates childcare provision in Ireland as severely underdeveloped; it describes the development of childcare as similarly hindered by a lack of financial resources and a lack of a childcare infrastructure and also by the lack of “support systems to secure and sustain the development and provision of appropriate childcare responses” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 37).

There have been issues in implementing and maintaining standards and regulations across the childcare sector. The National Childcare Strategy referred to the existing *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* and raised concerns about a number of areas stating that the regulations were perceived by the Expert Working Group as “limited in their provisions” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 23). They listed six areas of concern within the existing standards: “(1) notification, (2) training and experience, (3) exemptions, (4) implementation process, (5) planning and (6) the effects of implementation” (ibid.). The main recommendation emanating from this was that the Child Care regulations should be reviewed and revised. The regulations were revised in 2006 and the Towards 2016 Report subsequently recommended they be published and thus begin to establish “improved administrative systems to facilitate a national standardised inspection service” (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42). Across the policy documents in the corpus there is no consensus on how to successfully implement and monitor thorough standards and regulations within the ECEC policy area.

Within the need for professionalization discourse it is recognised that new approaches to training and education need to be developed, in order to make childcare a viable professional sector. The Childcare Strategy was open in acknowledging the situation with regard to childcare training in Ireland which “has developed on an ad hoc basis with the result that there is a bewildering diversity of training courses and qualifications currently on offer” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 27). The Strategy then further recognises the need for ongoing training within the sector so staff can “keep up to date and extend or improve their methods through planning and in-service training” (ibid., p. 28). In relation to training for childcare, the Strategy recommends that there should be a national framework for qualifications:

The national qualifications framework for childcare should provide progressive pathways of awards, which can be achieved through formal and informal education and training programmes or through the accreditation of prior learning ... *A minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have a grant eligible basic training of at least three years at a post-18 level, which incorporates both the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development* (Ireland, 1999a, p. 29, emphasis in original).

In 2006 a childcare related policy action in Towards 2016 was concerned with the:

development of a National Childcare Training Strategy which will aim to provide 17,000 childcare training places during 2006-2010, and include quality and training provisions of the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

This illustrates that the development of the sector with regard to training and qualifications in childcare, remained relatively underdeveloped in 2006.

The childcare sector has been further characterised as being women’s work and generally low paid.. The Childcare Strategy confirms the general perception of childcare: “characterised by low status, poor working conditions and an absence of a career structure. Childcare is traditionally viewed as “women’s work” and is generally not well paid or well regarded” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 29). As part of its proposals for developing the childcare policy area, the Strategy states that specific measures are

necessary “in order to bring childcare out of the informal economy and facilitate its development as a legitimate business within the services sector” (ibid., p. 58). The Strategy further recommended the establishment of a national pay scale “to reflect the social and economic value of the work undertaken by childcare workers” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 32).

#### ***7.3.4 Fulfilling an Equality Agenda***

The equality agenda with which the National Childcare Strategy is concerned has been heavily influenced by the European Union, as is illustrated in this quote from the Commission Report:

In particular, the EU’s competence in relation to quality of treatment and opportunity for men and women in the labour market and the need for measures to combine family responsibilities and occupational ambitions, has led the various institutions of the EU, including the EU Parliament and the Council of Ministers, to take up the call for quality services for young children (Ireland, 1998b, p. 239).

This excerpt positions quality services for young children as a response to adults needs to balance their work and family responsibilities rather than as a direct response to the consideration of young children themselves. The Childcare Strategy was expressly influenced by the issue of gender equality; “gender equality is, arguably, the most influential issue affecting the area of policy in childcare at present” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 4). The Childcare Strategy comes from the perspective that “the provision of quality, affordable and accessible childcare is recognised as a mechanism to achieve equality of opportunity in education, training and employment for men and women” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 46). The Commission Report previously highlighted the two sides of the equality drive for the development of childcare provision, referring to both the needs of children, and their parents:

The rationale for the provision of services for young children is entirely centred on the beneficial effects for all children, in terms of educational and social development. However, the issue cannot be divorced from the growing demand for childcare services

in Ireland as parents struggle to balance their need to work outside the home with their child-rearing responsibilities (Ireland, 1998b, p. 269).

While this excerpt highlights acknowledgement of the rationale for providing services for young children to reap benefits for them, it is still also contextualised in terms of parents needs to balance their work and family responsibilities. The White Paper located the perceived crisis in childcare as strongly linked to developments in the labour market, “the needs of employers for increased numbers of workers, as well as increased participation in the labour force, have simultaneously increased the demand for and reduced the supply of childcare places” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 5). The National Children’s Strategy constructs the equality agenda within childcare similarly and makes an assurance that the “substantial investment in the development of our childcare sector will continue and further inroads will be made to support parents in reconciling their work and family lives” (Ireland, 2000, p. 94).

Discussing the equality issue, the Childcare Strategy refers to the traditional understanding of childcare which was almost exclusively private and at parents’ discretion, an approach which the Strategy states as having “worked while we had a high rate of unemployment and while the majority of women opted to leave the workforce to care for their own children” (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxi). However, it also positions the need to balance work and family between parents as directly related to mothers making the choice to return to work, as exemplified in this excerpt:

Changed social and economic conditions and expectations have resulted in more women opting to combine work and family responsibilities at a time when the availability of childminders and places in childcare centres are contracting (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxi).

Thus, this understanding persists in locating childcare as the responsibility of women.

The location of childcare within this equality perspective reinforces the importance weighted to affording parental choice within all policy provision for young children. In this regard, ECEC policy is persistently contextualised with a focus on parents more so than children. An example of this persistence exists in the introduction of the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) in 2006; it was described as a measure which supported parents in making “the best childcare choices for their children” (OMCYA, 2006d). It consisted of a payment of €1000, paid in quarterly instalments of €250, to parents in respect of each child under the age of six until that child’s sixth birthday. In the launch speech for the ECS, the Minister for Children reiterated the focus of all government early years policy as facilitating parental choice as a priority:

I’d also like to stress that the issue of parents’ choice is fundamental to the Government’s childcare policy. That is why we decided to introduce the Early Childcare Supplement, because it is paid to all parents of children under six, regardless of whether they are being cared for in a crèche, by a childminder, or indeed by one of their parents. 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 (Lenihan, 2006).

This sentiment persists in locating the State as in the business of supporting parents with their ECEC choices for their children, rather than as responsible for the direct provision of ECEC services for young children.

### ***7.3.5 Childcare as a Social Support***

Childcare is further constructed within an overarching frame as a service which operates as a general social support. Childcare is constructed as particularly beneficial and supportive to those families who are on low incomes and in need of extra social support within the community. The Commission Report refers to this when it highlights “the need for childcare support for parents working full-time in the home and managing on a low income, often with no means of social support and no recognition of their valuable work” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 65). The Childcare Strategy locates childcare similarly, when

it draws attention to the important role childcare has to play in “combating family stress and social exclusion, particularly within families experiencing poverty and disadvantage” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 47). The Commission Report envisions childcare as a service at the centre of the community: “community-based facilities to meet the needs of different groups, including lone-parent families and children with special needs, should be a core feature of a national strategy on childcare” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 106). Nevertheless, the Commission Report cautions that targeted policy approaches to childcare services which focus on communities with greater needs and social disadvantage, have the potential to detract from “the wider benefits of early education for the general population of children” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 270). This highlights the existing policy dichotomy at the time, where childcare was seen as “minding babies” for working parents whilst early childhood education was seen as targeting educational interventions to those young children perceived to be “at risk” from educational failure.

Locating childcare within the context of its services as a social support, the Childcare Strategy sets out a number of principles which should be ingrained in all childcare services; they should be:

- within the local community and within easy reach of the population they seek to serve
- flexible
- able to adapt to the needs of the community
- multi-functional in order to provide for a variety of needs of children and families
- staffed by well-trained workers who have appropriate pay and conditions (Ireland, 1999a, p. 39).

With regard to rural areas, the Childcare Strategy discusses how childcare services need to be integrated into rural development plans, but only makes recommendations in relation to more general social exclusion terms: “the needs of children and families experiencing poverty, disadvantage or social exclusion should be prioritised and

resources targeted accordingly” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 40). Later the Towards 2016 Report continued to partially construct childcare in terms of its merits as a social support, iterating the following as one of its policy actions in relation to its overall objective for childcare:

In order to facilitate the provision of after-school facilities, the parties agree to support and encourage school facilities being made available for childcare provision as a key addition to the utilisation, development and support of local community facilities (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

Such discourse surrounding the construction of childcare as a social support suggests locating childcare centres in existing school premises, this is chiefly due to a dual concern of cost-effectiveness, alongside the re-construction of schools to be understood as the centre of local communities, hubs for lifelong learning and so on.

### ***7.3.6 ‘High Quality’ Childcare in Irish ECEC policy discourse***

The ambiguous concept of ‘high quality’ also reappears in wider discourse of childcare. The Childcare Strategy states that “the need to ensure good quality childcare services and equal access for all children to quality services is central to the proposed National Childcare Strategy” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 52). The Report subsequently lists fifteen characteristics as integral parts of a high quality childcare service; a quality childcare service is one that:

- offers both care and play based educational opportunities appropriate to individual children’s age and stage of development;
- provides a high quality environment with equipment, materials, activities and interactions appropriate to the age and stage of development of each child being catered for;
- has a high adult/child ratio;
- has carers/personnel who are trained and registered with the lead agency;
- offers children continuity of relationships with adults and other children;
- works in partnership with parents of children attending;
- listens to children and gives due consideration to their wishes;
- provides equal opportunities for all children attending;
- promotes the cultural needs of children;
- provides adequate remuneration and working conditions for carers/personnel in recognition of the importance of their role;
- provides equal opportunities for carers/personnel;



- provides carers/personnel with support and opportunities for inservice training;
- in partnership with parents, links children into other appropriate community activities and services e.g. library, school;
- positively asserts the value of diversity;
- is accessible to all (Ireland, 1999a, p. 49).

A number of the final recommendations within the Strategy go some way toward realising some of these quality constructions while others remain undeveloped in terms of objectives for achieving them.

### ***7.3.7 Summary of the construction of Childcare in Irish ECEC policy***

The childcare sector has been positioned as a previously neglected policy area that requires a coordinated approach to develop properly. The Childcare Strategy lead the way in discourse on how to change this state of affairs, setting up a clear approach to coordination. Nonetheless, seven years later, the Towards 2016 report continued to refer to the need for a more coordinated approach, highlighting a lack of progress in this area. Policy discourses highlight an understanding of childcare as an overarching concept of services for young children, encompassing services which perceive both care and education as intertwined and interdependent concepts. Within that understanding, the increased availability of childcare spaces is seen as the most urgent need, ahead of any further development of the quality of the sector. References to ‘high quality’ remain ambiguous despite some attempt at clarification in the Childcare Strategy particularly and increasing reference to the development of standards and regulatory procedures. Nevertheless, such categorising of quality through list form regulations and standards has been criticised elsewhere for its potential to reduce quality to merely “a prescribed, technical list of practices and outcomes” (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007, p. 264). Childcare has long been seen as a policy area with an inadequate infrastructure, which is undervalued, seen as low paid and as work that is primarily to be undertaken by women. Discourse in this respect has not shifted much further away from this perspective,

despite the gender equality remit of the Childcare Strategy. Thus the gender equality remit mostly centres on achieving equality of access to the labour market for parents, through developing childcare services for them to avail of. These childcare services are further constructed as a wider social support to both families and local communities.

#### **7.4 Discourses of “the Child” in the policy texts**

The construction of “the child” in Irish ECEC policy discourses is an interesting window in to the views of the policy makers. A 1998 Dáil debate which centred on discussion of the *UN Report on the Rights of the Child on Child Care Services in Ireland* highlighted some of the dominant constructions of the child, which were later seen echoed in the policy texts in the research sample. The Minister for Children positioned the Convention as a positive contribution to how we view children:

The convention adopts a radically different approach to children than we are used to. It presents challenges to the State, society generally, schools, everybody dealing with children and, in particular, parents. No one should be afraid of the principles set out in it. We will all benefit from living in a society where the position of children is recognised and cherished (Fahey, 1998b).

Other ministers characterised the Convention as a benefit, particularly in the context of a protectionist view of children, where children are seen as becomings in need of support and protection:

The convention is primarily concerned with ensuring that the rights of children are properly protected and that, where children are in difficulty, due to family problems, abandonment, neglect, personal difficulties or difficulties due to circumstances over which they have no control, certain minimum standards will be applied (Shatter, 1998).

Another minister gave an account of some of the views of the members of the CRC, in particularly how they viewed Ireland’s attitude to children:

A Russian member of the committee complained that Ireland has a “patronising approach to children”. He continued: “The child does not feel himself a full member of society.” The chairwoman of the committee, who is from Barbados, said that the submissions by the Irish “lacked the sense of the children as people”. She said there was much talk about the protection of children, but not enough talk about their empowerment. She felt in terms of Irish policy that children were invisible (Gormley, 1998).

The ECEC policy documents construct the child in early childhood as a myriad of different ages, within an overall consensus of age cohort of 0-6 years. The child is further constructed as in need of support from the state, the wider society and the local community to experience a positive childhood. Within that the child also requires access to widely available good quality services and other supports which will help children to become well rounded adults. The child is largely constructed as a dependant; dependent directly on their parents or families for education, care and support, and also dependent on the wider society in which they live. This ties in with the construction of children as in need of interventions in order to ensure the optimum experience of childhood, as well as constructing interventions in terms of targeting services to children ‘in need’. Children are also constructed as active participants, nay citizens, within society and as valued members of that society. With regard to ECE specifically, children are predominantly constructed as in need of ECE in order to be prepared for the transition to formal schooling in the primary school sector.

#### ***7.4.1 Knowledge constructed about the Age of the Child in Early Childhood***

The dissonance concerning the age of early childhood is the most prevalent discourse about the child within the policy documents. There is a general confusion over whether to adhere to a general 0-6 years age composition or 3-6 years, or whether to be more specific and target the general pre-school age (as it is in Ireland) of 3-4 years. Despite the mandatory school age being 6 years of age, children in Ireland generally start school from the age of 4. The Commission Report splits the age of early childhood into two categories; 0-3 years of age, in terms of supporting parents financially to choose their own care/educational arrangements privately; then 3 years to age 4/5 years as the age cohort in need of State supported provision of ECEC services. The Report states that “for children aged three and upwards there is a growing recognition of the benefits of

early education and participation in quality services outside the home” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 241). However, it further states that “the reality is that most four year olds and almost all five year olds are attending primary school” (ibid., p. 243).

At the launch of the Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, the Minister for Education spoke about the age of early childhood understood by the Forum, “in an important statement, the area covered by the Forum was not just pre-school education, but also all children up to age 6” (Martin, 1998). He reiterated the same point in the Dáil during a debate in advance of the publication of the White Paper the following year, “everyone at the forum on early education emphasised the importance of the continuum from zero to six years” (Martin, 1999b). Thus the White Paper initially locates the age of early childhood as 0-6 years, but further into the document it begins to refine the age for the provision of services to 3-6 years. It positions the 0-3 years age cohort as in receipt of private or parent-led care and early education in the home, and not as the focus of State service provision:

Care is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years and, because education is a more significant need of older children, the principal, though not exclusive, policy focus of this White Paper is on children aged between 3 and 6 years (Ireland, 1999b, p. 4).

The document further focuses in on the 3-4 year old age group for actual policy interventions/actions: “in particular, proposals will focus on meeting the developmental needs of children aged 3 to 4” (Ireland, 1999b, pp. 4-5). The White Paper rationalises this by stating that children aged 4 and over are well catered for with regard to their early educational needs, through the infant classes in the primary school system, “an extensive State-funded system of primary education is already available for children aged 4 to 6 and it is not proposed to put in place a parallel pre-school system for this age-group” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 16).

The *National Childcare Strategy* is concerned with the care of children from 0-12. With regard to children of early childhood age, the Childcare Strategy considers the needs of children under 3, advocating a care led approach to their needs:

Children under three need to be nurtured in a safe, supportive environment, in which they are given appropriate experiences which provide them with opportunities to learn. The particular needs of very young children include consistency and continuity of care, stimulation and routine (Ireland, 1999a, p. 53).

This excerpt does however highlight an understanding of the need for under-3's to be provided with opportunities to learn, taking a combined care and education approach. The *National Children's Strategy*, on the other hand, does not specify age when it sets out its targets in relation to ECEC policy; the objectives are directed towards pre-school children with no age cohort identified. It references both the National Childcare Strategy and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education in terms of stating the proposed development of policy initiatives. *Towards 2016* subsequently located the age of early childhood in tandem with Barcelona targets which aimed to make "childcare available to 90% of children aged between 3 and the mandatory school age ... by 2010" (Ireland, 2006b, p. 42).

#### ***7.4.2 In need of support to have a 'Good Childhood'***

The National Children's Strategy and *Towards 2016* have constructed a somewhat agentic child, who is an active contributor to their own lives, but is also in need of support from their family and wider society to enjoy an optimal experience of childhood. The Commission Report also used this construction to frame the argument for early education policy interventions, stating that:

The approach to policy in this sphere must be child centred focusing on children's rights to an optimal experience of being a child and supporting parents in their choices in relation to the care and education of their young children (Ireland, 1998b, p. 242).

