

To Investigate the Attitudes, Motivations, and
Barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC)
Professionals Towards Engaging in Regular
Continuous Professional Development (CPD)



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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Education Learning and Development, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other learners.

Signed: 

Dated: 14/07/2023

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Abstract

This research project investigates the attitudes, motivations, and barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards engaging in regular Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The study includes a literature review and data collected from a questionnaire and an online focus group. Results show that there is generally a positive attitude towards CPD amongst ELC Professionals. Managers and supervisors engage more in CPD than those who work directly with the children. Qualifications and experience impact CPD engagement. Barriers include lack of time, workload, financial constraints, and burnout. Supports include release from work, payment for CPD, and cost reimbursement. Overall, the research findings enhance understanding of attitudes, motivations, and barriers to CPD among ELC Professionals. Factors such as position, experience, and qualifications influence CPD engagement. Support and resources, autonomy in CPD choices, and a supportive community are important to ELC Professionals. The findings contribute to improving Professional practice and strengthening quality and Professionalism within the ELC sector.

Introduction

This research investigates the attitudes, motivations, and barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards continuous Professional Development (CPD). The study takes place after the introduction of increased CPD requirements for ELC Professionals as part of the Core Funding in late 2022 and before the imminent Development of a national programme of CPD under the Nurturing Skills Workforce Development plan by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). The goal is to highlight the common motivators and barriers ELC Professionals face in engaging in CPD and subsequently illicit what resources can be implemented to help ELC Professionals effectively engage in regular CPD.

The Irish Early Learning and Care sector has significantly transformed, particularly since the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in 2011. Before this, the Early Learning and Care sector was overseen by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA).

The OMCYA introduced the National Children's Strategy, which was implemented from 2000 to 2010, and aimed to improve the quality of life and status of all children in Ireland. The strategy led to the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) to "develop childcare services to enable parents to balance childcare needs with their working life or to engage in training, education or other opportunities" (OMCYA, 2007, p.84). The introduction of this programme led to the establishment of several early learning and care services throughout the country, with 40,000 childcare places created nationally (Hayes and Bradley, 2006).

Despite these Developments, the early learning and care sector faced challenges regarding staff qualifications. Until the introduction of the Free Preschool Year (ECCE Scheme) in 2010, there was no requirement for staff working in Early Learning and Care services to hold a formal qualification. This changed with the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, commonly known as the Free Preschool Year, which made a formal qualification mandatory for all Early Learning and Care staff. The free preschool year ECCE programme is a universal preschool programme for all children within an eligible age range. It is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year, and the programme year runs from September to June each year (DCEDIY, 2019). It aims to provide children with their first formal early learning experience before commencing primary school.

Since the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 amendment, all staff working directly with children in registered settings must hold a minimum level 5 childcare qualification. Additionally, financial incentives have been introduced since the ECCE scheme to encourage services to have graduate-led educators in place working directly with the children.

With the introduction of First 5, a 10-year whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children, and their families, in 2019, the Government has committed to "Improve access to high-quality initial training and CPD opportunities to ensure the staff involved in delivering early childhood supports and services are fully prepared for the demands of their Professional roles." (DCEDIY, 2018, p. 55). This is a significant Development, as previously, the only funded CPD initiatives available were BetterStart** and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI), established in 2016. BetterStart and the NSAI consist of a range of supports to services such as workshops and onsite mentoring sessions focused on the Síolta

and Aistear frameworks, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (an online resource for use by practitioners and others), and the Aistear and Play programme (BetterStart, 2023a)

These Developments reflect the Irish Government's commitment to improving the quality of the country's Early Learning and Care services. By ensuring all staff working in registered settings have the necessary qualifications and engaging in ongoing Professional Development, the Government hopes to provide high-quality early learning and care services that benefit children and their families.

Despite the Government's commitment to put qualification and CPD requirements in place and the documented benefits of engaging in CPD, participation remains voluntary and at the discretion of ELC services.

ELC Professionals work in demanding and underpaid jobs, making it challenging to find the time and motivation to engage in CPD (Cusack, 2017). Although research and literature highlight the advantages of regular CPD (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; OECD, 2021, Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021; OECD, 2018), little is known about what motivates ELC Professionals to engage in CPD and whether adequate support exists to help overcome participation barriers.

Moreover, there is limited research on whether ELC Professionals possess a positive attitude towards CPD and perceive it as an essential aspect of their role. This research aims to fill the gaps in the literature and provide insight into how ELC Professionals can be better supported to participate in CPD opportunities.

The following Research Aim, Objectives, and subsequent Research Questions guided the research.

Research AIM

To investigate the attitudes, motivations, and barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards engaging in regular, continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the attitudes of ELC Professionals towards CPD by exploring their perceptions of the value and relevance of CPD to their role
2. Identify the primary factors motivating ELC Professionals to engage in regular CPD.
3. Identify the most common barriers preventing ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Professionals towards Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and how do they perceive the value and relevance of CPD to their role?
2. What are the primary factors that motivate ELC Professionals to engage in CPD?
3. Are there any barriers to engaging in PCD, and what are the most common among ELC Professionals?
4. Do motivating factors and barriers differ among ELC Professionals with varying experience, qualifications, and positions within the service?

This research project will consist of a literature review and data collection through an online questionnaire and an online focus group with Early Learning and Care Professionals. The literature review will examine existing research on factors that motivate and prevent ELC Professionals from engaging in CPD and seek to understand the current attitude towards CPD

among ELC Professionals. The data collected from the online questionnaire and focus group were analysed to identify common themes and patterns and to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing ELC Professionals' participation in CPD. Finally, the research findings will be discussed considering the current policy context and recommendations for improving CPD provision for ELC Professionals in Ireland.

Literature Review

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a vital aspect of any profession, as it provides many benefits to Professionals in various fields. For Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals, CPD is even more crucial, as it directly impacts the quality of care and education they provide for young children (Peleman *et al.*, 2018; Slot, 2018). Some of the benefits of CPD are enhanced knowledge and skills, career development, networking, and personal growth (Mulvey, 2013). Additionally, CPD offers several benefits specifically for ELC Professionals, including improved outcomes for children, regulatory compliance, Professional recognition, and job satisfaction (McMillan *et al.*, 2016). This literature review explores CPD within the context of the Early Learning and Care sector in Ireland. Furthermore, it will seek to address the existing attitudes of ELC Professionals to CPD and what motivates and prevents ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Definition of CPD

"The formal in-service training undertaken that allows ECEC staff members to broaden, develop and update their knowledge, skills, and attitudes throughout their career. It includes both subject-based and pedagogical training. Different formats, such as courses, seminars, peer observation and support from practitioner networks, are offered. In certain cases, continuing Professional Development activities may lead to supplementary qualification" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p.144).

Professional Development in ELC Settings refers to several experiences that promote education, training, and Development opportunities for ELC Professionals. Professional Development applies to a full range of activities that try to increase the knowledge base, skill set, or attitudinal perspectives a staff member brings to their role (Sheridan *et al.*, 2009).

There are many different types of CPD. (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021) defines formal, non-formal CPD and Informal CPD in the context of ELC settings as follows:

"Formal CPD has clear learning objectives and is both organised and structured. It includes continuing education courses that result in a qualification" (p. 4)

"Non-formal CPD may or may not have clear learning objectives and has no formal certification. It includes engagement in short face-to-face or online training courses and workshops, attending webinars, conferences, and events, or being involved in a Professional body, Professional learning community or community of practice. Self-directed learning, such as reading journal articles, academic studies, or books, could also be classified as non-formal CPD" (p. 4).

"Informal CPD is neither structured nor organised and has no set learning objectives. It might be work-based, such as sharing ideas, shadowing a colleague, considering feedback from a parent, or reflecting on experiences at work with a colleague or manager. Watching a relevant video and informal networking would also come under informal CPD" (p. 5).

CPD in Ireland vs other countries: A comparison

In Ireland, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for ELC Professionals is at the individual's or their employer's discretion. There are no regulations, requirements, or recommendations for minimum participation (OECD, 2021).

The Department of Health and Children (DOHC) established a Preschool Inspectorate to oversee the implementation of the 1996 Preschool regulations (Hayes and Bradley, 2006). However, the regulations did not require staff working for ELC services to have a formal qualification. Even in 2023, The Child Care Act 1991 (ELC Services) Regulations 2016 (DHC, 1997 p.47) only makes it a regulatory requirement for services to have a Staff Training Policy, *'specifying the way the registered provider shall identify and address the training needs of employees and unpaid workers'* Article 7 of the 1996 Childcare Regulations only required enough competent adults to supervise the children in the service. There was no specification to hold a qualification; it was optional.

"A competent adult is a person who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare and is a suitable person to care for children" (DHC, 1997, p. 33)

The need for a formal qualification in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector came into place when the Free Preschool Year (Early Childcare Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme) was introduced in 2010. This qualification requirement was a landmark Development in the ELC sector. For the first time, it meant almost universal access to at least one year of Preschool Education for all children (Murphy, 2015). It also offered the sector a financial incentive for services to ensure staff had a minimum qualification (Murphy, 2015). To this day, for services to receive funding from the DCEDIY to offer the free preschool year, each room leader must hold a minimum level 6 childcare qualification or equivalent, and the room assistant must have a level 5 childcare qualification or equivalent.

"5.2 Recognition of Qualifications for ECCE"

DCEDIY also sets out the levels of approval on the approved list of qualifications and on Letters of Eligibility awarded to those who are successful in their applications.

- *Educator - meets regulatory requirements (applicant must have a minimum level 5 NFQ) Lead Educator - standard capitation (applicant must have a minimum Level 6 NFQ) (DCEDIY, 2022, p.19)."*

Revisions to the regulations which govern the ELC sector in 2016 introduced a minimum ELC qualification requirement for all staff working directly with children in registered ELC services (OECD, 2021). Since then, all ELC staff must hold a minimum level 5 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or its equivalent where the qualification is international (Tusla, 2018).

Since then, financial incentives have been introduced for services to have graduate-led educators in place. For services with an ECCE Room Leader with a level 7 qualification or above, were able to apply for "Higher Capitation", which rate was 24% higher than the Standard Capitation under ECCE Funding. Despite policy Developments and financial incentives to introduce mandatory qualifications, there has been little policy Development to introduce specific requirements for ELC staff to engage in regular CPD. However, the introduction of *First 5* in 2019, a ten-year whole-of-Government, whole-of-society strategy for babies, young children, and their families changed this. It includes the following strategic action:

"Improve access to high-quality initial training and CPD opportunities to ensure the staff involved in delivering early childhood supports and services are fully prepared for the demands of their Professional roles." (DCEDIY, 2018, p. 55)

Before this, the only CPD initiative from the Government came from the creation of BetterStart, a Quality Development Service, and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) in 2016. BetterStart and the NSAI consist of a range of supports to services such as workshops and onsite mentoring sessions focused on the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (an online resource for use by practitioners and others), and the Aistear and Play programme (BetterStart, 2023b). However, the engagement and participation of ELC services with BetterStart and the NSAI are entirely voluntary.

For staff and managers willing to engage in CPD, there is no consistent source, means, or financial contributions. Several Government-funded and private organisations provide various CPD opportunities, from short, prescribed courses to conferences, webinars, and workshops (OECD, 2021). The only financial contribution to CPD from the Government was if staff from an ELC service participated in the following programmes through BetterStart; Hanen, Lámh, and the Aistear and Play CPD Programme (OECD, 2021; BetterStart, 2023b). This initiative was disbanded soon after it was initiated as feedback from ELC Professionals and Pobal, the funding administrator on behalf of the DCEDIY, reported it was administratively demanding and posed a threat to participation in other, non-funded CPD activities (DECDIY, 2021).

This is similar to New Zealand, where a constant sporadic focus on CPD for ELC Professionals shifts between the Government determining the CPD focus based on recent policy agenda to targeting specific communities for initiatives, excluding those outside the community (Cherrington and Thornton, 2013). In recent years, CPD in New Zealand has not been given mandatory status but remains voluntary. Under their existing regulations, updated in 2022, employers only need to show the provisions for Professional Development under HR documentation (Ministry of Education, 2022). From a European perspective, the only

countries engaging in CPD as a mandatory requirement for all staff working in ELC settings are Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, Scotland, and Serbia (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). The amount of CPD required in each country varies widely, e.g., in Slovenia, all staff must undertake CPD over three years. Compared to Scotland, there is a requirement to undertake 60 hours per year. This is similar to Serbia, where 64 hours of CPD per year is required (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). In Luxembourg and Romania, the requirement to undertake CPD varies depending on the age group the lead or core educator is working with.

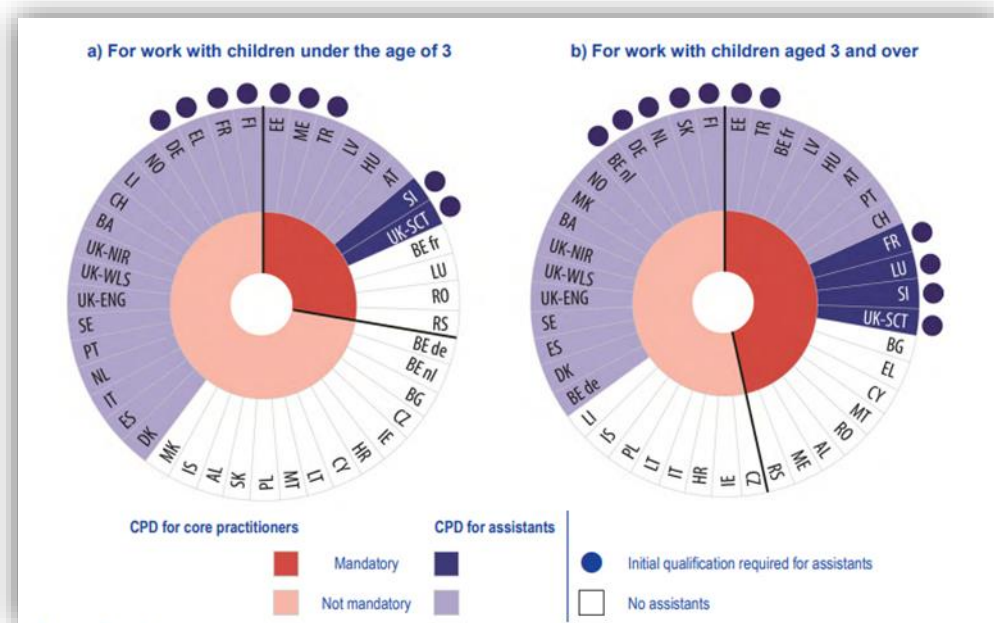


Figure 1: Mandatory CPD for all staff and Core Staff (European/Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, P. 15)

The Importance of CPD in influencing Government Policies

Establishing initial qualification requirements for staff working with children is the first step toward ensuring a well-qualified workforce. However, Continuing Professional Development

(CPD) is also essential because it allows employees to improve and extend their knowledge and develop new skills throughout their careers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, OECD, 2021). "*Continuing Professional Development is an essential element of effective work practices*" (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021, p.7). Research shows for staff to maintain their Professional quality, they need to engage in ongoing Professional Development. A well-trained practitioner not only has a good initial level of education but ensures that the effects of initial education do not fade out (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003).

In 2006 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published Síolta, National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. It is a framework that supports services to "*define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings where children aged birth to six years are present*" (DES, 2007). Standard eleven of the Framework guides ELC services to actively reflect on the Professional Development practices of the services. This is a recognition of how CPD can "*contribute positively to the Development of quality practices in the setting*" (Síolta Standard 11 (DES, 2007 p. 80)

Furthermore, research shows participation in regular, well-designed CPD amongst ELC Professionals is the most reliable indicator of effective staff-child interaction. It is also related to how well children learn and develop. (OECD, 2018, OECD, 2021). Similarly, it is shown that engaging in regular quality CPD can enhance staff's abilities "*to create close, warm and responsive relationships with children, to manage behaviour, and to stimulate children's reasoning and language Development*" (OECD, 2021, p.55).

Research by (Peleman et al., 2018) found that engagement in CPD increased ELC Professionals' competence and confidence and demonstrated deeper reflective practice. Additionally, the ELC Professionals demonstrated a shift in thinking about how children learn

and interpret their experiences, a new perspective on parents, and improved planning and evaluation (Peleman *et al.*, 2018).

Equally, it has been shown regular CPD participation can improve employees' Professional Identity, Development, and well-being, reduce the negative impacts of stress and burnout, and boost employee satisfaction, commitment, and retention. (OECD, 2021).

Additionally, regular CPD is an even stronger predictor of quality than "*staff pre-service qualifications*" (OECD, 2018, p.81). A study by Honig and Hiralal (1998, p.21) showed "training in early childhood education and child development was revealed as crucially implicated in ensuring more positive interactions of teachers with pre-schoolers". It is also believed ongoing CPD, which can include in-service (on-the-job) training, maybe just as crucial to boosting educator competency as initial pre-service qualifications (Moloney *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it has essential benefits for the children, the services, the ELC Professionals, and the parents (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021). As a result, CPD amongst ELC Professionals has become prominent in Government policy in recent years.

The Government's commitment to CPD amongst ELC Professionals is part of their overall goal to improve the lives of children by Professionalising the people who work with them and to improve the quality of the environment where they spend their time (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021).

In 2022, the current Minister for the DCEDIY introduced a Core Funding Model for the ELC sector. Within the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement, "*The Partner Service agrees to develop and implement a quality action plan*" (DCEDIY, 2022, p. 7). This requires all contract services to receive financial support under Core Funding to agree to and report on a quality action plan. Two agreeable actions under the Core Funding Quality Action Plan require ELC Professionals to engage in CPD.

Additionally, to support the implementation of the First 5 strategy, in 2021, the Government launched "Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028. The Government has committed to "Developing a National IT CPD system" within this plan (DECDIY, 2021, p. 70). The rationale for implementing this system is the Government's recognition of the amount of CPD ELC Professionals already engaged but with varied quality assurance systems and no place to 'track' participation in CPD (DECDIY, 2021). The state has also recognised ELC Professionals and their employers' difficulties in allowing time for engagement in CPD. Finally, there is a recognition that alternative CPD pathways can be achieved and utilised, such as online/Blended CPD considering learning changes during Covid-19 and in-service training and mentoring programmes (DECDIY, 2021).

The system to be developed included the following elements:

- *The Development of a portal to enable a single pathway for access to quality-assured CPD (both online and face-to-face)*
- *A National IT system for tracking and monitoring CPD activities.*
- *Review of Síolta and the Development of a suite of resources and training programmes*
- *Strengthening Quality Assurance Mechanisms for CPD.*
- *Developing links with the national structure of CPD for Primary School Teachers.*

(DCEDIY, 2021)

The 2022 Core Funding initiative has provided financial incentives to encourage ELC Professionals to engage in CPD. In addition, the Nurturing Skills Workforce Development Plan has introduced a new funding stream to support services in releasing staff during working hours (DECDIY, 2021).

