

**Marino Institute of Education**

**Mentors' Experiences of Supporting Practitioners to Reflect on their**

**Image of the Child**

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*I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Maja Haals Brosnan at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.*

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*Breda Dennehy*

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*'change can be frightening, because it moves us from a known territory into uncharted lands'*

**Rebecca Solnit**

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*Finally, to my son Bobby, age 5 ½ yrs. I love you dearly. I can't wait to play....*

### **Abstract**

This study explored mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of making this reflection central to mentoring practices for quality improvement. This study was carried out using qualitative methods of data collection. A narrative enquiry exploring the spoken and written word on the experiences of mentors'. The study employed a multiple methods approach using open response questionnaires and semi-structured focus group discussion. The participants were members of the Better Start mentoring team who are early childhood professionals (Level 8/9) and are qualified in mentoring and coaching.

Literature asserts that early years practitioners continuous professional development is central to the professionalisation of ECCE services, and is a critical component in the quality of the experiences afforded to children (Sheridan *et al*, 2009). Our view of children is where curriculum development should begin (NCCA, 2014). The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (2014) focuses on the rights of the child and practitioner image of the child to support reflection on the principles that underpin curriculum. This informs a practitioner's role in supporting children to show their confidence and competence (NCCA, 2006).

The Better Start Quality Development service is a mentoring service, which supports providers in implementing the quality standards of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006), and *Aistear: The National Early Years Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). Mentoring is an effective form of professional development in early childhood settings (Howe & Jacob, 2013). Change facilitated through mentoring is likely to be sustained (Chu, 2014; Garvey, (2004) as it considers the principles of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970).

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### **List of Acronyms**

CPD – continuous professional development

ECCE - Early Childhood Care and Education

EYS – Early Years Specialist

FP –Focus Group Participant 1-8

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

QLP – Quality Liaison Person

QP –Questionnaire Participant 1-18

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## **Chapter One - Introduction**

Chapter one outlines key concepts relating to the context of this study. It will define the aim and objectives of the research. The relevance and focus of this study will be outlined followed by an overview of how the dissertation is structured. This dissertation investigates mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner. Over the past number of years as a Better Start mentor I have gained experience in supporting practitioners in early years services to develop quality practice. This has led me to understand that reflection on the image of the child plays an important role in creating sustainable changes in practice. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these observations are reflected in the experiences of other team members within Better Start as well. As of yet, there is no concrete evidence of the effectiveness of this approach and which elements of it may or may not be work. In light hereof, the purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of making reflection on the image of the child central to mentoring practices for quality improvement in the early years. The study will explore what Better Start mentors' do to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child; why they support reflection on the image of the child in this way, and how this reflection influences practice that promotes children's learning within early years settings. The study will also explore challenges in supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade (Start Strong, 2014). Due to high demand, the quantity of provision has increased whilst the quality of provision has remained varied (O'Dwyer and McCormack, 2014; French 2007). Research on quality within the early years illustrates that practitioners' own learning and development influences positive outcomes for children and

is pivotal to quality provision (Urban et al, 2011; Moss, 2000). Both *Síolta and Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) state the significance of highly skilled, knowledgeable and competent adults supporting the well-being, learning and development of children.

### **Mentoring to Support Quality**

Engagement in continuous professional development (CPD) is critical to strengthening the knowledge and skills of practitioners and the quality of the experiences they afford to children (Sheridan, Samuleson & Johansson et al. 2009). Research has found that initiatives that are individualised and emphasise the transfer of knowledge directly into practice is a key factor in professional development. Mentoring programs for early childhood practitioners have been associated with quality development as research has found that mentoring is an effective form of professional development in early childhood settings (Howe and Jacobs, 2013). Mentoring is a process of change which supports the learning and development of an individual (Chu, 2014). It takes account of adult learning theory and involves an approach which enables a mentee to take responsibility for their own learning (Knowles, 1970).

Better Start is a mentoring service, which supports providers in implementing the quality standards of *Síolta* (2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Within Better Start the mentor is called an Early Years Specialist (EYS). For the purpose of this study the Early Years Specialist is referred to as the Mentor. Their role is to work directly with early years services to build their capacity to deliver high quality experiences for children and families. The EYS works within a professional relationship that is responsive and individual to the context of the practitioner's work. The aim of the approach is to support practitioners to engage in behaviors that extend their learning and improves reflective practice, thus leading to positive educational experiences for children and improved quality practice within early years

services. Reflection to support practitioners to develop a positive image of the child underpins this work.

The image of the child refers to what a person believes about the role of children in education and society. This image includes how people think about children's "capabilities, development, motivations, purpose and agency" (Martalock, 2012, P.4). Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, states that "each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to the child ... (and) it is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image" (Malaguzzi, 1994). The principles of Reggio Emilia encourage us to think about our image of the child and the ways we interact with children and plan curriculum and learning environments (Hughes, 2009; Tarr, 2003).

### **Reflection on the Image of the Child**

The work of Better Start values reflection on the image of the child and uses this approach to supports practitioners to examine the 'principles, values and attitudes that shape their work and the work of the setting' (NCCA, 2014, p 2). The principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta* place the child as a citizen with rights and sees them as competent, confident and at center of their learning. It is important to build a curriculum that reflects this view of children. The Better Start Quality Development process is informed by *The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (2014) (from here onwards simply referred to as the Practice Guide) which is used to develop a quality curriculum and to better support children's learning (NCCA 2014). Under the pillar *Curriculum Foundations* (Overview: Appendix A.) a range of activities (Appendix B.) are provided which focus on the rights of the child and a practitioner's image of the child. Collective discussion on these concepts can result in a shift in a practitioner's values and beliefs (ibid.). Whilst at times intangible, this can have an impact on all within a service (NCCA, 2014; Better Start, 2019).

Curriculum development which is underpinned by reflection on the image of the child (NCCA, 2014) is but one approach to quality development. The premise of this study is that supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child leads to sustainable change in quality practice. The purpose is to evaluate the effectiveness of making this reflection central to mentoring practices for quality improvement. The Participants in this study are a group of mentors' who work within the Better Start Quality Development service. The study engages in qualitative methods, specifically questionnaires and a semi structured focus group to explore mentors' experiences of supporting reflection on the image of the child. By its nature, any exploration concerning the image of the child relates to an individuals' values. The study has therefore been designed as a narrative enquiry to evoke rich descriptions of the mentor's experiences.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

Chapter one describes the context and focus of the study. The aim, rational, focus and objectives are outlines followed by an overview of how the dissertation is structured.

Chapter two outlines the relevant literature related to the study. This examines a range of literature which applies to the research topic and establishes the position of the study in the context of supporting children's learning within early years services Ireland.

Chapter three outlines the design of the research and methodology. The aims objectives and rational of the study are presented. The chapter provides the philosophical underpinnings and describes the position of the researcher. It provides an outline of participants and descriptions of all aspects of the design and procedures including data collection, coding and analysis methods, ethical considerations and limitations.

Chapter four organises and presents the main findings of the study. Relevant quantitative and qualitative data is outlined. Following coding, analysis and interpretation of the key findings have been presented through identified themes. These findings together with related literature will inform the discussion.

Chapter five presents the discussion of findings. The findings are framed within the context of the research questions and outlined in three key areas of discussion. Together with the relevant literature, the researchers understanding of the findings are presented. This discussion reflects the practical and theoretical implications of the study.

Chapter Six presents a summary of the insight gained through this research. Concluding statements based off the findings, analysis and interpretation of the study are outlined and further. These conclusions have been applied to form a set of actionable recommendations for policy, practice and research.

## **Chapter Two - Literature Review**

This chapter sets out the body of literature relating to the work of mentors' in supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child within the Better Start Quality development process. The context of the study is described through an exploration of the role of reflective practice, leadership and adult learning theory within mentoring processes which support quality development in Early Childhood Education. Key concepts and research relating to reflection on the image of the child and its impact on curriculum as well the role of the Practitioner in supporting children's learning presented.

### **Constructions of Childhood**

The image of the child relates to the role of children and an individual's concept of childhood (Mayall, 1996). Childhood may be defined as "a life period during which a human being is regarded as a child, and the cultural, social and economic characteristics of that period" (Frones cited in Waller, 2005, P.148). Children experience different childhoods depending on where they are from geographically, socially, and on their race and gender (Penn cited in Waller, 2005). A contemporary view acknowledges that childhood is not fixed or universal (Waller, 2005). There are multiple perspectives of childhood, and the work of Mayall states that 'Children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood or what they should be' (Mayall, 1996, p 1)

Our understanding of how children learn is informed by our particular view of children. Contemporary views of childhood place emphasis on children as active participants and having agency and power. The UN convention on the rights of the child (1989) created a climate for listening to the views of children. The child is seen as competent and complete



as themselves (Malaguzzi, 1993) and should be viewed as a young citizen. Learning and development takes place as part of social and cultural processes (Rogoff, 1990)

Our understanding of how children learn is informed by our particular view of children. One theoretical model for the study of childhood applies a developmental approach. This modernist theory includes the work of Piaget who outlined clearly defined stages of cognitive growth (Kellet, Robinson and Burr, 2009; Waller, 2005). Whilst somewhat criticised his work emphasised the active role of the child in his or her own cognitive learning.

Vygotsky stressed the role of children in their own learning however also accentuating the role of a knowledgeable other to support learning (1978). This work was further developed by modern theorists such as Rogoff, (1990), Bruner (1966) and Lave and Wenger (1999). A sociocultural understanding of learning sees the child embedded in the context of social relationships. The child participating in multiple contexts such as family and the community is recognised. MacNaughton (2003) sees the child as a cultural construction. When we describe children we are applying our own cultural biases and not what is existence in fact (Dahlberg et al, 2009)

### **Quality in Early Education**

Quality early childhood education produces beneficial and lasting effects on children (Hayes 2013, Moloney 2015, French 2007). As Ireland has undergone significant change in relation to early education in the last decade, issues relating to quality have dominated debate for some time (Start Strong, 2014). Through an increase in the demand the quantity of provision has increased, whilst quality of provision within early years services is varied (O'Dwyer & McCormack, 2014; French, 2007). Research illustrates the key role of practitioners in quality provision and the influence of their learning and development on

positive outcomes for children (Urban et al., 2011, Moss, 2000). Despite this, matters such as training, qualifications and remuneration for those working in the sector impacts on the provision of high quality education for young children (Moloney, 2015).

French states that high quality early years settings are those where practitioners/educators are knowledgeable on how children learn and are engaged, thoughtful and reflective in their practice (Hayes, 2013, p.171). In discussing high-quality early years practice, Hayes refers to “the quality of what is happening in early years settings every day ... and the importance of creating an atmosphere of secure relationships in which children feel that they belong and are valued members of the space” (2013, p.26). In contrast, low quality can be characterised “by limited reciprocal encounters between adults and children and few opportunities for child participation” (Hayes, 2013, p.26)

Quality in early childhood education is strongly associated with the quality of staff qualifications and participation in ongoing professional development (OECD 2012). A myriad of policies and initiatives have been developed, culminating in *Siolta*: (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) to enhance the quality of early childhood provision. Despite this, many practitioners are “ill-equipped” to engage with these frameworks, which Moloney describes as the “pillars of quality” in childcare in Ireland (Maloney, 2015, p.21). It is within this context, and in the knowledge that quality early childhood education produces beneficial and lasting effects on children, that the role of the Early Childhood Specialist as mentor with the Better Start National Quality Development Service is placed.

### **Reflective Practice**

Spaggiari (2004) emphasises the importance of practitioners being central to their own professional practice. International research has shown that reflective practice is a key

component of professional development (Van Laere et al, 2012; Lehrer, 2013) and essential element in quality practice (Schonfeld 2015, CECDE, 2006). “Reflective practice requires that the practitioner engages in thought processes that make him/her aware, in a critical way of his/her everyday activities with a view to continuously improving and refining practice” (CECDE, 2006).

Various theories have been developed which may support individual approaches to reflection. Reflection can be considered to function on three levels: surface level, pedagogical level and critical level (Hayes 2013). Critical reflection examines a practitioner’s personal and professional convictions and how these influence children directly and indirectly through their practice. This is important as some principles are below the surface of conscious reflection (Lindon, 2012). Reflective practice can happen in many forms, for example through conversations, documenting in a journal, by doing research or through the use of self-evaluation tools. Regardless of the method of reflection, Schon’s theory of reflective practice discusses it in two ways; reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection in action occurs as an event is happening. As an event is happening practitioners think to decide how to act, and then act according to the situation (Schon 1983; Schon 1987; Rouse, 2015). Reflection-on-action involves practitioners thinking about past events and how they may have handled it differently resulting in better outcomes for children (Schon, 1987). Recent research has also outlined “reflection-for-action”, which describes how practitioners recognise goals or areas for development and takes steps to achieve these goals (Rouse, 2015).

“Research has shown that practitioners who engage in critical reflection of their own practice are more likely to be responsive to children’s needs, to value the child’s thinking” (LCCC, 2008. p 6) and to be more capable in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Howe & Jacobs, 2013, p 606). It involves thinking and talking about what is at the core of

an individual's practice, so that over time reflective practitioners become clearer about their values (Lindon, 2012). This supports practitioners to create an image of children, which can then be translated into their pedagogical practice (Hughes, 2009).

### **Leadership**

Reflective practice is a key component of professional practice. The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide emphasises the importance of creating a culture within an early years service, which embraces the values of reflective practice. This involves creating an inclusive and supportive professional community where time for individual and group reflection is valued (NCCA, 2014). There may be a variety of barriers to reflection, some of which may be psychological including fear of criticism or judgment, defensiveness, professional arrogance or may include generally de-motivated staff, organisational or time constraints, or a lack of knowledge or reflective supervision (Schonfeld, 2015; Lindon, 2010). A reflective culture is seen as dependent on the vision of an effective leader who “rather than focusing on the narrow and specific details of getting through the day and keeping the setting running... spend their time reflecting on, deliberating about and planning broadly around values, philosophy, policies and the need to be responsive to change” (Rodd, 2006, p22).

This concept is embraced in the Practice Guide through the use of the term pedagogical leadership. Pedagogical leadership relates to the “educational role in a setting which encompasses the tasks that relate directly to supporting children’s learning and development using *Aistear* and *Síolta*” (NCCA, 2014). The Practice Guide acknowledges the challenge of being caught up in management tasks rather than leading learning, stating that leadership is about “ensuring that the whole setting embraces a consistent vision and supports quality practice” (NCCA, 2014, p.17). This enables practitioners to maintain their

continued professional development and ultimately empowers practitioners, as they support children within a quality early learning environment.

### **Mentoring for quality**

The work of Better Start is responding to the need for continuous professional development (CPD) and training on quality practice and the implementation of both *Aistear* and *Siolta*. According to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) early childhood settings need systematic support to implement an effective curriculum programme (DCYA, 2014), research has found that in order to implement an early years curriculum commitment is required, at both a government level and from practitioners implementing it on a daily basis.

Hale (1999) suggests that skills acquired through mentoring and coaching could bridge the gap between training and implementation. A mentoring approach supports trained practitioners as they continue to develop the knowledge, competencies, and skills required in early childhood settings and sees a move from the traditional method of one off instruction, replaced by the idea of lifelong learning (Parsloe & Leedham, 2009; Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2009; Clutterbuck, 2014). Mentoring in early childhood has been defined as 'a reciprocal professional relationship which not only helps to improve the professional practice of new practitioners but also provides opportunities for more experienced teachers to gain fresh perspectives' (Murphy & Thornton, 2015, p.15).

Research affirms that 'mentoring and leadership is vital in order to understand and implement' our national curriculum frameworks (Farrell, 2016; Davies & Slattery 2010). Findings from the *Aistear* in Action study (NCCA & ECI, 2013) highlights what is possible in curriculum reform when practitioners have access to mentoring support. Participants were

seen to engage with the frameworks, reflect on practice and develop an emergent curriculum based on the principals of *Aistear*. Mentoring when implemented effectively can help to bring about change in the practice of education, and a good quality early years mentoring program can strengthen overall professional practice by developing educators' reflective practice skills (Hayes & O'Neill 2017).

### **Adult learning theory**

Mentoring is essentially about learning and development. Mentors' must understand the learning processes for those involved and how to support change through adult learning practices. There is no single theory of learning that can be applied to adults. Historically what we have known about teaching has been based on an outdated principal that a teacher transmits knowledge to the child (Knowles, 2011, p.53).

Knowles developed the term 'Andragogy' as a distinct theory of learning for adults, defined as 'the art and science of helping adults learn' (Knowles, 2011). This (1970) presents a definition of learning described as a change in behaviors, values, ideas, or beliefs, which shift as a result of an experience (Knowles et al. 2011). According to Ozuah 'If one accepts the precepts of andragogy, then every effort should be made to move the learners gradually but firmly in the direction of autonomy and self-directedness' (2005, p.8) Andragogy is underpinned by a set of suppositions on the nature and characteristics of adult learners (Ozuah, 2005). Ozuah outlines these as;

- 1) The need to know: Adults want to understand the potential benefit of new learning and want the learning experience to meet their needs.
- 2) The learner self-concept: The adults self-concept is autonomous and self-directing, they learn best when the subject is for their own purpose.
- 3) The role of experience: A learner's prior experience are a primary source for learning. It is important the new learning connects with what they already know.

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- 4) Readiness to learn: The adult requires a sense of readiness and needs to be involved in the planning and evaluating process
- 5) Orientation to learning: adults learning is related to a task or life problem. It is not centred on subjects.
- 6) Motivation: Adults are motivated to learn in real life context

An important part of supporting practitioners during the mentoring process is facilitating each mentee to take meaning from their own individual experience as part of the change process. Transformative learning is a theory formulated by Mezirow (2009), and was developed to understand the nature of learning that changes the learner in a profound way. Transformational learning supports a mentor to introduce new learning and knowledge that builds upon existing knowledge. It has been defined as “the process of making meaning from one’s experiences” (Taylor, 1998). It involves perspective transformation, a paradigm shift, whereby interpretations and assumptions are critically examined to form new meaning (Mezirow, 2009). The transformation in perspective is achieved through the learner experiencing 1) disorienting dilemmas, 2) critical reflection, 3) rational dialogue, and 4) action.

