Is Unionisation Needed in order to Improve the Pay and Working Conditions of those Employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector?

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The undersigned declares that this dissertation is their work.

Signature: ____________________________

Printed name: ____________________________
Dedicated to Ireland’s ECCE Practitioners

You are worthy of pay and working conditions that reflect your level of expertise, so remember:

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Rules the World
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Abstract

An explicit aim of this research question was to identify whether or not unionisation was needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Much has been written about professionalisation of the sector over the last decade but relatively little has been done to ameliorate the poor pay and working conditions that characterise it. A qualitative research approach gave focus group and interview participants the opportunity to provide subjective responses rich in detail about the human side of this social issue as experienced by them. This particular research topic was not a random question. It was chosen because research has shown how early years practitioners in other countries enjoy much improved pay and working conditions, once unionised. An essential determinant of quality in relation to child related services has been proven to be quality pay. So, what needs to happen within the Irish ECCE sector in order to make this happen? Is unionisation needed?
1.0 Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the study

The concept ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Irelands Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector?’ was chosen as a research topic because to date very little has been implemented to effect any real change in respect of this social issue. The estimated number of people working in the sector is in the region of 24,000 (Early Childhood Ireland 2012). Nationally there are 4699 early years services (Magner, 2014). This solicits the question, why has a relatively large sector such as ECCE not yet been unionised?

1.2 Aims and objectives

An explicit aim of this research question is to identify whether or not unionisation has been recognised as needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed within the ECCE sector. This will be achieved by considering three supplementary questions to the research topic. These are as follows: is there a need to unionise the sector; why has the sector not been unionised to date; and what needs to occur in order to effect these changes? These questions reflect a type of alternative strategy used in comparative social policy analysis and are intended to raise awareness of a social issue that is worthy of some consideration.

1.3 Summary of the chapters

Chapter two comprises the literature review. Chapter three provides an outline of the research methods chosen to explore the research topic. It identifies factors that influenced the decision to research this particular area, assumptions associated with care work and the research ideology. Chapter four outlines the findings of primary research and these findings are discussed and analysed in relation to the literature review in chapter five. Chapter six concludes the research project and presents three recommendations.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the topic ‘Is Unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector?’ To date much has been written about the importance of regular professional development, training for a new profession, the need for a graduate led workforce, the professionalisation of the sector and the pathway to professionalism (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD Thematic Review, 2004; Dineen, 2005; Right from the Start, 2013; Workforce Development Plan, 2010; and Rodd, 2013). Further research illustrates the poor pay and working conditions experienced by those employed within the sector (Association of Childhood Professionals ACP, 2009; Early Childhood Ireland ECI, 2012; Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013) There is also the fact that Trade Union representation for childcare workers does not exist (OECD, 2006 cited in Centre for Social and Educational Research CSER, 2008).

Three supplementary questions underpinning the research topic helped to guide the secondary research and as a result the various sections below emerged. These sections have been presented as follows. Section 2.2 provides a definition of Trade Unions and an understanding of what unionisation means. Section 2.3 highlights the benefits of Trade Union membership. Section 2.4 discusses the constitutional right to associate. Section 2.5 highlights the lack of progress made to date in respect of improving pay and working conditions. Section 2.6 identifies government interventions. Section 2.7 considers lessons learned along with recognition of areas to consider when completing comparative analysis. Section 2.8 considers what is necessary for establishing a Trade Union. Section 2.9 presents arguments for and against union membership. Section 2.10 discusses professionalisation and pay. Section 2.11 highlights some outlier perspectives; and finally chapter two is concluded in section 2.12. To begin with, section 2.2 will explore what unionisation has come to mean.
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2.2 Defining Trade Unions and what unionisation means.

Trade Unions have been defined as “organisations which represent the needs and rights of employees” (Business2000, 2012, p1). Under the 1941 Trade Union Act, Trade Unions were defined as “bodies carrying on negotiations for fixing wages and other conditions of employment” (Wallace, Gunnigle, McMahon and O’Sullivan, 2013, p.51). Unionisation is simply the term used to describe the coming together of a group of people who share a similar set of beliefs or ideals and who want the same things from their employment. For example improved pay and working conditions. Coming together in this way, also referred to as collective strength, ensures that employees have the support of their Trade Union in relation to employment matters (Wallace et. al, 2013). Not only do employees possess a collective strength but they also have a source of information and protection and a channel through which their voices are heard (Citizens Information, 2013). Keeping these benefits in mind, some more advantages associated with being a Trade Union member will be considered in the next section, that is, the benefits of Trade Union membership.

2.3 Benefits of Trade Union Membership

A significant benefit of Trade Union membership is that pay and working conditions are determined and protected by the Trade Union and specific guidance in relation to wages and salaries are agreed upon in Trade Union and Employer Agreements (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union SIPTU, no date.). An example of this is the Croke Park Agreement 2010-2014 between public sector workers, the Trade Union and the Government (IMPACT, no date.). In the interest of employee discipline and rights at work the Trade Union is there to protect its members and to ensure fairness. Promotion and career progress are awarded fairly and in line with negotiated Trade Union and Employer Agreements. If there are any issues, the Trade Union works with all parties concerned towards a resolution. In the interests of employees having their say at work and in society, the Trade Union advocates for each employees individual rights while upholding the
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values of fairness, security and respect for all of its members (SIPTU, no date). One right in particular will be considered in the following section, the right to associate.

2.4 Right to Associate

In the context of rights, attention must be brought to the fact that a fundamental right of every Irish citizen is the right to expression, assembly and association (Government Publications, 2004) as guaranteed under Article 40.6.1 of our Constitution. At a national, European and international level Ireland has committed itself to upholding these rights. In spite of these commitments and various discussions in relation to leadership and advocacy, poor pay, working conditions and low qualification levels continue to characterise the ECCE sector in Ireland (Dineen, 2005; Expert Advisory Group Report EAG, 2013). Could realisation of our right to associate help to bring about change? The type of change needed would see funding and investment channelled in such a way as to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed within the ECCE sector. In 2005, this issue was brought to Ireland’s attention in the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report.

2.5 Lack of progress

In July 2005, the NESF report on Ireland’s ECCE sector noted ‘‘a national pay scale should be established for ECCE workers which should be developed through the most appropriate mechanisms available by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE)’’ (NESF, 2005, p.92). Almost a decade later and this intention has failed to materialise. The NESF report referred to the 2003 Social Partnership Agreement ‘‘Sustaining Progress 2003-2005’’. This Agreement saw the coming together of representatives from Irish Businesses and Employer’s Confederation (IBEC) and Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) in order to support the further development of Ireland’s ECCE sector. IBEC highlighted the need for investment in the quality of the childcare infrastructure but the statement remained unsupported in the context of how this was to be achieved (NESF,
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2005). The successor to ‘Sustaining Progress 2003-2005’, namely ‘Towards 2016 Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015’ did not discuss any plans for the revision or improvement of salary scales within the ECCE sector. Instead, it focussed on the need for educational provisions to be made available to children in other educational sectors and stated that policy developments for Early Years Education are to fall within the remit of the Minister for Children (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006). Such policy developments will be considered next.

2.6 Government Intervention

One of the most recent strategy developments ‘Right from the Start’ submitted to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs discussed a new National Early Years Strategy which addressed opportunities for the improvement and enhancement of Ireland’s ECCE sector. Within this report, theme 6 (Training and Professional Development) resonated with the research topic. Although the strategy recognised the poor pay and working conditions associated with the sector, specific goals in relation to improving the pay and working conditions were not addressed (EAG Report, 2013). In the final version published in October 2013 a recommendation was made which stated that the new National Early Years Strategy should support professionalisation by paying higher wages to graduates working within the ECCE sector through modification of the higher capitation grant. There were no specific details in relation to how this would be achieved (DCYA, 2013). It is worth considering at this point what needs to happen within the Early Years Education Policy Unit, EYEPU, in order to place the pay and working conditions of those employed within the sector on the government’s policy agenda.