The recognition of children as rights holders is positive in this context, however it is also clearly being subordinated to supporting the choices of parents, since children are

recognised as dependant on their parents. The White Paper sets out its early education policy as being inclusive of delivering a good childhood to children; it positions ECE as being “child-centred, providing children with the opportunity to enhance all aspects of their development” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 14). The White Paper also clearly states that “all children should have the opportunity to reach their full developmental and educational potential” (ibid., p. 45).

The National Children’s Strategy constructs childhood as being an experience which needs to be enriched to result in children becoming responsible and active adult citizens:

Children actively shape their own lives and the lives of those around them while at the same time needing the support of many people if they are to make the most of their childhood, to enjoy it to the full and to prepare themselves to take their place as responsible adults (Ireland, 2000, p. 6).

The Children’s Strategy positions both families, and wider society, as having an important role in supporting children to have a good childhood. The Children’s Strategy is unique in positioning children as people with interests and culture, rather than just as subjects of needs and services: “children are more than mere consumers of services, such as education and health services, they also need opportunities to relax, have fun, exercise their imaginations and cultivate a sense of the aesthetic” (Ireland, 2000, p. 46).

The Agenda for Children’s Services contextualises its core objective as being concerned with providing children with a positive and enriching experience of childhood.

At the core of The Agenda for Children’s Services is the promotion of what we want for our children – good outcomes: the best possible conditions, situations and circumstances to live their lives to their full potential. Outcomes are about both what is happening now in children’s lives and what may happen for them in the future. Outcomes address both the ‘being’ and the ‘becoming’ of childhood (Ireland, 2007a, p. 12).

Nevertheless, the Agenda’s reliance on the concept of good outcomes suggests that there were some conceptual barriers to the acceptance of children as beings and active

citizens in the now. This implies a conceptual difficulty with the recognition of children as citizens in their own right.

#### ***7.4.3 Dependant on others, particularly Parents***

All of the policy documents construct children as dependants to some extent. Children are constructed for the most part as directly dependant on their parents, but they are also seen as dependant on the State and wider society. The Commission Report positions itself as concerned with children receiving the best care possible, however in doing this it positions children as directly dependant on their parents by stating that “parents are affirmed by the State and the wider community as the primary carers and educators of their children” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 55).

The White Paper constructs the child in early education as having been dependant on their parents for their initial education and care; positioning parents as best placed to discuss their children’s educational needs. Thus the White Paper positions parents as important and vital contributors to the development of early education for young children:

Each child is unique and has specific needs, qualities and characteristics which parents are best placed to identify. By participating in meaningful and regular dialogue with teaching staff, parents may communicate such information to schools and pre-schools (Ireland, 1999b, p. 112).

The National Children’s Strategy looks at children as dependent, not just on their parents and families but also on the wider community. This dependency is characterised by the need for this wider community to provide appropriate supports and services to enrich children’s lives:

Essential supports and services are provided for children through the primary, social networks of family, extended family and community, known as the informal supports, and through the formal support services provided by the voluntary sector, commercial

sector, the State and its agencies. These provide the conduit through which children draw the supports and services they need and benefit from. Supporting this 'social capital' is a central theme of the Strategy (Ireland, 2000, p. 25).

The Children's Strategy constructs these networks within which the child resides as their social capital. This notion ties in with the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998); the child is viewed as an integral part of, and as an actor in the whole world around her, and all the systems involved in a child's life, for instance, family, school, culture, are significant contexts.

Towards 2016 continues to construct children as dependant on their parents and dichotomously recognises children as active agents on the one hand, while on the other hand treats children as a by-product of the more important social structure of the family.

Every child should grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, to nurture and care for the child, and foster the child's development and full and equal participation in society (Ireland, 2006b, p. 41).

This reflects a strong undercurrent within all Irish ECEC policy that persists in constructing children as becomings rather than beings through continuously positioning children as dependant on adults. Despite recognising children as active agents in their own lives, they are also persistently constructed in the context of the family, as opposed to being seen as truly individual. This is particularly evident within the constant importance attached to parental choice within ECEC policy.

#### ***7.4.4 In need of Interventions***

The word 'interventions' is used in a number of different ways in relation to the construction of the child in Irish ECEC policy discourses. Predominantly it is used to characterise a child who is in need of ECEC interventions as extra assistance, and has greater developmental and educational needs. Elsewhere, references to interventions for children are used liberally throughout the documents to characterise all children as in



need of some assistance within a variety of aspects of their lives in order to lead a more fulfilling and enriched life. The National Children's Strategy and Towards 2016 particularly construct a child who is in need of interventions which are facilitated by the adult world, in order to lead a more fulfilling life characterised by participation in sports, recreational activities, artistic pursuits and other cultural activities that help to foster a responsible and active citizen.

With regard to ECEC in particular, all of the documents tend to construct a usual child for whom they generally devise ECEC policy for, with additional strategies being devised for those children who are constructed as particularly "in need" of early education. These are typically children from disadvantaged communities and/or children who have special needs. An example of this exists in Towards 2016, which positions the first of its high level objectives as to "enhance early education provision for children from disadvantaged communities and for those with special needs" (Ireland, 2006b, p. 31). Interventionist strategies are most often targeted towards disadvantaged and special needs children.

Further discourses of interventions construct all children as in need of being provided with appropriate ECEC services in order to enhance their development. The Commission Report leads this sentiment on interventionist ECEC services:

Children have needs for socialisation, for recreation and for opportunities for exploration irrespective of their parents' employment status. Quality services for children in nurseries/ crèches and playgroups can meet these needs while supporting parents with their childcare needs, whether their choice is to work in the home or outside the home (Ireland, 1998b, p. 243).

This excerpt illustrates how the construction of children being in need of ECEC interventions is often directly linked to the notion that services for children must also support parent's choices. In terms of lifelong benefits for all children, the White Paper

states that “high-quality early education can make the crucial difference in helping each child develop to their full potential” (Ireland, 1999b, p. vi). The White Paper further elaborates that:

a child’s early learning provides the foundation for later learning, so the sooner intervention is begun the greater the opportunity and likelihood for the child to go on to learn more complex skills and have development enhanced (Ireland, 1999b, p. 83).

This constructs early education as an “early intervention”; therefore the understanding is that the earlier that their educational development begins, the more the child will benefit from it. This notion runs contrary to the White Paper’s stated aim of targeting the 3-4 year age group specifically.

The White Paper also constructs a child who is in need of ECEC interventions to assist them in coping with transitions from one form of education to another. The White Paper constructs ECEC, in this instance, as an intervention which is suitable for guiding the child “in need” into formal schooling with the minimum of upset. To justify this point, it states that “studies have shown that quality early education can have a significant impact on children’s capacity to cope with the transition to formal schooling and to develop a capacity to learn” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 8).

#### ***7.4.5 Valued Members of Society***

There is a widespread understanding of childhood throughout the National Children’s Strategy which describes children as valued members of society who should be treated accordingly. This sentiment is further alluded to in both the Agenda for Children’s Services, and Towards 2016. The Children’s Strategy sets out its construction of recognising children as valued members of society in the Minister for Children’s foreword: “all of us who work with children now realise that children’s views should be heard, their contribution to society valued and their role as citizens recognised” (Ireland,

2000). The Strategy constructs children as valued members of society, “children matter ... The National Children’s Strategy is an opportunity to enhance the status and further improve the quality of life of Ireland’s children” (Ireland, 2000, p. 6). The Strategy also goes as far as to hold up children as an integral part of a society who fulfil a role that is unique to their stage of life alone, when it states that “children deserve to be highly valued for the unique contribution they make through just being children” (ibid.).

#### ***7.4.6 Need to be Prepared for formal schooling***

The child has been largely constructed as in need of ECE in order to be properly prepared for formal schooling in primary school. This notion is predominantly set out in the White Paper where ECE is described as an integral tool in helping to create children who are attending primary school “ready to learn”:

Early childhood education will engender in children a disposition and state of readiness to learn in both formal and non-formal settings. Disposition to learn involves the development of social skills and behaviour patterns in young children which will facilitate their integration into a formal education environment. This will ensure that children will adjust well to the transition to the primary school system and culture and have the capacity and motivation to master new skills and challenges (Ireland, 1999b, pp. 14-15).

This discourse of preparing children for formal schooling, in order to be ready to learn, engenders an understanding of ECE as encompassing the teaching of young children to behave accordingly within the conventions attached to the formal education system. The White Paper further clarifies the benefits inherent within the concept of readiness to learn stating that “children who begin schooling with solid foundations in place will be better placed to develop to their potential” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 15).

#### ***7.4.7 Summary of discourses of “The Child” in the policy texts***

Discourses of the child have predominantly, and unnecessarily, centred on constructing an age of early childhood which corresponds to the policy that is being developed. The

lack of consensus on age throughout the policy discourse has contributed to the disjointedness of ECEC policy provision. However, 3-4 years of age is the dominant cohort which ECEC services are being directed towards within the policy discourse. All of the ECEC policy documents tend to locate themselves in the realm of aiming for the delivery of supports and services that will enhance the child's optimal experience of childhood encouraging them to reach their full developmental and educational potential. Nevertheless, this also ties-in with a general construction of the child as an "adult in waiting", or 'becoming', who requires education and care to socialise them appropriately into being "ready for school", in order to ultimately become a rounded active citizen and responsible adult. This understanding of the child as an active citizen situates the child within a neoliberal construction as someone "who must now guarantee to produce something for the state and its future" (Millei & Imre, 2009, p. 285), in other words giving something back to the society which educates him/her in terms of positive outcomes. Such understandings reinforce the construction of children as 'becomings', rather than 'beings'.

### **7.5 Discourses of the role of "Parents" in the policy texts**

Parents are positioned as the primary educators of and caregivers for their children. They are located as important contributors to the debate about ECEC and also as important stakeholders in the process of policy development. Even the policy documents which are not setting out a specific ECEC policy agenda still construct parents, and families, as important stakeholders in children's policy. Supporting parental choice in ECEC is situated as a policy priority. Parents are also constructed as benefitting from ECEC in terms of both personal benefits, and wider societal benefits.

### ***7.5.1 Parents and families as important Stakeholders in ECEC***

The White Paper is a fervent supporter of both the inclusion of parent's voices, and their full participation in the development of ECEC policy. Facilitating the involvement of parents is foremost in the policy process; a whole chapter of the White Paper is devoted to consideration of their role in ECEC policy. While not entirely clear about how parental involvement will be achieved, the White Paper is nonetheless steadfast about the importance of parents: "as far as parents are concerned, any model of provision devised must ensure their involvement in the system to the optimum degree" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 33). The White Paper further states that:

The active involvement of parents at all stages of the policy formulation process is recognised as vital to the quality of education policy development and the effectiveness of its implementation. This partnership and consultation approach is now well established in the education field and represents an essential ingredient for effective policy-making (ibid., p. 111).

Policy which relates to children in Ireland, generally constructs parents as the primary educators of their children and thus this notion provides the rationale for their inclusion:

Parents bring with them a vast quantity of expertise and different perspectives on the needs of their children. Parental involvement is particularly important in the case of pre-school children, where, as this White Paper has already acknowledged, parents are the prime educators and experts on children's needs (Ireland, 1999b, p. 111).

Discourse of parents as experts on their children locates policy as responding to the needs of children as defined by their parents, serving to rule out children themselves as valued contributors to the ECEC policy process.

A further commitment to parental involvement is iterated strongly within the White Paper where it sets out the State's objective to "seek to involve parents at every stage of the early education process" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 115). The document states that seeking to involve parents in the ECEC policy process will:

ensure strengthening of the parental voice and the development of a strong and expert interest group which will participate in the consultation/partnership process. As a result,

early education policy will be better informed, of higher quality, have greater acceptability among the public and achieve greater participation (ibid., p. 115).

It is important to note here the significance attached to ensuring the strengthening of the voice of parents, which again serves to rule children out from contributing to the ECEC policy debate.

The National Children's Strategy and other policy documents are more inclined to position families as important stakeholders in child policy in general, rather than ECEC policy specifically. The National Children's Strategy positions the family as "the best environment for raising children" (Ireland, 2000, p. 10) and asserts that "external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community" (ibid.). Later the Children's Strategy refers to the government's commitment to protect the family "through political, economic, social and other measures, which will support the stability of the family" (Ireland, 2000, p. 47). It identifies the Report of the Commission on the Family as containing policy actions which "are designed to make families central to policy making and the delivery of services" (ibid.).

The social partnership documents also contain commitments to the inclusion of families and parents, as integral actors in the developments of policy for children and families. Partnership 2000 talks in more specific terms, when it comes to consideration of parents as stakeholders in education, thus it prioritises "increasing support for the involvement of parents as partners in education" (Ireland, 1998a, p. 17). This discourse of partnership serves to remove the full responsibility for education policy from the State, locating parents as also accountable for the development of policy.

The Agenda for Children's Services talks of the necessity to include families, extended families and local communities within services for children, which the Report constructs as "ensuring that these services are actually responding to the needs of the child and ensures that they continue to be effective in the long term, even when direct intervention from State or voluntary agencies has ceased" (Ireland, 2007a, p. v). This discourse further removes the State from full responsibility for the development of services, putting an onus on families and communities in the long term success of services for children. Further understandings of parents' role in policy for children, created in the Agenda document, reiterated the policy focus on identifying parents as important stakeholders in children's policy in general:

One of the sentences in "The Agenda for Children's Services" stands out for me. It is a simple statement which reads "Retaining the trust of families is the key". For our children's policies and services to be truly effective we need to work in partnership with families. Long after our policies are published or individual interventions have been completed the families and communities of these children will remain. By working closely with families in designing, implementing and evaluating our service we will ensure that the value of our interventions will endure for the longer term (OMCYA, 2007c).

This further discourse of partnership positions families and communities as key actors in the design of policy, thus implying that services will be more successful if families and communities are involved in the service design. However, it remains that the Agenda document does not set out specific ways in which to facilitate this contribution to service design from families and communities.

### **7.5.2 ECEC as beneficial for parents**

The White Paper and the National Childcare Strategy construct parents as benefitting both from their children participating in ECEC services and also from their participation in the policy process. The White Paper suggests that benefits for parents from involvement in ECE may lead to "opportunities for further education and career development" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 10) although it does not elaborate further on how such

opportunities will arise. The White Paper also suggests that “there are likely to be considerable benefits for the health, welfare and education of parents, and for their employment and educational opportunities” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 47). Reinforcing these suggestions, the White Paper refers to outcomes from pilot ECE programmes where parents who were involved in their children’s early childhood education “reported improved self-confidence and better relationships with their children” (ibid., p. 112).

The Childcare Strategy constructs a view of both parents, and communities, as benefitting from childcare when they are involved in establishing and running community childcare services. It suggests that the benefits arise “through the personal development gained in the process of collaborating to set up, run and maintain community services” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 54). It further constructs parents as those who should want to be involved with their children’s ECE services, for the greater good: “the active involvement of parents in their child’s early childhood care and education, through their contribution to community services, supports their own development and that of their communities” (ibid.). Making an economic case for the Strategy, the document outlines the benefits to parents of their children’s participation in ECEC by suggesting that it will enable parents to “return to training, to take up second chance education, to start their own enterprises or to be placed in jobs” (ibid., p. 55). It further states that any investment in childcare services will lead to “increased employability” (ibid.), with economic benefits becoming evident “from the year 2000 onwards” (ibid.). This notion of parents benefitting from ECEC, constructs such services as being of the greater good for parents more so than their children. It suggests that a myriad of benefits can arise from parents having their children in ECEC services, with parents benefiting to an even greater degree if they become involved with the running of such services.



This discourse puts a further onus on parents as being the key to the success of ECEC services.

### ***7.5.3 Importance of parental choice***

Parents are persistently constructed as requiring freedom of choice; to choose services for their children appropriate to their own desires, circumstances, values and needs. ECEC policy is thus constructed to support parental choice as an important element of the provision of services. Prior to the publication of many of the ECEC policy documents in the corpus, childcare was debated in the Dáil in the context of the Child Care Regulations. The Minister for Children spoke of childcare policy being focused on having the minimum of interference in parent's right's to choose their preferred care services for their children. When asked if the Child Care Regulations would also target more informal childminding arrangements, the Minister replied:

Parents who leave their child or children with a neighbour or relative have a responsibility to satisfy themselves that person is responsible and capable of looking after their child or children. The majority of parents are satisfied with such arrangements ... If I were to contemplate making a change to cover every neighbour or relative who minds one child, I would be interfering too much in the parenting business (Fahey, 1998a).

This refusal to interfere with the business of parenting reflects the principal of subsidiarity which has influenced much of Irish social policy. The White Paper leads with this notion, constructing parents as “best placed to choose the most appropriate form of care and education for their children” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 13). It aims “to maximise parental involvement and choice, at all times” (ibid.). The White Paper further constructs ECE, whether within the family home or accessed privately, as an issue of choice; “although many parents now choose to have their children cared for, from a very early age, outside of the home. Other parents choose to provide their children's pre-school care inside the family home” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 24). The National

Childcare Strategy has a similar ethos in terms of constructing childcare as an issue of parental choice:

Access to and availability of information on all aspects of childcare is essential if parents are to have options and be able to make an informed choice in relation to types of childcare available and whether they wish to avail of those services for their children (Ireland, 1999a, p. 48).