**Better Start Mentoring Model**

The mentoring model in Better Start takes account of adult learning theories and supports the Early Years Specialist to tailor strategies with individual adult learners. The role of the Early Years Specialist as a mentor is to develop relationships in order to build the capacity of practitioners to promote quality practice. The process applies a strengths based approach, incorporating a range of strategies including observation and self-evaluation,

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feedback, video and reflective dialogue, goal setting, and a range of practical supports including modelling, scaffolding and questioning to promote reflective practice.

Wong and Waniganayake (2013, p170) outline essential attitudes of a mentor, including being caring, open, trustworthy; essential skills and knowledge outlined include the ability to evaluate, facilitate and communicate, along with the ability to take on roles such as being an instructor, coach and critical friend. A mentor develops a unique professional and challenging relationship to enhance knowledge, skills and abilities (Scottish Social Services Council, 2011). The mentor must understand and be able to facilitate processes, which support joint assessment, goal setting, coaching/modelling, observation and feedback in order to choose the appropriate tools and techniques to support the learning needs of individuals (Clutterbuck, 2014).

The Better Start mentoring model is primarily influenced by the developmental model (Clutterbuck, 2014). It facilitates the practitioner setting the agenda, coming to their own conclusions and promotes self-reflection. Within this model, an experienced mentor will use a full range of skills as appropriate to the situation and mentee's needs (Garvey, 2004). Clutterbuck (2008) describes four approaches to supporting a person's learning. An effective mentor will use these respond to the need and context of the mentee. The four styles include: coaching – which is considered as a directive approach, guiding – which involves giving advice or being a role model, networking- to help learners to develop their own resourcefulness, and finally, counselling – a non-directive approach that can involve supporting mentees through listening.

The Better Start model of mentoring uses a non-directive approach, which supports practitioners and services to engage at a level that meets their needs (Clutterbuck 2007). It also focuses on a strengths-based model. This identifies the strengths in the participants as motivation based on real life rather than aspirational situations (Kisthard 2002). The



approach places the person, not the problem, at the centre and works on building on individual's strengths and skills (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). It allows change to begin from differing foundations allowing the change process to be adaptable for different services, practitioners or rooms.

### **Image of the child**

The phrase image of the child is used by those who are influenced by the Reggio Emilia philosophy, which explicitly includes the image of the child as a basic principle. Reggio educators view the child as being competent, strong, powerful and rich in potential from the time of birth (Rinaldi, 2013) and this image of the child permeates all they do (Tarr, 2003). The principles of the Reggio approach are seen as a catalyst for thinking about early childhood education (Hughes, 2009). Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that the educator's image of the child impacts both implicitly and explicitly on the assumptions and the choices that they make as educators, and is in fact a declaration of the educator's ethical principles (Melia, 2018). Though people may not be consciously aware of the image they hold, everyone develops an image of the child from their experiences as part of a community and culture (Malaguzzi, 1994: Martalock, 2012: Tarr, 2003).

The practitioner's image of the child is seen as an important starting point in curriculum development (French, 2007), with Bredkamp (1993) stating that "the teacher's role cannot be separated from the image of the child". A positive image of the child allows practitioners to provide opportunities worthy of children's strengths, ideas, creativity and potential (Hughes, 2009). According to Hughes (2009), in order to ensure practice is meaningful for children and relevant to both the children and practitioners own experiences, they need to ask questions such as who is the child, what is childhood and how does a child learn?

Research has shown that adults often hold an image of the child that reflects their own personal experiences as learners (Harris & McCartney, 2014). This may be in contrast to the images the children hold of themselves, or the images held by their families, schools and communities (ibid.). According to Sorin (2005), when supporting young children, adults need to think about the child and reconstruct their practice accordingly. Harris and McCartney (2014) state that many educators see children as receptors of information while maintaining rigid control of children's activities and behaviours. This leads to a challenge as the contexts for learning are restrictive and support a competent young learner. This is in contrast to an understanding of a child who is active and engaged in a curriculum, which pursues their interests and their abilities.

### **Curriculum**

Curricula provided for children is informed by diverse beliefs and assumptions about children and their learning capabilities. The image adults have of children, directly relates to how they respond to children's agendas as a basis for curriculum (Dockett, 1998). This in turn influences practice in early childhood settings (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2009). A curriculum encompasses "the totality of the child's learning and development". Recent theory outlines principles of learning, which promote a curriculum to empower the child as a learner (French, 2007). Each child's inherent abilities and what "children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point of a child's education" (Ball, cited in Hayes, 2007, P7) This is important as a modern concept of childhood sees children as actively co-constructing their own lives (Waller & Schwann, 2005).

Approaches to curriculum in the early years reflect polarised views which focus either on expected outcomes, on the one hand, or pedagogy and play-based approaches on

the other (Hayes, 2013). Hayes describes an approach to curriculum and pedagogy based on childrens' current interests that meets the immediate learning needs of the child and allows practitioners to plan for future learning based on the child's own experience, knowledge and previous learning. This concept has been described as an emergent, inquiry based curriculum (NCCA, 2014). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) is the early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to six in Ireland. It is not prescriptive and provides information to help practitioners plan and build a curriculum, which emerges from the image of children as confident, competent, curious and creative learners (NCCA, 2014, NCCA, 2009).

*Aistear* is intended for all adults in early childhood settings who have responsibility for nurturing children's learning and development (NCCA, 2009). Consultative documents on the development of *Aistear* were premised on Malaguzzi's understanding of the child as rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children (Malaguzzi, 1993). Within *Aistear*, the child is understood as an active and inquisitive young learner. It promotes learning through play and is based upon reciprocal relationships with caring and understanding adults (NCCA, 2009; French 2007).

According to Hayes "Conceptions about early learning are often captured in the values and principles that are provided to introduce curricular or practice frameworks" (2013, p 50). The principles which underpin *Aistear* place children at the centre of their own learning and development and view them as "citizens with rights and responsibilities, free from any form of discrimination" (NCCA, 2014, p.17). It assumes a vision of children as capable of making choices and decisions (French, 2007) and as co-creators of knowledge, central to the education and care process (Hayes & O'Neill, 2017). The competence of the adult to implement curriculum is seen as critical to enabling children to become capable and masterful learners (Hayes & O'Neill, 2017).

### **The Role of the Adult**

The significant role of the adult is well documented through the Reggio Emilia approach to curriculum and learning. Malaguzzi outlines the role of the teacher as complex, multifaceted and responsive to the needs of children. The learning needs of the child should be complimented by the role of the adult who serves as partner, resource and guide. As described, the image of the child is where teaching should begin (Malaguzzi 1994) with Edwards further promoting the notion of “an idealized pair of images: teacher and child”.

Edwards poses the question “what kind of individuals are needed by our children?” (2012). Despite the exceptional pace and enormous capacity of children to develop skills, knowledge and understanding in their early years, Fisher (2013) claims “it seems that education can inhibit some of the most prominent characteristics of a competent young learner”. This emphasises the importance of practitioners reflecting on and reviewing their role in the early childhood curriculum. Pedagogy in early years practice relates to the role of a skilful adult in nurturing children’s learning. Pedagogy suggests a theoretically informed practice that encompasses the many processes involved in childrens’ learning and adults creating learning opportunities and environments that engage, challenge and interest young children (Hayes, 2013).

Sorin recognises the role of the adult in early childhood curricula (Sorin and Galloway, 2005) and challenges practitioners to critically reflect on how different constructs affect their own practice, encouraging them to examine their views and actions toward young children. Sorin (2003) describes ten constructs of childhood proposing that certain dominant images of childhood present as problematic, “particularly in terms of power relationships, agency for the child and how they may constrain the possibilities in early childhood curriculum” (Woodrow, 1999, p.7).

Constructs of childhood proposed by Sorin include the innocent child being protected from fear or anxiety with the adult “knowing better” and retaining the power within the setting. Within the early childhood setting this may be identified through a learning environment designed to protect a child from harm and “positions children as incompetent, vulnerable and dependent: a blank slate ready to be moulded by adults” (Sorin, 2005, p 14). In this environment the child is prevented from having choice or acting with independence or agency as the adult “knows better”. In contrast to this is a newer image of the agentic child, which challenges the notion of the innocent, powerless child. Children are considered as social actors who participate in their own education and lives (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). A curriculum for this child is co-constructed through adult-child collaboration and guiding by the adult. In light of this work, we see the importance of practitioners reflecting on their view of children. Understanding these constructs allows practitioners to challenge their own pedagogy and practice in order to provide a curriculum which encompasses a positive image of the child as a learner.

### **Guiding reflection on the image of the child.**

The Better Start mentoring relationship is used to help to guide and promote reflection on practitioners' image of the child, and support practitioners to bring their image of the child as a competent and confident learner to life in the curriculum (NCCA, 2014). The *The Practice Guide* (NCCA, 2014) supports reflection on the principles of *Aistear* (2009) and *Siolta* (2007), which place the child at the center of their own learning and views children as citizens with rights and as confident, competent and curious learners. It outlines reflection across seven pillars, with opportunities to reflect through a plethora of resources including

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self-evaluation tools, action planning tools, tip sheets, videos, galleries and resources for sharing (NCCA, 2014).

The pillar Curriculum Foundations has been specifically designed as a starting point to thinking about curriculum. Within this pillar, element two supports reflection on the image of the child and provides questions prompts and scenarios which encourage practitioners to think about their work with children (NCCA, 2014). This element provides a variety of activities A-E which are designed to support both group and self-reflection on children and their lives.

Activity A (appendix A) supports practitioners to describe their view of children, reflecting that “this shapes how you approach planning for learning and development, how you listen to and involve them (or not) and how the curriculum takes shape within your setting” (NCCA, 2014, p.21). Activity B involves practitioners thinking about their own experiences as a learner, and seeing all children as competent and confident learners. It outlines a number of scenarios and supports reflection on the messages practitioners may give children either directly or indirectly, on the things they can or cannot do. Activity C is used to explore challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence, and supports practitioners to think about how they show their trust and belief in children as they support them to learn by being creative, trying new things, and taking risks. Activity D is designed to allow a group of colleagues to make a tangible action plan to change practice, which allows children more opportunities to show their confidence and competence, either in a room or in a whole setting. The final activity E) supports practitioners to share their image of the child with others by describing how their views become evident in their daily work.

This suite of activities is designed to be carried out over a period of weeks or months with aspects of both self-reflection and group reflection. The activities are supported with a

variety of resources including tips-sheets, templates, actions plans, scenarios, photographs and videos. (NCCA, 2014, Curriculum Foundations, Element 2). It is hoped that a collective discussion of these key concepts within an early years setting can result in a shift in values and beliefs for practitioners. This conceptual shift can have a positive impact on all within the service.

### **Developing a positive image of the child**

Experiences of similar reflection on practitioner's image of the child, based on the inspiration of Reggio Emilia with practitioners in South Australia, have been described in research by Rinaldi (2013). Similar to the Practice Guide, this work provoked the construction of a positive image of the child as a competent child and a possessor of rights. This reflection inspired the following responses: "I've been saying that I see children as capable, but if I'm really honest I've really had two views of children: one for those who find learning easy and an empty view of the children who have learning difficulties. Why didn't I see this before?" and "I will never think of children in the same way again. You have opened my eyes to their capability and potential" (Rinaldi 2013, p.20).

Further research, which was carried out in the United States, by McCartney and Harris (2014) asked questions to ascertain how preservice teacher's images of the child were challenged or affirmed through experience in international preschool settings. Opportunities were provided for the participants to reconstruct their image of the child through exposure to different school cultures and the sociocultural setting in which the schools were situated. Participants found that 'teacher's expectations affect (children's) competence' (McCartney and Harris, 2014, p. 274). Unlike the practice in adult dominated settings they had previously experienced, children's initiative and competence was supported when they saw the children

as competent and active agents. The children were able to assume responsibility for their learning and were supported to think critically and creatively (ibid.).

In addition, this research reinforced the importance of providing intentional opportunities for both critical reflection, and for reflection in action (Schon,1983) as the implicit beliefs of practitioners were deeply engrained and can be difficult to challenge. Being supported to reflect on their image of the child and with scaffolding provided, participants began to question the practices and beliefs that they held, testing them against a different model of practice. This led to teachers being able to identify their ideas about appropriate pedagogy, to challenge previously accepted practice and value the child as a confident and competent learner.

These explorations outline the importance of forming a positive image of the child. These considerations are in line with international research, which has found that the most effective early childhood professionals reflect on and adopt a flexible image of children and childhood and consider the roles they play in children's lives.

## **Conclusion**

The work of the mentor within the Better Start Quality Development process supports practitioners to consider their practice and challenge assumptions through the use of reflective practice. When practitioners in an ECCE setting are supported to come together to decide on shared principles of practice this will help to develop the view of the child as competent and confident and facilitate consistent practice across the setting (NCCA, 2014). In the Better Start model practitioners are supported to reflect on their own professional role and ethical practice. *Aistear* and *Siolta* both acknowledge the role of the adult in supporting a positive image of the child and how this impacts on practice. It is the mentor's role to



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develop a relationship which effectively supports reflection to develop practitioner's knowledge base, and enhance quality practice in the early years based on our image of the child as a competent and confident Learner (NCCA, 2009).

As we have no concrete evidence of the effectiveness of this approach the purpose of this research is to evaluate whether making reflection on the image of the child central to mentoring practices for quality development in ECCE settings leads to sustainable change. The study will explore what Better Start Mentors' do to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child; why they do it in this way and how it influences practice which promotes children's learning within early year's settings. The challenges to this will also be explored.

### **Chapter Three - Research Methodology**

This chapter presents all aspects of the research methodology and procedures used to gather data on mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of making reflection on the image of the child central to mentoring practices for quality improvement in the early years. Within this research, qualitative methods, specifically questionnaires and a semi structured focus group, were employed to explore what Better Start Mentors' do to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child; why they support reflection on the image of the child in this way; and how this reflection influences practice which promotes children's learning within early years settings. These methods were also employed to explore challenges in supporting this reflection. This chapter outlines the researcher's position and describes the research design including a brief exploration of the underlying paradigms. It also describes the participants and outlines the research methods and data analysis procedures used. Ethical considerations and limitations of the research conducted are likewise indicated.

#### **Researcher's Position**

As valuable qualitative research seeks to hear all voices and perspectives (Czarniawsak, 2004, Gilgun 2005 cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018), it is important that I, as the researcher, outline my personal stance and position in this research. It is acknowledged that the writer brings biases, values and experiences to the study, as writing of this kind cannot be separated from the author. It is also important that I protect the rights, privacy and welfare of the participants in the study (Gabo Ntseane, 2013). By its nature, my relationship

with the participants within the study is ongoing and evolving. Ethical dilemmas within the researcher-participant relationship can be complex. Therefore, despite my good intentions, scrutiny within the study may inadvertently have negative impacts on participants. The inclusion of my own position and related reflections will help in revealing “the conflicts and tensions that all researchers inevitably face and learn from” (Gabo Ntseane, 2013, p. 296).

I am currently employed in a mentoring and coaching role as an Early Years specialist within the Better Start Quality Development process. I hold a degree in Early Childhood Care and Education. I also hold a postgraduate qualification in both Early Education, Mentoring and Coaching. During my initial post graduate studies in early education I gained new insight into the Reggio Emilia approach and the work and principles of Loris Malaguzzi. From related readings, I endeavoured to incorporate these principles into my daily practice in my then role as an early year’s practitioner. These principles helped in reinforcing some established practice, challenged other areas of practice and allowed me to develop new practice. This resulted in developing new approaches with the potential for positive outcomes for children as well as for myself as a practitioner.

On the uptake of my current role as a Mentor with Better Start, I gained familiarity with the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*, including the reflective activities on the image of the child within the pillar Curriculum Foundations. This helped me to recognise that on my own journey as a practitioner, I had been led to reflect on my image of the child through my own exploration of Malaguzzi’s work. The subsequent reconstruction of my image of the child was invaluable in developing my practice. Within my role as a mentor I have, at different stages, committed to utilising this pillar and associated activities to support reflection on the image of the child, thus endeavouring to make it central to my own mentoring practices for quality improvement in the early years.

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As this research is based on an area of practice I myself engage in on a daily basis it is important to reflect on my relationship with my colleagues. The study within my own place of work, held the potential to raise issues of power or risk to both the participants and myself (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to be able to appropriately collect useful data it was important to manage the relationship in a manner, which addressed any difficulties in remaining objective and eliminate any potential imbalance of power. For example, by listening to the focus group recording repeatedly I was able to overcome any bias in relation to the value of the input of participants who I know well and whose professional opinions have already had an influence on my own perspectives. In this study it was important to negotiate my positionality as both an insider and an outsider (Gabo Ntseane, 2013) who on one hand works as a mentor who has familiarity with the content and practices participants are referring to, but on the other hand doing the work of a researcher and interviewer. As there is an existing relationship with participants, there was a commitment from the group to the work, and thus a trust and openness to inform discussion and question practice. It was important that I balance engagement and disengagement with participants throughout the study to allow ideas, discussions and opinions to develop without bias. I also engaged in critical self-reflection in order to understand how my own knowledge of practice could add to the research as I have the advantage of sharing a similar background and experiences as those within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

**Research Design**

The theoretical framework of this study is built on an interpretivist approach acknowledging that the findings will vary according to the perspectives of the participants (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). As the social world is constantly changing, few situations are

exact replicas of others. The study therefore draws on social science theories, which shapes research and the researcher's view. It is set within a social constructivist paradigm where the knowledge is "constructed together" (Fraser & Lewis et al., 2009. p74), and in which the "researcher looks for a complexity of views" (Creswell & Poth 2018, p 25), therefore discounting the notion of "absolute truth" (Etherington, 2019). The focus is on the process of interaction with individuals, including the context of the information, which is also shaped by the experiences of the researcher. The aim of the approach is to investigate the voice of the participants whilst also acknowledging the multiple interpretations of a single issue (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Fraser & Lewis et al. 2009), thus applying the use of reflexivity, where the focus is on the "contexts of, and relationships between researcher and researched as shaping the creation of knowledge" (Etherington, 2019).