In 2009, the Association of Childhood Professionals published a two page document, detailing the recommended pay scales for childcare workers but these recommendations have not yet been implemented (ACP, 2009). The Workforce Development Plan in 2010, although recognising the need for a graduate led workforce did nothing to address the issues of poor pay and
working conditions for those employed in the ECCE sector. It opted instead to note that “such issues are outside the scope of this policy document” (Department of Education and Skills, DES, 2010, p.2). As previously highlighted pay and working conditions for those who are union members are determined and protected by Trade Unions but Ireland’s ECCE sector has no history of unionisation, no collective voice (Centre for Social and Educational Research, 2008). For this reason it is worth looking to countries where the ECCE sector has been unionised and where improvements in respect of pay and working conditions are apparent as a result. The next section will consider this.

2.7 Lessons learned

2.7.1 A note on comparative social policy analysis

Before moving on it is important to consider the pros and cons of comparative analysis. Comparative social policy develops an understanding of how and why something, for example unionising ECCE, appears to work in one setting, in this case New Zealand, in order to help determine its chances of success in another country, for example Ireland. Such examples from abroad give the analyst a point at which to start from when seeking to resolve a particular social issue, for example the poor pay and working conditions of those employed in the ECCE sector. Practical and theoretical difficulties may be encountered when embarking upon comparative analysis. Examples of practical issues may be resourcing, examples of theoretical issues may be the composition of the countries particular type of welfare economy (Jones, 1985).

Both Ireland and New Zealand have a liberal welfare state regime in effect. These regimes shape the policy environment of, for example, ECCE. In relation to the policy environment, a major contrast between Ireland and New Zealand is that ECCE in New Zealand falls within the remit of the Ministry of Education whereas in Ireland it is split between the auspices of various government departments. For example, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills and the
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Department of Health (Kiss, 2012; CSER, 2008). New Zealand understood the necessity and importance of rethinking and restructuring ECCE, could Ireland learn from this example.

2.7.2 New Zealand

In 1994 early years practitioners joined the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) and the NZEI Te Riu Roa (māori translation of union) was established (NZEI, no date.). Today it represents early year’s practitioners, school support staff and primary school teachers. By 2004 early childhood practitioners had successfully negotiated for pay on a par with other teachers and the agreement applied to ECCE workers in both the community and not-for-profit-centres (NZEI, no date.).

In New Zealand early childhood education and indeed all services for children from birth fall within the remit of the Ministry of Education (Education International, EI 2010). In Ireland this is not the case. Primary, secondary and third level teachers fall under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills and are represented by organisations such as: ASTI Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland; INTO, Irish National Teachers Organisation; and TUI, Teachers Union of Ireland. The ECCE sector is not so well represented. At present, ECCE policy and provision falls within the auspices of various government departments but it is not unionised. This prompts yet other questions. Why has the sector not been unionised and how difficult can it be to set up a Trade Union? These two areas will be explored further in the following sections.

2.8 Establishing a Trade Union

The process of setting up a Trade Union is relatively straightforward. The Trade Union registers with the Registrar of Friendly Societies. Following this the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation is contacted so that a negotiation license is obtained. In order to obtain a license a Trade Union must meet certain criteria in relation to notification, membership and finance. The Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and ICTU need to be notified at least eighteen months before application for a negotiating
license is made. A prerequisite of gaining a license is a membership of at least one thousand members. In respect of financing, Trade Unions are required to have deposits ranging from €25,395 for up to two thousand members, to deposits of €55,869 for more than twenty thousand members. Traditionally in Ireland, Trade Unions have represented teachers so why has a Trade Union not been established to represent the needs of those employed within the ECCE sector (Wallace et. al, 2013). Some difficulties or challenges associated with unionisation will be considered next.

2.9 Argument for or against union membership

A study of unionisation within the USA’s childcare sector highlighted three significant factors which influenced low levels of unionisation. These were: those working with children did not see themselves as the types to join unions; high attrition rates; organisational difficulties because of the numbers of providers and agencies associated with childcare; and too much risk associated with a move by any union into a sector where there was no previous history of unionisation. The same study described unionisation as “one approach to professionalising the childcare workforce with advocacy being the dominant approach to increasing wages and improving working conditions” (Brooks, 2003, p. 4).

Later research in 2006 highlighted that in occupations where the percentage of women to men is higher, pay for women workers was generally lower because of “the common perception that caring is a natural activity of women” (Bourgeault and Khokher, 2006, p.408). Caregiving professions such as ECCE “not only have structural barriers to overcome in relation to pay and working conditions” but “the sector also needs to overcome societal beliefs about the value of the work that practitioners do” (Bourgeault and Khokher 2006, p.421; Dineen, 2005, p131). It is widely recognised that disproportionate numbers of women to men occupy roles in childcare and that “organisations maintain gender inequality with poor pay and working conditions rewarded for skills associated with women’s work, for example, nurturance” (EI, 2010, p.16; Cohen and Huffman, 2003, cited in Bourgeault and Khokher 2006, p. 409). As the ECCE sector in Ireland is not unionised
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it is worth considering what this means from an employer’s perspective, is it the ability to pay minimum wages?

Unions, through shock effects, smarten up management. Workers are enabled to suggest better ways of doing things. As a consequence the positive attitudes of unionised workers improves their performance. Tenure among unionised employees increases as a result of improved pay and working conditions


Our focus will now turn to commonly held assumptions in relation to care work.

2.10 Commonly held assumptions in relation to care work

Care work is devalued because of the commonly held assumption that “little skill or training is needed when working with children, the infirmed, the elderly or disabled” (Cancian and Oliker, 2000 cited in Bourgeault and Khokher 2006, pg. 408). The profession is further devalued because it is regarded as an extension of women’s work in the home, a type of work which has long been perceived as requiring minimal skill and training. Alongside the gender bias associated with caring professions, pay and working conditions are also determined by the extent to which governments, policy makers and stakeholders are concerned about these services and how much they are willing to invest in order to improve quality standards (Armstrong and Armstrong 1992; Boyd 1997; Cancian and Oliker 2000 and Williams, 2001 cited in Bourgeault and Khokher 2006).

A further point associated with caring as a profession is that, women who work within these roles may tolerate discrimination in terms of pay and working conditions because of the innate rewards associated with choosing to work within the caring profession (England and Folbre, 1999, cited in Bourgeault and Khokher 2006). In the longer term, it is unlikely that such discrimination will be remedied as long as: “caring is relegated to those who lack the social, political and economic power and status needed to influence major change” (Scheyett 1999 cited in Bourgeault and Khokher 2006, p. 410). In relation to influencing major change, an important step for Ireland in 2013 was EAG’s recognition of the need that it was necessary to
professionalise the sector. Professionalisation and pay will now be considered in the next section.

2.11 Professionalisation and Pay

According to Dineen, “for there to be a move towards professionalising the sector leadership and advocacy are needed but such professionalisation is traditionally associated with teaching infant classes at primary school level” (Dineen, 2005, pp.130-137). Pay and working conditions within the ECCE sector are not specifically discussed by Dineen however improvements in both leadership and advocacy would certainly help with the process. The Canadian study ‘Caring and Learning Environments: Quality in Childcare Centres Across Canada’ maps the relationship between predictors of childcare quality. Significantly, the study showed amongst other findings, that staff remuneration and high levels of ECCE specific education positively influenced the provision of quality care (Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, 2000).