The National Children's Strategy constructs parental choice as an important aspect of delivering services to children in general; the Strategy proposes that "supports and services which children and parents need should be provided primarily through the activities and relationships which children and parents have in their local communities" (Ireland, 2000, p. 44). Within this it proposes also that "the needs of individual children and the preferences of parents" (ibid.) must also be taken into account.

Parental choice persists as one of the main policy focuses. In a 2007 press release announcing an increase to the ECS payment, the Minister for Children further stated the importance attached to providing parents with choices in ECEC policy:

I am delighted that the budget is acting on a key commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the Early Child Supplement, which is playing such a key role in allowing parents to make a choice about the type of childcare they want for their children (OMCYA, 2007b).

When the increase in the ECS became available to parents the following year, a further press release positioned the focus of the government on parental choice within ECEC policy even more resolutely:

The Early Child Supplement is a central element in the Government's strategy to provide parents with assistance in meeting the costs of childcare. Coupled with very significant increases in Child Benefit since 1997, parents are now being given the means to make real choices when it comes to providing affordable childcare for their young children (OMCYA, 2008b).

The focus on supporting parental choice particularly through cash payments served to remove an onus on the State to develop ECEC policy by positioning children at the centre of policy; conversely parents were placed firmly at the centre of ECEC policy.

#### ***7.5.4 Parents as principle educators and primary caregivers***

Discourses of education refer to the Constitution where parents are situated as the primary educators of and caregivers for their children. The White Paper locates parents in relation to Article 42.1 of the Constitution which “enshrines the role of the family as *the natural and primary educator of the child*” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 113, emphasis added). It states that the constitutional position on “the right and duty of parents to provide for their child’s education confers on them the right to active participation in the child’s education” (ibid.). The National Childcare Strategy also constructs parents in relation to their Constitutional position as primary educators:

The Expert Working Group on Childcare recognises parents as the primary carers and educators of their children. Children learn from birth and parents are their first teachers. Parents should be supported in their role by a variety of different means geared to meeting the needs of both children and parents. Indeed, society should share this responsibility with parents (Ireland, 1999a, p. 95).

The White Paper states its intention “to support and strengthen, but not to supplant” (Ireland, 1999b, p. vii) the role of parents within early childhood education. It also positions the participation of parents in more formal education as equally significant: “it is important that this parental involvement be continued through to the period of more formal education” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 111).

The Childcare Strategy, which comes from a gender equality perspective, is more focused on achieving equality for women in the labour market by developing care for the children of working parents; it acknowledges that “the responsibility for childcare still falls predominantly on women” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 3). Parents in this instance are constructed as the primary caregivers within recognition of the disproportionate burden this puts on women, who are more likely to have to “compromise on standards of care, split their working day and compromise on time spent with their children” (ibid.). The Childcare Strategy also recognises that the “provision of quality, flexible and integrated

services must be accompanied by measures to support and encourage increased involvement of fathers in the care and up-bringing of their children” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 6). Nevertheless, the Strategy does not go so far as to make any specific policy objectives in relation to such measures.

#### ***7.5.5 Summary of discourses of the role of “parents” in the policy texts***

Discourses of the role of parents in ECEC construct parents as the primary educators and caregivers to their children in line with the primacy given to the family in the Irish Constitution. The Childcare Strategy and the White Paper locate parents as key stakeholders within the policy area who should be deeply involved throughout the policy process; however there are no clear indications of how such involvement should be facilitated. Policy is positioned as directly responding to the needs of parents and the facilitation of parental choice is a stated priority across the board. It has been noted in other studies that focusing policy on facilitating parents rights and choices “silences the rights of children” (Bown et al., 2009, p. 206). Discourses about ECEC policy have positioned services as equally beneficial to parents and children. ECEC policy is constructed in the context that there must be ample provision of services to facilitate parents to exercise their right to choose their preferences for themselves and their children. Parents are further constructed within the policy texts as beneficiaries of their children’s participation in ECEC services, particularly when parents also become involved in the running of such services.

### **7.6 Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter presented and discussed the key findings from Irish ECEC policy discourses, and the constructions and understandings of the concepts of: early education, childcare, the child, and parents within them.

Early education is often understood as one element of services for young children that are discussed under the catch-all term of ‘childcare’ rather than as a separate entity; the general consensus is that care and education are seen as interrelated concepts across policy discourses. Nevertheless, this understanding of early education or ‘childcare’ is situated within a discourse of urgency which translates into the delivery of policy which prioritises the provision of care spaces rather than early educational programmes. Both childcare and early education discourses construct a policy objective of achieving the delivery of high quality services without properly defining what they entail. ECEC services in general whether conceptualised as childcare, or early education, are prioritised through targeting. The notion of targeting, is generally understood as catering for children who are socially disadvantaged or have special needs; however early education is also further targeted toward the 3-4 year age group specifically. Early education is understood as having two prime aims, one is to tackle disadvantage, and the other is to produce children who are “ready to learn” in formal education in primary school.

ECEC, generally referred to as ‘childcare’ in most policy discourses, has been recognised as an undervalued, uncoordinated and unregulated policy area, lacking in a standardised approach to training and professionalism. It is acknowledged that ECEC has been undervalued as a sector and is often understood as low paid work which is primarily undertaken by women. All the policy documents set out provisions concerned with developing the sector, the National Childcare Strategy in particular sets out specific structures to manage the policy area. The development of policy is recognised as needing a coordinated approach which represents all the relevant stakeholders; however children themselves are not included as stakeholders. The State displays an overwhelming reluctance to develop provision of ECEC services and continues to rely

on the existing diversity of provision. This reliance on existing provision is characterised within a discourse which sees the wide range of provision as responding to parent's rights to choose their preferred services for their children.

Whilst discourses abound that discuss the benefits of ECEC services for children and the subsequent returns to society, policy is continually constructed as and directed towards responding to the needs of parents and facilitating parental choice. This concept of parental choice is held in high esteem throughout policy discourse and parents are constructed as key stakeholders within the development of ECEC policy. Nevertheless, objectives to ensure that parents as key stakeholders are included in the policy process remain underdeveloped. Parents are constructed as the primary caregivers to and educators of their children, reflecting their position in the constitution. This primacy afforded to parents persists in locating children within a needs discourse where they are seen as dependents in need of supports and interventions, both in ECEC specifically and in the wider social policy arena. This serves to situate children as 'becomings', rather than 'beings'.

The White Paper is a significant document because it reflects the confusion apparent in many of the competing discourses of, and constructions within, these key concepts. It is permeated by a cycle of contradiction, or confusion, where there appears to be an ongoing internal conflict regarding understandings of many of the concepts shaping early education policy. This is particularly evident in the dissonance surrounding the age of early childhood; discourse relating to existing provision of early education; references to the "bewildering diversity of training courses and qualifications" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 30) on offer; and discourses of the educational content and quality of provision in early education services.

The description of the knowledge constructed about ECEC in the policy discourses continues in the following chapter, which considers the wider understandings of the concepts of needs and rights, alongside the closely related concepts of targeted and universal services.

## **8. DISCOURSES OF RIGHTS AND NEEDS IN IRISH ECEC POLICY TEXTS**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter further explores the text level of this critical discourse analysis study describing the dominant discourses of ECEC policy in Ireland, and the knowledge constructed therein. This chapter is chiefly concerned with discourses of rights and needs.

Analysis of the sociocultural and discourse practice levels of this study has already highlighted that Ireland has a difficult relationship with the concept of children's rights. This is exemplified by the special protection afforded to the institution of the family and the corresponding lack of explicit individual rights for children within the Constitution, along with the slowness of the State to move to make changes in this regard. Whilst the UNCRC was ratified without reservation in 1992, an ambivalence remains within Irish society about the role of children in society, their rights to participation, particularly with regard to ECEC, and their rights to be rights-holders. Hence, for this study it is important to include the findings from the pilot study which analysed Ireland's last periodic report to the CRC alongside the revised CRC guidelines for such periodic reports. These findings tell the story of the general official attitude towards children's rights in Ireland which are explored in terms of discourse trends. The rest of the chapter then tells the more specific story of the constructions of knowledge about both rights and needs, alongside the resultant construction of policy actions as universal or targeted services, as realised in the remaining policy texts which pertain more directly to the ECEC policy area.



This chapter includes an addendum which analyses the small amount of texts related to the most recent policy development in Irish ECEC policy, the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year. The implications of the knowledge constructed about the Free Pre-School Year thus far are considered in relation to the conceptual understandings of ECEC as realised through the previous documents from the 1998-2008 period.

## **8.2 Linguistic Textual Analysis of the CRC Reporting Guidelines**

The guideline documents: *General comment no. 5: General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)* (CRC, 2003), and *General guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports to be submitted by states parties under Article 44, paragraph 1(b), of the Convention* (CRC, 2005b) were analysed in order to understand if the structures and mechanisms within them are positioned in such a way as to allow for rhetoric and vagueness in states periodic progress reports. Both documents are directive documents; they both outline the essential information required from states parties to demonstrate their implementation of all the principles of the convention. *General Comment 5* has descriptive parts; it discusses, in a modicum of detail, the main issues in relation to implementation while also further iterating the necessary requirements for states reports. The 2005 *Guidelines* restate some information requirements in list form, and refer to the more explanatory provisions from *General Comment 5* in some instances. The 2005 *Guidelines* set out the necessary provisions for states reports under cluster headings from the Convention, and subsequently relates these areas to the corresponding articles of the Convention. For example, under the education, leisure and cultural activities cluster, the Guidelines advise states parties to provide relevant information in respect of:

- Education, including vocational training and guidance (art. 28);
- Aims of education (art. 29) with reference also to quality of education;
- Rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities (art. 31) (CRC, 2005b, p. 7).

The guidelines in both the CRC documents are relatively specific and comprehensive, particularly when individual state parties' previous experience in reporting to the CRC is taken into consideration. Subsequent periodic reports are expected to be constructed in a similar fashion; to build on previous reports in terms of advancing the implementation of the Convention. Both of the Guideline documents manage to provide a clear enough picture of the type of information which is sought, and the necessary areas that need to be considered in terms of information provision and data collection.

### ***8.2.1 Discussion of the analysis of the CRC Reporting Guideline Documents***

The analysis of the CRC Guideline documents does not reveal any prevailing ideology. Nonetheless, since the list of provisions under the cluster headings of the Convention is not infinite, this could imply that specific areas have been discreetly chosen by the CRC as the priority areas for consideration of the implementation of the Convention. Examination of these documents highlights the reliance of the CRC on state parties to be both dedicated to implementing the Convention and honest in disclosing how they have gone about their implementation efforts thus far. The CRC is therefore dependent to some extent on state parties self-regulating and self-monitoring their own implementation and reporting back truthfully on their progress made:

rigorous monitoring of implementation is required, which should be built into the process of government at all levels but also independent monitoring by national human rights institutions, NGOs and others (CRC, 2003, p. 8).

This excerpt highlights the additional elements involved in the monitoring process; the involvement of NGOs and human rights institutions serve as additional watchdogs and monitors of implementation of the Convention. The role of NGO's includes lobbying to keep the Convention and children's rights therein, on the agenda as much as possible. Nevertheless, the remit of the CRC, following the investigation of reports and hearings with NGOs, is still limited to guiding, advising and encouraging states parties to fully

implement the Convention. There are no legal sanctions for the non-compliance of state parties' and there is a limited amount of time involved for the CRC to deal with each individual State. Therefore the role of the CRC in overseeing implementation of the Convention often sees them as having to merely "monitor the monitoring" (Hammarberg, 2001, p. 134).

### **8.3 Findings from Linguistic Textual Analysis of Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the CRC**

*Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (OMCYA, 2005), focuses on accentuating the successes and achievements of the Government since the CRC's Concluding Observations on Ireland's 1<sup>st</sup> report (CRC, 1998). The Report tends to quickly gloss over description of areas where the government have been laissez-faire in their policy approaches. This is counter balanced by a strong focus on celebrating any progress that has been made in relation to implementing the Convention, through the government's "increased and enhanced development of policies and services for children in the 1990s and recent years" (OMCYA, 2005, p. 2). The linguistic textual analysis of this Report was focused on the use of language, and revealed four notable discourse trends, under which the findings are discussed:

- Well-presented positives.
- Incomplete policy actions.
- Recurring ambiguity.
- Weak policy commitments.

#### **8.3.1 Well-presented Positives**

The Report particularly celebrates the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000, which had been recommended in the Concluding Observations (CRC, 1998), and the appointment of the Ombudsman for Children in 2004 as promised in the National Children's Strategy. There is an air of confidence within the language used to describe

the successful actions of the government, often realised through lengthy and detailed descriptions. The majority of these successful actions are related to the publication of the National Children's Strategy, which was stated as "the most significant initiative in Ireland to implement the UNCRC and to promote knowledge and understanding of the UN convention" (OMCYA, 2005, p. 2).

Discourse within the Report, regarding the development of policy for children, is supported by a stated commitment to making children's lives better, reiterating the three goals of the National Children's Strategy. The Report reaffirms the vision of the National Children's Strategy as working towards realising:

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; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (Ireland, 2000, p. 4).

Demonstrating a new and improved approach to realising children's rights within Irish policy, the Report highlights the expansion and development of the role of the Minister for Children who is charged with the responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the Children's Strategy and the establishment of the NCO. The Report positions the National Children's Office as "a centre of excellence in children and young people's participation and children's research" (OMCYA, 2005, p. 2).

### **8.3.2 *Incomplete Policy Actions***

Throughout the Report a theme recurs where there is reference to legislative acts and other policy programmes that have not yet been fully enacted or have not yet commenced, typically due to a lack of resources or delays in implementation:

Under the Mental Treatment Act, 1945, a child was defined as a person under the age of 16 years. However, under the Mental Health Act, 2001 (enacted but not yet fully commenced), a child is defined as a person under the age of 18 years, other than a person who is or has been married (OMCYA, 2005, p. 53).

In this excerpt the implication of the delay in fully commencing the Act, is that 16-17 year olds could be left in a rather precarious position where they are treated as adults rather than children within the mental health system. Another example of the recurring theme of incomplete policy actions relates to aspects of juvenile justice legislation concerning the age of criminal responsibility:

Part 5 of the Children Act, 2001 provides for the raising of the age of criminal responsibility from 7 to 12 years. This Part of the Act has not yet commenced (OMCYA, 2005, p. 55).

This recurring theme of legislation that “has not yet commenced”, “not yet been commenced” or which will only commence “when resources become available”, is often associated with more sensitive policy areas such as mental health and juvenile justice, where children are often at their most vulnerable. Such exclusions are stated in a rather matter-of-fact style within the language of the Report; there is no further explanation or discussion around these issues. There is also no statement of intent, setting objectives, targets or timelines for implementation, to rectify these problems either.

There is elusiveness within the Report in relation to gaps in policy and legislation that serve to reinforce the invisibility of children and exclude their voices within matters that greatly affect them. Such elusiveness is demonstrated where the physical punishment of children by parents is considered. The Report cites the Common Law rule that “recognises the right of a parent to inflict moderate and reasonable physical chastisement on a child” (OMCYA, 2005, p. 86). The Report gives further credence to the legitimacy of this aspect of the law by explaining that, “where a parent physically chastises a child, the motive for, and the duration and force of, the punishment must be objectively reasonable, not just reasonable in the parent’s opinion” (OMCYA, 2005, p.

86), rather than recognising that the Common Law Rule is contrary to the provisions of Article 19.1 of the Convention.

In relation to ECEC policy the Report does display some frankness on the part of the State in openly acknowledging problems inherent in the ECEC policy area:

Notwithstanding a range of positive developments, childcare provision in Ireland is a continuous source of concern. The primary difficulties are articulated in the OECD Report on Early Childhood Education and Care, which refers to the fragmented nature of policy development in Ireland and the lack of coordination of service delivery (OMCYA, 2005, p. 126).

While this is the most direct acknowledgment of problems within a specific policy area in the Report, there are no indications of proposals to try and solve these problems, nor are there any suggestions that these policy difficulties are even being addressed.

### **8.3.3 *Recurring Ambiguity***

A recurring ambiguity permeates the Report, mostly demonstrated by an overuse of the word “should”. The use of a more distinct and direct auxiliary verb such as “must” would render statements within the Report as less open to diverse interpretation. Using the word “must” rather than “should” within such a Report would indicate more intent within statements; the persistent use of should is a little more nebulous.

This ambiguity implicated through using the word should is illustrated in this excerpt from the Report which discusses the attitude to custodial care for children in juvenile justice cases as set out in the Children Act, 2001: “detention should be a last resort, but where it is unavoidable it should be in institutions where the ethos is educational rather than penal” (OMCYA, 2005, p. 155). The ambiguity inferred here through the use of the word should, could lead to that statement being interpreted as meaning that there may be instances where detention for children is not used as a last resort, and also that

children could end up becoming detained in penal institutions even though they ought to be in institutions with an educational ethos.

A further example of the ambiguity sustained through the use of the word should, arises in relation to the discussion of local government planning regulations, as they relate to children:

local authorities should have due regard to the need for and the availability of key services and amenities, including the provision of community meeting places, recreation and leisure facilities (OMCYA, 2005, p. 146).

