"An exploration into School Age Childcare to evaluate & improve the current practice through gaining insights into the features of School Age Childcare practice in Ireland."

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Abstract

By learning more about the characteristics that define school-age childcare (SAC) in Ireland, this mixed-method action research study seeks to assess and improve current practices. The study collects detailed data from School-Age Childcare (SAC) practitioners using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The literature review situates SAC in Ireland and offers comparative evaluations of national approaches in the USA, Australia, and other European states. This gives Ireland a broad perspective and suggests possible areas for development. The results offer different viewpoints on present practices, challenges, and opportunities for change captured using a questionnaire given to a sample of SAC practitioner perspectives. After the questionnaire phase, semi-structured interviews are conducted to offer more in-depth understanding of the questionnaire results. Purposive sample interviews with SAC practitioners highlight specific areas that require improvement and provide detailed insights into SAC procedures. The findings are integrated with the body of research and their implications for practice and policy in the Irish SAC industry are discussed. It also discusses the limits of the study, including possible biases in the self-reported data. To sum up, this study sheds light on SAC practices in Ireland and makes evidence-based suggestions for improving quality through focused professional development. To improve results in SAC settings, the proposed SAC qualification seeks to provide practitioners with the fundamental abilities and information needed to support children's growth and well-being.

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List of Abbreviations

CPD	Continued Professional Development
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care & Education
ELC	Early Learning and Care
ERO	Employment Regulation Order
IDG	Inter Department Group
NCI	National College of Ireland
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
OCED	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SAC	School Age Childcare
SIPTU	Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union
UNCRC	United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter explores what this research study is about, why the researcher chose this subject, and what the researcher hopes to achieve. This exposition study aimed to examine the perspectives and experiences of school-age childcare practitioners and identify practices in school-age childcare services in Ireland to evaluate and improve practice. This chapter presents an overview of the rationale, research questions, and objectives of the research and gives a brief outline of the upcoming chapters.

This study was of personal and professional interest to the researcher as I have a dual role in completing this research as part of my Master of Ats in Educational Practice as well as supporting school-age childcare services in my role as a development officer for the South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC). The research topic was chosen as I had an interest in exploring the SAC services, their operations, and quality provision and wanted to address the lack of research on school-age childcare (SAC) in Ireland. Also, this piece of research allowed me to address my professional curiosity about the underpinning theory on the development of SAC in Ireland, considering the upcoming regulations related to, qualifications and inspections.

It is hoped that this research will provide rich insight into SAC practices in Ireland and provide specific knowledge on the perspectives and experiences of the practitioners working within this area. This study potentially can contribute to broader policy development in relation to quality and practice in SAC service in Ireland.

1.2 Aims & Objectives

This study aims to explore the practice of School Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland. I identified a gap in research about this area in Ireland. With a wider range of research conducted worldwide, I looked to explore the perspectives and experiences of SAC practitioners in Ireland. This research aims to inform policy developers in this area so that SAC policy and regulation can be informed and grounded by research from the field.

The overarching research question of this study is, "How can I evaluate School Age Childcare to improve the current practice through gaining insights into the features of School Age Childcare practice in Ireland." This research project aims to explore and appraise SAC practice to support policy development. Specifically, the objectives of this study were:

1) To describe the SAC practitioner who provides SAC services in terms of age group and qualifications.

2) To describe the SAC practitioners who provide SAC and the current nature of practice in terms of daily routine.

3) To identify practitioner's perspectives on quality, including child development & play in SAC practice.

4) To examine practitioners' perspectives on qualification & CPD.

5) To identify the practitioner's challenges in SAC practice.

6) To develop recommendations for policy and regulatory bodies to enhance the quality of SAC practice.

1.3 Background

School-age childcare can be defined in many ways across services in Ireland and across the world. For this study, SAC will be described as 'out of school' care of children from 5years – 15years who attend primary or secondary school. The care for children of this age group outside school hours is provided in SAC services in different settings and at a range of times across the day. SAC Services can operate several services including before school, after school, during school holidays, or school closures such as teacher training days.

These services provide care for children when their parents are unavailable and promote their holistic development (DCYA, 2017). Cartmel & Grieshaber (2014) in the context of Australia, suggest that SAC services were the fastest growing service for children when they conducted their study yet research within this field is scattered and insufficient (Hjalmarsson, 2011). In Ireland, with the view to improve the quality of services, the development of the National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services in 2020, and the requirement to register these services with Tusla in 2019 began the movement to professionalise these services with the upcoming development of regulations, focused inspections, and minimum qualifications. This study looked to inform policy developers on how SAC services operate in Ireland.

1.4 Rationale

The initial starting point for this research study began as part of my recent professional appointment to perform the role of a Development Officer for the South Dublin Childcare Committee. Within this role, I support both the early learning and care (ELC) & school age childcare (SAC) services. With a background in early

childhood education and care, I have been practicing in early childhood services (ELC) for over 20 years. During my practice, I had little interaction with SAC services before undertaking this role. However, in my new role as a development officer, I am required to support SAC providers and practitioners. While informal interactions with SAC practitioners, gave me some insight into the nature of their operations in different SAC services, I was interested to know more about the experiences of staff about SAC practice on the ground, and their ideas about structural and functional quality of these services and regulation requirements.

I also had several informal conversations with colleagues and directives from Government departments as part of my statement of work. Through these conversations, I learned that SAC services were at the beginning of a journey like that undertaken by Early Childhood (ELC) services over the last decade or so. It was these conversations that led me to an investigation into the pathway of development of SAC services. Was the road to professionalisation, underpinned with ground-up information and what research and evidence-informed policy development for this area?

While in search of literature, I found limited research on SAC in Ireland and needed to expand my research to other countries. This was interesting as many countries such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, Spain, and America had different approaches to operating SAC services. From a policy perspective, there are limited policies that are SAC-specific or include SAC services. Therefore, the Irish National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services (DCYA, 2020) document provides practice guidance and encourages high-quality development within SAC services. However, these guidelines are not mandatory for services, and therefore

many services that I encountered had never engaged in using them. Interestingly, I found little evidence that underpinned the SAC guidance document.

As part of my new role as a development officer, my colleague and I decided to develop and deliver a 3-hour training program specifically for SAC practitioners on how to use and implement these guidelines. The planning of this program involved us as trainers getting familiar with the guidelines and developing a presentation that each service could adapt to their service. In the planning process, we discussed the impact of hands-on training and ensuring the information landed with the participants. These participants may have never engaged in quality practice, so we ensured we started at a baseline.   The training program for SAC practitioners focussed on elements of practice that required strengthening. The pedagogy was activity-based using scenarios to allow practitioners to recall and think of incidents that may arise in a SAC service and what they currently do or need to implement to ensure high-quality practice as provided in the National guidelines. We also used small group work to encourage practitioners to work through the guidelines looking at the ways their services implemented them and identifying gaps in their practice that could be introduced. Each group was given one guideline and then gave feedback to the main group. This created a space for learning and sharing knowledge for these practitioners.

We rolled out these sessions in late 2023 and early 2024 and through engagement with the practitioners I became aware and gained insights into the diverse ways these services operated. Also, through conversations I learned more about the perspectives of the practitioners working on the floor in SAC services. These sessions highlighted a gap and a need for further study of SAC and in particular the ground-level experiences & perspectives of staff about quality, regulation, and qualification. It was in providing these sessions and the engagement of the practitioners that triggered

my interest in SAC practice in Ireland and motivated me to conduct this research study.

1.5 Purpose of the study

The study's purpose was to inform policy development within the area of SAC and provide research to policy developers on the insights, perspectives, and experiences of those already working within these services. SAC services commenced as informal support to local communities and have very recently come under the umbrella of regulatory authorities. Currently, these services are transitioning from being unregulated to being more regulated. SAC services now must register with TUSLA and follow an adult-to-child ratio of 1:12, but other than this criterion, they have no formal regulations specific to the delivery and quality of services. At present TUSLA does not engage in setting up SAC services and does not carry out fit-for-purpose inspections as they do for ELC (Early Childhood Education and Care) services.

SAC services are not routinely inspected; however, inspections are triggered from feedback or concerns received from the community, regarding the operation of an SAC service or if an early childhood, 'preschool' inspector has a concern during an ELC inspection about a co-located SAC service. These inspections look at specific aspects such as garda vetting of staff, safety, and adult-to-child ratios. They do not look at the quality of services provided, they are essentially related to health and safety measures and notional evidence for example "evidence that there are sufficient numbers of competent and suitable adults in place" and inspect if providers are taking

"all reasonable measures to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of the children in attendance" (Tusla, 2023).

From my background in Early Childhood, I have seen and experienced the development and transformation of this sector to become more professionalised over the last 20 years. I conjecture that SAC services are at the beginning of this process and would like to support policy development through evidence gained from research. Currently, these services are looking at 'preschool' policies and regulations as a guide. Still, the fact is that SAC services although co-located in many instances, cater to children of a mixed age group from 4 years up to 15 years. Therefore, they require different levels of care, engagement, and development than the early childhood years. The policies and regulations for SAC need to be carefully developed based on the experiential knowledge of those who provide those services, which are specific to the age and stage of the children. Besides, the staff may need training and skills appropriate for this age range. Through this study, I hoped to provide information to support the development of appropriate policies and regulations based on research from lived experiences in the SAC services.

1.6 Methodological Approach

The methodology chapter outlines the conceptual framework, organisation, and research methods that this exposition study employs. This chapter provides a thorough explanation of the methodical approach to data production and provides a deep understanding of the complexities of the study design. It explores the selected research paradigm and offers a justification for the choice of a mixed-method

approach to data collecting, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to give a comprehension of the study problem.

This chapter also describes the study design in detail, including the criteria for participant inclusion and exclusion as well as the procedures used for sampling. It provides a transparent explanation of the sampling style and underlines the dedication to ethical research techniques by addressing important ethical issues. Additionally, the methodology chapter examines the limitations of the study. It provides a thorough examination of the steps used to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the findings and thoroughly assesses the validity and reliability of the research. The chapter seeks to provide the reader with a comprehensive grasp of the methodological rigor supporting the research through this in-depth discussion.

1.7 Outline of study

The overall structure of the study takes the form of six chapters, including this introductory chapter.

Chapter 1 introduces the study discussing the background and rationale behind the choice of topic. The aims and objectives will be specified along with the methodology approach taken.

Chapter 2 outlines relevant literature previously written on the subject and identify gaps in research about the topic.

Chapter 3 details key elements of the methodology used for this research process including the research paradigm, method, and tools used for data collection. This chapter also highlights ethical issues and acknowledges the limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 tells the story of the results from the data collection. It will include critical analysis and discuss the findings of the research question and literature reviewed.

Chapter 5 concludes the study by giving an overview of the project and conclusions drawn from the research process. This chapter will also identify where the study could contribute to the field and give recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

1.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this introduction chapter has provided the groundwork for understanding the context, rationale, and objectives of this practice-based action research study on School Age Childcare (SAC) services in Ireland. The study aims to offer a comprehensive exploration of SAC practices, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of practitioners. By providing insights into daily routines, roles of the practitioners, and quality practice in SAC services, this research aims to inform and influence policy development, thereby enhancing the quality and regulation of SAC services. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the literature, methodological approaches, and findings, ultimately leading to informed conclusions and recommendations. Through this research, the goal is to contribute meaningful knowledge that supports SAC services in Ireland, ensuring better outcomes for children, practitioners and the wider community.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an exploration of research of School Age Care (SAC), beginning with a comprehensive overview of its historical evolution. By examining SAC's history and development over time, we gain insight into how past developments and developments from other countries have shaped current standards. The review incorporates research findings from various countries, highlighting global perspectives and best practices. The review extends to policy development, outlining the legislative and regulatory frameworks that impact SAC. The review highlights the importance of quality practices, including the role of play in fostering child development and the importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for practitioners. This chapter also explores challenges faced by practitioners working with children. The literature reviewed mainly focused on studies from Early Childhood Education (ELC) as no research was found on SAC practitioners. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough understanding of the various dimensions influencing SAC today.

School-age childcare (SAC) services are designed for children to grow and develop holistically outside of a school setting. These services can have a different range of services they offer including breakfast club, school collection, and summer camps for example. They may also offer homework supervision but are not designated homework clubs. These services can be located on or off-site from schools and are standalone services separate from the school itself (DCEDIY, 2020).

Hjalmarsson (2011) noted research in school-age childcare as limited. With the growth in this area and my current professional role, I decided to look at this area of study and explore "How can I evaluate School Age Childcare to improve the current practice through gaining insights into the features of School Age Childcare practice in Ireland". Working in a support and mentoring role myself with both early education and school-age childcare services I can see the contrast in the sectors' development. Experientially I can see some gaps in the sector, particularly in consultation with those who provide these services, in relation to policy development.

In Ireland, the engagement of parents with school-age childcare (SAC) settings has seen significant growth over the last 10 years. With many parents now working full-time the need for out-of-school hours care is fundamental for children when they enter the national school systems (DCYA, 2020). Barker and Smith (2000) argue that the changing employment status of parents has resulted in more children spending increased time in after-school provisions such as school-age childcare services. In this chapter, I will explore the literature about aspects of School Age Childcare.

2.2 History of Childcare in Ireland

The childcare sector in general has evolved over the last 20 years. Before this, the culture in Ireland was for the woman to stay at home with the children while the father went to work outside of the home. This changed due to the financial boom and more women actively engaging in work outside the home. The Central Statistics Office (CSO,2008) identified that 60.8% of women were engaged in the workforce in

comparison to 35% in 1990 (Russell et al., 2002). With many of these women parents, the use of professional childcare services or childminders increased to care for the children while the parents were at work. It became imperative to invest in children's education, development, and care to ensure quality provision of services that would impact the future of children and society (O'Hara, 2009).

While this sector was developing many neighbours, family friends and grandparents of these children were often the stopgap. With the number of places in childcare services slowly rising there was still an inadequate supply of affordable places (Government of Ireland, 2006). Gray (2005) states that grandparents had a regular engagement in the care of their grandchildren by providing care for younger children and doing the drop-off and collections from primary school. They also provided full-time care out of school term (Wheelock & Jones, 2002) and provided cover for days when children are sick, or schools are closed due to staff training (Ochiltree, 2006).

In 2009 the Irish Government announced the free preschool year in early childhood care and education (ECCE). This scheme was an investment of 170 million euros and would benefit approximately 70,000 children each year (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2009). This scheme specifically targeted preschool children but there was also a rise in children engaging in school-age childcare at this time. In 2009 the proportion of parents using care settings for their primary school-age children was 25% (CSO,2009).

The burdens of childcare costs are a barrier to using formal childcare services for lower-income families with higher-income families four times more likely to engage in formal childcare services (Adema, Clarke & Thevenon, 2016). These

excessive costs are also a barrier to females' continued participation in the workforce and improving child poverty (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel, 2014). Barry (2011) also identifies the lack of a developed system for the provision of quality childcare as a major barrier to the employment of women. The need for locally based afterschool programs that provide social, recreational, and developmental activities outside of school hours was highlighted in 2000 by the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group. It was suggested that these services could be provided on school grounds (DJELR, 2007).

Literature on the impact of engaging in School Age Childcare in Ireland is relatively limited however teachers involved in a study reported benefits to pupils who participated in these services (Hennessy & Donnelly, 2005). Moloney (2009) agrees and highlights that these services provide a safe, fun, and challenging environment for children outside of school hours. The opportunity to socialise with peers, engage in planned and non-structured activities, do their homework, and build on their learning from that day improved their overall academic achievements. Other themes in the literature reviewed concerning SAC highlight the impact of SAC services on social, cognitive, and additional benefits experienced by the children (Simoncini, Cartmel & Young, 2015). While the literature on the children's perspectives of SAC is limited, the studies that do exist show how children spend their time after school, the difference in formal and informal settings, and provide a context of what children value in SAC (Simoncini & Young, 2015).

Strandell (2012) states that children prioritise play, choice, being with friends, and having freedom in a space with a supportive adult available. In recent years, the use of technology has influenced the way children view play. Many children attending SAC services would have access to technology regularly and these services

allow the children time off screen to play more traditionally. Digital pay which would include taking photos and videos, applications on smartphones and tablets, and playing digital games on a gaming station has become increasingly popular for young children (Edwards & Bird, 2017, Heider & Jalongo, 2014). There are arguments for and against digital play. March et al. (2020) argue that digital play provides relaxation, entertainment, and the development of many skills while Jeong, Kim, & Lee (2017) identify the need for "free play" away from interacting and watching screens. These services provide a safe environment for children to play, interact, build relationships, and develop outside of a formal education setting with limited use of technology.