Quality care discussed in the context of professionalisation was addressed in an Irish Times article ‘Lessons in early education from New Zealand’. The article briefly outlined comparative issues. One such issue was quality. Quality was recognised as being achieved through employing highly qualified staff. Professor Linda Mitchell of the University of Waikato, New Zealand, interviewed by Sheila Wayman of the Irish Times, described Ireland in 2012 as being where New Zealand was 3 decades ago. “By 2002 childcare staff had secured equal pay with primary school teachers after a long union campaign” and “by 2006 50% of childcare staff held a 3 year university degree” (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 1997-2013). At present, Ireland’s ECCE sector is not unionised and “12% of the workforce presently hold degree-level qualification with an international benchmark set at 60%” (EAG, 2013, p.20). Further studies have shown that the importance of professionalising ECCE is on the agenda at an international level also.
Some specific commitments made by Education International (EI) in a report which studied the Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce of 17 participating countries were that: standards of early childhood teacher education needed to be at the same academic level as that of primary and secondary level teachers; early childhood education should fall within the remit of Ministries for Education and pay and working conditions should be on a par with the best available in other sectors of the education system (EI, 2010). The Taskforce articulated how the profile of the sector could be raised once societal beliefs about the worth of the work were overcome through realisation of these commitments. It is worth considering at this point if unionisation would achieve for Ireland’s ECCE sector what Education International are hoping to achieve for the ECE workforce.

A survey by ECI in 2012 highlighted the low wage conditions for the ECCE sector and also raised the question about who should actually pay the workforce. The average hourly rate for unqualified staff is €10.10 per hour. As this is an average, it is important to bear in mind some people employed in the sector may actually earn less or more. Staff with a Fetac 5 or Fetac 6 level qualification can expect to earn €10.85 per hour. Of grave concern is the pay for graduates of the sector. Level 7 graduates can expect to earn an average hourly rate of €11.24 per hour equating to €20,456 per year (CSO, 2013 cited by ECI, 2014).

A study by Moloney and Pope in 2010 highlighted the low pay received by level 8 honours degree graduates of the ECCE programme in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The respondents graduated between the years 2007-2010 inclusive. The study showed that salaries tended to be low with 56% of respondents earning less than €30,000 (Moloney and Pope, 2013). Similarly a primary school teachers’ Bachelor of Education also qualifies them to honours degree level 8 however their starting salary at entry point level is €30,088 (CSO 2013 cited by ECI, 2014). So, why do primary school teachers earn so much more? Section 2.12 will consider outlier perspectives next.
2.12 Outlier Perspectives

In New Zealand, prior to the development of the NZEI Te Riu Roa, key issues were inconsistencies in pay and working conditions across the education sector and “how low levels of unionisation made it impossible for those negatively impacted by these differences to speak up” (Mitchell, 2007, p.8). According to Professor Linda Mitchell change did come about but only as a result of “articulating arguments within children’s rights and quality discourse” (Mitchell, 2007, p96). Whether or not a similar discourse would provide the same outcomes in relation to the Irish ECCE sector remains to be seen.

A subsequent backlash experienced by NZEI Te Riu Roa following their successful campaign for pay parity was their removal from the state sector in 1997. Essentially the sector became privatised overnight. The reason given by the then government was additional funding allocated to improve pay within the sector exceeded that which had been previously allocated. The government’s argument was that the ECCE sector needed to be privatised so that it could afford to pay for itself (Mitchell, no.date.). Positive developments since then have seen the return of early childhood kindergarten teachers and associations to the state sector under the auspices of the Ministry for Education (EI, 2010).

In New York, some resistance to the unionisation movement came from the Office of Children and Family Services. They argued “unionising child day-care would ultimately put pressure on the Government to improve their pay and benefits which meant less state funding available to subsidise the child care costs of low income families”. At the time of the movement towards unionisation, “childcare workers earnings fell below the poverty line with over 50% of providers earning at the poverty level” (Gregory, 2008, pp.277-305). In New York State it took over two decades for child day-care providers to become legally allowed to unionise. There are no such legal implications associated with forming Trade Unions in Ireland as section 2.4 highlighted.

2.13 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has highlighted how relatively little has been done to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed within the ECCE sector despite various reports and strategy documents identifying and discussing the need for change. It has been highlighted that there are no clear goals set in relation to improving pay and working conditions. Leadership and advocacy were acknowledged as ways of possibly achieving these goals with moves towards professionalising the sector stemming from improvements in quality. For the purpose of comparisons, Canada, the USA and New Zealand were the main focus of this chapter because information in relation to ECCE unionisation in these countries proved less challenging to find. A need has been identified however to explore what is happening in Europe, possibly during the course of further study. The following chapter will explore the motivation behind this piece of research and the methodological processes that were implemented.
3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the research methods chosen to explore the research topic. Section 3.2 presents factors influencing the decision to research this particular area and section 3.3 discusses assumptions related to the chosen area. Section 3.4 considers the research ideology while section 3.5 outlines the research methods. Section 3.6 describes the research process while section 3.7 considers the sampling techniques used. Section 3.8 discusses ethical considerations and section 3.9 concludes the chapter.

To begin, factors influencing the decision to research this particular area will be presented.

3.2 Influencing Factors

3.2.1 Lack of representation

This topic was chosen because of the perceived lack of representation Irish ECCE practitioners have had to date in relation to matters directly affecting their pay and working conditions. As a final year student of the ECCE honours degree programme I would like to see some returns on the investment I have made in myself and in my professional development. I wish to pursue a career in the sector but not at the expense of earning just above the minimum wage.

3.2.2 Lack of pay parity

As highlighted in chapter two, primary school teachers are also educated to honours degree level but their starting salary and working conditions can in no way be compared to that of honours degree ECCE graduates. I have been aware of this inequality for some time now. My final year dissertation presented me with the opportunity to research the area further and in a sense pushed me to ask: ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s ECCE sector?’
3.3 Assumptions associated with the study

A certain insider or emic perspective has informed the following assumptions (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006). One assumption of this study is that there is a need to unionise the ECCE sector because without Trade Union representation, issues concerning poor pay and working conditions may never be addressed. Another assumption is that this research will get stakeholders such as students and professionals thinking about what needs to happen in order to make unionisation happen. As unionisation is based on collective strength, it is necessary to highlight the importance of solidarity within such social movements (Lister, 2010). In order to explore the extent of solidarity that exists within the sector it was necessary to adopt an interpretivist approach to this piece of research (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation RWJF, 2008). This approach will be explored in the next section.

3.4 Research Ideology

3.4.1 Epistemology

The interpretivist approach lends itself to the exploration of individual thoughts, opinions and ideas. To understand what the interpretivist approach is about it is worth considering where it has come from. Its origins are located within the epistemological school of thought which is comprised of systems of thought and knowledge. In turn these systems of thought and knowledge serve to define conceptual frameworks that determine the boundaries of knowledge in a given period (Crowley, 2009).

3.4.2 Ontology

The given period is this instance is the 21st century. The systems of thought and knowledge being explored are those in relation to the concept of unionisation of the ECCE sector. How these concepts come to be manifested constitutes reality with this reality informing our understanding of the existence of such concepts (Raddon, no date.). This means that the research topic considers how the concept of unionisation has manifested in
today’s society and what the actual reality of that manifestation is. It is through the use of the interpretivist approach that the research topic will be developed. In turn, its manifestation will be informed by the thoughts, ideas and opinions of the research participants involved. The discussion in relation to the interpretivist approach will be continued in the next section.

3.4.3 Interpretivist approach

As mentioned previously the interpretivist approach is concerned with the exploration of individual thoughts, opinions and ideas. These thoughts, opinions and ideas are also known as “valid data” and helped to uncover the research findings (Blaxter et.al, 2006, p.65). The methodology determined how the interpretivist approach was applied. Qualitative research methods were used to carry out the research which will be discussed in section 3.5.