In this example, the word should seems to imply that while local government are expected to include the requirement for the planning of proper community services and amenities within planning applications, there remains no legislative onus on them to do so, thus it remains at their discretion.

Another tendency within this wider discourse trend of ambiguity is where the Report includes some extremely long-winded explanations which manage to confuse and potentially distort the real meaning of the statements. This excerpt discusses the intentions of the Disability Act 2005:

to enable government ministers to make provisions (consistent with the resources available to them and their obligations in relation to their allocation) for services to meet those needs (OMCYA, 2005, p. 106).

The way the language is constructed here appears to suggest that the resources available to ministers and their discretionary decisions on how to allocate them hold priority over meeting the specific and special needs of disabled children. Further demonstration of this confusing use of ambiguous language within the Report, arises in an explanation about how children's entitlement to receive free healthcare services is compromised by provisions set out in the Health Act 1970:

At present, children are eligible to receive healthcare services free of charge, but system capacity means that there are delays in both assessment for and delivery of some of

these services. The system of eligibility for services within the health system is complex. The Health Act, 1970 explicitly provides for eligibility for a service; it does not provide that a person is entitled to receive a service (OMCYA, 2005, p. 122).

#### **8.3.4 Weak Policy Commitments**

The final key discourse trend identified is weak policy commitments, which highlight where policy and provisions have been introduced without evidence of any real strategic planning, adequate funding or resourcing. This is evident in the Report where there is continual reference to pilot projects that were either never further developed, or implemented in a far reduced manner compared to what was initially envisioned for that service. This is markedly so in the case of discourse about the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB); the role of the NEWB is to ensure that each child “in the State attends a recognised school or otherwise receives a certain minimum education” (OMCYA, 2005, p. 132). Explaining the NEWB service, the Report states that:

The NEWB is currently developing its services and has appointed a number of educational welfare officers who are responsible for encouraging school attendance. It is hoped to expand this service to cover all parts of the country in the future (OMCYA, 2005, p. 145).

The use of the word hoped here does not indicate a strong commitment to the expansion of the service.

A further example of these weak policy commitments occurs when the Report describes the National Youth Work Development Plan. The statement points out that the government’s intention is to have a phased implementation for the plan, but this phased implementation is dependent on the availability of resources, which suggests that it may well falter in its implementation:

The National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007 was published on 5 August 2003, following an extensive consultation process. It is intended that the plan will be implemented on a phased and prioritised basis as resources become available (OMCYA, 2005, p. 137).



Such discourse, which positions policy as developing as and when resources become available, suggests that there has been no specific allocation of resources for these provisions in the first place. Hence the use of language highlights the weaknesses inherent in certain policy discourses, and is contrary to the strong, confident language used to characterise the positives referred to within the Report.

### ***8.3.5 Discussion of the CDA of Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the CRC***

These findings exemplify the Irish government's unashamed use of positive language to promote and sell their achievements in implementing the Convention. This analysis also reveals a clear laissez-faire undercurrent towards certain, perhaps more challenging, policy areas relating to children. The hands-off approach to certain policy areas is illustrated by the use of language that tends to swiftly gloss over any problem of omissions, resulting in vague and ambiguous statements. The Report thus highlights a governance style in relation to children's policy, specifically with regard to implementation of the Convention, which consists of the prioritising of certain popular and preferred policy areas over others which may be more urgent and necessary. This runs contrary to the discourse of the National Children's Strategy which pledged that the:

Supports and services provided to children will focus on children's needs and will not be service driven ... The needs of marginalised children will be addressed so that all children have an equality of opportunity and will derive benefit from those supports and services (Ireland, 2000, p. 11).

Thus the attitude of the State in relation to general policy for children, in a rights context, accentuates the marked disparity between "rhetoric and reality" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 263) in government discourse; the difference between what the government say they will do versus what they actually do.

#### **8.4 A comment on the analysis of the UNCRC related documents**

While there is a general acceptance of the robustness of the CRC's monitoring process for the Convention, there has also been some criticism directed towards its efficacy. Much of this criticism refers to the tendency of state parties' to use the reporting procedure as a tool for "international accountability" (Santos Pais, 2007, p. 109), as opposed to employing it as "a national monitoring and policy making tool" (ibid.). Such a notion is evident in Ireland's case, as exemplified in this excerpt from the Minister for Children's speech made in advance of meeting with the CRC in 2006:

The aim of Government has been to translate our new-found economic success into positive social change. Much progress has been made. For instance, I speak to you today as the first ever Irish Minister for Children to attend meetings of the Cabinet. As such, the interests of children are taken into account in an unprecedented manner across all areas of government (OMCYA, 2006e).

This speech aimed to promote Ireland's great success to date in implementing the Convention and equally to promote the seriousness with which children's issues are treated by the Irish government.

Hammarberg has highlighted a reluctance by many states to engage in their own autonomous reporting and monitoring, outside of the generation of periodic reports for the Committee, which can be seen to reflect an "absence of a systematic, comprehensive approach to children's rights as a political priority" (2007, p. 113). Hammarberg further notes that this reticence towards fully embracing children's rights is often characterised by the resistance of decision-makers' to distinguish between "charity and a rights-based approach" (2007, p. 114). The CRC's monitoring of implementation of the Convention is reliant on "the willingness of national governments to take its criticisms and recommendations seriously" (Kilkelly, 2001, p. 309). The way that the CRC approaches the protection and promotion of children's rights is to encourage full implementation of

the Convention through offering constructive advice to state parties'; thus "its success relies on diplomacy rather than legal sanction" (Kilkelly, 2001, p. 309).

The Guidelines presented in both of the CRC documents are important tools in encouraging and supporting the implementation of the Convention and the provision of more comprehensive reporting. Nevertheless, the CRC still relies on information which is provided to them by state parties, which can often be "formal and legalistic and provides very little insight into the reality of children's lives" (Kilkelly, 2006, p. 36). This is where the inclusion of the NGOs and other interested parties help to fill the gaps. Nevertheless, while NGOs can lobby governments to put children's rights issues on the public agenda, and also highlight important issues to the CRC, they have limited capacity to force changes in legislation and constitutions and they also do not have a decision-making role. The formulaic content requirements of the CRC guideline documents have failed to engender a system which eradicates the scope for state parties' reports to be of a rhetorical nature. Aside from the work of NGOs and children's rights advocates, such as the Children's Rights Alliance and the Ombudsman for Children in Ireland, there is a propensity for discourse around children's rights, and the Convention, to drop off the agenda in the intervening years between periodic reports<sup>59</sup>.

The CRC, Hammarberg (2001), and others, have all recognised the importance of the collection of information through the use of child rights indicators, state of the nation's children reports, the improved collection of disaggregated data in relation to children, and the work of the NGOs in keeping children's rights on the public agenda. There is also a pressing need to develop "a culture of transparency and openness throughout the

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<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless in Ireland's case, the issue of children's rights has remained in focus since 2006, particularly in relation to the Irish Constitution, following the Taoiseach's announcement in November 2006 which promised a referendum on the matter, this was discussed in *Chapter 4, Section 4.8.7*.

government administration” (Hammarberg, 2001, p. 140) with regard to policy for children and recognition of their rights. This, in Hammarberg’s view, would allow room within the monitoring process for “doubt, self-criticism and constant efforts to find better methods” (2001, p. 140). Such an attitude should lay the foundations to promote full implementation of the Convention, and children’s rights, “in the spirit of human rights” (ibid.), which would reflect the view of children as ‘beings’ rather than ‘becomings’..

In Ireland’s case, the collection of information about children has been improving; biennial *State of the Nations Children* reports have been published since early 2007, and the ongoing seven year longitudinal study *Growing up in Ireland* has also been in effect since 2007. Nevertheless, while NGOs like the Children’s Rights Alliance have kept the issue of children’s rights on the agenda, the situation remains that children do not have explicit constitutional rights and are treated within a protectionist concern by the State. With no explicit children’s rights in social life generally, it is not surprising that the appreciation of the concept of children’s rights is largely absent from ECEC discourse. The remainder of this chapter considers the treatment of constructions of knowledge and discourse about rights, and needs, within wider ECEC policy discourse.

### **8.5 Discourses of Rights and Needs in Irish ECEC policy**

Attention now shifts from general understandings of children’s rights to discourses of rights and needs, and resultant corresponding discourses of targeted and universal services, within the rest of the ECEC policy texts that form the corpus for this study.

Throughout all of the policy documents in the sample, the concept of needs is frequently positioned as a more urgent, necessary and greater concept than rights. The terms

“needs” and “rights” are used interchangeably at times as if one cannot be distinguished without reference to the other. Irish social policy discourse is largely situated within a frame of policy as responding to needs, as is exemplified by this excerpt from the Taoiseach’s speech at a Towards 2016 plenary meeting.

The longer-term approach adopted in Towards 2016 is the first building block in a new integrated strategic framework for social inclusion based on the lifecycle approach, which orientates public services, income supports and activist measures around the needs of people at different stages of their lives - children, young adults, people of working age, older people and people with a disability. This new framework is also reflected in the social elements of the recently launched NDP 2007-2013, and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, which will be launched next Wednesday. I believe that, taken together, these key national strategies represent an ambitious and challenging agenda for tackling poverty and social exclusion. They underline this Government’s firm commitment to building an inclusive society and together provide a roadmap of investment priorities based on people’s needs at each stage of their lifecycle (Ahern, 2007a).

Dominant discourses about needs across the ECEC policy documents position children’s needs as an important concept which is understood within policy terms as developing services in order to meet multiple needs. There is a multifaceted construction of the meaning of needs within children’s policy, for example often considering the needs of parents as equal to, or more important than, the needs of children. Needs are also seen to be something which should be met under a wider community focus; within which, the concept of children’s needs is strongly collocated with the targeting of services. Needs are also viewed in terms of meeting children’s developmental needs, and their needs for both care and education.

The concept of rights is generally positioned as subordinate to the concept of needs within the policy documents. Many of the dominant discourses of rights are directly related to and thus reiterate understandings of children’s rights as constructed in the Convention. Prevailing discourses centre on the need to give children a voice and to subsequently hear their voices in matters that affect them. Nonetheless, participation for children is mostly constructed in terms of adult created and adult-led facilitation of

children in actually having their voices heard. Other dominant discourses construct the concept of rights as responding to and attempting to meet children's rights to access quality services, but these constructions of rights are often tied-in with or directly correlated to, the recognition of and response to the needs of children.

Considering rights and needs in ECEC, most of the policy documents generally include discourse of children having a right to access high quality early education and childcare. There is a polarity between discourse of policy in the National Childcare Strategy, which alludes to a need for policy for both childcare and early education to be formulated from a rights basis, and the White Paper which expressly constructs early education services as a response to needs. The Report of the Commission on the Family refers several times to children's rights to access quality childcare services<sup>60</sup>. The National Childcare Strategy positions childcare services in a discourse of rights when it states that "a right of access for every child to quality childcare in a safe and secure environment where he/she is respected and accepted, should be guaranteed regardless of the status of the child or of his/her parents" (Ireland, 1999a, p. 44). This also seems to be the case when it states that:

The Expert Working Group, while acknowledging that children, parents and community all have needs and rights in relation to childcare, believes that the primary consideration in a National Childcare Strategy is the rights and needs of children (ibid.).

Conversely, the White Paper has the principle objective that it is concerned with supporting "the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 14). Describing planned approaches to education in general, a number of years before the publication of the aforementioned

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<sup>60</sup> The Commission Report uses the catch-all term 'childcare' to refer to both early education and care services.

reports, Partnership 2000 positioned needs rather than rights as an underlying driver for future educational policy when it stated that “education policy will continue to be oriented in such a way as to give priority in the allocation of resources to those in greatest need” (Ireland, 1998a, p. 17).

Attention to the concept of needs is positioned generally across the policy texts as attending to the early education needs of children across the spectrum, but then subordinated to those general needs are the needs of “other” children who are seen as more in need; such as rural children, disadvantaged children, traveller children and children with special needs. While such needs are subordinated to general needs within a general discourse, when it comes to the construction of specific policy objectives the targeting of provisions for disadvantage and special needs are priorities. The White Paper expressly states that it will address “the needs of children with special education needs and the educationally disadvantaged” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 45) as a priority. The National Children’s Strategy sums up this needs greater than rights approach under “Objective A: Children’s early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures” (Ireland, 2000, p. 50), when it states that, “a key challenge in this period of expansion will be to ensure that the needs of children are the primary consideration in the development of new quality places” (Ireland, 2000, p. 51). Not one of the policy texts locates children’s rights to early education as a primary policy objective.

### ***8.5.1 Frequency of use of the terms rights and needs***

It became evident throughout the analysis process that the term “rights” was consistently being used less frequently than the term “needs”. In many cases where both of the words appeared, use of the term rights was being subordinated to the term needs,

prioritising needs in most contexts. To investigate this further, a word frequency search was conducted across NVivo, and also through the application supported word frequency searches in Adobe Reader and Microsoft Word<sup>61</sup>. This word frequency search highlights a strong polarity between uses of the term rights and uses of the term needs. The conceptual chasm between uses of the terms rights and needs is even more exaggerated when it is taken into account that many of the uses of the word rights are actually references to the UNCRC rather than necessarily being used in the context of specific discourse about rights.

POLICY DOCUMENT	RIGHTS	NEEDS
<b>Social Partnership: Partnership 2000</b>	1	10
<b>Report of the Commission on the Family</b>	72	187
<b>White Paper - <i>Ready to Learn</i></b>	3	133
<b>National Childcare Strategy</b>	48	140
<b>National Children's Strategy</b>	103	143
<b>Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Report to the UNCRC</b>	251	110
<b>Social Partnership: Towards 2016</b>	2	24
<b>Agenda for Children's Services</b>	11	58

**Table 8.1: Word frequency (approx.) of the terms *rights* and *needs* across the policy documents sampled**

Table 8.1 highlights the differences in the amount of times each word is used throughout the documents. In the case of the social partnership documents and the Commission on the Family report, the tally is taken from the relevant sections which were analysed on children and ECEC. Unsurprisingly, Ireland's 2nd report to the UNCRC demonstrates the most instances of uses of the word rights; which is expected

<sup>61</sup> In MS Word, word frequency can be established by using the find and replace tool, e.g. the results of a find 'rights' and replace with 'rights' search will also count the amount of times the word 'rights' occurs. In Adobe Reader, a search through the Advanced Search feature also counts the number of times a word appears.



considering the report is written for the Committee on the Rights of the Child to assess. The most apparent dichotomy between appearances of the words rights and needs appears in the White Paper, which uses the term rights only 3 times, one of which is a direct reference to the Convention:

In this regard, the White Paper seeks to take account of Article 29 1(a) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Article notes that “the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 14).

This is as opposed to 133 uses of the term needs in the White Paper. The National Children’s Strategy has the most balance in terms of references to each of the words rights and needs; however for a Strategy that is guided by the Convention and is permeated by much language of rights, it still contextualises policy as directly concerned with responding to and meeting children’s needs to a greater extent, rather than being truly rights based.

### ***8.5.2 The multiplicity of children’s needs***

ECEC services are situated as being developed in order to meet multiple needs; this often refers to meeting the needs of parents also. At a seminar on the White Paper for early childhood education, the Minister for Education referred to the multiple needs which ECE policy must address:

As education experts, you all know that early childhood education is about more than just academic attainment. In these crucial early years, children’s related needs for education, care and support must be addressed in a totally integrated fashion (Woods, 2000b).

This discourse of early education collocates education with care, constructing both as integral aspects of ECE. The National Childcare Strategy positions the development of its childcare services in order to “meet the needs of all children and parents and take into account the views of as many childcare interests as possible” (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxii). The Strategy continues to locate childcare as a development which will meet

multiple needs when it states that “Irish parents avail of childcare for many reasons, related to their own and their children’s needs. The need for childcare transcends all sectors of Irish society, whether urban or rural, disadvantaged or non-disadvantaged” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 7).

The National Children’s Strategy constructs its own understanding of the multiplicity of needs, it lists what it describes as “the main areas of children’s concerns and needs which must be addressed” (Ireland, 2000, p. 8), they are:

- health and wellbeing
- learning and education
- play, leisure and cultural opportunities
- children in crisis
- child poverty and youth homelessness
- discrimination in children’s lives
- supporting children with disabilities
- responding to and harnessing children’s concern for the environment (ibid.).

The National Children’s Strategy integrates the notion of general children’s needs alongside the construction of more specific and often greater needs which may need priority attention, within the overall concept of needs:

Supports and services provided to children will focus on children’s needs and will not be service driven. They will be provided in appropriate settings and in ways which are accessible to children. The full range of needs, as identified in the ‘whole child’ perspective, will be addressed. The needs of marginalised children will be addressed so that all children have an equality of opportunity and will derive benefit from those supports and services (Ireland, 2000, p. 11).

This situates the development of ECEC policy within a further discourse of providing children with equality of opportunity. Further to this, the Children’s Strategy describes its objectives to refocus the supports and services which are provided to children so that they:

address children’s basic needs, provide for the additional needs of some children and support families and communities in supporting children. This will be achieved by ensuring that supports and services address the full range of children’s needs, that they are provided in child friendly settings and delivered in ways which make them accessible to all children, removing the barriers which prevent access for some children (Ireland, 2000, p. 44).