Attitude, Motivation and Barriers

Attitude

The current attitude of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards engaging in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is not well documented in the literature. However, there are some indications that many ELC Professionals recognise the importance of CPD for their Professional Development and the quality of care they provide to young children.

For example, an online survey conducted by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2016 found ELC Professionals highlighted their reasons for engaging in CPD opportunities to improve their skills to benefit the children. A few per cent indicated they engaged in CPD to further their career (15%) or personal Development (9%). Additionally, over two-thirds of respondents (70%) indicated they had received on-the-job training or CPD within the last two years.

Motivation

"Motivation is a condition inside us that desires a change—a change in the self or a change in the environment" (Reeve, 2014, p.2). Motivation consists of the internal and external factors that stimulate the desire to attain a goal or take action (Ersanhi , 2015). (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021, p.14). Motivation can affect action in three ways: direction (choice), intensity (effort), and duration (persistence) (Locke and Latham, 2004) External factors or being motivated by something external is known as extrinsic motivation. The most notable examples include rewards, sanctions, and social support (Akdemir, 2020). When there is an intrinsic drive, internal factors determine how people act. What a person

needs or wants drives intrinsic motivation. Resources, curiosity, talent, and interest are among the most crucial. A person's attitudes and ideals also influence intrinsic motivation.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that individuals who feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others are more likely to engage in activities to enhance personal growth and Development (Ryan and Deci, 2022). Self-determination theory can be linked to the motivating factors that enable ELC Professionals to engage in regular CPD outlined below.

Firstly, SDT highlights the importance of *competence* for motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). When ELC Professionals feel competent in their roles, they are more likely to be motivated to enhance their knowledge and skills through CPD (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021). By participating in Professional Development opportunities, they can gain new skills and knowledge to help them feel more competent in their work. Secondly, *autonomy* is important for motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). ELC Professionals who have some control over their CPD choices (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021), such as selecting the topics they want to learn about or choosing the training format, are more likely to feel motivated to engage in CPD. Finally, SDT highlights the importance of *feeling connected* to others for motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). When ELC Professionals have a sense of community and feel supported in their CPD efforts (Barnardos and National Childhood Network, 2021), they are more likely to continue engaging in Professional Development activities.

Factors that may influence motivation.

Motivating staff to engage in the continuous learning and Development of their practice and ensuring they have access to opportunities are important considerations for any Professional Development system (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2019). In Ireland, the strong policy focus on upskilling and training the existing workforce means staff must have the incentives, resources, and opportunities to continue developing their skills (OECD, 2021, p.58). This research project aims to determine if ELC Professionals have the support to engage in CPD effectively.

The recent policy advancements from the Government emphasises their dedication to assisting ELC Professionals in participating in CPD. However, this research project seeks to examine whether the ELC Professionals themselves mirror this commitment and if there is sufficient enthusiasm or encouragement for these individuals to pursue CPD actively. The OECD TALIS report and additional research into motivation to engage in regular CPD indicate several other factors that will affect participation in regular CPD, highlighted below.

Qualification Level

Research shows higher qualification-level staff are more likely to engage in CPD (Mathieu *et al.*, 1992; OECD, 2019). Linder *et al.* (2016) maintain those with higher education levels have more of a desire to participate in extended Professional Development opportunities or CPD. Interestingly, research by Burchinal *et al.* (2002) showed ELC Professionals who do not have a degree but who attend relevant Professional workshops are found to provide higher quality care than colleagues who do not attend (OECD, 2018). As a result, this research project will explore whether higher qualified staff engage in more CPD opportunities and whom they consider responsible for providing CPD opportunities, themselves, their employer, or the Government.

Experience

Hildebrandt and Eom (2011) found inexperienced teachers had higher needs for achievement and growth than experienced teachers. To pursue greater achievements, inexperienced teachers were more motivated to participate in PD programmes (Zhang *et al.*, 2021).

However, a 2018 OECD survey on the experiences of new teachers found "*new teachers were less likely than more experienced teachers to have undertaken Professional Development in the 18 months before the TALIS survey*" (p. 50). In contrast, a study by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2004) found ELC Professionals who had lower qualifications and less experience were less likely to engage in CPD compared to those who had higher qualifications and more experience. As a result, this research will consider whether the experience level impacts participation in regular CPD.

Position within the service

Research has shown mixed results on whether ELC managers engage more in CPD than their staff. Some studies found ELC managers have higher rates of engagement in CPD than their staff (Sosu and Ellis, 2014), while others found no significant difference between the two groups (Nooruddin, S. and Bhamani, S., 2019). However, it is important to note the factors influencing engagement in CPD may differ between managers and staff. For example, managers may be more motivated by the potential benefits for their organisation and career advancement, while staff may be more motivated by personal and Professional growth opportunities (Sosu and Ellis, 2014). This research will look at this as a variable in the data collection to determine whether managers of the ELC services or the staff within it engage more in regular CPD opportunities.

Support from Management

Research shows Professionals felt more motivated to develop professionally when they were supported by their management (Bury *et al.*, 2020). They defined supportive management as management that gives Professionals time off by providing cover to allow staff to complete CPD on working days and not imposing negative consequences, such as not paying them on their training day (Bury *et al.*, 2020).

Similarly, it was discovered in the case of primary school teachers (Zhang, *et al.*, 2021) that principal leadership was crucial in motivating teachers to engage in Professional Development. Defining a school's vision for teaching and learning, which also improves teachers' attitudes toward their learning, principles, and management, can boost teachers' dedication to their schools and the teaching profession. Teachers may be more inclined to internalise organisational goals as their own objectives, which could boost their self-motivation to participate in Professional learning activities. (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Finally, this research will explore what types of support are in place from employers to engage in CPD and whether those who receive high levels of support from their employer engage in more CPD opportunities.

Barriers

Various studies have illuminated the challenges Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals face in regularly participating in Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The DES 2016 survey revealed barriers such as time constraints, cost implications, and inadequate support from employers, with 17% of participants feeling unsupported by their workplace. Similarly, evaluations of ECE Professional Development identified similar obstacles, including financial constraints, heavy workloads, difficulties in finding qualified relievers, limited involvement of

the entire teaching team, and inconvenient scheduling of CPD opportunities (Cherrington and Wansbrough, 2007).

ELC Professionals frequently cite multiple reasons for their limited engagement in regular CPD. These include a lack of time, financial constraints, limited availability of suitable CPD options, and inadequate employer support (Fairchild, 2012; Durchevska-Georgieva, 2020). Moreover, ELC Professionals express being overwhelmed by the vast amount of information and the pressure to stay updated with new Developments (Durchevska-Georgieva, 2020).

Research conducted by Siraj-Blatchford, *et al.*, (2002) identified workload pressures as a significant barrier to CPD engagement. Teachers reported difficulties finding time for Professional Development amidst their demanding responsibilities, consequently limiting their participation.

The lack of accreditation and CPD during personal unpaid time poses additional challenges for ELC Professionals. This situation is particularly problematic given their historically meagre wages (Fairchild, 2012). Moreover, scheduling CPD sessions in the evenings presents difficulties for many Professionals, requiring them to arrange childcare or incur travel costs they cannot afford (Durchevska-Georgieva, 2020). Additionally, the need to hold down a second job in the evenings and weekends further restricts their ability to attend CPD sessions (Durchevska-Georgieva, 2020).

The combination of unaccredited CPD, unpaid personal time commitments, and financial constraints creates an unjust situation for dedicated ELC Professionals. Recognising the demanding nature of their responsibilities and the potential benefits of CPD for their Professional growth, it is crucial to address these barriers and ensure equitable access to quality CPD opportunities that cater to their needs and circumstances (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

Conclusion

This literature review has explored the concept of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) within the context of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector in Ireland. CPD is crucial for ELC Professionals as it enhances their knowledge and skills, contributes to career Development, and has various benefits for Professionals and the children they care for. While CPD is not currently mandatory in Ireland, recent policy Developments, such as the introduction of the Free Preschool Year and the First 5 strategy, have emphasised the importance of CPD in the sector.

The review has highlighted CPD can improve the quality of interactions between staff and children, enhance Professional identity and well-being, and lead to positive outcomes for children's learning and Development. It has also identified the need for ongoing CPD to complement initial qualifications and ensure the effects of education do not fade over time. Comparisons with other countries has shown Ireland does not currently have regulations or requirements for minimum CPD participation, unlike countries such as Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, Scotland, and Serbia. However, the Irish Government has taken steps to promote CPD through initiatives like BetterStart and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative, although participation in these programs remains voluntary. Financial incentives have been introduced for services with graduate-led educators, but there has been limited policy Development to enforce regular CPD participation.

The review also discussed the influence of CPD on government policies and the recognition that ongoing Professional Development is crucial for improving the quality of ELC services. The Government's commitment to CPD is evident in the Core Funding Model and the Nurturing Skills workforce plan, which emphasise the importance of CPD and aim to support its implementation.

The next chapter will outline the research approach and methods used to explore the attitudes of ELC Professionals towards CPD, as well as the factors that motivate and hinder their engagement in regular CPD. We can better understand how to promote and support CPD engagement among ELC Professionals in Ireland by gaining insights into these factors.

Methodology

The methodology chapter is critical to any research study as it outlines the methods used to gather and analyse data (Dawson, 2019). This study adopts a pragmatism research paradigm that acknowledges the value of both quantitative and qualitative methods in understanding difficult research questions. A mixed methods approach was employed, utilising both online questionnaires and an online focus group to collect data, offering various benefits such as cost-effectiveness and convenience. The research project considers reliability and insider research considerations, ensuring the data collected is accurate and represents the perspectives and facts of the ELC Professionals, not the researcher's assumptions. Ethical considerations were paramount, with all necessary ethical standards and policies adhered to, to protect the rights and welfare of the ELC Professionals engaging in the research. The quantitative and qualitative data analysis includes descriptive and thematic analysis resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the factors that prevent and motivate ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.

Research Paradigms

Before the research could begin, the appropriate research paradigm was considered because it provided a structure and framework for conducting research that is systematic, rigorous, and coherent and enhances the credibility, validity, and relevance of the research findings. (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). A research paradigm is defined as a "*world view*" (Creswell, 2014) or a '*set of philosophical assumptions about the phenomena to be studied, about how they can be understood, and even about the proper purpose and product of research*' (Hammersley, 2012, p.2). There are three main research paradigms which include positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism. Each paradigm will have its own view on the "reality of being" (*ontology*), its

own belief about knowledge and "how we know what we know" (*epistemology*), the philosophical basis for guiding research (*methodology*) and how to gather the information (*methods*) (Rehmen and Alharthi, 2016).

Positivism is a research approach that suggests knowledge is objective and can be gained through observation and experiments (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021). It involves value-free research and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). In contrast, interpretivists believe natural science methodologies are unsuitable for studying people because people's actions have meanings, beliefs, and motivations (Williams, 2007). They use qualitative methods and seek to explore, describe, and understand reality as experienced by respondents (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021). Finally, pragmatism philosophy combines the key principles of positivism and interpretivism and serves as the foundation for mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014: Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021). The three paradigms could be broadly summarised as a view of the world that is objective, subjective, or flexible.

The pragmatism philosophy guided this research project because the researcher wanted to explore the attitude, experiences, and motivations of a particular cohort of people, i.e. Early learning and care (ELC) Professionals, but at the same time seek to gather objective data or data that can be measured, relating to the same cohort of people, i.e., Age of the person, level of qualifications.

Methodological approach

The chosen research paradigm will also influence the methodological approach to the research. The methodology or methodological approach is an essential component of any research project. (Dawson, 2019, p.14) defines research methodology as the '*philosophy or the general principle guiding the research*'.

The methodology used for this research project involved a mixed-method approach, which combined both online questionnaires via Microsoft Forms[®] and a focus group via an online platform called Zoom[®].

A mixed-method approach provides a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the research questions as it allows for both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analysed (Dawadi *et al.*, 2021, Creswell, 2014). Using questionnaires, the researcher was able to gather numerical data from a larger sample size (Young, 2015), i.e., a sample of the population of the 26,197 ELC Professionals who work in Ireland (Pobal, 2022). A Focus group allowed for more in-depth insights into the ELC Professional's experiences and perspectives on what motivates and prevents them from engaging in regular CPD (O. Nyumba *et al.*, 2018).

As suggested by Creswell, 2014 this research project began with a broad online questionnaire to "generalise results to a population" (Creswell, 2014, p.48), i.e. ELC Professionals and then, in a second phase, focused on qualitative, open-ended questions, via an online focus group, asked to a selection of ELC "to collect detailed views ... to help explain the initial quantitative survey" (Creswell, 2014, p. 48). This approach is known as a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Bowen *et al.*, 2017). The first phase involved collecting and analysing quantitative and partial qualitative data via the online questionnaire to explore the relationships between ELC Professionals' perceptions, experience, and engagement in regular CPD. The second phase involved collecting and analysing qualitative data via the online focus group to provide a deeper understanding (Bowen *et al.*, 2017) of the factors that motivate and prevent ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.

Online questionnaires

Using online questionnaires in this research project allowed the researcher to gather valuable data from many ELC Professionals efficiently. This method offers a cost-effective approach, allowing the researcher to collect standardised information, which promotes consistency and comparability among the respondents (Kabir, 2016).

Questionnaires accommodate various question types, such as multiple-choice, Likert scales, and open-ended responses, enabling researchers to capture diverse insights into the investigated topic (Rowley, 2014). The online questionnaire required various questions based on the areas to be explored within this research project. However, according to (Rowley, 2014), it was important to incorporate only a few question types. Therefore, the questionnaire was limited to three types: Likert Scale (to gauge the reason why ELC Professionals engaged in CPD in the past year), Multiple Choice (e.g., to determine the types of CPD they are most likely to engage in), and finally, single choice (e.g., to collect measurable data such as age and level of qualification). Only two open-ended questions were asked to determine what ELC Professionals think CPD is and why they believe CPD should be mandatory or voluntary.

The anonymity of questionnaires encourages more honest and open responses, reducing potential bias in the gathered data (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021).

While the research does not indicate an optimum length for a questionnaire, as it solely depends on the nature of the research topic and the type of data analysis to be conducted (Rowley, 2014), what is important to consider is to ensure the questions are *"logically sequenced, e.g., group together all questions that relate to similar areas"* (Burgess, 2001, p.7). As a result, the questionnaire for this research project was split into three sections. The first section gathered information about the participants, such as age, years of experience, and

qualification level. The second section sought their perspective on CPD, the types of CPD they engaged in in the past year and the motivating factors for engaging in CPD; the final section sought to gather the inhibiting factors for engaging in CPD.

Online focus group

The researcher considered interviews as a data collection tool. Interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, experiences, and attitudes and can provide rich and detailed data (Roberts, 2020). However, considering interviews can be time-consuming and resource-intensive (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021), the researcher opted to undertake an online focus group as the qualitative method for gathering additional data.

A Focus group serves as a crucial research method in gathering varied perspectives, opinions, and insights (Creswell, 2014) from ELC Professionals on their attitudes to CPD and what motivates them to engage in regular, continuous Professional Development, also gauging their perspectives on the data collected from the online questionnaire.

By engaging several ELC Professionals with different qualifications and experience, and from various ELC settings, in facilitated discussions, researchers can better understand different viewpoints and identify potential gaps in understanding (Gibbs, 1997).

In addition, a focus group facilitates the analysis of group dynamics and social interactions (Gibbs, 1997). Kitzinger (1995, p.301) clarifies that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question, like in an interview, "*people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view*". This collaborative approach fosters the emergence of new ideas through dialogue. It enables a deeper exploration (Gibbs, 1997) of the factors that motivate ELC Professionals to engage in regular, continuous Professional Development and, at

the same time, discuss in depth what prevents them from engaging in continuous Professional Development.

Thus, using an online focus group in this research project significantly contributed to capturing a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the factors that motivate and prevent ELC Professionals from regularly engaging in continuous Professional Development.

Conducting a focus group after a questionnaire can offer several benefits that can help to enhance the quality and depth of the research (Crewsell, 2014). The main reason the researcher conducted a focus group after the online questionnaire was to verify and validate the questionnaire data, as suggested by Gibbs, (1997). The goal was to see if the ELC Professionals within the focus group can confirm or challenge the findings from the questionnaire. This is a significant step in enhancing the credibility and reliability of the research project (Gibbs, 1997). Additionally, a focus group allowed participants to elaborate on their responses to the questionnaire. This can help clarify any ambiguities or misunderstandings arising from the questionnaire and provide a deeper understanding of the participants' views and experiences (Powell and Single, 1996). Furthermore, they can be used to generate new ideas and insights that may not have been captured by the questionnaire (Gibbs, 1997), as well as being able to explore these new ideas in greater depth (Powell and Single, 1996). Finally, a focus group can help to identify common themes and patterns that may have emerged from the questionnaire data, which can help to enhance and enrich the findings (Bowen *et al.*, 2017).

Benefits of an Online Approach

Conducting research online has become increasingly popular over the years due to its many benefits. Firstly, it is cost-effective as it eliminates the need for paper-based surveys, focus

group sessions, or face-to-face interviews, which can be time-consuming and expensive (Bowen *et al.*, 2017). Online research also allows for greater flexibility in terms of timing and location, as respondents can participate from anywhere in the world at a convenient time (Granello and Wheaton, 2004). This was particularly useful in this research project, as ELC Professionals work very long hours, and it can be difficult for them to engage in activities after working hours. Having the online focus group available in the evenings, online, allowed for a more diverse group to participate.

Additionally, online research allows for faster data collection and analysis, as data can be easily gathered and stored in digital format (Granello and Wheaton, 2004). Finally, online research, especially online questionnaires, provides greater anonymity to respondents, which can increase the willingness of participants to disclose sensitive information or opinions, leading to more honest and reliable data (Huang, 2006). Again, this was useful for this research project as the researcher was looking for honest answers to the questions from ELC Professionals about the factors that support them to engage in CPD and the things that prevent them. Some of these responses involve disclosing whether they have support from their employer or management. Finally, conducting research online offers greater opportunities for interactivity, such as surveys with skip-logic, real-time feedback, and dynamic question sets. It could lead to higher response rates and better data quality since respondents can get a more engaging and simplified experience (Granello and Wheaton, 2004)

The Target Group

The selection criteria to participate in this study focused on ELC Professionals. In inviting ELC Professionals via social media, the goal is to ensure a range of ELC Professionals participating

with various positions, ages, experience, and qualifications. These factors corroborate the additional research questions presented in the literature review on whether position within the service, experience, and age affect motivation to engage in regular CPD and whether having a higher qualification leads to higher motivation levels to engage in CPD.