The purpose of the study will be to inform the mentoring practice within the Better Start team. It will have the potential to inform the practice of other mentoring programmes and the development of further coaching and mentoring and opportunities for early year's education at a local and national level. In order to add to the validity and transferability of the study it is important to gather narratives through many different forms of data. The study therefore employed a multiple methods approach using open response questionnaires and semi-structured focus group interview. From an interpretivist-constructivist perspective, Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.259) states that triangulation remains a principle strategy to ensure validity and reliability, therefore in collecting data, the researcher intentionally planned to "make use of multiple and different methods" (Creswell, 2014, p. 251) whilst also considering that comparisons using similar methods can provide a check on the accuracy of information gathered (Denscombe, 2010). Getting more than one viewpoint in order to gain better knowledge improves accuracy and leads to a fuller picture, thus enhancing the "completeness of the findings" (ibid, p.348).

This research study was carried out using qualitative methods of data collection. Qualitative research is exploratory in nature. Its focus is on generating understanding and meaning of individual's experiences through rich descriptions. Qualitative research is flexible, evolving and emergent in its design. It is used to answer questions with the purpose of understanding phenomena from the participant's point of view (Reeves, 2008). Within qualitative data it is said that the researcher is the primary research instrument. Through the research design, stories were co-constructed as participants describes their lived experiences of supporting reflection on the image of the child. This included rich descriptions of participant's values, the contexts in which experiences took place and the feelings they evoked. The interactions between the participants and the researcher, and the participants with each other was invaluable. This allowed for dialogue to explore similar and dissimilar experiences and beliefs. It supported reflection and opportunity to question beliefs or build on each other's opinions. (Creswell, 2018, p.68).

This narrative enquiry was carried out to explore the spoken and written word relating to the experiences and challenges of participants who are mentors', supporting reflection on the image of the child within early childhood care and education settings. Participants are those who have experience relating to this particular phenomenon. Within this approach, participants provided a voice to allow the researcher to explore the educational problem presented (Creswell, 2014). Creswell & Poth (2018) state that through a collaborative approach between the research and participants the story unfolds. Through describing their experiences, participants provided a narrative, which presents their story on how an individual thinks, knows and feels, and informs us on how they makes decisions and gives insight into their lives (ibid). The stories are *re-presented* in ways that preserve their integrity (Etherington, 2019) and analysis (meaning making) occurs throughout the research

process rather than being a separate activity carried out after data collection (Gehart et al 2007).

In addition, this study incorporates aspects of phenomenological research as it creates a descriptive account of several individuals and can be applied to the lived experiences of multiple people (Creswell, 2014). It is recognised that this is a phenomenologically focused study as it is subjective to the individual's experience (Lester, 1999). By engaging in this study with multiple members of Better Start mentoring team, and comparing and contrasting their accounts, the researcher aims to gain a fuller understanding of what the experience of supporting reflection of their image of the child may be like. The essence is about incorporating "what" they have experienced and "how" they experience it (Creswell & Poth, 2018 p.77).

### **Research Participants**

The participants were a group of 28 Early Years Specialists who work as members of the Better Start mentoring team. A purposeful sampling strategy was used as the individuals were chosen based on their role as mentors' working specifically on quality development in early years services. This meant individuals could "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell & Poth 2018, p 158). These individuals were also convenient to sample as it was easy to gain access and permissions for data collection. To further facilitate convenience, it was planned for the focus group to take place on a day participants were already co located in their office base for the purpose of a team meeting rather than spread across the north, east and midlands region of Ireland.

## **Research Methods**

The methods used were chosen as the most appropriate and useful tools for the collection of empirical data in order to explore mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child. It was decided that the combination of questionnaires, followed by a focus group discussion allowed the researcher to look at the topic from a variety of perspectives. The findings could be corroborated, triangulated and questioned through exploring the data produced in both Denscombe, 2010). A questionnaire was used as the first, exploratory phase of a staged approach, and was followed by a focus group to further explore the findings from the first phase (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### *Questionnaire*

Questionnaires were the initial tool used to collect empirical data within this study. A well structured questionnaire containing considered questions works effectively as it can help eliminate elements of bias. As it does not involve an interviewer, the answers are in the respondent's own words and it allows participants adequate time to give well thought out answers. This approach was chosen to allow the researcher to gain a clear picture of the facts, evidence and opinions about the subject matter. According to Kothari (2004), the information gathered through questionnaires can serve as the basis for formulating further discussions, as was the case in this study.

The design of the questionnaire was based on the theoretical underpinnings of the literature review. As it is also important not to allow the literature to limit the scope of the study, open ended questions included in the questionnaire were designed to permit a free response from participants (Kothari, 2004). Through this it was intended to allow them to respond on their beliefs, attitudes and opinions in an expansive way (Mulhern, 2007). For example, a questions which ask for a yes/no answer were followed up with the opportunity



to give examples i.e *'do you feel that supporting reflection on the image of the child leads to changes in practice which promote childrens learning?'* followed with *'can you give examples of this'*. A small number of quantitative questions were also included in support of a combination of both direct and indirect questions. Closed questions were used to support the categorisation of responses and to allow some basic information to be quantified, and included elements such as ranking and semantic differential scale to rate aspects of their practice (Denscombe, 2010). The questionnaire was piloted with two participants, following which minor adaptations to eliminate duplication of questions and clarity of content occurred.

As response rates for internet based surveys are generally higher, the questionnaire was conducted using SurveyMonkey. This also meant that all participants regardless of their geographical location had equal access as participants are based nationally (Denscombe, 2010). In addition research has found that participants tend to respond more quickly, reflectively and incisively than in conventional postal questionnaires (Cohen et al, 2011). A link to the questionnaire and related information on the study was e-mailed to all participants (Appendix c). A total of 28 questionnaires with 17 questions were distributed to members of the Better Start quality mentoring team. All respondents were asked the same questions and 17 responses in total were gathered

### *Focus Group*

As it is important to incorporate multiple sources of data in order to corroborate, elaborate or illuminate aspects of the research, a semi structured focus group interview with eight members of the Better Start mentoring team of which the researchers are part of was also carried out (Kothari, 2004). This focus group discussion took place to allow the researcher to gain insight into the participants opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences (Denscombe, 2010) on supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a

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learner. The focus group lasted one hour and the discussion was based on the responses of the initial questionnaires. The value of this was to gain more information and greater depth on topics identified, whilst also allowing flexibility to explore new topics.

The use of a focus group was justified as Kane and O'Reilly De Brun (2001) outline that the major interaction is among members of the group working through an idea, issue or problem that the researcher has selected. Within a focus group the researcher acts as a facilitator and it is the "group interaction rather than the answer to questions that provide the insight" (Kane & O'Reilly De Brun, 2001, p.273). The researcher shares experience of mentoring with the participants, therefore the focus group addresses dynamics which help to illuminate subtle persuasive questions, responses or explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A semi-structured method was employed, using open-ended questions. Denscombe's "checklist for the use of interviews" (Denscombe, 2010) was utilised to support the appropriate use of this method. This included consideration on, for example: the use of prompts, probes and checks to gain insight; relevant fieldnotes being taken and the recording equipment being used. Following analysis of the initial questionnaires distributed, a list of issues to be addressed, general points of interest to explore and questions to be answered were drawn up. In leading the discussion, by way of introduction, the aim of the research and the researchers' interest in the topic was outlined. Some small discussion points pertaining to the results of the questionnaire were outlined as "stimulus material" (Denscombe, 2010) so that the initial discussion could relate to concrete rather than abstract ideas.

As was already established, the agenda of the focus group was outlined and participants were encouraged to critically reflect on what is working or not within current practice. Knowing the group, I was confident that critical reflection is a common and valued practice. I also had to be aware of my own objectivity in order to investigate the topic

critically as a researchers. I had to be adaptable in my approach, switching roles to ensure I was asking the correct questions from an outsider perspective to confirm particular information on generally accepted practice within the team. For example clarifying with participants who referred to staff team meetings, that these take place after practitioners work hours as is my own experience as a mentor.

According to Rubin & Rubin (2011) probing questions perform three main functions. To specify the level of depth the interviewer would like; signal to the interviewee that you want longer more detailed answers and they indicate that the interviewer is listening attentively. Through allowing myself the flexibility to present questions when they were most meaningful rather than a structured agenda, interviewees were encouraged to develop ideas and elaborate on points of interest. This meant that time and space was allowed for participants to expand and extend discussion and incorporate new ideas, whilst the researcher engaged in 'active listening'.

Allowing participants the freedom to talk whilst bearing in mind the broader aims of the study was essential as the value of a focus group is to "explore voices and experiences" (Silverman, 2008). Hess outlines five advantages of using focus groups (1968, cited in Clough and Nutbrown, 2002, p. 79), all of which apply to the focus group: (1) Synergism (a wider bank of data emerges through group interaction) (2) Snowballing (following the comments of one participant, a chain reaction of other statements follow) (3) Stimulation (the group discussion creates enthusiasm on a topic.) (4) Security (the existence of the group provides a comfort to each and encourages open responses) (5) Spontaneity (responses are more spontaneous and honest as participants are not required to answer every question). The focus group was recorded and transcribed on completion, for the further purpose of data analysis.

### **Data analysis**

According to Vasconcelos (2019), a reflexive researcher does not simply report facts but actively constructs interpretations of their experiences in the field, and then questions how those interpretations came about. The aim following data collection is for the researcher to be able to report their interpretations as they have evolved from the story, by describing, comparing, and relating characteristics of the responses to one another, and demonstrating that certain features exist in certain categories (Bell, 2005). The analytic process should be relaxed, flexible and driven by insight gained through interactions with data rather than being overly structured. (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p.12 ). Through the process of qualitative data analysis, themes are created as responses are categorised and interpreted for similarities, differences, groupings, and items of significance. Responses are coded and recorded and interpretations presented as relevant findings (Kothari, 2004).

Coding is used to identify relationships, patterns or similarities to try to understand why things happen. Within this study, for the purpose of data analysis, coding was carried out. This is the process of examining the data, and assigning codes or labels to words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs in transcripts and texts. This involved reading across the responses and transcript to find similarities and differences in relation to what participants have discussed and described in relation to the things they do to support reflection on the image of the child. Cope (2010) defines coding as “a process of identifying and organizing themes in qualitative data”. Coding allows us to make sense of our data by evaluating and organising it, it allows us to handle the large volume of data gathered and reduce it into key themes (ibid).

The process of open coding was applied, and during the initial coding stage the text was read through for broad code names, which relate to similarity or relationship within the text. This allowed the researcher to focus on key data and areas of priority. The research

questions also helped in identifying (Auerbach & Silverstein). This process was followed by, line by line coding, which is a detailed process of examining the data collected and manually assigning a code or label word for similar thoughts, ideas, descriptions or behaviours etc. that capture the essence of the text. Following line by line coding the text was analysed and sorted into categories. Categories which are consistent throughout the text and transcripts were determined as overarching themes of the data, and colour coded to support further clarity (Cope, 2010; Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). Once the themes were determined, meaningful perspectives and narratives from the data became evident. This included a variety of perspectives and stories based on themes and subthemes of the coded data.

A coding matrix which included quotes and text was developed under each theme to support analysis and also as a means to support the integrity of the process. A qualitative coding matrix enables a systematic way of achieving the discrimination between data sources and various interpretations of the different parties' (Graham, 2019, p. 253). Vasconcelos (2019) outlines the importance of researching with integrity stating that participants of an interpretivist study need to be respected, specifically at the analysis stage to ensure that findings are expressed respectfully and truthfully.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are many ethical issues that must be taken into consideration when carrying out research, particularly in the field of education. The study followed all ethical procedures and requirements of the Master of Education (Early Education) programme in Marino Institute of Education, and was approved on application by the ethics committee. The research methodology was designed in a way, which protects the interests of the participants.

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There was no deception involved and the study complies with the law. All information will remain confidential and the personal identities of participants will not be disclosed. As participants are known to the researcher, assurances were given that participation is voluntary, and participation could cease at their will, up until publication date (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denscombe, 2010).

As the sample group is made up of work colleagues and practitioners with whom the researcher has a mentoring relationship established, existing knowledge and relationships may interfere with the information gathered and presented. The researcher's aim was to limit this by ensuring that the study was transparent by concentrating exclusively on the data gathered (ibid) and outlining my own positionality. Within the research, I have the obligation to colleagues as study participants to ensure rights such as privacy and welfare are protected. In practical terms, this meant providing clear information on how the study was to be carried out as well as the purpose and dissemination of findings and recommendations. General consent was obtained to carry out the focus group on the day of a team meeting, followed by individual invites for participants to partake, and the opportunity to provide individual consent via email prior to the event.

As the participants are identifiable as a group delivering a national programme, any further identifying information on individuals could seriously compromise ethical efforts. It was of utmost importance to ensure vigilance in relation to anonymity. In addition, best practice advocates for care of participants by engaging in acts of reciprocity (Gabo Ntseane, 2013), therefore, the ongoing opportunities taken by myself to engage in similar research, studies and reflective activities at the request of colleagues endorses this practice.

### **Limitations**

This section identifies the potential weaknesses and scope of the study. The limitations include power dynamics throughout the process as the participants and researcher are known to one another. This is also relevant specifically in relation to the focus group. As these are inherently social, there is a complex social context within this kind of group interview (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). A focus group can be influenced by individuals and encompass an element of “group think” (Hart, 2005). Also, time can be lost while dead-end or irrelevant issues are discussed (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This was the experience for a part of the focus group in this study, where the researcher’s role as a moderator to keep the group on topic was needed.

The outline of the study is to investigate the voices of the participants. Due to the nature of data analysis and the active interpretation of the researcher it is not possible to hear all of the voices within the study (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002) . A further limitation which relates to data collection is a lack of field text, such as journals, pictures or further information to back up the narratives collected within the study (Creswell, 2014). For example, completed activities on the Image of the Child from the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, or photographs of accessible environments to illustrate changes in practice, which may support children’s learning within a setting may have been useful for further validity. In addition should time and the scope of the study have allowed, the perspectives of practitioners as mentees being supported to reflect on their image of the child would have enhanced triangulation, validity and added a richness of information to the study.

## **Conclusion**

This Chapter has looked at the principle research tools that were used in conducting this study. A qualitative approach was considered most suitable based on the research and sample size. A narrative inquiry, carried out through the use of questionnaires and a focus group, and based on participants' experiences of supporting reflection on the image of the child took place. The research tools were described and the approach to data analysis including coding was outlined in detail. The ethical considerations and limitations of the study have also been described.

The methodology and procedures utilised were designed to explore how mentors' support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child. Based on descriptions, which accurately conveys participants' experiences, this design will inform the researcher's interpretation in order to reach an understanding how this happens. The following chapter will outline this interpretation through exploring the key findings.



### Chapter 4 - Research Findings

This chapter organises and reports the main research findings from this study. These present the quantitative and qualitative findings as connected to the research questions. Following thorough data analysis including coding and categorization of both data sources, overarching themes and supporting themes have been determined and herein presented. Table 1 shows a profile of the research participants. Study participants who completed questionnaires and engaged in the focus group are denoted by the acronyms QP (1-17) and FP (1-8) throughout.

#### Participant Profile

Questionnaires were completed by seventeen participants, and eight participants took part in a focus group discussion. A profile of the participants is provided in Table 1. below.

|   |                            |
|---|----------------------------|
| Total Number of Participants                            | 17                         |
| Gender  | 100% Female      0% Male   |
| Highest Level of Qualification in Early Years Education | Bachelor Degree      29.4% |

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

|  |                       |         |
|--|-----------------------|---------|
|  | Post-Graduate Diploma | 29.4%   |
|  | Masters Degree        | 41.2%   |
| Years' experience working with<br>Better Start         | 0-1 Year              | 05.9%   |
|  | 2-3 Years             | 29.4%   |
|  | 4-5 Years             | 64.7%   |
|  | 5+ Years              | 00.0%   |
| Years' experience working in coaching<br>and mentoring | 0-1 Year              | 00.0%   |
|  | 2-3 Years             | 29.4%   |
|  | 4-5 Years             | 64.7%   |
|  | 5+ Years              | 05.9%   |
| Mentoring & Coaching Qualification<br>(Post-Graduate)  | Yes 94.1%             | No 5.9% |

*Table 1 - Profile of Participants*

The participant profile indicates that all participants are qualified to level eight or nine on the National Framework of Qualifications, with 70% qualified to level nine. This suggests a depth of knowledge in early childhood education within the team. The majority of participants have worked Better Start program since its establishment in 2015. Despite all except one mentor holding a post-graduate diploma in mentoring and coaching, the findings do not indicate a depth of mentoring experience. Figure 1. shows the limited number of years' experience within the team, indicating that individuals involvement in mentoring and coaching expands only the duration of their work within Better Start. This testifies to the recent nature of mentoring approaches within the sector. This combined with limited training opportunities for practitioners to build their knowledge of *Aistear* and *Siolta*, points to potential challenge for mentors' working in a quality development process which is underpinned by reflection on the image of the child.

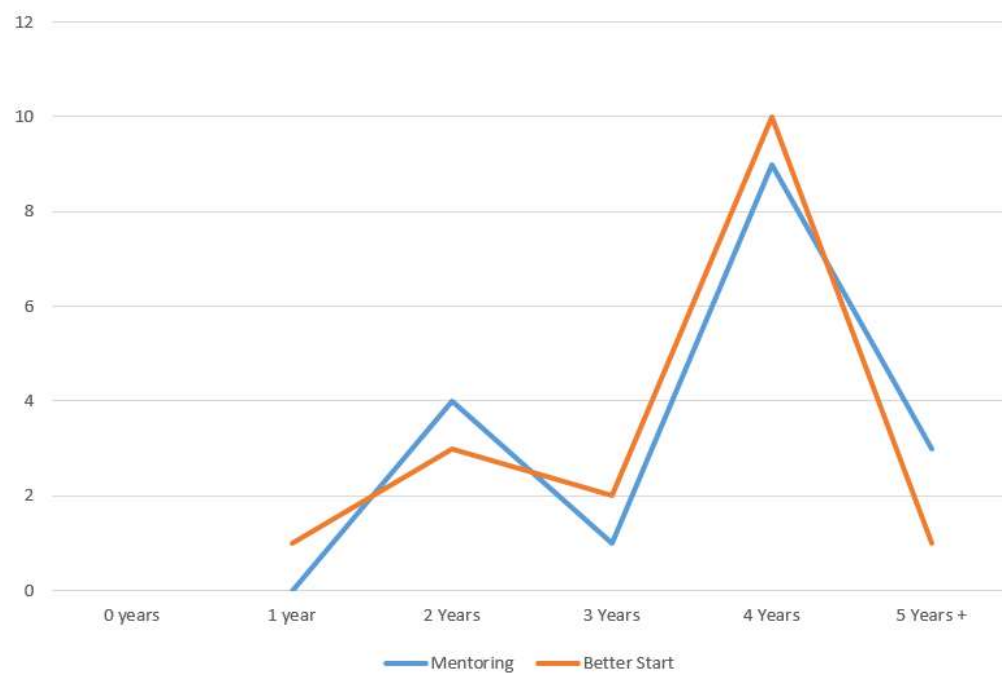
***Mentoring******Experience***

Figure 1. shows the number of years experience in mentoring and coaching compared with the number of years mentors' have worked with Better Start.