This excerpt further situates the development of ECEC policy within a discourse of equality of opportunity achieved by responding to children's needs. Taking inspiration from the Children's Strategy, the Agenda for Children's Services aims to be driven by "the key messages of existing policies in relation to children" (Ireland, 2007a, p. 2). In particular the ones which promote:

- a whole child/whole system approach to meeting the needs of children;
- a focus on better outcomes for children and families (ibid.).

The Agenda document constructs policy as responding to the multiple needs of children and within that collocates children's needs with the needs of families also.

### ***8.5.3 A community focus on needs: particularly targeting disadvantage***

Needs have been strongly constructed within the policy documents as a concept which should be understood as having a wider community focus, where children's needs are closely intertwined with the needs of their families and the local community. Within this understanding, the concept of children's needs is strongly collocated with the targeting of services, prioritising targeting those children perceived as most in need within the community. The Commission Report view is that the development of services should "be achieved through a programme of support for the community and voluntary sector in developing appropriate services to meet the needs of these children and their families" (Ireland, 1998b, p. 247). The Childcare Strategy expands on this notion and directly equates the focus on local needs with the targeting of services when it states that "equality of access and participation in childcare requires a wide ranging, creative and flexible approach to the development of services, which must be based on local needs led planning" (Ireland, 1999a, p. 40). The Strategy further constructs the provision of childcare as needing to be reflective on and "responsive to the local

community context and needs. Services should be integrated, addressing a range of different needs for both parents and children” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 72).

In 2006, a press release detailing some of the funding priorities within the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP), which itself is a subsequent development of the National Childcare Strategy, persisted in focusing childcare policy as responding to local needs; it stated:

Minister Lenihan said the Government had given a clear mandate for expansion of the childcare sector with ambitious targets for the next 5 years, including the creation of 50,000 new childcare places to meet identified local needs, not just in terms of numbers but also in terms of the specific needs for pre-school services, school age childcare and wrap around services for children and parents (OMCYA, 2006b).

A policy focus on meeting identified local needs reinforces the construction of policy as targeted service provision.

The Agenda for Children’s Services is more explicit in its construction of children’s needs as being related to wider community needs thus informing the targeting of services. The Agenda contends that to achieve the delivery of quality services to children they must be “based on the accurate identification of need matched to service design and intervention” (Ireland, 2007a, p. 20). It further states that the delivery of services must be concerned with “the outcome of meeting identified needs” (ibid.). The Agenda constructs needs as being met within the family and wider community, and it subsequently locates services as requiring the basis of a needs assessment in order to meet these identified needs and thus target services accordingly:

Just as families meet the full range of children and young people’s needs (emotional, intellectual, social, cultural and material), so too must there be a wide range of services available to children and those who care for them. These need to be provided at a series of levels of need and matched services (Ireland, 2007a, p. 23).

The Agenda sets out a greater obligation for the State in this regard, when it suggests that “families with more complex needs require more complex services, for which the

State must take greater responsibility” (ibid.); it also charges the OMCYA with the responsibility for meeting the needs of both children and families, “to ensure that priority is given to those most in need, while at the same time ensuring that children and families with less pressing needs are also able to access appropriate support and services” (Ireland, 2007a, p. 34). Essentially, this discourse locates the OMCYA as having the responsibility to meet children’s needs in a broadly defined way; more importantly it allows them the opportunity to prioritise supports and services in order to target more urgently defined needs accordingly.

#### ***8.5.4 Developmental needs: care and education***

Needs discourses in the ECEC policy texts also see the concept constructed as meeting children’s developmental needs; encompassing their needs for both care and education. The Commission Report used such discourses to construct ECEC services as beneficial for meeting the developmental needs of children. The Commission Report positions ECEC in this context, as encompassing services which should meet an array of the needs of young children, “physical, emotional and cognitive - and not just focus on the academic” (Ireland, 1998b, p. 271). The White Paper follows this trajectory, while also pointing out the interrelated understanding of care and education which services should recognise: “that young children have needs for both education and care and that the focus can never be exclusively on either. For very young children, their education and care needs are closely intertwined, and must be met in a unified way” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 3). However, further elaboration on this point highlights a slightly confused and contradictory mindset in approaches to setting out ECEC services for younger children; as is exemplified in this excerpt:

Early childhood education is very important for children aged 3 and under, given the long-standing research evidence that the pace of development is most rapid in the earliest years. However, “The rationale for early childhood education for children under

2 years of age is not as well established as that for 3-, 4-, 5-year old children”<sup>62</sup>. This difference in need will be reflected in the differing nature of the interventions and supports recommended for this age group (Ireland, 1999b, p. 5).

This collocation of age with needs further highlights the cycle of contradiction<sup>63</sup> within the White Paper, where young children are positioned on one hand as in need of ECE while simultaneously creating an understanding of care for very young children which removes the onus on the State to create provision that meets the needs of the under-3’s. The White Paper cites “the inextricable linkage between education and care” (Ireland, 1999b, p. 5) as the reason why early education should not be viewed as just education alone, but as “one element in an all-encompassing policy concerning the rights and needs of young children”<sup>64</sup> (ibid.).

The National Childcare Strategy also positions ECEC services as necessary to respond to the developmental needs of children; children are recognised as having unique and “special learning needs at different stages in their development” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 28). The Childcare Strategy further recommends that “the diverse needs of children at different stages of development” (ibid.) must be reflected in childcare training programmes so that they can be met on the ground. The National Children’s Strategy also includes a discourse of meeting developmental needs in ECEC services; the Strategy states that the needs of children must be ensured as “the primary consideration in the development of new quality places” (Ireland, 2000, p. 51). They add to this by constructing quality ECEC services as those that:

provide lasting cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children, particularly those with special needs or who are disadvantaged, and they have the capacity to meet the holistic needs of children as identified in the ‘whole child’ perspective (Ireland, 2000, p. 51).

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<sup>62</sup> Quote in excerpt from: *The Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998, p. 43).

<sup>63</sup> See Page 254 for discussion of the cycles of confusion and contradiction in the White Paper

<sup>64</sup> This reference to “rights” from the White Paper is one of only 3 uses of the word “rights” in the whole document.

This discourse collocates quality ECEC services with meeting children's needs, constructing an understanding of high quality ECEC services as needs oriented rather than rights based. This also highlights the continuing ambiguity surrounding the concept of quality in ECEC services, highlighting its importance without defining what quality services truly entail. In 2008, the Minister for Children described the NCIP as providing "a proactive response to the development of quality childcare supports and services which are grounded in an understanding of local needs" (OMCYA, 2008a). The Minister further stated that a key objective of the NCIP was to support "a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare which is centred on the needs of the child" (ibid.). Such discourses coming direct from government reinforce the position of needs as the foremost concept within the development and direction of ECEC policy

#### ***8.5.5 Rights as referencing the UNCRC***

Many of the dominant discourses of rights throughout the policy documents are directly related to, and thus reference, understandings of children's rights as constructed in the UNCRC. This referencing of the Convention in order to portray an active discourse of children's rights is an interesting move considering the CRC's outright criticism of the lack of explicit children's rights in the Irish Constitution, which has been widely reported in the media and debated in the Dáil. The following excerpt is from a Dáil debate where the Minister for Children is discussing the response from the CRC in relation to Ireland's 1<sup>st</sup> periodic Report:

It commented on the absence of a national policy in regard to children which led to the State's response to the rights of the child being somewhat fragmented. This is an issue we will have to address and I am anxious to bring forward proposals, which I intend to do shortly. The committee felt existing services for the welfare of children do not adequately reflect the child's rights approach of the convention and commented that not enough emphasis was placed on preventive measures. We agree (Fahey, 1998b).

Often the policy texts refer directly to the Convention in order to include a discourse of rights, for example, the National Childcare Strategy lists the seven articles of the UNCRC that are particularly relevant “in considering the needs and rights of children in relation to childcare provision ... Articles 2, 3, 12, 18, 23, 30, 31” (Ireland, 1999a, p. 44). In relation to discourses of the Convention, the National Children’s Strategy locates itself as “a major initiative to progress the implementation of the Convention in Ireland” (Ireland, 2000, p. 6). The Children’s Strategy refers to the guiding principles of the Convention which also inform the guiding principles of the strategy, to some extent; they are:

- all children should be entitled to basic rights without discrimination;
- the best interests of the child should be the primary concern of decision-making;
- children have the right to life, survival and development;
- the views of children must be taken into account in matters affecting them (Ireland, 2000, p. 6).

Later in the Children’s Strategy there is a description of the existing state of children’s rights in Ireland in terms of which rights are already provided for in the Irish Constitution:

Children’s rights in the Irish Constitution are found under Article 40 (personal rights), Article 41 (family), Article 42 (education), Article 43 (private property) and Article 44 (religion). A number of the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are already provided for in the Constitution, either expressly or impliedly. Others are provided for in legislation (*ibid.*, p. 35).

Nevertheless, this discussion of existing rights is followed by explication of the concerns of the CRC, and the Constitution Review Group, with regard to the lack of explicit children’s rights in the Irish Constitution. The Agenda for Children’s Services also follows the trend of referencing the Convention; stating that “it is incumbent on professionals and services to uphold the rights of children and families – in particular, the rights of children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Ireland, 2007a, p. 20). The Agenda Report does not expand on discussion of these rights any further after this.



#### ***8.5.6 Rights: hearing children's voices and participation***

The CRC has been critical of the lack of platforms for children's participation in Irish society and the lack of importance attached to hearing children's views. This matter was raised in a Dáil debate in 1998; however the government were still unclear as to how to rectify this situation: "The committee was critical of the failure to take account of the views of children in the family, school and society. Clearly, innovative responses will be required to allow society in general to respond to this criticism" (Fahey, 1998b). In the same debate, discourses abounded with regard to there being a need for an active and innovative Minister for Children who would be an appropriate advocate for all children, but especially to champion the rights of those children with greater needs:

Children, especially those at risk and who are most vulnerable in our society, need someone to champion their rights, someone who will fight for them and insist their rights are met in full. They need someone who will campaign for them. Unlike adults, children do not have a platform, by and large they do not have their own campaign and lobby groups and for that reason we need someone who will fight their corner for them. That is the type of Minister we need in charge of children (Shortall, 1998).

Prevailing discourses of rights thus tend to centre on the previously rather neglected notion of the need to give children a voice; to hear children's voices in matters that affect them. A shortcoming of planned approaches to hearing children's voices, and providing them with opportunities for participation, is that they are often constructed in terms of adult created and adult-led participation for children, within an adult centric view of children's lives. The National Childcare Strategy suggests that children's views should be listened to by childcare providers:

Childcare providers should develop ways of listening to children's views according to the age and maturity of the child and discussing them seriously should be part of the process of developing practice (Ireland, 1999a, p. 45).

The Childcare Strategy, however, does not elaborate on suggestions for how to listen to children's views in this regard.

It was the National Children's Strategy that really started to recognise the importance of, and also tried to set out mechanisms for, hearing children's voices. The Children's Strategy is concerned with developing policy for children that recognises their status as citizens, their agency, and also that "their rights need to be strengthened in legislation, policies and practices and that they have a right to express their views" (Ireland, 2000, p. 8). Two of the three national goals of the Children's Strategy are directly related to the notion of children having a voice, the first national goal states that "children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity" (ibid., p. 11). This goal also understands children as social agents and recognises that they "have an active contribution to make in shaping their own lives and the lives of those around them" (ibid., p. 30). The Children's Strategy sets out the important elements of planned approaches to hearing children's voices:

Giving Children a Voice Means:

- \* encouraging children to express their views and demonstrating a willingness to take those views seriously;
- \* setting out clearly for the child the scope of such participation by them to avoid misunderstanding;
- \* providing children with sufficient information and support to enable them to express informed views;
- \* explaining the decisions taken, especially when the views of the child cannot be fully taken into account (Ireland, 2000, p. 30).

The second national goal of the Children's Strategy states that "children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services" (ibid., p. 11). Nevertheless, plans to include children in terms of hearing their voices and allowing them a platform for participation are very much constructed in an adult developed and assisted context, as exemplified by this excerpt:

It is important to take account of the age and capacity of children in designing specific measures and prioritising the need for direct participation. Building children's input to decision-making will require enhancing their analytical and communication skills and shifting the public perception of its value. Developing the skills to effect change cannot

be learnt by adults and then applied to children. Participation skills will be best learnt by providing children with opportunities to engage and participate, i.e. active learning (Ireland, 2000, p. 31).

Although this excerpt does not explicitly position adults as the facilitators of such participatory measures for children it is strongly inferred and reads as though it is speaking directly to adults rather than children. Much of the discourse surrounding this issue in the Strategy reads similarly, implying that adults are driving the development of all new measures, supports and services directed towards children. Nevertheless, such an approach to facilitating children's participation and hearing their views does tie-in with aspects of the model of participation as developed by Shier and discussed by Smith (2002)<sup>65</sup>. It remains vague as to whether the approach in the National Children's Strategy intends to go so far as to allow children to share in the power and responsibility of decision making, as in level five of Shier's model, or not.

Strategies proposed for hearing children's voices include the development of the *Dáil na nÓg* "a national forum where children can raise and debate issues of concern to them on a periodic basis" (Ireland, 2000, p. 32), and the establishment of an Office of Ombudsman for Children charged with "promoting the welfare and rights of children" (ibid., p. 33), which involves "raising public awareness and promoting children's issues at government level" (ibid.). Other planned approaches in the Children's Strategy to facilitate children's participation and hear their voices include looking into ways to represent their views on "existing national and local fora in relation to relevant services such as education and health" (ibid.). The Children's Strategy proposes that "discussions will be held with the relevant bodies and partnership interests on how best to represent children's views in these fora" (ibid.). Within that the Strategy constructs such new methods of allowing children to participate and have their voices heard as

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<sup>65</sup> Shier's model of participation, as considered by Smith, is explored in *Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5*.

requiring “professional training courses ... for key staff to equip them to operate and support children’s participation” (Ireland, 2000, p. 36); further constructing children’s participation within an adult centric understanding of the concept. In the meantime children are viewed as merely needing “to be supported” as opposed to requiring training or education, in making “the most of the opportunities which will now be available to them” (ibid.).

Towards 2016 continues with the construction of hearing children’s voices through adult led participatory measures, when it introduces one of its “Innovative Measures” for children and young people’s participation. It elaborates on the implementation of the Comhairle Na nÓg, which are youth councils facilitated by local authorities whose representatives get to inform the Dáil na nÓg with local concerns. It also refers to the “establishment and operation of democratic student councils in schools, in accordance with the Education Act 1998 and the National Children’s Strategy” (Ireland, 2006b, p. 47), which are also to be developed and facilitated by adults.

#### ***8.5.7 Rights to quality services: meeting needs***

Other dominant discourses throughout the policy documents construct the concept of rights as addressing children’s right to access quality services; however these constructions are often tied-in with or directly linked to the recognition of, and as a response to, children’s needs. The National Childcare Strategy encompasses references to the concepts of needs and rights as distinctly linked together from the outset:

The Group agreed that the needs of children and their right to access quality services, regardless of their social and economic background, should be the primary consideration in the development of a National Childcare Strategy. Throughout all the deliberations of the Expert Working Group, the needs and rights of children were placed centre stage (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxiv).

The Childcare Strategy locates itself as concerned with providing children with the quality services to which they should have a right to access; within this notion, rights are constructed as recognising and meeting children's needs. This excerpt demonstrates the Childcare Strategy's focus on quality services and the benefits they could bring to children, their families, and the wider community, in terms of recognising their rights and meeting their needs.

Increasingly, the childcare debate has also focused on the rights of children to equality of care and early education. There has been growing recognition, both nationally and internationally, of the role of quality childcare services in providing enhanced social and educational opportunities for children, in addition to the substantial benefits it brings to families and communities in terms of its contribution to health, educational attainment, socialisation, participation in training and employment and job creation (Ireland, 1999a, p. 7).

The Childcare Strategy states that "the rights and needs of each child must be the first and primary consideration in the delivery of childcare" (ibid., p. 44). It explains this further by positioning the basic principle underlying the rights of children: "that society has an obligation to meet the fundamental needs of children and to provide assistance to aid the development of the child's personality, talents and abilities" (ibid.). The Strategy qualifies this by suggesting that "a right of access for every child to quality childcare in a safe and secure environment where he/she is respected and accepted, should be guaranteed regardless of the status of the child or of his/her parents" (ibid.). The use of the weaker auxiliary verb should here rather than the stronger one of "must" implies that while this right to access quality services should be guaranteed, there may not be the capabilities and resources available to ensure that this is so. The statement on rights of access is not an actual recommendation of the Childcare Strategy, thus it is more a construction of what would be an ideal situation rather than a statement of intent.

The recognition of children's rights to access quality ECEC services not being met was highlighted in a Child Care motion put forward in the Dáil in 2004:

The care of our children should be a central issue for society. The quality of child care determines the health and well-being of an entire generation. It is scandalous that it has been sidelined and ignored for so long. A clearly funded child care policy based on the principle of the rights of children to care, security and opportunity and the right of parents to make arrangements of choice as to how best to provide such care for their children is needed (McManus, 2004).