Recruiting the ELC Professionals, who work directly with children and their managers, to engage in this research project has several benefits. Firstly, these Professionals are at the forefront of delivering quality early childhood education (Essa and Burnham, 2019), and their experiences and perspectives can provide valuable insights into what motivates them to engage in CPD (Brock, 2013). By involving them in research, we can better understand their learning needs and preferences and design more effective CPD programs tailored to their specific requirements (Brock, 2013). Finally, involving full-time Professionals in research about what motivates them to engage in regular CPD may also help to facilitate policy Development and amendments being considered by the DCEDIY, most notably the imminent introduction of a "National Programme for CPD" (DCEDIY, 2021). The researcher intends to disseminate the research findings to government officials to support evidence-based practice in the Early Learning and Care field.

Reliability and Insider Research

The researcher currently works in an organisation that gives support and advice to those working in the field of Early Learning and Care and has experience working in ELC services prior to the commencement of this research project which was undertaken as part of a master's in education, Learning and Development. Therefore, the researcher could be considered an "insider researcher" (Griffith, 1998, p. 361). This means the researcher's previous underlying knowledge and previously held assumptions of CPD amongst ELC

Professionals informed the rationale for the research project (Teusner, 2016). There are significant advantages to research led by an insider researcher (Coughlan and Shani, 2015). The researcher is somewhat familiar with the phenomenon under investigation, i.e., CPD amongst ELC Professionals and the participants. Potential ethical considerations in the form of bias and subjectivity of Insider Research will be discussed below.

Ethical considerations

This research project was guided by Griffith College's Standards and Policy on Research Ethics under the supervision of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The policy and ethical standards include "*informed consent, the right to withdraw from research, data protection, and respect for human rights and equality as well as sensitivity to issues arising from inequalities of power*" (Griffith College, 2014).

As a result, a Participant Information Sheet, and a Participant consent form, free of jargon and using plain language English, were developed. The information sheet contains information about the research's objective and details the participants' expectations if they choose to participate in the research. The consent form allows participants to opt in to participate in the research project. At all steps in the process, participants can opt out of the research. This was communicated both in the participant Information sheet and the consent form.

The information sheet was sent with the invitation to ELC Professionals being selected to participate in the online focus group. A copy of a signed consent form was required in advance of the online focus group meeting. This was requested via email. A consent form was not required to complete the online questionnaire; however, a confidentiality and anonymity statement is included in the introduction. The Participant Information Sheet was included with

the link inviting ELC participants to complete the online questionnaire. The Participant Information sheet was also available to download from the social media link.

Another ethical issue the researcher needs to consider is the potential that the ELC Professionals may find the research topic sensitive and may cause distress or discomfort. Currently, participation in regular CPD is optional, and advising the participants there may be an increase in expectations due to the introduction of Core Funding may be upsetting for participants. They work very demanding jobs, and engaging in CPD after their working day can be difficult. To alleviate this, the researcher advised participants this research will seek to inform government policymakers precisely what needs to be in place for ELC Professionals to ensure they can meaningfully participate in CPD.

In addition, some of the ELC Professionals participating may need help to give informed consent due to English not being their first language. According to Pobal the Annual Sector Profile 2020-2021, 7.1% of staff who work directly with children obtained their qualifications outside of Ireland (Pobal, 2022). If we assume that 7.1% are non-Irish nationals, we further assume these Early Years Professionals First language is not English. As a result, the ELC Professionals participating may not have English as their first language. To ensure these participants understood the research goals and could give informed consent, the researcher tested the information sheet and the research questions with other people for whom English is not their first language and who were not engaging in the research.

Finally, to mitigate the potential for bias, two specific strategies were used as suggested by (Greene, 2014). First, reflexivity was deployed before the data-gathering process to ensure the researcher identified and acknowledged their biases and position within the chosen topic. Designing the questionnaire and the semi-structured questions for the focus group was solely

based on the findings from the literature, not on the researcher's assumptions. Secondly, the researchers used multiple data sources in the form of both an online questionnaire and an online focus group to validate findings using a triangulation process. "Triangulation involves seeing data and theories from more than one perspective to increase the validity of findings" (Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 260). Given the basic principles of geometry, multiple viewpoints allow for greater accuracy (Jick, 1979, p.602)

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

Throughout this research project, the researcher is committed to ensuring GDPR compliance. Firstly, to protect any individual's privacy, no personal data was collected during the collection of data via the online questionnaire. In relation to data storage, all data collected was stored in a computer system with strict security measures, i.e., password protection. While Microsoft Forms is a cloud-based program, access is only granted by strict password and 2-step verification, ensuring strict confidentiality of data. The privacy of individuals during the focus group was guaranteed by allocating a screen name upon entry, i.e., participant 1 etc. This also allowed the researcher to identify participants in the transcription and data analysis.

Secondly, participation in the research was entirely optional, i.e., the participant had to opt in by clicking on a questionnaire line. For those participating in the focus group, informed consent was sought, and the purpose of the research was clearly explained. While it was included in an information sheet, a reminder was issued at the beginning of the focus group about data collection, processing, storage, and eventual deletion. Finally, all participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any point.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an essential part of any research process. Analysing the data collected from an online questionnaire and an online focus group involves several steps as recommended by (Creswell, 2014; Whitaker and Fitzpatrick, 2021; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004)

Transcribe the data: The data from the responses to the online questionnaire and the online focus group was converted into a text format. As the questionnaire was housed on the Google Forms platform, the data was automatically transferred into Google Sheets. The online focus group was recorded, and a manual transcription took place using the "Dictate" function in Microsoft Word.

Code the data: A coding system was developed based on the themes identified in the Literature Review, including motivating factors, inhibiting factors, and interpretation of the definition of CPD. A coding scheme was created manually, and a list of codes and definitions was used to classify the data. The same coding system was applied to the qualitative data of the questionnaires and the focus group responses. Quantitative data was separated and positioned within the context of the research questions.

Categorise the data: The qualitative data from both the online questionnaire and the focus group was grouped into categories – attitude, motivating factor, and barrier, based on the list of codes. The qualitative data was also further grouped to determine whether a response was negative, neutral, or positive. This grouping allowed for a sentiment analysis to be conducted. According to Mejova (2009), Sentiment analysis allows the researcher to address what a person thinks about a particular topic. In the context of this research, it was used to determine how ELC Professionals feel about engaging in CPD.

Interpret the data: The categorised data was then analysed to identify key themes, trends, patterns, relationships, and connections that emerged from the data. A cross-analysis of the data was used to determine the other key factors as identified in the literature, e.g., does experience affect motivations levels, i.e. do those with more than 10 years' experience engage in more CPD than those with less than 10 years' experience and does having a higher initial qualification mean you were more or less motivated to learn, i.e. sample comparative do those with level 8 or 9 qualifications engage more in CPD than those with a level 5 or 6 qualifications.

Validate the data: The validity of the data from the online questionnaire was evaluated with the participants during the online focus group. Statistics from the data were shared, and information to contextualise the response was sought, e.g., asking the focus group participants whether they thought the positive attitude of the questionnaire respondent was reflective of all ELC Professionals. This was to ensure the data collected accurately in both the questionnaire and the focus group reflected both the perspectives and experiences of ELC Professionals as a cohort.

Report the findings: The findings are presented in the next chapter clearly and concisely, using quotes, examples, and visual aids to illustrate the key themes and trends. The finding and conclusions from the data are directly linked to the research objectives and questions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this methodology chapter of this research project has given an overview of how a mixed methods approach was employed to meet the research objectives. The approach combined a questionnaire and an online focus group to gather and analyse data on the attitudes, motivational factors, and barriers of ELC Professionals in engaging in regular CPD.

Adopting a pragmatism research paradigm allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the research questions, considering both quantitative and qualitative methods. Ethical considerations were prioritised, ensuring the participant's rights and well-being protection throughout the research project. The online approach offered many benefits, such as reduced cost, increased flexibility, and increased anonymity, while promoting interactivity and engagement through multiple recruitment means. Overall, this methodology chapter laid a solid foundation for the subsequent chapter on findings, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the data that highlights the factors influencing ELC Professionals' engagement in regular CPD.

Findings

Introduction

This chapter on findings presents a detailed analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire and the online focus group. It will provide information on what the overall attitude is towards CPD. It also presents data on the primary motivating factors and barriers ELC Professionals face engaging in regular CPD. It will present the quantitative findings from the online questionnaire, giving insight into the respondent's position within the services, experience, age, qualification level and engagement in CPD in the past year. It will also delve into the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire and the online focus group, offering a deeper understanding of the factors influencing ELC Professionals' CPD engagement. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, the findings chapter will provide a comprehensive picture of the ELC Professionals' attitude to ELC and the factors that prevent and motivate ELC Professionals in pursuing CPD.

Section 1: Background information

Question 1: Job Title

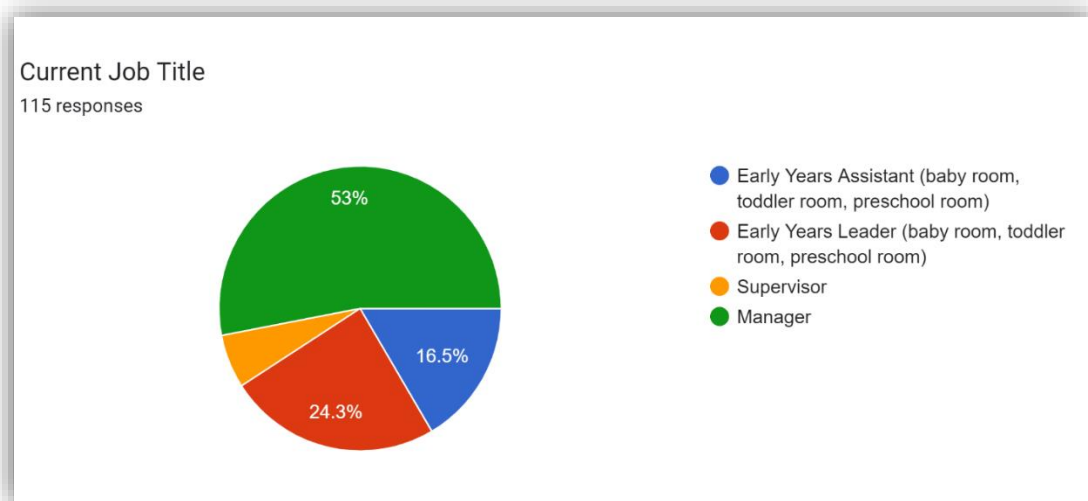


Figure 2: Job Title

More than half of the respondents were in a management role within the service. The other largest percentage of respondents were staff working directly with children. This data allowed for analysing whether managers or staff engage more in CPD opportunities. It is worth noting there was a 36.5% difference between the respondents who were either a manager or a supervisor compared to the respondents who were Early Years Leaders or Assistants.

Question 2: Weekly working hours

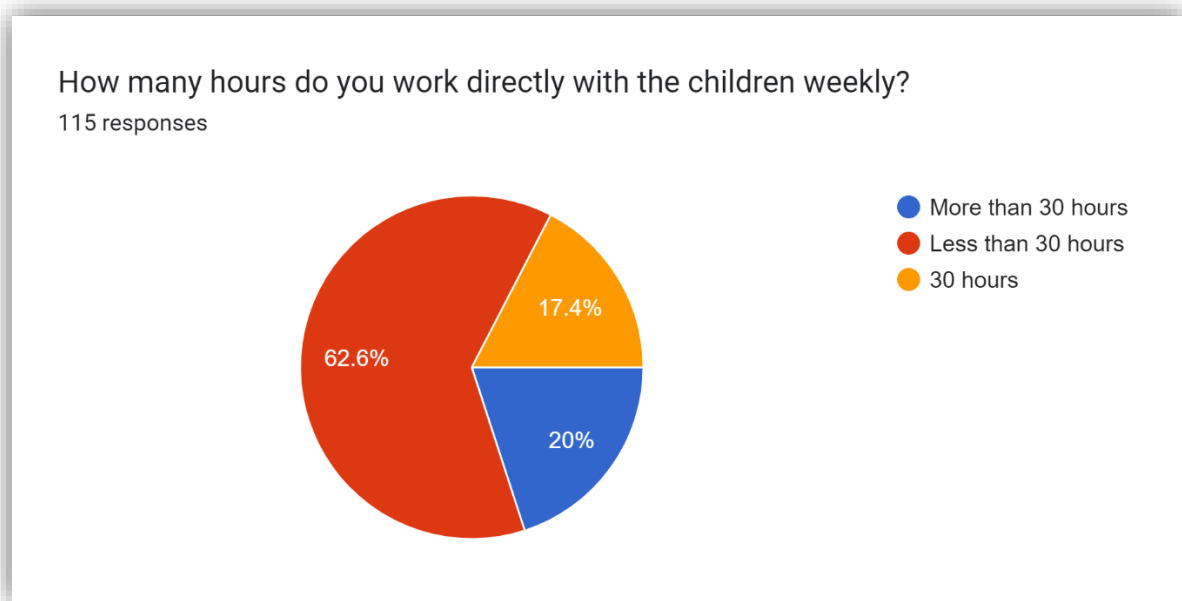


Figure 3: Weekly Working Hours

The majority of respondents worked either 30 or less hours a week. Only 20% of respondents worked more than 30 hours per week. This data will generate insight into whether the current respondents struggle with engaging in CPD due to time constraints considering the majority work part-time hours.

Question 3: Experience

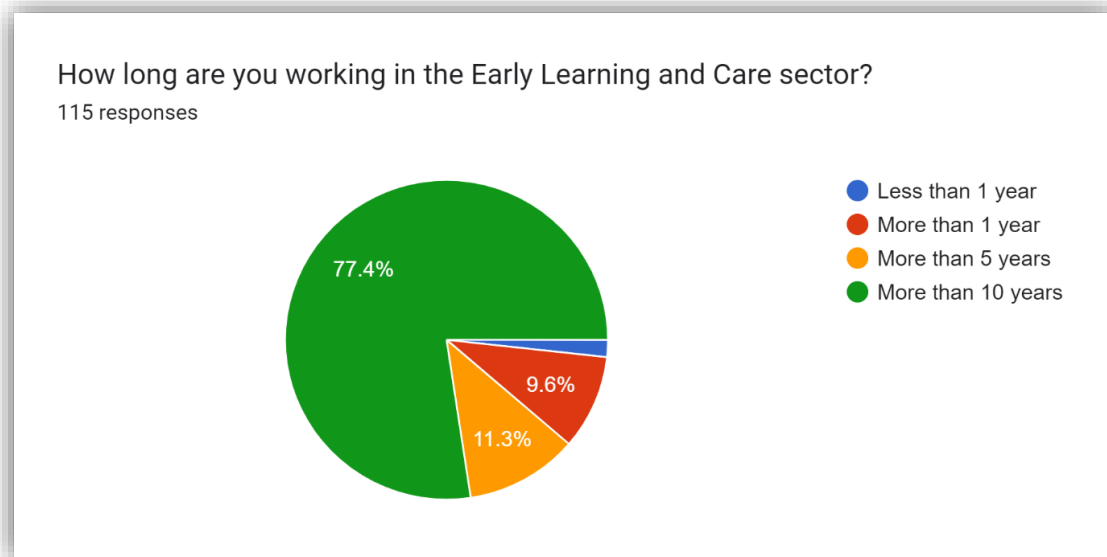


Figure 4: Experience

Most respondents have worked in the sector for more than 10 years, and a significantly less proportion are working for less than one year (1.7%). The difference between the number of respondents working less than 10 years made a data comparison to determine whether experience influences CPD engagement more difficult.

Question 4: Qualification Level

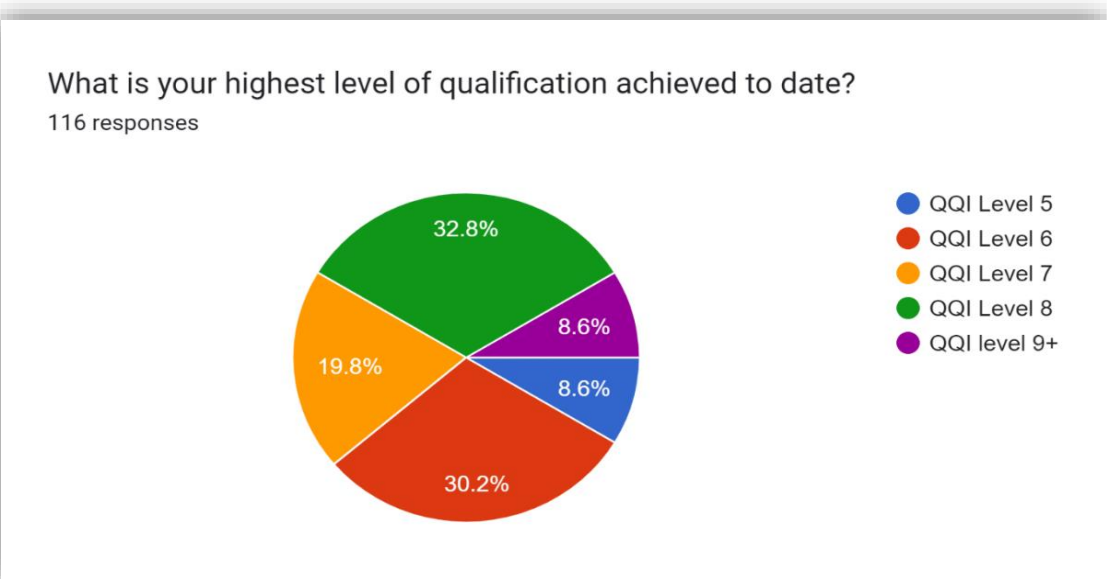


Figure 5: Qualification Level

There was a considerable variation in the level of qualifications held amongst the respondents. This made the analysis to compare whether those with a higher level of qualifications engage more in CPD compared to those with lower qualifications significantly easier. Similarly, it was easier to determine the motivational factors of those with higher versus lower qualifications.