Section 3.5 Research Methods Chosen

Section 3.5.1 Qualitative Methods

Five qualitative methods were initially chosen. These were: a focus group; interviews; library research; an opinion survey and a case study. Of the five methods, three were implemented. These were the focus group, interviews and desk-based library research (Reardon, 2006).

Section 3.5.2 Challenges Encountered

Early in the qualitative research stage, a decision was made not to incorporate a case study. This decision was taken because of the complexities associated with developing, organising and managing case studies and the further research required at undergraduate level to understand how to go about the process. It was recognised however that a case study could well be more suited to an in depth research process at post graduate level. A second challenge encountered was in relation to the interviews. Five possible interviewees were identified and invited to participate. Of the five, three participants made themselves available. As one of the potential participants was based overseas, it was necessary to find out how to arrange a video call while taking account of time differences.
The options presented to facilitate the call were Adobe Connect and Google Chat. A significant challenge was that these two applications had never been used by the interviewer before. A final challenge encountered was in relation to the opinion surveys. Surveys are often associated with quantitative research however by adapting the topic guide created for the focus group an opinion survey was devised comprising 10 questions (Reardon, 2006). Possible respondents to the survey were identified and the survey was created on survey monkey. It was intended to forward this survey to final year undergraduates of ECCE but a decision was taken late in the qualitative research stage not to go through with this. The decision was made because the volume of work generated by the focus group and the three interviews had been underestimated. Once again, it was recognised that such in depth research may be more suited to research at post graduate level. The next section will describe how the chosen methods of research were carried out and also the challenges encountered.

3.6 Research Process

3.6.1 How the research was carried out

The library research informed the literature review which helped to identify and develop the questions used in the focus group and interviews. The library data bases Ebrary (academic texts available online), Web of Science, Academic Search Premiere, Business Source Complete and JStor (journal store) were most frequently used during the literature review research. The following websites were made available through the library Moodle page: www.rian.ie which made it possible to access 17 institutional repositories; EthOS (electronic thesis online service); ERIC (education resources information centre); along with union websites, google scholar and google. An important element of the desk-based research was the Interlending Library Loans and Document Supply service provided by the library which made it possible to loan a Doctorate of Philosophy manuscript from New Zealand and a social policy text book from the United Kingdom. Other useful websites were those of Education International, the International Labour Organisation, the Human Rights Commission and the European
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Industrial Relations Observatory. Organisation of the focus group will be outlined next.

The focus group was carried out with various professionals from across the sector. The participants of the focus group were identified through referral sampling and quota sampling techniques (Family Health International FHI, 2005). The focus group was comprised of three ECCE students, managers of two community settings, a quality development officer from Sligo County Childcare Committee, a recent graduate of the ECCE honours degree programme and a parent. Each participant was contacted via text, email or telephone call. Subsequently each participant was sent an information pack (see Appendices) prior to the focus group outlining the date, time and location of the focus group, organiser contact details, informed consent form requesting a signature and a topic guide. The topic guide listed 10 questions for each participant to consider in advance. Of the seven participants invited to attend, all seven made themselves available and the focus group was digitally recorded. The venue for the focus group was a seminar room booked in the library by the organiser. Organisation of the interviews will now be outlined.

The referral and quota sampling techniques were used to identify participants for the interviews (FHI, 2005). The three interview participants were the current chairperson of ACP, a TUI representative based in Institute of Technology, Sligo (I.T. Sligo) and an owner/manager of a private ECCE service. As with the focus group, each interviewee was contacted by text, email or telephone call and sent an information pack (see Appendices) prior to the interview. Two of the interviews were completed over the phone as the participants were based in Cork and Laois. One interview was carried out in person. All interviews were digitally recorded. Consent was obtained in writing for the interview carried out in person and verbal consent was given by the other two interviewees. As mentioned previously referral and quota sampling techniques were used to identify possible interview and focus group participants. Both of these techniques will be considered in section 3.7
3.7 Sampling Techniques

3.7.1 Quota Sampling

Some of the focus group and two interview participants were chosen by implementing non probability purposive sampling (Research Methods Knowledge Base, 2006). This meant that some of the participants chosen for the focus group and interviews were preselected because of their experience and expertise within the ECCE sector. Quota sampling is thought of as a type of purposive sampling (FHI, 2005). A particular challenge was identified while using the quota sampling technique, which will be highlighted in section 3.7.3. Another type of purposive sampling will be considered next.

3.7.2 Referral Sampling

The second technique used for the other focus group participants and the third interviewee was referral sampling which like quota sampling is also considered a type of purposive sampling. This technique was used with the help of an informant to make contact with people who were not directly known to the researcher. This technique proved to be a success (FHI, 2005). The challenge mentioned above will now be identified.

3.7.3 Challenges encountered with quota sampling

One characteristic three of the seven focus group participants had in common was that they were fellow undergraduates on the ECCE programme at I.T. Sligo. These students were known only to the researcher in an academic capacity. It was identified as important to make this distinction in order to avoid speculations that the researchers’ personal bias or assumptions contaminated the findings of the focus group. In the next section, variables considered as having an impact on research findings will be discussed.

3.7.2 Variables

Variables within this research were the subjective attitudes of those who participated in the focus group and interviews. Other variables were those
associated with a type of cause and effect relationship between unionisation and improved pay and working conditions. For the purpose of this research piece, unionisation may be considered an independent variable with improved pay and working conditions being considered as dependant variables. This particular example has been chosen because the dependant variable, improved pay and working conditions, is known to be affected by the independent variable, unionisation. (Trochim, 2006). An example of this is the formation of the INTO during the era of the Powis Commission in 1868 which brought about improved pay for teachers commensurate with the extra duties they were being instructed to take on (Coolahan, 1981). They took action to achieve what was fair and right for them, which brings us to the final section of this chapter, ethical guidelines.

3.8 Ethical Guidelines

Ethical guidelines were followed in accordance with the general principles of the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI). These principles were: professional competence; integrity; respect for human rights; diversity and equality; and social responsibility (SAI, 2008-2013). How these guidelines apply in the context of the research topic will be considered next before concluding the methodology chapter in section 3.9.

3.8.1 Professional competence

Ensuring necessary resources for example room availability and information packs are utilised in order to maintain professional competence during the research project.

3.8.2 Integrity

This means, acting in an honest and fair manner, identifying challenges and taking appropriate action to address them.

3.8.3 Respect for Human Rights, Diversity and Equality

Recognition of the fact that it is important to remain cognisant of the differing values, attitudes and opinions of the participants.
3.8.4 Social Responsibility

This is specific to safeguarding confidential information. For example: by providing participants with consent forms and a copy of the Institutes ethics policy; being alert to and being able to recognise conflicts of interest; and being aware of issues arising from inequalities of power, for example the vulnerability of the participant.

3.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, the qualitative research methods chosen gave participants the opportunity to provide subjective responses rich in detail about the “human side” of an issue, as experienced by them (FHI, 2005, p.1). This chapter discussed in detail factors influencing the choice of topic and assumptions associated with the topic. The research ideology considered the school of thought informing the interpretivist approach followed by a discussion of the qualitative research methods chosen along with any challenges encountered. The research process was outlined and a particular challenge associated with the quota sampling technique was documented. Finally, the Sociological Association of Ireland’s ethical guidelines were considered in the context of the research project. In the next chapter the findings from the interviews and the focus group will be discussed followed by an identification of the themes that emerged.
4.0 Findings and Themes

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from the focus group and interviews and identifies the themes that emerged. The chapter has been organised as follows. The questions used for both the focus group and the interviews will be discussed in section 4.2 under the heading presentations of respondents perspectives. The themes that emerged as a consequence of the data generated in the focus group and interviews will then be presented in section 4.3. The chapter will be concluded in section 4.4 and a brief introduction will be given to the analysis chapter, chapter five.