The excerpt here clearly highlights the conceptual collocation of children's rights with parent's rights; children's rights to access quality ECEC services is constructed within a discourse which prioritises providing parents with rights to choose services as an important driver of policy. It creates an understanding that allowing parents to exercise their right to choose preferred services means that children's rights to access quality ECEC services are being upheld. This highlights the continuous side-lining of children's rights in the development of ECEC policy. It was reiterated and recommended throughout the debate that the child, and the rights of the child, must be central to the development of ECEC policies: "child care and work-life balance policies need to be driven by the criteria of what is in the public good and the recognition at all times that the rights of the child must be paramount" (Morgan, 2004). Nevertheless, this rights of the child discourse was not bolstered by any solid proposals on how to ensure that children's rights are upheld in ECEC policy.

#### **8.5.8 *Summary of discourses of rights and needs***

This section has shown examples of the dominant discourses of rights and needs within Irish ECEC policy documents. Discourses of rights and needs have been presented together here to reflect the continued positioning of rights and needs as complementary concepts; particularly to demonstrate how rights are persistently subordinated to needs throughout the language of Irish ECEC policy documents. Despite developments which have seen the language of rights appear more frequently in policy documents pertaining to children, discourses outlining the development of services are still oriented towards responding to needs. At other times, the terms rights and needs are used

interchangeably, making each directly related to the other and thus serving to devalue the notion of children's rights. In this context policy discourse has constructed an understanding of "children's rights" as predominantly being about meeting children's needs, rather than being understood as children's entitlement to participate fully in public life and to access and receive supports and services universally.

## **8.6 Targeting vs. Universal service provision**

Discourses of targeted and universal services within ECEC policy discourse, tie in closely with discourses of needs and rights. Targeted services are generally contextualised in relation to needs, whilst universal services are generally contextualised as more rights based. Targeted responses, particularly responding to the needs of disadvantaged children and those with special needs, have characterised the ECEC policy area throughout the period studied.

It is often the case that new approaches to policy are constructed in universal terms generally, only for the more specific measures within that approach to be framed in the context of a targeted response. An example of this is in the discourse surrounding the lifecycle approach of the Towards 2016 social partnership programme:

the Agreement puts in place a new social policy perspective based on the lifecycle framework. This approach seeks to move us away from a situation where policy is developed along Departmental lines, to one where the focus is on the outcomes we need to achieve for people at different stages of their lives (Ahern, 2006a).

Such discourse of achieving outcomes at different stages throughout the lifecycle could be construed as a relatively universally situated discourse. However, discourse related to more specific measures under Towards 2016 have been framed in the context of targeting specific policy concerns, as is evident in this excerpt from the Taoiseach's speech at a later plenary meeting:

We have continued to substantially increase investment in our health and education services, while pressing ahead with necessary reform agendas. Very significant improvements have been delivered in services for people with a disability, in care for older people in their homes and in special needs education (Ahern, 2007b).

#### ***8.6.1 Targeting: addressing disadvantage and responding to needs***

Throughout ECEC policy discourses, targeted services are predominantly constructed as responding to the additional needs of the disadvantaged, thus providing equality of opportunity to all children. Targeting is a policy focus of all of the documents reviewed.

An example of the policy focus on targeting, particularly within ECEC, comes from the White Paper which repeats its aim throughout the document as: “to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs” (Ireland, 1999b, pp. 14, 41). The White Paper later qualifies the importance of this policy focus on targeting:

Addressing the needs of the disadvantaged through early childhood education is necessary in order to:

- promote equality of opportunity
- tackle the cause of disparities in attainment and opportunity early (this is more effective and cost-efficient than later intervention)
- maximise the private and social returns on investment (Ireland, 1999b, p. 45).

The White Paper further positions the policy focus on targeting as necessary to ensure equitable treatment for children. Nevertheless, such a policy focus is contradictory insofar as the White Paper states that the aim is to develop policy which is targeted but without a knock on effect of stigmatising either ECE or the targeted children:

Although priority for and targeting of the disadvantaged is necessary, care must be taken to avoid stigmatising children. It is also important to avoid giving the impression that early childhood education is only for the disadvantaged. Accordingly, where possible, provision should take place in integrated settings (Ireland, 1999b, p. 102).

The National Childcare Strategy is also strongly focused on the targeting of services to those children seen as most in need:



it is recognised that in the context of equality of access and participation for all families and children, the National Childcare Strategy will need to facilitate a targeted approach so that the particular needs and interests of marginalised children or children with special needs are taken into account in the policy making process and in the on-going evaluation and implementation of the policy (i.e. the policy needs to be equality proofed and poverty proofed) (Ireland, 1999a, p. 47).

References to equality of access here are misleading since the notion of equality proofing through targeting generally follows an equality of opportunity concern whereas equality of access is located in terms of provision that caters for and recognises diversity. The texts have repeatedly situated ECEC policy in the context of achieving equality of opportunity.

The National Children's Strategy was published during a time of economic buoyancy in Ireland. Within that context, targeting was put forward as a mechanism to provide services to those in society who were not benefitting from the economic success of the rest of the country. The Children's Strategy constructed the targeting of services for children in this context:

Increases in government expenditure, particularly in the areas of education, health and family and community development have contributed to improving services for children and their families. Targeting the services to disadvantaged areas, where children tend to form the larger proportion of the local population, is an important way of channelling resources from economic progress to the most socially deprived sections in our society (Ireland, 2000, p. 22).

These sentiments with regard to the targeting of ECEC services echo the spoken discourse around ECEC provision that has taken place during Dáil debates. Speaking several months after the publication of the White Paper, the Minister for Education informed the chamber of the targeted focus of the policy plan:

The White Paper focuses in particular on increasing participation among the priority groups – children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with disabilities – and addresses the issue of direct provision where there are gaps in provision (Woods, 2000a).

This discourse of the targeted focus of policy reinforces the States role in supporting existing provision rather than developing a new State delivered service.

At the opening of *The Joint Seminar on the White Paper on Early Childhood Education*, the Minister for Education also spoke of his plan to aim to combat educational disadvantage:

My policy is to address this issue, by unambiguously targeting the early education of children with special needs and the educationally disadvantaged.

My Department already makes provision for disadvantaged children through a wide range of programmes. My aim will be to build on and, where necessary, improve these programmes (Woods, 2000b).

In 2004 the targeting of services was still being prioritised in ECEC policy; answering a question about early intervention for disadvantaged children in ECE, the Minister for Education stated:

My priority in that area will not be to introduce pre-school education for every child in the State because we would end up doing only half the job. The priority will be for disadvantaged areas, from where it can spread out (Dempsey, 2004).

This view of prioritising the targeting of services within ECEC persisted through to the next Minister for Education also, who reiterated a commitment to targeting in an early childhood education Dáil debate in October 2004. Her discourse about disadvantage also highlighted an ambiguity around what can be defined as disadvantaged, “there is no golden rule as to what qualifies for disadvantaged status. We need to have targeted responses in various areas” (Hanafin, 2004). When asked in the same debate if the government would act on recommendations from the OECD thematic review report on ECEC, the Minister gave this response: “I do not envisage I will be in a position to offer a free pre-school place to every child in the country. I do not believe Government resources would allow that” (Hanafin, 2004). This statement thus locates the government discourse on the universal provision of services as firmly in the realm of considering them as far too costly.

The policy focus on targeted services for children in general, has been lauded as a successful policy measure by the government; an example of this comes from the

Minister for Children's opening address to the CRC, when he asserted that "some 100,000 children have been lifted out of deprivation between 1997 and 2005 as a result of targeted measures and supports" (OMCYA, 2006e). This discourse further reinforces targeting as a key policy response which is held up as a successful policy measure.

### **8.6.2 *A dearth of universality***

It comes as no surprise, considering the primacy of targeting within ECEC policy discourses, that discourse centring on the universality of services is relatively scarce throughout the policy documents. When the concept of universal services is discussed, it is often in terms of painting an ideal situation picture as opposed to positioning the development of services as aspiring to universality.

The White Paper refers to ECE as being universal insofar as it is a policy area "covering all children from 0-6 years" (Ireland, 1999b, p. 47); nevertheless direct policy objectives are proposed to target ECE services to the 3-4 year age group only. This nod to universality is then qualified with the statement that "the nature of the provisions will vary according to age and circumstances, with support being directed in particular to those with a special educational need or in situations of disadvantage" (ibid.); constructing universality as subordinate to targeting. The National Childcare Strategy has a stronger line on universality stating that "universal policies, at the level at which the Exchequer could afford them, are unlikely to result in improving either the quality or quantity of childcare services" (Ireland, 1999a, p. xxiv); thereby further constructing universal approaches as too expensive. Later the Childcare Strategy refers to child benefit as an example of a universal measure that is provided to the parents of all children, which may be used in order to pay for childcare:

child benefit has the advantage of being a universal benefit and would therefore be available to all families, irrespective of whether the mother works inside or outside the home or whether the family income is from employment or social welfare (Ireland, 1999a, p. 63).

However, the Childcare Strategy then also illustrates the downside of child benefit as a universal benefit for childcare:

The disadvantage of child benefit as a means of subsidising childcare is that it is expensive and, as it is not targeted on childcare, is not guaranteed to increase the provision of childcare places or to improve the quality of childcare without a parallel investment in the supply side of childcare (Ireland, 1999a, p. 63).

This explanation also serves to cast a shadow over the use of cash payment type universal approaches towards ECEC services in general, as it implies that targeting is the best way to ensure that subsidies actually go towards paying for childcare services. The universal payment of child benefit, the one consistent universal measure to which the ECEC policy documents refer, is subsequently also constructed as a measure to tackle child poverty in the National Children's Strategy:

Child benefit is an important means of reducing child poverty and supporting the welfare of children, given its universal coverage and its neutral relationship to both the employment incentive and decisions regarding family formation. Significant increases have been allocated directly to support and maintain children in Ireland. Child Benefit will continue to be increased over the lifetime of the Strategy (Ireland, 2000, p. 63).

It is of interest that in the wake of the demise of the Celtic Tiger era of economic buoyancy in Ireland, this discourse surrounding child benefit has shifted. From 2009, child benefit has persistently been re-constructed from being understood as a universal payment with a number of related benefits, to being understood as a costly and unnecessary universal policy measure which has been giving financial assistance to many who did not need it. Subsequently child benefit rates have been cut and means by which to begin to target or tax the payment are being investigated by the government.

Dáil debates have highlighted a reticence to commit to the universal provision of services; the Minister for Education was asked the question:

Does the Minister intend to consider giving a free pre-school place to all children, as suggested, and to give more intensive support to children in disadvantaged areas, in line with a further suggestion? (O'Sullivan, 2004b).

The Minister replied positioning the government as unable to afford the universal provision of free pre-school places, “I do not believe Government resources would allow that” (Hanafin, 2004).

The later, relatively short-lived development of the introduction of the early childcare supplement (ECS) from 2006-2009, is a good example of one of the few policy developments couched within the overall concept of universality. Albeit, in this case, this was a universal payment targeted towards, and available to, the parents of children within the 0-6 years age group only. This adheres in some respects to the DCYA concept of tailored universalism<sup>66</sup>; in this case supplementing the parents of a specific age cohort rather than supplementing the disadvantaged. Nevertheless, when the ECS was introduced, discourse around it centred on it as a universal family support for the parents of young children, which would enable parents to choose the most appropriate childcare services relative to their needs:

the introduction of the Early Childcare Supplement represents a very substantial commitment by this Government to supporting parents, particularly during the early years when the costs associated with caring for children, can be particularly high. I believe the new Supplement also illustrates the multi-faceted approach which this Government is adopting in addressing childcare needs and parents' choices for their children's care (Lenihan, 2006).

This lauding of the provision of a universal payment to parents which allows them to choose their own preferred ECEC services came about despite previous doubts about universal childcare payments, raised in the Childcare Strategy. Nevertheless when the economy faltered, the ECS was abolished within a discourse of the exorbitant expense attached to providing universal cash payments, which was accompanied by a discourse

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<sup>66</sup> Tailored universalism has been described as “the provision of quality services available to all, but with additional supports provided to enable disadvantaged groups to access them” (Langford, 2007, p. 258).

which positioned targeting as necessary to ensure that the money was being directly spent on ECEC services.

### **8.6.3 *Summary of Targeting vs. Universal service provision***

Discourses of universality have not appeared heavily on the agenda within the ECEC policy discourses located in the documents used in this study. Policy provisions are persistently contextualised as general, for all children, but within that services have been continually targeted towards those seen as most in need. This predominantly translates into policy approaches which see a general conceptual strategy for the development of policy in universal terms, which is subsequently couched in terms of targeted approaches on the ground for more immediate and detailed provisions. All Irish ECEC policy discourses between 1998 and 2008 have tended to follow this trajectory.

## **8.7 Addendum: Recent Developments - The Free Pre-School Year**

This study has initially been concerned with the developments in Irish ECEC policy in respect of policy texts published throughout the period from 1998-2008. However a significant policy development occurred in April 2009, which for the purposes of this study cannot be overlooked. The Minister for Finance announced in an emergency budget in April 2009 that the ECS payment was to cease, and instead the government would now provide a universal Free Pre-School Year to young children. The Minister for Children described some of the provisions of the new Free Pre-School Year in greater detail in the Dáil:

With effect from 1 January 2010, a child aged between three years and seven months and four years and ten months will be able to avail of a free preschool year in the various facilities around the country. Thereafter, on 1 March each year, all children aged between three years and three months and four years and six months will be able to avail of the service. The age cohort was specifically designed to ensure flexibility for parents and to ensure the capacity would be able to be met by the existing provision of child care places (Andrews, 2009a).

From the outset the Free Pre-School Year was met with suspicion by the opposition parties in the Dáil. The general consensus among them was that while the introduction of a free preschool year was welcome, they felt that it was being introduced in an underhand fashion as a means to dampen criticism of the government for abolishing the ECS payment. This is exemplified in this extract:

The principle behind this measure is one I and Fine Gael have long espoused. I remember the former Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, saying a few years ago that it had no educational value. After 12 years of having the money to implement such a measure and not doing so, the Government has decided to introduce it, not because it suddenly believes it to be worthwhile but because it allows a bigger saving to be made somewhere else (Enright, 2009a).

A motion was raised in the Dáil for debate on this matter which contended that the government had spent the economically buoyant period in Ireland's recent history throwing money into the sector through cash payments, to providers and parents separately, rather than developing it properly. The sudden turn to the universal Free Pre-School Year was subsequently seen as a cost cutting mechanism rather than as a considered policy development:

Instead of attempting to find the best solution or attempting at that point to begin to develop and nurture a successful and viable preschool system in Ireland when the money was available, the Government ignored the sector. It has decided instead to develop it during a recession. The Government simply gave parents a few more quid to use howsoever they wished and ignored the opportunity to develop a long-term system that would serve generations (Enright, 2009b).

No one has been fooled by the Government's sudden conversion to the importance of preschool. It introduced this measure suddenly in an attempt to blunt the impact and response to this massive cut to families (Enright, 2009b).

Further debate on this matter also highlighted some general reluctance towards embracing universality in the Irish political psyche in general. Some opposition discourse located the new free preschool measure as anti-family in that it was impacting on the freedom of parental choice. Such discourses positioned the ECS as having provided parents with choice, thus the removal of the ECS and its replacement with the Free Pre-School Year was being constructed as removing parent's freedom to choose.

There was also widespread criticism of the age range as being too rigid. The initial government response in this debate was to sell the positives attached to this policy development, reiterating the beneficial nature and child-centeredness of such a measure: “ECCE has been introduced as a child-centred measure. The benefit of a preschool year for any child who avails of it is immense, and the benefits for society as a whole are well documented” (Moloney, 2009).