2.3 Policy Development

Up until recent years, the emphasis has been on the early years sector in Ireland. In 2019 the Irish Government introduced the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). This scheme was developed to improve the affordability of childcare for parents of children aged 6 months to 15 years old. This scheme has increased parents' engagement with school-age childcare services therefore ensuring policies for the development of the sector were introduced. This was the first time that the Irish Government subsidised childcare for children up to 15 years old increasing the engagement of parents with School Age Childcare services. Parents can choose to apply for NCS subsidies in two ways. These are universal or income assessed. Parents whose income is below a certain level can receive a maximum hourly subsidy which is then reduced based on the parental income (DCYA, 2016).

Research from Callan, Keane & Regan (2020) found this scheme benefitted families in the bottom third of income distribution the most. As this scheme was up to 15 years old it was the first official recognition of School Age Childcare services and provided parents with funding support to access these services for their children. As these services were now engaging with government funding the move to improve quality through guidelines and the journey to regulations began (Doorley et al., 2021). Following on from NCS, Core Funding was introduced and both ELC and SAC services can sign into Core funding and apply for additional funding depending on the size and services delivered. In signing up for both the National Childcare Scheme and Core Funding the SAC services agree to ensure quality provision in their services.

The development of School Age Childcare policy must be set within wider policy contexts that relate to SAC. Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014) identifies a set of principles concerning children and young people that would apply to SAC. These principles include children's rights, family, equality, evidence-informed policy, and accountability. This policy also recommended the removal of barriers for parents and carers and promoted increasing the accessibility and affordability of after-school services.

In March 2017, the Minister for Education & Skills identified the need to provide activity-based settings that provide a happy, safe, and secure environment where they are stimulated, and their creativity & social development are fostered (DES, 2017). The National Action Plan for School Age Childcare (2017) was the first recognition of School Age Childcare services. This document was based on research and consultation with children (177), parents, providers, and other stakeholders. This report identified that cost, transport, and convenience of location were fundamental for parents in choosing childcare for their child outside of school hours. The National

Action Plan also recognises the need for a variety of options for parents that are affordable, accessible, and provide high-quality care for children (DCYA & DES, 2017).

Of the 177 children who engaged with this consultation 81 were between 5-7 years old and 96 were between 8-12 years. The younger age group reported play as extremely important while attending a service outside of school while the older age group specifically identified play in the outdoors as enjoyable in these services. Both groups identified their ideal school-age childcare service comprising of play, friendship, outdoor activities, food, and art & crafts. The Irish Government developed an Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) to develop a model for SAC provision in Ireland. This IDG suggested a model of three components which were quality, accessibility, and affordability. This model suggested that children who need care outside of school hours could access this care in their community from local service providers and staff will be trained and supported to provide quality care. This care provision should be accessible to all families including those on lower incomes. The IDG identified the need for a comprehensive set of standards and guidelines that cover the needs of the children and young people availing of SAC (DCYA, 2017).

The Department of Children & Youth Affairs (DCYA) later went on to publish the National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare Services in September 2020. These guidelines are specific to centre-based services and not home-based care (DCYA, 2020). This document also defines school-age childcare as centred-based care for school-going children from 4 – 14 years. These services can care for children before school, after school, or during school holiday periods. These SAC services can be standalone only offering SAC or combined offering SAC and ELC. The purpose of these guidelines was to develop and enhance quality and inform the future

development of the sector (DCYA, 2020). There are 7 guidelines each made up of different components and elements. Within these guidelines the role of the adult is to facilitate children's initiatives and ideas rather than direct them while also encouraging social interaction. These guidelines can be used as a road map to quality practice in SAC services (DCYA, 2020).

Through my review, I have established a gap in the literature on SAC-specific services in Ireland with a heavy emphasis on the early childhood learning and care sector. This has led me to look at other countries and their development of the SAC sector as part of this literature review only to see that they are also at the start of this evolving sector. This gap has also guided my research question to look specifically at SAC educators and what are their experiences in the SAC sector in Ireland. Moloney (2009) suggests that like other European countries and the USA, the growth within the SAC services in Ireland has continued to increase in response to parental demand for supervised, safe environments to care for children outside of school hours. A study from the European Commission into the provision of SAC concluded that the provision of SAC across Europe is "rather limited" (Plantenga & Remery, 2013). Agreeably, a further study in 2017 concluded that Ireland came bottom along with Spain on a table of SAC quality standards based off child to staff ratios, maximum group sizes, and staff qualification requirements (Plantenga & Remery, 2017). These studies informed my decision to look at SAC practices outside of Ireland.

2.4 SAC provision and engagement in other countries

In a study conducted in Denmark in 2001, private childcare is used by parents for 20% of children. It is more frequently used as a part-time solution for school-age children (Jensen, 2001). This has now substantially grown with policies developed to promote a family–work–life balance including gender equality (Bonke & Esping-Anderson, 2011). The Danish government provides affordable childcare (Gornick & Meyers, 2003) which allows mothers to return to work after maternity leave while Danish fathers have flexible work conditions and shorter working days (Gracia et al., 2011).

In contrast with Denmark, Spain has a lower level of female engagement in the workforce as the family is considered the key to the welfare provision for children (Esping-Anderson, 2009). All children in Spain aged 3 – 5 years can enroll in kindergarten but there is low provision for childcare for 0 – 2-year-olds (OECD,2007). There is also low engagement in after-school services as parents tend to work part-time while the children attend school.

Australia identifies significant growth in SAC services as increasing numbers of children use these services. My time, our place framework for school-age childcare in Australia guides services to implement principles and practices that help them achieve high quality (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011). Many school-age childcare services across Australia are situated within school buildings (Cartmel, 2009). This practice is also seen in New Zealand with SAC programs known as OSCAR (out-of-school care and recreation) located on and near school grounds (Walter, 2007). These services can differ in urban and rural areas as demand is higher in urban cities with both parents working (Walter,2007). This does not differ from the situation here in Ireland however these

countries are further on the development of their quality provision and professionalism of the sector.

The United States of America (USA) has also signified the growth of services for children outside of school hours. Research from the USA shows evidence of an increase in truancy, risk-taking, and lower grades for children who do not engage in after-school activities (Aizer, 2002). This research states that children who attended formal after-school activities were associated with better grades and social skills. These children spent more time in academic activities and having social engagement rather than watching television or playing outside their homes unsupervised. Physical activity of children between 5 – 13 years was evaluated in the USA with the results showing that children who engaged in a community-based after-school activity rather than a school-based after-school program had increased physical activity. Physical activity and play are fundamental parts of holistic learning for a child or young person.

Research from Finland shows the different experiences of children attending services in schools and the community (Strandell, 2013). The research was based on 7 – 8-year-old children attending 1st or 2nd grade. The findings show that services in schools were an extension of the school day with educational goals and organised activities while under constant surveillance. In contrast, the community settings were the very opposite. They used open space and encouraged the children to choose their activities and make use of the facilities provided. The providers classed themselves as guiding the children and did not strictly supervise all activities and interactions. Children's views were taken on board by the adults who let the children "be free" after a day in school. This research emphasises the importance of play for all children and young people (Strandell, 2013).

Scotland has introduced a strategic plan named "Best Start". This strategic plan characterises the strategic priorities across all childcare services. This plan includes building a system for school-age childcare for children in primary school cantered around three high-level outcomes, to improve children's development, especially in poverty-related areas, to improve family well-being, and to allow parents and carers to take up work or training (Government of Scotland, 2023). This strategic plan also illustrates the need to build an infrastructure to underpin the growth and expansion of this area and highlights the need for regulation, legislation, qualifications, and supporting improvements in quality.

2.5 Quality care & education in SAC

In recent years, the focus has shifted from increasing the availability of early childhood education spots to enhancing the quality of these programs and the experiences of the children who use them. This shift was driven by assessments linking the quality of services to better outcomes for children, media reports of rule violations and child abuse in some services, and persistent lobbying by organizations supporting early childhood education. The negative press surrounding childcare issues attracted significant public attention, bolstering the campaign for quality improvements (Murphy, 2015).

In Ireland, as previously discussed the quality guidelines for school-age childcare services were developed in 2020 after the National Action Plan for School Age Childcare (DCYA, 2017) was published. These guidelines were published to guide the sector towards professional practice. The guidelines range from the environment, health, safety, and well-being to staff and professional practice.

Although there is currently no staff qualification level for SAC services this is in development by the government and the quality guidelines refer to the requirements set out in legislation. The full regulations for this sector are also in the development stages.

Concerning quality many aspects need to be factored in that may differ from the early years sector. One such aspect is the voice of the child since children are older and have more choices and opinions on their learning. An effective SAC service will identify the voice of the child and engage children in their decision-making processes depending on their age and stage of development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises that 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her 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'. A flexible program of activities to allow children to choose what they are interested in and want to do is important in SAC. When children are engaged and interested, they are learning and while they are involved in the decision-making within the service, they feel motivated, respected, and seen (Willoughby, 2020). Schweinhart & Weikart (1997) state "When children do what we tell them, they are learning how to do what we say. When we ask them what they want to do and they do it, they are learning how to take initiative."

Regulations and inspections are used in early education services to promote quality improvement and have become more widespread in recent years throughout OECD countries (OECD, 2015). The development of these regulations and inspections will further develop SAC in Ireland. In the meantime, the development of the Quality Action Plan as part of the core funding agreement requires services

receiving core funding from the government to develop a plan and report on elements of their practice related to quality that they are working on each year (DCEDIY, 2023). One area of quality that can be engaged in by practitioners in SAC is a community of professional practice.

Communities of practice are a commonly used approach to enhance the learning and development of a sector by increasing knowledge (Elbrink et al., 2023). The concept of a community of professional practice is a group of people who share a passion, problem, or concern and gather to deepen their knowledge by interacting with each other regularly (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice are a low cost with the main cost being the time and commitment of the participants (Millen et al., 2002). Members of the community of practice can engage online, in person, or as a hybrid model with subjects such as common goal achievement, practice improvement, or shared aims such as regulations and inspections (Shaw et al., 2002).

As the SAC sector is moving to professionalisation and regulation a community of professional practice would encourage the owners, managers, and staff to engage in the shared development of the sector and improve the quality provision of SAC services across Ireland. Education is made up of opening identities and exploring new experiences and is transformative. Education is not age-dependent and therefore offering an environment of shared learning and experience can extend the possibilities for the participants (Wenger, 1998).

The question of care and education is often part of discussion in the field of childcare. The early years services in Ireland have developed into a professional sector and are not known as early learning and care (ELC). The preschool program known as ECCE stands for early childhood care and education. This signifies

education and learning as part of the delivery of ELC services along with the care element needed to nurture young children and provide a safe environment. The move in professionalising this sector over the last decade has given educators a professional stance on the education they provide to young children in their care. This stance has been based on qualification, regulation, and policy development with minimum requirements that need to be met by all educators and service providers.

When we look at SAC services there are no standards or qualifications needed by practitioners and therefore, we cannot look at them as formal educators in the same way.   However, these practitioners support learning and development as we have an understanding that children learn through the natural inquiry process of play (Whitebread et al., 2012) signifying that children are developing and learning while in SAC services. Theorists such as Dewy (1910) and Vygotsky (1978) both identify that the inquiry process and play are influential on child development such as speech, social and emotional development, cognitive development and self-awareness, and self-regulation. Probably one of the most well-known and broadly accepted concepts connected to Vygotsky is the zone of proximal development. The widely held belief of the zone of proximal development assumes that a less competent person will interact with a more competent person on a task until the less competent person gains independent proficiency at what was initially a jointly achieved work (Chaiklin, 2003).

Concerning the care of children in these services Berry & Malek (2017) identify that children's relationships and environments shape their development and lifelong trajectory. Both children and adolescents have a right to feel secure in their everyday environments and be supported in their social and emotional

development. These services provide a safe environment where children and
adolescents can engage in relationships with peers and adults safely.

2.6 The Importance of Play

Play is an experience for children and should be an expectation for SAC
services (PLÉ, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
(UNCRC, 1989) sets out a child's right to play. Play is commonly referred to as the
preferred activities that engage a child and can often promote learning (Gray,
2017). The play policy developed by the Irish Government (NCO, 2004) mentions
free choice and that play is what children do once nobody is telling them what to
do. A study in Ireland of children aged 5 years old highlights that children enjoy and
engage in painting & drawing, pretend play, outdoor play, dance, and music with the
majority also playing with an electronic device daily (Smyth, 2016). Dowdall, Gray
& Malone (2011) state that children are becoming separated from the natural world
with their access to the outdoors decreasing.

Smith & Baker (2001) highlight a lack of time for authentic free play in after-
school clubs but in contrast, Howard & King (2014) suggest that after-school services
offered a higher level of free play than either a home or school playground. Howard
(2010) also identified the need for trained practitioners to support children's place
choices while attending these services. Play can often be dismissed as unimportant,
but research has shown that playing with friends or classmates has a significant
impact on the social and emotional development of children (Gibson & McNally,
2024). Children of all ages not only learn through play but also through their
involvement in routine, planning, and decision-making. Additional skills such as
problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-care, and nutrition are acquired through
daily activities with adult support (Willoughby, 2020). The adults in SAC services

foster learning and development by providing a safe and nurturing environment to gain these skills.

Children attending SAC are enabled to develop friendships outside of a formal school setting by playing and socialising together. Friendships enable children to develop their emotional, social, communication, and language skills through engagement in play and conversation. These experiences can be through imaginative play, conflict resolution, and sharing of their experiences and feelings with children of different ages and stages which is not possible in a formal school setting (Dunn, Cutting & Fisher, 2002).

2.7 Qualification & Continuous Professional Development

It has been argued that the percentage of employees in a setting who possess a degree level relevant to their work can be used to measure the qualifications of that staff. The National Academy of Sciences Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy in America highlighted that each group of children in an early childhood education and care program should be assigned a teacher who has a bachelor's degree in early (National Research Council 2001). Having practitioners qualified to this degree is frequently seen as best practice, although there isn't much data to support this claim as claimed by Early et al. (2007). This view is supported by Mashburn et al. (2008) in studies looking at evidence of high staff qualifications' impact on children's outcomes. Agreeably, in Europe Ulfert & Anders (2016) found evidence that a broader range of qualifications is important. Evidence from the UK indicates that graduate-level employees can generate higher-quality work when observed in the

classroom (Mathers et al. 2011). However, there is no clear correlation between staff members' higher-level degrees and children's development (Blandan et al. 2017).

Currently, there is no mandatory formal qualification needed to work in an SAC service. In ELC services in Ireland a minimum level 5 in early childhood education is needed to work in these services (DCEDIY, 2024). Practitioners and educators within these services also participate in continuous professional development (CPD) courses throughout the year without a legal requirement. Continuous professional development (CPD) is defined as in-service training that allows staff members to develop, expand, and update their knowledge and skills throughout their careers (Henwood, 2000). Several studies and reports have identified that quality is dependent on a competent staff team who work within a holistic care and education setting (UNESCO, 2010; European Commission, 2011; European Commission, 2014). Continued professional development (CPD) is not limited to discussions on skills, procedures, and policies but is an ongoing process that involves practitioners in constant dialogue about their specific needs within the work context (Lazzari, Picchino & Musatti, 2013). These courses and activities can increase the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a staff member brings to their role in the service (Sheridan et al., 2009).

There are different types of CPD including formal and informal CPD. Formal CPD can be described as having clear objectives, held in an organised and structured context with results in the qualification while informal CPD may or may not have clear objectives and does not carry a formal qualification (Barnardo's and National Childhood Network, 2021). Informal CPD may consist of online short training courses, workshops, webinars, attending events, sharing experiences with colleagues, or feedback from your manager.

The current attitudes of SAC practitioners in Ireland towards CPD are not well documented in the literature. One attitude needed to engage in CPD is motivation. As reported in previous studies motivation is described as a condition within us that desires a change in oneself or the environment and consists of internal and external factors that stimulate the desire to act (Ersanhi, 2015; Reeve, 2014). Internal motivation can be described as intrinsic motivation and comes from what a person thinks, wants, or needs. The interests, attitudes, and ideas of a person are also intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, external or extrinsic motivation comes from external incentives such as rewards, achievements, and promotions (Locke & Latham, 2004).

