
‘Exploring the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles: A qualitative research study using semi structured interviews and thematic analysis’.

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This dissertation is submitted for the fulfillment of a Masters in Human Resource Management

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Abstract

It can be alleged that job titles are unimportant in comparison to the responsibilities one holds, however these beliefs are based on postulation rather than scientific findings as they can symbolize elements of identity (Baron & Bielby, 1986). Professional identity within the Early Education sector has been an unresolved topic given its presence in the national press, policy developments and government strategies. Though, there still appears to be a disconnect surrounding the appropriate use of job titles, particularly in the recruitment and retainment of employees.

Whilst literature surrounding Job Titles in the context of recruitment and retention remains under explored in the Early Education context in Ireland, few studies indirectly addressed sub-topics i.e., professional identity and identity construction whereby evidence suggests salary and work conditions (Moloney, 2010) as a retention factor. Nevertheless, research has relied on quantitative data, therefore, has not encapsulated the feelings toward job titles, consequently there is an evident gap for qualitative research within the Early Education sector (Shenoy, 2021).

Following qualitative methods through ten semi-structured interviews, the researcher captured the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the sector toward job titles. Collectively, this research suggests that employee's professional identity is '*undecided*' and '*undervalued*' by society and government. Professionals cited that job titles were important for career progression as they reflect social status. Significantly, participants felt that clearly defined job titles support life-course priorities i.e., mortgage. However, most notable was that career progression influenced retention, though, this was constrained by the lack of flexible working conditions.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to policy change to better understand the value of job titles, a clearly defined career path and flexible working conditions aiding recruitment and retention.

Keywords: *Professional Identity, Collective Identity, Job Title, Title Inflation, Social Status, Recruitment, Retention.*

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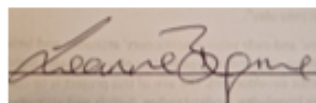
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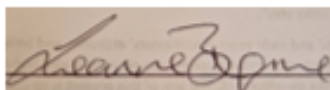
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For; Nanny Aida

'just a rose in a garden of weeds'

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List of Abbreviations

EEd – Early Education

JTI – Job title inflation

PI – Professional identity

RTA – Reflexive thematic analysis

SIT – Social identity theory

ELC – Early learning and care

SAC – School aged childcare

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter Introduction:

The Early Education sector has been under publicized pressure regarding the recruitment and retainment of its workforce, resulting in immense strain. Consequently, the sustainability of organisations has been heavily impacted, thus, reflecting many closures (Wayman, 2023) necessitating the beginning of changes to policy and the unresolved continued need for investment at government level. Nonetheless, these challenges are still being encountered daily. This chapter provides insight into the research background and imparts vision and justification as to why the present study has been explored. Qualitative research was undertaken to capture the valuable perceptions and feelings of ten professionals in the Early Education (EEd) sector in Ireland by engaging in semi-structured interviews to elicit rich information pertaining to the research question.

1.1 Background of Study:

According to Harper (2015), job titles assume responsibility and status of the corresponding position within an organisation. For example, an IT consultant infers the responsibility and function relating to the person who is consulted regarding technology. For employees, titles can be a representation of their identity (Baron and Bielby, 1986) and throughout life, are associated with self-identity, professional/role identity and social status. Accordingly, there are many benefits to having clearly defined collective and role identities in a workplace such as aiding the chain of command, accountability and determining a hierarchy for progression as jobs titles act as a recognized shorthand for depicting one's skills, abilities and other characteristics (Grant, Berg and Cable, 2014).

According to Walters (2023), there has been a 38% increase in professional sounding titles requiring less experience awarded to those early in their career, thus, highlighting the perplexity surrounding job title inflation. Job title inflation has emerged as a technique to attract and retain talent, although without the experience, qualification, and salaries to reflect that. An example of this may be the title of *Director of Operations*, however there may only be one employee, thus highlighting in this instance - job title inflation. Yet, little empirical qualitative research has examined the influence of titles and perceived social status on recruitment, on entry, and later in a career.

In recent years, the EEd sector has struggled to come to an agreed term to represent professional identity (PI) i.e., *Title* of its workforce with discussions in studies as early as 2010 (Moloney, 2010). Though, this is still unresolved as cited in the most recent workforce development plan (Government of Ireland, 2021) whereby an explanation was provided for the titles used ‘for the purpose of the document’, showcasing nomenclature and the need to abbreviate terminology aiding understanding. Titles are typically associated with the chain of command and hierarchy eliciting a perceived social status. Thus, becoming an increased challenge for the recruitment and retention of experienced employees within the EEd sector, particularly within small-medium businesses as the hierarchy is narrower, thus, internal progression opportunities are challenging in effect increasing leavers intention.

1.3 Present Study Rationale:

According to Early Childhood Ireland (2023), 56% of EEd services reported recruitment challenges recently, consequent to limited career opportunity and lack of status. It appears when seeking employment, individuals are motivated by progression opportunities projected by seeking a specific Job Title/Status, though, many have insufficient skills or experience associated with the role advertised. Given the recruitment challenges, inflated job titles are being implemented to attract and recruit to fill the gap in workforce talent. Hence, the motivation for this research study.

Much research completed to date has focused on identity construction, although still turbulent, it has been explored. Conversely, research on PI in the form of titles and the impact this has on both recruitment and retention has been underexplored. Whilst previous studies have focused on retention as a construct, they have done so using a quantitative method of exploration omitting the consequences captured by a qualitative constructivist approach. By using a qualitative approach, allows the exploration of factors that are difficult to measure when using quantitative methods such as professionals’ subjective feelings toward PI.

The research prospect was considered to capture the perspectives and opinions of those who are or have been in a leadership role in the EEd sector on whether job titles are influencing the recruitment and retention of professionals through motivation and to explore the rationale for the same. It is anticipated that these findings and succeeding discussion will further educate CEO’s, Managers and recruiters’ understanding of title significance to employees if any, in efforts to alleviate recruitment pressures within the sector. This study has potential to provide insight into the vitality of clearly defined PI, distinct career paths and progression routes for

employees, supporting retention and contributing to further research to change government policy.

1.4 Organisation of Study

The remainder of the dissertation will first be depicted in chapter two by a judicious synthesis review of relevant and appropriate literature connecting to the research topic. Thereafter, chapter three will articulate the rationale for the chosen research question and objectives and will specify the gap in research noting the credibility of this study. Chapter four will consider the chosen methodological underpinning and will illustrate the philosophical positioning of the research. Chapter five will rigorously showcase the study's findings and by way of data analysis and will stress the study limitations and implications. To bring the study to a close, an extensive insightful discussion of the researchers' interpretation of findings whilst drawing on key literature and study limitations will be presented in chapter six. Lastly, chapter seven will represent the study conclusion, emphasizing the salient topics emerging from the research whilst considering the priorities of a cost benefit and recommendations regarding further studies, practice and policy interventions in addition to a personal learning statement reflecting the study journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

The Early Education sector in Ireland has been central to media attention due to concerns regarding workforce recruitment and retention, with many organisations struggling to remain viable (Wayman, 2023). The recruitment of leadership level employees is most challenging, as the chance to develop and progress appears critical when searching for a role. Subsequently, job title and social status may influence professionals applying for roles particularly within small organisations where progression opportunities are limited given the narrower hierarchical structure. Consequently, to progress, professionals may be attracted to inflated titles. Therefore, this study aims to better understand the feelings and perceptions of EEd professionals toward job titles through two concepts, namely professional and social identity.

Whilst existing research has focused on professional identity in terms of professionalisation of the sector (Simmie and Murphy, 2023), occupational role profiles (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017) and turnover intentions (Thorpe *et al.*, 2020), few studies have considered the feelings and perceptions toward job titles as factors contributing to the recruitment and retention of the EEd workforce. The findings depicted in the key studies evidenced a lack of professional identity and social status and emphasised the value of qualifications in professionalising the sector. Though, no apparent studies have explored feelings toward job titles in terms of recruitment and retention. By addressing this gap in literature, this research has the potential to contribute toward a change in policy towards universal job titles as a recruitment and retention strategy. To support the depiction of key literature, a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) technique (Byrne, 2021) was employed to synthesize the literature and permit the generation of key themes pertaining to the study.

2.2 Professional Identity

Professional Identity (PI) is conflictingly defined in literature (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2012), though, within this study, the definition referred to is that of Ibarra (1999) who ascertains PI is concerned with the collective beliefs, values and experiences in which one defines themselves in a professional function and is an indispensable component of how professionals view the work that they do (Reay, Goodrick, Boch Waldorff and Casebeer, 2017). Similarly, Mao, Lu, Lin and He. (2021) presents PI as a self-perception of values, attitudes and individual work motives. PI can be shaped by enhancing experiences pertaining to the expected professional role through interacting with like-minded professionals (Ibarra, 2004) i.e., gaining

a sense of belonging. Researchers report, a fully developed PI positively influences retention (Mancin, Carcati, Panari and Tonarelli, 2015) and emphasises the importance of focusing on the growth of identity and the influence it has on commitment and success (Seyranian, Madva, Duong, Abramzon, Tibbetts and Harackiewicz, 2018).

Conversely, Moloney (2010) suggests, negative PI is associated with feeling undervalued, a diminished self-worth and underestimated by society, hence the findings of this study called for reform and investment at government level regarding the misunderstanding of PI. Hong (2010) supported this, suggesting further studies are conducted focusing on the contributing factors of the recruitment and retention challenges (Hong, 2010). A rudimentary postulation is that PI can evolve based on experiential learning and constructive feedback, allowing for insight into values, talents, and preferences (Schein, 1978). Thus, PI formation is multi-faceted, however, it is likely to be mutable in the primary stages of a career (Ibarra, 1999). As people gain experiential learning through networking with likeminded professionals (Ibarra, 2004), they adopt personas and demeanours correlating with the roles they aspire to, creating possible selves (Ibarra, 1999).

These professional relationships aid the development of individual craft knowledge, triggering changes in PI and reflecting how individuals define themselves professionally (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006). Researchers focusing on education depict PI through Mead's lens, whereby supposing others' perspectives, supporting the understanding of oneself (Nicholas, Schutz, Rodgers and Bilica, 2017; Delaney, 2015).

2.2.1 Professional Identity in Early Education

In the Early Education context, i.e., the education system before formal schooling, PI is a key focus for understanding the relationship between profession and identities significantly depicting who we are and what we do (Kenny, Whittle and Willmott, 2011), though 'who we are' has been historically (Helterbran and Fennimore, 2004) and presently - unclear. Beijgaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) reflected on twenty-two studies focusing on teacher identity, with reviews showcasing an indisputable lack of research on agreeable definitions of PI. Recent discussion within the sector has comprised of talks regarding professionalism, development of working conditions and identity formation (Government of Ireland, 2021). Whilst conceptualizing teacher PI has evolved over many years, much has been documented about teacher identity in relation to professionalism, knowledge, and qualifications (Moss, 2014).

Urban *et al.* (2017) study focused on the occupational role profiles of EEd professionals in Ireland by reviewing literature, analysing Irish policy documents, engaging with key stakeholders, and gathering feedback from roundtable discussion at a consultation event. A key theme identified was professional identity, with participants feeling undervalued, consequent to their collective identity being inconsistent, incoherent and fragmented. Accordingly, the PI of EEd professionals is disconnected and warrants discussion and collaboration from those in the field to determine what it means for the Irish sector (Arndt, Urban, Murray, Smith, Swadenar and Ellegaard, 2018). Nevertheless, PI has been interlinked with social identity theory on the foundation that individuals obtain part of their identity from their profession due to the reliance on socialization (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978).

2.3 Social Identity

Social Identity theory (SIT) suggests we identify ourselves through personal identity i.e., unique characteristics and social identity i.e., belonging to a social group (Lightfoot and Frost, 2015). By engaging with those who share a similar professional field, knowledge and expectations supports the categorization of a social identity and how groups are formed. It has been identified that professionals want to inherit and preserve a positive social identity, however this estimation has been challenged for many years within the EEd sector. Despite high qualifications, plentiful experience and hopes to professionalise the sector, study findings have shown with the absence of defined terminology, societal values and priorities have led to misunderstandings of the sector (Moloney, 2010). This is relevant within research findings of Simmie and Murphy (2023) who conducted research of critical feminist enquiry with 104 participants, 11 of which were interviewed whereby recognition surfaced as a key theme in terms of participants job titles being incoherent in society.

Although education is a collaborative process, research suggests that social identity has been unexplored in relation to education (Mavor, Platow and Bizumic, 2017). Thus far, studies have explored social identity in higher education (Boucher and Murphy, 2017), however Rushton and Reiss (2019) acknowledge that other than Mavor *et al.* (2017), studies have yet to explore social identity perspectives of teachers as educators. Haslam (2017) identified five 'I's with magnitude for social identity being - *identification* (underpinned by group membership shaping individual behaviour), *ideation* (concerned with mutual identification i.e., group norms), *interaction* (associated with identity development), *influence* (extent which one leads another), and *ideology* (saturates education by providing context). Each 'I' draws on the group and

collective identity element to associate education and social identity which appears under-explored.

2.4 Collective/Group Identity

Researchers have applied SIT to the workplace as a form of social identification pertaining to how one associates psychologically with an organization (Simbula, Margheritti and Avanzi, 2023). This may be reflected in a job title/role i.e., Nurse/Teacher. Collective identity connects with social identity, thus organisations provide group membership, by having several similarly identified individuals/categories. Defining oneself as part of a professional group contributes to a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth (including self-esteem) and identity. This study contended that whilst individuals can think, feel or act their way into an identity, enactment and social validation solidify such identity (Ashforth, Harrison and Corkey, 2008). Nevertheless, there is no one definition of collective identity, the concept itself suggests it relates to a shared understanding of those who encompass collectively. This is particularly relevant in the EEd sector as the collective identity of the workforce is stagnant, misunderstood and misconstrued. Hierarchical level has been suggested and considered as a social category (collective identity), as according to self-categorisation theory, individuals are likely to associate with a social group, thus, associating with an organisation's formal hierarchy develops the perception of a social category within that hierarchical level or role.

2.5 Role Identity

Role identity suggests individuals gain a sense of self through performing social roles pertaining to behavioural norms, expectations, and values (Thoits, 1991). Such roles, particularly if holding salience and importance, become central to a sense of self, relating to work role identity. Whilst there have been extensive studies conducted on role identity in higher education (Komba, Anangisye and Katabaro, 2013) there appears to be a gap in the literature surrounding the role identity of EEd professionals which this study hopes to address.

Professional and role identity is expected to change overtime, for example early constructions of PI are frequently based on naïve and underdeveloped perceptions and will recalibrate as feedback is processed giving insight into new possible selves (Ibarra, 1999). Ibarra (1999) evokes that individuals who are moving towards senior roles, enact PI by observing and evaluating feedback. Similarly, Tansley and Tietze (2013) found that ratifying PI is necessary when transitioning to a more senior role, when moving up the hierarchical ladder to fit in with organisational expectations. Though, a key theme from a longitudinal study conducted by

Thorpe, Jansen, Sullican, Irvine and Mcdonald (2020) was limited career pathways, hindering the possibility of moving up the hierarchical ladder. During such career transition, Ibarra (1999) argues that as people identify role models, experiment with behaviours, and reflect on progress – they are assembling probable identities.

2.5.1 Work Role Transitions

Most studies suggest that professional/work role identity is stable and difficult to change and when faced with the possibility of alternative work practices or identities, employees can avoid these situations (Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin and Waring, 2012). Whilst individually this may present as a challenge, collective identity changing over time due to established pathways and external factors may be less daunting (Ibarra, 1999; Kyratsis et al., 2017). Though for the EEd sector, much discussion surround's role transitions/changes as noted within documents such as the Review of Occupational profiles in Ireland (Urban *et al.*, 2017) and within a cross-national discussion (Arndt *et al.*, 2018) whereby it appears that EEd work role identity is misaligned showcasing a desire to have a transparent work role identity aligning with the intent of this study.