Question 5 and 6: Type of qualification

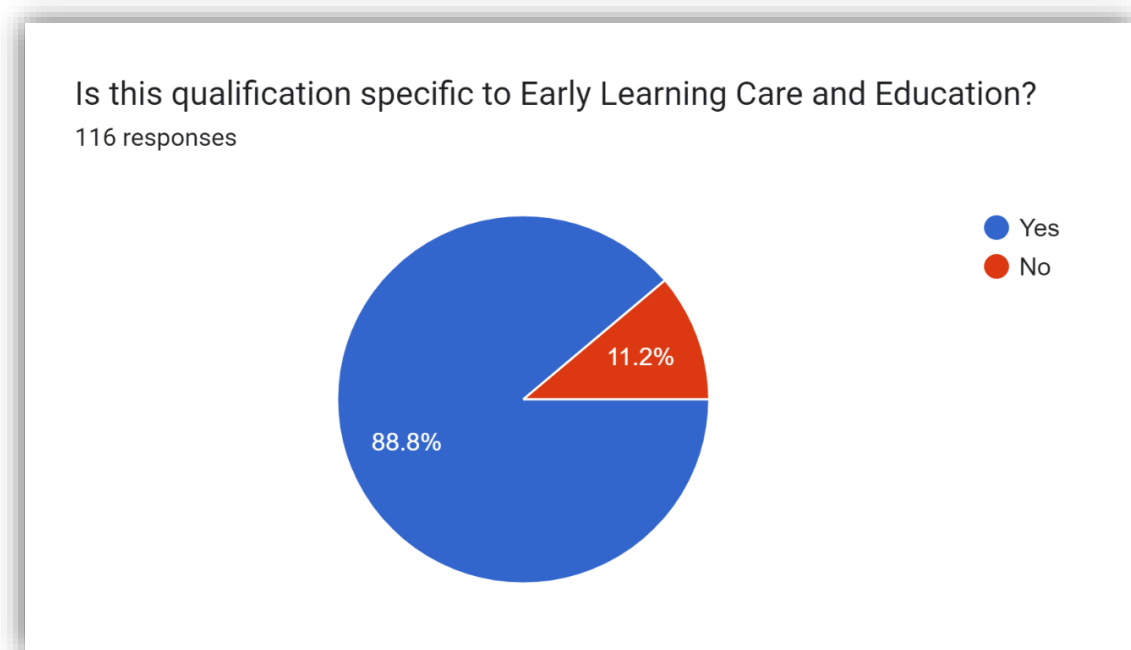


Figure 6: Qualification specific to Early Learning Care and Education

Most respondents (88.8%) have a qualification specific to the early years. The remaining respondents indicated qualification in Primary Teaching, Social Care, Business and Management, SNA (Special Needs Assistant).

Question 7: County of Employment

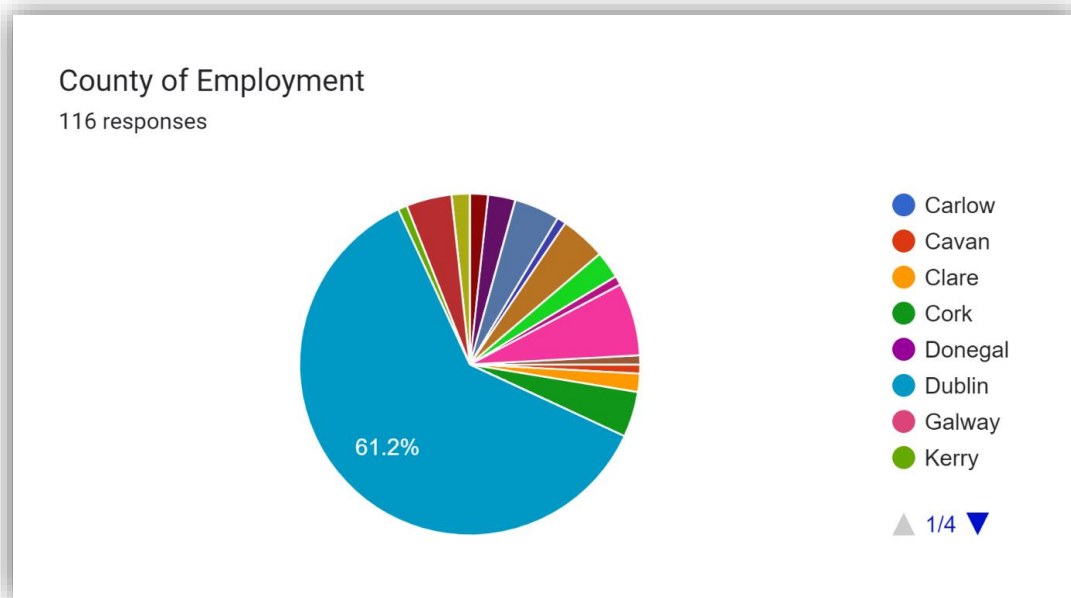


Figure 7: County of Employment

The majority of respondents were from the Dublin area, which is indicative of the employment location of the researcher and the permissions granted by the employer to contact these services directly via email in disseminating the questionnaire.

Question 8: Age

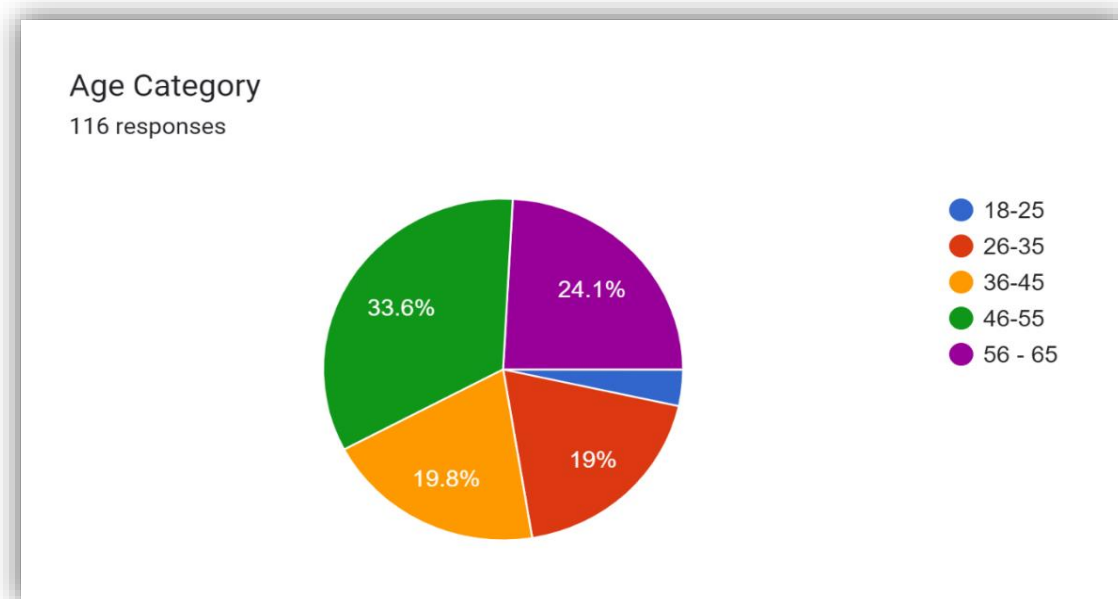


Figure 8: Age Category

There was a mix of respondents from the different age categories presented. The 45-55 age group represents the most common age group at 33.6%, with the lowest representation in the 18-25 age group. This data, while not directly mentioned in the literature review, will be compared to determine if age motivates or prevents ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.

Section 2: Definition of CPD

From the given data, some of the themes gathered to describe a definition of CPD include:

1. *Importance of keeping up to date:* Many respondents mentioned CPD is essential to keep up with changes and Developments in the ELC sector. It helps them update their skills, knowledge, and understanding of key elements, especially best practice for working with children and families and what is required from them regarding regulations.
2. *Upskilling:* The respondents named CPD as an opportunity to upskill, enhance their current practice, and engage in new ideas, theories, and practices. Respondents also highlighted CPD is beneficial for their career progression.
3. *Continuous learning:* Respondents described CPD as an ongoing learning and development process that helps maintain their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. Respondents highlighted CPD is not just limited to formal training or courses but can also include informal learning, such as webinars or interaction with other Professionals.
4. *Importance for the sector:* Respondents highlighted CPD as an essential part of the ELC sector to sustain the quality and Professionalism of the role.

5. *Challenges with CPD*: Many respondents also mentioned CPD can be time-consuming and stressful, especially when working full-time. Some respondents also felt CPD is underappreciated and not recognised through wages.

According to the respondents, CPD is considered an important and integral part of the ELC Professional role, helping them to keep up with constant changes within the sector and maintain their skills and knowledge to benefit the service, children, and themselves.

Section 3: Attitude towards CPD

Sentiment analysis was conducted on the following open-ended questions within the questionnaire to determine the overall attitude of the respondents toward CPD:

- *Question 9: In your own words, how would you define CPD?*
- *Question 12: Give a reason for answering whether you think CPD should be mandatory or voluntary.*

The responses towards a given definition of CPD were overwhelmingly positive, with over 99 positive phrases out of the total respondents (n=117).

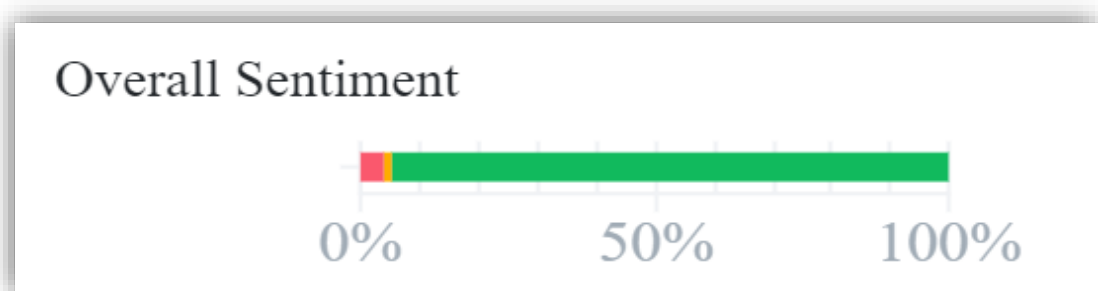


Figure 9: Overall Sentiment

Of those who had a negative sentiment, the main reasons were related to not being paid to complete CPD, no reward financially for completing CPD and the difficulty completing it after work:

Respondent 29 - "...as it is not recognised through wages..."

Respondent 30 - "...but after school very hard to make time and too tired..."

Respondent 82 - "...and there is no reward financially for our sector..."

Respondent 85 - "...but unfortunately, we are not paid for training days..."

Similarly, a Sentiment Analysis was conducted on question 10 to determine why ELC Professionals think engaging in CPD should be mandatory or voluntary. Of those who believe engaging in CPD should be Mandatory (n=71), more than half of the comments made were either negative (36.6%) or neutral (32.4%). Those with a negative sentiment towards CPD as Mandatory refer to lack of time, excessive workload, personal commitments, financial constraints, lack of resources or funding, potential burnout, and the belief that CPD should be a personal choice rather than imposed.

Those with a positive attitude towards CPD as a Mandatory aspect of their role as an ELC Professional mention personal choice to undertake CPD, CPD that is relevant to the role, and support and recognition for engaging in CPD.



Figure 10: Sentiment: Why CPD should be Mandatory.

However, the analysis of the reasons for CPD to be voluntary yielded different results: 76% had a positive attitude towards CPD staying voluntary, and only 13.5% expressed a negative attitude towards CPD remaining voluntary.



Figure 11: Sentiment: Why CPD should be Voluntary.

Some of the reasons indicated by the ELC Professionals why CPD should be voluntary, include personal choice, individual circumstances and engaging in meaningful Professional Development, as opposed to a tick-boxing exercise.

Question 10: Perception of CPD to the ELC role

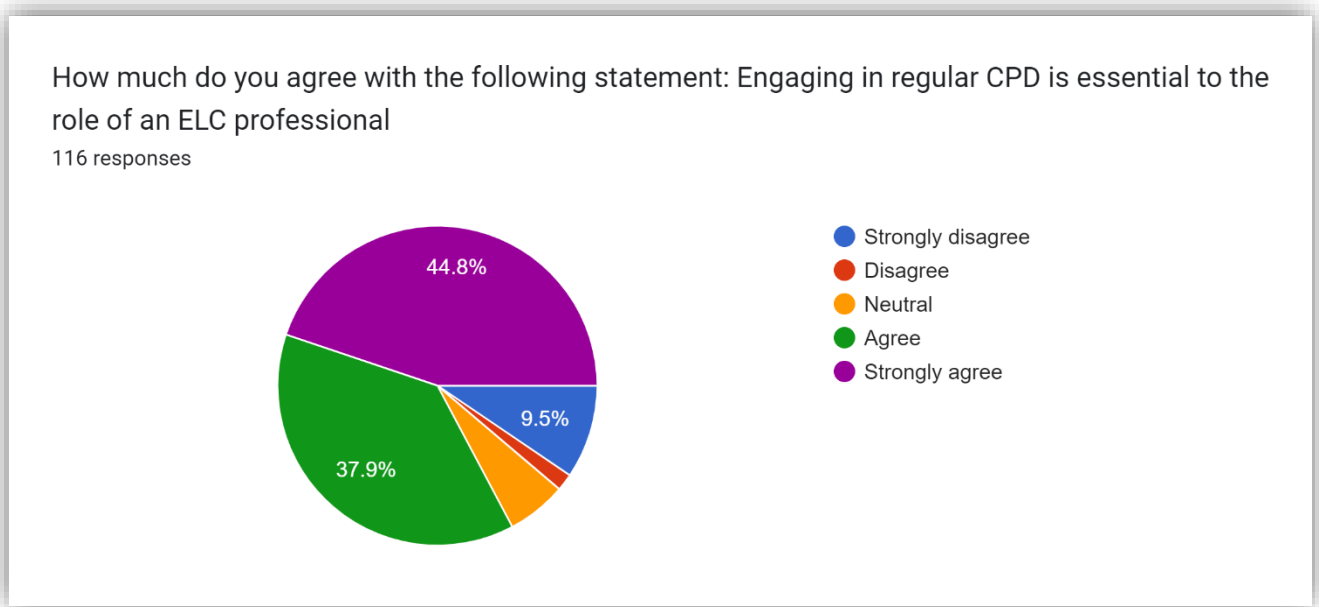


Figure 12: Engaging in regular CPD is essential to the role of an ELC professional – level of agreement.

About the question, “How much do you agree with the following statement: Engaging in regular CPD is essential to the role of an ELC Professional the majority of respondents (82.7%) either Strongly Agree or Agree.

Section 4: Motivation and Engagement in CPD

An analysis was conducted to determine the level and type of engagement in CPD, assuming that those who engaged in more CPD were more motivated as individuals to engage in regular CPD. It was found in the past year was *Internal/In-house Training* (55.2%) followed closely by *Online/In-person training of more than 5 hours* (48.3%) and *Online/In-person training of fewer than 5 hours* (47.4%). The least common type of CPD engaged in was *Full-time Accredited/Certified Training, e.g., QQI Level 5 up to HE Level 9 (9.5)*. The most common CPD opportunity undertaken by Managers/Supervisors was *Internal/In-house training* (57%). The least common type of CPD engaged in was *Full-time Accredited/Certified Training, e.g., QQI Level 5 up to HE Level 9* (6%). The results are similar to those in an ELC Leader/Assistant role, with 53% engaging in *Internal/In-house training*. However, the least common CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year were *Professional Conferences* (11%) and *Community of Practice* (13%)

The literature review alluded to several factors that could influence engagement and motivation in regular CPD. Data analysis was conducted to deduce the following:

1. *Does position within the ELC service determine whether one engages more or less regularly in CPD?*
2. *Does the length of time work in the sector impact engagement in CPD?*
3. *Does a higher or lower qualification determine whether an ELC staff member engages more or less in CPD?*

4. Lastly, is age a factor? Does engagement in CPD opportunities increase or decrease with age?

Position within the service



Figure 13: CPD Undertaken by Position within the Service

If the data is extrapolated to assume the same number of Early Years Leaders/Room assistants as respondents, the number of engaged opportunities would be 224. Similarly, if we compare the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken by each group, the following is evident.

- Of the 68 managers/supervisors, the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken is 3.76.
- Of the 47 leaders/assistants, the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken is 3.29.

Experience

The initial data analysis based on actual respondents indicates significantly more CPD opportunities were undertaken in the past year by those working more than 10 years in the sector than those working less than 10 years.

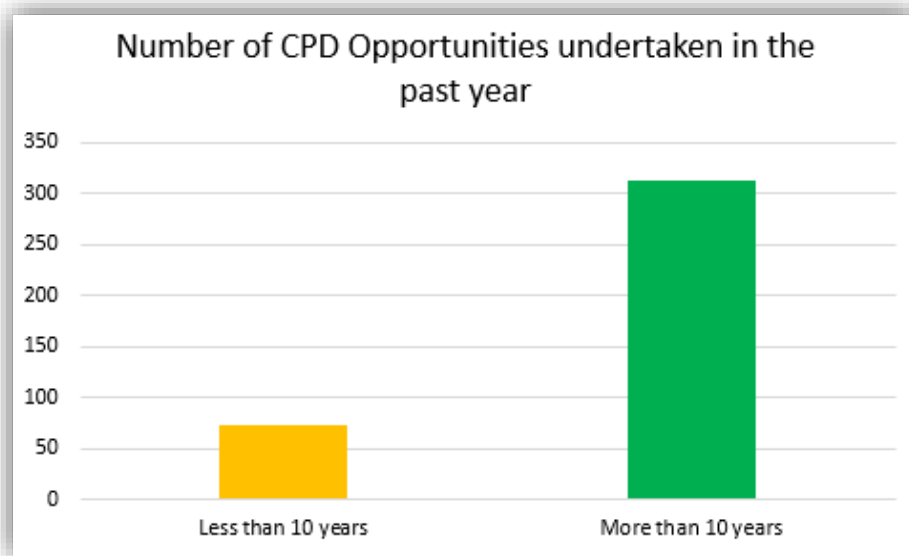


Figure 14: CPD Undertaken by Level of Experience

However, suppose the data is extrapolated to assume the same number of respondents are working less than 10 years as those working more than 10 years. In that case, the number of CPD opportunities engaged within the past year is 236. Significantly lower than the 313 opportunities undertaken by those working in the ELC sector for more than 10 years. Similarly, if we take the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken by each data group, the following is evident:

- Of those working in the sector for less than 10 years, the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year is 2.8
- Of those working in the sector for more than 10 years, the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year is 3.77.

Qualification Level

An analysis was conducted between the lowest level of qualification achieved (level 5) and the highest level of qualification achieved (Level 9+), revealing those with a level 9+ engaged in a significantly higher number of CPD opportunities in the past year than those with a level 5 qualification.