The Irish Government has highlighted its commitment to CPD within Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028. The vision of this working plan highlights the need for a well-qualified, skilled, diverse, and valued professional workforce that is focused on children's rights, needs, and potential and that offers high-quality experiences for kids in collaboration with families, and communities, while advancing professional development within a capable system of care (DCEDIY, 2024). Two goals specified in this work plan are "a funded special purpose award for SAC Practitioners who already have related qualifications (including in ELC) to meet a new SAC level 5 qualification requirement" and to "finalise a level 5 award in SAC, and seek the development of combined level 5 programs in ELC and SAC that will qualify an individual to work in either or both areas" (DCEDIY, 2024). This plan also strives to elevate the financial cost of undertaking a professional qualification for practitioners. There may be barriers or challenges for practitioners to engage in CPD such as time management, and support from management.

2.8 Challenges for SAC

According to Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, and Peters (2012), any revision of professional roles and profiles in early childhood can only have significance if it is approached from a perspective that considers the system as a whole and questions the challenges and its capacity and willingness to evolve into a competent system. (European Commission, 2011).

Previously, the Irish early childhood sector was underfunded despite increases in government spending, and there has historically been a preference for short-term parent incentives over long-term service investment. This has resulted in unsustainable working conditions and worker pay scales. In recent years with the development of Core Funding, the Government has implemented a long-term plan for services including SAC services. Included in Core Funding is the development of an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for practitioners with minimum levels of pay within the services contracted under Core Funding (DCEDIY, 2024).

Every industry struggles with staff attrition. All businesses have a level of appropriate amount of turnover based on the kind of goods or services they offer and the pay scale for their staff. However, typically we can expect more turnover in low-wage industries, such as childcare (Philips et al., 2000). High levels of staff turnover can also place the continued operation of a childcare service in jeopardy or hinder the service's efforts to improve quality (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003).

Compared to other professions, educators and practitioners working with children are more likely to experience burnout (Turner & Theilking, 2019). We particularly allude to educators' experiences of persistent exhaustion related to their work when we talk about burnout (Fiorilli et al., 2017). The unique problems are a

reflection of broader cross-sector difficulties with hiring and retaining employees, such as low skill and knowledge levels in the workforce or a bad fit between an individual and a company, industry, or particular position (Ellis et al 2017).

2.9 Theoretical Framework

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), a child's development is impacted by a multitude of systems, from their immediate surroundings—such as their family and school—to larger social factors such as their culture. Because of the connections between these systems, a complex web of interactions forms, influencing the development of the child. This theory comprises five main systems:

1) Microsystem: Direct surroundings, such as home, school, and childcare facilities including SAC services.

2) Mesosystem: Interactions between various microsystems (parent-SAC practitioner communication, for example).

3) Exosystem: Outside settings that have an indirect impact on the child (parents' work can impact the amount of time the parent spends with the child, for example).

4) Macrosystem: More inclusive Government laws, policies, customs, and society norms.

5) Chronosystem: The aspect of time that includes life changes and historical occurrences.

In the context of SAC services, this theory ensures that children are at the heart of the service by considering how various layers of their environment interact to support their development. It is vital that childcare providers prioritise the child's

development and experiences to create a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. The activities offered, peer relationships, and staff-to-child interactions all have a direct effect on the emotional, social, and cognitive development of the child. The bioecological model aids in framing these interactions as being crucial in determining the child's general wellbeing in this situation. The mesosystem emphasises how crucial the ties are between families, schools, and daycare providers. Maintaining continuous communication of the child's development is ensured by consistent communication amongst parents, and practitioners. Collaboration, guarantees that the required modifications are done in childcare facilities as well as schools when a kid has a disability, enabling inclusive participation.

he child's experience may be indirectly impacted by outside factors such as government regulations regarding childcare services, funding for inclusivity, and community resources. The bioecological model of childcare acknowledges that to support the child, policies that fund inclusiveness, staff development, and high-quality care must be understood and supported. The macrosystem looks at how society views inclusivity, education, and children. Child-cantered SAC programs can better serve the needs of children from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with additional needs or from minority communities, by incorporating an awareness of the macrosystem.

The chronosystem looks at how a child is influenced by changes over time, such as when they move from one developmental stage to another. This could men modifying programs in SAC services as the child matures to make sure they are developmentally appropriate and catered to their changing interests, and skills. A child of 4 years old in junior infants starting in a SAC service will be very different from a child of 12 years in 6th class. This approach prioritises the growing individual, the

educational setting, and the individuals within it, all of which have personal roles, interactions, and procedures (Härkönen, 2001). This can be seen in SAC services in the following ways: 1) designing activities that take into account the child's interests, needs, and developmental stage in order to make them feel involved and appreciated.

2) assisting the child's social network, which consists of their parents, teachers, and peers, and acknowledging them as a member of a wider community.

3) establishing inclusive surroundings that ensure the larger social ideals of diversity and inclusion.

4) constantly reflecting and adjusting depending on developments in the child's life or in the larger social context.

In conclusion, SAC services make sure that the child is at the centre of all considerations by implementing Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and considering the different systems that effect their development and well-being. A more inclusive, encouraging, and caring environment comes from the holistic approach, which makes sure that care services consider the child's growth as well as their present needs.

2.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature reviewed on School Age Childcare has provided valuable insights into the development of these services over the last number of years as the workforce has moved away from the mother staying at home with the children while the father works. This includes the development of SAC-specific policies and including these services in funding strands. By engaging with literature from other countries we can encourage the growth of the sector in Ireland and see what is happening across the globe. The reviewed literature highlights the importance of

training and continuous professional development of staff and the opportunities these staff can give to the children within their care such as engaging in a community of professional practice where educators can share experiences and knowledge to promote quality for children. Although there were many areas to explore through this literature few studies or papers were SAC-specific, so this area needs more research to ensure we get a clearer picture of the sector.

Throughout my engagement with the literature, I explored the history of SAC in Ireland and the current policy development for SAC. I looked at different countries and their development of SACs and finally inquired about quality aspects of care such as continuous professional development, and communities of practice. Throughout my reading, I could not locate any research into SAC practitioners' perspectives in Ireland which I have highlighted as a gap leading to my research.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlined the conceptual framework, structure, and research methodology of this dissertation. The chapter aimed to present the approach to generating data and give an insight into the research design, discuss the research paradigm, and provide a rationale for choosing a mixed-method approach for data collection. Sileyew (2019) defines research methodology as the pathway to be taken by the researcher. This pathway began with the formulation of the research questions and concluded with the findings. Through this chapter, the researcher explores the research design, giving details of their sampling style and the criteria for the participants. The chapter looks at ethical considerations and the reliability and validity of the research. Finally, the chapter looks at the limitations of the study.

3.2 Research Aim & Question

The overall aim of this study is to explore the practice of School Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland. The researcher identified a gap in research in relation to this area in Ireland. With a wider range of research conducted worldwide, the researcher looked to explore the perspectives and experiences of SAC educators in Ireland. The objective was to inform policy developers in this area.

The overarching research question was "How can I evaluate School Age Childcare to improve the current practice through gaining insights into the features of School Age Childcare practice in Ireland." This research project aims to explore and

appraise SAC practice to support policy development. The aims and objectives of this study are:

1) To describe the SAC practitioner who provides SAC services in terms of age group, and qualifications.

2)`To describe the SAC practitioners who provide SAC and the current nature of practice in terms of daily routine.

3) To identify practitioner's perspectives on quality, child development & play in SAC practice.

4) To examine practitioners' perspectives on qualification & CPD.

5) To identify the practitioner's challenges in SAC practice.

6) To develop recommendations for policy and regulatory bodies to enhance the quality of SAC practice.

3.3 Methodological Approach

Research has been described as an investigation (Burns, 2012) where data is collected, analysed, and interpreted to understand or describe a phenomenon (Mertens, 2007). Before the research could begin, the researcher considered the appropriate research paradigm and approach because it provided a structure and framework for conducting research that is systematic and enhances the credibility, reliability, validity, and relevance of the research findings. (Kivunja and Kayani, 2017).

This mixed method exploration research study aims to shed light on the SAC service procedures in Ireland, to provide a picture of the SAC sector as it currently

exists in Ireland, the researcher examined the experiences, viewpoints, and insights of SAC practitioners throughout this study. The most common meaning of the definition to explore is to study, inspect, analyse, or research something. Testing or experimenting with something to get to know it better is a second meaning (Stebbins, 2001). Researchers explore when they have little or no knowledge about the group, process, or situation they want to examine but have reason to believe it contains elements worth discovering. To explore effectively a given phenomenon, they must approach it with flexibility and open-mindedness (Stebbins, 2001).   The exploration of SAC services and practices was a starting point as upon investigation there was no previous research from Ireland available to the researcher. This exploration could ignite an action research project.

The term "paradigm" has been defined as a collection of assumptions, propositions, and concepts that orient research and thinking (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.22). Creswell (2014) identified a research paradigm as a "worldview" while McNiff (2013) simplifies a paradigm further by explaining that it is a set of attitudes and ideas that inform research. This view is combined with a set of philosophical assumptions, how these can be understood, and the purpose of the research (Hammersley, 2012).

Positivism is a research approach that suggests knowledge is objective and can be gained through observation and experiments (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021) using quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). In contrast, an interpretive approach identifies that natural science methodologies are unsuitable for studying people because people's actions are defined by their values, beliefs, and motivations (Williams, 2007). A pragmatism philosophy combines the key attitudes of positivism and interpretivism and gives a basis for mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014).

This study adopted a pragmatism research paradigm as it allows the researcher to gather both statistical data and gather the perspectives and experiences of SAC practitioners. The aim was to gather extensive data from practitioners on their daily routine, qualifications & CPD, challenges, and quality practice. Ontological studies relate to concerns about how things exist within reality (Crotty, 1998) while epistemological studies look at the nature of knowledge, and the diverse ways to gain knowledge and learn about the reality we live in (Crotty, 1998). There will be no correct answers as part of this epistemological approach as all experiences and perspectives will be considered in this approach. This research embraces a relativist epistemology and recognises the researchers' interpretations of the phenomena are subjective and can clash with the objectivity of the research. Within this study, the researcher's experience in supporting & mentoring SAC services was required to ignite discussion and meaningfully interpret their experiences during the survey and interview stages. By embracing my role as a partial insider, I have added depth to this phenomenon.

Having a clear methodology gives the research its philosophy as agreed by Almalki (2016) and Dawson (2019). The researcher must engage in strategic decisions about their research approach (Denscombe, 2007). Research has been described as an investigation (Burns, 2012) where data is collected, analysed, and interpreted to understand or describe a phenomenon (Mertens, 2007). Before the research could begin, the researcher considered the appropriate research paradigm because it provided a structure and framework for conducting research that is systematic and enhances the credibility, reliability, validity, and relevance of the research findings. (Kivunja and Kayani, 2017).

Initially, the researcher had envisioned an approach using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method to investigate the experiences of SAC practitioners in their roles however with limited or no research in Ireland on this topic the researcher identified a need for exploration of this area and adopted an exploratory approach to the research study. Polit & Beck (2013) suggest that research is designed to illuminate a phenomenon and can be used to uncover a little-understood phenomenon which is also agreed by Reid-Searl & Happel (2011) who suggest this research approach allows the researcher to explore a topic that has limited coverage and allow participants to contribute to the development of the area by increasing the knowledge of this phenomenon. In the context of this research approach the review of the literature needs to identify a deficit of knowledge and identify a need for further study (Cronin, 2008).

3.4 Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited for the study by sending email invites to SAC services registered on the government HIVE system (Appendix i), requesting managers to engage and encourage their staff to participate in this study. The email addresses used were in the public domain on the National Childcare Scheme portal. In the first round of emails, only 21 participants engaged in the questionnaire for the study but after a follow-up email a week later the number of participants increased. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions and the researcher received 53 responses in total before the questionnaire closed for submissions. These responses were from a mix of managers, room leaders, and practitioners.

Sampling is a fundamental part of an investigative study (Flick, 2007) which should take place in the preliminary stages of research to define the focused participants (Cohen et al., 2018). To include every member of the population would be impractical so participants must be identified by their relevance to the research topic (Saunders, 2009). As the researcher looked for participants working in SAC services, they used purposive sampling which is a non-probability approach to sampling. Purposive sampling is an approach used where the researcher keeps the research goal in mind while seeking participants (Bryman, 2016). As this research is looking at SAC practitioners the researcher seeks data from this population cohort and therefore only invited these practitioners to complete the questionnaire (Kumar, 2014).

This research was carried out with the use of a questionnaire through Google Forms. Deanscombe (2003) identifies that surveys are based on real-world observations and allow for inclusive coverage across the selected cohort. An online questionnaire was also cost-effective for the researcher and enabled data collection at no cost. The inclusion criteria for the study specified that all participants needed to be working directly with children in School Age Childcare services. The exclusion criteria were that staff working in School Age Childcare services but not working directly with the children should not participate, this included some managers, kitchen staff, and cleaning staff.

The follow-up interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The last question of the questionnaire was if you would be available for a follow-up interview. From those who selected yes, the researcher selected 4 interview participants. One of these participants would be used for a pilot interview. The researcher chose the participants based on their level of qualification and their role in

the SAC service. The interview participants were an unqualified practitioner, 2 room

leaders with a level 6 qualification, and a room leader with a level 8 qualification. No

managers selected they would like to be considered for a follow-up interview. These

practitioners were emailed and asked to attend an online interview (Appendix

iii). The email also had an informed consent and information sheet attached for their

information before the interview commenced (see Appendix iv & v). The researcher

selected one of the level 6 room leaders as their pilot interview.

3.5 Data Collection

This section will outline the mixed-method methodology used in the research,

which included a thorough questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to thoroughly

capture participant perspectives. Supported by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), this

strong design combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to produce a

comprehensive study. A thorough examination of the experiences of the participants

was made possible by the semi-structured interviews, which also revealed complex

insights and individual viewpoints. On the other hand, the questionnaire made it

possible to gather a large amount of information from SAC practitioners throughout

Ireland, guaranteeing statistical reliability and wide representation. The advantages of

both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive grasp of

the subject matter, this integrative strategy guarantees a thorough and equitable

evaluation of the research issues.

3.5.1 Method and Instrument of Development

A mixed-method approach was applied which allowed the researcher to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participant's perspectives. The tools used for data collection were a questionnaire and semi-structured follow-up interviews. The questionnaire was comprised of both open-ended and closed questions to yield answers that were analysed to give the researcher both percentage or numerical data and open-ended narrative responses.

A mixed-methods approach is a research methodology in its own right. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) identified that; a mixed-methods research design has its methods of inquiry. Within this approach, there are directions for the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources in a single study. A mixed-methods design offers several benefits to approaching this research area as it integrates post-positivism and interpretivism (Fetters, 2016) by interweaving qualitative and quantitative data to give a meaningful explanation of the areas explored. The use of mixed methods enables researchers to answer research questions with sufficient depth (Enosh et al., 2014) and helps identify findings and implications of the researched issues.

The quantitative approach helps a researcher to collect the data from many participants increasing the possibility of gathering findings from the wider population. The qualitative approach, on the other hand, provides a deeper understanding of the issue being investigated, through discussion and listening to the voices of the participants. A questionnaire was the main source of data collection supplemented by semi-structured interviews. There are many advantages to using an online questionnaire. This method is based on a real-world view, and it gives scope for inclusive and geographical coverage without strenuous expectations on the

participants (Deanscombe, 2003). Using a questionnaire the researcher was able to gather information from SAC practitioners all over Ireland.

3.5.2 Pilot Study

After the questionnaire 4 participants were selected for a semi-structured interview to gather deeper information on their perspectives and experiences. A pilot interview was conducted by the researcher with the first participant and the data collected within this interview was not used in the study. This interview was conducted in advance of contacting the other participants. The pilot was conducted on MS Teams and lasted 38 minutes. This gave the researcher a guide to ask the participants to schedule 45 minutes for their interview. The pilot interview allowed the researcher to discuss the process from the participant's perspective through feedback, learn the interview schedule and the flow of the questions, and test the MS Teams recording and transcribing software.

Following on from the pilot interview some small adjustments for example limiting the direct questions that were previously uncovered in the questionnaire and instead looking for practitioners to give better detail of these perspectives with examples from practice based on their previous answers in the questionnaire. These changes were made, and the participants were contacted by email and invited to attend an interview on Microsoft Teams at an agreed time. All three interviews began similarly but then they each varied as the researcher responded to what they were hearing (Roulston, 2010). Semi-structured interviews encourage the use of the schedule in a flexible way (Bevan, 2014). The result was that questions were asked in a different order as the researcher followed the flow of the participants. During each

interview, the researcher made brief notes specifically to capture emotions and gestures and the interviews were spaced a week apart (see Appendix vi).