### **Mentors' understanding of the image of the child**

In describing mentors' own understanding of the image of the child, all participants stated their image of the child relates to their view of children and how they learn, for example, *'in simple terms it is how we view children'* (QP14), *'it is our default mode for thinking about children'* (QP10). The importance of having a positive image of children was noted, and almost half of the participants referred to viewing the child as a competent and confident learner. The work of Fisher (2013) describes children as natural and successful learners, an understanding engrained in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), the purpose of which is "to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners" (NCCA, 2014, p.21).

Participants believe that a person's view of children impacts the curriculum they provide to support children's learning. This is also inferred through statements such as, *'the image of the child is where teaching should begin'* (QP17). Within the Reggio Emilia approach children are described as "powerful active and competent protagonists in their own growth" (Edwards, 2012, p. 148). This phrase is used by QP8 who describes the child as a *'Protagonist of his/her own learning, guided by caring and responsible adults'*. In addition one *Siolta* research digest (2007) states that a "supportive climate where collaboration between adults and children is encouraged is essential for learning" (CECDE, 2007, P.5). Participants also indicated that the image of the child is related to our values and beliefs for children, including *'the position they hold in society'* (QP14) linking this view to using a *'rights based perspective'* (FP5). This relates to a child's right to participation "where the child is seen to have agency and power within her/his own life" (CECDE, 2007, p2).

How children view themselves is also important. Rinaldi states that adults must not just think about children as being strong and competent, but must act in such a way that children come to share that image and believe that of themselves (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Participant QP9's view encompasses these concepts, saying the image of the child *'has important implications on the curriculum, as through this, messages are sent to the children regarding how we view them, which also influences how they view themselves'* (QP9).

Converse to these findings one participant out of 17 questionnaire responses, defined the image of the child as a *'reflective experience'* (QP7) and referred to it as a group activity outlined in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. This infers a limited knowledge of the rights based values underpinning the image of the child. However, QP7 also describes the benefits of this reflection on children's learning. We can surmise that the question was interpreted as relating specifically to activities from the Practice Guide. Within the Practice Guide specific activities on the image of the child are presented within the pillar Curriculum Foundations. As described in the literature review, these activities are designed as a starting point to thinking about curriculum.

### **The image of the child guides the work of the mentor**

When asked, 94% of participants responded that the image of the child guides their work as a mentor, with a number proclaiming *'very much so'*, (QP14) *'yes, completely'* (QP15) and *'absolutely'* (QP11). Some stated that this happens *'subliminally'* and a less definitive *'I think so'* (QP12). Initial responses appeared to focus on the use of the image of the child activities. These were outlined as being useful for practitioners to: reflect on how they view children; to think about their practice; to reflect as a team (QP1: QP2: QP7), and

particularly at the beginning of the mentoring process. The Practice Guide recommends carrying out these activities as part of the pillar *Curriculum Foundations*. The element on the *Image of the Child* comes together with three other elements; *Developing a Curriculum Statement*; *Professional Practice* and *Themes of Aistear* to form the pillar: *Curriculum Foundations*. It is recommended that a service completes work on *Curriculum Foundations* firstly, as these are “an important starting point when thinking about curriculum” (NCCA, 2014, p17).

Activity A of these five reflective experiences encourages practitioners to think of words to describe their view of children. The majority of participants describe carrying out this activity with a group. Many identified this activity as a good starting point, ‘*it requires some self-assessment and reflection*’ (QP16), ‘*It is a very good place to start with a mentee as you can learn a lot from their image of the child*’ (QP11). As a practitioner’s image of the child has important implications for the curriculum they provide for children, it lays the foundation for the development of quality in supporting how children learn. Additionally Clutterbuck (2014) describes the use of dialogue and discussion as a rapport building strategy. This activity encompasses a “this is me this is you” kind of approach and may explain its success at the start of the mentoring process (2014, p.41).

Though participants referred value of the image of the child activities, it is also acknowledged that they are not the only effective way to support reflection on the image of the child. On deeper analysis of both data samples, we find evidence of mentors’ feeling that the image of the child is embedded throughout their role. In describing this one participant QP16 states,

*The image of the child guides my work. It is informed by my beliefs, values and principals. It underpins all aspects of my work. It is a sort of moral compass that guides all the decisions and judgments I make in my work.*

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

In addition to guiding mentors' beliefs, the image of the child is embedded in the mentors' every day practice. Participants describe practical elements which emphasise this;

*I think that no matter what we do we are touching on the image of the child and I know if we aren't using these (activities)...the minute we start talking about environments, interactions, play and everything we do, it's making them think about putting the child at the centre... you are always bringing it back to that image of the child. (QP2).*

These findings indicate that mentors' feel good practice and the development of an effective curriculum for young children emerges from the image of the child. The mentors' work is informed by the belief that quality practice arises through the mentoring process which is underpinned by a positive image of children.

From the data, we find that 84% of participants feel the image of the child is embedded in their work. Figure. 2 identifies how the image of the child guides participant's work which happens through the use of activities, embedded in their practice or a combination of both. This highlights flexibility in how mentors' approach their work on the image of the child with practitioners. Despite these statistics it was also stated that '*on reflection, I feel that I have not spent enough time supporting educators' image of the child in practice*' (QP2). This may identify a gap in training for the Better Start mentoring team, or alternatively indicates limited experience of the positive impact of working with services to support this reflection. This demonstrates the importance of mentors' refining their own mentoring practice.

How the image of the child guides mentors work

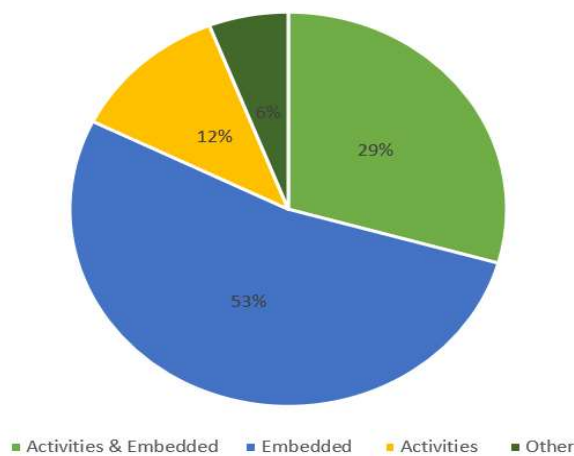


Figure 2. Analysis the ways in which the image of the child guides mentors' work

### The use of activities from the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.

Figure 3. outlines the frequency with which mentors' use Activities A-E from the *The Practice Guide*. Further interpretation finds that mentors' find value in all the activities, but some are used more frequently. According to the data 65% of participants use activity A: Describing your view of children most frequently. Participants described using it as a foundation for developing a curriculum statement with a service. Developing a written curriculum statement informs long term planning. It outlines an approach to curriculum planning that can be shared with others such as parents (NCCA 2014). Mentors' state that this is an efficient way to overcome the challenge of time constraints. *'I find I don't get enough time to do them all, team meetings are often used for curriculum statements and work on planning rather than the other activities though I could see the benefit of them'* (QP2). The value of combining two major elements of curriculum development due to limited time, leads to a questioning of the effectiveness of activities used in this way. This indicates the challenge for mentors' in relation to supporting practitioner's image of the child, particularly as mentors' indicate value of this reflection in supporting best practice.



## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

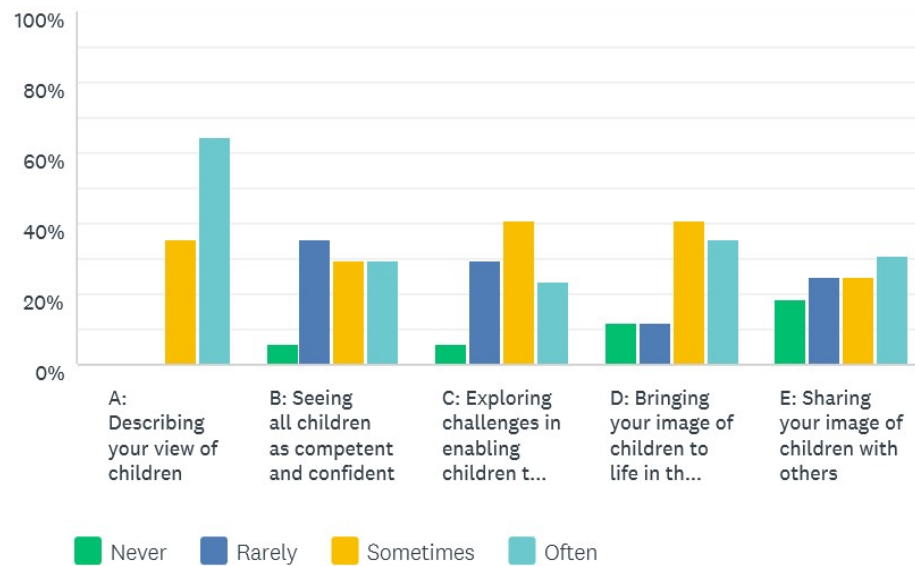


Figure 3. Frequency of use of activities

Activity D: Bringing the Image of the Child to Life in the Curriculum, is the second most frequently used by 35% of participants. Following questions and prompts for reflection, Activity D literally asks practitioners to name ‘three things we will do next week to help children be more confident and competent’. QP5 states that *‘I will often leave activity D with a service to complete within their teams, and this would create content for goal setting’*. This activity creates a practical approach to developing a quality curriculum and can inform identifiable actions for practitioners to work on. One respondent identified that she doubts the value in these activities; however, also questioning if this is related to a ‘wish for “proof” that I make a difference with a more physical change?’ (QP10). From this it is suggested that activities can form an identifiable goal may be more effective for practitioners, leaving them more desirable for mentors’ use.

The value of activities is examined by the mentors’ with some participants stating, *‘I use them often as I find them useful’* (QP1) and *‘I think the activities are important... I feel they are interlinked and can be carried out together’* (QP17). Alternatively QP6 says

*'sometimes I do not use the activities at all... I incorporate the image of the child more informally'* (QP6). Their significance is questioned for example by FP1 who claims, *'I think it needs to be a bit deeper than that... the activity is only on the face of it'*. It is also felt that the activities which provide prompts takes away from the personal reflection and gives the mentee the idea, *'circle this one and you'll be ok'* (FP8). From this we can conclude that sometimes activities can feel removed from the mentees direct practice, potentially impacting on their meaning.

Respondents outlined the context in which they carried out these activities. Just one person stated that she used the full complement of activities A-E with services at the beginning of the process as recommended in *the Practice Guide*. The majority stated that team meetings or non-contact time in small groups were essential. We can interpret that mentors' choose group learning experiences in the hope of translating learning into the whole service (NEYAI, 2014). Alternatively respondent F1 advised *'I think that image of the child activity, it's kind of a personal piece isn't it?'* What we can tell by these observations is that the sequence of support and use of reflective activities does not need to be uniform. As mentoring has been described as a relationship and not activity, the needs of the mentee are taken into account in forming the experiences, pace and direction of the mentoring process (Clutterbuck, 2014).

### **Challenges to supporting reflection on the image of the child**

The three most common areas of challenge were outlined as:

- 1) Time
- 2) Lack of mentee experience in relation to reflection/self-reflection
- 3) Leadership to support change

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Seventy per cent of questionnaire responses referred to a lack of time to support reflection on the image of child. This was further reflected in the focus group. Participants identified limited non-contact time for individual reflection and a lack of team meetings to support group reflection as challenging. *'If there's no non-contact time if you've no individual time with them, if we don't have access to team meetings it's very difficult to work on these pieces'* (P4). P13 also describes, *'the activities or conversations are done in a group in staff meetings and sometimes I don't get the time on a one to one to follow up on this'*. Robins (2006) outlines the importance of early years mentoring programs in developing practitioner's professional practice through reflection. Without the time to do this it is difficult for mentors' to support changes in quality development.

Respondents linked the value placed on time for reflection with the ethos of the service. *'I think there's a little bit of a disconnect between what non-contact time is supposed to be used for...now it's for filling in paperwork.... there's no value placed on it as a reflective space'* (FP3). The data finds that Managers lack an understanding of the value of reflective opportunities and participants feel most practitioners do not have *'strong leadership to support change'* (Q P4). Other areas identified as barriers to supporting the supporting reflection on the image of the child include: working in large services, concerns about health and safety, regulations and non-compliance issues, lack of training, lack of motivation to engage in the quality development process and continuous turnover of staff.

From these challenges we can see that the support of mentors' who promote reflection on the image of the child, presents a valuable opportunity for inspiring changes in quality practice. Participants identify that leaders have not developed an effective framework for reflective practice within settings. The *Aistear Siolta* Practice Guide acknowledges the importance of leadership roles within the element *Professional Practice*.

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

This element describes the role of the practitioner in leading children's learning as well as the role the manager in leading the learning of a team (NCCA, 2014).

Participants outlined four key approaches to supporting reflection on the image of the child within early years setting. The four most common strategies used either individually or in combination were:

- 1) Using activities on the image of the child in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*
- 2) Through the use of dialogue, discussion and reflective questioning
- 3) 'Weaving' the image of the child into the Pillars of the Practice Guide
- 4) Supporting reflection based directly on practice and/or observation within the setting.

Appendix F elaborates on the context and mentoring strategies used within these approaches.

QP1 stated *'I use the activities, I get them to use words to describe the image of child... to think of ways this is evident in daily practice... and how they could make changes to support this image'*. P11 outlined her use of *'reflective questioning, getting practitioners to consider how particular experiences went from the child's perspective'*.

Similarly respondent Q16 elaborates on the context of discussion for supporting critical reflection proclaiming,

*I engage in reflective dialogue with the educators and discuss aspects of their practice based on observations. I encourage them to deconstruct their interactions or planned experiences and think about how their image of the child has informed their curriculum. I encourage dialogue between colleagues in smaller groups to explore their image of the child.*

Mentors' also outlined the importance of supporting practitioners '*where they are at*', based on their individual competencies, whilst also supporting them to lead their own learning. '*Sometimes in the practice they don't understand why they're doing things the way they are doing it? They are doing it because they have seen it or however it comes... but they don't really think about it ... the image of the child explains that*' (FP8). This shows that mentor's place value on practitioners being invested in the process. The Better Start mentoring process reinforces this by outlining a cycle of joint reflection in order to set goals and action plans together with practitioners.

### **The image of practitioners**

The complimentary roles of the practitioner and the child is described by Malaguzzi as, "an idealized pair of images; teacher and child" (Edwards et al., 2012, p150). Just as the early year's practitioner is central to quality practice, which is influenced by a positive image of the child, the practice of the mentors' is influenced by their image of practitioners. Whilst throughout the data there is reference to limitations of the knowledge base and training provided for practitioners, this study finds that the mentors' generally hold a positive image of the mentees. FP1 states '*a lot of people who are in early years are there because they really want to be there and people stick it out because they really want to work with children*'. A positive image is reinforced by FP2 for example, who identifies practitioners ability to lead their own learning by stating '*they were really good at picking out how some to these things are happening in their own practice*' and '*could identify how they could improve on it*'. This is identified as the starting point for building good practice into the future.

Participants highlighted challenges in developing their view of practitioners, for example describing an experience where *'there is no changing or turning in somebody ...who is just adamant that it is there way or no way'* (FP4). For mentors', the concept of suspension challenge presented by Pascal & Bertram (2014) is essential as it means suspending or holding back on our own prejudices and judgements so you can listen to and observe what is going on within a setting. The "psychological climate should be one which makes the adult feel accepted, respected and supported" (Knowles, 1970, p.57). For this reason, being able to adapt a flexible approach to the mentoring process and relationship development is essential.

### **Confidence, Training and Continual Professional Development**

Figure 4. Indicates the overwhelming confidence of respondents in supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child. Despite limited training we find that this confidence is entrenched in the mentors' shared belief that a positive image of the child is at the centre of quality practice. Mentors' descriptions show that this is an emotive area of practice. Reflection on the image of the child is now outlined as best practice as supported by the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. *I know even though deep down in our hearts we believe it and truly believe it we now have something else to support that when we go to services which does help I think'* (FP1). This reinforces mentors' beliefs and informs their practice thus leading to confidence in supporting reflection on the image of the child to inform quality practice.

**Mentors' Confidence**

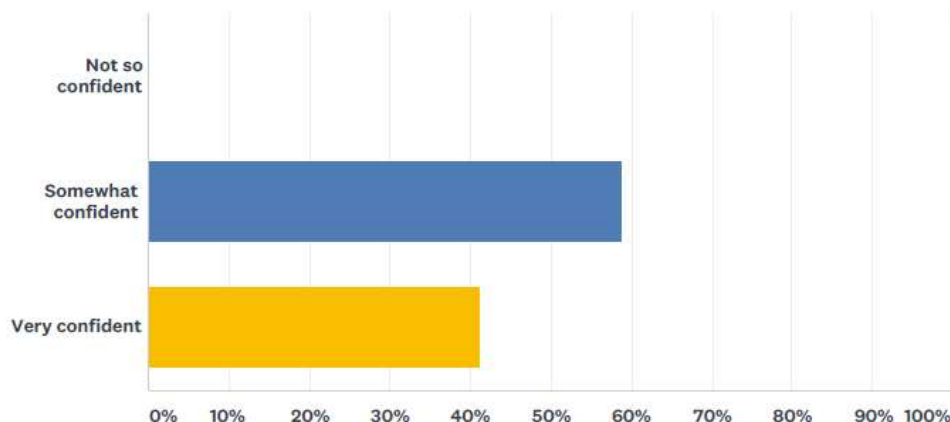


Figure 4. Outlines mentors' level of confidence in supporting mentees to reflect on the image of the child.