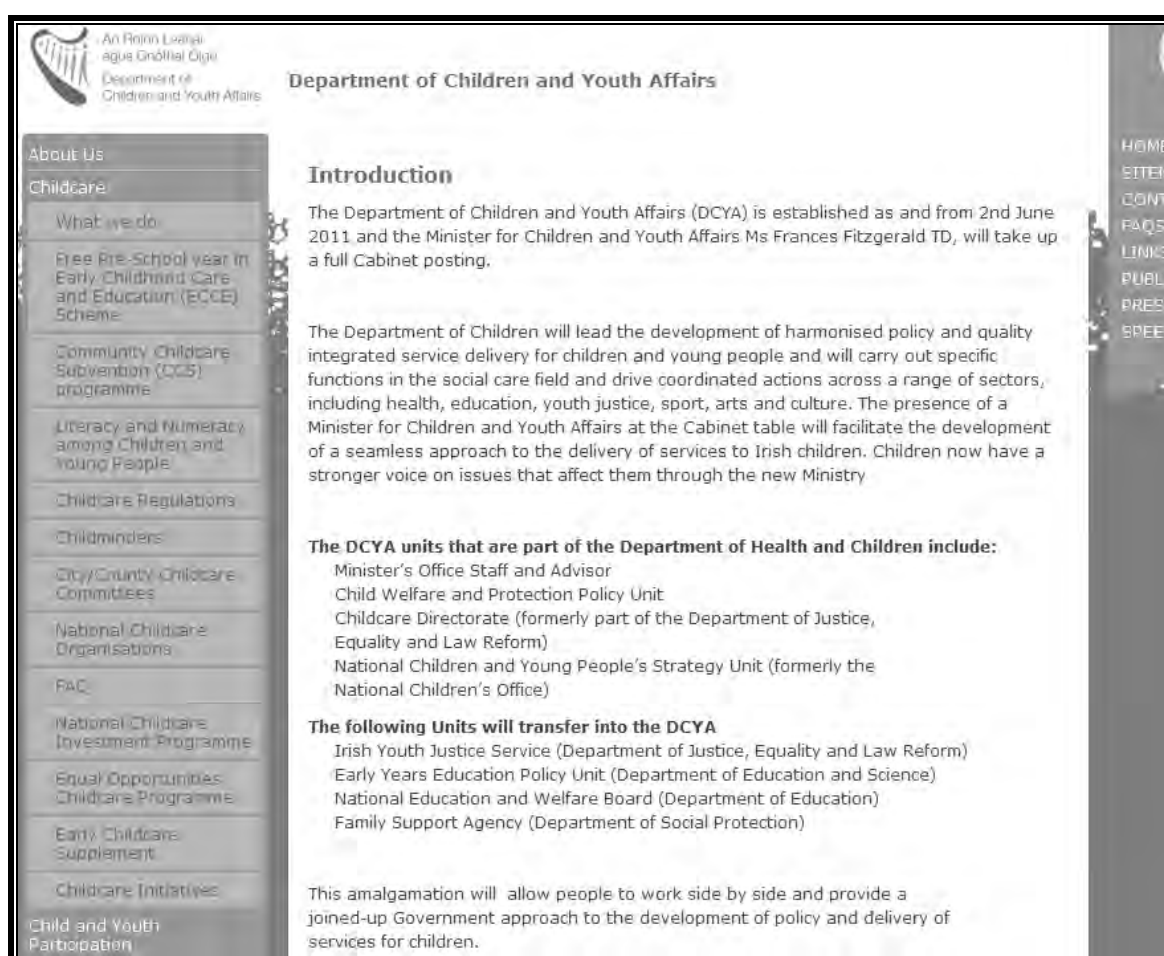
In discourse of the Free Pre-School Year the government construct it as an early childhood care and education (ECCE) measure, rather than as an early childhood education and care (ECEC) measure, positioning care ahead of education. Official discourse about the Free Pre-School Year has marked a shift from the State referring to services solely under the umbrella term of “childcare” to the widespread use of the term “ECCE” to describe the Free Pre-School Year and other early years services. The State constructed the decision to provide a Free Pre-School Year as the correct policy move, which was also acting on expert recommendations:

Minister Andrews said, ‘re-direction of over €170 million from the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) into the provision of a free pre-school year starting in January next, was the right policy choice. This policy has been called for by experts in early years care and education, including bodies such as the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), Barnardos, the Children’s Rights Alliance and the OECD’ (Andrews, 2009b).

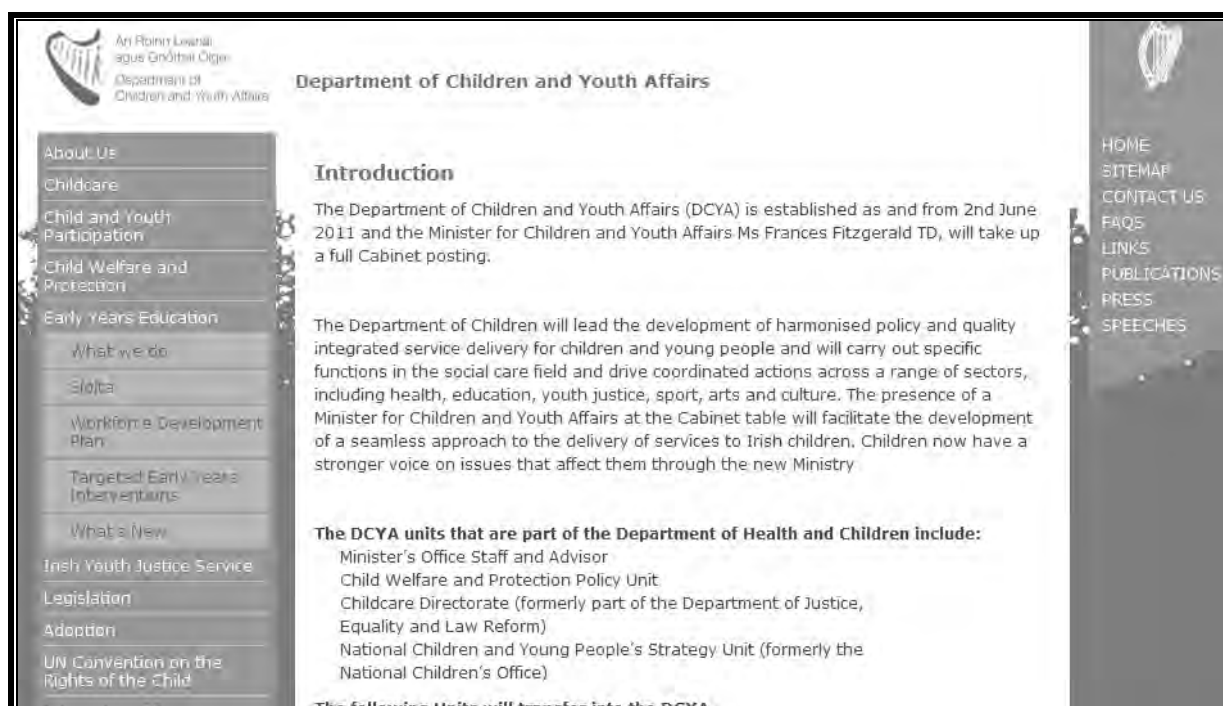
Analysis of the discourse surrounding the Free Pre-School Year thus far has not revealed any significant shift in the government’s ideological approach to ECEC policy. The knowledge constructed about the Free Pre-School Year is not much different to the knowledge constructed about ECEC in wider ECEC policy discourse. There has been no development or establishment of new centres of provision; the Free Pre-School Year service is accessed through existing providers as opposed to any strategic development



of new standardised provision. Reference is made to the importance of, and benefits from, the provision of early education across the texts about the Free Pre-School Year; however from a linguistic perspective early education is still contextualised as subordinate to the overarching concept of childcare. The subordination of early education to childcare is exemplified through the DCYA's continuing adherence to the use of the descriptive terms 'childcare' and 'ECCE', as opposed to ECEC. Consequently this locates care as the dominant concept in early childhood policy with education as the subordinate. This subordination is evident in this screenshot of the DCYA website, taken on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011, where the information for the Free Pre-School Year is to be found in the side-bar menu of the childcare section of the website, as opposed to being found in the side-bar menu of the early years education section.



**Figure 8.1: Screenshot of DCYA website, <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/> taken August 23rd 2011, showing drop down side-bar menu under heading Childcare.**



**Figure 8.2: Screenshot of DCYA website, <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/> taken August 23rd 2011, showing drop down side-bar menu under heading Early Years Education.**

The policy approach of the Free Pre-School Year is predominantly conceptually centred on the notion of preparing children in order to make them ready for school:

What is the free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)?  
 The ECCE is a new scheme designed to give children access to a free Pre-School Year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment. (OMCYA, 2009a).

The eligibility terms for the Free Pre-School Year state that it is not available to children under the age of 3 years and 3 months old, while also stating an expectation that formal schooling will have begun by the age of 5 years 6 months, following a year of free preschool participation. Many debates about the scheme have involved opposition parties expressing their dismay at the rigidity of the age spectrum which the scheme covers. The government response to this has been to insist that is a necessity to the preparation for formal schooling nature of the scheme to adhere to the specific age spectrum:

Targeting the preschool year at a particular age cohort is clearly fundamental to the scheme and it is necessary, therefore, to set minimum and maximum limits to the age range within which children will participate in the scheme each year. I am satisfied that the age range set for the scheme achieves a reasonable balance between supporting the provision of appropriate age-related programmes and activities and providing flexibility to parents and their children, and I have no plans to review the position (Andrews, 2010).

This adherence to the specific age range has been reiterated by the new Minister for Children also; “there will always be children who fall outside the cohort. From a policy point of view, this age range was seen as the most appropriate for preschool services” (Fitzgerald, 2011a). In the Andrews excerpt above, the Free Pre-School Year is further characterised as providing flexibility to parents. The notion of flexibility further serves to locate the measure in the “childcare realm”, and continues the discourse of parents as an important consideration within the development of ECEC policy.

While much of the positive discourse surrounding the Free Pre-School Year centres on the recognition of the benefits of early childhood education, the returns to society and the preparation of young children for formal schooling; there has been less explication of the educational strategy for the scheme. The scheme is supported by a curricular framework rather than by a specified ECE curriculum or programme, which could lead to interpretation of the scheme as perhaps not particularly universal, considering that there may be scope for each provider to construe the curricular framework in a distinct manner. The required educational programme of Free Pre-School Year schemes remains ambiguous:

Services can participate in the scheme only where they meet requirements regarding staff qualifications and where they implement an appropriate programme of educational activities; neither of these requirements apply to pre-school services outside of the scheme. This is the first time specific educational standards will be in place for pre-school provision (OMCYA, 2009c).

The focus on meeting qualification requirements and standards take precedence over the development of curriculum. The lack of debate about the educational nature of the scheme lends further weight to the implication that the provision of care places, albeit in

the guise of the provision of some undetermined educational programme, remains the dominant policy concern.

Providers of the Free Pre-School Year are expected to employ staff which meet the specified criteria for qualifications: “the scheme will, for the first time, introduce requirements for staff to hold qualifications in child care” (Moloney, 2009); they are also expected to adhere to the quality framework set out in *Síolta*<sup>67</sup>. The terms and conditions expressly state that: “participating service providers must agree to provide an appropriate educational programme for children in their pre-school year which adheres to the principles of *Síolta*, the national framework for early years childhood education” (DCYA, 2011). The current Minister for Children has not made any conceptual changes to the scheme; responding to a question about the future of the scheme in July 2011, she restated the focus of the programme:

Services participating in the ECCE programme are required to provide age-appropriate activities and programmes to children within the *Síolta* framework for early learning. They are also encouraged to implement the Aistear curriculum which has been developed for children aged from birth to six years. The ECCE programme is universally available, free of charge, to all preschool children and this is critical to ensuring equality of access and school readiness (Fitzgerald, 2011b).

It is noteworthy again to point out that in relation to implementation of the Aistear curriculum, which is a curricular framework rather than a specified curriculum or programme of ECE, the word encouraged rather than expected is used, this implies that providers do not have to develop a programme in line with Aistear if they do not wish to. Thus the Free Pre-School Year scheme remains ambiguous in relation to curriculum, and the educational nature of provision can vary from provider to provider. This can be

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<sup>67</sup> It is interesting to note here, that in the first debate where issues relating to the Free Pre-School Year were raised, the Minister for Children stated the following:

“I want to pay tribute to the CECDE which is now being subsumed into my office for the work it has done. It was only set up for the purpose of developing this quality framework and again it is fortuitous that *Síolta* is now available to be rolled out and to ensure quality during the pre-school year throughout the country” (Andrews, 2009a).

This is despite the remit of the CECDE being rather more involved than just merely devising the quality framework.

construed as meaning that there is a lack of continuity of the educational quality of provision across the scheme.

Discourse pertaining to the Free Pre-School Year has tended to focus on the universality of the scheme rather than focusing explicitly on any rights context. The understanding of universality within which the Free Pre-School Year is positioned is actually a very specific and targeted construction of universality, which appears to be an interpretation of the DCYA's favoured concept of tailored universalism. From the very specific age cohort to the lack of a developed educational programme within the scheme, the Free Pre-School Year appears to be constructed within a particularly biased and singular understanding of what a universal service entails which is a unique perspective of the DCYA, tailored universalism.

Changing times and economic restrictions were the initial force behind the government's decision to introduce the policy measure of a Free Pre-School Year; its inception was essentially a cost saving mechanism through a redirection of funds. This has been acknowledged by the State, and the Free Pre-School Year has been constructed as a redirection of the ECS funds into a cheaper yet more considered policy approach. The Free Pre-School Year has only been in operation for a relatively short period of time at this stage; thus apart from centring on the DCYA's unique understanding of the universal nature of the provision of the scheme, alongside the move to interchange the terms 'childcare' and 'ECCE', discourse of the ECEC policy area has not really been recast within any noticeable conceptual shift.

## **8.8 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings with regard to the knowledge constructed about rights and needs within ECEC policy discourses, which subsequently influence the outlook on targeted and universal service provision. This chapter described the attitudes to children's rights generally as realised in the discourses of documents under the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was followed by description of the knowledge constructed about rights and needs within the ECEC policy texts.

Attitudes towards rights and needs directly influence approaches to the targeted and universal provision of services. The findings presented in this chapter highlight the rhetorical nature of consideration of children's rights in Irish policy; this is exemplified through official discourse on rights which is often publicised in reports and responses to the CRC and framed in prescribed language centring on prescribed content. The findings show how rights and needs are enduringly collocated as complementary concepts, within which rights are continually subordinated to needs. Discourse of rights is of an incessantly rhetorical nature, using references to the UNCRC as evidence of a rights discourse rather than positioning any policy as coming from a rights basis. The language of rights is inherent in recent policy discourse; however the development of services is still predominantly oriented from a needs response perspective. Thus "children's rights" are often understood as being about meeting children's needs, rather than positioning children as valued social actors in their own lives, who are entitled to receive services and supports. This is reaffirmed by the absence of explicit children's rights in the Irish Constitution.

The construction of needs as the predominant concept within ECEC policy discourses has created a scenario which legitimates the prioritising of targeted policy responses in order to meet these urgent needs. Consequently, discourses of universality are largely absent. Instead, discourse of the provision of universal services has been recast into a uniquely targeted understanding of universality, tailored universalism, which is chiefly characterised through the delivery of ECEC services as the Free Pre-School Year. The Free Pre-School Year is thus somewhat disingenuously constructed as the universal provision of an ECEC programme, despite it only being universally available to a significantly targeted cohort. The Free Pre-School Year discourse reflects wider ECEC discourse in Ireland with a reliance on the poorly defined concepts of high quality and standards in early education, alongside a lack of consensus on service provision from an educational perspective.

The final chapter follows, concluding this thesis, synthesising the main arguments derived from the identification of the key knowledge constructions within Irish ECEC policy, and stating the implications for future policy and research.

## **9. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR IRISH ECEC POLICY**

For most of us, the knowledge provided by our common historical perspective is so embedded within ourselves and our own culture ... that we have not conceptualized the need to question the history/knowledge that we “know” (Cannella, 2008, p. 3).

This thesis has come from a perspective which understands the need to question what we “know”. The aim of the thesis has been to understand the conceptual construction of Irish early childhood education and care policy, focusing in on how children’s rights are both constructed and obstructed within the truths known about ECEC and how this impacts on a rights based construction of policy. This has been achieved through analysis of Irish ECEC policy texts using a critical discourse analysis approach in order to discover and understand the dominant policy discourses, and the construction of knowledge about ECEC therein, which shape the policy area in Ireland. Since Ireland’s ratification of the UNCRC in 1992, the language of rights has increasingly permeated policy discourse for children. The focus of this study has been on investigating how ECEC policy is generally understood in Irish society, and more specifically how it is understood in relation to discourses of rights. Consequently, this study set out to answer the key research question:

Does the knowledge constructed within Irish ECEC policy discourse hinder the development and implementation of early childhood education and care policy from a rights basis?

The CDA was conducted through textual analysis of the corpus of Irish ECEC policy texts which were published between 1998 and 2008, focusing particularly on language choices and the linguistic construction of texts. This CDA approach also involved deep analysis of the sociocultural and socio-political climate in which these policy documents were created. Influenced by Foucault’s understanding of discourse, where he saw discourse playing an important role in structuring how we understand particular topics



through the tactical combination of truth, power and knowledge, this study was focused on the particular knowledge constructions that dominate within ECEC policy discourses. This was in keeping with an understanding of policy discourses in policy texts working as “power/knowledge configurations par excellence” (Ball, 1990b, p. 22). The key problematic within Irish ECEC policy discourse exists in the knowledge that is constructed about key concepts which shape wider understandings of the policy area. The meaning inherent in these concepts drive approaches to policy in this area; these key concepts were identified as: the child; needs; rights; early education; childcare; universal provision and targeted provision. These concepts can be seen as creating types of cultural categories, hierarchical meanings of “normality”, which are taught, learned and reproduced through the consumption of policy discourses (Luke, 1995; MacNaughton, 2005). These subsequently become truths (Foucault, 1981, 1984a) about ECEC in Ireland. The truths that become known through the “orderly constructions” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 119) of these concepts in wider discourse are controlled through the use of language which works to legitimate them and embed them in wider society as the only truths about ECEC.