2.6 Social Status and Motivation

Organisational identification and commitment directly relate to workplace behaviours, one that is quite visible is one's hierarchical level. Therefore, it is common that an individual's perception of their position in the organisation represents a social category/social status (Cole and Bruch, 2006). A key assumption of moving up the hierarchical ladder concerns that of social desirability- therefore any regression i.e., loss of status/title, reflects a step backward (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Social status concerns an individual's status relative to others relating to traits, resource attainment, performance, abilities, and roles. Regarding occupation prestige, professions can be ranked according to income, status, and education i.e., medical doctors/solicitors differ from other occupations (Adams, 2013). Thus, such prestige and positive PI can enhance self-esteem (Siebert and Siebert, 2005) particularly for the teaching profession (Fuller, Goodwyn and Francis-Brophy, 2013).

Remarkably, further implications associated with arising issues of PI is turnover, due to alleged lack of status. Consequently, supporting Mc Clelland's (1985) motivation theory - the need for power, achievement, and affiliation, thus supporting the research objective. Otto, Dekker, Dekker, Richter and Zabel (2022) highlights promotion i.e., increase social status, is recognised as a reward, and is used to motivate employees whether immediate or not, as even the

perception of promotion aids motivation. Studies have also considered teachers PI being a driver in motivation, effectiveness and retention (Hong, 2010).

2.7 Motivation

Maslow (1943) 'Hierarchy of Needs' argues that motivation stems from human needs and how one pursues these needs, whereas, Herzberg poses a two-factor theory (motivation-hygiene theory), which establishes job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction (Gawel, 1997). Herzberg (1959) concluded that attitude to work is entangled by hygiene factors such as wages and work conditions and in contrast determined five main motivators i.e., recognition, responsibility, the work itself, achievement and advancement. Motivation is concerned with the effort toward organisational success (Franco, Bennett, Kanfer and Stubblebine, 2004). However, individually, motivation can be associated with one's perception of values, beliefs and experience (Pires, 2023) asserting dimensions to PI such as motivation and commitment, both being an essential incentive for retention (Pires, 2023).

Perryman and Clabery (2020) study findings depict demotivators being related to the workload which can be a deterrent to the profession. Nevertheless, to remain motivated in an organisation, engagement is necessary thus, employers should support, appreciate and assist the growth of its employees (Roy, 2013). Kahn and Iqbal (2013) furthered this by suggesting a focus on motivational factors both extrinsically (promotion) and intrinsically (desire for growth and development), which are helpful in achieving positive engagement. Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that many EEd professionals have opportunities for higher pay externally therefore retention challenges are individual intrinsic motives (Government of Ireland, 2021). Rana, Kafeel and Ahmed's (2020) research suggest a negative correlation between employers supporting progression and employee's intention to leave.

Findings from a longitudinal study by Thorpe, Jansen, Sullican, Irvine and Mcdonald (2020) suggest a proportion of EEd professionals exited the workforce for promotion implying promotion as a key motivator. Although focused on an Australian sample, findings reaffirm that improved career pathways i.e., advancement, would address the shortage of EEd professionals. Similarly, Odukah (2016) suggests that professionals are motivated by being offered higher roles and responsibilities such as succession planning, which is typically focused on job titles and moving up the hierarchical ladder (Guinn, 2000).

2.8 The Nature of Job Titles in Organisations

Job titles are the cornerstone of organisations and are vital tools serving the basics for job design and analysis (Grant *et al.*, 2014) and reflect organisational structure. They can be defined as symbols signaling responsibilities held by one, relative to others. As a ‘title’ signifies a workplace identity, this often has implications both inside and outside work. Within the organisation, titles are frequently shared when introducing oneself, anchoring identity (Baron and Bielby, 1986), and outside the organisation, they can signal social status. Job titles can assist organisations manage their human capital, though it can be argued that titles do not reflect the value employees bring to their role. Within organisations, job titles are a function used to concisely depict the skills, ability and knowledge required for a job and inform processes such as recruitment, appraisals, learning and development and the organisational structure (Grant *et al.*, 2014).

Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2005) imply job titles transmit explicit and implicit connotations. Explicitly, job titles show employees hierarchical position (Martinez, Laird, Matin and Feris, 2008) and for employees may represent promotional opportunities which not only gives the employee a sense of accomplishment, but also can sway their determination on retention. Assumingly, a high-regarded job title/status is likely to enjoy benefits i.e., respect, admiration. Aquino, Galperin and Bennett (2004) ascertain that high-status employees are bestowed with status affirming resources such as “desired outcomes (pay and promotion), social recognition and prestigious job titles”. Potipiroon and Ford (2019) allude to the fact of an existence of a social hierarchy via a high-status job title. Research implies titles can be seen as an ‘identity badge’ as it represents a first impression (Grant *et al.*, 2014) therefore inferring a level of importance. Whilst some research suggests titles as being intended to be a descriptive predictor reflecting the nature of tasks performed in that job (Smith, Hornsby, Benson and Wesolowski, 1989), this is not the case for the EEd sector.

Simmie and Murphy’s research (2023), noted that participants job titles showed neither clarity nor coherence regarding public perception with as many as eleven job titles being identified to support the understanding in the EEd sector in Ireland (Adams, 2008). A study conducted in England by Lightfoot and Frost (2015) also noted this being a challenge, as participants suggested a range of complex terms to represent the titles of the profession. Many participants shared their dissatisfaction regarding the altering of titles and consequent influences on status and roles. Mello (2002) suggests the success of an organisation is associated with its workforce,

thus decisions made during recruitment processes will play a key role in business success as job titles are used as an attraction tool drawing attention (White, Stafford and Beaver, 2019). Hence, the recent emergence of title inflation and the rationale for this study.

2.8.1 Inflation of Job Titles

Job title inflation (JTI) intrinsically implies value, for example, if the title of Communications Executive is used instead of Customer Care, it is probable that more value will be placed on that employee. Nonetheless, the concern is that organisations are seeing the value of titles erode as the pretentiousness of titles further to excessive levels (Green, 2022). An important segment of the definition is the expectation of gaining value, though appearing tokenistic, according to the Pygmalion effect model (Rosenthal, 1995) – known as the self-fulfilling prophecy model, the person holding the inflated title, may display behaviours associated with the title. Consequently, employers are using JTI to either avoid compensating to market rates or competing with competitors (Martinez *et al.*, 2008).

In a tight labour market, title inflation, whilst initially attractive to employees, can lead to great misunderstanding and misalignment regarding expectations relative to status and authority. Though the theory of JTI has been unexplored in the EEd sector, title inflation is becoming more common for organisations in efforts to recruit and retain employees. Organisations have recognized that many employees value PI and titles, consequently, this tactic is used in recruitment initiatives whereby we see titles such as *quality coordinator*, or *curriculum planner* which are not ‘typical’ roles for the sector. Pearl Meyer and Partners survey revealed that almost three-quarters of companies use titles to express power and accountability, with employers using titles to retain and reward employees (Tilo, 2023). Though such study does not appear to have been conducted in Ireland, hence the justification for this research.

2.9 Retention

Singh and Dixit (2011) refer to retention as the analogy of “keep the people who keep the business”. Gorde (2019) also signifies that retention is the capacity to retain employees aiding sustainability and success. The findings of the longitudinal meta-analysis study of the relationship between organisational support and job outcomes suggested fewer retention issues occur in a supported organisation (Riggle, Edmondson and Hansen, 2009). Whilst a supportive environment appears to benefit retention, Ibarra (1999) asserts that people in their 20s and 30s tend to ‘job hop’ more, possibly due to more options. In opposition to this statement is Rana *et*

*al.*s (2020) research concluded that there was a clear negative correlation between organisational support for progression and chance to develop and employee's leaver intention.

Retention in the EEd profession is a challenge with organisations grappling for talent and retention becoming a budding issue. An Australian longitudinal study conducted by Thorpe *et al.* (2020), focused on the predictors of retention. The study findings suggest that employers should take steps to retain employees with participants expressing that work conditions i.e., flexible hours were a retention barrier. The study also suggested that those likely to stay in the profession were at management level supporting previously explored literature suggesting that hierarchical level positively contributes to retention. For those remaining in the sector, promotional opportunities and consequent pay increases are of interest however appear restricted as the career pathways appear flat. Despite this, Cole and Bruch (2006) research showed that turnover intention was much less concerning for those with management responsibilities/titles.

2.10 Chapter Conclusion

The EEd sector in Ireland has been grappling with the PI of its workforce focusing on aspects such as training (OECD, 2006), recognition (Moloney, 2010), remuneration (Arndt *et al.*, 2018). Despite efforts reflected in the Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP) survey (2017), and the *Review of occupational role profiles in Ireland in early childhood education and care* (Urban *et al.*, 2017), the re-occurring dispute of professional titles remain unsolved. This concern was highlighted to the Oireachtas in May 2024 by the Federation of Early Childhood Providers and within the workforce development plan 2022-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2021), stressing the need for further research. Simmie and Murphy (2023) revealed that participants' job titles and responsibilities neither exhibited transparency or unity. This perception was further evidenced in the workforce development plan where it was agreed that final decisions for professional terminology would be a 'future decision', but in the interim, for the purpose of the document 'working titles' had been adopted (Government of Ireland, 2021).

A critical review of literature suggests that the feelings and perceptions of leadership level employees toward job titles is underexplored. Concepts professional and social identity theory surfaced as key themes highlighting concerns of collective and role identity, as well as the motivational influence toward social status. Whilst research in other professions such as nursing has progressed, there is a scarcity of research addressing the perceptions and feelings surrounding how job titles in the EEd sector and how these affect recruitment and retention. To

fill this void, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews was conducted with ten participants to explore how professionals feel about job titles. Insights gained may identify barriers and opportunities for improving recruitment and retention. It is hoped that this research can contribute to the gap in literature surrounding job titles roles in recruitment and retention and potentially contribute to change in government policy within the sector.

Chapter Three: Research Question

3.1 Research Question:

The recruitment of leadership level employees appears to be most challenging as it emerges when searching for a role, the chance to develop/progress is of high importance. Therefore, we see a workforce where job title/social status is a pre-determining factor of the successful recruitment and retention of higher skilled, more experienced employees. Subsequently, this is leading to issues and challenges particularly within small and medium-sized EEd services as the hierarchical structure is narrower, consequently, internal progression opportunities are less frequent. Thus, reflecting a retention challenge as employees seek further professional development and progression. As a direct consequence, it is likely that employees may be offered inflated titles as a recruitment and/or retention strategy, though may be without the skill set associated with the advertised role due to the recruitment challenges in the sector (Walters, 2023).

What is in a title?

3.2 Aim of Research:

This aim of this research is to explore the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees toward Job Titles and whether they feel job titles are a driving force for the successful recruitment or retainment of EEd employees in Ireland. Job titles are directly associated with a professional identity; therefore, this construct will be explored supporting the research topic. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding ‘recruitment,’ ‘retention’ (Cunningham, 2020) and the phenomenon of ‘PI’ as a stand-alone construct (Urban *et al.*, 2017). However, such studies have been explored in professions such as nursing (Hu, Wang, Lan and Wu, 2022), however, research is underexplored and limited surrounding the PI of the EEd sector in Ireland and the consequence this has on the recruitment and retainment of its workforce, with only a handful of known studies being undertaken on a similar topic.

The researcher hopes to contribute to current research surrounding the topics identified in the literature review to further inform/educate CEO’s, Managers, and recruiters in the EEd sector. Such contributions may provide up to date data supporting the need for universally defined Job Titles, subsequent career paths and progression routes for professionals in the sector. Furthermore, the researcher hopes to contribute to research surrounding government policy which would contribute to streamlining a universal career progression route that is understood

sector wide ultimately leading to a workforce whereby title inflation is not only a recruitment strategy, but that intentional progression comes to fruition.

Thus, the proposed research question is:

‘What impact are Job Titles having on the successful recruitment and retention of leadership level employees in the EEd sector in Ireland?’

3.3 Research Objectives:

This study evidences the gap in literature on the thoughts and feelings regarding job titles in the Early Education sector in Ireland, therefore, the researcher’s objectives are to:

1. To examine the perceptions of social identity through the lens of professional, collective and role identity theory to inform whether PI is understood collectively.
2. To examine the thoughts and feelings of EEd professionals towards the importance of job title/social status within one’s career.
3. To better understand the significance and weighting of Job Titles to employees as a motivator and retention strategy.
4. To explore how EEd professionals think and feel about the role of job titles and career progression routes.

Through engaging in semi-structured interviews with EEd professionals who are likely to be in the position where career growth and professional development is a probable consideration, the researcher will explore the two principal underpinning theoretical constructs of Identity theory and Social Identity theory. By exploring subtopics such as social status, motivations and job titles, the researcher hopes to elicit information pertaining to the overarching research question.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Preliminary Research and Introduction to Research Context:

The aim of this study was to engage with EEd professionals to explore their thoughts and feelings towards job titles, and whether they feel these influence their desire to stay in a job and impact recruitment. The main goals of the study are to offer insights and build on current knowledge relating to professional identity to potentially contribute to Government policy change. In doing so, would bridge the gap of underexplored research and may provide insight into creating a more robust identity for the profession with clearly defined career pathways and development opportunities aiding retention and professionalism in the sector.

The study was underpinned by an ontological perspective steering the philosophical thinking and research process whilst employing an interpretivist and social constructivist approach. This chapter discusses how the data was collected and processed and will outline the reasoning in conducting a qualitative study comprising of ten semi-structured interviews through inductive reasoning, addressing the practical constraints encountered. Later in the chapter, the data analysis procedure will be highlighted and lastly will identify any ethical considerations pertaining to the research.

4.2 Research Philosophy:

The researcher's philosophical perspective informs the way they see and observe the world, shaping their perspective, thoughts and beliefs informing the interpretation of data and guiding their actions in research informing the study question, methodology and approach (Khatri, 2020).

Research paradigms consist of four branches - epistemology - how we come to know something (Cooksey and McDonald, 2011), ontology, - what is reality, existence, being or becoming (Scotland, 2012), methodology - an approach to systematic enquiry and axiology – the nature of ethics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Understanding these branches allowed the researcher to adopt an ontological perspective. Ontology concerns the beliefs and assumptions one makes when conceptualising the research problem (Kivunja and Bawa Kuyini, 2017). The researchers' objectives were to discover if the research question is a reality for professionals in the EEd sector, deeming an ontological perspective appropriate. Through the lens of an ontological position and by adopting a social constructivist philosophical view, asserts that the phenomenon is being socially considered (Bryman, Clarke, Foster and Sloan 2021).

The researcher sought to construct meanings of participants' experiences through interactions i.e., social constructivist approach. Thus, the intent was to interpret participants' experience, adopting an interpretivist approach as opposed to starting with a theory reflecting a postpositivist approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). Crotty (1998) suggests that people construct meanings based on the realm in which they live and work, supporting the researcher to capture multifaceted views and opinions. Thus, an ontological constructivist paradigm was deemed appropriate for understanding the feelings and thoughts of leadership level employees toward job titles, consistent with the ontological cornerstone of social constructivism.

Limited research has explored the research topic therefore, an interpretivist approach was best suited, allowing for meanings to be constructed based on interpretation of perspectives. Bryman *et al.* (2021) suggests objectivism typically supports an explanatory study, therefore, is unsuitable given the exploratory nature of the present study. A quantitative approach was deemed unfitting as it is difficult to measure the subjective thoughts and feelings of EEd professionals in Ireland toward the topic of job titles, therefore, qualitative research was selected.

4.3 Research Approach & Design:

The researcher implemented a qualitative, inductive approach aligning with their ontological position of social constructivism and epistemological scaffold of interpretivism. This method allowed the researcher to capture varying perspectives and rich data to identify trends and patterns. As PI is not an easily constructed concept due to deriving from differing disciplines (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2010), the use of a mono-qualitative approach was suitable, allowing the complexity of identity to be explored.

Qualitative research often relies on inductive reasoning to uncover broad themes to generate a perspective about a phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2022) rather than quantitative research which measures pre-determined relationships amongst variables aligning with a deductive approach (Bryman, 2012). Thus, an inductive approach permitted new insights into the thoughts and feelings about job titles, and their impact recruitment. This method allowed the researcher to elucidate finer details reflecting deeper insights and thoughtful understandings (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020) by investigating from the viewpoint of those who have engaged in the experience (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpi, 2019).