3.5.3 Process of Data Collection

The questionnaire was sent to all SAC services registered on the National Childcare Scheme system. This questionnaire provided information that was analysed both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. It allowed for the use of descriptive statistics, for example, percentages such as 49% of participants were managers of services while also allowing participants to give their views, experiential insights, and perspectives, of their practice. The questionnaire had both closed and open-ended questions to allow the participants to describe their day, discuss their opinions on the quality of SAC services, and discuss qualifications within SAC. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the experiences and perspectives of the SAC practitioners and have in-depth discussions examples can be found in Appendix V.

Using Google Forms allowed the researcher to gather information and ensure participants' anonymity (Kabir, 2016). The questionnaire comprised 29 questions and varied types of questions. Agreeing with Rowley (2014), the researcher felt it was essential to limit the variety of options and decided on three types of questions to avoid confusion when answering. The questionnaire included different question types such as open-ended responses, multiple choice, and Likert scales. The use of an online questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather data effectively. The questionnaire offered a cost-effective approach to collecting information that is standardised, consistent, and comparable among the respondents (Kabir, 2016). A

copy of the questionnaire is available in Appendix i. Based on the questions and data already collected an interview schedule was developed. This included both biographical and content-related open-ended questions. This schedule was agreed with the research supervisor.

3.6 Online Approach

This type of research approach has become increasingly popular due to its benefits and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many benefits to an online approach to research. This approach is cost-effective illuminating the need for paper-based surveys or the hire of rooms for focus groups or interviews which can be costly and time-consuming (Bowen et al., 2017). Other benefits include the flexibility of participant engagement as they can log onto interviews and access the questionnaire from around the country at a time that is convenient to them (Granello & Wheaton, 2004).

An online research approach also allowed the data to be collected and analysed digitally which was faster and more convenient for the researcher (Granello & Wheaton, 2004). By using teams for the interviews, the researcher used the transcribe function when the interview was recorded. This allowed additional time for analysis of data. The last benefit of this approach was the anonymity of the participants as the researcher wanted open and honest answers. The participants could remain anonymous unless they expressed an interest in a follow-up interview. This anonymity increased the willingness of the respondents to give their honest experiences and perspectives which leads to reliable data (Huang, 2006).

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of turning data into findings (Patton, 2002). In this study, the questionnaire received 53 responses. Once the Google Form was closed off the researcher began reading and becoming familiar with the data. The researcher looked for significant data relevant to the research question (Clarke et al., 2015). The data yielded information that was quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Descriptive statistics such as percentages were used for quantifiable data.

For qualitative data generated from the interviews and open-ended questions - The researcher used thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach for the questionnaire responses as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Braun & Clarke 6 step thematic analysis (2006).
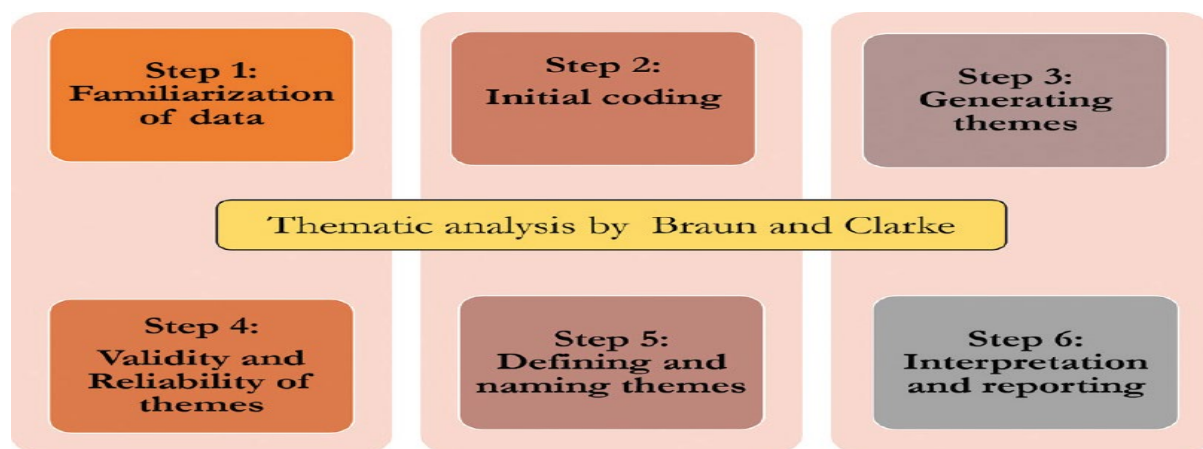
Themes from this analysis began to appear and while some were like those in the initial literature review, some gave the researcher new areas of literature to research. One main theme from the initial analysis was continued professional development (CPD) rather than formal qualification. Many participants agreed that continuous training on relevant topics was more beneficial to SAC practitioners than a

full qualification needed in ELC. The researcher had not looked at CPD in their initial literature review, so this gave a new insight.

The follow-up interviews were recorded and transcribed through teams. These transcripts were then coded and themed using the same approach as the questionnaire. The interviews allowed the researcher to ask questions such as why?? And tell me more about that??? Which allowed the participants to give richer and deeper details on their lived experiences in SAC. In Table 1, you can see how the researcher used the 6 steps of thematic analysis to analyze the research data.

Table 1 – steps of thematic analysis

Thematic Analysis Steps	Thematic Analysis Process
Familiarise yourself with the data	Transcribe interviews Read and reread questionnaire answers and transcribed interviews Make notes
Generate initial codes	Highlight relevant responses and phrases Group responses using codes Line by line analysis for interviews Question by question analysis for questionnaire
Search for emergent themes	Look for patterns Group phrases by theme
Review themes	Combine themes Look for similarities in the responses from similar participants Create provisional themes for narrative report

Define & name themes	Developed description through themes in relation to the research question
Create report	Combination of participants words and my own interpretation of their experiences of the phenomenon Discussion, implications and recommendations in relation to the research question.

3.8 Reliability & Validity

Reliability refers to how well the research method, discussion, findings, and conclusion refer to the research phenomenon (Bush, 2012). The researcher used triangulation to ensure the validity of the study. Triangulation refers to the merging of different forms of information gathered (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This information was gathered through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as tools. These tools used open and closed questions to gather information on the phenomenon. While triangulation can support the study's validity, the researcher must also identify and be conscious of its reliability (Alif et al., 2013). The researchers' personal bias can influence and affect the study which may lead to invalid results (Bush, 2012).

In this study, the researcher remained conscious of any bias and worked to alleviate it. The researcher identified their link with both the ELC & SAC services and previous experience as the reason for their interest in this phenomenon. The researcher was conscious during question selection, analysis, and discussion of findings to be mindful of any bias.

3.9 Positionality

The researcher worked in a support and mentoring role working with those working in ELC and SAC services. From this role as a development officer, the researcher identified the gap in research for SAC services. The researcher has experience working in the ELC sector for 20+ years but has limited experience in SAC services before taking on this research study. The researcher worked in an after-school facility for a brief period over 15 years ago.   The researcher could therefore be considered an "insider researcher" (Griffith, 1998). This means the researcher's previous experience and interactions with SAC providers and practitioners along with their perceptions and assumptions informed the rationale for this study (Teusner, 2016). There are significant advantages of being an insider researcher as they are already familiar with the phenomenon being explored (Coughlan & Shani, 2015). The disadvantage of being an insider researcher can come from bias and subjectivity which falls under the ethical considerations outlined below.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This research study was conducted in line with the National College of Ireland's policy on research ethics and was passed by the CELL (Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning) ethics filter committee. Conducting a research study with human beings we must ensure we respect their values, beliefs, and dignity to safeguard their honesty within the study (Taquette, 2022). In addition, Deanscombe (2007) states that legislation is in place to protect the public from the use of their data for unsuitable purposes.

In line with National College of Ireland policy, a participant information sheet and participant consent form were created using plain language statements. The information gives the rationale for the research and includes the objectives and aims while also giving the participants their expectations of them if they choose to participate. A confidentiality and anonymity statement were provided at the start of the online questionnaire. Once a participant submits the completed Google Form, they have given consent to participate in the research anonymously.

As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview, if they agreed, they were asked to provide their email address. If they consent to participate in a follow-up interview, they are no longer anonymous to the researcher. At this point, the researcher emailed the selected participants a consent form which needed to be signed and returned to them before the interview. The information sheet and consent form both specify that the participant can withdraw from the study at any point and their research interview transcripts will be removed. These documents were to ensure the participants had a constant awareness of the parameters of the study (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000).

Another ethical consideration by the researcher was the content of the study and how this may make SAC practitioners uncomfortable. Currently, there is no expectation for SAC practitioners to have a formal qualification but within this study, they may feel pressure to participate in continuous professional development as these qualifications are due to come into effect in the coming years. To alleviate this, the researcher will inform participants that this research may inform government policy on what SAC practitioners may need to engage in formal qualifications.

Finally, the researcher sought to combat their bias using strategies of reflexivity and triangulation (Greene, 2014). Reflexivity was acknowledged by the researcher in identifying their bias and position on the topic before data collection and designing the questionnaire based on the literature review. The semi-structured interviews were based on the responses to the questionnaire and were further backed up with literature. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources to gather information. In this study, the researcher used both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to give different perspectives and increase the validity of the findings (Whitaker & Fitzpatrick, 2021). In the process of a research study, the researcher needed to reduce any implications by maintaining these ethical standards throughout. The researcher also remained sensitive and offered transparency during all stages. (Winifred, 2012).

3.11 Conclusion

`   This chapter has outlined the methodological framework of this study, which seeks to explore the practice of School Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland using a pragmatic research paradigm. This chapter gave a detailed outline of the research design, participant recruitment, tools for data collection, data analysis approach, and ethical considerations. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of SAC practitioner's experiences and perspectives. The use of a mixed method approach of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews gives depth to the findings.

Purposive recruitment ensured that the participants were relevant to the research question and the use of thematic analysis highlighted significant themes.

Ethical considerations were maintained, ensuring anonymity, and requiring consent from interview participants. The positionality of the researcher as an insider with experience and knowledge of the field is acknowledged and managed through triangulation to help mitigate bias. Lastly, the chapter identified the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter 4 – Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter offered insights into the current state of practice and highlights areas for potential development and improvement in SAC services, through a presentation of the results obtained from SAC practitioner's experiences and perceptions of School Age Childcare (SAC) services in Ireland. Applying both a structured questionnaire and follow-up interviews, this study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the SAC field.

Data analysis plays a crucial role in research as it transforms raw data into meaningful insights. Bell (2005) highlights that thorough data review and understanding are essential to present logical and coherent findings. This chapter reports on the data collected from 53 SAC practitioners who participated in the survey, alongside the qualitative insights obtained from follow-up interviews. The sections will describe in detail the results, providing a clear and organized presentation. These results are supported by figures and participant quotations. The results are presented in four sections that align with the study's aims and objectives:

1) the background of the SAC practitioners and their services.

2) practitioners' perception of quality, including child development and play in SAC services.

3) considerations regarding qualifications and ongoing professional development in SAC practice.

4) the challenges faced by practitioners.

4.2 Section 1: Background information of participants and services:

This section will include a description of the participants who responded to the survey and participated in follow-up interviews. It will include their role within their services, their age group, the size of their service, and the region they work in.

4.2.1 Role of the participants

In all, as mentioned earlier, 53 individuals responded to the survey. Almost half (49%) were managers of a SAC service. Of the other 51% of respondents, 10 (19%) were room leaders and the remaining 17 (32%) were practitioners. Having a representation of staff working at various levels in SAC services gives a round picture of SAC services from diverse levels.

Figure 2 - role of participants
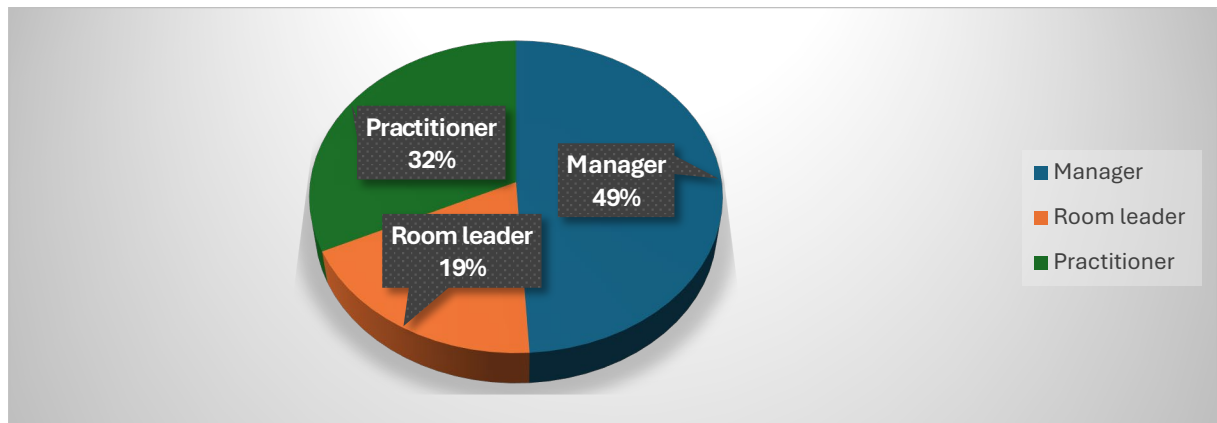
4.2.2 Age range of participants

The participants belonged to a wide age range from 18 – 64 years old. The median age was between 35 – 44 years old. From the results we can see there is a vast difference in age groups working within this area. The largest age range with

32% of the total is staff ranging from 35 – 44 years old. The remaining 68% were

broken down as 24% of practitioners were aged 25-34 years old, 21% were aged 45 -

54 years old, 15% were 55 – 64 years old and finally 8% were aged 18 – 24 years old.

When compared to the role in the SAC service 85% of SAC managers

were over 35years old and the younger age group of 18-24years were all practitioners.

Of these managers within this age group 82% had a level 7 qualification or above.

This would show the level of experience needed to manage an SAC service. Of the

10 participants that identified themselves as room leaders, 8 (80%) were between 25 –

44 years old.

4.2.3 Location of participants

Participants belonged to all regions in Ireland however most participants

(66%) belonged to the Leinster region of Ireland. This was not surprising with Dublin

having a high percentage of the 2,500 registered SAC services in the country (Tusla,

2023). Munster had 17% of the participants, followed by Connaught with 13%.

There were only 2 participants (4%) who responded from Ulster. This may be

because services in Ulster were not directly sent to the survey as they do not

participate in the NCS scheme as it is funded under the Government of the Republic

of Ireland. These practitioners may be working for SAC services along the border but

may live in the Ulster region.

4.2.4 Numbers of children accessing SAC services

There was a huge variation in the number of children accessing SAC

services from under 10 to over 50 children. There were only 4 services catering for

less the 10 children with the remaining services offering places to more than 10 children. From the responses we can see that 15 services offered places to 10-25 children which accounts for 28% of the total, while 16 services offered places to 25 – 50 children accounting for 30% of the total and finally 18 services offered places to more than 50 children accounting for 34% of the total.

Comparing the service size in relation to the region of the service the data shows that 35 services are in Leinster, which accounts for 66% of the total services. Of these 35 services 94% accommodated more than 10 children with only 2 services (6%) offering places to less than 10 children. This may be due to Dublin being in Leinster and being an urban area with more parents needing care outside of school hours. The 2 other services offering less than 10 places were in Munster and Connaught, which would have a larger rural population.   The 2 practitioners who work in services in Ulster reported they accommodated 50+ children. This may be due to being located on the boarder of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland so having a wide scope of families to engage in these services. 70% of the services offering 50+ places to children were in Leinster. Agreeably, the literature reviewed from Australia highlighted differences between urban and rural areas in terms of access to childcare services. Urban areas tend to have more extensive services due to higher population density and greater demand (Cartmel, 2009).

4.2.5 Operating times of SAC services

SAC services operate at various times of the day and school calendar year, as required by the community that they cater to, for example, services such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs, out-of-school care during holiday periods or just

after school care during term time. These services can vary at separate times of the year, but participants were asked the average number of hours they worked directly with children each week. Most (70%) of the participants identified that they spent over 20 hours per week working directly with the children in the school age service. Of the 37 participants that identified they worked over 20 hours weekly with the children 70% of these participants were in Leinster which supports the argument of urban areas needing additional care hours for working parents. In comparison to the participants who selected they lived in Connaught only 5% acknowledged working 20+ hours a week with the children.

Similarities to Ireland were observed in other countries such as Denmark, Australia, America, and Finland including the flexibility of services offered, the considerable number of hours spent directly with children by practitioners, and the regional variations in service demand (Jenson, 2001, Walter, 2007, Aizer, 2002, Strandell, 2013). These factors are influenced by socio-economic conditions, and the need to support working families with flexible childcare options. These results further support the ideas explored in Denmark that the demand for SAC in rural areas as more frequently part-time (Jensen, 20021) and mirror the study in Australia showing a growth in parents in urban cities needing more hours during school holiday periods (Walter, 2007). Understanding these similarities or differences with other countries can help in adopting best practices and tailored approaches to meet the diverse needs of children and families across different regions and countries.