This thesis has been structured within an overarching framework of Fairclough’s (1995) dimensions of discourse model. The thesis chapters were organised according to the three levels of his model. Consequently, the literature review chapters attended to the sociocultural practice level and the discourse practice level, exploring dominant discourses of childhoods and also the dominant discourses within the construction of ECEC. These chapters also reviewed the dominant discourses of Irish childhoods, and early childhood education and care in Ireland. At the level of discourse practice, the interpretation of these dominant discourses into policy for children with regard to ECEC services and children’s rights specifically were considered through a review of the

developments in Irish ECEC policy throughout the period 1998-2008. The story of how the research was carried out was then described throughout the methodology chapter. At the text level of Fairclough's (1995) model, the final chapters described the findings revealing the dominant knowledge constructions and discourses within Irish ECEC policy which have shaped and perpetuated understandings of ECEC. The findings of the study were presented across three separate yet interrelated chapters. The first of the findings chapters described the results of the analysis of the texts in terms of their physical presentation and generic chaining within the context of policy text production. The second findings chapter then described and discussed the knowledge constructed about the key concepts which shape understandings of ECEC generally. The third findings chapter described and discussed the construction of knowledge about rights and needs, which impact on the proposed direction of the delivery of policy in terms of universal or targeted provision.

With regard to the context of policy text production, the analysis touched on the physical presentation of the published policy texts. The analysis considered the notions of voice and representation, alongside discussion of the generic chains which the texts are a part of. The findings revealed that the voice of the State dominates in Irish ECEC policy texts, which are typically presented in a relatively generic manner. There is uniformity in the presentation of policy documents, and in the use of language which is characterised through a great deal of repetition and intertextuality. While the documents are situated generally as a promotional genre, for selling the proposed policy to the general public, they foster an impression within that they are rather more specifically directed at the policy makers and other stakeholders, rather than being developed for wider consumption by the general public.

Given constraints, circumstances and practicalities, the translation of crude, abstract simplicities of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involves productive thought, invention and adaptation. Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set. A response must still be put together, constructed in context, offset against other expectations. All of this involves creative social action, not robotic reactivity. Thus, the enactment of texts relies on things like commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, cooperation and (importantly) intertextual compatibility (Ball, 1993, p. 12).

This quote from Ball situates policy texts as the starting point in the policy process; he considered policy texts as immaterial without human intervention and interpretation. Nevertheless, the pattern of similarity within the Irish ECEC policy documents and the insufficiency of real tangible policy development on the ground, aside from financial investment, points to the Irish situation as being a lot more nuanced. Thus it seems that the conservative ideology which permeates the policy documents constructs an even narrower view of ECEC on the ground. The outcome of this is that a much more diluted version of some of the proposals outlined in the language of policy objectives have been slowly translated into actual policy provisions, over a protracted period of time.

The “demands of neoliberalism” (Ruffolo, 2008) have deeply influenced the construction of knowledge within Irish ECEC policy discourse. This is chiefly evident in discourses which prioritise the increased provision of places amidst aims to enhance choice and availability, thus serving competition and privatization. It is also evident in discourses of ECEC services working to produce children who are ready for school, thus fulfilling the neoliberal aim of enhancing future productivity. The construction of knowledge within Irish ECEC policy discourse sees the term “childcare”<sup>68</sup>, as the most common term applied to discourse of all early childhood services whether

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<sup>68</sup> The term “childcare” has recently become widely iterated as “ECCE” particularly in discourse of the Free Pre-School Year.

encompassing care, early education or both. Care and early education are predominantly discussed, and therefore regularly understood, as interrelated concepts:

we must recognise that young children have needs for both education and care and that the focus can never be exclusively on either. For very young children, their education and care needs are closely intertwined, and must be met in a unified way (Ireland, 1999b, p. 3).

The ECEC sector is continually recognised across the policy texts as needing coordination and development, thus it is persistently located as an embryonic policy area which is continuously in a state of becoming rather than being. Consequently, there is a reactive urgency apparent in most of the texts, which is used to legitimate the provision of places within existing structures taking priority over the wider strategic development of the policy sector as a whole. The overarching policy goal is to achieve the delivery of high quality “childcare” or “ECCE” services to young children, however high quality remains an intangible concept which can be open to multiple interpretations. Parents are constructed as key stakeholders within the policy area, rather than children. All discourse of policy development within the texts locates parents as central to progress, positioning their rights to have choices with regard to the kind of services their children will attend, as a top priority. This serves to silence children’s rights within ECEC policy discourse. Parent’s insider knowledge of their children’s needs is also situated as an important contribution to the development of high quality “childcare” or “ECCE” provision. Policy measures have predominantly taken a targeted approach to provision. This persists; more recent policy developments, such as the Free Pre-School Year, are couched within a nuanced understanding of universality. The DCYA refer to this as tailored universalism. Targeting is chiefly positioned as a policy measure to tackle disadvantage and provide extra assistance to children with special needs. However, within a wider understanding of the age of early childhood as 0-6 years, the 3-4 year age cohort is specifically targeted for pre-school education. This age

targeting reflects Piaget's theory of developmental stages in children's learning, and aims to foster in young children a "readiness to learn" in order to prepare them for the beginning of their formal education in primary school. It is also situated within a wider neoliberal discourse which sets such educated children up as future units of productivity. While discourse abounds that situates ECEC services as beneficial to children, and subsequently to the wider society, the chief consideration of children in ECEC policy is in terms of making them "ready to learn", therefore ready for school.

On a deeper conceptual level the issues of rights and needs, as constructed within the policy texts, have been of great importance for this study. It has been recognised that Irish ECEC policy is not constructed from a rights basis. This issue was identified by Hayes and Bradley (2009); they criticised the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme due to the omission of a focus on "the needs and rights of children ... as a policy objective of the programme which failed to address issues of quality and equality of access" (p. 5). The findings of this thesis have demonstrated that the consideration of children's rights in Irish policy, particularly ECEC policy, remains of a chiefly rhetorical nature. Discourses of rights are persistently contextualised and located within references to the Convention, rather than rights being an integral driving concept within policy development and discourse. This Convention related rights discourse permeates the language of policy texts without influencing the ethos of policy objectives. The concept of rights is predominantly collocated with the concept of needs, positioning them as complementary concepts; within which rights are continuously subordinated to needs. Policy is contextualised from a needs discourse, thus service development chiefly responds to needs. This has led to a situation in which the meaning of "children's rights" within policy discourse is understood as being about meeting children's needs. Acknowledgement is given throughout policy discourse to the notion of recognising

children as social actors, who have a valued contribution to make to social life. However this understanding falls short of recognising children as having rights which give them an entitlement to receive services and supports. Opportunities for children, as social actors, to exercise their agency are constantly realised within adult created and adult-led notions of participation. This lends much credibility to Valentine's contention that the emphasis within facilitating children's agency is "on process not outcomes" (2009, p. 8), wherein children's views may well be "considered and then discarded" (ibid.) as long as they are seen to have been consulted. Considering how the balance tips with regard to the child's right to be heard and the child's right to be protected (Archard & Skivenes, 2009), in Irish policy it is tipped more in favour of a protectionist concern reflecting the construction of children within the needs discourse, seen as becomings rather than beings.

The targeting of services prevails within the ECEC sector to the extent that discourses of universality have been recast into a uniquely targeted understanding of the provision of universal services; tailored universalism. This is chiefly evident in the Free Pre-School Year, characterised as a universal programme of ECEC provision through wider discourse. However as a universal measure the Free Pre-School Year is tailored towards a very specific targeted age cohort. While welcoming the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, Hayes and Bradley (2009) expressed some concern about the context in which it has emerged. They have subsequently pointed to some of the elements necessary for the conceptual restructuring of such a landmark policy decision:

Once a right is granted *to* ECEC ... the design of a rights-based framework involves identifying the necessary components to ensure children's rights are met *in* ECEC. Quality within settings, measured through the daily experiences of children, staff qualifications and remuneration, setting resources and curriculum frameworks must also be appropriately provided for. Children's perspectives on factors they consider important to them within ECEC settings must also receive attention. Now that government has conceded to a right *to* access ECEC for children of a given age, the

need to consider children's rights *within* ECEC settings becomes all the more pressing (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 46).

Thus far there has been no such conceptual restructuring of the ECEC area. There is a repetition within the policy discourses in the corpus for this study, including more recent texts concerned with the Free Pre-School Year. Irish ECEC policy is persistently contextualised as in a state of becoming, which will be realised through building on existing provision and structures. The State has refrained from fully developing the policy area into the delivery of specific State provided ECEC programmes. Instead the State continues to rely on a wealth of different providers, with different ethos, providing different interpretations of early childhood education and care. Existing State funded childcare services, under the auspices of the DCYA, deliver a locally constructed interpretation of an appropriate programme of care and education to the general population of children. Meanwhile State provided early education services, delivered by the Department of Education and Skills, intervene to target "needy" children in order to try and lift them out of poverty or possible educational failure.

Cannella has critiqued the notion of such split provision of ECEC:

Early childhood programs have perpetuated this institutionalized belief in others as inferior by functioning as a socioeconomically segregated system. The poor are placed in subsidized programs while the affluent are served by private programs. The groups do not commonly interact with each other. Further, the curriculum is viewed as designed to eliminate deficiency in one and to develop full potential in the other. We have clearly institutionalized different early childhood educations for different groups of children and their families (Cannella, 2008, p. 112).

These approaches to Irish ECEC policy have succeeded in homogenising two different types of ECEC provision for different groups of children and their families. This homogenisation is legitimised by the persistent location of children within the needs discourse. That is not to say that more progressive views have not infiltrated the ECEC policy discourse. There is clear evidence, on paper, of the influence of theories such as those espoused by Bronfenbrenner which view children within a systemic approach.

Recognition is given to the agentic possibilities of children within their own lives particularly in terms of the relationship between children and their environments; the significance of all the systems in a child's life. Nevertheless, within that overarching progressive discourse, when it comes to the development of ECEC policy in terms of providing services and support, Irish children are still characterised as "needy" dependants. This is in keeping with a perceived status of children generally as "apprentice citizens rather than fully constituted members of the social world" (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 84). Such a perception is reflected in the continuing constitutional subordination of Irish children to the family, and children's corresponding lack of explicit individual rights therein. The shadow of the Constitution on Irish society generally ensures that the child in Irish social policy remains contextualised within this needs discourse, constructing:

a form of natural authority used to support personal, political and power agendas. The needy label constructs authority for those who identify and address needs. Needy children are created as helpless and passive. The construction of natural needs ... results in a form of scientific authority in which needs are not questioned (Cannella, 2008, p. 123)

Thus the concept of needs is validated as an accepted scientific truth which in this case is legitimately driving the development of ECEC policy. The needs discourse also subordinates children to adults, in terms of their ability to mediate their own social worlds (Wyness, 2001). The persistence of the needs discourse leaves children within an ambiguous situation where the development of ECEC policy can oscillate between attending to children's interests and attending to children's needs (Wyness et al., 2004). This is typically reflected by a conceptual chasm which references children's interests in policy discourse and conversely targets children's needs in policy developments, rather than developing policy from a children's rights perspective. With regard to Foucauldian understandings of the tactical combination of truth, power and knowledge; in Irish policy the persistence of the needs discourse legitimates conservative truths and



understandings about ECEC being known. These truths thus bestow authority on the State to discursively construct ECEC policy in response to the prioritised needs and rights of parents, with children's needs as subordinate and children's rights obstructed accordingly.

Fairclough (2001) has advocated the importance of looking for “gaps and contradictions that exist” (p. 231) within policy discourses in order to seek out the “unrealised potential for change” (ibid.). Certain discourses will remain absent in order to strengthen the existing regimes of truth (Foucault, 1981, 1984a). Considering the knowledge constructed within Irish ECEC policy discourses, there has been a notable gap, or absence, of a pedagogical discourse as understood by Moss (2006), and others. To reiterate Moss's concept, he advocated the reconceptualisation of understandings of ECEC services within a pedagogical discourse where services thus act:

as a complement to, not a substitute for, the home, offering children qualitatively different experiences and relationships within which the members of the workforce are viewed as reflective and researching practitioners ... graduates with a similar status to school teachers (Moss, 2006, p. 158).

In Moss's view, countries that situate their early childhood education approaches within this discourse tend to deliver ECEC services from the Department of Education, and understand the care element of ECEC as an integral “part of any work with people” (Moss, 2006, p. 160). Others such as Brostrom (2006) and Hayes (2008c) have also suggested reconceptualising care as more of a nurturing pedagogy, where understandings of education and care mutually support and reinforce each other. This understanding of pedagogy comprises “a unity of care, upbringing, and teaching” (Brostrom, 2006, p. 403). Brostrom advocated for the reconceptualisation of ECEC services that are developed within such a discourse so that they integrate concepts of teaching and learning in to childcare settings, while also integrating care concepts into school settings (Brostrom, 2006). In Irish ECEC policy discourse there has been no such

reconceptualisation of services, policy is developed without any real debate on or attention paid to the deeper meaning of concepts of education and care within ECEC. There is a notable absence of discourse which considers such notions of pedagogy as advocated by Moss (2006), Brostrom (2006), and Hayes (2008c). These “silences in the text” (Marston, 2004, p. 125) point to an absence of any real interrogation of current understandings of education and care for young children whatsoever. The split system of provision continues, even in new policy developments such as the Free Pre-School Year. The educational nature of the Free Pre-School Year remains undefined, masked by ambiguous discourse of high quality services which exist without any evidence of conceptual depth. Thus the closest move towards any semblance of a reconceptualisation that appears within the Irish ECEC policy discourses is simply an amendment to a name for services, rather than a true reconceptualisation. Represented by the shift to use of the term “ECCE”, instead of and/or as well as the term “childcare”, particularly to refer to Free Pre-School Year ECEC services.

Implications for Irish ECEC policy and future research which arise from the findings of this study are twofold. Firstly the analysis which focuses on the context of policy text production within this thesis highlights a shift in approaches to the visual design of children’s policy texts. It was noted that the presentation of children’s policy documents has evolved, and that appearance has seemed to become more important. The use of design and illustrations in certain documents, particularly the National Children’s Strategy and the Agenda for Children’s Services, have showcased a more innovative way of presenting information. This study was not expressly concerned with exploring the specific semiotics of the design elements of the texts. Hence there is a potential space where further semiotic analysis could be undertaken to more thoroughly consider the implications of design elements of Irish ECEC policy texts, in order to evaluate if

they are merely empty eye-catching diversions or if there is any deeper meaning behind such visual concepts. Secondly, as this thesis has repeatedly highlighted, there is a great need for a wider conceptual debate about what is understood by ECEC, by children's rights generally, and children's rights to access ECEC services. This is particularly so in relation to recasting understandings of education and care to include principles from a pedagogical discourse, as well as considering the factors suggested by Hayes and Bradley with regard to "identifying the necessary components to ensure children's rights are met *in* ECEC" (2009, p. 46). It is also imperative to redefine and reinforce understandings of children's rights within Irish society, and to subsequently allow rights principles to form the basis for all child related policy. A large step towards doing this would be to have a wider debate about what we as a society understand by children's rights, followed by the long promised constitutional referendum on this issue, which should serve to strengthen children's rights within society and the Constitution. Without a distinct shift in the conceptual understandings of both ECEC policy and children's rights, a rights focus within ECEC policy will remain underdeveloped.

This thesis has contended that the knowledge constructed within Irish early childhood education and care policy discourse is hindering the development and implementation of ECEC policy from a rights basis. The ongoing reticence, within Irish policy discourse, to question the knowledge that we know leaves any potential to progress beyond the status quo at an impasse. The truths that are known about ECEC within Irish policy discourse have yet to evolve to an understanding where they strengthen the argument for the provision of a robustly defined concept of high quality services to all young children as a right. Discourses of early childhood education and care must be reframed so that debate, reconceptualisation and children's rights principles become

integral drivers in the developing policy process; only then will policy start to take shape within a truly equitable rights-based dimension.

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## APPENDIX A

*Full text of Articles 41 and 42 from Bunreacht na hEireann (Ireland, 1937)*

### **The Family**

#### **Article 41**

1. 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.  
2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.
  2. 1° 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.  
2° 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 in the home.
  3. 1° The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.  
2° A Court designated by law may grant a dissolution of marriage where, but only where, it is satisfied that
    - i. at the date of the institution of the proceedings, the spouses have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the five years,
    - ii. there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation between the spouses,
    - iii. such provision as the Court considers proper having regard to the circumstances exists or will be made for the spouses, any children of either or both of them and any other person prescribed by law, and
    - iv. any further conditions prescribed by law are complied with.
- 3° No person whose marriage has been dissolved under the civil law of any other State but is a subsisting valid marriage under the law for the time being in force within the jurisdiction of the Government and Parliament established by this Constitution shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage within that jurisdiction during the lifetime of the other party to the marriage so dissolved.

### **Education**

#### **Article 42**

1. The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.
2. Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.
3. 1° The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.  
2° The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.
4. The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.
5. 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.

## APPENDIX B

### *List of Publications and International Presentations*

Kiersey, R. A., & Hayes, N. (2010). Reporting the Rhetoric, Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as Represented in Ireland's Second Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Child Care in Practice*, 16(4), 327-346.

Kiersey, R. A., & Hayes, N. (2010): *The discursive construction of 'children' and 'rights' in Irish Early Childhood Policy*. Paper presented at the 20th EECERA Conference, Knowledge and voice in early childhood, Birmingham, UK, September 6th, 2010.

Kiersey, R. A. (2009): *Exploring early childhood education and care policy in Ireland: critical discourse analysis as a methodological tool*. Paper presented at EECERA 2009, Nineteenth European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education. Palais des Congrès of the European Union, Strasbourg, France, August 28th, 2009.