A phenomenological approach concerns understanding the dimensions of personal lived experiences (Manen, 2017) allowing you to see through the eyes of participants from another viewpoint which is closely connected to interpretivism (Bryman, 2012). Although broadly addressed in literature in the context of professional, collective and role identity, less attention has been given to exploring the influence of job titles on recruitment. This gap in research provides an opportunity for exploration in efforts to gather deep, contextually appropriate opinions/views using open-ended exploratory questions. To represent the phenomenological underpinning, the questions posed were considered to validate the constructivist and interpretive paradigm. Charmaz (2002) emphasizes that open-ended questions provide insight and showcases the researcher's skillset due to the required flexibility to follow the line of enquiry. Adams (2015) agrees however stipulates the need to form question order ensuring the data collected is useful.

4.4 Sample:

The excellence of a research study is not only based on the methodology and research instrument but is also supported by the sampling tactic. The research adopted a cross-sectional study design to gather information from ten participants using semi-structured interviews. Participants were required to understand the research topic therefore non-probability purposive sampling was implemented as opposed to systematic sampling (Bryman *et al.*, 2021). The study criteria outlined that participants had to have been in a leadership position in the EEd sector with three or more years' experience. As not to show bias, which is common with non-probability sampling, potential participants first expressed an interest in the study as a pre-screening technique whilst noting the exclusion to the study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Creswell and Creswell (2022) recommend that researchers ensure participants fully understand the exclusion criteria before engaging in the study. Thus, adopting a form of stratified sampling as the study was both randomised and categorised.

4.4.1 Pilot:

The researcher piloted an expression of interest inviting '*supervisory/management level*' employees to participate in the study (Appendix 1) and thereafter completed a pilot interview based on the participant meeting the criteria. During the pilot interview, the researcher discovered that some questions did not reflect the intent of the study, consequently, questions were rephrased (Appendix 2) to enhance the reliability of the interviews (Silverman, 2010). This reflection also led the researcher to revisit their advertisement, changing the title of the

target group i.e., ‘supervisory/management level employees to those in leadership positions (Appendix 3). Van Ments (1983) encourages piloting in three stages - the running of the role play; in the researcher’s case - the pilot interview, debriefing as stage two, which was implemented by discussing with the pilot participant to rectify mistakes and misunderstandings and lastly, the follow up, completed by refining the interview questions, leading to the modification of the interview procedure.

4.5 Practical Constraints:

On reflection, not all participants were equally as articulate and perceptive during the interview stage as some participants were overtaken by their feelings regarding professional identity, both past and present. This prompted the researcher to reconfigure the questions allowing for those feelings to emerge at the beginning of the interview, leaving the remainder of the interview focusing on the intent of the study. The researcher noted the value in allowing the time for participants to express their experiences and opinions as their career progressed as it echoed the objective of the study itself which was to gain insights stemming from perspectives. This supports Patton (1980), who emphasises the importance of putting the participants at ease at the beginning of the interview.

4.6 Research Instrument for Data Collection:

The research employed semi-structured interviews devised by the researcher who considered the participants comfort and ease, therefore holding interviews via Teams meeting or face-to-face (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). Opting for a semi-structured format as opposed to structured, unstructured, or non-directive, allowed for open-ended questions offering opportunity to prompt the interviewee to elaborate or follow a line of inquiry (Mathers, Fox and Hunn, 2002). This technique allowed the researcher to discover feelings and thoughts surrounding the research topic. Conversely, unstructured interviews whilst providing depth, can be too flexible which had the potential to yield the study aim.

The initial questions were pilot tested and refined to ensure they captured the emergent themes surfacing from literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Research questions were asked open-endedly allowing insightful perspectives to emerge. Primarily, questions were discussed openly to build rapport, thereafter the questions narrowed to specific topics deriving from themes within the literature. It was in the researchers’ interest to gain practical insight into participants’ first-hand experience with the research topic to ensure the data gathered would be credible.

Cohen *et al.* (2007) triumphs the value in prompting and probing during a semi-structured interview to elicit the richness of data, depth of responses and to gain honest and comprehensive feedback - all pertaining to successful interviewing (Patton, 1980). To support this format, the researcher organized their questions broadly, then creating a funnel toward more specific questions, ensuring a fluid and flexible structure.

Prior to participation, participants received an information sheet ensuring the transparency of permissions and key discussion points (Appendix 4) ensuring full disclosure prior to involvement. Before participation, participants signed a consent form ensuring voluntary participation and addressing any ethical concerns (Appendix 5). The interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy and validity and the ethics surrounding this were thoroughly explained inclusive of the retention period of transcriptions. Before, during and after the interviews, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and advised of support services if they so wish to engage. The interview style was influenced by Moloney (2010) who used semi-structured interviews in a study on the perspectives of preschool and infant teachers on PI in the Early Years.

4.7 Data Analysis:

The data analysis process can take a considerable amount of time for a researcher given the abundance of data to be analysed, therefore having a vigorous system in place was essential (Janesick, 2015). According to Drever (2003) raw data should be represented by a three-stage process – data preparation, data analysis and surmising the results.

Data preparation, i.e., ‘cleaning’ of the data involved the researcher immediately transcribing the interview verbatim, using a transcription tool on Microsoft Word guaranteeing accuracy, reliability, and validity. This ensured familiarity with the data, ensuring it was manageable whilst simultaneously retaining as much raw data as possible (Drever, 2003). Secondly, data analysis involved organising, categorising by thematic analysis and coding, assisting the formation of results in occurrence with the research question (Drever, 2003). Lastly, surmising the results involved using RTA to identify patterns and trends to draw a conclusion reflective of the semi-structured interview technique employed.

Whilst several forms of analysis were considered, given that the research was inductive in nature, the researcher anticipated playing an active role in the production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019) by gaining insight into the perspectives and experiences of those within the

EEd sector as underpinned by a constructivist and interpretivist research approach. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was chosen as a robust method in identifying themes as it could respect the subjectivity of participants' narratives whilst encompassing the researcher's role in producing knowledge through reflexive interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher also applied additional techniques such as 'memoing' and 'coding' (Punch, 2005), as an expected study limitation was the disconnect in defining job titles which surfaced in several of the participants interviews.

Braun & Clarke (2006) suggests a six-phase method for implementing thematic analysis depicted below, however the researcher was flexible with the process rather than linear as the data evolved. Consequently, the analysis was an iterative and recursive process (Byrne, 2021).

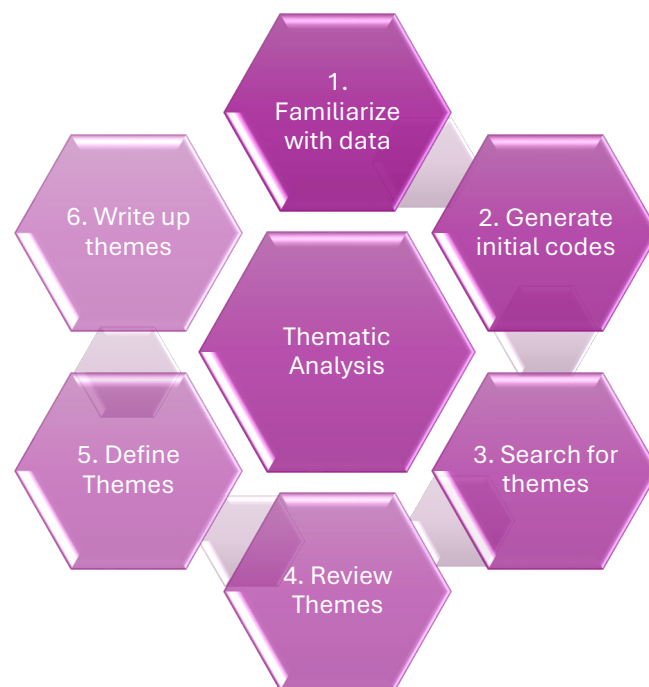


Figure 1: Thematic analysis

(Maguire and Delahunt, 2017)

Phase One: Familiarisation

The researcher manually sifted through the transcriptions and engaged in 'active listening' as when listening back to the recordings there were some incomplete sentences. This allowed the researcher to fill in any gaps and then re-read the complete transcription facilitating a deeper immersion into the data (Byrne, 2021). The researcher also highlighted the exact research questions and direct answers to support familiarisation (Appendix 6).

Phase Two: Initial Coding

By systematically filtering through the entire dataset, the researcher made note of brief but sufficient and informative ‘codes’ which would later become themes. The preliminary annotations were documented by pen to paper on the printed interviews and signaled by ‘memoing’ technique, emerging initial trends (Appendix 7). The focus was to develop ‘codes’ supporting the data gathered, though it is uncommon that the researcher will produce codes like another study, as RTA follows an interpretive reflexive manner. According to Byrne (2021), corresponding data to the research question, should be documented in the coding procedure, as through repetition of this process can inform the researcher as to which codes should be discarded or can contribute to emerging themes. Whilst initial codes were documented, they were later re-visited allowing the researcher to determine which path to follow. Supportively, the researcher tracked the progression of the codes (Appendix 8).

Phase Three: Search for Themes

The researcher recognised the relationship and shared meanings between codes that could be later constructed into a theme or sub theme and has showcased these in a mind-map (Appendix 9).

Phase Four: Review Themes

Engaging in a recursive review of participants opinions and views supported the researcher in determining the theme in which the perception related to. The researcher asked herself reflective questions such as ‘what is the quality of this theme’ to inform whether the theme informed the research question as it is not uncommon that some codes may require revision (Byrne, 2021) The themes and subthemes represented in the next chapter tie together to create a clear picture of the overall dataset.

Phase Five: Defining Themes

As part of the thematic framework, the researchers’ focus was to present a clear, concise and memorable narrative of the data set and research question. Subsequently, the title of each theme and sub theme should make logical sense and prepare the reader for the analytic narrative to follow (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Phase Six: Write up Themes

Whilst it is assumed that the write up of emerging themes occurred last, this was an interactive process involving reflection, refinement and re-visiting. Organising themes into a logical flow was a process that changed multiple times as the researcher wanted to ensure to adopt a ‘funnel’ approach.

4.8 Methodological Limitations:

Due to the gap in the literature, the researcher was reliant on the data collection and analysis to inform the research. Of the literature gathered, majority of research was not from an Irish context.

A further limitation to the study was the time constraint associated with the study. Data was collected over a 2-month period in May and June 2024 due to the lack of initial interest allowing the researcher to start earlier (Appendix 10). Consequently, the researcher altered the study criteria to widen the pool of participants (Appendix 3).

Lastly, during pilot interview stage, the researcher found that she felt obliged to ‘over explain’ and get involved in the study (Drever, 2003) and as a result, had an abundance of ‘wasted’ information was captured when reviewing the transcripts. Although reflection combatted the preceding limitation, had the researcher not had a reflective personality, this could have created a methodological limitation to the study due to the time constraints.

4.9 Ethical Considerations:

According to Bos (2020), ethics relate to what is right and wrong, thus, as a researcher it is imperative to maintain clear boundaries as qualitative research is conversational. The considerations surrounding ethics revolve around consent, privacy, harm, and confidentiality (Lune & Berg, 2017). Consequently, an ethics application was written as part of the research proposal assignment and was reviewed by the National College of Ireland (Appendix 11).

The researcher chose to omit individuals working directly alongside her from her specific organisation to avoid compromising results or intruding on employees’ personal perceptions. For any known participants whether directly or indirectly, the researcher clearly differentiated between their connections and the study participation.

The voluntary consent of participants was of utmost importance and highly valued therefore, a consent form was required before participation outlining the research purpose, objectives and ethical considerations (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). Prior to involvement, participants received a full revelation of the study through an information sheet and consent form and were offered opportunity to ask questions about their contributions (Briggs & Coleman, 2012).

During interviews, the researcher was conscious not to project their own preconceptions as with a semi-structured interview, the researcher had formed some questions beforehand however, given the open-ended nature of questions, it was expected that data collection would go beyond the researchers' questions (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

On completion of interview engagement, the researcher shared a de-briefing sheet including contact information for relevant mental health supports namely, Aware and Samaritans in case participants were distressed by any aspect of the study participation (Appendix 12).

4.10 Section Conclusion:

Since the objective of this chapter was to generate theory as opposed to test it, the study design was open-ended allowing for unplanned themes to surface. This was prevalent in the research paradigm which represented an epistemological and ontological underpinning. By adopting an interpretivist and social constructivist approach, participants' perspectives flourished using semi-structure interviews. The analytic procedures adopted were depicted with rationale and were justified. Naturally, the researcher endured some methodological limitations showcasing the active role she played in concluding comments in this section of study. The next chapter will showcase the analysis and findings from the interviews held and will address the research question posed whilst drawing on key findings learnt from the RTA process.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Findings

5.1 Chapter Introduction:

This chapter interprets and presents key findings surfacing from the study. Keeping with the interpretivist and social constructivist approach, participants' perspectives were central to the study. The findings were explored through the RTA approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019) ensuring an iterative and reflexive process throughout. Four key themes and consequent sub themes emerged as presented in figure 2 below.

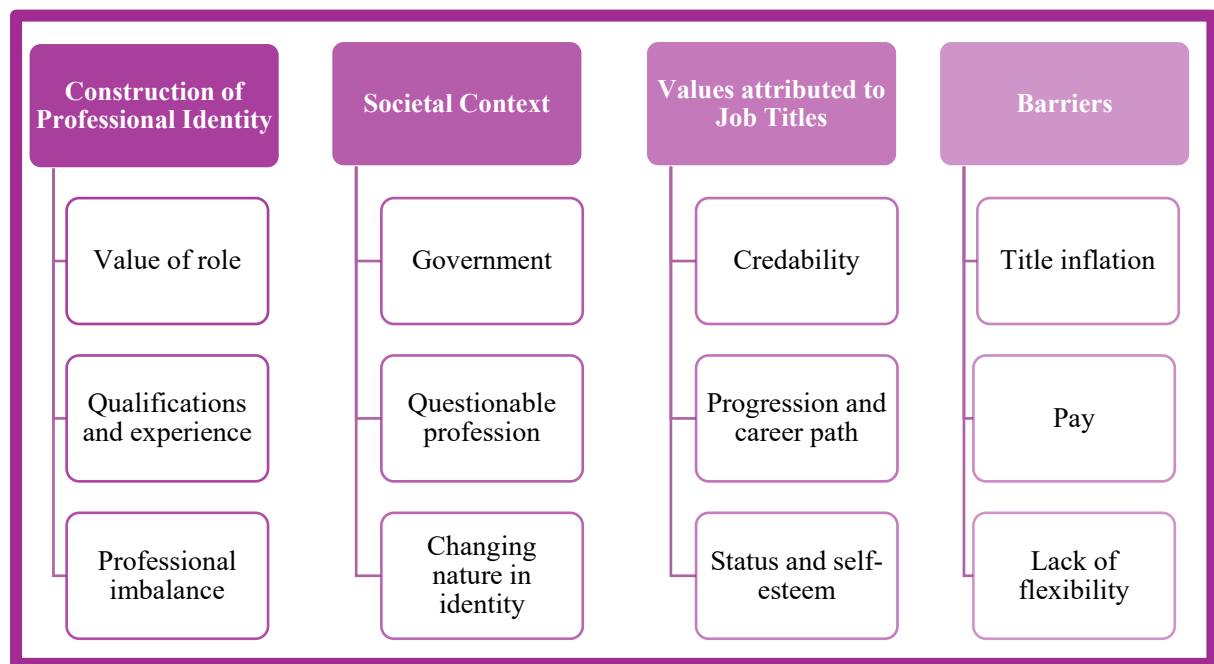


Figure 2: Thematic framework

5.2 Demographics:

To present the data findings, table 1 illustrates participants' diversity in age, qualification level, years of experience and the roles/titles held. The ten participants interviewed will be referred to as P1-10. Whilst gathering participants, the intention was to examine men and women, however all participants were women. Gender is likely to be an important factor to consider when examining this topic. It is suggested that further research should examine men's perspectives. The mean age of participants is 35.1 years, and the mean years' experience is 14.1 years.