4.2 Presentations of Respondents Perspectives

4.2.1 What does the term unionisation mean to you?

Participant 1 described unionisation as backing up your position to make your position stronger. Participants 2, 4, 5, and 6 understood unionisation as a means of bringing people together so they can work towards the same goal, promote and protect their employment and have a voice. Participant 3 described unionisation as a representative body speaking on our behalf and addressing our concerns and opinions. Participant 7 answered that unionisation, for them, is an organisation which represents and supports its members and guarantees clarity on job related issues.

Interviewee 1 described unionisation as a means of uniting people, having a strong voice to “fight for stuff and stand up for things”. Interviewee 2 felt that unionisation was the coming together of all childcare providers.

Interviewee 3 described the term as:

being about collective voice and action and the willingness of people to work together in order to achieve particular aims. Members are protected, represented in decision making and are part of the ongoing change in their sector. Alongside the right to be represented, the individuals views are heard and considered and their treatment and conditions of work are fair and right.
4.2.2 **In your opinion, does the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (ECCE) sector need to be unionised?**

Participants 1, 3 and 5 were not sure if the sector needed to be unionised. They did reflect on the challenges the sector faces in respect of pay and working conditions and the possibility that such challenges could be remedied with the formation of a Trade Union. It was felt that a move towards unionisation might be supported by a small minority which would cause a further divide within the sector. Participants 2, 4, and 6 felt the sector should be unionised so as to address concerns in relation to pay, respect for and recognition of those employed within the sector. They felt that the complexity of the role of the early years practitioner would be acknowledged through unionisation. Participant 7 recognised that a union is needed in order to attract more qualified staff with pay that reflects their levels of expertise.

Interviewee 1 commented that the sector needs organisation and unifying but not necessarily unionisation. Interviewee 2 stated that the sector definitely needed unionisation: “we need this and the children need it”. Interviewee 3 explained the sector needed to be unionised: “so that the profession could become established and defended, that those employed in the sector could get properly paid for their experience and expertise and to enable a career structure to be put in place”.

4.2.3 **If you do not think that the sector needs unionisation, please state why?**

Participant 1 clarified their statement initially by stating that they were not saying the sector did not need unionisation but they recognised a need to achieve the goals associated with unionisation from something like unionisation. Participant 1 further supported their statement by acknowledging that if people joined a union, the same union should represent everyone. Participant 2 was unsure what to say however they had identified a need for a union in their answer to question 2. Participants 3 and 4 both agreed that there should be a union also. Participant 5 felt that it
was important for them to understand what unionisation would mean before they could comment however they did acknowledge that a union would help raise awareness of the amount of control or lack of, that owner managers have in relation to staff pay. Participant 5 made the point that a union would need to figure out the best course of action and determine what to do first. Participant 6 also recognised the need for a union and supplemented their response by adding: “it is definitely up to the union to find the right course of action”. Participant 7 agreed with the participant 6’s response.

Interviewee 1 replied that a reason why the sector did not need unionisation was because of the complex composition of the sector. The example given was that: “the state in one way seems to be an employer along with private providers.” Interviewee 2 and 3 stated that: “unionisation is definitely needed” “there is no doubt about that.”

4.2.4 In your opinion, why do you think the sector has not been unionised to date?

Participant 1 explained that it may be because the sector is seen as: “a caring profession, very soft”. Participant 1 identified a certain element of fear: “we are afraid to call ourselves business people, afraid to demand leadership and afraid of getting peoples backs up”. They coupled this element of fear with the costs of union membership and felt that these reasons may go some way towards explaining why the sector has not been unionised yet. They expressed a concern that the sector could end up with 2 or 3 unions each representing a different group within the sector or perhaps not getting any support at all. Participant 2 felt that membership costs, the workload involved in creating a union and time constraints as they main reasons as to why the sector had not been unionised. Participant 3 felt that the main reason why the sector had not been unionised was because of: “the love of the job some people have, the joy working with children brings them and a tendency not to stand up for ourselves.” Participant 4 identified that lack of unionisation may be because of the way the sector is perceived in wider society and also expressed: “fear of standing up, putting our foot down, not
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being taken seriously and lack of conviction” as further constraints along with the costs associated with setting up a union. Participant 5 felt that divides within the sector, for example, childminder vs private vs community could help to explain why the sector had not been unionised to date along with the opinion that the ECCE honours degree qualification was seen as a new qualification which: “would take a bit of getting used to.” The importance of having parents and directors on board was stressed by this participant along with challenges that not having their support could present. Participant 6 and 7 contributed a reluctance to speak up, not being informed and a tendency to keep quiet as main reasons for the lack of unionisation across the sector but recognised the need to become more informed.

Interviewee 1 felt a number of issues contributed to this: “the different areas within the sector, different pedagogical methods and the divide between community services and private providers.” Interviewee 2 felt that the various schemes on offer within the ECCE sector contributed to the divide between community and private service providers. Interviewee 3 expressed that:

the ECCE sector is a relatively young sector and also a new identity. It will take time for people to develop as leaders who would help others to organise. The sector is comprised of a traditionally female workforce who did not come from unionised backgrounds.

4.2.5 What do you think needs to happen in order for unionisation to come about?

Participant 1 stressed the importance of consensus and of understanding the process of unionisation. They felt it would bring those employed in the sector together, along with the importance of clear goals to work towards. Participant 2 recognised the importance of coming together along with the need for a clear understanding of what the advantages and disadvantages were and what can be gained from being unionised. Participant 3 suggested that a comparative study of other unions be carried out to: “see what we can take from it”. Participant 4 also recognised the need to look to other areas to see what could be learned. By doing this it was felt that knowledge
would be built from the bottom up so that everyone would become fully informed. Interestingly participant 5 voiced the opinion that those in the ECCE sector needed to stop worrying about what others thought, for example bosses and parents and: “get over the fact that we are going to ruffle a few feathers”. Participant 6 felt that the government needed to: “wake up and give graduates the respect they deserved”. Participant 6 reiterated the importance of not going against parents or children and that those employed in the sector must: “protect each other by looking out for ourselves.” Participant 7 highlighted that the process of unionisation needed to be researched and put together possibly in business plan format and then a chance needs to be taken while acknowledging that: “we care too much about upsetting others.”

Interviewee 1 commented that the state needed to become the provider of services across the sector. The example they gave to support this statement was in relation to teaching: “in the earlier days of teaching, the government was not the national employer. Teachers were paid by parishes (communities) and sometimes by wealthy people (private individuals)”.

Interviewee 2 recognised the need for: “spokespersons on behalf of private and community providers to sit on a panel to get the campaign started”.

Interviewee 3 recognised the need for leadership to come from existing unions. The example they gave was of such leadership stemming from the pre-school inspectorate because the inspectors are public health nurses who come from unionised backgrounds.

4.2.6 What do you perceive to be the advantages and or disadvantages associated with unionising the ECCE sector?

Participant 1 gave the following scenarios as disadvantages: strike action, demands and negotiations and: “the risk that the wider community would go against us.” It was recognised that unionisation could help to achieve a common goal for children. The goal identified was improvements in quality. Participants 2 and 4 recognised that a particular advantage for
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ECCE workers would be advocacy: “we would have someone speaking up on our behalf but that a small minority advocating may only serve to divide the sector further. A disadvantage they felt could be the negative perceptions some people have of unions. Participant 3 felt that having one formal body of representation would be an advantage but that the sector may be perceived as: “suddenly putting our foot down which could actually go against what it is we are trying to achieve”. Participant 5 identified the sector finally getting the respect and conditions that it deserved as an advantage but: “the shock factor” associated with the sector becoming unionised could go either way. Participant 6 recognised that not everyone would: “buy into” unionising the sector but added that: “every child would have a voice because we would have found ours”. Along with advocacy, participant 7 felt that other advantages could be more money in the sector, job security, lower attrition and highly qualified practitioners. A possible disadvantage identified was that unionisation could end up costing ECCE services more money if the sector did not have government support.