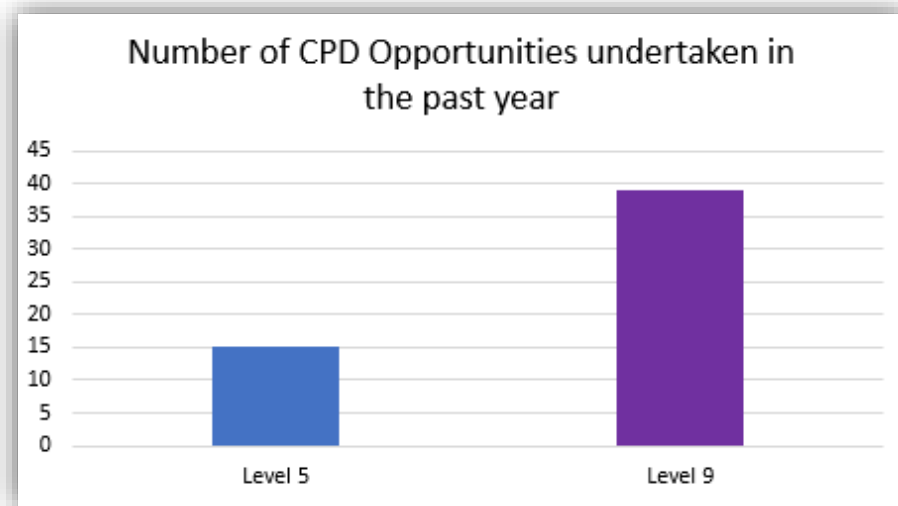


Figure 15: CPD Undertaken by Qualification: Level 5 vs Level 9

Similarly, those with a level 8 qualification engaged in more CPD opportunities than those with a level 6.

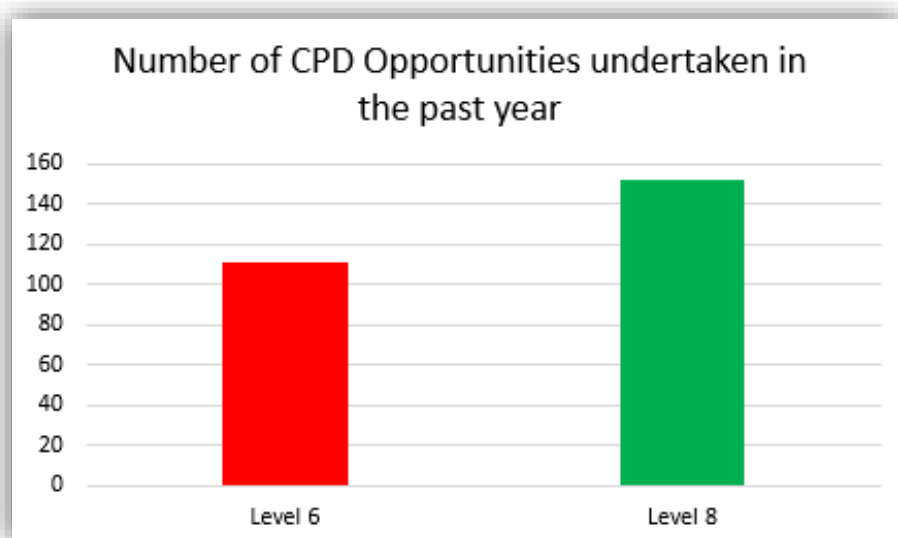


Figure 16: CPD Undertaken by Qualification: Level 6 vs Level 8

Based on the fact that there were more level 8 respondents, an extrapolation determined that level 6 respondents participated in 121 CPD opportunities, which is lower than level 8 participants who participated in 152 opportunities. Again, to counteract the disparity in the level of responses, an average of the number of CPD opportunities was undertaken, and the following was found:

- Of those with a level 6 qualification, 3.36 was the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year.
- Of those with a level 8 qualification, 4.2 was the average number of CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year.

Age

When the data were compared based on the number of CPDs undertaken based on a person's age, as anticipated, there were disparities because the number of responses varied under each age category. An average of the age groups was conducted along with an extrapolation exercise and the analysis found no significant differences in the amount of CPD opportunities undertaken in the past year across all the age groups.

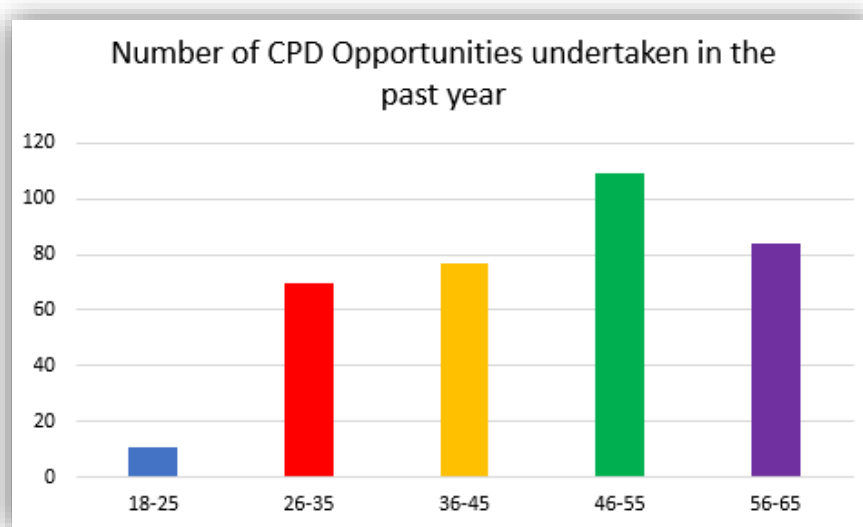


Figure 17: CPD Undertaken by Age Category

Section 5: Motivation Theory

The reasons why the respondents engaged in CPD were analysed against the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) – Competence, Autonomy, and Feeling Connected – starting with the options available in the questionnaire and then moving on to the other factors reported by the respondents. The motivational factors can be grouped into the principles of SDT as follows:

Competence	Autonomy	Feeling Connected
<i>I required new knowledge and skills for my current role</i>	<i>I required new knowledge and skills for my current role</i>	<i>I work with children with special needs and required new knowledge to effectively work with them</i>
<i>I have always engaged in regular CPD, it's just part of the role</i>	<i>I have always engaged in regular CPD, it's just part of the role</i>	<i>To network and collaborate with other ELC Professionals</i>
<i>I work with children with special needs and required new knowledge to effectively work with them</i>	<i>I work with children with special needs and required new knowledge to effectively work with them</i>	<i>Engaging in regular CPD is part of my employment contract</i>
<i>I required new knowledge and skills for a new role</i>	<i>I required new knowledge and skills for a new role</i>	<i>I was requested to attend by my employer</i>
<i>I work with disadvantaged children and wanted new knowledge to work with them</i>	<i>I wanted a pay rise</i>	<i>I work with disadvantaged children and wanted new knowledge to work with them</i>
	<i>I work with disadvantaged children and wanted new knowledge to work with them</i>	

Table 1: Motivation Theory Principles vs reasons why Respondents engaged in CPD.

Similarly, the responses volunteered by the respondents, in addition to the given options on the questionnaire, can be grouped into the principles of SDT as follows:

Competence	Autonomy	Feeling Connected
<i>I like new learning and that happens in all workshop or training courses</i>	<i>There were online courses I was interested in</i>	<i>I like new learning and that happens in all workshop or training courses</i>
<i>I enjoy learning more about the field I work in, so I keep on top of courses that I have an interest in.</i>	<i>to enhance my own development, learning and knowledge</i>	<i>to enhance my own development, learning and knowledge</i>
<i>There were online courses I was interested in</i>	<i>To be aware of current thinking and recommended best practices. I plan to do a masters next year</i>	<i>To fulfil the vision and mission of the organisation with up-to-date knowledge and ensure all professionals are working towards the same level of knowledge to make a difference</i>
<i>to enhance my own development, learning and knowledge</i>	<i>Our Company pays for our CPD while also paying us to complete the CPD</i>	
<i>To be aware of current thinking and recommended best practices. I plan to do a masters next year</i>		
<i>I enjoy taking part in training and regularly sign up to training on offer, no requirement, just to ensure i am staying current.</i>		
<i>Our Company pays for our CPD while also paying us to complete the CPD</i>		

Table 2: Motivation Theory Principles vs other reasons why Respondents engaged in CPD.

Section 6: Barriers to engaging in CPD.

An answer to this questionnaire was only given by 75% (n=88) of respondents. The most common barriers identified by ELC Professionals as to the reasons why they could not engage in CPD in the past year are as follows: *There is not enough staff to cover my absence (50%), CPD conflicts with my work schedule (39.8%), and I did not have the time due to family responsibilities (37.5%)*

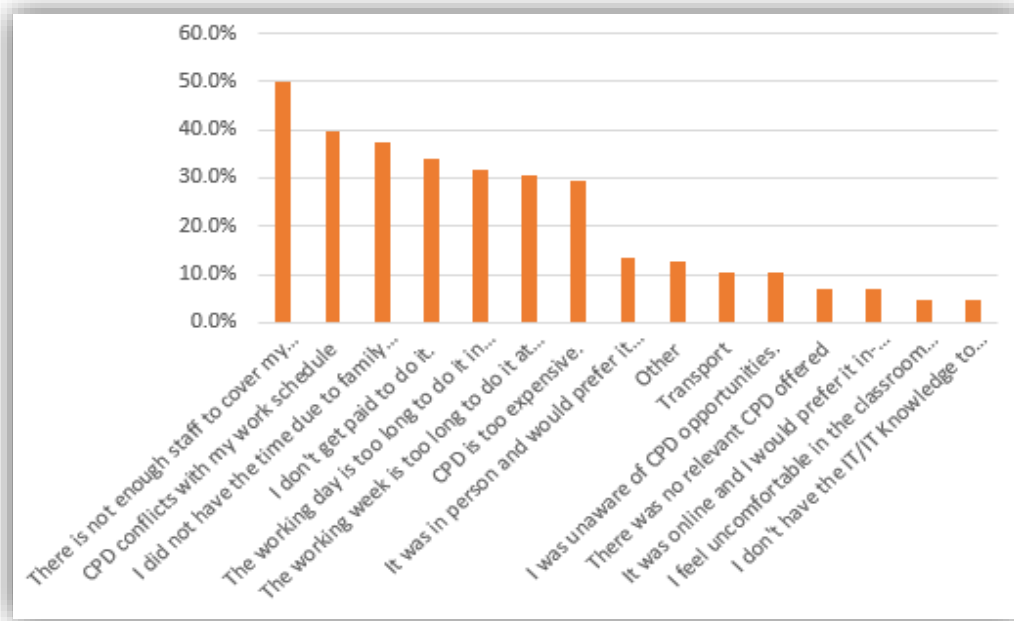


Figure 18: Barriers engaging in CPD.

Of the ELC Professionals (n=7) who engaged in **no** CPD in the past year, the table indicates the reasons why they were unable to engage in CPD.

There is not enough staff to cover my absence.	43%
CPD is too expensive.	43%
CPD conflicts with my work schedule	43%
I don't get paid to do it.	43%

Table 3: Barriers for those who engaged in no CPD.

Similar to the analysis conducted under actual CPD undertaken in the past year, an analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in the barriers depending on the respondent's *qualification level, experience, position within the service or age.*

Qualification Level

The most common barrier regardless of qualification level was *“There was not enough staff to cover my absence.”*

Experience

“There was not enough staff to cover my absence” was a common barrier for all respondents regardless of the years working in the sector. On analysis of other common reasons, *“I don’t get paid to do it”* was a significant barrier (27%) for those working less than 10 years and *“CPD conflicts with my work schedule”* was a common barrier (28%) for those working more than 10 years.

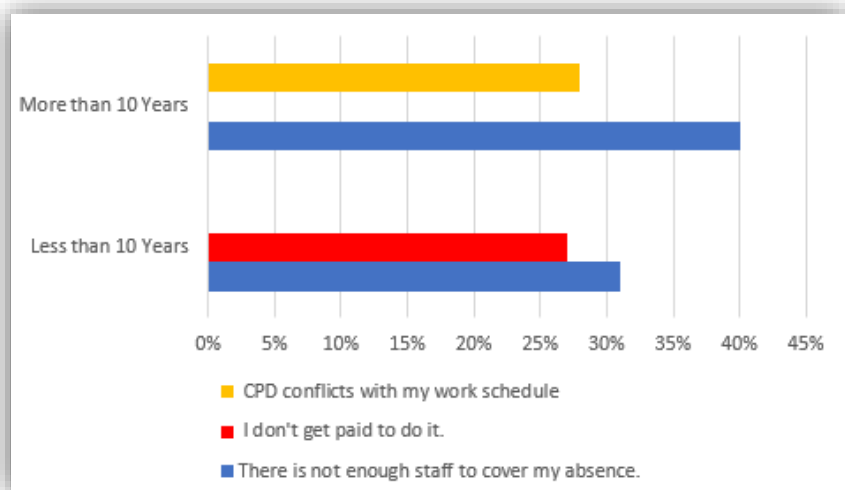


Figure 19: Barriers by Level of Experience

Position within the service

Finally, *“There was not enough staff to cover my absence”* and *“CPD conflicts with my work schedule”* was common barrier regardless of the position within the ELC service. Another barrier for those in the ELC Leader/Assistant role was *“I don't get paid to do it”*, and another

barrier cited by Managers/Supervisors was "The working day is too long to do it in the evening."

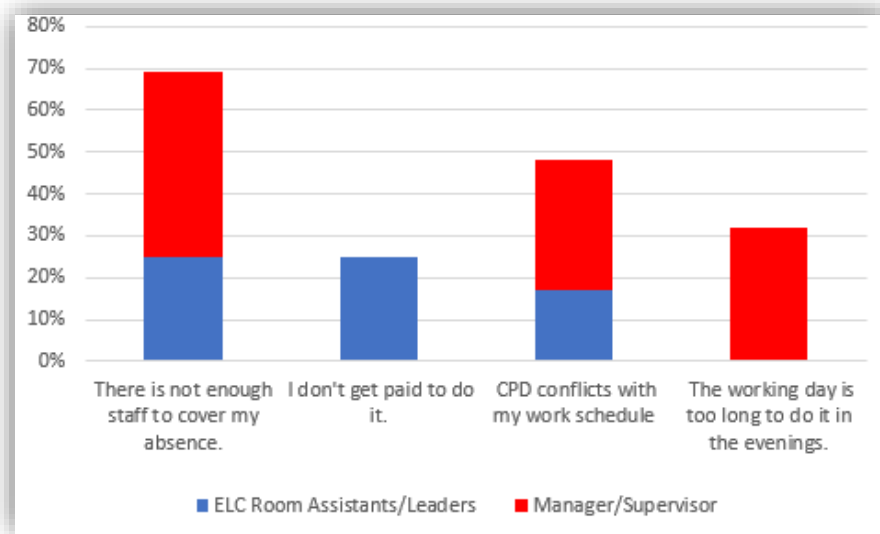


Figure 20: Barriers by Level of Experience

Age

Similarly, "There was not enough staff to cover my absence" was the most common barrier amongst ELC Professionals of all ages within the sector. The only age group where this was not the top barrier was amongst the 18–25-year-olds. Their most common (55%) barrier was "CPD conflicts with my work schedule." The only other age group to mention this as a barrier was the "56-65 age group" (36%). Both the 18-25 age group (27%) and the 26-35 age group (32%) cited "I don't get paid to do it" as a barrier to CPD. The only age group to mention "The working week is too long to do it at the weekend" was the 36-45 age group (26%).

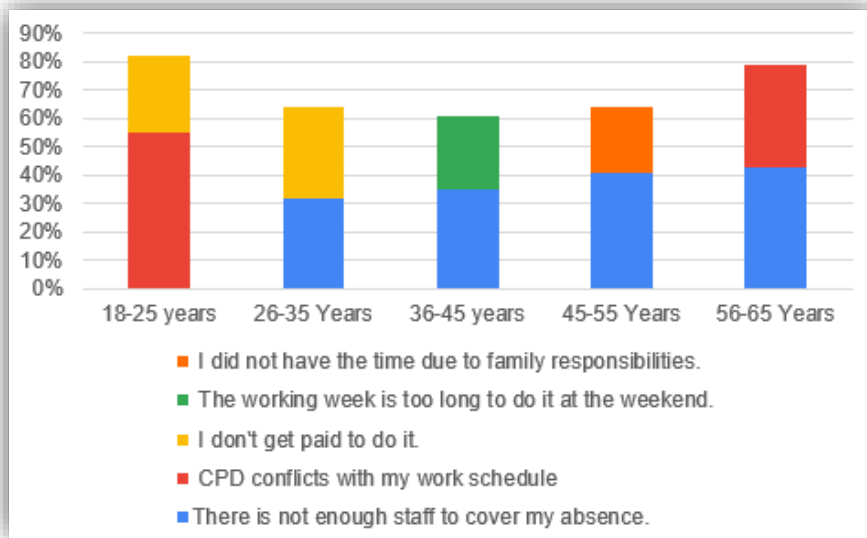


Figure 21: Barriers by Age Category

Section 7: Other insights found in the questionnaire data.

Question 11: CPD: Mandatory or voluntary

Substantially more respondents (n=116) believe CPD should be mandatory.

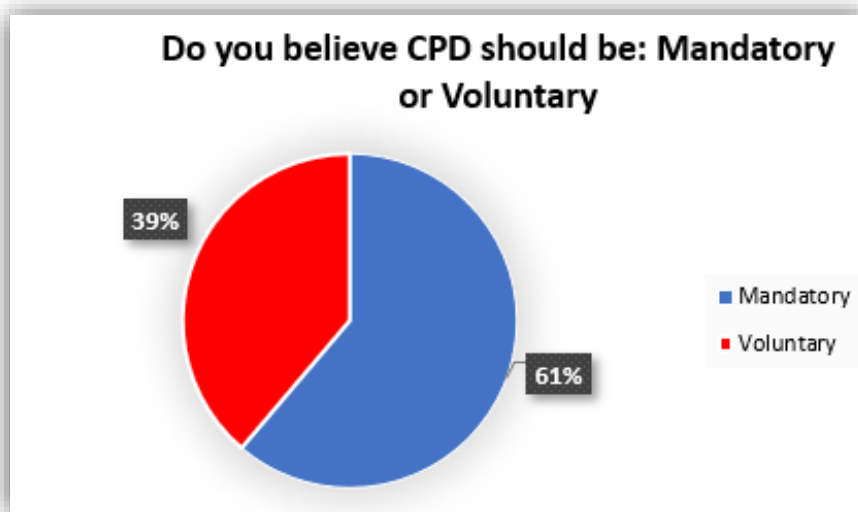


Figure 22: CPD: Mandatory or Voluntary

The responses were similar regarding whether CPD should be mandatory or voluntary between managers/supervisors and ELC Leaders/Assistants. In terms of a comparison between the responses, a higher proportion of ELC Leaders/Assistants believe CPD should be mandatory.