<u>Code</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Role/Title</u>	<u>Qualification</u>	<u>Experience</u>
P1	31	Female	Manager	Level 8	13 years
P2	33	Female	Manager and Lecturer	Level 8	12 years
P3	27	Female	Team Leader	Level 8	7 years
P4	26	Female	Quality Mentor	Level 8	5 years
P5	42	Female	Lead Educator	Level 8 & 9	5 years
P6	36	Female	Manager	Level 8	12 years
P7	34	Female	Manager	Level 8 & 9	34 years
P8	36	Female	Deputy Manager	Level 7	14 years
P9	48	Female	Practice Manager	Level 8	26 years
P10	38	Female	Manager & Lecturer	Level 8 & 9	12 years

Table 1 Participant Demographics

5.3 Construction of professional identity:

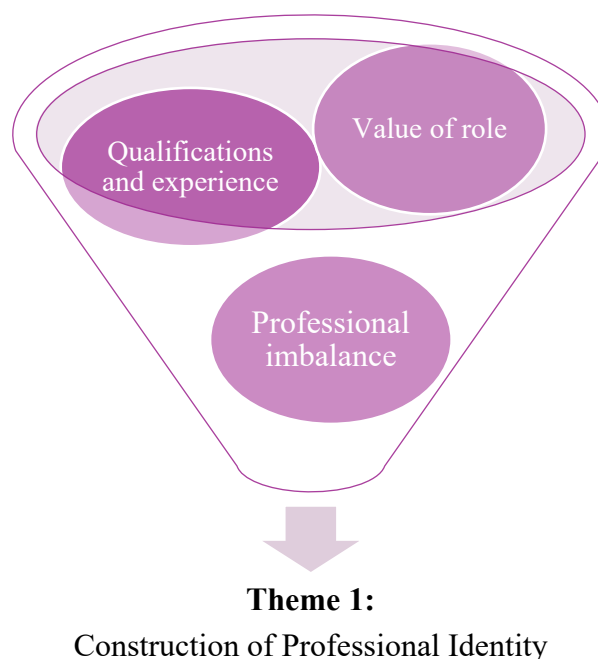


Figure 3: Construction of professional identity

5.3.1 Value of Role:

Professional identity (PI) has a variety of meanings, and collectively, participants felt confident in sharing their personal understanding of the phenomenon - *“It’s about who you are... your values, beliefs...”* (P.5), appearing to be a commonality as P.7 highlights *‘in the settings I’ve worked, people strive for professionalism and conduct themselves in the same way’* indicating feelings of a level of professionalism and a cohesiveness in the sector. Being valued appears to be of high importance for participants. Findings indicate that participants expressed value in working within the EEd sector, with references to the importance of the profession and feelings of passion and proudness, as illustrated by (P.6), *“For me it’s education... its EEd, when anyone says to me it’s not formal education, I say ‘we educate children so they can be educated’”*. Similarly, P.8 triumphed the importance of her role in creating a concrete base for children by sharing an element of her professionalism and PI *“... children in homeless services needing outside play, to see family members – we bring those together”*. Such illustrations were articulated protectively, perhaps indicative of how these feelings can be associated with misunderstandings of the profession due to *“constantly having to validate and justify what we do”* (P.4)

5.3.2 Qualifications & Experience:

Interestingly, there was a consensus among participants' feeling that qualifications and experience aided the construction of PI with many participants emphasizing the degree to which they qualified and underwent continuous professional development to enhance their PI. Participants each have a high level of qualification, suggesting the importance of qualifications particularly at leadership level. For example, P.3 shared thoughts around the challenge endured, leading the researcher to believe that qualifying is subject to desire, rather than fallen upon, *"I would say my experience, and my qualifications, I worked hard for that"*. However, P.9 acknowledged that the sector was not always that way, *"I'm an advocate for identity in the sector... you meet that with qualifications, respect for the role... thinking back 20 years, there was limited qualifications... I remember calling my mam to come in ... now you have to be qualified, it professionalises the sector"* emphasising the progression of the sector and suggestive of increased PI by a qualification requirement. As a way of reaffirming their professional selves, participants illustrated positive sentiments signifying that although qualified, continuously upskilling was felt to develop PI and keeps practice relevant *"... you start with a level 5 or 6 and you may practice one way, then you seek more education, the more you learn... it's something that always changing"* (P.5). Each participants' experience demonstrated a commitment to development, though it became clear that not everyone wants to upskill, suggesting a gap and imbalance of professionalism *"some haven't upskilled in a while, they can sometimes be stuck in their ways"* (P.10), furthered by P.3 when asked if PI was understood collectively, *"within our sector... the majority of us"*.

5.3.3 Professional imbalance:

Professional imbalance i.e., the disparity in professionalism, emerged as a key finding when reflecting on the collective attitude towards PI, whereby at varying stages of the interview, participants appeared disheartened and emotionally blunt when sharing opinions of other professionals, referring to the sector as *"just minding kids"* (P.4) (P.9) (P.3) – 'just' being the repetitive term. Likewise, P.3 expressed *"there are a lot of people within the sector who have a mindset of 'I just work with kids' – they don't want to learn... they don't seem to be progressing... it's 'we've always done it this way'"* suggesting participants felt this devalued the profession. P.7 shared similar views, *"from working in different services, they kind of didn't have the awareness of professionalism, I suppose it's got to do with training... huge variety of people who would have absolutely no time for enhancing their practice"*.

Several participants compared less experienced, highly qualified employees to highly experienced, less qualified employees with little interest in upskilling. Participants felt that the accessibility of professional development with requirements for alternative work placement outside of the current organisation being a condition, meaning that employees either must use annual leave or be without pay, and this could be a potential barrier. Although the Irish Government has funded such programmes recently, making them more accessible, these findings suggest the government needs to relook at accessibility with a practical lens, to respond to P.8's opinion depicting the government's qualification funding as "counterproductive".

5.4 Societal Context:

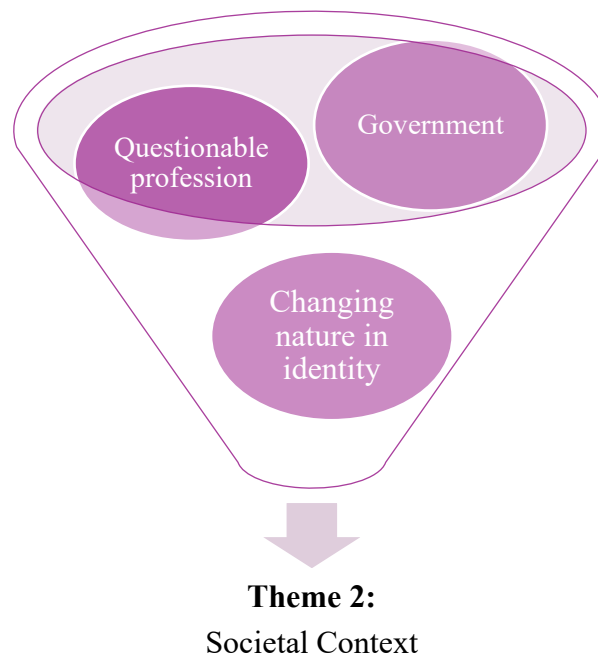


Figure 4: Theme 2: Societal context

5.4.1 Government:

Recognition was felt to be a societal issue whereby most participants expressed cynicism relating to the government's perception of the identity of the sector, e.g., *"I feel the sector is perhaps not recognized as professional by government and that has led to perceptions within society"*. P.2 and P.8 also felt the lack of government and societal understanding of the sector, *"We are heard but not understood – the comprehension isn't there. They know we do a good job, but they don't understand what we do, like why we are being funded"*. Echoing this opinion,

P.6 expressed, *“to me it’s about being recognised – government wise, I think that’s one of the things I find most frustrating...”*. Participants alluded that the government has had a profound influence on how PI of the EEd sector is socially considered, using examples from the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby decisions affecting the operation of the sector were discovered as an ‘afterthought’ (P.6). Supportively, P.3 shared, *“even the simplicity of instructions during severe weather alerts... we were left to wonder if school closures included us, when it didn’t, we were waiting...why risk our safety but not primary or secondary schools?”*.

These findings suggest several participants felt unheard and felt their work was underappreciated. (P.9) felt distinctly displeased, highlighting the lack of recognition for EEd in comparison to other educational systems *“It’s an uphill battle... my impression is that government still does not see us as professional... your only childcare...they deem us incompetent in our role, not in comparison to primary”* as EEd professionals are left questioning their professional demeanor.

5.4.2 Questionable Profession:

Some participants experienced many conversations from family and friends, who are often experienced to be perplexed as to why one would remain in the EEd profession, adding feelings of ambiguity to the recognition of participants’ PI, e.g., *“[Family]... they’re kind of baffled by it, they just couldn’t understand like the input... versus the salary...”* (P.7). Despite expressing the precarious nature of the work and the importance of the role of EEd, several participants agreed society, inclusive of family and friends, ponder the decision to stay in the EEd sector. Such conversations appeared to be a cause of frustration to several participants, with some feeling underappreciated by friends and family, i.e., *“A friend of mine is an accountant, he didn’t understand the value in what we do until he had 3 children, now he can’t get over the work we do!”* (P.10), leaving participants feeling that unless the sector is needed, it is insignificant and unrecognised. *“People feel, you are ‘just’ working with kids – nobody sees the other things – I mean it’s pretty damn important. Everyone knows what an Occupational Therapist is or a Speech & Language therapist - it’s in the name, but our title is still ‘semi-decided’”* (P.10). Subsequently, P.4 implies the identity is *“undecided”* which is a possible solution to the problem.

5.4.3 Changing nature of identity:

Participants felt that their identity has shifted *“too often”* in the eyes of society, with expressive comments such as *‘whatever we are called now’* (P.5) – showcasing a fracture in the understood

identity of professionals furthered by insinuations that there is a lack of universal understanding of the identity of the profession with P.5 highlighting the potential to be represented by varying identities – “*it depends where you are and what they call you there*”. Supportively, in table 2, across ten interviews, twelve changeable identities were cited suggesting that the changing nature of identity is still an occurring issue.

Educator	Team Leader	Manager
Practitioner	Lead Educator	Supervisor
Childcare Worker	Room Leader	Practice Manager
Preschool Teacher	Creche Worker	Preschool Manager

Table 2: Changeable identities

EEd professionals felt that job title imbalance does not support clear societal views “... *how you view yourself and how others view your profession*” (P.10). What is evident from the data is the breath in current nomenclature felt by participants which has given rise to feelings of uncertainty regarding titles leading to lack of clarity around PI and societal perceptions of the sector.

5.5 Values attributed to Job Titles:

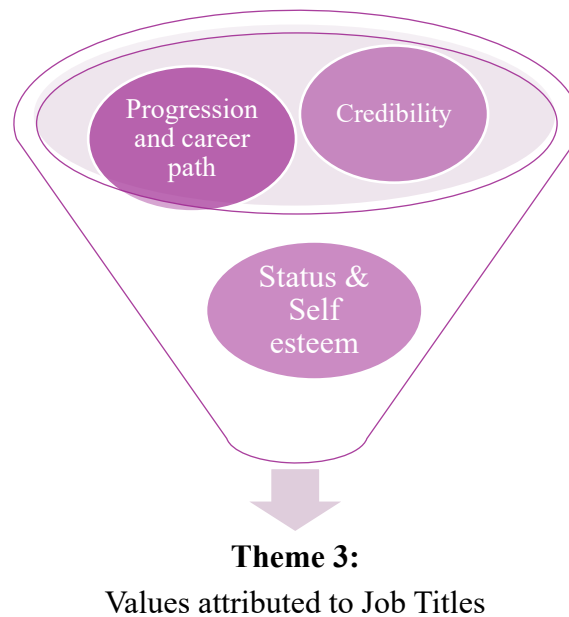


Figure 5: Values attributed to job titles.

5.5.1 Credibility:

Socially, participants felt job titles lacked clarity and shared understanding, however individually, participants felt that having a concrete job title signifies a sense of credibility, social status and influences their self-esteem. Consequently, they felt their professionalism was developed by having clearly defined job titles. Supporting this point, one participant highlighted the shift in feelings associated with having a clearly defined job title, *“thinking back to years ago, I wasn’t proud of the work I did...now I am, its more professional”* (P.9). Several participants noted *“respect”* and *“recognition”* were directly associated with their ‘Manager’ title, therefore contributing to their thoughts surrounding the positive impact of established job titles. Furthermore, P.1) shared that whilst her feelings echo the previous participant, this was not always the case *“...before management, I wanted to work my way from educator to a room leader and then up to management. Now I am there, it doesn’t really matter to me”*, suggesting that acquiring a leadership title supports a feeling of credibility. This too was suggestive of the views of society as participants shared their experiences whereby their job title impeded on the views from society *“I always had the mindset of working up the ladder to a manager... I’ll give an example of when I was buying my house, that was an eye opener moment for me, I was working as an educator and we didn’t get a mortgage in that time...*

because of wage too, but a huge amount of the viewpoint from bankers and brokers was my job title” (P.1). Additionally, P.3 noted that *“even with your car insurance they ask for your job title and the premium increases or decreases, if that doesn’t tell you a title matters – I don’t know what does”*, implying that having an established title influences social status.

5.5.2 Status & Self-esteem:

Several participants felt that having a clearly defined job title influenced their feeling of status and self-esteem. Some participants also felt job titles were a source of motivation. When asked ‘what does having a title mean to you?’ some respondents felt that their title was important to them and amplified prestige - *“having a title kind of equals a social status...all you have to say is your job title and there is a questionable perception made nearly instantaneously, so it is helpful”* (P.10), *“it gives you a different level of responsibility... a sense of achievement that I had progressed”* (P.8) and *“it benefits in both ways, its appealing for people, but also gives gratification and a stature that you have an important role”* (P.9), essentially providing validation of success both personally and professionally. Conflictingly, P.5 did not value titles however felt it her title should reflect her role, *“for me it doesn’t matter whether I am a preschool teacher; whether its educator – once I know and it reflects what I do”*, alluding to having a clearly defined job title would increase a collective understanding of PI and roles and responsibilities.

5.5.3 Progression/Career Path:

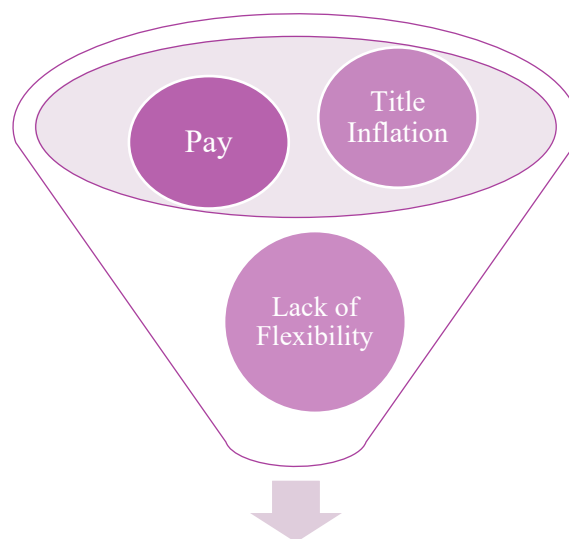
For other participants, titles were felt be important for their immediate career and future career aspirations, e.g., *“a title is highly motivating when apply for positions... you’re looking into your career as a whole and into your future”* (P.1). Findings imply that job titles carry significant weight and are perceived to be a marker of progressional growth and development. Participants noted that if they were to change roles, they would be concerned with the title they use to represent their skills and experience - *“I do think it’s important for people who want to progress... it would help the progression stance”* (P.2), *“...if I was to change, I would probably put ‘manager’ on my CV”* (P.3), supported by P.7, *“when seeking other employment, the title stands to you”*. However, one participant highlighted variations in how leadership/management roles are perceived, saying *“I don’t necessarily think everywhere calls it the same”* (P.5), suggesting that some titles may not guarantee similar roles and expectations. Furthermore, some titles used are not felt to be collectively understood, hence several participants felt they needed to adopt their title to signal their roles.

A surprising finding was that job titles were felt to be a stronger motive for participants prior to reaching a prestigious role. For example, one participant said, *“until I became manager, it signaled progression”* (P.4), and another said, *“I was working toward being a manager; that was my goal then, now it doesn’t bother me”* (P.1), suggesting that gaining titles can signal career advancement and professional growth.

There appeared to be limited growth opportunities in smaller EEd services as owners/managers held multiple roles, making it challenging to move up the hierarchical ladder bearing retention challenges. For example, one participant said, *“particularly in smaller services, when managers are the owners of services, they’re never going to move on...”* (P.10). Participants felt there was a lack of clear and transparent progression routes from service to service. This example highlights the absence of universal understanding of job titles and collectively understood progression routes. *“I found it didn’t transfer over service to service”* (P.7).