4.3 Section 2: Practitioners' perception of quality, child development and play in SAC services.

4.3.1 Introduction

This section focused on whether School Age Childcare (SAC) services should be integrated with Early Learning and Care (ELC), and the dual roles of SAC practitioners as educators and carers. This section also includes perspectives on the provision of quality, child development and curriculum & activity planning.

4.3.2 Where should SAC fall?

The question of whether SAC should be integrated with ELC showed different opinions among participants, reflecting differing perspectives based on their experiences within SAC services. Participants highlighted benefits of integration such as access to support systems like the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and free SAC provisions, while those against integration underlined the distinct needs of SAC children, particularly their greater independence and different developmental requirements compared to younger children. They argued that SAC services require different skills and approaches, using the example of the differences between primary and secondary education.

When participants were asked if SAC should fall under the same sector as ELC the results showed that the participants were equally divided in their responses. 51% of respondents answered yes and 49% answered no. This result may be a balance of the qualified SAC practitioners that have knowledge ion ELC and combined services that operate both services. These practitioners may if qualified work a dual role in ELC and SAC. The unqualified staff would not have had the

opportunity to work in ELC rooms and may be unfamiliar with the regulations, policies, and procedures for this sector.

Those participants that opined that SAC should fall under the same sector as ELC gave reasons such as: P04 "In my service we have 5-year-old preschool children and 4-year-old School aged children. There is a significant overlap with ECEC and SAC, children do not grow and develop in a linear way and so many aspects of ECEC education are vital for children in SAC". P20 "Yes there should be adjustments made to ELC qualifications and government policy to have all care under the same umbrella, including access to Aim Supports and Free SAC etc".

Those participants that felt SAC services should stand alone as a separate sector gave reasons such as: P16 "SAC children are a totally different kettle of fish than ECCE and ELC children. Their needs are vastly different, and they need staff a lot less, they need a bit of freedom, independence and trust". P18 "It's a complete separate set of needs. It is my opinion that the government do not recognise SAC or the importance of it and this is seen very clearly within the core funding model as there is no graduate uplift. Some SAC children are 12 years of age. Within the SAC area there is some children that I consider could come in under ELC but not for children in 4th, 5th and 6th class".

When asked to further expand on their answers during interviews the participants gave different perspectives and gave examples from their experience working within SAC services. Interview participant 2 expanded saying "Better to integrate the whole childcare system, it's too overloaded with administration, give us a salary so that all our time is not taken up with extra administration which does nothing for children, and takes valuable time away from them". When asked for an example the interviewee expanded that often her manager asks her to leave an activity

to ensure the administration tasks are complete and once, she returns to the activity the "learning experience for that child is lost" so by integrating the system she felt there would be less administration.

During interview 1 the participant identified that "Different skills are needed by staff. It would be like putting primary and secondary schools under the same sector". This was a point the researcher had not thought of and again showed the vast difference between these age groups. A child in primary school has very different care needs and interests than a teenager in secondary school. This interviewee felt staff needed "age specific training" on areas such a "puberty and social and emotional development". These differences in opinion may link to the qualification of the participant or the type of service they work in as staff who work in a combined service with a qualification would already adapt many of the polices and follow regulations of the ELC sector.

4.3.3 SAC practitioner's role as an educator & carer

Participants were asked to give their opinion on if they thought SAC practitioners educated children while in the SAC service. The responses to this question identified that 89% of the participants identified that they felt SAC practitioners' educated children while in their care while only 11% felt they did not educate children while in the SAC service. This is illustrated in figure 16. This result would signify that the majority of participants view their work with the children as a learning experience. This may be formal in assisting with homework prn informal using the Zone of Proximal Development to help a child achieve a goal or reach a milestone (Vygotsky, 1978). This result further supports the ideas of Berry & Malek

(2017) who identified that children's relationships, interactions and environments shape their development.

Very little was found in the literature on the question of education and care in relation to SAC, so the study asked if the participants felt their SAC service concentrated on or prioritised education or care of SAC children while in their care. As seen in figure 17. 64% of the participants identified that both care and education were concentrated on in their service while 32% stated that care was their priority. This may link back with not needing a formal qualification for SAC services as many non-qualified practitioners may not identify as educators.

Figure 3 - priorities of SAC services
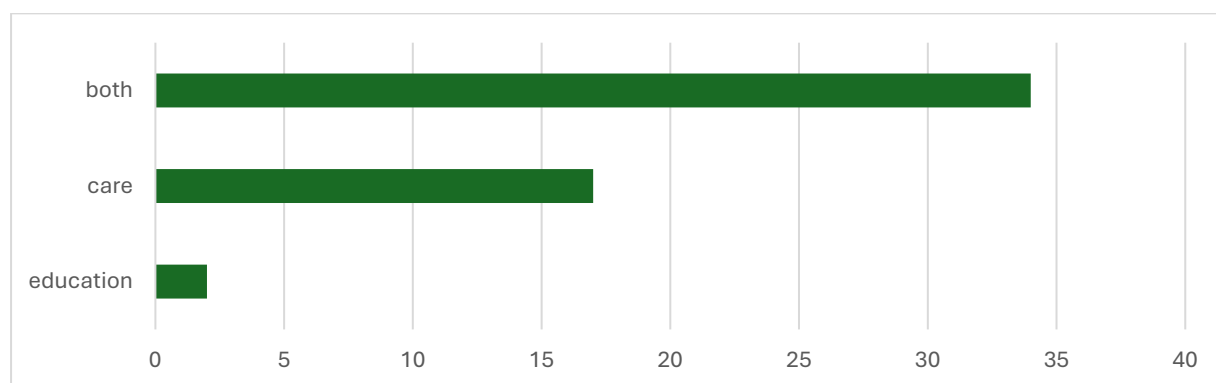
When the survey asked participants to elaborate on the care and education they gave the children in their care, a variety of viewpoints were evident in the responses, albeit many of them concentrated on the aspect of helping with schoolwork. P03 identified "I help children from 5 to 12 (junior infants to sixth class) with their homework. I would have children of mixed ability, children come in not knowing what is being asked of them in relation to fractions and decimals, they have issues with learning English, constructing simple sentences, doing projects which all need my help". Agreeably P29 highlighted this area stating "During covid we were open

for essential workers, and we did homeschool with the children, we look after homework".

Other participants identified education outside of homework and school activities such as social and emotional development and life skills. P08 acknowledged "We are responsible for supporting and developing the holistic child...... support working as part of a team, teaching respect, learning to follow rules and turn taking. We teach children about healthy choices" while P09 recognised "we try to ensure all children are safe, happy and catered for. Teaching morals, manners, different strategies for problem solving etc. it may not be a curriculum, but it is teaching and learning none the less".

During the interview stage education and the impact of teaching life skills were also highlighted by all the interview participants. The 1st interview participant stated "We teach practical skills. We engage the children in projects and give them opportunities to engage in STEAM activities". Interview 3 agreed that "These activities are enjoyable for the children and are valued learning experiences". This shows the understanding of the practitioners that education is not just formal in a school setting but that these children are consistently experiencing learning opportunities. When asked for examples of these learning experience in practice in interview 3 they responded, "in playing games the children learn rules, teamwork and this can help them in their life as they become adults".

From the participants who identified care as the main priority of their SAC services they identified areas such as not having a teaching qualification and the importance of relaxation and play after a day in a formal school setting. P26 recognised that "The children have been in school all day. They need to be able to

relax and play". Agreeably P32 highlighted care as their priority "obviously we try and share our knowledge with children, but we are not qualified teachers, so care is our primary focus". Some other participants identified that this approach to care did however show an element of informal education giving the following examples. P44 stated "Less formal education approach more care home away from home with child led activities" and P48 acknowledged their role as "mostly about caring for them so their parents can work, but I feel I support them socially and emotionally and help to learn to be kinder to other children". None of the interview participants prioritise care over education but they did all agree of the importance of the care aspect in SAC services. These answers although coming from very different perspectives would again be supported by the theories of Dewy (1910) & Vygotsky (1978) as they highlight learning and development through structured and unstructured activities and the inquiry process.

4.3.4 Quality Provision in SAC services

When participants were asked about quality within their service most participants spoke highly of the quality care provided to children within their care. The interview participants spoke passionately during interviews about quality and the different ways their services supported and prioritised quality care.

One of the first questions asked in relation to quality was if participants felt that qualifications would improve quality in SAC services. 74% of participants agreed that qualification in SAC would improve quality in SAC services while 26% felt that qualification would not impact quality care as demonstrated in figure 18. This result would suggest that although there is currently no mandatory qualification needed to

work in SAC the practitioners would support its introduction with many (79%) already qualified in a similar field.

The questionnaire then moved to ask the participants specifically how exactly they felt these qualifications would impact quality and what challenges were faced to improve quality. When participants were asked about what quality means in their service and how qualifications would impact quality there were some areas that were highlighted across the responses. For the impact of qualification within the SAC services the areas that were highlighted were enhanced knowledge & skills, the importance of child development knowledge and increasing the professionalism of the SAC services.

The importance of knowledge of child development can be seen across the responses. Many respondents stated that child development knowledge was paramount in the delivery of quality care. Agreeing with the significance of child development, many also signified the need for knowledge and skills to support children with an additional need. Responses included: P03 "Quality means skills, it means knowledge, it means insight into developmentally appropriate activities for specific children, some of whom have additional needs. Furthering their education will empower and equip SAC workers to meet the holistic needs of this age group", while P11 agreed "Child development knowledge is so important, especially when having to care for a child with additional needs" and P51concured "Education and knowledge is key in improving what provision is provided for our children".

While these questionnaire responses highlighted the positive impact of qualified staffing in SAC there were also respondents that disagreed it would directly impact quality. These responses showed many practitioners seen a capable adult as

sufficient to provide quality care for children in SAC services and some stated it was more about the person than the qualification. Other respondents stated that quality was set by management and service providers so qualification of staff would not make a difference to the care the children receive. Some of these responses included: P23 "Quality is set by the service, and we follow their policies. Doesn't make a difference if staff are qualified once managers are" and P42 "Won't change the care the children get". Interview participant 3 gave examples of care given to children in her SAC service by a non-qualified adult as "caring, supportive, patient and kind" and highlighted that "adults who are parents bring new approaches to situations in SAC services over staff who are qualified with no life experience".

During interview 1 the participant highlighted that a colleague had a level 8 in social studies, and she was "better equipped to deal with the teenagers". I asked her to expand on this statement and she explained that this staff member approached these older children in a different way and gave them more responsibility. She continued that as she was early years qualified, she had never taken this approach and could see the "benefits for the children in the service" of the staff member using this style. The participant wanted to highlight that "an early year's qualification does not teach the skills needed for older children" and yet this adult would be seen as unqualified even though she had the skills needed.

Another significant response to the impact of qualifications within SAC was on the professionalism and recognition of the services provided. Participants identified that if SAC staff want to be identified as more than "minders" they need to make the commitment to achieve a qualification within their role as an SAC practitioner. P19 stated "Qualified staff can support children and have knowledge to back up why they do what they do. If we want to be seen as more than minders, we

need to commit to achieving a qualification" with P41 agreeing it would help with the importance of qualification for professionalism stating, "It will help with role recognition through proper pay". While interviewing participant 2 they expanded to say that as their SAC service was "not in core funding they did not follow the ERO". This highlighted the difference in the way these services run and on how they are managed as there is no legal obligations on services that are not signed into core funding. By regulating the services pay rates will be legalised and staff will be paid based on qualification and role within the services.

Participants argued that the introduction of these qualifications will create a consistent standard for all SAC services with qualifications ensuring a baseline level for knowledge and quality care provision across all staff within these services no matter what services they provide. These practitioners highlight that this baseline should include knowing the policies, regulation requirements, compliance, and ethos of these services. P13 states "Will ensure all staff are aware of same regulations and ethos" while during interview when asked to expand on the baseline qualifications participant 2 identified "The more you know the more quality improvement are seen. You can adapt environments, experiences and better handle the overall ethos if you have a qualification". Agreeably, during interview participant 3 declared "Everyone will have a baseline to start at like the level 5 for creche work / basic knowledge of the important fields like compliance & regulations". These responses signify the need for this baseline so that all practitioners are aware of the policies, ethos, and requirements of the services they are providing.

Overall, these results align well with existing literature on qualifications, CPD, and practitioner attitudes in childcare services. The high educational standards among

SAC practitioners in Ireland, and their commitment to ongoing CPD shows their motivation to their field. The identified areas of essential skills and knowledge for SAC practice are also seen within literature, highlighting the need for continuous training and support to maintain high-quality care standards in SAC settings. The importance of play, care and education such as child development can be seen through the literature which coincides with the practitioner's views.

4.3.5 Child Development

Many respondents emphasised the importance of understanding the development of the child and supporting and enhancing their holistic development while in the SAC service.

One respondent elaborated stating that "Child development from birth to 15years" (P23) which includes adolescence should be included in the SAC qualification. Current qualifications include the study of child development from 0-6years. Children within an SAC service would include an older group of children at a different stage of development than practitioners may have already studied as part of an ELC qualification. Comments in relation to training in puberty and the social and emotional development of children during puberty were also highlighted throughout with P08 stating that the course should deal with "different ages and stages of development -ie: hormones, puberty etc. this can present as young as 10 and some educators have no experience dealing with such instances". This area was discussed again during interview with participant 1 as she expanded on the influence that the staff member with the social studies degree has guided the staff in ways to approach "puberty and difficult conversations that may arise with older children". Other

practitioners identified areas such as play and social skills such as conflict resolution.

P34 signifies the importance of a "play based education setting for older children, where their voice and rights are central to everything".

During the interview stage the researcher wanted to delve deeper into this area as many participants had highlighted its importance. While asking the interviewees why child development was important the following statements were made. I02 "child development is the core of everything we do. The child is the centre and their journey throughout the services from when they start as babies right through until they leave at maybe 12 and their development in these years is the most important thing". Another area highlighted during the interviews was when I02 acknowledged "trauma informed practice and conflict resolution as areas to be developed within the course as again the children are at a stage where their communication skills have developed, and they may have witnessed or experienced more life experiences in the home and community which may be factor in their holistic development".

4.3.6 Curriculum & Activity Planning

Another prevalent area considered by practitioners is the importance of curriculum development and planning that is tailored to SAC. This is supported by the voice of the child and their involvement in tailoring their day gives them the opportunity to engage in activities of interest (UNCRC, 1989). The importance of the child's voice is seen in the responses with P05 highlighting "Curriculum development with children as co constructors" and play based learning, creative and expressive activities and sports are also identified as important aspects of curriculum development in SAC. This understanding by practitioners aligns with the theory that children naturally learn through inquiry and play as supported by Dewy (1910) and

Vygotsky (1978) When the survey asked participants to elaborate on the care and education they received from the providers, a variety of viewpoints were evident in all of the responses, albeit many of them concentrated on the aspect of helping with schoolwork.

Further results illustrate that practitioners agree with previous literature that children continue to learn and develop while in SAC through play and natural inquiry (Whitebread et al., 2012). Skills identified by practitioners in the responses such as conflict resolution, problem solving, and self-regulation can be fostered with adult support. This point is supported by Willoughby, (2020). Other areas highlighted by P11 are "team building, project-based learning and sports". #

4.4 Section 3: Practitioners perspectives on qualifications and ongoing professional development in SAC.

4.4.1 Introduction

Leading on from quality care in SAC being a paramount concern, 72% of respondents agreed that qualifications would enhance the quality of SAC services, citing improved knowledge, skills, and professionalism. They highlighted the importance of understanding child development and the need for specific training to support children with additional needs. However, there were also concerns that formal qualifications do not mean better care. Qualification and CPD are pivotal in ensuring high quality care and education of children. In this section I will delve into the educational backgrounds of the participants, their attitudes towards further qualifications and their view and beliefs on the introduction of SAC specific qualifications and training.

Despite there being no mandatory formal qualification needed to work in SAC in Ireland over half of the respondents (55%) have achieved a level 7 qualification or above with 64% of the respondent's qualification being specific to ELC or SAC. Interestingly the remaining 36% of respondents with a level 7 or above have qualifications in related fields such as social care, family & youth studies, and the arts. This highlights a diverse range of skills and interests among SAC practitioners.