Respondents outlined that training received to support reflection on this area included general coaching and mentoring training in relation to the use of the Practice Guide and other continued professional development opportunities such as peer support, group discussion, team meetings and communities of practice.

**previous training**

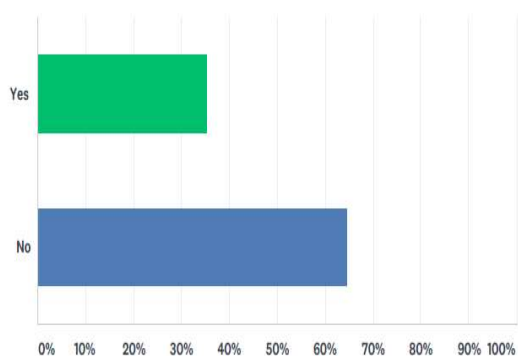


Figure 5. Training on image of the child

**previous role**

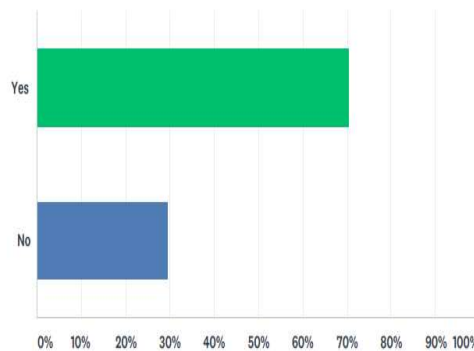


Figure 6. Previous use of reflection

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Disparity was found between the induction experience of those who began working with Better Start in the initial cohort employed within the program, and those who have taken up the role in years since. It was identified that training on the image of the child was carried out during induction in that initial period. Some participants briefly recalled training related specifically to the image of the child, which was delivered by Early Childhood Ireland and included areas such as the rights of the child and Siolta standard 1, the image of the child. QP3 outlines,

*People who were here from the start had that training, but also we would have had a huge amount of time to reflect on it ... and how as a collective vision that could be brought together... whereas for there wouldn't have been the same emphasis on embedding the idea*

Over 60% of participants reported that they received no training. From this we can tell that the variety experience within the team impacts the confidence level of the team and as such may influence the success of mentors' as they support this reflection.

Despite a lack of training and prior experience (in figure 5 and figure 6), we find that practical experience in early education and theoretical input from educational experience explains participant's confidence. The manner of this outlined in the description of a previous role held as practitioner, *'every day we'd have had to reflect on the dispositions and the image of the children and then to put it into practice in the following day. That would have been active'* (FP7). These important findings will be further explored and analysed in the discussion chapter to follow.



**Reflection on the image of the child leads to changes in practice.**

Respondents feel that reflection on the image of the child leads to changes in practice which impacts quality development and children's learning. However, the benefits can depend on the level of engagement of those involved. QP4 states, *'this (change) does not take place in all services that engage and each room or service will develop differently, but continually working on developing a positive image of the child can only develop quality practice'*. Examples of theoretical, philosophical and practical changes which are named within the data include: children have more autonomy; children have a voice; children are seen as individuals; letting go and giving children control; reflecting on practice; respectful interactions; children can use sand and water; rolling snack to support transitions at mealtimes: carrying and pouring water: free flow from inside and outside; choice of where to play; risky play; increased time to play; opportunities to explore materials; and accessibility in the environment.

The majority of responses referred in some sense to supporting the development of children's learning dispositions, particularly in relation to independence. The development of dispositions - which Katz (1993) defines as "enduring habits of mind" - in supporting children's identity as a learner is seen as an important outcome of early education (Hayes, 2014, p.43). Responses also referred to practice which influences the development of an emergent curriculum.

### Change in practice following reflection on the image of the child

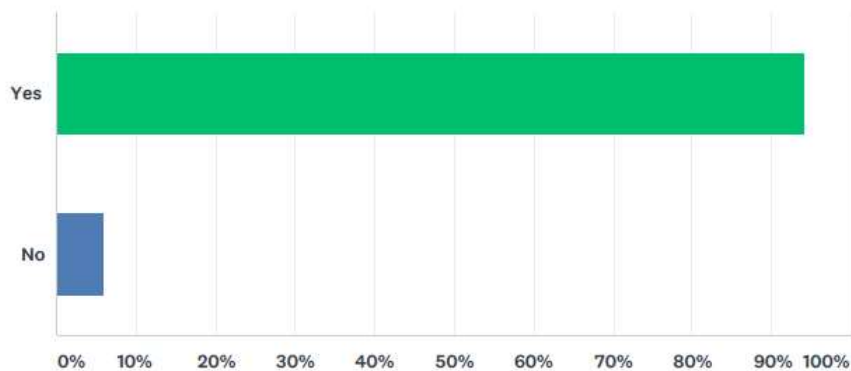


Figure 7. Reflection on the image of the child leads to changes in practice which supports children's learning

As QP4 advocates 'without a positive image of the child it is difficult to achieve sustainable change'. In addition QP6 states 'I think that a team coming together to tease out their ideas of children is important... it helps them to create a collective idea and basis upon which they all can work' (QP6). One respondent describes the importance of supporting practitioners change in practice, saying,

*it's supporting their changing image of the child so you're really helping them to work in a very proactive way... they're doing a piece of action research for themselves, doing things one way then put something new in place and trying it.*  
(QP4).

This approach builds on the principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1970). The learner is motivated to by a need for information as, he/she believes that their learning can be applied to practical life (Wong & Premkumar, 2007). From these findings we can see that that reflection on the image of the child can support a service to create a collective idea on how to support children's learning and can help individuals understand the what, why, and how of their practice.

**Conclusion**

Chapter four organised and presented the main findings of the study. Relevant quantitative and qualitative data was reported. Following coding, analysis and interpretation of the key findings have been presented through identified themes relating to the research. These findings together with related literature will inform the discussion in the coming chapter.

## Chapter Five - Discussion of Findings

Chapter five presents the discussion of findings. The findings are framed within the context of the research questions and outlined in three key areas of discussion: The importance of national policy and frameworks; promoting self-directed learning and the individual's role in leading learning. Together with the relevant literature, the researchers understanding of the findings are presented. This discussion reflects the practical and theoretical implications of the study in relation to supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child and its impact on childrens learning in ECCE settings.

### Discussion point 1

#### **'You're not a lone ranger': The importance of national policy and frameworks**

The findings tell us that Better Start mentors' believe in the importance of holding a shared understanding of the image of the child. Their view of the child as a competent and confident learner as underpinned by our national frameworks *Siolta and Aistear*, informs their mentoring practice and quality development work. Mentors' aim to support practitioners to develop a positive image of the child in order to inform practice within early childhood settings. Just as the work of the practitioner is underpinned by the image of the child so too is the work of the mentor. Mentors' declared that their own training in childcare, experience on the ground, opportunities for continuous professional development including communities of practice and reflective discussion (both prior to and within their mentoring roles) informs their shared image. These opportunities has served to embed their own beliefs which are reinforced by the principles of national policy and frameworks.

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Despite findings that show mentors' have limited training or previous experience on the use of this reflection (fig.1), guidance on best practice in the form of the Practice Guide informs the approaches of the mentors' as they support reflection on the image of the child. FP6 attests '*it's framed very clearly now in the Practice Guide ... there is an ideal process to support services to reflect on the image of the child consistently*'. The value of being able to "name" the image of the child is evident in this research. For example, FP8 outlines, '*That change is supporting their changing image of the child so you're really helping them to work in a very proactive way to do that for themselves... they are feeling that this is the right direction but they may not be able to name it*' (FP8). From this, we see that the guidance of the Practice Guide, as it identifies the use of reflection on the image of the child to inform practice, is an invaluable tool for mentors' use.

A shared understanding of the image of the child to inform a consistent and effective mentoring approach is important. The variance in the induction experience of new mentors' to the program as outlined in the findings may see a lost opportunity for sharing knowledge and building a shared vision. Those who engaged in training, peer support and communities of practice within the initial cohort of early years specialists employed by Better Start draw on this valuable group learning experience. In discussing her induction experience FP2 refers to developing a '*commonality*' in the group's approach through specific training on the image of the child and through reflection on Standard 1 of Síolta: The rights of the child (CECDE, 2006). She describes this experience saying, '*in order for us to support practitioners to look at the image of the child we had to fully reflect on it, and our own understanding so that's what we did as a group*'. Much of the data relating to supporting practitioners' image of the child reinforces the value of the mentoring team holding a shared image. The induction process presents a timely opportunity to embed the beliefs and

principles of national policy and frameworks, and reinforce mentoring practice in supporting reflection on the image of the child throughout the mentoring team.

### **Rights Based approach**

The data collected sees a focus on the principles, standards and components underpinning the two national frameworks, with specific and frequent reference to the importance of a rights based perspective, which views the child as an active and participatory citizen as informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Participant FP5 outlines both the practical and theoretical foundation for her own knowledge base, which informs our vision and image of children. She states *'I know when I was in college doing the degree initially we had a whole module on children's rights and it would have been using a rights based approach'*. She follows this with an example of practical and group learning experience working as a practitioner

*We would have had team meetings in relation to Aistear and seeing children as a competent and confident... it was the image of the child but we didn't name that as it is. We were talking about our beliefs and views in terms of do we share that view of children as competent and confident.*

Mentors' feel they are effective in how they support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child, leading to quality improvements in the early years. Respondents consistently outlined changes relating to children's rights such as transformation in *'how mentees see children as capable and confident and being able to make decisions... giving them the right to do so... just giving them that right'* (FP4). FP7 stated *'I think children are seen more as individuals like they have more respect for the children and they start to understand that actually children have a voice'*. Early years settings of high quality ensure a participatory

approach where individual children feel valued and their learning is supported through reciprocal relationships (French, 2007, Mayall, 2001, UNCRC,1989) From this perspective, we see the importance of mentors' developing their views on a rights based approach as this knowledge underpins the process of reflection, which supports practitioners to develop a positive image of the children they work with

### **The principles of the national frameworks**

As outlined in the research findings, the majority of mentors' feel the image of the child is embedded throughout the work they do. It is central to their mentoring practices around quality improvement in the early years. This research has found that reflection on the principles of the national frameworks are important for supporting the work mentors' do to support the development of quality practice within settings.

*'you're supporting practitioners to recognise that those principles and that image is throughout everything that they do in their practice ... all the experiences they offer children and so I think it's just supporting them (mentees) to make those connections themselves' (QP5)*

Building on this, FP1 declares, *'I think they need to know what are we charged within early childhood. It's like if you go into any other organisation there's an ethos there about what (it) is about and what are they going to do'*. Importantly P1 summarises by asking *'who and what is deciding what the image of the child is'*, arguing... *'You're not a lone ranger'*. In other words, in order to fully understand the why and how behind their practice, practitioners need to be familiar with the principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta*. As outlined in the literature review everyone develops an image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1994). When working in the early years practitioners need to consider best practice as underpinned by these

principles. These support their construction of a positive image of children through self-reflection and guidance on best practice.

Respondent FP1 refers to a recent 'lightbulb moment' when working with a team within a service in relation to,

*'looking at the principles that underpin the framework, from Aistear.... because they are at the very core of it, the very starting point, That isn't something that I would have done before. It was a learning for me... I thought, in future I'll actually go back to those and start asking people to look at those and how they happen in their service.'*

Participant FP1 has identified the need for an additional learning opportunity to reflect on the principles, as a precursor or complimentary task to supporting practitioners through the image of the child activities. In this way, practitioners can begin to engage in the principles underpinning *Aistear* and *Siolta* and identify how these influence practice. This shows the importance of mentors' critically reflecting on their own practice and identifying new approaches to supporting reflection on the image of the child. It reinforces the notion of mentoring being a two way process where learning occurs within a reciprocal relationship. Therefore this observation can be seen to have positive implications for the practice of both the practitioners and the mentors'.

## **Discussion point 2**

### **Empowering Practice: *Promoting self-directed learning***

As outlined in the literature review, mentoring when implemented effectively can help to bring about change in the practice of education. This research finds that Better Start



mentors' are committed to supporting positive sustainable change through learning process which encourage reflection on the image of the child. The approach of the mentors aims to empower practitioners by supporting autonomous and self-directed learning (Ozuah, 2005). This is succinctly described by QP17 who states, *'practitioners feel motivated and enthusiastic. They realise their vision and want it to be nurtured for the children. They begin to reflect on their own views and values and see how children are an active citizen. The practitioners feel more empowered'*. As described by Parsloe (2009), mentors' should see their purpose as supporting practitioners to manage their own learning, allowing them to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be.

### **Knowledge base of practitioners**

As outlined in the research findings, the majority of mentors' feel the image of the child is embedded throughout the work they do. Respondents referred to weaving the image of the child throughout the pillars of practice in the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide. In addition, mentors' referred to *Síolta* standards and *Aistear* principles both in a general and in a specific sense, with areas such as environments, interactions, play, transition, curriculum and planning, partnership with parents, and professional practice being referred to. It was identified by the mentors' that those practitioners with good knowledge of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, including those who have had experience with the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme have a strong knowledge base and are able to reflect on their image of the child and be able to articulate and understand its value and impact upon their practice.

The data collected acknowledges that those involved in the education of young children hold an innate quality which influences their positive image of children. FP4 states,

*'I think that your own beliefs and values have a huge impact and that's really inherently where it comes from'. FP8 references 'an innate belief in the rights of the child', which is supported by FP1 who says, 'people who are in early years are there because they want to work with children and they come from that kind of value base... that's where our passion is'. This innate belief and passion for working with children forms an important aspect to the mentoring process, as without this, childcare services would not exhibit the will to request and engage in quality development supports.*

### ***Mentoring to support the development of knowledge skills and competence***

Throughout the data participants have identified a gap in the knowledge and skill level for many of the practitioners they work with. This is congruent with generally accepted evidence within the early year's sector in Ireland, as it is not always the case that when a student completes a training course that they have an adequate level of practical competencies combined with theoretical knowledge and understanding (NEYAI, 2014). In addition, early year's settings "struggle to provide in-service training and professional development opportunities for staff, further widening the gap and indeed potentially harming quality provision for children and families" (NEYAI, 2014, p7). Developing the early years workforce is central to the delivering quality early years education experience and Bennet (2003) outlines the importance of a well-qualified workforce, appropriate pedagogical practice and ongoing professional development as being central to developing high quality services. In light of this Robins describes mentoring as, "a means of capability building for the practitioner, which should, in turn, have beneficial outcomes for the immediate work place and potentially the wider sector through the fulfilment of individual potential and the dissemination of practice" (2006, p.68).As previously stated, mentors' have described this as an empowering process.

### **Motivation for the adult learner**

Through analysis of the data we find that the nature and characteristics of the practitioners as adult learners are considered throughout the mentoring practices of the team. The work of Knowles outlines the principles of andragogy, and we find that through changes identified following reflection on the image of the child, mentees show evidence of increased motivation as new learning can be applied to practical life and support them to perform better. For example, QP2 states that *'by supporting reflection on the image of the child, educators make changes in their own individual practice'*. QP12 points out that this reflection has provided practitioners *'opportunities to get to know children well, build closer relationships with their parents and trust in children's ability to lead their own learning resulting in a calm and relaxed atmosphere in the service'*. QP9 describes how one particular service demonstrated a high level of engagement with this element and at the end of the process, this is what they felt had made the *'biggest impact'*. It helped them *'to be child led and say they could now identify how they could support children to be independent and active. They provide more time and opportunities for them to do things for themselves and make choices and decisions'*. From these examples we see evidence of practitioners "motivation to learn based on their own need for new information" (Knowles year 2011).

### **The Role of the Practitioner in Curriculum Planning**

The quality of an early years practitioners practice is central to 'process quality', features of which are described by Hayes as including "the general quality of interactions, the ethos, the responsiveness to individuality within the group and atmosphere of the setting" (2013, P.24). Importantly the findings from this study identifies the complimentary role of the adult as being aligned with the role of the child as a learner, for example FP8 states *'this*

*ties up with* the adults role to supporting children in the setting and how and what is my role as an adult in the service? How *do I do that best for the child to be confident and competent and reach their full potential*'. This notion is reinforced by fisher (2013) points out the role of the practitioner is "inextricably bound up with how children are viewed as learners". Within this study, respondents inferred value in supporting a positive image of the child in order to inspire the development of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. Drawing on the sectors experience with *Síolta* and *Aistear* the concept of this type of curriculum "uses children's and practitioners interest's, questions and experiences as a starting point for curriculum planning... in partnership with children practitioners identify ideas that become the focus for learning" (NCCA, 2014: intro). This is reflected for example, in respondents references to: the importance of a practitioners image of the child during observation; the image of the child '*placing children at the center of their own learning and development*' (QP12) and acknowledging that '*children have ideas and experiences of their own that they bring with them*' (QP8).

### **The image of the child as a foundation for curriculum development**

The primary objective of the Better Start mentoring programme is to improve and develop the quality of early year's settings and experiences for children. Research outlined shows us that the image of children we hold impacts our ongoing practice and is seen as an important foundation in curriculum development (French, 2007, Bredkamp, 1993). As echoed in the literature, findings and discussions thus far, "An important starting point in curriculum development therefore involves asking, what is my image of the child? Do I share the view of *Aistear* and *Síolta*? And if so, how is this reflected in children's experiences?" (NCCA, 2014, 17). These questions are asked of practitioners so as to place the learning in

the practitioners own hands. Through practitioners reflection on the image of the child they are empowered to make changes in their own practice which enhances quality within the early childhood settings they work in.

### **Discussion point 3:**

#### **Individual role in leading learning: Leadership for learning: an individual's role in developing a positive image of the child**

Regardless of their role, each individual working in an early childhood setting is a leader for learning. This implies that during the mentoring process all individuals hold the responsibility for learning which leads to the development of quality within the setting. The work of Thornton (Murphy & Thornton, 2015) outlines mentoring as an effective leadership approach as it enhances professional learning and development. Effective leaders support children, parents and colleagues to understand and extend learning (NCCA, 2014).