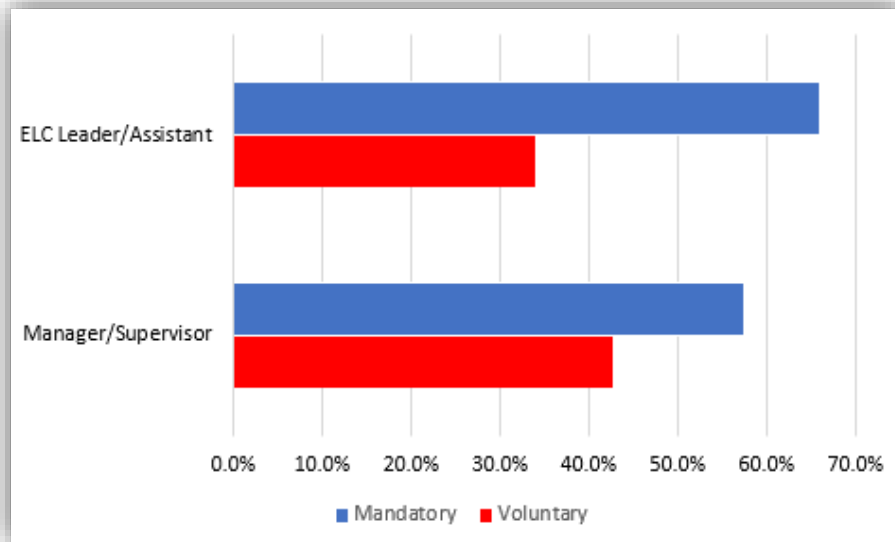


Figure 23: CPD as Mandatory or Voluntary by Position within Service

Question 18: Who is responsible for providing CPD Opportunities

A higher proportion of respondents (40%) believe the Government should be responsible for providing CPD Opportunities for the ELC sector. Of those who responded Other (17%), some of the responses included a combination of “all of the above”, Myself and My Employer, My Employer and The Government”. Some respondents specifically mention financial support from the Government.

Respondent - “It should be funded especially now that core funding demands it.”

Respondent 24 - “As an employer with very limited autonomy and finances I feel the government should take more responsibility for this.”

Respondent 62 - “I think the government should support companies financial for CPD for all staff”.

Respondent 107 - "As we are regulated and have to operate under the rules for funding CPD should be included and provided for by Funding ..."

There is little difference between the respondents who were Managers/Supervisors (36.7%) or ELC Leaders/Assistants (38%) that the Government is responsible for CPD opportunities. Nor is there a difference between Managers/Supervisors (20.5%) and ELC Leaders/Assistants (23.4%) that they are responsible for their own CPD opportunities. There is only a slight difference between Managers/Supervisors (14.7%) and ELC Leaders/Assistants (25.5%) where they believe My Employer is responsible for providing CPD opportunities.

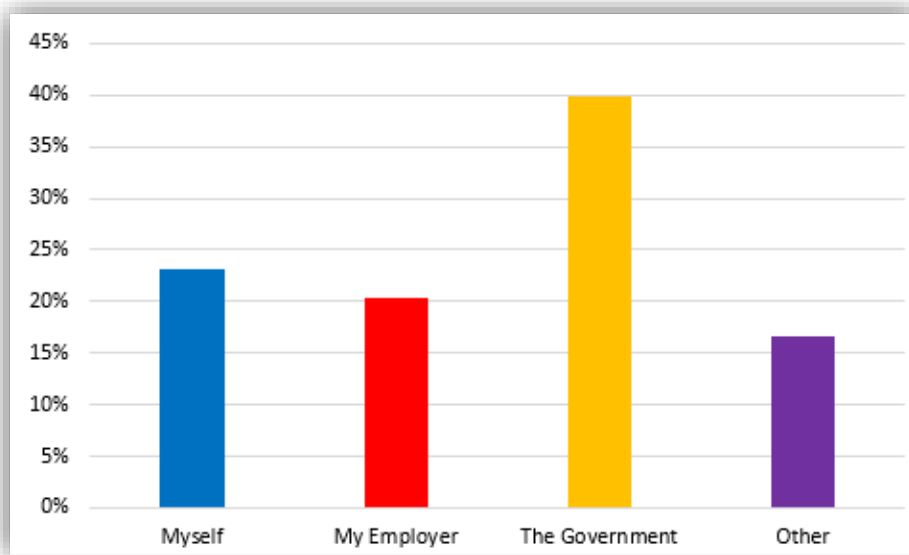


Figure 24: Who should be responsible for providing CPD opportunities.

Question 16: What do you believe is required to allow ELC Professionals to engage in regular CPD.

There was significant feedback from ELC Professionals on types of support that should be provided to support them engage in regular CPD. The most common responses were *Release from working with children for CPD during regular working hours (72%)*, *Payment for CPD outside of working hours (68%)* and *Reimbursement or payment of costs (63%)*.

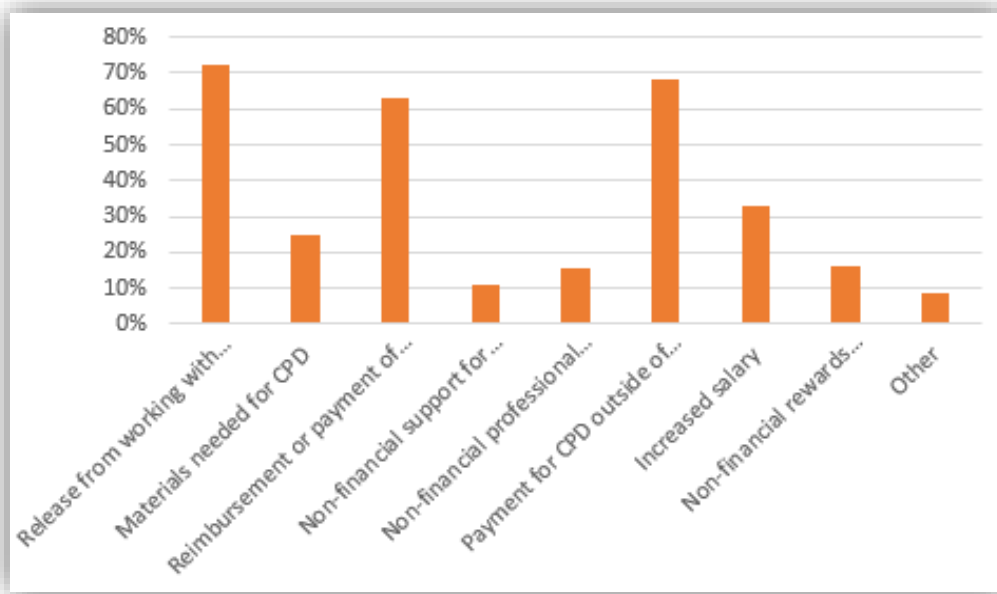


Figure 25: Support and Resources required.

Other responses include reference to more quality and relevant CPD opportunities and a model like training days provided to Primary School Teachers.

Respondent 3 - "I have been doing it for more than 30 years and most of the general stuff is worthless and generally boring and could be delivered in half the time it's usually delivered in."

Respondent 1 - "We should not be penalised for training. There should be teacher training days."

Respondent 105 - "Creche should be allowed by Department to close for CPD days, and the funding should be provided through CORE FUNDING. If the creche cannot close an extra staff person should be paid for by CORE FUNDING to allow staff to attend CPD during the working day"

Question 19: Engaging in future CPD to a higher level of qualification.

Regardless of the qualification held, more respondents indicated they were either unlikely or highly unlikely to engage in a higher qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education.

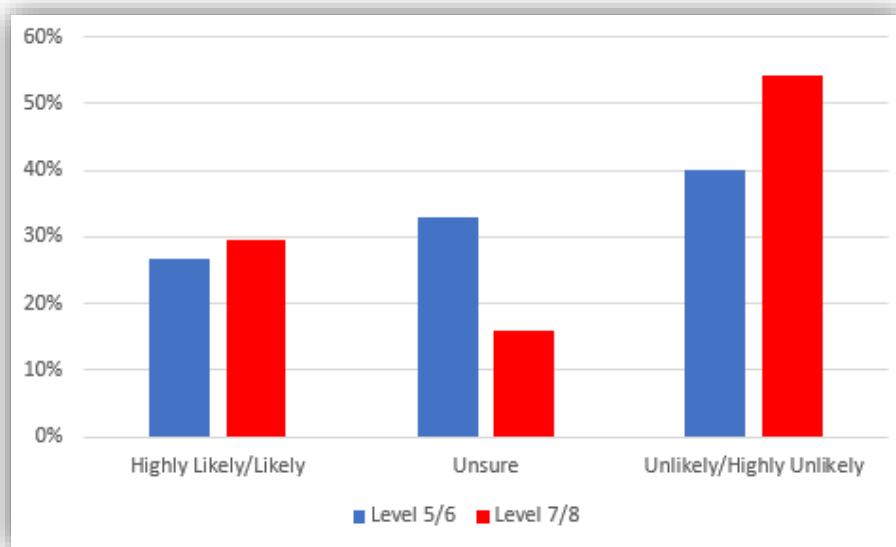


Figure 26: Likelihood of engaging in future higher-level CPD.

Section 8: Online Focus Group

Based on the analysis of all the questions within the questionnaire, the following semi-structured questions were addressed during the online focus group with 6 ELC Professionals.

1. *Please share your CPD experience over the past year, the types of CPD you engaged in, why you engaged in CPD, and whether you faced any barriers in participating.*
2. *The responses of the survey generally convey a positive attitude towards CPD. Do you think this is reflective of all ELC Professionals within the ELC sector?*
3. *A higher proportion of respondents believe the Government should be responsible for providing CPD opportunities. What are your thoughts in the matter?*
4. *82.7% of respondents either strongly agree or agree with the following statement: Engaging in regular CPD is essential to the role of an ELC. Why do you think the other 17.3% don't?*

5. *The most common CPD engaged in, in the past year is Internal/In-house Training. Are you surprised by this?*
6. *“I have always engaged in regular CPD, it's just part of the role” is the most common reason ELC Professionals engaged in CPD in the past year. Why do you think this is?*
7. *“There is not enough staff to cover my absence” followed closely by “CPD conflicts with my work schedule” is the most common reasons why participants cannot engage in regular CPD. How do you think we could overcome this?*
8. *The majority of respondents regardless of their current qualification level was likely not engage in a higher qualification in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education. What do you think the reasons are?*
9. *Is there any concluding message you would like to convey to policy makers in the Development of a national IT system for CPD?*

Section 9: Focus Group Analysis

Profile of respondents

6 ELC Professionals engaged in the online focus group, including 1 part-time manager, 1 full-time supervisor and 4 full-time staff members who work directly with the children. An analysis of the transcript determined the overall sentiment from the participants during the focus group was positive.

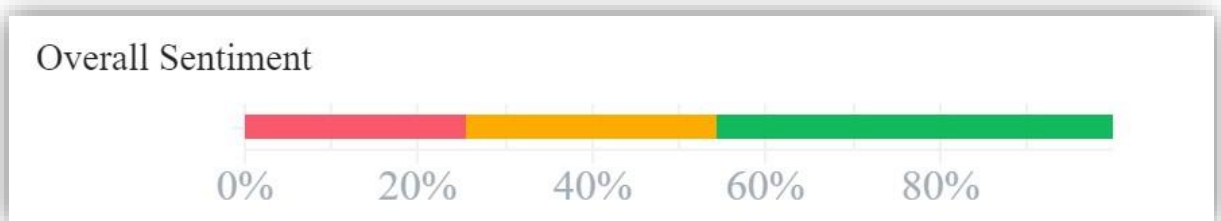


Figure 27: Overall Sentiment of Focus Group Participants.

Attitude towards CPD

Most focus group participants expressed a positive attitude towards CPD, understanding its importance in improving their skills and knowledge in their roles. Some quotes from the focus group supporting the positive attitude include:

Participant 1 - "...most of the girls I work with are always up for doing training and stuff."

Participant 2 - "I did enjoy them though. I think it's easier when you do it with people you know."

Participant 3 - "I also think most childcare staff would have a positive attitude towards training."

Participant 4 - "I love participating in training, I do it as often as I can."

Participant 5 - "...I regularly attend sessions of different topics like play, activities for children with special needs, outdoor play."

However, it was clear in some instances, individual circumstances and personal preferences may influence their attitudes towards CPD.

Participant 1 - "I like working in childcare, I just wish I was paid better, and there was more staff, so I didn't have to work as many hours."

Participant 1 - "I would say it needs to be user-friendly and accessible." (Making reference to the new IT System)

Participant 3 - "As a supervisor, I believe the national IT system would be very beneficial."

Participant 4 - "Yea it might be a good idea. If it could be accessed in a flexible way, it might be easier to get my staff to engage in CPD."

Participant 5 - "Yea flexibility would be important but also a variety of CPD opportunities webinars, online resources, and the ones like the Sensory processing disorder programme I did with Betterstart, where you click through the material yourself."

Motivational Factors

Participants cited various factors that motivated them to engage in regular CPD, such as personal interest in learning and improving, a positive work environment, employer support, and training with peers.

Participant 1 - "I will do it though if I have to and prefer do it when there are other girls from the service doing it too."

Participant 2 - "For me I would have done much training anyway for lots of different reasons but being able to do it in house helps a lot."

Participant 4 - "I love training. I always have. I love learning."

Participant 5 - "We have our own training team within the organisation, so I do most of my training in-house."

Participant 6 - "I was really lucky my employer paid for the course, and she is giving me lots of support in getting through the programme, she recently graduated herself from the same course. She has even built in study days into our training policy to help anyone doing college courses."

Barriers to engaging in CPD.

The main barriers identified by participants included lack of staff coverage to attend training, exhaustion after long working hours, training sessions clashing with personal commitments, financial constraints, and not being paid for attending training.

Participant 1 - "I work full time, so I was glad they were in the evenings, but I don't think I would be up for more. I do be wrecked at the end of the day."

Participant 5 - "Juggling work, studying, and personal life can be overwhelming at times."

The feedback and opinions expressed by the focus group participants suggest motivational factors, and barriers may differ among ELC Professionals depending on factors such as

qualifications, experience, position within the service, and personal circumstances (e.g., family commitments).

Participant 4 - "I even regularly organise inhouse training for the staff, particularly if it is linked to a Tusla inspection. I think doing training regularly is really important as things are always changing in the sector. However, I understand it can be difficult for the girls, as I only work part-time, but the majority of them work full time and have their own family stuff going on."

Participant 1 - "I mean, not everyone might be as tired as me or have the same level of enthusiasm for additional training. It really depends on the individual and their circumstances, you know?"

Participant 5 - "I think maybe if someone does a course and they don't learn anything new, it can be like "what was the point in that". I know I have been to a few courses that were a bit boring and focused a bit too much on theory."

Discussion

Introduction

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) plays a crucial role in enhancing Professional skills, knowledge, and overall quality of practice in the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). However, with increasing CPD requirements due to the introduction of Core Funding in the ELC sector and the impending Development of a national IT system for CPD, this research set out to explore the following research objectives:

1. *To investigate the attitudes of ELC Professionals towards CPD by exploring their perceptions of the value and relevance of CPD to their role to identify the most common factors that motivate ELC Professionals to engage in regular CPD.*
2. *Identify the most common barriers that prevent ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD.*

This discussion aims to compare the findings from the literature review with the questionnaire results and feedback from the online focus group, providing a thorough overview of CPD participation among ELC Professionals. By exploring the attitudes, motivational factors, and barriers to engagement in regular CPD of ELC Professionals, this discussion seeks to address the overall research aim "*To investigate the attitudes, motivations, and barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards engaging in regular, continuous Professional Development (CPD)*" and subsequently make recommendations to employers and policymakers within the ELC sector.

Summary of Results

Results show managers and supervisors engage more in CPD opportunities, while those working less than 10 years struggle with time constraints. Qualification level also impacts the level of CPD engagement. CPD is noted as essential for career progression, continuous learning, and maintaining the quality and Professionalism of the role. However, some respondents find CPD time-consuming, stressful, and underappreciated. A sentiment analysis revealed that most respondents believe CPD should be mandatory, with negative opinions stemming from lack of time, workload, financial constraints, and potential burnout. Positive attitudes towards CPD include personal choice, relevant CPD, and support and recognition. The most common type of CPD is *"internal/in-house training"* (55.2%), followed by *"online/in-person training of more than 5 hours"* (48.3%) and *"online/in-person training of fewer than 5 hours"* (47.4%). Barriers to CPD include insufficient staff, work schedule conflicts, and family responsibilities. Suggested supports for ELC Professionals to engage in regular CPD include release from working with children, payment for CPD outside working hours, and reimbursement for costs.

Attitude to CPD and its Relevance to the ELC Professional Role

The findings presented in Section 3 shed light on the attitudes of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The Sentiment Analysis revealed that most respondents had a positive attitude towards CPD. When asked to define CPD in their own words, over 99% of the respondents provided positive phrases. This indicates a general recognition and understanding of the importance of CPD among ELC Professionals,

as suggested by (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, OECD, 2021; Mitchell and Cubey, 2003).

However, it is noteworthy that some respondents expressed negative sentiments towards CPD. Their main concerns revolved around not being financially rewarded for completing CPD, finding time to engage in CPD after work, and the need for recognition for CPD in their sector. These concerns highlight some of the challenges faced by ELC Professionals and the need for adequate support and incentives to facilitate their engagement in CPD.

The Sentiment Analysis revealed a more nuanced perspective when asked whether CPD should be mandatory or voluntary. A significant portion of those who believed CPD should be mandatory expressed negative or neutral sentiments. Their concerns included time constraints, excessive workload, personal commitments, financial constraints, and the belief that CPD should be a personal choice rather than imposed. On the other hand, respondents who supported the idea of mandatory CPD mentioned the importance of personal choice in undertaking CPD, the relevance of CPD to their role, and the need for support and recognition in engaging in CPD. These positive sentiments suggest that ELC Professionals who endorse mandatory CPD strongly recognise its value in maintaining Professionalism and quality within the sector (Bleach, 2014).

Interestingly, the Sentiment Analysis revealed a stronger positive attitude towards CPD being voluntary. Most respondents expressed positive sentiment towards CPD remaining voluntary, citing reasons such as personal choice, individual circumstances, and the desire for meaningful Professional Development rather than a mere tick-boxing exercise.

It is worth noting that a significant proportion of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that engaging in regular CPD is essential to the role of an ELC Professional. This finding aligns with

previous research and highlights the recognition of the importance of CPD for Professional growth and the provision of quality care to young children (McMillan *et al.*, 2016, Síolta Standard 11 (DES, 2017).

While the current literature on ELC Professionals' attitudes towards CPD is limited, this research provides valuable insights into their perceptions of the value and relevance of CPD to their role. The positive sentiments expressed by most respondents indicate a general understanding of the benefits of CPD. However, the concerns raised by those with negative sentiments highlight the need to address issues such as financial incentives, time constraints, and providing adequate resources and support for CPD. These elements are further explored in the barriers section below.