This section then looks at the willingness of the participants to engage in further qualifications for their professional development. While the current qualification levels are already at an advanced level, respondents expressed a motivation to pursue higher qualifications in specific domains, showing a commitment for professional growth. This is particularly significant given that 53% of participants indicated a likelihood to engage in further training, despite the already prominent levels of qualification among respondents.

This section breaks down the specific areas of knowledge and skills that practitioners deem essential for effective SAC practice. These include child development, curriculum and activity planning, behaviour management, child safeguarding, and various professional and practical skills. Each of these areas is discussed in detail, drawing on insights from practitioners to highlight the need for targeted training in these domains. This section provides an understanding of the current qualifications and CPD in SAC, highlighting both the achievements and the areas needing further development.

4.4.2 Perspectives on qualifications

The researcher noted that over half the respondents had a level 7 qualification or above. When asked if their qualifications were specific to early childhood education & care or school age childcare 64% answered "yes" while 36% answered "no". Of the 36% that answered no to this question some of the areas of qualification included social care, family & youth studies and history, arts and languages. The qualification level within the responses to the questionnaire was surprising as this area has no legal regulation to have a formal qualification. The researcher noted this may be due to many managers answering the questionnaire.

Figure 4 - current qualification level
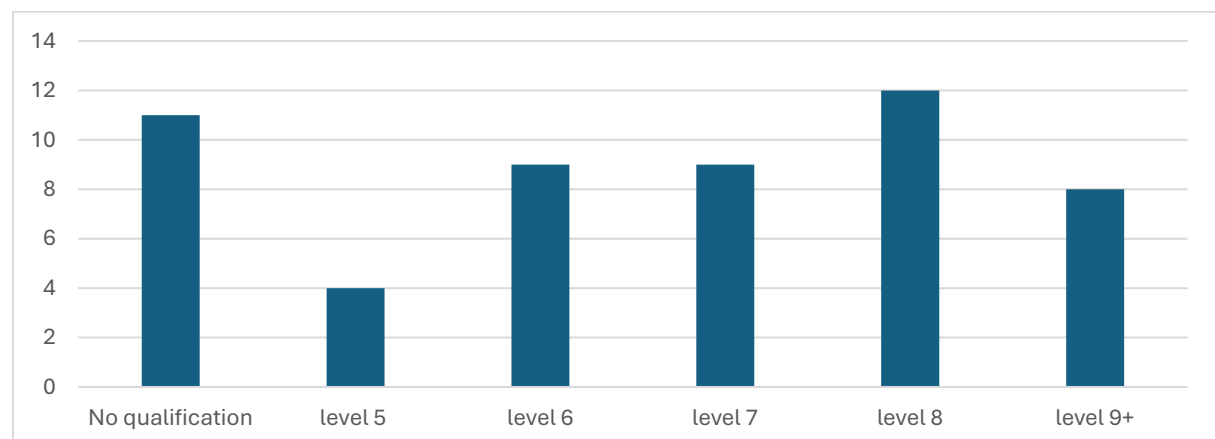
When asked if the participants would engage with a higher qualification within their field the responses shows that although the qualification level within the study was already high there was still a motivation to further develop and continue to engage with professional development through study. There were some responses that were somewhat or very unlikely to engage in a further qualification that amounted to 39% across both levels but over half the respondents at 53% were either somewhat or very likely to have further engagement with training and qualification. These practitioners will be supported and encouraged to upskill

under the Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (DCEDIY, 2024).

As 42 out of the 53 participants already held a level 5 or above qualification this shows the further engagement by these participants to further develop their skills and education. This motivation shows the desire to change and develop oneself as acknowledged by Reeve (2014). The participants that are already qualified in ELC can also engage in the above plan to add the specific special SAC qualification to their current qualification once developed (DCEDIY, 2024).

Figure 5 - participants likely to engage in further qualification
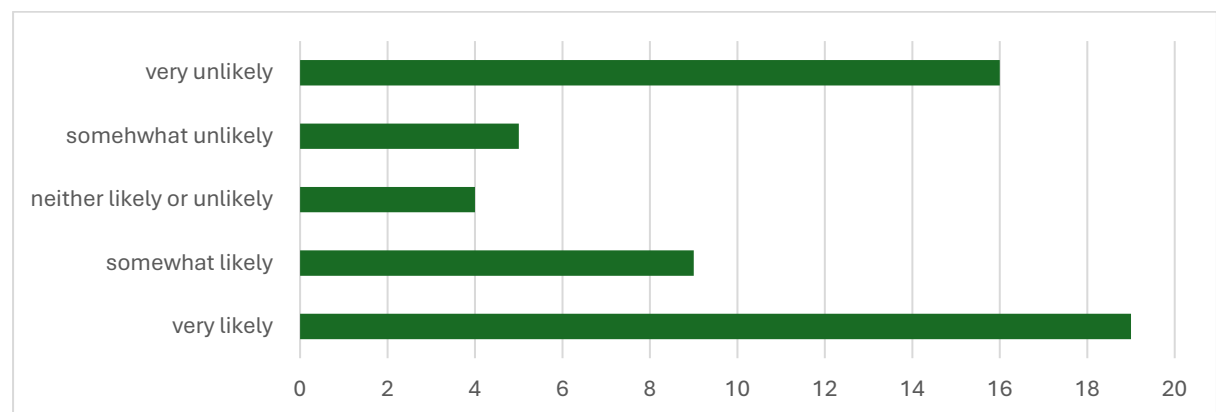
A significant portion (72%) of the respondents highlighted the importance of qualifications to practice in SAC as seen in figure 10. Participants were asked how they agreed to a statement that SAC practitioners need a formal qualification using a Likert Scale. The results were that 38 of the 53 (72%) participants either strongly agreed or agreed that SAC practitioners should have some formal qualification specific to SAC. 8 participants remained neutral and only 7 of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that SAC practitioners should have a formal qualification specific to SAC. This again identifies the alignment of the practitioners on the ground in SAC with the developments coming down from

Government in relation to qualifications and the professionalism of the SAC

practitioners and services.

When asked what level of qualification do the participants feel this

qualification should be? Most (63%) felt a level 5 would be sufficient, with only 13%

expressing they would like to see a level 7+ qualification implemented for SAC

practitioners. When asked about the subject content of learning the participants

identified 5 areas such as child development, curriculum and activity planning,

behaviour management, child safeguarding and finally professional practical skills.

The voice of the child was seen throughout the responses with practitioners

highlighting the ability of the children to express their views, opinions and interests as

they get older.

4.4.3 Continued Professional Development (CPD)

As highlighted throughout this study there is no qualification needed as a

mandatory requirement for SAC practitioners in Ireland however three quarters of the

participants (79%) in this study do have a qualification in relation to children. These

are mainly in the ELC sector which concentrates on 0 – 6 years but some have

additional qualifications in adolescent and youth studies. Just because there are no

formal requirements for qualification within these services this study shows there is

high engagement in training and development within these services. This applies to

not only recognised qualifications through Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

but also courses for continued professional development (CPD) which can be short

courses in face or online to improve skills, share knowledge and develop as a

practitioner. The questionnaire asked if the participants had the opportunity to engage

in CPD over the last year. In figure 15 we can show that 96% of responses agreed they had the opportunity for CPD engagement.

Figure 6 - participants who engaged in CPD
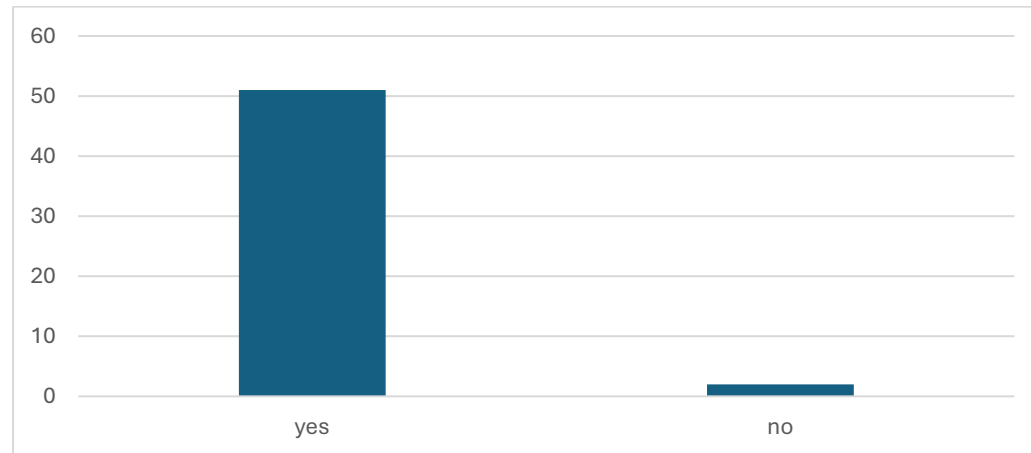
These opportunities included many courses which are shown in the figure 16 below. When asked to identify other CPD courses attended participants identified other courses such as autism awareness, behaviour management, cyber safety, and trauma awareness training. These figures would show that although formal qualifications are not required these practitioners identify the need to be upskilled and knowledgeable when responsible for the care and development of children. The researched asked participant 3 who is unqualified during her interview why she decided to engage in CPD but had not completed the level 5 qualification. Her response was that she felt the level 5 in early years education was "not relevant" as she was only interested in working with children over 5 years. She said she gained "lots of knowledge through CPD that I use every day". She also added that she could "chose the courses that I feel are useful at that point" which allowed her to tailor the skills needed at different stages of her career.

Figure 7 - participants who attended CPD
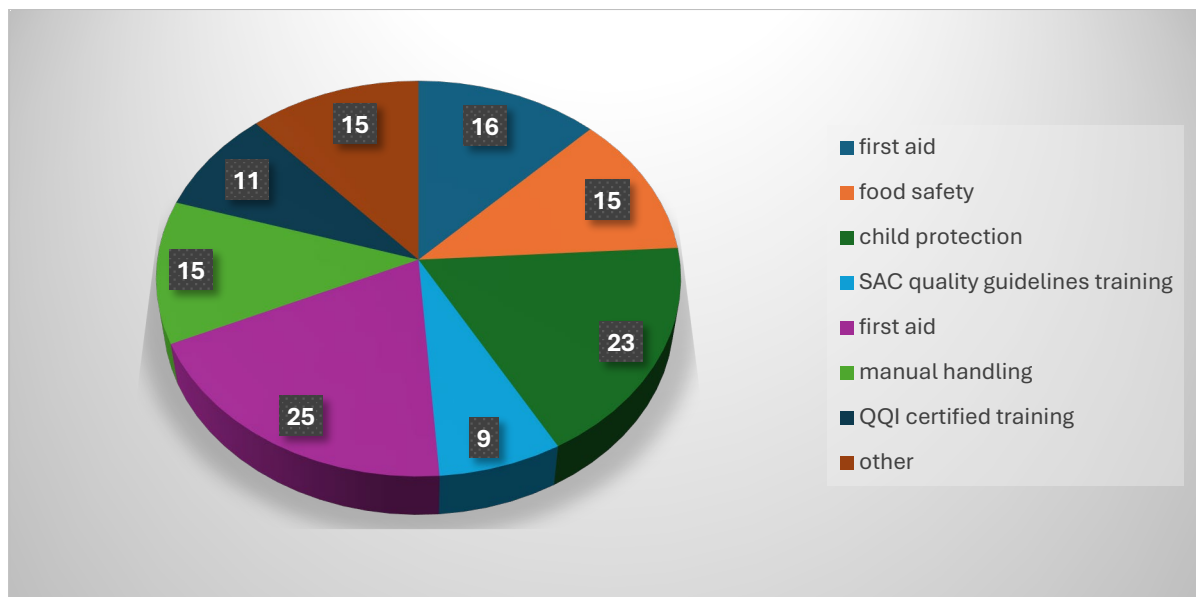
Previous studies from Sheridan et al. (2009) would agree that these courses and activities increase the skills and attitudes of staff members which impacts the role in the service provided. When asked why participants engaged in CPD the answered varied as shown in figure 17. The motivation to gain knowledge for their current role was the highest reason given by participants with 27 out of the 53 responses highlighting this as a reason with gaining knowledge for a new role the lowest of the responses with only 3 out of 53 participants identifying this as a motivation. This again highlights that even with no formal qualification needed for SAC practitioners they want to engage and improve their skills. It is interesting that less than 10 participants had to be asked to attend training. This shows intrinsic motivation from the participants themselves to develop their skills as supported by Ersanhi (2015) & Reeve (2014).

Figure 8 - Why participants engaged in CPD
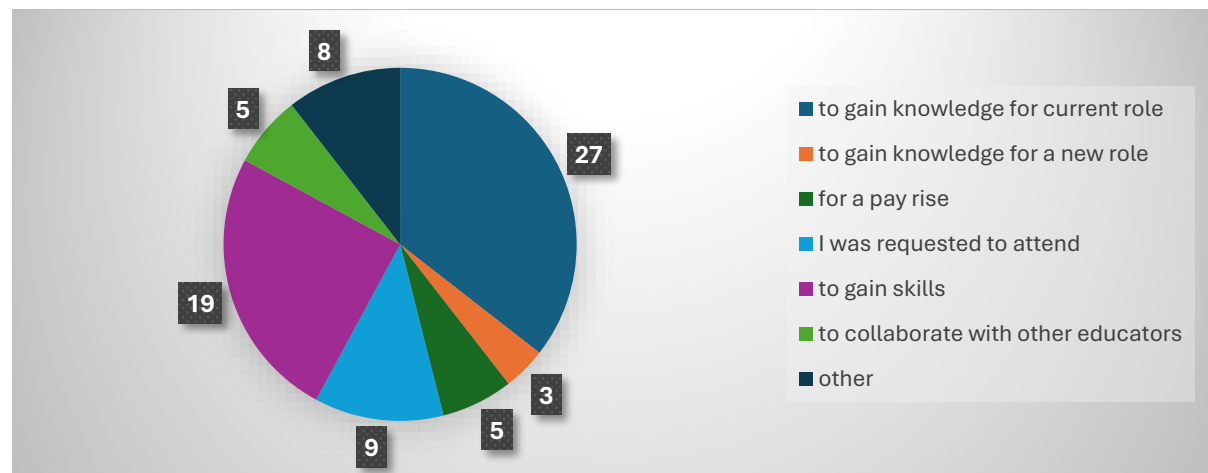
In the section detailed other the participants were asked to give their reasons these ranged from identifying certs needed to be kept up to date and others wanting to develop their own professional practice. Some the responses included were: P33 "To further my own professional practice and education and to better understand children in my care", P51 "Continue refreshing knowledge and up to date certs" and P54 "To collaborate with other educators".

4.3.4 Play, Behaviour Management & Child Safeguarding

Play and the need for free play can be seen as a thread throughout the questionnaire with practitioners identifying that children have spent "many hours being instructed" (P13) in school and "need time to do what they chose" (P17). This time to play and chose their activities allows the children own their learning and development and has an impact on their social and emotional development as stated by Gibson & McNally (2014). The need for training in both behaviour management and child safeguarding are key concepts that have emerged from the study in relation to qualification and the professional development of SAC practitioners. Topics such as supporting children with additional needs, conflict resolution, child safeguarding

and positive behaviour management were consistently seen in the replies from respondents in what they would like to see in a formal qualification for SAC. Many highlight the importance of having the skills to understand and support children with additional needs in the SAC service. This area was discussed during interview with participant 2 stressing the importance of an age appropriate course stating "Child development of school aged children, behaviour management, how to deal with conflict between children, inclusion of children with additional needs" with interview participant 3 going on to highlight the need for the access and inclusion model (AIM) in ECCE services to extend to SAC services "hopefully AIM will extend to SAC soon".

4.3.5 Professional & Practical Skills

Finally, respondents recognized the need for, and importance of various professional and practical skills needed for engagement in SAC services such as communication, understanding policy and regulation, partnership with parents and mandatory skills training such as first aid and manual handling. P09 signified the need for the qualification to include "Regulations, standards, policies, all mandatory training i.e. safeguarding etc". At present training in the SAC quality guidelines are available for SAC services but it is not mandatory to receive. The communities of professional practice were highlighted by respondents as a shared space to learn and develop through discussion with other practitioners. These communities of practice are supported by Elbrink et al. (2023) who supports this as an opportunity to increase knowledge and Wenger et al. (2002) who identifies a community of practice as a meeting held regularly to share knowledge, discuss a concern, or share a passion.

4.5 Section 4: Challenges faced by SAC practitioners

4.5.1. Introduction

The challenges faced by practitioners is a prominent issue seen in the responses to many of the questions asked within the survey. There are many challenges identified throughout the survey such as unqualified staff, wages, staff retention & turnover, workload, and clarity on their role. This section investigates these issues as reported by the study participants, providing insights into the operational realities of SAC services.