In overcoming identified challenges, throughout the study participants acknowledged the value in working with leaders to support change and promote a positive image of children as confident and competent learners. In acknowledging the role of a leader in sustaining change, the Better Start Quality Development Process requires each service to nominate a Quality Liason Person (QLP) who works to support and promote the Quality Development Process with the service. QP2 advises *'I have spoken to the manager or QLP in relation to challenges in terms of how best they can further support educators such as peer mentoring supports , training or engaging in communities of practice'*.

According to Coughlin and Baird (2014) pedagogical leadership requires individuals to rethink the way we work and learn with other adults. "Any person who has a deep understanding of early learning and development may take on the role of pedagogical leader"

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

(Couglin & Baird, p2). This role ensures that practitioners have the methods and time to “reflect on their practice, study children and explore multiple perspectives” (ibid), this of course include the rights and views of the child.

The value of this role in creating a culture for learning which supports a positive image of the child is highlighted by participant FP5 who states,

*‘It’s on a cultural level, it’s about the culture in the service and what are the messages that are giving to practitioners and how are they supported in terms of what’s the collective image of a child, you know how there’s a leader that can support that within the service and give that kind of support ... in terms of modelling and at team meetings and in supervision, and that there’s links their made and it’s not in isolation’*

In order to support the development of such a culture, services must embrace and understand the value of individual and group reflection. A key characteristic of effective learners is their ability to reflect on their own practice. Reflection helps individuals to become more intentional in their role ‘in supporting holistic learning and development’. By refining their role this improves outcomes for children. Throughout the data, mentors’ describe their belief in the value of reflection in order to support the development of a positive image of the child. QP10 for example extends this notion to the point of naming ‘*critical reflection*’ as a key element of the work carried out. As previously described critical reflection examines individuals personal and professional beliefs leading to improved practice (lindon , LCCC 2008). In spite of this, respondents consistently outline a lack of time and understanding in relation to reflective practice. QP12 and QP14 declare a ‘*lack of awareness and understanding of reflection*’, elaborating, practitioners ‘*are not used to professional self-reflection*’. As the literature review states, good quality early years

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mentoring programs can strengthen overall professional practice by developing educators reflective practice skills and this indicates the essential role of the mentor in modelling pedagogical leadership within the setting. Through their work, mentors' can support settings to develop a model of learning supported by framework which values reflective practice.

As outlined each individual working with children has a responsibility for leading learning. According to Robins (2006), "the value of this practice based learning which occurs in the workplace is enhanced through the development of a learning community. Through the analysis, data, discussion and findings we see that the mentors' use such approaches to support reflection on the image of the child with in the hope of translating learning into the whole service" (NEYAI, 2014). As described by participants, in addition to reflection occurring informally within rooms and through one-to-one feedback, mentors' continuously referred to group learning experiences such as team meetings or smaller group meetings within rooms or units of the service which are beneficial in '*facilitating discussion amongst peers*' QP2. A community of learning allows for individual learning to be applied to the wider organization (Robins, 2006). The effectiveness of such an approach is outlined by QP10 who describes '*the buzz in team discussions*', which '*helps overcome any lingering self-doubt about its effectiveness*'. The value of this is seen to be the development of "an association of individuals, groups and organisations that evolves or develops as a whole through learning" (MacNaughton 2003 p 271).

Conversely Mentors' also acknowledge the perspective of those who are less participatory in the process. QP2 states '*I believe that this depends on the level of interest, motivation and engagement in the processes*'. QP8 elaborates that effective change in relation to practitioners image of the child '*can depend on a number of other issues for example, time management, practitioners own views, managements influence and stress can have an impact*'. The work of the quality development process is dependent on the

participation of individuals within the mentoring process. From this perspective, individuals are supported to take responsibility for, and lead their own learning and the learning of the children in their care with the support of their mentor. As previously outlined, reflection on the image of the child marks a good starting point to developing an individuals practice in order to support children's learning. The Practice Guide links an individual or teams ability to engage in reflective practice as an approach to developing their own professional practice. Developing areas of professional practice allows practitioners to build their skills in leading learning and contributing to the development of a community of learning. Through promoting a culture of learning within a setting we see the importance of individuals leading learning regardless of the role whether that is as a mentor, practitioner or manager.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter five presented the discussion of findings. The findings are framed within the context of the research questions and outlined in three key areas of discussion. This exploration was built on the premise that supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child leads to sustainable change in quality practice. What we can conclude from the findings of the study is that elements from all three discussion areas influence the impact of this approach. However when we the context for mentor support takes account of these three area the potential for a change which encourages a positive image of the child is greater. Together with the relevant literature, the researchers understanding of the findings were presented. This discussion reflects the practical and theoretical implications of the study in. From this conclusion and recommendations will be drawn and presented in the next chapter.



## Chapter 6 - Conclusion and Recommendations

*“Without a positive image of the child it is difficult to achieve sustainable change”*

- (FP4)

The image of the child refers to what a person believes about the role of children in education and society. The work of Better Start values reflection on the image of the child and uses this approach to support quality development. Mentors' support practitioners to develop a positive image of the child in the belief that this leads to sustainable change in practice. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. This chapter reviews the main findings of this research study and considers recommendations for early years policy and practice and further research in the area.

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### *Summary of key findings*

The main findings of this study present insight into the experiences of Better Start mentors' who support practitioners to reflect on the image of the child in order enhance quality development. The study was developed to explore what Better Start mentors' do to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child? Why they support reflection on the image of the child in this way? How this reflection influences practice that promotes

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children's learning? challenges in supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child were also outlined.

From the analysis of data gathered through questionnaires and a focus group three key discussion points arose. These are outlined as:

- 1) The importance of national policy and framework: A shared understanding of the image of the child underpins the work of the Better Start mentoring team.
- 2) Empowering practice through self-directed learning: the learning processes used to encourage reflection on the image of the child leads to changes which empowers practitioner's pedagogy and practice.
- 3) Leadership for learning: individual's role in developing a positive image of the child. Everyone within an early years setting has an impact on children's learning. Individuals who inspire learning have a key role to play in developing a positive image of the child.

This research study presented an invaluable opportunity to gain insight into the practice of the Better Start Early Years Specialists who work as mentors' within the Quality Development Process. The results of this study affirms the premise that supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child leads to sustainable change in quality practice. As QP4 advocates '*without a positive image of the child it is difficult to achieve sustainable change*'. It is obvious the work of the Mentors' is underpinned by a rights based approach which values a positive image of the child. Reflection on the image of the child supports practitioners to consider their assumptions and how they influence practice (NCCA, 2014; Hayes: 2007; Hayes & O'Neill, 2017). As described by the mentors' when effective, this inspires a change in attitude which leads practitioners to develop a positive image of children which has an impact how children learn. The literature on change theory describes that learning such as this requires intrinsic motivation and willingness on the part of the

practitioner (Pew, 2007). It can therefore be concluded that, just as the mentor is committed to this process, so too are these practitioners, managers and ECCE services who engage in reflection on their image of the child within the Better Start Quality Development Process.

As explored in the discussion the mentors' hold a shared image of the child as confident and competent learners as underpinned by the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE 2006). The Practice Guide serves as a tool used to support the implementation of our national frameworks, presents a host of activities which supports reflection on the image of the child. As the findings demonstrate, there is variability in how mentors' use these activities and there is debate on their overall effectiveness. However as described by the mentors', when supporting reflection on the image of the child, there is value in using this activities in conjunction with other elements of the Curriculum Foundations pillar (for example creating a curriculum statement). Curriculum foundations outlines four elements as a starting point for curriculum development which includes work curriculum statements and the role of the practitioner. As described throughout the study the role of the adult is paramount to providing an effective context for children's learning. Curriculum Foundations allows practitioners to reflect on ethical and professional practice and their own personal attributes. The role of the adult should be complimentary to their image of the child. Despite this there is no evidence to suggest that an approach which directly links these activities to supporting a positive image of the child is considered. As collective discussion on these fundamental concepts within an early years setting can lead to a change in values and beliefs for practitioners, a firm commitment to working on areas of curriculum foundations would be beneficial for all involved.

The benefit of a flexible approach to supporting reflection on the image of the child is outlined throughout the study. This is essential in order to overcome constraints of time and the challenges met within the varying contexts of the ECCE settings. Mentors' describe

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reflection on the image of the child as being embedded in all the work they do. This approach links with the developmental model of mentoring (Clutterbuck 2014). The developmental model focuses on a mentee defining their own goals which leads to a more motivating and sustainable learning process. Within this approach the mentor draws on a range of strategies to meet the practitioners individual learning needs. Strategies identified in the data included the use of strengths based feedback, modelling, observation, self-evaluation, group discussion and reflective dialogue for example. With such a wide and varied approach to supporting reflection and affirming a positive image of the child it essential that mentors', just like practitioners, share practice, engage in reflective discussion and use self-reflection for continued refinement of their own mentoring skills. As identified all individuals within an early years' service have a role to play in leading learning. Mentors' too have a responsibility to model and enact pedagogical leadership within their own role. The value of time for individual and group reflection to support pedagogical leadership skills is well documented (Coughlin & Lorrie Baird, 2013). Its value is also evident through the experiences of the research participants in this study. The focus group in itself provided opportunity for reflection on this topic and participants identified the need for additional learning opportunities to reflect on the principles. Mentors' also described the affirming nature of coming together as a group during their initial induction which allowed them to develop a shared image of the child and embed a rights based approach to their work with practitioners. Such opportunities are fundamental to developing effective mentoring practices which support sustainable change throughout the team

To conclude, in response to the research questions three key discussion areas relating to mentors' experiences of supporting reflection on the image of the child. These are summarised as, the importance of national policy and frameworks to inform a shared image of the child; empowering practice through self-directed learning; the role of the individual

in leading children's learning. Through integration of the study's findings, analysis, interpretation and discussion we can assert that an approach to supporting practitioners to reflect on their image which considers all three aspects in its application is in a good position to achieve sustainable change. Like all academic explorations this study reveals as many questions as it answers. Recommendations for further research and areas of focus are outlined in the recommendations section to follow.

### **Recommendations**

This study was conducted as a small scale research project. By the nature of this, limitations of time impacted the depth of data analysis and the range of data collection methods available for use. Despite this the data gathered would support the following recommendations with regard to research, policy and practice:

- Consideration of the Better Start induction process would be beneficial in order to inform a consistent approach for newly employed Early Years Specialists. Opportunities to reflect and share practice on supporting a rights based approach would help to embed the beliefs and principles of national policy and frameworks during the induction stage. This would help in reinforcing mentoring practice on the image of the child throughout the program. This is particularly important given that formal mentoring approaches in the early years are in their infancy.
- Opportunities to reflect on the practice and approach of Better Start mentors' in supporting reflection on the image of the child would be of benefit to the team. Peer support and group reflection for all mentors' including new inductees would help support mentoring practice. In order to enhance mentors to support reflection on the

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image of the child an opportunity to share the key findings of this research study would help in identifying areas of reflection for the team.

- As mentors have stated that understanding the principles of Aistear and Siolta are a key aspect to forming a positive image in of the child. Reflection and discussion of mentoring approaches to support practitioners to understand these principles would be of benefit.
- The research has identified that the support of leaders in learning is invaluable in order to achieve sustainable changes. The development of reflective practice skills are paramount to enabling change. In order to develop a reflective ethos and culture and embed the principles of Aistear and Síolta pedagogical leadership is essential. Specific mentoring and coaching supports which a focus the development of pedagogical leadership for those in leadership and management roles, or any person with a deep understanding of early learning (Couglin & Baird, 2013) would be beneficial in order to build a culture of reflective learning.
- The development of a nationally coordinated CPD programme for the early years sector to comprehensively support the use of the Curriculum Foundations Pillar of practice would be beneficial. This pillar encompasses elements on the image of the child. The importance of incorporating on site mentoring visits would be critical to developing the necessary skills to engage and gain value from this pillar of practice. This would support the development of quality practice as informed by Aistear and Síolta.
- The perspectives of the mentors' as participants gathered rich and varied data on supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child. Further research to

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

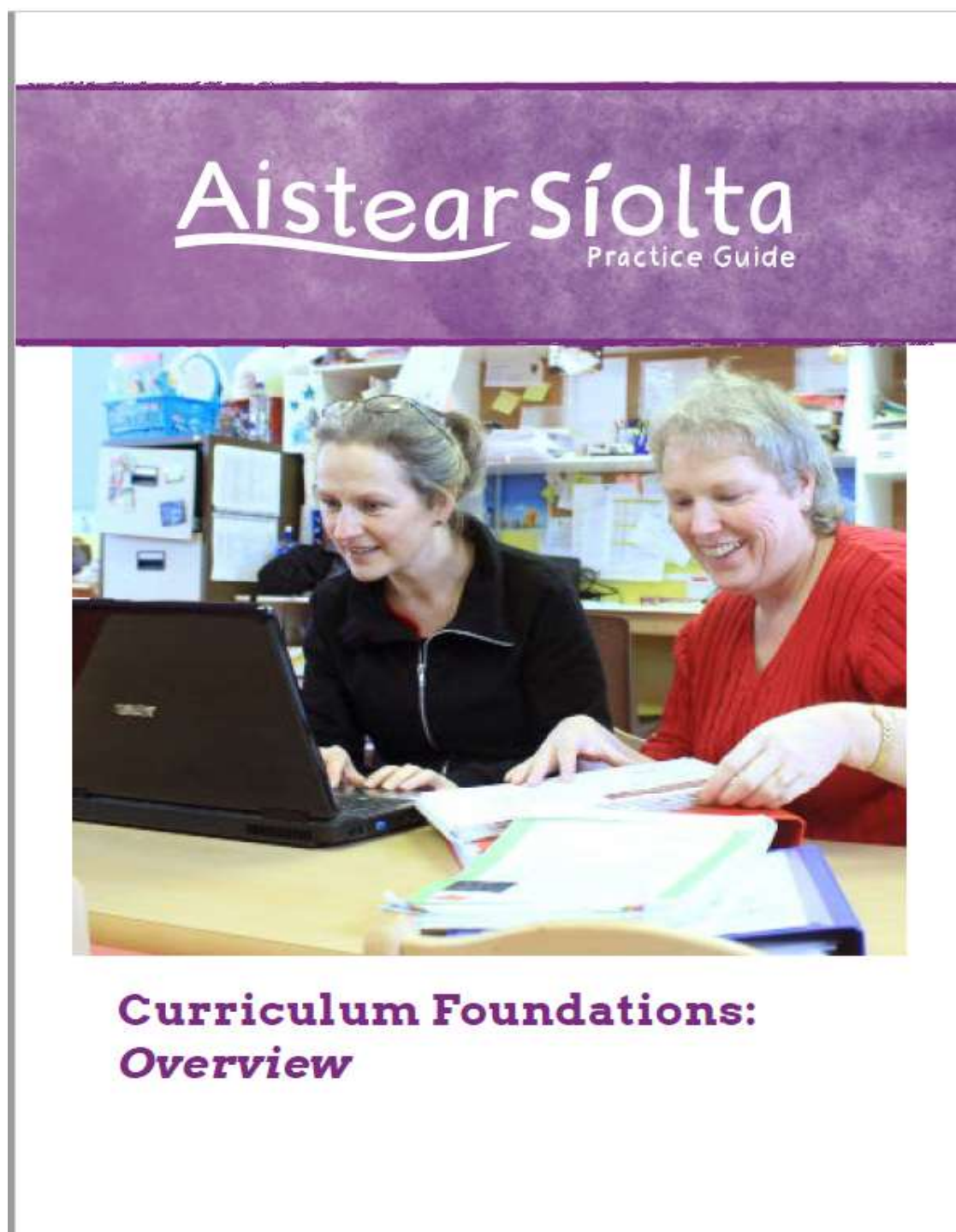
understand the perspective and experiences of practitioners and managers within childcare settings would be of benefit. This would identify both the value in supporting reflection on the image of the child, and reinforce best practice in relation to mentoring approaches to support this reflection.

- Further research into the impact of the use of the image of the child activities on practice would be beneficial. A long term study throughout the time frame of the complete quality development process within a childcare services may be beneficial in identifying how these activities are used. Case studies such as this would be beneficial in order to recognise the changes in attitudes beliefs and practice within a service. Thus identifying changes in quality development and how this impacts outcomes for children.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Curriculum Foundations overview - Element 2 : Activities A, B and C

(*Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, 2015)





## Connections to Aistear and Síolta

### Aistear

*Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking*  
 All [Guidelines for good practice](#)

### Síolta Standards

1: [Rights of the Child](#), 2: [Environments](#), 3: [Parents and Families](#), 5: [Interactions](#), 6: [Play](#), 7: [Curriculum](#), 11: [Professional Practice](#), 13: [Transitions](#), 14: [Identity and Belonging](#), 16: [Community Involvement](#)  
[Research Digests](#) linked to the above *Standards*

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is intended to help you in your role as curriculum-developer to build, reflect on and extend your curriculum to support babies', toddlers' and young children's early learning and development. Drawing on the early childhood sector's experiences of using *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the Practice Guide includes:

- **Curriculum Foundations** and
- six interconnected **Curriculum Pillars**:
  1. Building Partnerships with Parents
  2. Creating and Using the Learning Environment
  3. Learning through Play
  4. Nurturing and Extending Interactions
  5. Planning and Assessing using *Aistear's* Themes
  6. Supporting Transitions.

This document gives an overview of **Curriculum Foundations**. These Foundations are an important starting point when thinking about curriculum.



Curriculum Foundations are rooted in the principles, values and attitudes that shape each practitioner's work and that of the setting. The Foundations include the following four elements:

#### **Element 1: Developing your Curriculum and Curriculum Statement**

This element looks at the meaning of curriculum and in particular, an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. It helps you to think about your own curriculum and develop a statement about it which you can share with others. This statement can become the basis for your long-term curriculum planning and can be updated as necessary.

#### **Element 2: Principles including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child**

This element looks at the principles underpinning *Aistear* and *Síolta*. In particular, it focuses on the rights of the child and practitioner image of the child and helps you to think about the principles that underpin your curriculum. These activities are designed to be completed over time.

**Element 3: Themes in Aistear**

This element focuses on the themes of *Aistear* which describe learning and development and help to support the holistic development of all children.

**Element 4: Professional Practice**

This element looks at professional practice including the concept of pedagogical leadership.