Motivation and Engagement

The findings presented in this section provide valuable insights into the level and type of engagement in CPD among Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals. However, a critical discussion of these findings is necessary to understand the implications and limitations of the results fully.

Firstly, the analysis assumes that individuals who engage in more CPD are more motivated to engage in regular CPD. While this assumption may hold true in many cases, it is important to consider that various other factors can influence a high level of engagement, such as contractual requirements, as reported by 14.6% of respondents. Therefore, it is crucial to interpret these results cautiously and consider other factors that may affect individuals' motivation to participate in CPD.

Regarding the types of CPD engaged in, the findings indicate that "*internal/in-house training*" and "*online/in-person training of more than 5 hours*" were the most common opportunities undertaken by ELC Professionals. Engaging in "*internal/in-house training*" suggests that employers and services play a significant role in providing CPD opportunities to their staff. It highlights the importance of creating a culture of continuous learning within ELC services and continuous support from employers, as Peleman *et al.* (2018) and Slot (2018) suggested.

On the other hand, "*full-time accredited/certified training*" was the least common." This finding is not surprising considering the majority of respondents work an average of 30 hours per week, and according to Further Education Training and Courses Hub indicates that full-time courses are "*usually delivered over two academic years on a full-time basis of 30 hours per week*" (FETCH, 2023). Other least common CPD opportunities were "*Professional conferences*" and "*communities of practice.*" This finding raises questions about the potential benefits of these types of CPD and whether there may be missed opportunities for networking, knowledge sharing, and Professional collaboration among ELC Professionals (Barnardos and NCN, 2021). Exploring ways to increase participation in such activities could foster a sense of community, as suggested by Deci and Ryan, (2021) in their work on motivation and support in the exchange of best practices in the field (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

Section 4 of the findings examines the influence of position, experience, qualification level, and age on engagement in CPD. The findings suggest managers/supervisors tend to engage in more CPD opportunities than ELC Leaders and ELC Assistants. This can be linked to several factors. Firstly, managers may have more access to resources and support for CPD due to their

leadership roles (Oberhuemer, 2013). They may have greater flexibility in scheduling and allocating time for Professional Development (Ang, 2012) and the authority to make decisions regarding staff development. Additionally, managers have a higher level of responsibility and accountability (Oberhuemer, 2013), potentially motivating them to stay current with the latest practices and knowledge in the field. Furthermore, managers often play a crucial role in setting the tone for a learning culture within the organisation (Ang, 2012), which may encourage their own engagement in CPD.

The findings also confirm that more experienced ELC Professionals tend to engage in more CPD opportunities than those with less experience. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that Professionals with more experience in their roles are more likely to value and actively seek out opportunities for Professional Development (Mathieu *et al.*, 1992). With increased experience, Professionals may recognise the evolving nature of the field and the need to update their knowledge and skills continuously (Sonia, 2017). This was continually mentioned throughout the research, with those defining CPD and indicating why they engaged in CPD in the past year.

Respondent 4 "Upskilling, improving knowledge to further develop in your career".

Respondent 6 "...refresh knowledge, improve skills, and keep up to date with latest Developments."

61.2% of the total respondents indicated that they required new skills and knowledge for their current or new roles.

Many respondents were specifically able to state that they required new skills to work specifically with children with additional needs (27.5%) or with disadvantaged children (10.3%), indicating a better understanding of their own Developmental needs and the areas

where they can benefit from further learning. Additionally, experienced Professionals may have established networks and connections that provide them with information and access to CPD opportunities. Many of the respondents with more than 10-year experience stated that they engaged in "*Communities of Practice*" (24.7%) in the past year, and their reasons for engaging in CPD were to "*network and collaborate with other ELC Professionals*" (38.2%). In comparison, only 8% with 1-5 years of experience engaged in "*Communities of Practice*", and only 16.6% engaged in CPD for networking and collaboration.

The findings indicate that ELC Professionals with higher qualifications tend to engage in more CPD opportunities. This finding can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, individuals with higher qualifications may have greater motivation for Professional Development due to a deeper understanding of the field and the value of continuous learning. Higher qualification levels often indicate a commitment to ongoing education and a desire for career advancement, which can drive engagement in CPD. Additionally, individuals with higher qualifications may have access to specialised training and advanced CPD opportunities relevant to their specific roles. This highlights the importance of promoting and supporting individuals in attaining higher qualifications to enhance their Professional growth and engagement in CPD. Unfortunately, only 26.6% of those with level 5 or 6 qualifications indicated it would be either "*likely or very likely*" they would engage in a higher qualification in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education, with a staggering 40% indicating that they would be "*unlikely or very unlikely*" to.

While age was not a factor explored in the literature review, the results of this question have yielded some interesting results. The analysis suggests that age does not significantly influence engagement in CPD among ELC Professionals despite an assumption that older

Professionals may be less inclined to engage in CPD due to established routines or reduced motivation (Pool *et al.*, 2015). The results indicate that individuals of different age groups demonstrate a similar level of commitment to their Professional Development, as shown in Section 4 of the findings.

The findings also connects to Self-Determination theory (SDT) as a framework for understanding the motivations behind engagement in CPD. By applying a motivation theory, the researcher could gain further insight into why ELC Professionals were motivated to engage in certain actions or behaviours, such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The principles of competence, autonomy, and feeling connected to others are important factors influencing individuals' motivation to engage in CPD (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Each principle will be explored further below.

SDT Principle: Competence:

Several focus group participants mentioned engaging in extensive and varied CPD activities to enhance their competence and Professional Development over the past year. Participant 1 highlighted the workshops on risky play and speaking to parents about Developmental concerns, which they found useful. Participant 4 expressed a strong interest in training and regularly attended online and in-person sessions.

Similarly, several questionnaire respondents indicated they engage in CPD purely for new skills and knowledge (19%), with 42% suggesting CPD is a core part of the ELC role and its strong benefits for Professional practice. The focus group participants and the questionnaire respondents indicate a strong desire amongst ELC Professionals to acquire new knowledge and skills, indicating a motivation to feel competent and effective in their roles.

SDT Principle: Autonomy

Autonomy is controlling one's choices and decisions (Legault, 2020). This suggests CPD opportunities for ELC Professionals remain as it currently is in Ireland under the policy, which is at the employer's or individual's discretion. However, feedback from the participants in the focus group was conflicted in their decision on whether it should be a personal choice or with external support. Focus Group participant 3 expressed a strong preference for being able to decide which training courses to attend, suggesting a desire for autonomy in CPD choices. On the other hand, focus group participant 4 mentioned their staff might find it easier to engage in training if it was mandated by the government rather than the employer. It is interesting to note Participant 3 is an ELC staff member, whereas Participant 4 is a manager. The questionnaire data showed similar responses on whether CPD should be *mandatory* (61%) or *voluntary* (39%). Therefore, there is no clear basis for suggesting that autonomy is an important factor in the motivation of ELC Professionals to engage in CPD, as the results indicate some individuals may value external direction and guidance in their CPD decisions. In contrast, others prefer the freedom to choose based on their interests and needs.

SDT Principle: Relatedness

The need for relatedness emphasises the importance of feeling connected to others and being part of a supportive community (Ryan and Deci, 2022). Focus group participant 4 mentioned organising in-house training sessions for their staff, particularly related to Tusla inspections, to support their Professional Development. Focus group participant 5 highlighted the advantage of receiving regular updates about workshops and courses through their local County Childcare Committee (CCC). These examples demonstrate efforts to foster a sense of community and support among ELC Professionals. Similarly, it was indicated in the

questionnaire "*Internal/In-house Training*" accounted for 37% of the types of CPD engaged in the past year, with 20.6% of the respondent indicating the reason for engaging in CPD as "*To network and collaborate with other ELC Professionals*". The respondents indicated a desire to collaborate with others, either with their colleagues or other ELC Professionals, further highlighting the need to continue to provide CPD opportunities that facilitate peer learning and collaboration.

In summary, the qualitative data suggest that the participants in the ELC sector demonstrate varying motivations and preferences regarding CPD. While some individuals are intrinsically motivated to enhance their competence through regular CPD, others may require external support and guidance. The importance of autonomy in CPD choices and the role of a supportive community are also evident. Understanding these factors can help inform the design of the new upcoming "National IT system" and ensure any new CPD aligns with the motivations and needs of ELC Professionals.

Barriers to engaging in CPD.

The findings from the research on the barriers to engaging in CPD among Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals align with several key themes identified in the literature. However, there are also some differences and additional insights that emerged from the research.

Consistent with the literature, the research findings highlight time constraints as a significant barrier to CPD engagement among ELC Professionals. The DES (2016) survey and previous studies have also identified this as a significant challenge. However, this research adds a specific factor by indicating that the need for more staff to cover their absence is a prominent reason for time constraints, as there is an expectation for staff to complete CPD outside of their working hours. This finding emphasises the need for organisations and employers to

consider staffing arrangements that allow Professionals to participate in CPD without compromising the quality of care provided to children.

Another common barrier identified in the literature and the research is CPD conflicting with work. ELC Professionals often struggle to balance their work responsibilities with CPD opportunities. However, the research findings reveal a nuanced difference related to years of experience. While work schedule conflicts were a common barrier for those working more than 10 years, Professionals with less than 10 years of experience cited not getting paid to engage in CPD as a significant barrier. This finding suggests that financial constraints have a greater impact on early-career Professionals, who may have lower salaries and less job security.

In conclusion, while the research findings on barriers to engaging in CPD among ELC Professionals align with the literature, they also provide additional insights and nuances that have implications for future research and recommendations. The findings highlight the need to address staffing constraints, work schedule conflicts, and financial barriers. By addressing these barriers and tailoring CPD initiatives to meet the diverse needs of ELC Professionals, stakeholders can promote continuous Professional Development and support the growth and well-being of Professionals in the early learning and care sector. Future research can build upon these findings to further explore and develop effective strategies that facilitate regular CPD engagement among ELC Professionals.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides some valuable insights into the attitudes, motivations, and barriers of Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals towards engaging in regular Continuous Professional Development (CPD), it is important to acknowledge its limitations:

Sample size and representativeness: The study may have a limited sample size or may not represent the entire population of ELC Professionals. This could limit the generalisability of the findings to a broader context.

Self-reporting and response bias: The study relies on self-reported data from ELC Professionals, which may be subject to response bias. Participants may provide socially desirable responses or interpret the questions differently, leading to potential inaccuracies or biases in the data. Additionally, participants who chose to respond may have different attitudes or motivations than those who did not participate, leading to a biased sample.

Limitations of sentiment analysis: While sentiment analysis provides a quantitative measure of attitudes, it may not capture the full complexity of participants' opinions. The researcher manually constructed the Sentiment analysis, which can lead to human error and biases. Some sentiments may have been oversimplified or misinterpreted.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Employers

- Employers should prioritise the CPD of ELC Professionals by providing them with adequate resources and support. This includes allocating sufficient financial resources for CPD activities, ensuring appropriate staffing levels to allow participation in CPD and offering flexible working arrangements.
- Creating a culture of continuous learning within the organisation is crucial. Employers should communicate the benefits of CPD, facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among staff, and integrate CPD goals into support and supervision.
- ELC Professionals have diverse learning needs, so employers should offer CPD opportunities accordingly. Providing various options such as internal training, online courses, Professional conferences, and communities of practice allows staff to personalise their learning journey.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Policymakers should develop supportive policies that facilitate CPD engagement among ELC Professionals. This includes ensuring access to quality, relevant and equal CPD opportunities and advocating for funding and resources to meet Professional Development needs.
- Encourage the establishment of communities of practice and networking events for fostering knowledge sharing, peer support, and collaboration among Professionals. These initiatives enable Professionals to learn from each other's experiences and contribute to the sector's growth.

- Investing in research and evaluation is vital. Policymakers should allocate resources to study the effectiveness of CPD initiatives in enhancing Professional growth and improving care quality.
- Promoting access to higher qualifications is another important aspect. Policymakers should support and promote the pursuit of advanced qualifications by providing financial assistance and flexible learning options.

By implementing these recommendations, employers and policymakers can create an environment that supports the motivation and engagement of ELC Professionals in CPD. This, in turn, will contribute to the improvement of Professional practice, the provision of high-quality care to young children, and the overall advancement of the ELC sector.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison between the literature review, the findings from the questionnaire and online focus group enhances understanding of the attitudes, motivational factors, and barriers to regular engagement in CPD among ELC Professionals. The results support the existing knowledge regarding the importance of CPD in the ELC sector and allude to the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards CPD among ELC Professionals. The identified barriers, such as time constraints and financial burdens, align with the existing literature and provide further evidence of the challenges faced by ELC Professionals in engaging in regular CPD.

The influence of factors such as position in the service, age, experience, and qualifications on CPD engagement is also evident in the findings. Managers and supervisors have greater access to CPD opportunities, indicating the importance of having a strong organisational culture of CPD and leadership support. Professionals with more experience and higher qualifications tend to engage in more CPD, highlighting the positive correlation between experience, qualifications, and CPD engagement.

The expectations for support and resources expressed by ELC Professionals, such as release from work, payment for CPD outside of working hours, and reimbursement of costs, reflect the practical challenges Professionals face and the need for employer and government support. The preference for autonomy in CPD choices varies among Professionals, with some valuing the freedom to decide which training to attend, while others prefer external support and guidance. The importance of relatedness and the need for a supportive community are evident in the efforts made by ELC Professionals to provide in-house training sessions and engage in networking and collaboration with their colleagues.

Applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to the findings provides a potential framework for understanding the motivations and preferences of ELC Professionals in CPD. The need for improving competence is evident, with ELC Professionals actively seeking opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills. Autonomy appears to vary among Professionals, indicating the importance of considering individual preferences in the design and availability of CPD opportunities. Relatedness and the sense of belonging to a supportive community are also valued by ELC Professionals, emphasising the need for collaborative and networking opportunities in CPD offerings, either internally or externally.

Overall, the findings from this research contribute to our understanding of the attitude, motivational factors, and barriers to CPD engagement among ELC Professionals and provide valuable insights for policymakers and employers. Addressing the identified barriers and meeting the expectations of ELC Professionals regarding CPD support can enhance Professional Practice, improve outcomes for children, and strengthen the ELC sector as a whole. By aligning CPD offerings with the motivations and needs of ELC Professionals, policymakers and employers can create an environment that promotes continuous learning and Professional Development in the ELC sector.

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Appendix 1: Online Questionnaire

Introduction

Dear Early Learning and Care Professional,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this questionnaire aimed at understanding the factors that motivate and prevent professionals like yourself from engaging in regular continuing professional development (CPD). Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. We assure you that your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study and personal information will not be gathered. Please answer all questions as honestly and accurately as possible. Your feedback is greatly appreciated. Thank you again for your time and valuable contribution.

PART 1

1. **1. Current Job Title**

Mark only one oval.

- Early Years Assistant (baby room, toddler room, preschool room)
- Early Years Leader (baby room, toddler room, preschool room)
- Supervisor
- Manager

2. **2. How many hours do you work directly with the children weekly?**

Mark only one oval.

- More than 30 hours
- Less than 30 hours
- 30 hours

3. **3. How long are you working in the Early Learning and Care sector?**

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 1 year
- More than 1 year
- More than 5 years
- More than 10 years

4. **4. What is your highest level of qualification achieved to date?**

Mark only one oval.

- QQI Level 5
- QQI Level 6
- QQI Level 7
- QQI Level 8
- QQI level 9+

5. **5. Is this qualification specific to Early Learning Care and Education?**

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

6. **6. If no, please state which sector it applies to.**

Mark only one oval.

- Social Care
- Primary Teaching
- Other: _____

7. 7.County of Employment

Mark only one oval.

- Carlow
- Cavan
- Clare
- Cork
- Donegal
- Dublin
- Galway
- Kerry
- Kildare
- Kilkenny
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Limerick
- Longford
- Louth
- Mayo
- Meath
- Monaghan
- Offaly
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Tipperary
- Waterford
- Westmeath
- Wexford
- Wicklow

8. **8. Age Category**

Mark only one oval.

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56 - 65

PART 2

9. **9. In your own words how would you define CPD?**

10. **10. How much do you agree with the following statement: *Engaging in regular CPD is essential to the role of an ELC professional***

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. **11 Do you believe engaging in regular CPD should be:**

Mark only one oval.

Mandatory

Voluntary

12. **12 Please explain your answer?**

13. **13 In the past year, what types of CPD opportunities have you undertaken: *(Please select all that apply)***

Tick all that apply.

Full-time Accredited/Certified Training e.g. QQI Level 5 up to HE Level 9

Part-time Accredited/Certified Training e.g. QQI Level 5 up to HE Level 9

Internal/In-house Training

Coaching/Mentoring – Internal or external

Online/In-person training of fewer than 5 hours

Online/In-person training of more than 5 hours

Workshop

Professional Conference

Community of Practice

None

Other: _____

14. **14 Please indicate the reasons why you engaged in CPD in the past year. (Please tick all that you agree with).**

Tick all that apply.

- I required new knowledge and skills for my current role.
- I required new knowledge and skills for a new role.
- Engaging in regular CPD is part of my employment contract.
- I have always engaged in regular CPD, it's just part of the role.
- I wanted a pay rise.
- I was requested to attend by my employer.
- I work with children with special needs and required new knowledge to effectively work with them.
- I work with disadvantaged children and wanted new knowledge to work with them
- To network and collaborate with other ELC Professionals
- Other: _____

PART 3

15. **15 Please indicate the reasons you were unable to engage in CPD in the past year. (Please tick all that you agree with).**

Tick all that apply.

- There is not enough staff to cover my absence.
- CPD is too expensive.
- CPD conflicts with my work schedule
- I did not have the time due to family responsibilities.
- There was no relevant CPD offered
- The working day is too long to do it in the evenings.
- The working week is too long to do it at the weekend.
- It was in person and would prefer it online.
- It was online and I would prefer it in-person.
- I was unaware of CPD opportunities.
- I feel uncomfortable in the classroom environment.
- I don't have the IT/IT Knowledge to attend CPD online.
- Transport
- I don't get paid to do it.
- Other: _____

16. **16 What do you believe is required to allow ELC professionals to engage in regular CPD. (Please select all you agree with)**

Tick all that apply.

- Release from working with children for CPD during regular working hours
- Materials needed for CPD
- Reimbursement or payment of costs
- Non-financial support for activities for CPD outside working hours
- Non-financial professional benefits (improving promotion opportunities)
- Payment for CPD outside of working hours
- Non-financial rewards (classroom resources/materials, book vouchers, software)
- Increased salary
- Other: _____

17. **17 What opportunities and resources, if any, does your employer provide to support you to engage in regular CPD? (Please tick all that apply)**

Tick all that apply.