Like ELC, discontentment in wages emerged as a critical issue, with many respondents citing low pay as a major barrier to engaging and retaining staff. This high turnover disrupts the continuity of care for children and places additional strain on the remaining staff. Time management and workload are additional challenges reported by SAC practitioners. The diverse roles and responsibilities they undertake, combined with inconsistencies across services, contribute to difficulties within SAC services. These challenges directly impact the quality care and time given to the children. This concern is important as practitioners juggle many tasks and responsibilities while also caring for children

4.5.2 Unqualified staff

As mentioned above the results of this study show an elevated level of qualified staff who participated in this study but as a whole SAC staff do not need a formal qualification to work directly with children in these services. Responses from participants show that with "no minimum qualification" (P40) & "not having

qualifications as a mandatory requirement" (P27) places pressure on qualified staff to guide and support the workforce. P51 identified that the "Lack of hours" in SAC creates a "disinterest" to pursue a qualification. A respondent also linked wages as a challenge to encourage staff to upskill and gain qualifications stating there is "little interest in the sector due to pay for being a qualified person in this role" (P44).

Interview participant 1 was passionate about this area and argued that "immense pressure is placed on staff to protect, care and educate our young people with no recognition for what they do". She stated that teachers in formal education settings are seen as "professionals" while practitioners in SAC services are seen as carers whether they are qualified or not. She continued that "there is no incentive to upskill for SAC workers, they do it because they want the best for the children".

4.4.2 Wages, retention & turnover

Many respondents recognised that wages were a challenge for staff in SAC. Multiple participants identified "low pay" as a barrier to engage staff in SAC services with P16 stating that staff are leaving to "go abroad as wages are better elsewhere". Due to poor wages SAC services are experiencing issues with staff retention and turnover as staff "leaving frequently" (P16) due to these issues. Since the questionnaire was completed by participants the researcher would like to confirm an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) has been implemented in June 2024 for staff in SAC services in Ireland. The rates of this ERO for SAC staff are €13.65 for a practitioner, €14.70 for a room leader €16.28 for a graduate room leader, €16.49 for an assistant manager, €17.33 for a manager and finally €18.11 for a graduate manager. This ERO was introduced by the government on 24/6/24 for all partner services engaged in core funding (DCEDIY, 2024).

4.5.4 Diverse responsibilities and lack of consistency across SAC.

A challenge reported throughout the study was that of time management and workload of SAC practitioners. The diverse roles and responsibilities of staff are inconsistent across many services and the diverse types of service can also impact the workload on the staff. Many respondents describe their roles including administrative and management duties while also caring for the children in ratio. P01 states that her roles as a manger are "I am owner, manager, cook, driver, cleaner, activities organiser, parent liaison person & many more" while P19's role as a practitioner include "School collections, plan activities, supervise free play, supervise homework". This shows the diverse roles undertaken by many within the SAC services.

The way that SAC services are run can also differ across services and staff may be on duty for breakfast clubs in the morning or just in the afternoons. Some work term time only and some take children for full day care when schools are closed. This can make it difficult to determine and define what an SAC service is. Throughout the questionnaire and interviews the researcher identified many services who operate in different ways. When asked to describe their current day in the questionnaire the responses varied from each participant. Some such as P14 who works in an SAC that operates mornings, afternoon and full time on school closures described their day as "Breakfast club 8am, school drop offs, school collections, managing afterschool, operating out of school full day care" while in contrast P24 who works at an SAC providing only term time after school care described their day as "School collections (on foot), make dinners/clean up, make snack for later, homework supervision, playing with children, liaising with parents, outdoor play, conducting activities". These different operations of services and services provided align with the urban and rural divide seen across New Zealand (Walter, 2007).

Although there are similarities between these daily routines there are also differences across services. Some services highlight the importance of supervising homework while other services do not mention homework as part of their routine. P18 describes their routine as "Prepare room for children, ensure suitable activities for the day are prepped and ready, collect children from school, interact with children and provide support when needed", P35 outlines their routine as "Can consist of free play or planned activities. Cleaning daily, Paperwork, Outdoors, Lunch time, reading time. Arts, and crafts time" but in contrast 28 respondents highlighted supervising homework as part of their daily routine. Theorists such as Dewy (1910) would support the importance of the social & emotional aspect of this role with the inquiry play process and Vygotsky (1978) identifying the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as fundamental while the practitioners are supporting children during homework.

During the interviews the researcher asked the participants what impact their day had on the care of the children. Participant 1 stated that her service prioritises the homework before play. She signified that children were not allowed to play until they finished their homework as that "is what the parents want". She did not agree with this but as it was the direction given by management, she had to carry out their instructions. In contrast participant 3 reported that children in her service had the "option to do homework or to play". She said many chose to do the homework so it was done but also could do it at any time so the process "was less structured". She agreed that this approach seemed to work, and the parents were "aware when they signed up" that homework was an option for the children.

Many of the participants also identified cleaning as part of their workload with duties ranging from end of day cleaning to ad hoc cleaning duties throughout their

day. Participants that indicated cleaning at the end of the day mentioned things like hoovering, mopping floors, cleaning bathrooms and setting up the room for the next day while others mentioned cleaning throughout their daily duties like cleaning after meals, practicing good hygiene like handwashing before and after meals and cleaning after activities such as art & crafts. From these examples we can see the different impacts on staff in relation to workload and time management.

4.5.5 Funding & Resources

The last challenge identified by participants throughout the study was that of support through funding and resources. Insufficient funding for resources and professional development is a common issue. Some participants highlighted the need for funding increases to enhance the services, pay bills and staff. These included P13 who stated, "Lack of funding for resources, behaviour difficulties, service in a fee freeze so cannot increase fees to meet demand of expenses (heating, bills, food, wages etc)".

During interview 2 the participant agreed that "Staff leaving frequently to go abroad as wages are better elsewhere. The core funding and fee freeze have made it so hard to up wages for our wonderful staff". These challenges for staffing are based on the funding of the SAC services but there are also resource difficulties given in these responses such as interview 1 who identifies the need for additional support in SAC for children with an additional need "Lack of continuity of support for children with additional needs". An example of this is a child with a special needs assistant (SNA) at school that does not continue into the SAC service. Interview 3 also identifies that "SAC staff are not given enough time and pay to engage in planning and CPD etc".

The Government is working to support these funding challenges through additional support under Core Funding and Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY, 2024).

4.5.6 Challenges for quality

The challenges identified by participants in relation to quality care in SAC services is varied. Some continue to argue the experience of staff v's the qualifications of staff as a challenge as many staff members can be placed based on their qualification and not their skill set.   P16 identifies that "SAC is mostly common sense, care, and warmth. I've had level 5 staff who far outperformed level 9 staff, had much more cop on and approachability. I genuinely feel it's about the person not the qualification".

Other practitioners agreed that a challenge for quality care may be the introduction of a base qualification as it may push experienced staff out of the sector and exasperate the staffing crisis which directly impacts quality. P18 highlights "If qualifications were a requirement SAC services will close. We see this in preschools. I do think the room leader should be qualified but supporting staff should not". During discourse with interviewees, they raised valid points such as the need for a "introductory period" to allow unqualified staff to train over time. They also added that services will "loose good staff as many feel too old to go back and study". There can be arguments for both sides however the SAC services are now in the position that the ELC services were in a decade ago when formal qualification structures were introduced. This can cause upset in the transitional phase but as most participants agreed qualification will improve the quality in SAC services.

Another challenge to quality provision in services is time management.

Within SAC services there are many responsibilities for staff including dropping and

collecting children from school, preparing meals, supervising homework, cleaning

and arranging play activities as discussed earlier in the chapter. These responsibilities

impact quality as practitioners and services prioritise different services. Participants

identified limited time to plan activities and engage with children due to other duties

such as administration as stated by P19 "Time, lack of staff, challenging behaviour",

P25 "Lack of time, Hrs spent on Admin. NCS" and P35 "It's hard to provide quality

when we have so many other responsibilities and are time restricted". The last area

identified by participants as a challenge to quality in SAC is the lack of support and

recognition of staff. Participants highlight there is inconsistent or unclear information

given in relation to regulation and policy which leads to challenges for quality as

identified by P12 "Lack of lined up thinking from policy makers" and P10 "No

regulations".

Responses during interviews also show there is a lack of professional practice

due to there not being a recognised SAC professional qualification and the lack of a

professional pathway for SAC practitioners. Participants showed there are continuous

professional development (CPD) courses available, but these are normally at the time

and cost to the individual. Interview participant 1 suggested there are "No SAC

specific courses available" and participant 3 stated "0-6 level 5 is not sufficient for

this age group yet is classified as a qualification in an SAC service". Many

respondents did highlight that CPD was available but was not SAC specific which is

needed.

4.6 Conclusion

The analysis of School Age Childcare (SAC) services in Ireland reveals a diverse range of services defined by regional variations, challenges in professionalisation, and diverse perspectives on the integration with Early Learning and Care (ELC). The study highlights the significant regional difference in SAC service provision, with urban areas like Leinster having a higher concentration of services and longer working hours compared to rural regions.

Qualification and professional development emerged as pivotal factors in ensuring high-quality SAC services. Despite no mandatory qualifications for SAC practitioners in Ireland, a sizeable portion of these practitioners hold qualifications, which are mainly in Early Learning and Care (ELC) or related fields.

The motivation of practitioners to pursue further qualifications indicates a commitment to professional growth and aligns with the potential benefits of introducing qualifications within the SAC sector. These results also identify key areas for professional development, such as behaviour management, child safeguarding, and supporting children with additional needs, which highlights the necessity for specialised training in these areas.

The challenges related to unqualified staff, low wages, and high turnover rates show significant sustainability issues for services and barriers to quality of SAC services. The introduction of the Employment Regulation Order (ERO) in 2024 aims to impact low wages, but its long-term impact on staff retention and service quality remains to be seen. The different roles and responsibilities of SAC practitioners, along with inconsistent service structures, has a significant impact on how to standardise

these services. The concluding chapter of this study will offer recommendations to support the conclusive outcomes of this study.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter links back to the overarching research question, aims, and objectives of the study "How can I evaluate School Age Childcare to improve the current practice through gaining insights into the features of School Age Childcare practice in Ireland."   The aims and objectives were:

1) To describe the SAC practitioners who provide SAC services in terms of age group and qualifications.

2) To describe the SAC practitioners who provide SAC and the current nature of practice in terms of daily routine.

3) To identify practitioner's perspectives on quality, child development & play in SAC practice.

4) To identify the practitioner's challenges in SAC practice.

5) To examine practitioners' perspectives on qualification & CPD.

6) To develop recommendations for policy and regulatory bodies to enhance the quality of SAC practice.

The primary aim was to explore SAC practices, perspectives, and experiences to support policy development in Ireland, addressing a notable gap in research within this specific area. Additionally, this study aimed to develop recommendations to improve SAC practices which are illustrated in this chapter. Through this comprehensive investigation, the study provides valuable insights and recommendations, ensuring that future policies and regulations are informed by the experiences and needs of SAC practitioners. This chapter will also highlight any limitations to this study and areas for further research.

5.2 Conclusions of the study

The conclusions of this study on School Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland show several key insights. The results and findings show areas of concern and potential pathways for improvement and professionalism. These results illustrate a comprehensive understanding of the current state and future needs of SAC services from the perspectives of the SAC practitioners.

This study found that a significant proportion of participants within the study hold a level 7 or higher qualification. This shows a strong foundation of formal qualifications within these services despite the lack of a mandatory qualification. The educational backgrounds of these participants were diverse including ELC, social studies, family & youth studies, and the arts. This shows a high skill set covering a wide range of interests which enriches SAC services.

The distribution and extent of the care provided within SAC services varies across regions with Leinster, including Dublin having a higher number of services and children accommodated within these services. This is likely due to the urbanisation within Leinster and the higher demand for SAC services. In contrast, the rural regions like Connaught have fewer services within the study and those who participated showed lower capacity and hours of accommodation for children.

This study highlights the clear motivation and willingness among practitioners to pursue further qualifications or CPD. This shows a commitment to professional growth This study does identify a gap in specialised SAC training specifically in areas such as child development for older children, behaviour management, child safeguarding, and support for children with additional needs. Quality care within SAC

services is closely linked to the skill set, knowledge, and experience of the practitioners.

Throughout the study, low wages were highlighted as a barrier to attracting and retaining staff. This issue places additional pressure on staff to ensure quality care for the children. The recent implementation of the ERO is a positive step towards improved pay and recognition. These practitioners often juggle multiple roles within their workday. These wide ranges of duties vary across services and lead to inconsistency in the service delivered to the children. This can cause a challenge in defining and standardising these services.

This study reveals there is a divide in the opinions on the integration of SAC with the ELC sector. Those in favor argue that this integration could streamline policies, regulations, and support structures for children while those opposed argue the distinct needs of older children in SAC services are unique and need to be looked at separately from those in ELC.

The challenges reported within this study highlight time management and undefined roles as significant challenges for SAC services. These challenges often impact the quality of care provided to the children as practitioners struggle to fulfill many roles in short periods. This study identifies a need for a better support system with clearer guidelines and a consistent framework to relieve the pressure on practitioners to give them time to focus on the holistic child by interacting and supporting development.

5.3 Limitations of the study

The researcher identified several limitations with sampling and validity within the study process that may impact the interpretation of the results. As email addresses for services registered to receive NCS funding were used this email would have gone to the primary authorised user (PAU) of the service to then send to the staff team. This process may account for the high number of managers who participated in the study which may have an impact on the responses about workload and additional responsibilities. This may also account for the elevated level of qualification shown throughout the study. These perspectives may not fully represent the diversity within the SAC services.

The findings of this study reflect a specific point in time and may not show ongoing changes, improvements, and challenges. The researcher strived to include policy changes throughout the study such as the implementation of the ERO on 24th of June 2024 however changes within the services would not have been reported. An additional limitation of the study may be the participants answering questions based on what they believe the researcher expects. The researcher explained at both the questionnaire and interview stages that participants could speak freely and give true opinions and perspectives. The researcher also used tools to ensure their own bias, assumptions, and perspective did not impact the objectivity of the study.

The researcher used triangulation to ensure the validity of the study and used the participant's experiences and opinions in the description of the results showing the authenticity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher also encouraged participants to feel at ease and speak freely during interviews which added rigor (Smith et al., 2009).

5.4 Recommendation for further research

The research has provided interesting and useful knowledge on SAC services in Ireland which adds to the validity of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although this study has been a starting point for the exploration and investigation of these participant's experiences, attitudes, and perspectives there is a huge scope for further research within this area. The knowledge gained in this study gives insight into the operations of SAC services and the perspectives of 53 participants working directly in these services. It gives a view of the needs of these practitioners and identifies the support needed for their development.

From the review of the literature and the findings, there is a significant need for further research and investigation into SAC to inform policy development. As this is a new area for research some possibilities for further research could include:

1. An investigation into parental perspectives on SAC services to include their experiences, satisfaction with the current system, barrier to accessing SAC, and their preference for SAC services.

2. A comparative study on services delivered within different regions in Ireland or with other countries. This study could highlight in detail the difference in services delivered, staff qualifications, and regulations.

3. A study exploring how SAC services cater to children with additional needs with AIM currently unavailable for this age group and service type. This study could impact policy development such as the extension of AIM into SAC services.

4. A study to look at the workforce well-being in SAC such as workload, job satisfaction, burnout rate, and retention strategies. This study could support staff and enhance quality in SAC.

5. A study to explore children's experiences in SAC in Ireland including younger children in junior infants right up to children in secondary school still attending these services. This would inform services on activity planning, interactions, behaviour management, and relationships.

By addressing these areas for future research, we can build a bigger picture of SAC in Ireland which can impact policy, regulation, and the improvement of quality provision within these services which will benefit the children and families attending these services.

5.5 Recommendations:

Based on this study of SAC in Ireland several key recommendations have emerged. By reviewing the practitioners' perspectives from the evidence provided in this study the following recommendations are highlighted:

1. The introduction of a baseline mandatory qualification for all SAC practitioners at a phased implementation to allow current unqualified practitioners to upskill. Through the qualification process elevate the professional status of SAC practitioners. The implementation of SAC qualifications could enhance and standardise the quality of care.

2. This qualification should include a module specific to child development of 6 – 12 years and puberty as an understanding of child development is needed as

a 'key to providing quality care and education for all children' (Urban et al., 2019).

3. Develop a structured CPD framework to include SAC-specific courses on child safeguarding, behaviour management, and supporting children with additional needs. Ensure these are affordable and accessible to SAC practitioners.