Interviewee 1 gave the following as advantages: a united voice, financial backing from membership fees, a negotiating license and the experience of other union leaders. The complex nature of the sector was described as a disadvantage. Interviewee 2 identified possible advantages as follows: “everyone would be on the same playing field, issues would be addressed and childminders would be registered.” It was felt that unionisation would be a disadvantage to childminders because: “so many of them are unregistered.” Interviewee 3 felt that the advantages to unionising the sector outweighed the disadvantages. The disadvantages were described as the union being perceived as an obstacle to change but this was balanced by the union seeking out the best deal for its members: “which of course they do”.

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4.2.7 **In your opinion, who do you think the major stakeholders should be if a campaign to unionise the sector is to be successful?**

Participant 1 identified early childhood professionals and parents as major stakeholders. Participant 2 recognised ECI and the County Childcare Committees (CCC’s). Participant 3 included ACP. Participant 4 considered the focus group participants as major stakeholders along with the above organisations. The focus group was comprised of a quality support and development worker with Sligo County Childcare Committee, two community childcare providers, a parent, and undergraduates and graduates of the BA ECCE Honours Degree programme at I.T. Sligo. Participant 5 acknowledged that everyone involved in making the profession the profession that it is, was a major stakeholder. Participant 6 agreed with participant 5 while also stressing the point that: “parents are so important”. Participant 7 agreed with the views expressed by participant 5 and 6.

Interviewee 1 replied that: “it could be something that the ACP would be very interested in because it might even be the way that things will have to go eventually”. They also identified existing unions such as IMPACT and INTO as possible stakeholders and: “the biggest driving force”. Interviewee 2 explained that stakeholders should be people who can represent the different sectors within ECCE. The CCC’s were recognised as major stakeholders along with people that are passionate about unionising the sector. Interviewee 3 recognised the need for stakeholders to: “come from existing unions governed by Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) along with employees from the ECCE sector.” They explained: “existing union structures could offer support which would have the effect of legitimising the organisation and its advocacy campaign.”

4.2.8 **If you think such a campaign would or would not be successful please state why?**

Participant 1 felt that the campaign would not be successful if the campaign to unionise the ECCE sector began before everyone was fully informed or if the passion and interest in the movement was not shared by all the major
stakeholders. They felt these factors would determine the campaigns success. Participant 2 felt that the campaign would not be a success if everyone was not on board. Participant 3 expressed the concern: “ruffling a few feathers could backfire on us, but until we try we will never know”. Participant 4 was of the opinion that the campaign would not be successful if everybody including parents were not well enough informed. Participant 5 stated the importance of not seeing the campaign to unionise in terms of being successful or not successful but as a work in progress and stressed importance of not giving up. Participant 6 identified reluctance within the sector: “to market what it is trying to achieve for itself, a reluctance to keep parents informed and a reluctance to break the mould that society has set for us” as factors which would determine whether or not the campaign would be a success. Participant 7 added: “not going about it the right way” could negatively impact the campaign.

Interviewee 1 felt that a difficulty would be trying to unify the sector. Interviewee 2 stated a campaign to unionise would be a success. Interviewee 3 explained that: “the campaigns success would depend on whether or not issues in respect of terms and conditions of pay and work would be addressed” They added: “if there was enough happening to keep enough people satisfied from the official management side then it was going to be difficult to promote a union”. They also acknowledged: “if those working in the sector are relatively satisfied with their level of pay or are not actively seeking a career outlet they won’t join a union, they won’t have a need to”.

4.2.9 In your opinion, what alternatives to unionisation could effectively bring about improved pay and working conditions within the ECCE sector (interviewee’s only)?

Interviewee 1 replied that a strong organisation which was membership based could be an alternative. Interviewee 2 stated there was no alternative to unionisation for them and identified a possible course of action to be:
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lobbying the government in respect of the fact that primary and secondary school teachers are paid by the government and that the same needs to happen for those who work in childcare because their work lays the foundation for children’s learning in the future.

Interviewee 3 explained that any effective improvement in pay and working conditions would only come about if it was looked at nationally. They gave the following example of another sector in the Irish economy that is divided within itself but which had managed to achieve unionisation:

another sector that is divided within itself is the banking sector. There is the banking union which is made up of two associations, one for your professional development and the other for terms and conditions, professional issues are dealt with by the Institute of Banking whereas the Irish Bank Officials Association represents all bankers in terms of their terms and conditions of pay and employment. There’s always a complex balancing act between the two roles that needs to be maintained but it can be done, it’s not impossible.

4.2.10 Any other thoughts ideas or opinions in relation to the topic discussed (focus group participants only)?

Participant 1 recognised the importance for the sector to regard itself as professional and that for the government too, sometimes such recognition can be a process of trial and error. Participant 5 felt that in the past there have been too many constraints placed on settings in relation to the administration of the higher capitation fee and that services should have more autonomy in relation to how it is administered. Participant 5 added that lack of funding meant the quality of the service they were trying to provide for parents and children was being negatively impacted despite the services best efforts. The example given was the cancellation of school trips. Participant 6 commented in relation to the free preschool year that not enough freedom was given in order to work with parents in relation to flexible start/finish times. Participant 6 expressed the concern that more could be done by the government to improve this. Participants 5 and 6 concluded the focus group by re-iterating the importance for the sector to: “fight for its rights without losing its nurturing side, to keep pushing forward while staying positive and remembering what it is we are trying to achieve”.

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4.3 Themes

4.3.1 What does the term unionisation mean to you?

The themes that emerged were collective action, advocacy, unity, employee representation and employee protection.

4.3.2 In your opinion, does the ECCE sector need to be unionised?

The themes identified in relation to this need were: raising the professional profile of the sector; minority support; and unionisation not necessarily being the most effective course of action needed.

4.3.3 If you do not think the sector needs unionisation please state why?

The themes that emerged were: unionisation was needed, more knowledge was needed and recognition of the complex nature of the ECCE sector was needed.

4.3.4 In your opinion why do you think the sector has not been unionised to date?

Several themes emerged in response to this question. It was interesting to observe that similar themes arose in both the focus group and interviews. The themes were as follows: the sector being perceived as a: “caring profession, very soft”; the theme of fear: “fear in relation to speaking up and demanding leadership, fear of getting peoples backs up and being afraid to call ourselves business people”; themes in relation to funding constraints and the lack of unity and communication within the sector emerged, for example private versus community; the theme of inexperience became apparent in the sense that the sector was being perceived as a relatively young sector in comparison to other areas of education; along with a consensus that there was a lack of knowledge in relation to unionisation.
4.3.5 What do you think needs to happen in order for unionisation to come about?

The themes that emerged in response to this question were: leadership; recognition of the need to learn about unionisation; and consensus.

4.3.6 What do you perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages associated with unionising the sector?

The themes associated with advantages were: advocacy; a united voice; and financial backing. The themes associated with disadvantages were: divides within the sector; lack of government support; and the perception that unions are obstacles to change.

4.3.7 In your opinion who do you think the major stakeholders should be if a campaign to unionise the sector is to be successful?

An interesting theme that emerged was the recognition that existing unions could become major stakeholders.

4.3.8 If you think such a campaign would or would not be successful please state why?

Themes that grew from this question were: the realisation of collective strength; recognition of the need for change; reluctance to embrace change; and lack of unity.

4.3.9 In your opinion what alternatives to unionisation could effectively bring about improved pay and working conditions within the ECCE sector?

The recurring theme was that unionisation was the only alternative.