When discussing progression, participants felt there were limited professional development opportunities, possibly due to lack of awareness about progression routes, e.g. *“there is room leader in there somewhere too I think”* (P.5), *“I wouldn’t have known”* (P.3).

5.6 Barriers – the missing piece:



Theme 4:

Figure 6: Barriers - the missing piece

5.6.1 Title Inflation:

As previously discovered, job titles and responsibilities appear to be misleading or inaccurate, according to participants, such disconnect has the potential to deter candidates from applying for a role due to unrealistic expectations, *“I have seen people advertise for roles that I just know don’t entail what they’re saying... even showcasing the responsibilities under that title...it’s getting people in with the fancier title, then the actual reality of what your doing is totally different... it’s good to get people in, but not to retain them”* (P.4) and *“I think they can be used to attract people - like you see them on social media, all of these big words used to basically describe the same role as something else – its madness”* (P.10). One participant recalled *“one day I was told ‘you’re going to be senior room leader’ I didn’t even know it was a thing”* (P.7) suggesting the use of title inflation.

“In a sea where everything is similar, it would and could influence you” (P.8)

Participants felt that creative recruitment strategies are commonly observed and implemented as the sector struggles to recruit and retain talent *“it’s a play on words to attract people”*, *“when advertising, you have to be creative”*, P.2, P.1 and P.7 felt that titles matter, for example, *“from my own experience, looking for jobs you do mostly look to see if it is an established title, if it is not appealing on the job advertisement... it could deter someone applying”*(P.6). From her recent experience applying for a role showcased, P.7 said, *“the job title and the responsibilities that come with it, just did not match the pay”*, suggesting some participants felt a lack of prestige and/or recognition associated with titles can be a possible recruitment barrier.

5.6.2 Pay:

Central to participants’ feelings was that increased status leads to a *“financial element”* (P.2) (P.7) (P.8) or *“better pay scale”* (P.3) (P.4) (P.5) (P.6). Given that pay in EEd is relatively low, several participants felt it was challenging for professionals to achieve long-term financial stability. Participants felt that the sector can be a financial burden, saying, for example, *“if I was starting off, trying to buy a house – it wouldn’t really happen”* (P.5), *“it’s impossible”* (P.1). Such opinions suggest possible reasons for current retention and recruitment challenges in the sector. Additionally, the feeling of inequity surfaced when participants compared other sectors who *“are doing less work for more money”*, *“seeing them [friends] in different sectors, different pay, different terms, some of them doing absolutely minimal work for maybe twice the salary”* (P.7). Many perceptions reflected P.2, who said *“so much input for little output”*,

possibly contributing to retention barriers and possibly leading to consideration of other careers with better terms and conditions of employment, and more flexibility.

5.6.3 Flexibility:

A lack of flexibility surrounding terms and conditions of employment appeared several times throughout the interviews. Four participants have children and all four experienced challenges in remaining in their leadership role due to the hours and workload being incompatible with family commitments, leading to three of four having to move toward higher-education roles offering flexible working conditions. Participants shared their experiences, *“particularly becoming a parent... impacted my ability to put that amount of energy into a role, mentally and physically... looking for part-time work with a senior role... I thought maybe this sector isn’t for me... EEd isn’t necessarily supportive of part-time work”* (P.7), *“working conditions – 40 hours a week, well 45 because your there over lunch – it’s tough going, emotionally draining... the demands, workload – it’s a hamster wheel”* (P.5). Findings suggest that flexibility may not be consistently available leading to retention challenges with leadership/management level employment.

5.7 Chapter Conclusion

Through the process of thematic analysis, key findings were interpreted regarding participants thoughts and feelings surrounding the influence of job titles on recruitment and retention in the Ed sector in Ireland. Several participants expressed strong feelings surrounding the importance of their PI, however, some participants felt that within the sector there was a professional imbalance. Such imbalance was thought to be related to societal views of the sector, including the views of family and friends, which participants felt was prompted by a lack of government understanding of the sector as a profession, and was enhanced by the lack of a clear professional identity. For participants, titles were thought to be highly valuable regarding credibility, progression and positively influence social status and self-esteem and particularly relevant for important financial decisions such as applying for a mortgage or getting car insurance. Participants shared their thoughts on title inflation, pay, and flexibility in the sector, and several participants perceived title inflation, pay, and flexibility as barriers to recruitment and retention in the sector. All significant findings were interpreted and reflected upon and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Chapter Introduction:

This chapter interprets and discusses key findings of the present study and explores how the findings contribute to knowledge gaps relating to the research topic. The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions and feelings of leadership employees toward job titles in the context of the EEd sector in Ireland.

By critically reflecting on the literature presented in chapter two, gaps in knowledge were evident, therefore the researcher's objectives were to:

1. To examine the perceptions of social identity through the lens of professional, collective and role identity theory to inform whether PI is understood collectively.
2. To examine the thoughts and feelings of EEd professionals towards the importance of job title/social status within one's career.
3. To better understand the significance and weighting of Job Titles to employees as a motivator and retention strategy.
4. To explore how EEd professionals think and feel about the role of job titles and career progression routes.

A series of ten semi-structured interviews took place, followed by thematic analysis, producing the following key findings in the form of themes and sub themes. Such findings will be applied to recent research to discover the existence of similarities or differences between the present study and previous research. To conclude, the strengths and limitations of the research will be explored.

6.2 Summary of Findings:

The participants revealed four key themes that will be discussed individually throughout the chapter. The key themes were construction of professional identity, societal views, values attributed to job titles and barriers. The data generated from ten semi-structured interviews revealed a consensus of a personal understanding of professional identity. Several participants felt that by valuing their role and having a high qualification level, they developed a sense of professional identity. Though, many participants felt there is a disconnect surrounding the collective understanding of professional identity across the EEd sector. Respondents

unanimously suggested that their identity is undervalued and misunderstood in the eyes of government and thus, society. When reflecting on their sense of professional identity and how this changed over time, several participants noted that their identity was often undervalued by the government and society. They also felt that job titles influence employee motivation as a signal of promotion contributing to elevated self-esteem and social status. Furthermore, the interviews revealed many barriers such as pay, lack of flexible employment and the use of title inflation.

6.3 Construction of professional identity:

Some participants indicated their sense of professional status was based on qualifications and experience being valued, however suggested a professional imbalance within the sector. Consistent throughout interviews was the sentiment that PI construction stems from personal values, beliefs and educational underpinning, aligning with Mao *et al* (2021) who discussed value being the cornerstone to PI construction. Noteworthy, the consensus among many participants was that qualifications and upskilling played a significant role in building their PI as it fosters a culture of progressive learning and development. This finding concurs with research conducted by Urban *et al.* (2017) where a review of international literature and policy documents supported conversations with key stakeholders and participants from a consultation event to discover that higher qualifications are directly linked with professionalism. Based on such findings, the implementation of a workforce development plan could be helpful for employees to develop a sense of professional identity.

Consistent with further findings, higher qualified EEd professionals showcase an increased positive outlook by describing their role professionally (Irvine, Lunn, Sumsion, Jansen, Sullivan and Thorpe, 2023). Thus, one could speculate that perceptions of the role are influenced by qualification level. Hence, the current findings make an important contribution to existing literature by increasing our understanding of professionalisation in this sector and suggest room to develop the collective identity of professionals. Moreover, to encourage professional development collectively, many participants referred to the need for flexibility in government initiatives due to workplace flexibility barriers consistent with a study conducted by Booth, Coldwell, Muller, Perry and Zuccollo (2021) whose participants offered solutions to such barriers for example, increased time allocated to professional development supported by flexibility.

Several participants noted that they see less qualified professionals undermining the perceived importance of the role, contributing to societal perceptions of roles in EEd as “just minding kids.” This underscores the importance several participants placed on qualifications. Such findings are consistent with Curristan, McGinnity, Russell and Smyth (2023) as the importance of qualifications emerged as a key theme and implied that a challenge would be to upskill the current workforce.

6.4 Societal Context:

Most participants articulated perceptions of being undervalued and unrecognized as a consistent theme. Such frustrations were illustrated by participants referring to the sector being viewed as an “*afterthought*” by the government regarding policy decisions which have a knock-on impact on societal perceptions. Similar themes were identified in recent research by Simmie and Murphy (2023) on professionalisation of early childhood education and care practitioners in Ireland, where a lack of societal respect highlighted the need for government representation in terms of working conditions.

These findings further align with Urban et al. (2017) study whereby a survey noted lack of respect in society for the role, thus, participants feeling undervalued and secondary to teachers. Such findings, supported by the research literature discussed in chapter two, imply that societal perceptions influence a person’s sense of PI and was further compounded by participants having to justify their rationale for remaining in the sector to family and friends. Such findings hint at cultural disconnect which occurs when skills and qualities of members are driven by external demands such as opinions. This supports P.7 who referenced family members saying, “*they couldn’t understand*” and questioned why she was in the sector “*they were like why is she doing it*”.

Whilst previous studies appear dated, calls for action are still relevant given the most recent submission for the Budget 2025, whereby advocates for policy change suggest elevating the status of EEd to that of primary education to aid workforce sustainability (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). This concurs with data collected as some participants highlight the uphill battle toward recognition as P.9 refers to her feelings of lack of social status “*if you think about core funding, my impression is that government still does not see us as professional – we are going to tell you how to operate your business because you need to be told, because your only childcare, what do you know, you don’t know how to run a business. They deem us incompetent in our role*” and P.3 who felt the lack of importance regarding notification of closures “*we were*

left to wonder if school closures included us ... but not primary or secondary schools". Implications of this evidence could contribute and support movement toward a sustained and valued workforce.

Furthermore, what is evident from the data is the breath in current nomenclature felt by participants which has raised feelings of uncertainty regarding titles as a clear identity and societal perceptions of the sector not being clearly defined. Many participants noted that collective identity could differ based on their employment, implying a range of diverse terminology used to represent the workforce. Findings corresponded with Simme and Murphy (2023) which followed a critical feminist inquiry of policy analysis and a purposive sample of 104 workers who partook in a national survey, 11 of which were interviewed. This study found that "job titles and responsibilities showed neither clarity nor coherence". Having clearly defined titles correlating to responsibilities could support the sector in recruiting the right people in addition to offering clearly defined career paths aiding retention.

6.5 Attributes of Job Titles:

The study aimed to better understand participants' feelings around job titles in relation to motivation and retention strategies. Findings indicate that participants felt that defined job titles were important as they were associated with respect regarding professional recognition and social status. Simmie and Murphy (2023) study identified similar themes, where recognition was a key concern, and titles were unclarified. Having undefined titles could contribute to retention challenges in the sector due to a want for progression or professional recognition.

Interestingly, findings show that participants felt that job titles were important to them in reaching a prestigious stage in their career i.e., management. This could imply that a need for power and need for achievement was a motivational factor for participants. This was similarly found within Jager, Born and Van der Molen (2017) who examined one's need for affiliation, power and achievement using a social relation analysis model to examine participants consensus.

These findings align with previous studies conducted by Otto *et al.* (2022) who found that increased social status i.e., job title, equaled promotion therefore was a motivational factor for employees. Supporting the previous, Herzberg (1959) asserts that recognition, growth and promotion are considered as motivational factors. The present study builds on foundational

theories of employee motivation and contributes to a clear understanding of present-day factors influencing employee motivation and retention.

Participants noted their feelings of credibility and a sense of achievement as they progressed in their career. Findings are consistent with literature in chapter two showcasing the clear link between social status and self-esteem (Siebert and Siebert, 2005). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs deems esteem needs being directly associated with promotion in terms of individuals needs to feel appreciated and have their status recognised, thus supporting participants desire for growth and progression. Based on respondents, limited opportunity for growth and development was felt to encourage turnover and retention challenges. Such findings are consistent with themes identified in Thorpe *et al.* (2023). The study found that those in managerial roles were more likely to stay. It was suggested that an element of this was due to career status. One could imply that employees 'move up and out'.

6.6 Barriers:

Participants reported a variety of opinions on the topic of pay. Participants discussed comparisons in pay toward other sectors, implying low pay status in the EEd sector. McDonald, Thorpe and Irvine (2018) study also identified pay as a key theme, suggesting that pay in the sector has been an ongoing struggle. Likewise, these findings were supported by Simmie and Murphy (2023) where remuneration surfaced as a threading theme and a significant issue. These results build on the existing evidence that pay is still a challenge in the EEd sector and imply that intention to leave an organisation is associated with pay.

Contradictory to the study findings, recent research in Australia by Thorpe and colleagues, on retention and professional wellbeing in the EEd sector (N=916 participants from national survey data), showed that only a small proportion of participants moved for pay, suggesting the importance placed on pay in the current study might be specific to our participants, and/or to the EEd Sector in Ireland (Thorpe, *et al.* 2023). This is possibly due to the further advancement in the EEd sector in Ireland in comparison to the UK as indicated by Curristan (2023). Thorpe's study also noted that whilst pay is a barrier, those in managerial roles were more likely to remain in the sector potentially due to the increased pay and social status associated with a management role. This too was reflected in the present study findings as participants expressed their drive and desire to reach a more prestigious role/title.

Further study findings indicate that participants noted their change in feelings toward job titles as their career progressed, implying that titles mattered to them greatly before reaching a leadership role. This finding diverges from current research as feelings surrounding this topic did not appear to be clearly documented in research in the EEd sector. Simmie and Murphy (2023) interviewed 11 EEd professionals in Ireland who referred to recognition, suggesting that job titles were unclear. It is possible that the phrasing of questions in the present study elicited such data.

Furthermore, participants indicated the use of job title inflation in attracting and retaining employees in the sector. It was felt that employees were attracted to prestigious roles and employers used job title inflation as a recruitment strategy. This finding aligns with Martinez *et al.* (2008) whose study shows that organisations tactically understand that job titles infer valued resources such as power and status. However, other participants felt that such recruitment strategies did not support retention, implying title inflation as a negative long-term strategy.

Further findings indicate that the EEd sector does not offer flexibility in working conditions to support for a work-life balance, leading to retention challenges. This finding aligns with research from Kutsyuruba, Godden and Bosica (2019) regarding teacher retention, as the findings suggest including cultivating a work-life balance was important. A similar theme was derived from Thorpe *et al.* (2020) relating to ‘life-course priorities’ which resonated with the present study participants relating to retention. This was particularly noticed by employees who have children, referring to the EEd sector as ‘*impossible*.’ As the study participants were all female, four of which had children, all four experienced such challenges. It is suggested that this perception does not reflect the whole EEd sector in Ireland however offers insights into feelings surrounding barriers.

6.7 Strengths and Limitations:

In keeping with the research methodology, this study explored perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles. The research sample size required to conduct thematic analysis was met. Though a limitation of this research is that the data are not generalisable to the wider population. Therefore, future research could conduct a larger scale quantitative study to confirm findings like Thorpe and colleagues in Australia which could provide data on the perceptions of job titles that are more generalisable to the wider population of leadership level Early Education employees in Ireland. Additionally,

as all participants were women, research questions exploring perceptions of barriers in the Early Education sector, may have led to responses more specific to women; thus, further research including men might be helpful to better understand perceptions of job titles in Early Education in men.

Moreover, more in dept research would be beneficial to capture varying opinions of the research phenomena such as conducting a cross-sectional study. Whilst this study derived clear themes', it would benefit the topic to support the findings by completing quantitative research. Accordingly, this method would alter the outcome of the study as it would provide insight into alternative views and contributing factors to the topic by gathering data from numerous samples.

Due to the lack of up-to-date research in Ireland addressing job titles as a form of PI, the results cannot confirm definitively whether job titles influence recruitment or retention of the EEd workforce. Nevertheless, this study has captured valid feelings and thoughts of EEd professionals therefore has the capacity to contribute toward future research surrounding the research topic. Furthermore, an identified strength of this study therefore is that the study itself was an original contribution to the knowledge surrounding job titles and JTI use in Ireland as a strategy to attract and retain employees in the EEd sector. This was evident given the researcher developed their own research questions offering a differentiation factor to the study. Furthermore, another strength of the study is the use of widely established and proven qualitative methods such as thematic analysis and the use of sample size that is appropriate for those methods.