## Using the resources in Curriculum Foundations

Each of the four elements has a range of resources to support you to reflect on your practice. Table 1 gives an overview of these.

**Table 1: Resources in Curriculum Foundations**

| Category and Purpose  | Resource Title   |
|---|--|
| <p><b>1: Developing your Curriculum and Curriculum Statement</b></p> <p>These activities help practitioners to think about their current curriculum and to develop a curriculum statement before they begin work on the Practice Guide. They also support practitioners to develop a more emergent and inquiry-based curriculum and invite them to revisit their curriculum statement at a later stage to ensure it reflects changes made as a result of working with the Practice Guide.</p> | <p><b>Activities related to your curriculum</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Introduction</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity A: Starting with your current curriculum</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity B: Developing an emergent and enquiry-based curriculum</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity C: Reviewing your curriculum in light of the Practice Guide</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Podcast</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Curriculum: Interview with Professor Elizabeth Wood</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Moving to an emergent curriculum</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">What is a curriculum statement?</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Using Aistear to plan and assess (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Explaining an emergent, play-based curriculum to parents</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Creating a curriculum statement</a></li> </ul> |

| Category and Purpose  | Resource Title  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>1: Developing your Curriculum and Curriculum Statement</b></p> <p>These activities help practitioners to think about their current curriculum and to develop a curriculum statement before they begin work on the Practice Guide. They also support practitioners to develop a more emergent and inquiry-based curriculum and invite them to revisit their curriculum statement at a later stage to ensure it reflects changes made as a result of working with the Practice Guide.</p> | <p><b>Podcast</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Defining curriculum and curriculum planning</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Practitioner Beliefs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Explaining the term funds of knowledge</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">The benefits of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Explaining the term emergent curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Explaining the term inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Explaining an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years) Dr. John Nimmo</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Making the curriculum more emergent and inquiry-based (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Planning, documenting and assessing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">How to use curriculum and quality frameworks and standards with an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">The adult's role in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Using an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum with other curriculum philosophies and approaches (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Other sources of the emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">What an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum looks like for young children (3-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">What an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum looks like for babies and toddlers (Birth-3 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">The visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> </ul> |

| Category and Purpose  | Resource Title  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>2: Principles including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child</b></p> <p>These activities provide reflective questions, prompts and scenarios to encourage practitioners to think about the principles which underpin their work with children.</p> | <p><b>Activities related to principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Introduction</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activities A-E on principles related to <i>Children and their lives in Early Childhood</i></a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">Activity A: Describing your view of children</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Activity B: Seeing all children as competent and confident</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Activity C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Activity D: Bringing your image of children to life in the curriculum</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Activity E: Sharing your image of children with others</a></li> </ul> </li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity F: Reflecting on principles related to <i>Children's connections with others</i></a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity G: Reflecting on principles related to <i>How children learn and develop</i></a></li> </ul> <p><b>Video clips</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Children's voices: what children enjoy in pre-school</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Me and my body</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Being independent at snack time</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Promoting independence at snack time</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">My favourite things</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Nurturing Dispositions</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Image of the child: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their confidence and competence</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Learning Experiences</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Making wraps</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Reindeer visit</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Personal books</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Hospital</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Dinosaurs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Learning experience 20: I did it, I stood up</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Learning experience 64: Pilots are boys</a></li> </ul> |



| Category and Purpose   | Resource Title   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>4: Professional Practice</b></p> <p>These activities support practitioners to think about their role as reflective, pedagogical leaders.</p> | <p><b>Activities related to principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Introduction</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity A: Professional Role</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity B: Ethical Practice</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity C: Reflective Practice</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity D: Reflecting on my dispositions, skills, abilities and knowledge</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity E: Self-reflection and reflecting as a team</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity F: Thinking about leadership for learning</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity G: Leader for learning in a managerial role</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity H: Supporting change</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Activity I: Leading professional practice</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Podcasts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">What being a professional means to me</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Pedagogical leadership and professional practice</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Supporting others to become professional</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Image and role of the practitioner</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Skills needed as a professional in early childhood (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">ICT Supporting Reflective Practice</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">The adult's role in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Key elements to creating a rich learning environment (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Leaders for Learning: Creating vibrant learning environments for children in the early childhood setting (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Reflective Practice in Early Childhood Care and Education (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Being Intentional in our work: How do we do our best for children in our ECCE programmes (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Documentation: Why and how? (Birth-6 years)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Leaders as passionate engaged educators in the ECCE setting (Birth-6 years)</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Action Planning Template</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Professional Practice: Action Planning Template</a></li> </ul> |

**Appendix B: Image of the child activities A, B, C, D and E**

**Activity A**



**Curriculum Foundations**

**Element 2: Principles, including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child**

**Principles related to children and their lives in early childhood: Activities A-E**

| Principles related to Children and their lives in early childhood  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that needs to be valued, respected and nurtured. Each child has his/her own set of experiences and unique life story and is confident and competent. Recognition of the child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs as citizens are central and contribute to a quality early childhood experience where an understanding of equality, rights and responsibilities is promoted.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality (A and S)</li> <li>• Diversity (A and S)</li> <li>• Child's uniqueness (A) and Children First (S)</li> <li>• Children as citizens (A) and Value of early childhood (S)</li> </ul> |

This set of principles includes the rights of the child and the practitioner image of the child. At the centre of any curriculum is how children are viewed. This shapes how you approach planning for learning opportunities, how you support children's learning and development, how you listen to and involve them (or not) and how the curriculum takes shape within your setting.

**Prompts for mentors or facilitators**

|                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Able</b>       | <b>Fun</b>         |
| <b>Active</b>     | <b>Helpful</b>     |
| <b>Ambitious</b>  | <b>Independent</b> |
| <b>Capable</b>    | <b>Intelligent</b> |
| <b>Competent</b>  | <b>Kind</b>        |
| <b>Confident</b>  | <b>Loving</b>      |
| <b>Curious</b>    | <b>Noisy</b>       |
| <b>Creative</b>   | <b>Persistent</b>  |
| <b>Developing</b> | <b>Strong</b>      |
| <b>Eager</b>      | <b>Unique</b>      |

Curriculum Foundations: Element 2, Activity A

2

### Activity A: Describing your view of children

Using the box, describe your view of children. Write down what comes to mind. This activity can be especially useful if done by yourself first before working with a colleague or mentor.



**Possible words to describe children**

**Create a short statement about your view/image of children using some of the words listed above.**

**Children are**

## Activity B

# Element 2: Principles, including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child

## Principles related to *Children and their lives in early childhood: Activities A-E*

### Activity B: Seeing all children as competent and confident

This activity involves thinking about your own experiences as a learner as well as thinking about some scenarios of children as learners.

#### Part 1: You as a learner

Take a few minutes to remember a time when you were facing a challenge. This could be learning to drive a car, cooking an important meal, drawing or doing maths at school, singing solo in a choir, returning to study or another example.

- Did someone believe in your ability to succeed?
- How did that person support you and facilitate you to achieve the goal?
- How did that make you feel?
- Did someone believe you could not do the task?
- How did they convey that?
- How did that make you feel?

#### Part 2: The competent child

This activity involves you thinking about different scenarios and explaining why you chose a particular response.





**Scenario 1**

Sergei is eleven months old. He is learning to crawl and as he crawls he bumps gently against a highchair. He is not hurt and does not cry.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Scenario 2**

There are eleven children aged eighteen months to three years in the toddler room. The manager suggests that the children could be more independent at snack-time.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Scenario 3**

A two-year-old child is learning English as a second language. The parents are concerned about his ability to learn two languages at once because they are learning English also. They ask for your advice.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Scenario 4**

A group of three- and four-year-olds are in the block area. They are building a city and want to draw a map of it.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Scenario 5**

A four year-old boy is telling you about dinosaurs. He says his favourite is Tyrannosaurus Rex and his next favourite is the Brontosaurus.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Scenario 6**

Anna is four years old and has Down Syndrome. Her boot gets caught and comes off.

*How do you react? Why do you choose this response? What might influence how you respond?*

**Sample responses and additional resources****Scenario 1**

- Do you pick him up and cuddle him and tell him it will be alright?
- Do you watch him, to be there if he needs you, and see him come out from under the high-chair beaming that he crawled so far?
- Do you lift him up and put him in the high-chair in case he hurts himself?

**Scenario 2**

- Do you think they are too young to pour their own water from the jug and to choose fruit and crackers from a serving plate and continue to manage snack time as you always have?
- Do you say they could do it but it would take too much time and be too messy?
- Do you get smaller plates and jugs to support the children to developing self-help skills?

*Additional resources*Promoting independence at snack timeBeing independent at snack timeLearning experience: making wraps'**Scenario 3**

- Do you tell the parents not to worry, you will teach him English?
- Do you encourage the parents to speak English only at home with their child?
- Do you explain to parents that it is important to continue to speak their first language to their child at home, as this supports him learning a second language? Do you reassure them that he will naturally develop English in your setting through conversation, play, books and songs?

*Additional resources*Tipsheet: Supporting children to become bilingualTipsheet: Supporting your child to become bilingual**Scenario 4**

- Do you tell them it's nearly tidy-up time?
- Do you give them some paper and let them get on with it?
- Do you provide some real maps, some measuring tapes, pencils, markers and some large sheets of paper and assist them where needed without taking over the play?

**Scenario 5**

- Do you smile with your colleagues at the cuteness?
- Do you extend his language by talking with him about palaeontologists, excavations, fossils, herbivores, carnivores and look at books and websites to scaffold his knowledge further?
- Do you tell him there are no dinosaurs anymore?

*Additional resources*

[Learning experience: Dinosaurs](#)

**Scenario 6**

- Do you watch and see if she can put it back on herself?
- Do you put the boot back on for her?
- Do you ask another child to help her?

*Additional resources*

[Nurturing dispositions](#)

**After-activity notes**

*Aistear* and *Síolta* support the learning and development of all children from birth to six years. Your curriculum also needs to support every child to reach his/her full potential. Do you have high expectations for all children?

Think about messages you might indirectly or unconsciously give some children about things they can or cannot do. Are there different messages or expectations for different groups of children, for example, children with special educational needs, boys or girls, children from different cultural contexts or particular backgrounds? Are there opportunities for all children to progress to more complex tasks? Is there a balance between familiarity which helps children to feel secure and novelty and challenge which engages their interest, and extends their thinking and learning?



## Activity C

## Element 2: Principles, including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child

### Principles related to *Children and their lives in early childhood: Activities A-E*

#### Activity C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence

##### Part 1: Thinking about children's competence and confidence

At times, supporting children to show their confidence and competence in your setting can lead to challenges and concerns for adults. This activity invites you to look at a selection of photos of babies, toddlers and young children showing their growing competence and confidence.

*Photos with music or Photos with no music.*

Reflect on what you have seen and complete the table below.

##### Thinking about the photos



What words would you use to describe the children and their experiences in the photos?



**Activity.D**

## Element 2: Principles, including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child

### Principles related to *Children and their lives in early childhood: Activities A-E*

#### Activity D: Bringing your image of children to life in the curriculum



Activity A looked at how you as an individual view children.

Activity B explored how our beliefs in relation to ability, gender, culture and background might impact on how particular groups of children are viewed and our expectations for them.

Activity C looked at challenges in enabling children to show their confidence and competence.

The next activity provides an opportunity for you and your colleagues to look at how the whole setting or room can give children more opportunities to show their competence and confidence.

### Seeing and enabling children to be confident and competent

As a team, identify three ways you could enable children to show their confidence and competence in your setting. Keep *Aistear's* themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking* in mind as you do this. For example, supporting children to be more active, have more say in what they do, have more opportunities to do things for themselves, take part in riskier play, challenge their thinking.

#### Prompts for Reflection

As a team do you support and encourage each other to stand back a little and slow things down to let children's competence and confidence be evident?

Does the curriculum:

- build on children's interests and needs?
- give children choices and respect those choices?
- involve children in decisions that effect them?
- give sufficient time each day for children to get deeply involved in activities and experiences?
- provide a balance between familiarity which helps children to feel secure and novelty and challenge which might arouse a new interest and extend learning?
- provide opportunities for children to be independent and responsible and developing skills like pouring, climbing, mark-making, assessing risk, categorising, sequencing, problem-solving?

Have you spoken to parents about why children need opportunities to be independent, build self-help skills and to be seen as competent and confident?

Curriculum Foundations: Element 2, Activity D

3

Three things we will do next week to help babies/toddlers/young children be more confident and competent

1

Person responsible

2

Person responsible

3

Person responsible

## Activity E

## Element 2: Principles, including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child

### Principles related to *Children and their lives in early childhood: Activities A-E*

#### Activity E: Sharing your image of children with others

Having worked through activities A, B, C and D over a number of weeks or months and after making some changes to enable children to show their confidence and competence, it might be helpful to share this change with others. You might like to rework your short statement from Activity A to describe the view now evident in the daily work in the room or setting. This can be done using a short paragraph or a collection of photos of children with words underneath them presented as a poster and displayed in the room or communal area in the setting.



**We view babies, toddlers and young children as...**





### **Appendix C: Final Questionnaire from Survey Monkey**

**Mentors' experiences of supporting Practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner.**

#### **Introduction**

**As part of my study for an MA in Education (Early Education) at Marino Institute of Education I am required to undertake a dissertation and I invite you to consider participating in the study. Prior to your participation, I would like to provide you with some information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.**

**I have chosen to carry out a piece of research, which explores Mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner. Mentors' perspectives will be used to evaluate the effectiveness and explore the challenges of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child.**

**Participation in the study is voluntary. It will involve taking part in a questionnaire through survey monkey. With your permission, the results from the questionnaire will be used to form the research as part of my dissertation. You may decline to answer any part of the questionnaire if you so wish and you may decide to withdraw or stop participating at your will up until the submission of my dissertation. All information provided is considered confidential; no names will appear in any part of the research.**

**Data collected during this study will be retained securely on a password protected laptop for the duration of the study and deleted after 13 months following submission. Only the supervisors associated with my study will have access. There are**

**no known or anticipated risks to any of the participants in this study. Results from this research will be shared with you on request and feedback will be welcomed.**

**If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please contact me by email at [bdennehy@betterstart.ie](mailto:bdennehy@betterstart.ie) or by telephone on 086-0750911. You can contact my supervisor at [Maja.HaalsBrosnan@mie.ie](mailto:Maja.HaalsBrosnan@mie.ie)**

**I would like to assure you that this research has been reviewed and received ethical clearance from Marino Institute of Education. By proceeding with this survey it is understood that you are giving permission to participate in this part of the research project.**

**The questionnaire includes 17 questions and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.**

**I thank you in advance for your assistance in this research**

**Mentors' experiences of supporting Practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner.**

### **Questionnaire**

#### **Question Title**

**1. What is your qualification in relation to early education or similar area of study? w**

**0**

OK

**Question Title**

**2. Do you hold a mentoring Qualification? w 0**

**w 0**

yes

No

Please outline details:

OK

**Question Title**

**3. Can you briefly outline some of your relevant experience prior to becoming a mentor with Better Start? w 0**

OK

**Question Title**

**4. How many years have you worked as a mentor? w 0**

OK

**Question Title**

**5. How many years have you worked with Better Start? w 0**

OK

**Question Title****6. What is your own understanding of the image of the child? w 0**

OK

**Question Title****7. Does the image of the child guide your own work as a mentor, if so in what way? w****0**

OK

**Question Title****8. How confident are you in supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child? w 0**

- Not so confident
- Somewhat confident
- Very confident

OK

**Question Title**

**9. Have you had training on supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child? w 0**

Yes

No

please outline details:

OK

**Question Title**

**10. Have you previously used this type of reflection in your own practice with children? w 0**

Yes

No

OK

**Question Title**

**11. Within your current role, what are the 3 most common ways you support practitioners in an early years setting to reflect on their image of the child? w 0**

OK

**Question Title**

**12. How often do you use the activities listed below, from element 2 of the Curriculum Foundations pillar, to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child? w 0**

|  | Never  | Rarely   | Sometimes  | Often  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| A: Describing your view of children  | <input type="radio"/> A: Describing your view of children  | <input type="radio"/> A: Describing your view of children  | <input type="radio"/> A: Describing your view of children  | <input type="radio"/> A: Describing your view of children  |
| B: Seeing all children as competent and confident                                    | <input type="radio"/> B: Seeing all children as competent and confident                                    | <input type="radio"/> B: Seeing all children as competent and confident                                    | <input type="radio"/> B: Seeing all children as competent and confident                                    | <input type="radio"/> B: Seeing all children as competent and confident                                    |
| C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence | <input type="radio"/> C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence | <input type="radio"/> C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence | <input type="radio"/> C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence | <input type="radio"/> C: Exploring challenges in enabling children to show their competence and confidence |
| D: Bringing your image of children   | <input type="radio"/> D: Bringing your image of children   | <input type="radio"/> D: Bringing your image of children   | <input type="radio"/> D: Bringing your image of children   | <input type="radio"/> D: Bringing your image of children   |

MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Never Rarely Sometimes Often

to life in the children to life in children to life in children to life in children to life in curriculum the curriculum the curriculum the curriculum the curriculum

Never Rarely Sometimes Often

E: Sharing your image of children with others  
 E: Sharing your image of children with others  
 E: Sharing your image of children with others  
 E: Sharing your image of children with others  
 E: Sharing your image of children with others  
 Never Rarely Sometimes Often

Please reflect on why you use these activities in this way i.e. rarely, often etc.