4. Define clear roles and responsibilities. Streamlining these roles and responsibilities could increase staff satisfaction and enhance quality care.

5. Regularly review the ERO to ensure qualified staff receive a competitive salary based on their qualifications and responsibilities.

6. Consider a unified framework to include ELC & SAC services while recognising the unique needs of each group. This would include shared quality standards and coordinated policies and procedures.

7. Expand access to the AIM model for children attending SAC services ensuring children access consistent support.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study on School Age Childcare (SAC) in Ireland offers valuable insights into the current state and future needs of SAC services from the perspectives of practitioners. The high level of formal qualifications among participants indicates a strong foundation even though there are no mandatory qualification requirements.

Regional differences in SAC service provision highlight the impact of urbanization, with Leinster having a higher number of services and greater capacity compared to rural regions like Connaught. This study also highlights the motivation and commitment of practitioners to professional growth. This study shows a gap in SAC-specific training in areas such as child development, supporting additional needs, and child safeguarding.

Significant barriers to attracting and retaining staff were identified. The recent implementation of the Employment Regulation Order (ERO) is a positive step towards improved pay and recognition. The varied roles and responsibilities of SAC practitioners can lead to inconsistency in service delivery, which highlights a need for clearer guidelines and a consistent framework to support quality care.

The integration of SAC with the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector received divided responses, reflecting the different needs of older children in SAC services. This study highlights the importance of specific approaches to SAC that understand the different needs and requirements.

Challenges such as undefined roles within services were signposted as having an impact on the quality of SAC services. By addressing these challenges through better support systems and clear role definitions we will provide practitioners the time and skills to focus more on the holistic development of children.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of SAC services in Ireland. It identifies some key areas for improvement and professional development. By addressing the highlighted challenges and implementing the recommendations, SAC services can enhance the quality of care provided to children and better support practitioners.

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Appendices

Appendix i: Participant Recruitment email for services

Dear SAC provider

My name is Katherina Doyle, as part of my research project for my Master of Arts in Educational Practice I am conducting an online questionnaire for school age childcare educators to gain their perspectives and experiences of the school age childcare sector in Ireland.

I would be grateful if you could share this email with your staff team and encourage them to participate.
The questionnaire is anonymous and will take approx.10 mins to complete.

The results of the questionnaire will be analysed and used as part of my master's dissertation.

Please find attached the information sheet and the link for the questionnaire is https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=wUnbbnK_6k6LP6f9CiW2jOKCBtkfpxFGgarqu1ATfdRUQldVWFhVNkZVWVFWN0VYOFZSRkhHMk9PSS4u

The questionnaire will close for submissions at 12noon on Friday 29th of March.

If you have any questions, please email me at x18107745@student.ncirl.ie.

Your support and that of your team is greatly appreciated and your responses will contribute to valuable research in the field of school age childcare in Ireland.

Kind Regards
Katherina Doyle

Appendix ii: Questionnaire

An exploration of School Age Childcare in Ireland

Introduction:
Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey.

This study aims to gain an understanding of SAC educators and their experiences and perspectives on school age childcare in Ireland.

You have been invited to participate in this study as you work in school age childcare.

My name is Katherina Doyle; I am currently pursuing a Masters of Arts in Educational Practice in National College of Ireland and this survey is part of my dissertation.

There are no known risks associated with your participation. All current legislation will be adhered to in keeping with Data Protection GDPR guidelines. Survey participants will remain anonymous, I will not be asking for any personal details or identifying information within this survey.

This survey/interview schedule has been developed in consultation with my supervisor and approved by the research ethics subcommittee.

If you have any questions, please contact me at x18107745@student.ncirl.ie. You can withdraw from completing this survey at any point before submission.

There are 25 questions, some questions will require you to select an option and others will require more details.

It will take about 15 minutes of your time to complete. You can withdraw from answering the questionnaire at any time before you submit.

The questionnaire is open until 29th March 2024.

Thank you in advance for your time and input in this survey.

1.What is your current role? Required to answer. Single choice.
Manager

Room Leader

Practitioner

2.What is your age group? Single choice.

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

3.What is your qualification level? Required to answer. Single choice.

no qualification

level 5

level 6

level 7

level 8

level 9+

4.Is this qualification specific to Early Childhood or School Age Childcare? Single choice.

Yes

No

5.If your answer to question 4 is No - please state your current qualifications.

Enter your answer

6.Provence of employment? Required to answer. Single choice.

Leinster

Munster

Connaught

Ulster

7.How many hours do you work directly with children each
week? Required to answer. Single choice.

under 10

10- 20

20+ hours

8.Size of SAC service? Required to answer. Single choice.

less than 10 children

10 - 25 children

25 - 50 children

50+ children

9.Please select if you agree with the following statement:
All SAC educators should have a formal qualification. Single choice.

Strongly agree

agree

neutral

disagree

Strongly disagree

10.If you selected strongly agree or agree. In your view what should be
included in the course content? Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

11.In your view at what level should SAC educator be qualified? Single
choice.

level 5

level 6

level 7+

12.How likely are you to engage in a higher qualification in your field? Required to answer. Single choice.

Very likely

Somewhat likely

Neither likely nor unlikely

Somewhat unlikely

Very unlikely

13.What are your current roles and responsibilities? Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter you're answer

14.Describe your current work day. Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

15.Do you feel SAC and ECCE should fall under the same sector of ELC? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

16.Please comment further on this view. Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

17.In your opinion do SAC practitioners educate children while in their care? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

18.Does your service concentrate on care or education of SAC children? Required to answer. Single choice.

Care

Education

both

19.Please comment on your answer to question 18. Required to answer.

Enter your answer

20.Do you feel qualifications will improve quality in SAC services? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

21.Please comment.
How will this qualification impact quality? Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

22.What does quality mean in your practice? Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

23.What are the challenges for quality in SAC services? Required to answer. Multi Line Text.

Enter your answer

24.In the last year have you had the opportunity to engage in training? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

25.If yes please indicate which courses you have attended? Multiple choice.

Fire Safety

Food Safety

Child Protection

SAC guidelines training

First Aid

Manual Handling

QQI certified training (level 5/6/7+)

other

26.If other please give details

Enter your answer

27.If you engaged in training, why did you choose to? Multiple choice.

To gain knowledge for current role

To gain knowledge for a new role

For a pay rise

I was requested to attend

To gain skills

To collaborate with other educators

other

28.If other please give details. Single line text.

Enter your answer

29.Would you like to be considered for a follow up semi structured interview? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

Appendix iii: Recruitment email for interview

Dear _____

Thank you for participating in my online questionnaire on the experiences and perspectives of school age childcare educators in Ireland. Your valuable contribution and insights have provided me with significant data to further my research.

As part of my research study, I am now scheduling follow up semi structured interviews to delve deeper into themes and ideas that emerged from the questionnaire responses. I believe your perspective and experience will greatly enrich the research through further discussion at an interview.

Before I proceed, I kindly request your consent to an online interview to be held on the 9th, 10th, 13th or 14th of May.
I am flexible with my availability that week and can conduct interviews throughout the day and evening. Attached to this email you will find a consent form.

I kindly ask you to complete the consent form and return it to me by Wednesday 8th of May along with times you are available for interview. you are available for interview.

I understand your time is valuable and I appreciate your willingness to engage both the questionnaire and in a further interview.

If you have any questions or need further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Many thanks
Katherina Doyle

X18107745@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix iv: Consent Form

Consent Form:

Research Study Title

The working title of the study that you are invited to participate in is: "A study to investigate school age childcare (SAC) educators' attitudes & experiences in school age childcare in Ireland".

It is being undertaken at the Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning at National College of Ireland by Katherina Doyle.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perspectives of SAC educators within the SAC sector in Ireland. The aim is for the findings of this study to inform further development and support for the sector.

Please complete the following section by ticking the boxes for each question.

Section 1: General Understanding	Please tick
I agree to take part in this interview	
I confirm that I have read and understand the information leaflet	
I understand all data collected from me will remain anonymous	
I understand taking part in this research is voluntary	
I understand I will not be paid to participate in this study	
I understand I can contact the researcher for clarification if I need too	
I agree to the data collected from me through the interview, being used by the researcher.	
I agree to the data collected from me, being shared with NCI.	
I agree that the interview will be recorded	
I agree to the use of anonymised quotations from the interview by the researcher	

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Once you consent to this interview you can no longer withdraw from the study as interview responses will be collected anonymously. All Interview recordings will be destroyed after transcripts are written. These anonymised transcripts will be stored in a secure cloud storage.

Protecting confidentiality of data

The data collected during this study is confidential and will be analysed only by the researcher. The anonymity of participants will be protected to the best of the researcher's ability. The researcher can only can only ensure confidentiality within the limits of the law.

<u>Please read and sign the section below.</u>

I have read and understood the information provided in this form.

I had the opportunity to ask questions about this study.

Any questions I had have been answered by the researcher and I have a copy of this consent form.

I consent to take part in this research project.

_____   _____   _____

Participant Name   Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____

Researcher Name   Researcher Signature   Date

Appendix v: Information sheet

Information Sheet

Research Study Title:

"A study to investigate school age childcare (SAC) educators' attitudes & experiences in school age childcare in Ireland".

Purpose of the research:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perspectives of SAC educators within the SAC sector in Ireland. The aim is for the findings of this study to inform further development and support for the sector.

Research Mentor:

Dr. Meera Oke will be my mentor on this research project. Her email address is: meera.oke@ncirl.ie.

Details of the required involvement in the Research Study

All participants must be working within an SAC service in Ireland. Participants will remain anonymous at all stages of the research with no identifying questions contained in the survey.

What does my participation entail:

If you decide to take part in the study, you need to:

• click on the link provided which will take you to a Microsoft forms document. By completing the survey, you are agreeing to participate in the study.

• There will be a series of questions for you to complete.

• The first section of the survey will be about your setting and your background.

• The second section of the survey will ask you questions about your qualification and training experiences.

• The third section will cover ask questions in relation to quality

• The fourth section will ask questions in relation to professional development.

Your survey answers will be recorded by Google Forms, where data is stored in a password protected electronic format. All responses are confidential. Google Forms does not collect identifiable information such as your name, email and/or IP address. This is to ensure you are protected from risk. Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and should take no more than 15 minutes to complete.

In addition to the survey, you can select to be considered for a semi structured interview. The researcher will use purposeful selection to identify the participants to interview taking into consideration their knowledge, qualifications, and experience.

Benefits of involvement in the Research Study

The purpose of the study is to get a general understanding about the SAC sector educators in Ireland. As a growing sector there is limited research on the sector and this study will give insight into this developing sector and the educators are the forefront.

What happens to the results of the study:

The full study will be submitted to National College of Ireland in summer 2024 for grading as part of my master's dissertation and will then be publicly available from NORMA (NCI's research repository).

Arrangements to be made in order to protect confidentiality of data T

At the bottom of the survey participants will be asked to select if they would like to participate in a follow up semi structured interview to gain further insight. The researcher will then select participants using purposeful selection based on information-rich surveys completed. Interviews will be on teams and will be approx. 45mins / 60mins in length. Participants who select to participate in the follow up interviews will no longer be anonymous to the researcher but will not be identified in the research writing. Any quotes from interviews will be identified as participant 1, 2 or 3.

The data collected during this study is confidential and will be analysed only by the researcher. The anonymity of participants will be protected by the researcher to the best of their ability. Interview recordings will be transferred to a secure cloud storage. Each interview will be identified by a number. Recordings will be destroyed after transcripts are created. Anonymised transcripts will be stored in a secure cloud storage of National College of Ireland. All collected and stored data is compliant with GDPR regulations.

Advice that data is to be destroyed after a minimum period.

According to NCI policy, the collected data will be securely destroyed after having them stored for five years.

Participation in the Research Study is voluntary.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary, and you have the right and opportunity to withdraw consent to participate in the study at any point. You can withdraw your consent by emailing x18107745@student.ncirl.ie.

Any further questions?

Appendix V: Examples of conversations from interviews

I feel it should be different.
I work with somebody who are background is working with teenagers, disadvantaged teenagers and she has no childcare qualification whatsoever.

Katherina O Shea/Doyle 7:07
Umm.

So she works very different to me.

Katherina O Shea/Doyle 7:18
OK.

Or I think look and I take a lot from her.
She gives them a lot more freedom, takes them nearly.
You know the way some kids, they come up to act more mature because she's treating them more mature and and sometimes she just be looking at me and she does like, whereas, you know, with the preschoolers we'd be like, oh, no.

Katherina O Shea/Doyle 7:33

Yeah.
I just find the toys that I always say that sometimes you walk into a preschool room and you after school don't have a stamp on it.
Like we only talk back to boards.

Katherina O Shea/Doyle 9:35
Yeah.

You wouldn't walk in and know that it's also their real: room
So I think a lot of the time it's merely a means to an end like some businesses have to do the after school.
So it's like put them in that room.
There's no choice.
Swapped over.
There's nothing for age or stage.
You know what I mean?
Going from a 3 year old to possibly a 10 year old, it's like, well, what's available to them.
So I think does a big gap where the providers in my experience and I've been asked like the current one is always asking me are we missing something?
And I'm like, like you say that I just say, well, apart from, you know what I mean, that the rule nearly.
I'm not saying the whole room flick with their needs to be changed, their needs to be

Caravan & Byrne.

I actually only did we're kind of an unborn, so they had neurodiverse children within a school age childcare set.
I only did that module there a couple of weeks ago because we had the little fella diagnosed with dyspraxia and as I said, I wouldn't have block and it was kind of like I'll just do it to see if there is any difference because obviously I've done that a preschool level.
And so yeah, our training is OK, paid for.

Katherina O Shea/Doyle 4:30
Yeah.

So we can do, we could do one and months within reason.
I think it has to be under £100.
We can do one training session and one to whatever we want to pick ourselves.
So why constantly do I practically done everyone?
Now we're kind of in a boring at this stage, like every month I'm going instead of saying anything, I don't know where you know when you find the little gaps in your knowledge.
While there's plenty you don't know, but when you find the gap in your knowledge relating to the children in your room and kind of like, OK, like I did, one about not in English speaking children only there two weeks ago as well.

Appendix vii: Examples of data collected from questionnaire

SAC practitioners should have a formal qualification	
strongly agree	20
agree	18
neutrsl	8
dosagree	4
strongly disagree	3

Participant willing to engage in higher qualificatio	
very likely	19
somewhat likely	9
neither likely or unlikely	4
somehwhat unlikely	5
very unlikely	16

Are children educated while in SAC?	
yes	47
no	6

Why participants attended CPD

Reason	Count
to gain knowledge for current role	27
to gain knowledge for a new role	3
for a pay rise	5
I was requested to attend	9
to gain skills	19
to collaborate with other educators	5
other	8

	Provence of employment	Size of SAC service?	Provence of employment	Size of SAC service?	Provence of employment	Size of SAC service?	Provence of employment	Size of SAC service?
2	Connaght	10 - 25 children	Leinster	50+ children	Munster	10 - 25 children	Ulster	50+ children
3	Connaght	10 - 25 children	Leinster	50+ children	Munster	50+ children	Ulster	50+ children
4	Connaght	25 - 50 children	Leinster	25 - 50 children	Munster	25 - 50 children		
5	Connaght	25 - 50 children	Leinster	50+ children	Munster	10 - 25 children		
6	Connaght	50+ children	Leinster	25 - 50 children	Munster	25 - 50 children		
7	Connaght	50+ children	Leinster	10 - 25 children	Munster	25 - 50 children		
8	Connaght	less than 10 children	Leinster	10 - 25 children	Munster	25 - 50 children		
9			Leinster	25 - 50 children	Munster	less than 10 children		
10			Leinster	less than 10 children	Munster	10 - 25 children		
11			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
12			Leinster	50+ children				
13			Leinster	50+ children				
14			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
15			Leinster	50+ children				
16			Leinster	50+ children				
17			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
18			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
19			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
20			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
21			Leinster	50+ children				
22			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
23			Leinster	50+ children				
24			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
25			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
26			Leinster	less than 10 children				
27			Leinster	50+ children				
28			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
29			Leinster	50+ children				
30			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
31			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
32			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
33			Leinster	25 - 50 children				
34			Leinster	50+ children				
35			Leinster	10 - 25 children				
36			Leinster	50+ children				

Summary table (columns I–M):

	Connaght	Leinster	Munster	Ulster
less than 10 children	1	2	1	0
10 - 25 children	2	10	3	0
25 - 50 children	2	10	4	0
50+ children	2	13	1	2

Sheet1 Sheet2 **County Comparison** Age comparison Sheet3 +