6.8 Future research:

The study participants all had experience in leadership positions in the EEd sector, therefore it is suggested that further studies be completed with those in the earlier stages of their career. By doing so may capture differing feelings and thoughts pertaining to the research topic. Similarly, this study involved participants from both the public and private EEd sector. Consequently, further studies could be conducted singly with organisations. In doing so, such research may have the potential to offer further insights into any differences or similarities in the use of job titles to attract and retain employees in different areas of the sector. It also has the potential to showcase differing hierarchical structures and avenues for career progression.

Further avenues for research could include conducting longitudinal research. This would provide insight into how participants feelings and thoughts on Job Titles evolve over time.

Some participants noted that roles and responsibilities did not transfer from service to service, therefore, a further research question, such as “Tell me about your job title and responsibilities” could be asked. Whilst through quantitative methods, this would encourage participants to discuss elements of their roles related to their job titles, thus enabling the researcher to compare responsibilities across job titles. To complete the suggested study, findings would be solidified by completing quantitative research looking at correlations and relationships.

6.9 Chapter Conclusion:

This chapter interpreted the key discussion points generated from the research findings undertaken by thematic analysis. Literature presented in chapter two provided insight into the key research areas, however discussion of the findings provided further insight into the feelings and thoughts of professionals in the Early Education sector. Such feelings revealed an understanding of professional development, however, notes pervasive feeling of being undervalued by society. The research underscores the role of job titles as motivation factors by participants linking job titles to achievement and social status. Whilst inflated job titles were recognised as a recruitment strategy, the long-term efficacy notes the sustainability of such strategies. The discussion also highlighted barriers impeding the retention of employees in the sector such as pay, flexibility and JTI. Whilst limitations of this research were depicted, the exploratory nature of the study allows for insight into participants thoughts and feelings and can offer contributions to larger scale discussions on such topics.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Chapter Introduction:

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of leadership level Early Education employees in Ireland towards job titles. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis performed on transcripts. Four themes were identified: construction of professional identity, societal context, values of job titles, and barriers, highlighting several challenges faced by employees in this sector and supporting prior research.

7.2 Recommendations for Practice, Policy and Research

Consequent to the present study and previously completed studies including, Simmie and Murphy (2023), Urban (2017) and Thorpe, *et al.* (2020) recommendations are made that have the potential to contribute to changes toward practice, policy and research. Such recommendations will include possible timelines and financial costs associated with implementing the suggestions whilst being aware of priorities and potential resource implications.

7.2.1 Practice Recommendations:

Suggestions:

- Review ‘in house’ pay scales based on both qualifications and experience. Whilst the sector is encouraged to drive a graduate led workforce, those with lower level of qualification may feel ‘stagnant and underappreciated’. Therefore, it is suggested to acknowledge experience for professionals who were in the sector prior to the introduction of the planned ‘graduate led workforce’ to equal graduate pay levels.
- A consistent approach to recruitment initiatives. Often organisations are in ‘fight or flight’ mode when recruiting due to sector pressures. Whilst challenging, it is suggested to remain consistent with the inhouse pay scales as to be fair and equitable to current employees

Timeline and estimated costs:

- This suggestion has the possibility to be implemented immediately with little cost implication. To implement such a structure, it is recommended that services liaise with

a business support mentor to remain objective and detached. The cost of this service is approximately €500 for this single service.

7.2.2 Policy Recommendations:

Suggestions:

- To address PI and societal understandings of PI, it is suggested that public awareness campaigns are prioritised to highlight the importance of the EEd sector in terms of the education that is provided.
- It is further suggested to alter the terminology of ‘care’ being a focal point to depict the sector and emphasising the ‘education’ element first. This would require consultation at policy level.

Timeline and estimated cost:

Given the urgency of these suggestions, a prompt response would benefit the sector, however the researcher understands the limitations in implementation at policy level. Therefore, it may be possible for this to be rolled out in time for the Budget 2025. The cost of such a suggestion depends on the level at which it would be rolled out.

Suggestion:

- Further develop a universal clearly defined career path shared in a government publication ensuring that it is universal across both the public and private sector and only alters based on organisation size.

Timeline and estimated cost:

Given that this change is at policy level and would require thorough consultation, it is suggested that this be included in the recent workforce development plan 2022-2028, aiming to be implemented thoroughly within 2 years. This would allow time and resources to alter workplace terminology and re-define hierarchical structures. The cost associated with this suggestion would be on two levels, government level which could be planned for in Budget 2025, and service level which would cost approximately 1 hour per employee to issue addendum to contracts regarding the title.

Suggestion:

- Fund services for investing in a thorough induction programme ensuring that career opportunities are made known, and access routes are shared with new employees.

Timelines and estimated cost:

This could be implemented imminently using little resource time, as it could be added to an induction policy and implemented with ease. This would only incur the cost of the time to change organisation policy.

Suggestion:

- Requirement to complete alternative work placement when upskilling. It is suggested that investment in funding to conduct alternative placement opportunities whilst in full-time employment may entice engagement in professional development.

Timelines and estimated cost:

This has the potential to be implemented for the commencement of the programme year, September 2024. The estimated costs are based on the average 40-hour week wage in the sector, i.e., approx. €500 per employee.

Suggestion:

- Consider other wages to augment wages i.e., pension schemes.

Timelines and estimated cost:

Given the nature of such policy change, it is suggested that first this would require intense consultation from governing bodies, thereafter, strict policy development, and further implementation. Therefore, this is a projected recommendation for possible implementation by 2028 coinciding with the workforce development plan. The cost of this could be based on a percentage of the living wage in Ireland.

7.2.3 Research Recommendations:

Suggestions:

- Due to the lack of research of JTI and its significance to EEd professionals in Ireland, future research in this area is warranted.
- Little empirical evidence has examined the progressive change in PI over time, therefore it is suggested that longitudinal research is undertaken to monitor the troughs and peaks of PI over time.
- Longitudinal data could be collected in nationally representative samples.
- Quantitative measures of perceptions of job titles, such as responses on validated surveys using Likert scales, etc., could be compared statistically before and after notable events (e.g. before and after a promotion), using statistical methods such as paired samples t-tests.
- Whilst the sample of the present study is comprised of both the public and private EEd sector, the topic could be further explored singly and quantitatively to ascertain whether there are significant differences in responses.
- The sample of this study is female orientated, a further avenue to explore would be to focus the same study with a male demographic.
- The present study demographic was on professionals who had advanced in their career therefore it is suggested that research is completed with those in the primary stages of their career.

7.3 Chapter Conclusion:

This chapter concluded the overall position of the research whilst reminding the reader of the aim of the study, and the research objectives. By critically applying theory and concepts, key literature was studied, thus, the research was able to sustain engagement throughout. This allowed the researcher to identify gaps in knowledge pertaining to the research topic, illustrating the importance of the topic and identifying research objectives. By completing ten semi-structured interviews and following up by RTA, the research was interpreted, and findings were presented creatively drawing on insightful limitations and implications of the study. Key findings consisted of the construction of PI, societal context, attributes to job titles and barriers,

all of which were discussed in connection with supportive or conflicting literature. The study concluded by offering recommendations for practice, policy and research. Given that a limitation of this study was that the demographic was solely female and conducted across both the public and private sector, further research has been suggested in this light. This may contribute to the research further.

What's in a title?

Personal Learning Statement (CIPD)

“She believed she could, so she did” R.S. Grey

Being a naturally reflective person, the task of documenting a personal learning statement was more challenging than expected. To meaningfully reflect on the past two years, a wide range of thoughts, emotions and feelings surfaced. If one feeling had to be chosen, it would certainly be - achievement!

Whilst engaging in many Human Resources Management (HRM) roles and responsibilities over the years (mostly by default), it was felt that gaining an understanding of the theoretical concepts and underpinning research would be an asset to the role of the researcher in current and future career aspirations. This became particularly relevant a few years ago, having had first-hand experience when the indispensable value that HRM knowledge and documentation was utilized and further validated. This is when the interest sparked.

Initially, the intention to participate in further study was daunting, however after careful consideration given to the module content and teaching styles employed within the Postgraduate Diploma in HRM with NCI, was the deciding factor to embark on this learning journey and a steppingstone to immerse into a research study pertaining to a lived topic of interest.

The process of formulating a research topic was everlasting, with many changes, alterations and sifting through numerous articles and research papers whilst not losing sight of personal interests. Initially, the intention was to gain insight into the lived experiences of EEd professionals and their understanding the influence of job titles on recruitment and retention. However, what stood out was the continuous misunderstanding of professional identity with many participants deliberating their understanding of collective identity due to the several titles implemented in the sector.

Having completed this study, I have been afforded the opportunity to develop my self-awareness and see challenges faced from a different lens which has inspired me to refocus my attention toward re-developing recruitment and retention strategies which I will implement in my current and future career. Who knows what's next, possibly further research!

Appendices

Appendix 1: Initial participant sourcing



The poster has a light orange background. At the top right, there is a purple abstract shape. In the center, the title 'Research Participation Needed' is written in large, bold, black font, with 'Research Participation' underlined. Below it, 'MA Human Resource Management' is written in a smaller, italicized font. To the right of the title is a tilted document icon with the word 'RESEARCH' at the top and several lines of placeholder text. Below the title, the word 'Topic?' is underlined. The main topic is stated in bold black text: 'Are Job Titles influencing the recruitment and retention of supervisory/management Level employees in the Early Education sector?'. In the bottom left corner, there is a lightbulb icon with a pink base and a blue glow, with the word 'Idea' written in a cursive font next to it. In the bottom right corner, the word 'Criteria;' is followed by a bulleted list: '• Supervisory/Management Level' and '• 5+ years experience'. Below that, the word 'Get Involved:' is followed by a bulleted list: '• Message me directly or;' and '• Email: x22148710@student.ncirl.ie'.

Research Participation Needed

MA Human Resource Management

Topic?

Are Job Titles influencing the recruitment and retention of supervisory/management Level employees in the Early Education sector?

Criteria;

- Supervisory/Management Level
- 5+ years experience

Get Involved:

- Message me directly or;
- Email: x22148710@student.ncirl.ie

Appendix 2: Pilot and research questions

Appendix 2: Pilot & Interview Questions

Welcome:

(Thank candidate for participating in the study, re-iterate the purpose of the study and remind candidate that they can choose to not respond to any questions they wish)

Code	
Black font	Topic
Purple font	Semi-structured interview questions
Blue font	Researchers focus questions

Pilot Interview Questions	Interview Questions
Demographic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Qualifications?<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What qualification level do you currently hold?2. Role/Title: What is your current role/title?<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Experience: How long have you held that title/position?3. Experience? – Tell me a bit about your career to date?<ul style="list-style-type: none">- How long have you been in Education- What are the key events in your career?	Demographic: <ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Age:2. Gender:3. Role/Title: What is your current role/title?4. Experience: How long have you held that title/position?4. Qualifications?5. What qualification level do you currently hold?5. Experience?6. How long have you been in Early Education?
Titles:	Objective: Is Professional Identity understood?

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your opinion on professional/role identity of Early Education professionals? - How do you feel your professional identity is understood both inside and outside the sector? 2. What does having a 'Title' mean to you? - Do you feel there is a connection between your title and your status/hierarchical position? - Do you feel there is a stigma associated with Job Titles? 3. Has your title changed over time? If so, can you explain how? 4. Does your Title match your role? If not, how would you change it? 5. What is your view on the statement 'Job Titles influence social status'? 6. What is your view on 'Senior sounding titles' i.e., Lead, Executive, Chief, Director, Curriculum Developer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. What does professional identity mean to you? 7. Pro's & Con's? 8. How have you constructed this view? 9. Contributing factors? 10. How has your professional ID evolved over time? 7. How do you feel your professional identity is understood both inside and outside the sector? 11. Has anything contributed to changing this?
<p>Hierarchy/Status</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about the hierarchical structure in your organisation. 	<p>Objective: Importance of Job titles</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. What does having a 'Title' mean to you?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does this structure relate to the titles people hold? <p>2. What are your thoughts and opinions on a clearly defined hierarchical or organisational structure?</p>	<p>12. What do you feel is the connection between Job Titles and social Status/Hierarchical position?</p> <p>13. In your opinion how do job titles affect the perception of roles and responsibilities of employees? Is this the case for your title and role?</p> <p>9. In your experience, how do job titles relate to progression both inside and outside your organisation?</p> <p>14. Can you share with me what the progression route looks like for you within your organisation & how do to access it?</p>
<p>Motivation:</p> <p>1. In your opinion, do you feel that a Job Title is a form of motivation?</p>	<p>Objectives: Titles as motivators?</p> <p>1. In your opinion, how does a Job Title motivate professionals?</p> <p>2. In your opinion how important are job titles in attracting and retaining employees in the EY sector?</p> <p>15. How do you think titles are perceived by others?</p> <p>16. Title inflation?</p> <p>17. Can you describe the Job Titles used within your organisation to differentiate employees from one another?</p>
<p>Career Path/Progression Route</p> <p>1. In relation to your position, are you aware of a clear progression route?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If so, what does this look like? - How do you access this? 	<p>Objective: Retention</p> <p>1. If you were changing your career, what would motivate and attract you to apply for a specific role?</p>

<p>2. If you were changing your career, what would attract you to a role? (Salary, Responsibility, Role, Title)</p>	<p>18. (Salary, Responsibility, Role, Title, Progression)</p> <p>2. In your professional opinion and experience, what are the contributing factors that cause employees to leave organisations?</p> <p>19. Can you elaborate on reasons why employees have left your organisation over recent times?</p>
<p>Leavers</p> <p>1. In your professional opinion and experience, what are the contributing factors that employees leave organisations?</p>	<p>Conclude:</p> <p>1. Of all we have discussed, what element sticks out to you and why?</p> <p>- Would you like to add anything to the interview?</p>
<p>Conclude:</p> <p>1. Of all we have discussed, what element sticks out to you and why?</p> <p>- Would you like to add anything to the interview at this time?</p>	

Thanks:

(Thank candidate for participating in the study, re-iterate the purpose of the study and remind candidate that they can choose retract their participation)

Appendix 3: Updated participant sourcing

MA Human Resource Management

Research Participation Needed

30-40 min interview



Topic?

Are Job Titles influencing the recruitment and retention of senior/**leadership Level** employees in the **Early Education sector?**

Criteria;

- Willing to engage in a semi-structured interview via Teams or in person.
- In a leadership style role
- 3+ years experience

Get Involved:

- Message me directly or;
- Email: x22148710@student.ncirl.ie



Appendix 4: Information sheet

Participant Information Sheet

'The exploratory analysis on the perceived influence of Job Titles and the impact this has on the recruitment of senior/leadership level employees in the Early Education Sector in Ireland'

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you should understand why the research is being explored and what your contribution would entail. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and of course, I encourage you to ask any questions you may have whilst deciding whether to participate.

Researcher Information and Research Background:

Let me introduce myself, my name is Leanne Byrne, and I am a Masters Student in the National College of Ireland studying Human Resource Management. I am conducting research as part of a course of study in partial fulfillment of a MA in Human Resource Management (NFQ Level 9). I would like to explore the perceived influence that Job Titles have on the successful recruitment of senior/leadership level employees within the Early Education sector in Ireland. I am exploring the chosen topic as I have a keen interest in the recruitment and retention of professionals in the Early Education sector and given the staffing crisis in the sector at present, felt that this topic was worthy of further investigation.

What to expect:

If you chose to participate in this research study, a semi-structured interview would take place in person or via teams – whichever is best suited to your schedule. This interview will last approx. 45 minutes and with your consent, will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. After transcription, all audio recordings will be permanently deleted, and transcriptions will be stored on a password protected file in accordance with the National College of Ireland's Ethics policy. Any identifiable information within transcripts will be deleted and will not be used within the study. We will discuss topics such as: professional identity, social status, job titles and retention.

Participant Selection:

Firstly, I want to extend my thanks to you for expressing an interest in this study. The selection criteria for this study are that an employee within the Early Education sector would be/have been in a leadership style role with 3 or more years' experience. For this reason, you have successfully been selected to participate.

Choice to participate:

Whilst you have been selected to participate in this research study based on your initial expression of interest, this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse participation at any stage of the study and can refuse to answer any questions if you may wish. You also have the right to withdraw from the study completely without any consequence.