OK

**Question Title**

**13. Do you feel that supporting practitioners to reflect on the image of the child leads to changes in practice which promotes children's learning within early years settings?**

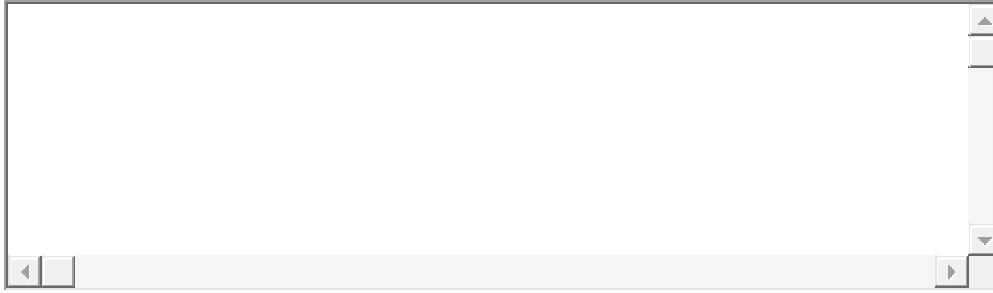
w 0

Yes

No

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

If yes can you give an example/examples of this:



OK

**Question Title**

**14. Do you feel that supporting reflection on the image of the child leads to changes in practice which are of benefit to practitioners themselves? w 0**

Yes

No

if yes can you give an example/examples of this:



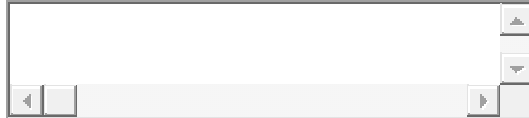
OK

**Question Title**

**15. What are the 3 most common challenges you face when supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child? w 0**



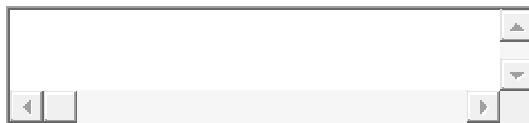
## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

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OK

**Question Title**

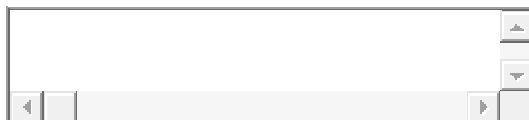
**16. Can you give examples of how you have worked to overcome any of these challenges? w 0**

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OK

**Question Title**

**17. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the work you do to support practitioners to reflect on their image of the child? w 0**

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**Appendix D: Letter of Consent Focus Group and Letter of Consent Questionnaire****Letter of Consent Focus Group**

Dear Early Years Specialist

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study as part of my dissertation. I am a 2nd year student currently attending an MA in Education (Early Education) 2018-2019 at Marino Institute of Education. Prior to your participation, I would like to provide you with some information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

I have chosen to carry out a piece of research, which explores Mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner. Mentors' perspectives will be used to identify and explore how this reflection has supported practitioners to bring their image of the child as a competent and confident learner, to life in the curriculum.

Participation in the study is voluntary. It will involve taking part in a focus group. You may decline to answer or take part in any of the activities if you so wish, and you may decide to withdraw or stop participating at any time. With your permission, information from the focus group will be used to form the research as part of my dissertation. All information provided is considered confidential; no name's will appear in any part of the research.

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Data collected during this study will be retained for the duration of the study in a locked office in my home and on a file on my laptop, which will be password protected. Only the supervisors associated with my study will have access. There are no known or anticipated risks to any of the participants in this study. Results from this research will be shared with you and feedback will be welcomed.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please contact me at 086-0750911 or by email at [biddennehy@gmail.com](mailto:biddennehy@gmail.com). You can contact my supervisor at telephone number:  
email address:

I would like to assure you that this research has been reviewed and received ethical clearance from Marino Institute of Education. However, the final decision on participation is yours. I thank you in advance for your assistance in this research. I would appreciate it if you could complete the attached permission slip and return it to the following email address [biddennehy@gmail.com](mailto:biddennehy@gmail.com)

Yours Sincerely,

Breda Dennehy

**CONSENT FORM**

I have read the information presented in the letter about a focus group interview conducted by Breda Dennehy as part of her research study at Marino Institute of Education.

I am aware that excerpts from the focus group may be included in the research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous. I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time by advising the researcher.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance through Marino Institute of Education. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the college on telephone number?

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

yes            no

I agree to complete a questionnaire.

yes            no

I agree to anonymous quotations been used.

yes            no

I agree to the focus group being voice recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes

yes            no

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Researchers Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Letter of Consent Questionnaire**

Dear Early Years Specialist,

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study as part of my dissertation. I am a 2nd year student currently attending an MA in Education (Early Education) 2018-2019 at Marino Institute of Education. Prior to your participation, I would like to provide you with some information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

I have chosen to carry out a piece of research, which explores Mentors' experiences of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner. Mentors' perspectives will be used to evaluate the effectiveness, and explore the challenges of supporting practitioners to reflect on their image of the child.

Participation in the study is voluntary. It will involve taking part in a questionnaire through survey monkey. With your permission, the results from the questionnaire will be used to form the research as part of my dissertation. You may decline to answer any part of the questionnaire if you so wish, and you may decide to withdraw or stop participating at your will up until the submission of my dissertation. All information provided is considered confidential; no names will appear in any part of the research.

Data collected during this study will be retained securely on a password protected laptop for the duration of the study and deleted after 13 months following submission. Only the supervisors associated with my study will have access. There are no known or anticipated risks to any of the participants in this study. Results from this research will be shared with you and feedback will be welcomed.

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please contact me at 086-0750911 or by email at [biddennehy@gmail.com](mailto:biddennehy@gmail.com). You can contact my supervisor at telephone number:  
email address: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to assure you that this research has been reviewed and received ethical clearance from Marino Institute of Education. However, the final decision on participation is yours. I thank you in advance for your assistance in this research. I would appreciate it if you could complete the attached permission slip and return it to the following email address [biddennehy@gmail.com](mailto:biddennehy@gmail.com)

Yours Sincerely,

Breda Dennehy

**CONSENT FORM**

I have read the information presented in the letter about a questionnaire being conducted by Breda Dennehy as part of her research study at Marino Institute of Education.

I am aware that excerpts from the questionnaire may be included in the research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous. I was informed that I may withdraw my consent by advising the researcher.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethical clearance through Marino Institute of Education. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, you may contact the my supervisor at xxxxx

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

yes            no

I agree to complete a questionnaire.

yes            no

I agree to anonymous quotations been used.

yes            no

As a result of the findings from this questionnaire a focus group will be conducted can you indicate below if you are willing to take part in a focus group.

yes            no



## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please print)

Researchers Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E: Coding and Analysis****Transcript with coding**

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

- 1 P1 I find in some services if they're giving their image of the child it can be very negative  
 2 words so that is totally contradicting what the Aistear principles say..
- 3 P1 .... *It is their own personal...* whereas as well as that I think it's about the whole idea of  
 4 whats underneath early childhood... what underpins all of that and they are those principles  
 5 in Aistear
- 6 (others agree) 'it's giving the foundation of knowledge'... 'start here'... 'bring it back'
- 7 P1 yeah I think this is another step after that like how to they relate it on a *personal level*...
- 8 P5 yeah but then it's also on a cultural level. it's about the culture in the service as well and  
 9 what are the messages that are given to practitioners and how are they supported in terms of  
 10 what's the collective image of a child is (other yep) you know how there's a leader that can  
 11 support that within the service and give that kind of support as well in terms of modelling  
 12 and at team meetings and in supervision and that there's links their made and it's not in  
 13 isolation that there's a culture there
- 14 P2 I also think it's fair to say that it's like each practitioner and you're working with where  
 15 they are so maybe you really do need to pare that back and looking at them really thinking  
 16 about it... and some may be there and you're looking to get them to think deeper about the  
 17 image of the child, like, in terms of they may be ready for some of these and the the right  
 18 words maybe coming out as more as were they just implementing it... or are they actually  
 19 putting it into practice in their rooms.
- 20 P? I think also as part of what you said on ... was it activity A. *that can be very deep if you*  
 21 *have the knowledge there* like for example I can say I want independence but what actually  
 22 does that mean to me.

MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Questionnaire with coding

Mentors experiences of supporting Practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner.

SurveyMonkey

Q6 What is your own understanding of the image of the child?

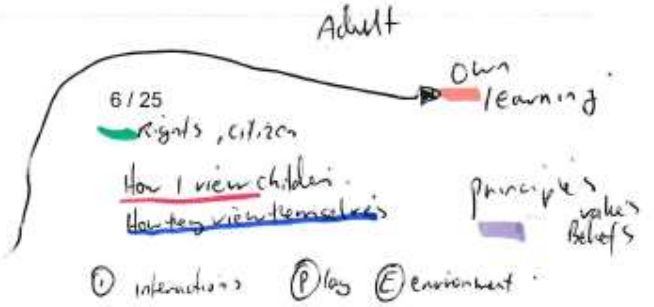
Answered: 17 Skipped: 0

Paragraph. discussion

| #  | RESPONSES  | DATE               |
|----|--|--------------------|
| 1  | My understanding of the Image of the Child is seeing children as <b>capable and competent</b> participants in their own learning journey.  | 3/19/2019 12:52 PM |
| 2  | My understanding of the image of the child is how educators perceive children and how this influences their <b>teaching</b> in relation to the implementation of the curriculum, educators' interactions, how educators <b>support play and enhancement of the environment</b> .   | 3/15/2019 2:44 PM  |
| 3  | My image of the child is about seeing them as <b>competent learners</b> curious about the world around them from birth.  | 3/14/2019 2:44 PM  |
| 4  | <b>Capable, confident and independent</b> individuals, with thoughts, ideas and opinions of their own to be <b>respected and listened to</b> . Children are <b>explorers, risk takers, creative problem solvers</b> with the ability to persevere and be <b>resilient</b> with the support of positive relationships with <b>parents, caregivers/guardians</b> .           | 3/14/2019 10:22 AM |
| 5  | My understanding is that this is each <b>individual's values and beliefs for children</b> , which comes into play in their daily <b>practice</b> .   | 3/14/2019 9:59 AM  |
| 6  | It is about <b>how I view children</b> .   | 3/13/2019 6:07 PM  |
| 7  | The image of the child is a reflective experience where the individuals and groups identify the words that they use to describe the children in their care. When identified, they are prompts for reflection - e.g you had identified children as <b>'creative'</b> are there opportunities for children to be creative in your indoor/outdoor learning environments?      | 3/13/2019 5:44 PM  |
| 8  | <b>Protagonists of his/her own learning</b> , guided by caring and responsible adults.   | 3/13/2019 5:32 PM  |
| 9  | How we <b>view children</b> , it has important implications on the <b>opportunities</b> provided as through this messages are sent to the children regarding <b>how we view them</b> , which also influences how they <b>view themselves</b> and the <b>opportunities</b> they are afforded.   | 3/13/2019 5:32 PM  |
| 10 | It is our <b>default mode for thinking about children</b> . Whilst we may acknowledge differences in individual children, when meeting a child for the first time or working with a group, <b>this image</b> guides our interactions, planning etc. My own image of the child is the <b>confident, competent child</b> with an emphasis on interesting and fun to be with. | 3/13/2019 3:02 PM  |
| 11 | This is how we view children i.e. <b>strong, capable learners</b> , they have <b>rights</b> and are <b>active citizens</b> .   | 3/13/2019 2:48 PM  |
| 12 | <b>The views, beliefs, knowledge and understanding of what we know about children</b> i.e. how children <b>learn and think</b> , what is important for them, what do they need to <b>grow and develop</b> , what are the <b>needs of the child</b> etc.  | 3/12/2019 11:15 AM |
| 13 | My own understanding is that children are <b>capable and confident learners</b> and that they are <b>curious, independent, playful</b> etc if they are given the opportunity. Educators' image of the child varies and this often depends on the age of the child and the setting.   | 3/4/2019 5:28 PM   |
| 14 | In simple terms the way in which we <b>view children</b> ; our understanding of them, the <b>position they hold in society</b> , how we <b>perceive them and our aspirations for them</b> .  | 3/4/2019 3:47 PM   |
| 15 | The image of the child is about recognising the child as <b>unique and individual</b> as well as treating children with <b>respect</b> . It is essential that we see children as <b>capable and competent agents of their own learning</b> .   | 3/3/2019 6:45 PM   |
| 16 | To me the image of the child relates to how an individual <b>views children</b> , what an <b>individual values in children</b> and how an individual <b>promotes and fosters</b> children's <b>growth and development</b> .  | 2/28/2019 9:56 PM  |
| 17 | The image of the child is <b>where teaching should begin</b> . It focuses on the <b>the rights of the child</b> and practitioner's image of the child. It helps you to think about the <b>principles that underpin your curriculum</b> .   | 2/28/2019 6:01 PM  |

Reggio (W)

- own view
- educators view
- competent confident
- influence practice (P)
- influence curriculum (C)
- Learning & dev (Ld)





## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

## Questionnaire analysis of coding

Mentors experiences of supporting Practitioners to reflect on their image of the child as a learner.

SurveyMonkey

## Q7 Does the image of the child guide your own work as a mentor, if so in what way?

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0

| #  | RESPONSES  | DATE               |
|----|--|--------------------|
| 1  | Yes I use it when I can at the start of the mentoring process during staff meeting to trigger practitioners to think about how they view children and how this is seen within their service. I use it to get them thinking about their practice and only share examples if they choose to do so. It gets the group talking about their daily practice within their rooms and the service as a whole  | 3/19/2019 12:52 PM |
| 2  | Yes. I have facilitated the image of the child activity using the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide under Curriculum Foundations with services at team meetings.   | 3/15/2019 2:44 PM  |
| 3  | Yes as many practitioners I come across do believe is a child's competency until they reach the age of approximately 3. I enjoy opening people's minds up to the wonders of the under 3's and how they are capable of being curious and competent learners from a very early age.  | 3/14/2019 2:44 PM  |
| 4  | It is embedded in our everyday practice, in role modelling in childcare services to being the foundation of all mentoring conversations, it is the "why" behind practice and starting point for developing quality practice. Without a positive image of the child it is difficult to achieve sustainable change   | 3/14/2019 10:22 AM |
| 5  | Yes. I see children as competent and confident and independent, also seeing them as important citizens. This influences my expectations of practice that I see in services. I expect educators to treat children as I would and to provide them with opportunities to be competent, independent etc.   | 3/14/2019 9:59 AM  |
| 6  | Yes, I sometimes use it to support practitioners to develop different areas of practice. For example, if they are developing the indoor physical layout, I may get them to reflect on their image of the child, and then support them to consider how they can develop the layout to support this image.   | 3/13/2019 6:07 PM  |
| 7  | Yes, This is an team activity that I do with whole staff teams during every engagement. It provides a collective idea of children as they see them and prompts further reflection on the Pillar of PPractice that they are working on at that time. E.g. Interactions - they have identified children as confident and confident - are there opportunities for this to be enhanced during the daily routine, such as at meal times? The image of the child is a powerful activity and prompts educators to apply their values to their practice. | 3/13/2019 5:44 PM  |
| 8  | Yes. Observation of the child is key.  | 3/13/2019 5:32 PM  |
| 9  | Yes, it influences my aspirations regarding services approaches to children's learning and development and my own beliefs and values.  | 3/13/2019 3:55 PM  |
| 10 | I am sure it does subliminally and in my expectations that others will treat children in a manner that reflects this kind of image. Especially as it is similar to Aistear. I use the Image of the Child Activity from the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide with groups, pairs and individuals in my work and if they are not coming up with words, the words I give to get them started will come from my own image of the child.  | 3/13/2019 3:02 PM  |
| 11 | Absolutely, I believe having a strong positive image of children ensures they remain at the core of all you do as a mentor. Likewise its a very good place to start with a mentee, you can learn a lot from their image of children.   | 3/13/2019 2:48 PM  |
| 12 | Yes, I think so. The view of children as confident and competent, curious and creative learners. This places the children at the centre of their own learning and development, with rights and responsibilities and influences the role of the adult in planning preschool curriculum, which supports each child's learning and development.   | 3/12/2019 11:15 AM |
| 13 | I like to establish what the educators view is of the image of the child first or early on. I find that this influences the play experiences they provide for the children, it influences how much they will do for the children and how much they allow them to be independent. I use the activities from the Practice Guide Curriculum Foundations Pillar.   | 3/4/2019 5:28 PM   |



## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING REFLECTION ON THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

| <b>Practice most commonly used by mentors to support reflection on the image of the child</b> |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Description</b>  | <b>Mentoring Practice</b>   | <b>Context</b>  |
| 1. Aistear Siolta Practice Guide reflective activities  | Self-reflection, group discussion, link with curriculum statements, identify words, view video from ASPG, photographs of practice to reinforce the image, view podcasts, develop display on the image of the child, action planning, group feedback,  | Team meetings, non-contact time, one to one, small groups, room leaders, manager/QLP, management team, support room leader to use with the team, large groups discussion followed by individual support in rooms, |
| 2. Dialogue, discussion and reflective questions  | Discuss links to practice, reflect on changes, link to developing children's dispositions, view podcasts, explore both mentors & mentees image, draw from experience of mentor & mentee, discuss challenges, respectfully challenge, critical reflection, ask what? Why? How?                               | Personal reflection, with peers, team discussion, individual discussion, within the room, non-contact time, with leaders, partnership with parents,   |
| 3. Throughout the pillars of practice   | 'weave the image of the child into the pillars', self-evaluation tools, action planning tools,<br><br>Reflection on pillars of the Practice guide: Planning & Assessing, Environments; Play; Interactions, Partnership with Parents<br><br>Self Evaluation tools, Videos, Podcast, Tip sheets               | Self-reflection, team meetings, non-contact time, identifying actions, setting goals, changes environments, observation and planning, interactions, partnerships with parents, supporting play                    |
| 4. Observation/Practice   | Identify strengths, provide concrete examples deconstruct experiences, challenge evidence, allow time to embed, guidance on child observation, identify way so support the development of children's dispositions, deconstruct interactions/planned experiences, reflect on the what? Why? how? of practice | Time in the service, within rooms, in group discussion, allow time for mentee to identify practice/changes/benefits, identifying actions, setting goals   |

| <b>Mentors Previous Experience</b> |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <b>No. Of Participants</b>         | <b>Experience</b>   |
| 7                                  | Practitioner in private childcare service                     |
| 3                                  | Manager/Owner private childcare service                       |
| 5                                  | Practitioner in community childcare service                   |
| 4                                  | Manager in community childcare service                        |
| 7                                  | Owner/Manager of childcare services                           |
| 3                                  | Family support worker   |
| 4                                  | Development worker in city/county childcare committee         |
| 4                                  | Advisory officer/specialist within national programs          |
| 2                                  | Mentoring role, nationally funded Early Years programs        |
| 5                                  | Tutor/Trainer in QQI level 5 & 6 in Early Childhood Education |
| 1                                  | Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies                           |



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