4.3.10 Any other thoughts, ideas or opinions?

The themes of empowerment and autonomy emerged at this point along with two themes that emerged previously. These were unity across the ECCE sector and the need for support and leadership to come from within existing unions.
4.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed in detail the findings of the focus group and the three interviews. An unexpected finding was the perspective of one interviewee who felt that unionisation would not be successful because of the divides that exist at present within the sector and because funding was more of a priority for the sector than unionisation. Another unexpected finding was the comparison between the Irish Banking sector and the ECCE sector. The comparison was used to highlight the complex composition of both, yet the banking sector had managed to organise and become unionised. This chapter outlined the themes which emerged and highlighted those that recurred. An example of recurring themes were lack of unity within the sector and recognition of the fact that unionisation is needed. Finally, chapter five, Discussion and Analysis, will discuss the findings and themes of this chapter with those that informed the content of the literature review in chapter two.
5.0 Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the findings and themes uncovered in chapter four and relates them to the findings and themes identified in chapter two, the literature review. Similar findings and themes uncovered in chapter four were linked with those of the literature review and informed the discussion and analysis in section 5.2, the main body of this chapter. Section 5.3 presents the conclusion. To begin, what unionisation means will be considered next.

5.2 Discussion and Analysis of Findings and Themes

5.2.1 What unionisation means?

As defined in chapter 2, unionisation is the coming together of a group of people who share a similar set of beliefs and who want the same things from their employment. For example, improved pay and working conditions. Coming together in this way is also known as collective strength (Wallace et. al, 2013). Focus group participants and the various interviewees defined unionisation in much the same terms: “having a collective voice or having a representative body speaking on our behalf and addressing our concerns”

5.2.2 Benefits of Trade Union membership

This particular area was phrased slightly differently on the topic guide. Respondents were asked to list the perceived advantages and or disadvantages associated with unionisation. The recurring themes which emerged in relation to advantages were: improvements in quality which would benefit children; and a united voice advocating on behalf of the sector. A united voice has been identified as a characteristic benefit of Trade Union membership (SIPTU no date).
5.2.3 Right to Associate

The right to associate was identified both indirectly as a means through which the sector could assert itself and directly when the importance of the sector: “fighting for its rights” was acknowledged during the focus group.

5.2.4 Lack of progress and government intervention

An awareness of the lack of progress and government intervention to date was echoed in the responses of participants. This lack of progress was highlighted in chapter two when attention was drawn to the fact that various reports, policy documents and strategies rolled out by successive governments have failed to tackle the issues of poor pay and working. Respondents recognised that unionisation was needed so that the profession could become established and practitioners receive pay which reflected the quality of their work and level of expertise. A further point made was that the State needed to become the provider of all services across the ECCE sector.

5.2.5 Lessons learned

The desire to be more informed about the unionisation process and learning from existing unions were identified by respondents. In chapter two a discussion explored key issues and events which led to the unionisation of the early childhood education workers in New Zealand. Key issues prior to unionisation were the differences in pay and working conditions. These were remedied by the successful negotiation for pay on a par with other teachers in the education sector (NZEI, no date). An important difference highlighted was that services for children from birth fall within the remit of the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (EI, 2010). In Ireland, services for children fall within the auspices of several different government departments. Ireland adapted New Zealand’s Te Whāriki curriculum and created Aistear, the Early Years Curriculum Framework. What is to stop Ireland following New Zealand’s lead so that ECCE practitioners become unionised and all services for children from birth fall within the remit of one government department?
5.2.6 Argument for or against union membership

Respondents were asked to consider why they thought the sector had not been unionised to date. The possible explanations were as follows. The sector was seen as not inclined to stand up for itself; the private providers and community providers divide; a tendency to keep quiet; not knowing what it is to be unionised; and a sector traditionally comprised of a female workforce not coming from unionised backgrounds. The respondents answers concurred with studies by: Brooks 2003; Cohen and Huffman 2003; Dineen 2005; Bourgeault and Khokher 2006; and Education International 2010. In chapter two, unionisation was described as “one approach to professionalising the childcare workforce with advocacy being the dominant approach to increasing wages and improving working conditions” (Brooks, 2003, p. 4). These reasons were also apparent in the responses given by the participants: “we would have someone speaking up on our behalf; and a union would seek out the best deal for its members”.

5.2.7 Commonly held assumptions in relation to care work

Commonly held assumptions in relation to care work as identified in a study by Bourgeault and Khokher in 2006 were evident in the answers of the respondents. They found that women who work in caring professions may tolerate discrimination in terms of pay and working conditions because of the innate rewards associated with that particular type of work. The participants felt that the main reason the sector had not been unionised was because of: “the love of the job some people have” and “the joy working with children brings them”. Other reasons were: “not wanting to get anyones backs up” and ECCE practitioners putting the needs of others ahead of their own.

5.2.8 Professionalisation and pay

The findings highlighted the importance respondents placed upon being recognised as professionals and recognition of the quality of their work. Not only did they feel that unionisation would acknowledge the complexity of the role of the ECCE practitioner, they also felt unionisation would attract
more highly qualified employees to the sector. They felt this would help to establish and defend their profession so that those employed in the sector would get properly paid for their expertise. A Canadian study carried out in 2000 demonstrated that staff remuneration and high levels of ECCE specific education positively influenced the provision of quality care (Centre for Families, Work and Wellbeing, 2000). In study by the ECE Taskforce for Education International several commitments were identified, two of which were reflected in the findings of the focus group and interviews. These were: the government becoming the provider of all ECCE services and achieving pay parity (EI, 2010).

5.2.9 Outlier perspectives

Some unexpected findings emerged which had not been anticipated. One such outlier perspective was that a campaign to unionise might only have the support of a minority causing a further rift in the sector. Another opinion was that organisation, unifying and funding were priorities for the ECCE sector but not necessarily unionisation. The literature review revealed that resistance to the unionisation movement in New York came from the Office of Children and Family Services. At the time of the movement towards unionisation in New York, childcare workers earnings were at the poverty level (Gregory, 2008). In Ireland, ECCE staff with a Fetac 5 or Fetac 6 level qualification can expect to earn €10.85 per hour, roughly €2 more than the minimum wage. Of grave concern is the pay for graduates of the sector. As per ECI, level 7 graduates can expect to earn about €20,456 per year whereas the average industrial wage in Ireland was €41,807 in 2012 (Business Economy Technology and Companies, 2014). A final surprising opinion was that the ECCE sector was a relatively young sector, a new identity. In contrast to this, CSER seminar proceedings in 2008 highlighted that childcare was on the States agenda prior to the advent of social partnership which would estimate childcare as a profession to be in the region of thirty plus years old (CSER, 2008). Section 5.3 will now conclude this chapter.


5.3 Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, of all the ECCE policy instruments, strategies and reports that have been published to date, none have been effectively used to bring about improvements in pay and working conditions for those employed within the ECCE sector. CSER has recognised the fact that practitioners “who work directly with children do not enjoy the benefit of their work being placed on a national pay scale unlike their counterparts in the ECCE sector, namely administrators, educationalists and inspectors, suggesting that the work of the ECCE practitioner is valued less (CSER, 2008, p24). This discussion and analysis chapter highlighted the need for improvements in pay and working conditions alongside the barriers facing those employed in the ECCE sector. These barriers are very real and linked with those identified in chapter two. Is unionisation needed however? This chapter has certainly put forward a strong argument in its favour. To quote one participant: “the rumblings have already started”. To quote another: “it (unionisation) will be a success because there is a need for it to be a success”.


6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude with some final insights in section 6.2 in relation to the research topic followed by three recommendations in section 6.3.

6.2 Conclusion

This research topic challenged the status quo by asking: ‘Is unionisation needed for Ireland’s ECCE sector?’ The majority response was: “Yes, it was needed to raise professional profile of the sector; to give practitioners a collective voice; and to positively influence the quality of early childhood care and education that children receive”.