Potential Risks and Benefits of Participation:

Whilst this research is not personal in nature, you may choose to discuss aspects of your role/title that have value and meaning to you. With this can come passion, morals, and values – therefore I would like to draw your attention to the possibility of minor emotional distress. If you experience any of the feelings or thoughts associated with psychological distress, I have provided you with a de-briefing sheet where you will find relevant support points. You will also find my supervisor's contact details should you wish to discuss further.

Confidential Participation:

As shared with you on your consent form, your anonymity is of utmost importance to me. For this reason, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. I would also like to highlight that any non-anonymized data included on the signed consent form and audio recordings will be collected and retained as part of the research process.

If for any reason, the researcher has a strong belief that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either, you the participant or another individual (e.g., physical, emotional or sexual abuse, child protection concerns, rape, self-harm suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious

crime has been committed, the researcher is obliged to break the confidentiality agreement and report as appropriate as a mandated person.

Data collection, Protection, and Storage:

The information you provide during the semi-structured interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Once the transcription is complete, the audio itself will be permanently deleted. Any identifying information in the transcriptions will also be permanently deleted. The remaining transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file, on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the researcher and supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy.

Results of the Study:

It is the hopes of the researcher that after submission and grading, the final research product will be published on the National College of Ireland's database.

Further Information:

If you would like to discuss this research further, or would like to receive a copy of the final product please contact me directly via email: x22148710@student.ncirl.ie

If you would like to discuss any element of this study with my supervisor, you can contact David Mothersill via email: David.Mothersill@ncirl.ie

Thank you.

Appendix 5: Informed consent form

Informed Consent Form

Degree Title:	MA Human Resource Management
Research Study Title:	<i>'Exploring the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles: A qualitative research study using semi structured interviews and thematic analysis'</i>
Researchers Name:	Leanne Byrne
University:	National College of Ireland

To be completed by the participant prior to engaging in the study:

- I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any point and can refuse to answer any question without any consequence.
- I fully understand that I have the option to withdraw permission of data usage from my interview within two weeks after the interview.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study shared with me and have received a supporting information document for my own reference.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions before the commencement of the interview.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree with my interview being audio-recorded and later transcribed.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that the information gathered by way of audio-recording will be treated confidentially, stored securely and any distinguished extracts will remain anonymous.
- I understand that distinguished extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertations itself, conference presentations and published papers.
- I understand that this research study may be published and any report on the results of this research that my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a password protected file on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the student and Supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy. This information will be retained until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Research Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

*I believe that the participant has signed this document in reflection of their informed consent to participate in this research study.

Appendix 6: Familiarisation

really feel that's a real motivational factor, but in terms of growth opportunities and progression and associated perhaps with titled roles, perhaps is something that people strive for, but not for the terminology associated with it, but for the experience and the ability to influence change and help underpin quality within settings. Perhaps from a societal point of view. People feel that you know such roles are such titles associated with management, perhaps offer more you know. What would you say? Credit perhaps, or something to their old, but I don't believe the majority of people in the LC sector that the title is. What really motivates them and what really matters to? Them.

00:05:24

So 2 then in your opinion, how important are job titles in attracting and retaining employees in the EY sector again linked to the last one, I really don't feel it's it goes any way in terms of Average reducing staff turnover or you know, attracting new staff members. I feel people are attracted to management styles, management structures and job opportunities, growth opportunities and professional development as opposed to titles as such and so.

I don't think like the terminology associated with titles is something that really would attract somebody to a particular role.

So the job titles that were used within our organisation, so everybody was classified as an early years educator and that was termed from everybody that worked directly or had worked directly with children. So in terms of the nursery classes, the junior preschool classes, the toddler classes, the senior preschool classes and the school age services, everybody was considered.

And early years educator. And then in terms of management structure, we often refer to ourselves and we're encouraged to refer to ourselves as early years educators as well. But for the division of roles, there was a manager who oversaw the day-to-day running. So it was very much like a leadership role. Then there was a supervisor. And then there. Was myself in terms of quality assurance. But again, it was more so in terms of the division of the tasks that we would do as opposed to, you know, hierarchy structure. Everybody still got in and did the same work and good worked to support the same goals.

00:07:12

IN YOUR OPINION HOW DOES A JOB TITLE MOTIVATE PROFESSIONALS? I don't really feel that in the ELC sector for the majority of people that a job title motivates professionals, and I think they're either committed to the work or they're not. It's not an easy sector to be in. So if you're striving for, you know, a title about your name. I don't really feel that. That's. Obvious or applicable in the services that I have worked in anyway, maybe it? Is for some people. But I feel the demands of the job and the complexity of the job, the challenges that are faces and perhaps a lot of people are, you know, not clued into it at all. But it's not the easiest of professions to be in, and I don't think any of that is alleviated by Association with the title.

00:07:55

So for that, if you were or have changed your career what would motivate and attract you to apply for a specific job? And so I have somewhat changed my career in that I no longer working directly in the ESE service and that was largely down to How many commitments and personal

pay. So that really when family my family grew and the commitments and requirements that came with additional Children to look after. And I feel that that kind of was the motivating factor in how it could work. You know more efficiently and still, I suppose, bringing an income as well. So that kind of led to the Change of my career. But it wasn't the only factor. It wasn't something that I would enter into if I didn't really enjoy as well, and I've always wanted to strive for quality and make sure that services are underpinned by quality provision and practise, and in having an assisting role in The development of new early years educators and being involved in their training and influencing their understanding of theory and knowledge, and how it to apply that practise and that size was what motivates me to work in this career in that I feel I can successfully train and new ELC emerging educators. To carry out quality work when they enter the workforce.

00:09:48

So in your experience, how do you think the job titles relate to progression both inside and outside your organisation? Can you share with me what the progression route would look like for you within your organisation and how that was accessed?

00:10:02

So I think new recruits were were hired for the role of early years educators and where people displayed Knowledge, capability, interest and qualifications necessary with those more management or administrative roles, and they were then approached by management or management, would welcome their suggestions and You know, willingness to engage in additional duties and that's how I always suppose I started. I could see that there Was. It was a big service and that. And it was hard for the one person to kind of keep tabs on all different areas. So I kind of proposed a new structure, I suppose, in terms of compliance and overseeing and, you know, regulatory of Different inspection frameworks. And how that could be divided up? And so you know, it was taken on board, it was considered, and the role was offered because I was seeing to have the necessary skills and qualities required to achieve it. So in terms of, like, the hiring of staff, I suppose area new educators always kind of started. Five and classroom leaders or assistant leaders and worked their way up.

It was very, very rare and I believe to be very, very rare across the sector that a new individual would be hired for a leadership role where a setting was unknown, where they were unknown to a certain setting or, you know, they didn't come highly recommended in some capacity. I feel having like a stranger come into that role. And it's not something that's typical in term. The more desired route is progression upwards.

00:11:50

So in your professional opinion and experiences, what are the contributing factors that cause employees to leave early education settings? I suppose at the minute in terms of the Current. Climate and the demands of the work, coupled with the pay scale and requires a lot of people to put in a huge amount of hours, a huge amount of effort and For less work or less effort in different sectors and they can earn just as much. So it's a. Difficult setting to be in governed by so many rules and regulations that don't always allow for the balance of, you know, work life, relationship and so I Feel that that balance is more easily struck in less stressful jobs that pay

Appendix 7: 'Memoing' technique

for the better. And I have brought a more professional and it caused the qualification in the last 20 years. It could, you know, old school children need to be told children need to be given this information in our job to, you know, it is more in the right direction. They're like the change. Yeah. Do we? Are we seen as professionals within the wide community – I would say is lacking – it's not there yet – its frustrating.

00:04:25 Speaker 1

Yeah. So do you think that you kind of answer the next one as well. So professional identity understood both inside and outside the sector. Do you think that differs?

00:04:37 Speaker 2

Yes definitely different – it is still an uphill battle. If you think about core funding, my impression is the government still does not see us as a professional – we are going to tell you how to operate your business because you need to be told, because you're only childcare, what do you know, you don't know how to run a business. They deem us as incompetent in our role.

The government wanted it to be run by the provider but they want to be the key drivers, don't want to pay staff, have the liability but have the glory – it is not on an even footing.

inside the sector, so from an early age professional to another, do you feel that special identity is shared and understood in that sense I do think its getting there and I do think a lot of professionals now and a lot of people do see themselves as teachers, they see their making a difference, the role they play on development.

I think now more so in my new place is a lot more respect for each other. There are still gaps though. I think that comes down to, unfortunately, when people qualified and what level they qualified so.

almost probably I would say 75% of the workforce are seeing themselves professionally and capable but they're still 25% are happy to continue and they want to stay where they are. Its getting there but not fully.

what would having a title mean to you?

I think for me personally a title, is important and it gives me credibility in my role and I think when I think back to all those years ago my first started a title. There was no title you were considered a creche worker. You were considered, you know, all you do is stay with children. I didn't like happened back then and I wasn't proud of the work I did. It was a long time where I was I didn't feel Pride in my work.

But now I do. Yeah. Absolutely have come from being more professionalised. I feel like more of a Professional in my role. It has come down to the professional And come down to the policy

lack of Recognition

Progres but still gaps

qualifications

The really different types and like you said, they come to a different reality or qualifications. Yeah, yeah.

I know stations as well, like 20 years and doesn't get the same pay as me. Like I'm like six or seven years more. Than half high. Qualification. So you kind of have to match.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

I have exactly. I think that's a big thing in childcare qualifications and someone has like 20 years of experience and has a level 5. And then here's me. That has like a level aged and only seven years of experience, but I've worked hard in college, but they worked hard in childcare just. I'm like, yeah, yes, I'm kind of like exactly is kind of there is like, yes, trying to strike that balance and be difficult.

Definitely you know. The bone of contention in the sector, but it is changing, you know, with the ERO rates are increasing on the 24th of June, 24th of June this year. Yeah, that's amazing. Yeah. So that's good.

So in, in your opinion, do you think job titles are important to attract new employees?

Speaker

Have.

Yes, I think so. So I don't know, like obviously it depends like in each like company cause. I would apply for like a management job if it's like listed as a management job, or like if they listed as like an and supervisor or like a leader might not. So it is, it does kind of have an impact on people and this is just what like yeah it like kind it is what it is. You know exactly exactly.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go. Level forget it goes with the social aspect of like like I found myself kind of being more kind of proud of my job right now. But like before, you just a childcare worker, blah, blah blah, yeah. Where now you can go and explain like what you do and. Exactly. Goes into it and what you do for the company and that's your. It's just more motivating. I think that there's definitely there's definitely.

Yeah. And have you noticed in the sector at all any sort of typical inflation, so fancy sounding titles and so?

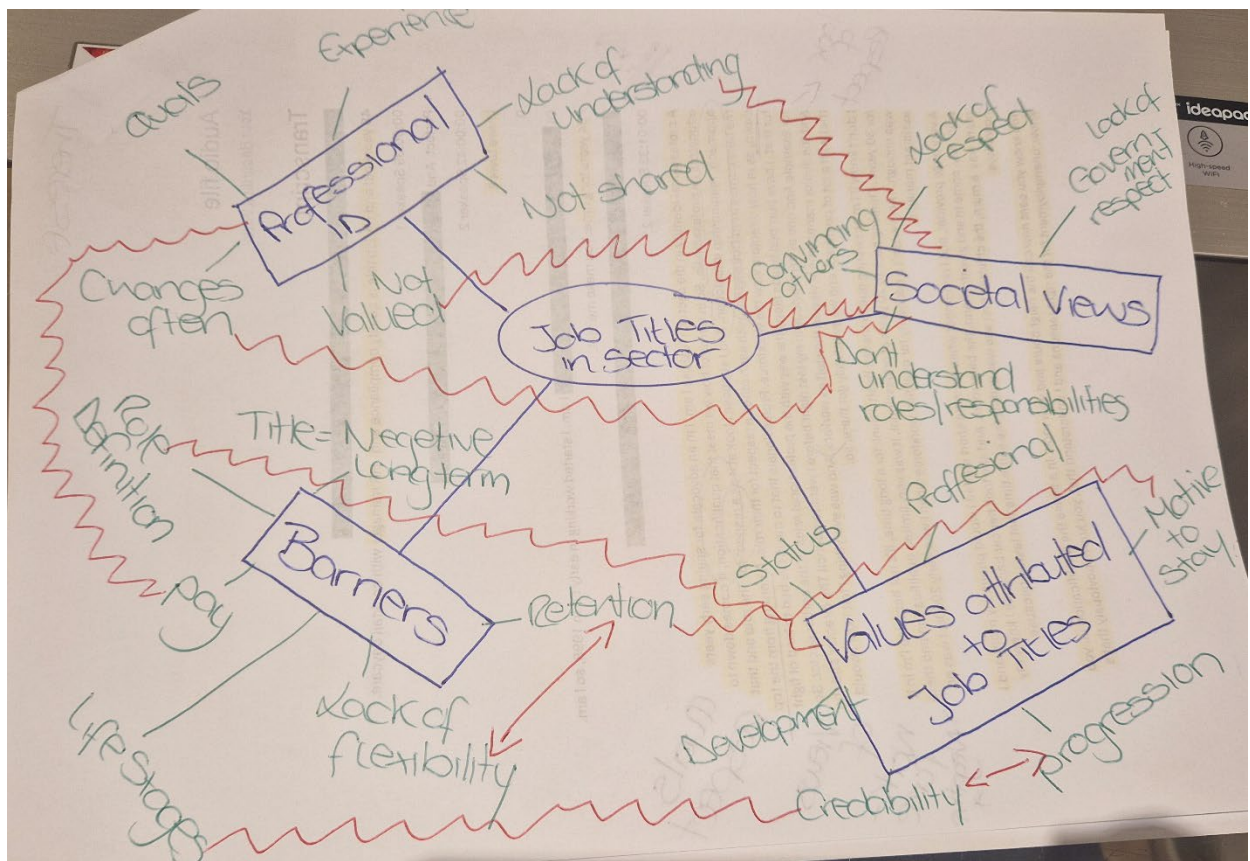
Yeah, you're aware of or something that you've seen. I haven't seen that, actually. OK, I've seen like after school coordinator just let, like, announce people just naming it like fancy.

Why do you think that?

Appendix 8: Progress of codes

Theme/Sub- Theme	Evidence
1. Construction of Professional Identity - Qualifications & experience - Disjointed understanding of professionalism/Lack of shared understanding - Changing nature of identity	- Importance of qualifications & experience in shaping PI - Roles/Responsibilities - Differing opinions across the sector - Varying titles – misunderstood - Perception of value - <u>Self respect</u>
2. Societal Context - Questionable profession (family) - Government - Changing nature of identity	- Convincing others - Lack of government recognition - Questionable profession – ‘just minding kids’ - Under-valued - Un-appreciated
3. Values attributed to Titles - Titles as motivators - Progression	- Status - Professionalisation - Understood universally - <u>Credability</u>
4. Barriers - Lack of flexibility- Moving up and out? - Pay - Title inflation – negative impact on long term retention.	- Lack of role definition - Lack of respect - Life stages – Mortgage/Car Insurance - Pay - Lack of flexibility - Demands?? - Unsupportive of progression/Differing progression routes/stages

Appendix 9: Mind-map



Appendix 10: Interest limitation

Research Participants										
Cancelled										
Not Suitable										
To Show										
Completed										
No.	Code	Interview Date	Age	Gender	Role/Title	Qualification	Experience	Shared	Transcription Complete & Debriefing	
1		Tues 23rd April @ 5.30pm		Female	Deputy Manager		30 Years			
2	P1	Thursday 09 May @ 6pm	31	Female	Manager	Level 8	13 Years	Yes		
4				Female						
5		Thursday 25 April @ 5.30pm		Female						
6	P2	22/05/2024 @ 8pm	33	Female	Manager and Lecturer	Level 8	12 years	Yes		
7	P3	Thursday 06/06/2024 @ 6pm	27	Female	Team Lead	Level 8	7 years	Yes		
8	P4	Wednesday 12 June 2024 @ 6.15pm	26	Female	Quality Mentor	Level 8	5 years	Yes		
9	P5	Monday 17 June @ 7pm	42	Female	Lead Educator	Level 8 & Level 9	5 years	Yes		
10	P6	Wednesday 05 June 2024 @ 7pm	36	Female	Manager	Level 8	13 years	Yes		
11				Female	Owner/Manager	Level 8				
12										
13	P7	Wednesday 19th June @ 7pm	34	Female	Manager	Level 8 & Level 9	34 years	Yes		
14	P8	Thurs 27th June - 2pm approx	36	Female	Deputy Manager	Level 7	14 years	Yes		
15	P9	Fri 28 June @ 11am	48	Female	Practice Manager	Level 8	26 years	Yes		
16	P10	Thurs 27th June 6pm approx	38	Female	Manager and Lecturer	Level 8 & Level 9	12 years	Yes		

Appendix 11: Ethical application

National College of Ireland

Human Participants Ethical Review Application Form

All parts of the below form must be completed. However, in certain cases where sections are not relevant to the proposed study, clearly mark NA in the box provided.

Part A: Title of Project and Contact Information

Name

Leanne Byrne

Student Number (if applicable)

22148710

Email

X22148710@student.ncirl.ie /

Status:

Undergraduate ☐

Postgraduate ☒

Staff ☐

Supervisor (if applicable)

David Mothersill - david.mothersill@ncirl.ie

Title of Research Project

'Exploring the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees within the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles: A qualitative research study using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis'

Category into which the proposed research falls (see guidelines)

Research Category A ☒

Research Category B ☐

Research Category C ☐

Have you read the NCI Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants?

Yes ☒

No ☐

Please indicate any other ethical guidelines or codes of conduct you have consulted.**Has this research been submitted to any other research ethics committee?**

Yes ☐

No ☒

If yes please provide details, and the outcomes of this process, if applicable:

Is this research supported by any form of research funding?

Yes ☐

No ☒

If yes please provide details, and indicate whether any restrictions exist on the freedom of the researcher to publish the results:

Part B: Research Proposal

Briefly outline the following information (not more than 200 words in any section).

Proposed starting date and duration of project:

February 2024-August 2024

The rationale for the project:

The Early Education sector has been under immense pressure in recent years in relation to the recruitment and retention of its workforce. This issue has resulted in great strain and as a result, sustainability of services has been heavily publicised, thus, reflecting changes of policy and investment at government level in a bid to alleviate pressures – though the issue is still a major concern.

It has been observed that the recruitment of a more experienced employee i.e., at a supervisory/management level, is most challenging as it seems that when one is searching for a new position, the chance to develop and progress is of high importance, thus we see a workforce where Job Title/Status is a pre-determining factor of the successful recruitment of higher skilled, more experienced employees, though, without the skill set associated with the role. This is leading to issues and challenges particularly within small and medium-sized Early Education services as the hierarchical structure is more narrow, thus internal progression opportunities are a challenge. Given recruitment still being a challenge, we see inflated job titles being implemented to attract and recruit successfully.

The research aims and objectives :

This proposed research study aims to conduct an exploratory analysis of the perceived influence of Job Titles on the recruitment of senior level employees within the Early Education sector in Ireland. By conducting interviews with those who have more than 5 years' experience and who are at supervisory/management level, the researcher's objectives are to:

- 1) To examine social identity through the lens of professional, collective and role identity theory.
- 2) To examine/identify the importance of job title/social status within one's career within the Early Education sector.
- 3) To understand the significance and weighting of Job Titles to potential employees as a motivator.

By gaining insight into the above, the researcher hopes to further inform/educate CEO's Managers and recruiters in the Early Education sector of the need to have a universal defined career path and progression route for professionals in the sector.

The research design:

The researcher will take an ontological position (what is true/real and the nature of reality) of a constructivist paradigm as to explore participants opinions, views, and personal experiences. Taking this position to research, determines that the researcher implementing an interpretivist through a qualitative research method.

It is also important for the researcher to build on the epistemological position of research to determine how participants know what they know. It was too decided to take an interpretivist

approach as it allows the researcher to explore, understand and interpret meaning from participants responses. Naturally the research lends itself to being inductive in nature.

The research sample and sample size:

Please indicate the sample size and your justification of this sample size. Describe the age range of participants, and whether they belong to medical groups (those currently receiving medical treatment, those not in remission from previous medical treatment, those recruited because of a previous medical condition, healthy controls recruited for a medical study) or clinical groups (those undergoing non-medical treatment such as counselling, psychoanalysis, in treatment centres, rehabilitation centres, or similar, or those with a DSM disorder diagnosis).

The research sample is proposed to be conducted with the following:

1. Supervisory/Management Level employees (with 5 or more years' experience) in the Early Education Sector

The sample size is planned for a minimum of 10 individuals to ascertain a variety of thoughts, feelings and perspectives.

If the study involves a MEDICAL or CLINICAL group, the following details are required:

- a) **Do you have approval from a hospital/medical/specialist ethics committee?**
If YES, please append the letter of approval. Also required is a letter from a clinically responsible authority at the host institution, supporting the study, detailing the support mechanisms in place for individuals who may become distressed as a result of participating in the study, and the potential risk to participants.
If NO, please detail why this approval cannot or has not been sought.
- b) **Does the study impact on participant's medical condition, wellbeing, or health?**
If YES, please append a letter of approval from a specialist ethics committee.
If NO, please give a detailed explanation about why you do not expect there to be an impact on medical condition, wellbeing, or health.

The nature of any proposed pilot study. Pilot studies are usually required if a) a new intervention is being used, b) a new questionnaire, scale or item is being used, or c) established interventions or questionnaires, scales or items are being used on a new population. If no such study is planned, explain why it is not necessary.

As the researcher will devise her own questions for interviews, it is planned that pilot interviews will be held to ensure the questions depicted represent a shared understanding of the phenomenon.

The methods of data analysis. Give details here of the analytic process (e.g. the statistical procedures planned if quantitative, and the approach taken if qualitative. It is not sufficient to name the software to be used).

Study Procedure

Please give as detailed an account as possible of a participant's likely experience in engaging with the study, from point of first learning about the study, to study completion. State how long project participation is likely to take, and whether participants will be offered breaks. Please attach all questionnaires, interview schedules, scales, surveys, and demographic questions, etc. in the Appendix.

The researcher will use a qualitative method of Data Analysis by way of semi-structured interviews allowing participants to share their knowledge, providing insight into their experiences.

Prior to the interview, the participants will be provided with an information sheet containing background information to the study, a consent form and will be provided with key information in relation to the Ethical considerations surrounding this study i.e., respect, Beneficence and non-maleficence and justice. The participant will also be informed about the right to withdraw consent at any stage of the research study and study ID's will be used.

A list of the proposed interview questions (yet to be finalized) will be used to support the interview. These interviews will take place in person – in an agreed location or alternatively via Teams Meetings. Interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed using an appropriate tool. Whilst audio recordings and transcripts will be potentially identifiable, this will be clearly explained to the participants. Audio recordings will be permanently deleted. Any identifying information in the transcription will be permanently deleted. The remaining transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file, on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the student and Supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy.

After transcription, the researcher plans to use thematic analysis by way of coding, to determine sub themes emerging from the data collected.

Participants will be reminded of informed consent throughout the study.

Each interview is envisaged as taking approx. 45 mins to 1 hour, however, may exert the time planned in which case the researcher will invite the participant to take a break if they feel necessary.

Part C: Ethical Risk

Please identify any ethical issues or risks of harm or distress which may arise during the proposed research, and how you will address this risk. Here you need to consider the potential for physical risk, social risk (i.e. loss of social status, privacy, or reputation), outside of that expected in everyday life, and whether the participant is likely to feel distress as a result of taking part in the study. Debriefing sheets must be included in the appendix if required. These should detail the participant's right to withdraw from the study, the statutory limits upon confidentiality, and the obligations of the researcher in relation to Freedom of Information legislation. Debriefing sheets should also include details of helplines and avenues for receiving support in the event that participants become distressed as a result of their involvement in this study.

Social Status:

Ethical risks considered relate to current employees at a supervisorys/management level – the participant will be reminded that their responses will not be shared with their employer as to ensure no impact on their social status or position within the work context.

Audio/Transcription:

Further ethical risks considered are given to the audio recordings and transcriptions.

Study ID's will be used. Whilst audio-recordings and transcripts will be potentially identifiable, this will be clearly explained to the participants. After audio recordings have been transcribed, audio will be permanently deleted. Any identifying information in the transcriptions will also be permanently deleted. The remaining transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file, on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the student and Supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy.

The remaining transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file, on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the student and Supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy.

Right to withdraw:

Participants will be informed throughout the study that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any given time. If participants become distressed during their participation in the study, the researcher will provide the participant with contact details of relevant mental health charities.

Do the participants belong to any of the following vulnerable groups?

(Please tick all those involved).

- ☐ Children.
- ☐ The very elderly.
- ☐ People with an intellectual or learning disability
- ☐ Individuals or groups receiving help through the voluntary sector
- ☒ Those in a subordinate position to the researchers such as employees
- ☐ Other groups who might not understand the research and consent process
- ☐ Other vulnerable groups

How will the research participants in this study be selected, approached and recruited? From where will participants be recruited? If recruiting via an institution or organisation other than NCI please attach a letter of agreement from the host institution agreeing to host the study and circulate recruitment advertisements/email etc.

The researcher will approach a broad pool of professionals within the Early Education sector via an online platform, sharing the nature of the study and requesting participants to share their expression of interest to be involved in the study. If the researcher gains more than 10 expression of interests, individuals will first be selected based on the eligibility criteria i.e., over 18 years of age and those who are in a supervisory/management position currently with 5 or more years experience.

What inclusion or exclusion criteria will be used?

Inclusions: The researcher will include those who meet the criteria of the study i.e., individuals in a supervisory/management position, those with 5 or more years' experience and those who are over the age of 18 years.

Exclusions: The research will exclude employees who are not in a supervisory/management position within the Early Education sector. The research also excludes those who may be in a supervisory/management position with less than 5 years' experience. The researcher will exclude those who are not 18 years of age. The researcher will exclude those who fall into the eligibility category but who are within the researcher's own organisation.

How will participants be informed of the nature of the study and participation?

Participants will be informed via email and will be provided with an information sheet to ensure the background to the study is shared and understood before any agreed participation.

Does the study involve deception or the withholding of information? If so, provide justification for this decision.

N/A

What procedures will be used to document the participants' consent to participate?

Consent form via electronic means i.e., digital signatures. The researcher will re-confirm the permission verbally during interview.

Can study participants withdraw at any time without penalty? If so, how will this be communicated to participants?

Yes- this will be communicated within the information sheet and consent form issued to participants once interest is registered. Participants will also be informed of the right to withdraw from the study at the beginning and end of the semi-structured interviews.

If vulnerable groups are participating, what special arrangements will be made to deal with issues of informed consent/assent?

N/A

Please include copies of any information letters, debriefing sheets, and consent forms with the application.

Part D: Confidentiality and Data Protection

Please indicate the form in which the data will be collected.

☐ Identified

☒ Potentially Identifiable

☐ De-Identified

What arrangements are in place to ensure that the identity of participants is protected?

Study ID's will be used within the research to ensure anonymity and initials will be used on the file names to ensure the researcher can relate to who it is but it does not contain telling information. Any disclosed information within the interviews, when transcribed will be blanked out using X, Y Z approach.

Whilst audio recordings and transcripts will be potentially identifiable, this will be clearly explained to the participants.

After audio recordings have been transcribed, audio will be permanently deleted. Any identifying information in the transcriptions will also be permanently deleted. The remaining transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file, on either a password protected computer, and/or password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, that only the student and Supervisor will have access to. This data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy.

Will any information about illegal behaviours be collected as part of the research process? If so, detail your consideration of how this information will be treated.

N/A

Please indicate any recording devices being used to collect data (e.g. audio/video).

Audio/Video depending on the mode of interview.

Please describe the procedures for securing specific permission for the use of these recording devices in advance.

The researcher will provide the participant with a consent form detailing of the use of recording devices and will remind the participant of this at the beginning and end of the recording.

Please indicate the form in which the data will be stored.

☐ Identified

☐ Potentially Identifiable

☒ De-Identified

Who will have responsibility for the data generated by the research?

The researcher, the supervisor allocated and NCI ethical committee.

Is there a possibility that the data will be archived for secondary data analysis? If so, has this been included in the informed consent process? Also include information on how and where the data will be stored for secondary analytic purposes.

The data will be held by NCI as per Ethical Considerations guidelines. This information will be depicted on the consent form for participants.

If not to be stored for secondary data analysis, will the data be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy?

☒ Yes

☐ No

Dissemination and Reporting

Please describe how the participants will be informed of dissemination and reporting (e.g. submission for examination, reporting, publications, presentations)?

Participants will be informed on their information sheet and consent form. They too will be encouraged to check with the researcher via email if they are unsure of any elements on the information sheet or consent form.

If any dissemination entails the use of audio, video and/or photographic records (including direct quotes), please describe how participants will be informed of this in advance.

Participants will be informed of the use of audio and video on their information sheet and consent form which will be both signed by the participant.

Ethics Application Checklist

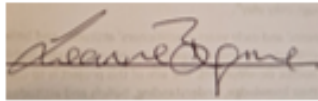
To be submitted alongside three printed and signed copies of the ethics application.

Please complete the below checklist, ticking each item to confirm that it has been addressed.

1. I agree to obtain informed written consent from all human participants aged over 18 who are involved in this research (or if circulating digitally, I will ensure that informed consent is completed, and will have the participants indicate their informed consent by continuing with their study engagement).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. I agree to obtain informed written consent from the parents of anyone aged under 18 in this research (or from the schools if appropriate), and informed written assent from those under 18 in this research.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. I append a letter of agreement from a clinically responsible individual agreeing to (where appropriate) help me recruit/provide clinical support in the event that participants become distressed/host the study data collection.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. I append a letter of agreement from an external institution or organisation agreeing to host the study.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. I agree to comply with NCI's Data Retention Policy.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. I have appended a) information sheet, b) consent form/assent form, c) debriefing sheet.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7. I have provided details of how non-anonymised data will be stored, in a safe and encrypted manner.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. I have included my contact details and those of my supervisor (where appropriate). I have only included my NCI email address and not included any personal contact information.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9. I have given sufficient details on the proposed study design, methodology, and data collection procedures, to allow a full ethical review, and I understand that my failure to give sufficient detail may result in a resubmission being required.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. I understand that if I make changes to my study following ethical approval, it is my responsibility to seek an ethics amendment if the change merits ethical consideration.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Part E: Signed Declaration

I confirm that I have read the NCI Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants and agree to abide by them in conducting this research. I also confirm that the information provided on this form is correct.



Signature of Applicant:

Date 20/01/2024

Signature of Supervisor (where appropriate):

Date _____

Any other information the committee should be aware of?

Appendix 12: De-briefing sheet

De-briefing Sheet

Degree Title:	MA Human Resource Management
Research Study Title:	<i>'Exploring the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles: A qualitative research study using semi structured interviews and thematic analysis'</i>
Researchers Name:	Leanne Byrne
University:	National College of Ireland

Dear Participant,

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude and thanks to you for providing me with your valuable time, contribution, and insight into this research study.

The purpose of this study is to 'Exploring the perceptions and feelings of leadership level employees in the Early Education sector in Ireland toward job titles.

The interview you have completed will now be transcribed and then permanently deleted. The transcription itself will be stored in a password protected file in line with NCI's ethics committee. Any identifiable information within the transcripts will be permanently deleted. Once transcribed, the finding will be analyzed thematically by use of coding techniques and thereafter written up to compile the research project itself.

Little research has been documented in relation to the thoughts and feelings of leadership level employees toward how Titles and whether they can have an influence on the recruitment and retention of employees within the Early Education sector here in Ireland. Therefore, it is hoped that this study can convey the importance of having clearly defined Job Titles and clearly defined progression routes to recruiters and CEO's of Early Education organisations in Ireland.

If you are interested in what is discovered from this study, please contact me directly on x22148710@student.ncirl.ie and request a copy of the completed study. Additionally, if you wish to discuss this study further, David Mothersill – Research Study Supervisor can be contacted via email David.Mothersill@ncirl.ie

If you feel you have been affected in any way by partaking in this study, I would like to extend the following services to you. You can access these services by using the following websites www.mentalhealthireland.ie or <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support/supports-services/> or by using the contact information provided below:

- AWARE; Freephone – 1800 804 848 <https://www.aware.ie/>
- Samaritans Ireland; Call: 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.ie

Kind regards,

Leanne Byrne

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