The research topic was not a random question. It was chosen because early years practitioners have been successfully unionised in other countries as this study has highlighted, and as a result they enjoy much improved pay and working conditions. They are regarded as professionals and their profession is valued. The research topic was used, in effect, to get a sense of whether or not unionisation was recognised as a need and it was.

The foreword of the most recent policy document for children and young people, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020, identifies that more focus on early childhood is to be a priority of government for the next seven years. One of the commitments given is to invest more in the quality of children related services because our government recognises: for services to be of a high quality and effective they must be delivered by well trained staff. Equally it recognises the importance of giving every child the best start in life; and the value of early childhood care and education DCYA, 2014).

As an ECCE practitioner this recognition is significant but our government really needs to move beyond what ECI describe in their pre-budget submission as “rhetoric” (ECI, 2014 p.2). It needs to effect the type of change that will bring about improvements in the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s ECCE sector. Policy makers need
to consider improved pay and working conditions for ECCE practitioners as an essential determinant of the quality they seek in relation to child related services.

6.3 Recommendations

Incentivise

‘Right from the Start’ highlighted how, in 2012, only 12% of the ECCE workforce were qualified to degree level compared to an international benchmark of 60%. In order to move beyond 12%, one opportunity may be to incentivise practitioners to work towards degree level qualification and to reflect their level of expertise in their pay packet. Graduate pay for graduates funded possibly by the extra revenue water metering is going to generate within the exchequer.

Specialise

As New Zealand has demonstrated, one ministry overseeing all child related services works. At the moment the EYEPU for the ECCE sector is part of the Department of Education and Skills, our preschool inspectorate is comprised of public health nurses who are under the auspices of the Department of Health and the new Child and Family Agency, TÜSLA falls within the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Unionise

The ECCE sector in Ireland needs to actualise its right to associate and campaign for unionisation. This is something the sector needs to do for itself. Other professions such as teaching and nursing have been in our position at some point in their history and they chose to move forward. This dissertation has certainly created a strong argument in favour of unionisation. To quote one participant: “the rumblings have already started”, to quote another: “it can be done, it’s not impossible”.
Bibliography


Is Unionisation Needed in order to Improve the Pay and Working Conditions of those Employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector?

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Is Unionisation Needed in order to Improve the Pay and Working Conditions of those Employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector?

Colette Saunders


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Is Unionisation Needed in order to Improve the Pay and Working Conditions of those Employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector?

Colette Saunders


Dear Participant

My name is Colette Saunders. I am a 4th year student on the B.A. (Honours Degree) Early Childhood Care and Education program. A requirement of this course of study is the completion of a dissertation on a topic of my choice.

I have decided to complete my dissertation on the following: ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education sector?’

You have been asked to participate in this Focus Group because your area of expertise and experience within the ECCE sector will contribute greatly to the development of my dissertation topic.

Please find attached the following:

- Informed Consent form for you to read and acknowledge.
- A printed copy of the Informed Consent will be provided to you on the day of the Focus Group and will require your signature.
- Focus Group Venue and Organiser Contact Details.
- Focus Group Topic Guide/Questions for you to consider.
Appendix 2

Informed Consent

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this Focus Group. The content of which will be kept strictly confidential.

However it is my duty to inform you “the participant” that this Focus Group will be digitally recorded in order to properly assemble the information presented and to analyse its content.

The recording will be stored, for legal reasons, for a period not exceeding 3 years. After which time the recording will be destroyed.

Now that I have informed you of the above, please voluntarily give your consent to participate in the Focus Group by signing below.

Participant signature:

........................................

Date: ................................

Yours sincerely

........................................

Colette Saunders
Appendix 3

Focus Group Venue and Organiser Contact Details.

- Venue: IT Sligo
- Date: 04th of March 2014
- Time: 3.00pm to 4.30pm
- Location: IT Sligo Library, Information Zone, Room 4
- Organiser: Colette Saunders
- Contact: T: +353 (86) 1027860

Please consider the questions overleaf. They will be discussed in further detail during our Focus Group.
Appendix 4

Focus Group Topic Guide in Support of Dissertation Topic: ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education sector?’

What does the term unionisation mean to you?

In your opinion, does the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (ECCE) sector need to be unionised?

If you do not think that the sector needs unionisation, please state why?

In your opinion, why do you think the sector has not been unionised to date?

What do you think needs to happen in order for unionisation to come about?

What do you perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages associated with unionising the ECCE sector?

In your opinion, who do you think the major stakeholders should be if a campaign to unionise the sector is to be successful?

If you think such a campaign would be successful please state why?

If you do not think such a campaign will be successful please state why?

Any further thoughts, ideas or opinions?
Appendix 5

Dear Interview Participant

My name is Colette Saunders. I am a 4th year student on the B.A. (Honours Degree) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) course at the Institute of Technology, Sligo. A requirement of this course of study is the completion of a dissertation on a topic of my choice. My dissertation supervisor is Dr. John Pender email contact: pender.john@itsligo.ie

I have decided to complete my dissertation on the following: ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education sector?’

You have been asked to participate in this Interview because your area of expertise and experience within the ECCE sector will contribute greatly to the development of my dissertation topic.

Please find attached the following:

- Informed Consent form for you to read. Your consent will be digitally recorded for the purposes of this telephone interview.
- Interview Questions for you to consider in advance of our scheduled interview ____________________________ as per your request.
Appendix 6

Informed Consent

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this Interview. The content of which will be kept strictly confidential.

However it is my duty to inform you “the participant” that this Interview will be digitally recorded in order to properly assemble the information presented and to analyse its content. The information gathered will only be used for this purpose.

The information will be stored, for legal reasons, for a period not exceeding 3 years. After which time the information will be destroyed.

As you are voluntarily participating in this Interview, you may withdraw at any time or request that the interview be stopped.

Participant signature:

........................................

Date: .................................

Yours sincerely

........................................

Colette Saunders
Appendix 7

Organiser Contact Details

- Organiser: Colette Saunders
- Contact: T: +353 (86) 1027860
- Email: S00103617@mail.itsligo.ie

Please consider the questions overleaf in advance of our telephone interview.
Appendix 8

Telephone Interview Topic Guide in Support of Dissertation: ‘Is unionisation needed in order to improve pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education sector?’

1) What does the term unionisation mean to you?

2) In your opinion, does the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (ECCE) sector need to be unionised?

3) If you do not think that the sector needs unionisation, please state why?

4) In your opinion, why do you think the sector has not been unionised to date?

5) What do you think needs to happen in order for unionisation to come about?

6) What do you perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages associated with unionising the ECCE sector?

7) In your opinion, who do you think the major stakeholders should be if a campaign to unionise the sector is to be successful?

8) If you think such a campaign would be successful please state why?

9) If you do not think such a campaign will be successful please state why?

10) In your opinion, what alternatives to unionisation could effectively bring about improved pay and working conditions within the ECCE sector?

Any further thoughts or opinions?
Appendix 9

Survey Monkey

Is unionisation needed in order to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in Ireland’s Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector?

1. What does the term unionisation mean to you?

2. In your opinion, does the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (ECCE) sector need to be unionised?

3. If you do not think that the sector needs unionisation, please state why?

4. In your opinion, why do you think the sector has not been unionised to date?

5. What do you think needs to happen in order for unionisation to come about?

6. What do you perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages associated with unionising the sector?
7. In your opinion, who do you think the major stakeholders should be if a campaign to unionise the sector is to be successful?

8. If you think such a campaign would be successful please state why?

9. If you think such a campaign would not be successful please state why?

10. In your opinion, what alternatives to unionisation could effectively bring about improved pay and working conditions within the ECCE sector?