- Information and advice on CPD opportunities
- Membership
- Time off in Lieu
- Paid time for CPD hours
- Financial assistance
- Mentoring or Job Shadowing
- Internal training opportunities
- Other: _____

18. **18 Who do you think is responsible for providing CPD opportunities?**

Mark only one oval.

- Myself
- My employer
- The Government
- Other: _____

19. **19 How likely are you to engage in a higher qualification in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education?**

Mark only one oval.

Very Likely

1

2

3

4

5

Very Unlikely

20. **Would you be willing to engage in a follow-up online focus group to discuss this area further.**

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

21. **If yes, please insert your email address so the researcher can contact you directly regarding the online focus group.**

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



GRIFFITH COLLEGE

Participant Information Leaflet

My name is Marie Dowdall, and I am a Master's Student in Education, Learning, and Development. I am also interested in ensuring the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector becomes recognised as a profession. As part of my studies, I would like to explore your experiences of what motivates and prevents you from engaging in regular Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what taking part involves. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Don't hesitate to get in touch with me at marie.dowdall@student.griffith.ie if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the research?

Research shows that regular CPD is beneficial and worthwhile. However, Early Learning and Care professionals work very demanding and underpaid jobs. Therefore, finding the time and/or motivation to engage in CPD without clear objectives or benefits can be challenging. I want to discover what these motivating factors are and what prevents you, an early year's professional, from engaging in regular CPD. The research results will be shared with the people who create the policies for the ELC sector. This will ensure your voice is captured in any policy development regarding CPD in the sector.

I plan to collect the opinions and experiences of several early year's professionals via questionnaires and online focus groups.

Why have I been chosen to participate?

I am interested in understanding the experiences of several ELC professionals. You are invited to participate in this research because you work full-time in the ELC sector. I hope to engage 40-50 ELC professionals via a Google Forms questionnaire and an additional 10-14 early learning and care professionals in an online focus group session.

What is an online Focus Group session?

An online focus group session is a research method involving a small group of people guided through a discussion by a researcher. It takes place on an online platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Can I withdraw from the research?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to the analysis of findings, at which stage the data will be anonymous. Up to this point, you are free to withdraw your data, without giving a reason for withdrawing, and without your withdrawal having any adverse effect on you.

What will happen to me if I take part?

There are two ways you can participate in the research – via the online questionnaire and/or the online Focus Group.

If you choose to participate in the Online Questionnaire, the following will happen:

1. I will send you a link to a Google Forms questionnaire.

2. There will be a series of questions for you to complete, broken into three sections.
3. The first part of the questionnaire will seek to discover your personal perceptions of CPD – what is it, the types of CPD you engage in and whose responsibility it is to provide CPD.
4. The second part of the questionnaire will be based on your CPD experiences to date and the factors supporting your engagement in regular CPD.
5. The final part of the questionnaire will be based on the factors that prevent you from engaging in regular CPD. It will also ask questions like your job title, nationality and, the type of service you work in.
6. Your questionnaire answers will be recorded by Google Forms, where data is stored in a password-protected electronic format. Your responses are confidential as Google Forms does not collect identifiable information such as your name, email, and/or IP address. The questionnaire data will be deleted within 90 days.

Your participation in this questionnaire is voluntary and should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

If you choose to participate in the online Focus Group, the following will happen:

1. You will be invited to attend an online session via Zoom on a particular date and time.
2. The focus group will be recorded on Zoom and will last approximately 1 hour.
3. I will share the results of the questionnaire and seek your opinions on the findings.
4. Finally, I will ask you and the other ELC professionals about your experience of participating in regular CPD. I will also ask about what makes it easy for you to attend CPD and what will stop you from attending.

5. Please be advised that when recording the online focus group session on Zoom I will be choosing the "record to my computer" option and will not be recorded to the cloud.

After the session, I will listen to the recording and type up what was said. The data will be stored securely on the researcher's password-protected laptop and a backup on an encrypted USB memory stick. I can assure you that all data collected up to this point will be destroyed after graduation or in 24 months, whichever is sooner.

What data will be captured?

All the data collected will be anonymous. This means that no personal data or data to identify you will be collected via the online questionnaire or via the online focus group.

What will happen to the results of this research?

The results of this research will be submitted to Griffith College for grading as part of my dissertation. The results will also be shared with the DCEDIY Quality Unit via email to consider in the development of ... "a national programme of CPD opportunities" (Nurturing Skills, p.5)

What do I do if I have any further questions?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in the research, please ask the researcher who gave you this leaflet for further information. They will be happy to answer any questions that you may have. I can also be contacted via email at marie.dowdall@student.griffith.ie

Link to Questionnaire: <https://forms.gle/HcaQQQRAnaikTagT7>

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Research: A mixed-method approach to discover the factors that motivate and prevent Early Learning and Care (ELC) Professionals from engaging in regular Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

Recruitment Site: Direct email

Date: Wednesday 24th May 2023

Time: 7-8pm

Platform: Zoom

There are **two sections** in this form.

Section 1 contains statements of understanding and asks you to tick each if you understand. Please ask any questions you may have when reading each of the statements.

Section 2 asks for your informed consent. Please select either 'yes' or 'no' to indicate your choice.

The end of this form is for the researchers to complete. Thank you for participating.

Section 1: General Understanding	Tick
I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for the above research. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand all data contributed by me via the online questionnaire and/or the online focus group will be anonymous.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. I understand that not taking part will have no negative impact on me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw from this research at any time up to the point of the research findings. I understand at this point my data will be anonymous. I do not have to give a reason for withdrawing and understand withdrawing will not have an adverse effect on me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I will not be paid for taking part in this research or receive any benefits from any products developed because of this research.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know how to contact the researcher if I need to.	<input type="checkbox"/>

By ticking each box above, choosing my options below, and signing this document, I agree to participate in the research as described in the Participant Information Leaflet.

Section 2: Consent	Tick
--------------------	------

I agree to participate in this research, having been fully informed of the risks and benefits in the participant information leaflet.

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I agree to the anonymous data I have contributed including information from online focus group sessions and/or the online questionnaire, being used by the research team for this research as described in the participant information leaflet.

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I agree to the anonymous data I have contributed to the research being shared with The DCEDIY for research in the development of a National Programme for CPD.

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant Name (Block Capitals)	Participant Signature	Date
-----------------------------------	-----------------------	------

Witness Name (Block Capitals)	Witness Signature	Date
-------------------------------	-------------------	------

To be completed by the researcher or assigned nominee.

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this research in a way that they could understand.

I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the research that concerned them.

I have given a copy of the participant information leaflet and consent form to the participant with the researcher's contact details.

Researcher name	
Title and qualifications	
Signature	
Date	

Appendix 4: Invitation Email for Completing Questionnaire



2 attachments (5 MB) Save all to OneDrive - Griffith College Download all

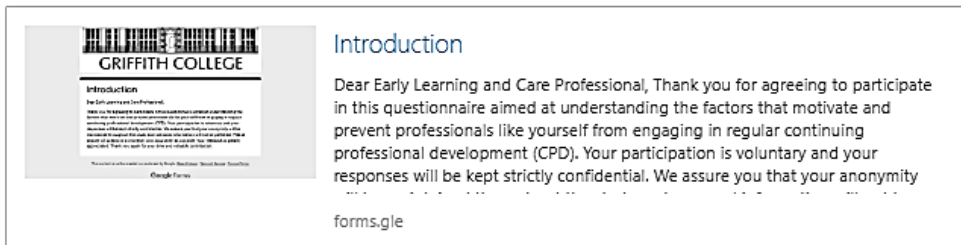
Dear ELC Manager

My name is Marie Dowdall. As part of my research project, I am conducting an online questionnaire on the factors that motivate and prevent ELC Professionals from engaging in regular Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

I would be grateful if you could share this questionnaire with your team members and encourage them to participate. The survey is anonymous and will take no more than 10 minutes to complete. The results will be analysed and used in the final submission of my Master's Dissertation.

Please find attached the participant information sheet and the questionnaire link below if you would like to forward this email directly to your team members. Alternatively, I have attached an invitation poster that you could kindly display on your staff notice board. Your Team members would simply access the participant information and the questionnaire with a QR code.

Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/Qq3AuQH81GWFTI2j9>



The deadline date for submission is Friday 5th May 2023. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at marie.dowdall@student.griffith.ie.

Your and your team members' support and participation in this study is greatly appreciated, and your responses will contribute to valuable research in the field of CPD in the Early Learning and Care sector.

Thank you for your support.

Best regards,

Marie Dowdall



Can you help my college research?

My name is Marie Dowdall and I am completing my Master's dissertation with Griffith College on the area of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) among ELC Professionals like yourself.

Can you spare 5-10 minutes to complete my online questionnaire?

Please scan the QR code below to access the participant information and/or the questionnaire



Questionnaire



Participant Information



Thank you!

Appendix 6: Invitation Email for Focus Group Participation



2 attachments (191 KB) Save all to OneDrive - Griffith College Download all

Hi There,

I hope this email finds you well.

I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for your participation in my recent questionnaire on what motivates and prevents you from engaging in regular CPD. Your valuable insights and contributions have provided me with significant data to further my research for my Master's dissertation. Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire.

As part of my research study, I am now planning to conduct an online focus group to delve deeper into the themes and ideas that emerged from the questionnaire responses. I believe your perspective and experiences will greatly enrich the discussions during the focus group.

Before I proceed, I kindly request your consent to participate in the online focus group. Attached to this email, you will find a consent form outlining the details of the focus group, including the date, time, and platform we will be using. I kindly ask you to review the form, complete it, and return it to me by Tuesday 23rd May 2023.

Participating in the focus group will provide you with an opportunity to engage in interactive discussions with other ELC professionals, share your thoughts, and contribute to further research into the area of CPD in the ELC sector. Your input will be highly valued.

I understand that your time is valuable, and I genuinely appreciate your willingness to participate in both the questionnaire and the potential focus group.

If you have any questions or require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am more than happy to provide any additional information you may need.

Once again, I extend my heartfelt appreciation for your participation and your ongoing support in my research endeavor. I look forward to receiving your completed consent form and the possibility of your presence in the upcoming focus group.

Warm regards,

Marie Dowdall

Appendix 7 : Focus Group Transcript

Facilitator: Hello everyone and welcome to this online focus group. It is a follow up focus group to an online questionnaire that you may have already completed on what motivates and prevents ELC Professionals from engaging in regular CPD. It is part of my master's dissertation in Education, Learning and Development with Griffith College.

Can you all give me a thumbs up if you have read the participant information sheet and returned your consent form to me. Thank you.

Can you all give me a thumbs up to confirm that you are all aware that this session is being recorded and I will use your responses in my upcoming dissertation. Thank you.

Please jump in at any point if you have any questions, or if you want me to clarify anything.

Please give me a final thumbs up if you are ready to start.

Great so let begin with the first question. I would love to hear about your CPD experiences over the past year – what type of CPD you engaged in, why you engaged in CPD and were there any barriers that prevented you from engaging in CPD over the past year?

Participant 1: Over the past year, I participated in a couple of trainings. I recently did a workshop on risky play and an online course with Barnardos on speaking to parents about Developmental concerns. I found them really useful. I work full time, so I was glad they were in the evenings, but I don't think I would be up for more. I do be wrecked at the end of the day.

Participant 2: In the last year, I did the FAR course over 3 Saturdays, Child protection training, manual handling and I think, fire safety training. The manual handling and fire safety was done with the whole team in the service. I think that was quite a lot. I did enjoy them though.

I think it's easier when you do it with people you know. Thankfully, they were all paid for by my boss, as I couldn't afford all that training myself.

Participant 3: Um I am only new to the role as a supervisor, so I spent a bit of time working directly with the manager helping me to get settled so I didn't have much time for training or courses as I have found myself constantly prioritising the demands of the job day to day. I did do my Child Protection training through as I am the DLP (Designated Liaison Person), and I needed it.

Participant 4: I love participating in training, I do it as often as I can. I even volunteered in a forest school and tried to bring the learning back to the staff in the services. I attend a lot of training online and in person with my local CCC and ECI. I even regularly organise inhouse training for the staff, particularly if it is linked to a Tusla inspection. I think doing training regularly is really important as things are always changing in the sector. However, I understand that it can be difficult for the girls, as I only work part-time, but the majority of them work full time and have their own family stuff going on.

Participant 5: I work for a large creche who part of a chain, and they have their own training team, so I regularly attend sessions of different topics like play, activities for children with special needs, outdoor play. I am the same as participant 2 in that we do our manual handling training and fire safety with the other staff. They only last 2 years, so I feel like we are doing it all the time. I am also doing my level 8 in childcare, so it has been a very busy year for me. Juggling work, studying, and personal life can be overwhelming at times.

Participant 6: I am also doing my level 8, and I have 3 children, so I don't really have the time for any other courses or training. I was really lucky in that my employer paid for the course, and she is giving me lots of support in getting through the programme, she recently graduated herself from the same course. She has even built in study days into our training policy to help anyone doing college courses.

Facilitator: Thank you everyone, I can really hear the great CPD experiences you have all engaged in in the past year. Are we ok to move onto the next questions, or would anyone like to add anything more? Great. The next question is the responses of the questionnaire generally convey a positive attitude towards CPD. Do you think this is reflective of all ELC Professionals within the ELC sector?

Participant 1: I think it does, most of the girls I work with are always up for doing training and stuff. Only recently there had to be a name drawn out of a hat of who would be put forward for the LINC course as so many of them wanted to do it.

I reckon the positive attitude towards CPD in our group might not be the same for all ELC Professionals in the sector. I mean, not everyone might be as tired as me or have the same level of enthusiasm for additional training. It really depends on the individual and their circumstances, you know?

Participant 2: Yeah, I agree with you there. As I said before we do a lot of training in house and there are never too many people complaining about it. Maybe the food that we get bought by the boss helps a bit.

Participant 3: I also think most childcare staff would have a positive attitude towards training. In supervision recently with staff I discussed Professional Development, and most of the staff were up for doing courses. A few mentioned that family stuff might make it difficult, but I think that's normal in most sectors not just ours.

Participant 4: I am not too sure on this one, while I have a very healthy relationship with doing courses and training, I can find it difficult to get the girls to go on anything. It would be easier if I was able to close the place and get all the girls together during the day to do training, but I know that is not possible sometimes as parents need the childcare. Extra funding would also be helpful, and more staff.

Participant 5: That's true. We're just a small group, and there's a whole bunch of ELC Professionals out there. Some might be fully focused on completing their formal education, like us, while others might be content with the training provided within their own organization. So, it's hard to say if our positivity reflects the whole sector.

Participant 6: Yeah, I agree with what everyone's saying although there's a good few people on the course I am doing, and they all seem to be enjoying it, so may yea, I think it might be reflective of most practitioners. Most of the people I know that work in childcare love their job and the children, so I think that helps.

Facilitator: Is that everybody?

Participant 1: Yes, I think so.

Participant 4: Yes.

Great. Thanks everyone. Are we ok to move onto the next question. Great. So, in the questionnaire I asked who should be responsible for providing CPD opportunities and the majority of the people said the government. What are your thoughts on this?

Participant 1: I think I answered the government on that question. I was thinking maybe if they provided funding to the services for CPD. That might help.

Participant 2 Aren't they doing that with Core Funding though?

Participant 4: Not everyone is part of Core Funding.

Facilitator: I can clarify here if you like. Core Funding was introduced for a number of reasons. It is being used to support the new Employment Regulation Order by providing additional funding to increase salaries. The funding is also a contribution towards non-contact time, CPD, curriculum implementation other quality improvements. I hope that helps.

Participant 2: Yes, so if they are already providing funding, how else can they help?

Participant 4: Maybe support us get more staff. Make the sector more attractive to work in, therefore, we can let staff do training during the day.

Participant 2: having more staff would really make a difference.

Facilitator: Would anyone else like to make a comment.

Participant 3: Personally, I would prefer to decide what training I should attend. There may be a lot of people who are happy with having the choice and may not like having to be told what training they should do or how many hours training they have to do. It may be easy for me to

do a course this year, but maybe not next year for whatever reason. I would also hate to have to tell my staff that that have to do X or Y training course.

Participant 4: I don't know about that though. I think it would be easier to get my girls to do training if the ask was coming from the government and not me.

Participant 5: it would be useful though for the government to be in charge of making sure that the training is the same across the country. I know I get regular updates from my local CCC about workshops and courses, but the staff in the services in other counties don't have that same opportunity. I know sometimes the manager says the staff are from the service in that county just to give them the opportunity. It would be nice if training was available in all counties as some can be really good.

Participant 6: I agree that the same courses should be available no matter where in the country you are located, but I would still like to make the decision for myself whether I do the courses or not.

Facilitator: Thanks everyone. Some great feedback and ideas there. Would anyone like to add anything else? Ok. Are we ok to move onto the next questions? Great. In the survey I asked whether people agreed or disagreed with the following statement Engaging in regular CPD is essential to an ELC's role. 82.7% of those either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement: why do you think the 17.3% disagree?

Participant 4: Not everyone likes doing training, so maybe may not see it as being an important part of the job. For my staff doing CPD is part of their employment contract, but it doesn't mean that they will actually do it.

Participant 2: I know I think doing training is an important part of the job, but it's just difficult to get the time or do it in the evenings when there is family stuff to do. It is also part of my work contract as well, and it comes up in my support and supervision sometimes as well.

Participant 5: I think maybe if someone does a course and they don't learn anything new, it can be like "what was the point in that". I know I have been to a few courses that were a bit boring and focused a bit too much on theory. For example, I would prefer if a course gave me ideas of how to create play activities for babies, then tell me why play is important for babies. I already know that. I just need to get some new ideas.

Participant 2: Maybe it's people who are just stuck in a rut, you know that people who just do the same things year after year. They are just happy doing the same thing, and don't then see the benefits of doing courses or training.

Facilitator: Participants 1, 3 or 6 would you like to add anything else?

Participant 3: I agree with participant 2 about being "stuck in a rut", I have worked with plenty of staff like that and it can be hard to motivate them to think "outside the box", let alone attend training. They do the mandatory stuff like Child Protection or First Aid and that.

Facilitator: Anyone else?

Participant 1: I don't have anything else to add.

Participant 6: Me either, I think the others covered everything.

Facilitator. Thanks everyone. Are we Ok to move on to the next questions? Ok. "Internal/In-House Training was the most common CPD opportunity the questionnaire respondents engaged in over the past year? Does this surprise you?"

Participant 1: Not me anyway, I do quite a bit of training within the service after working hours. It's handy, ya know? We get to learn from our own experienced staff and share ideas with our colleagues. It's like a support system right within our own workplace.

Participant 2: Same but for me, in-house training is a bit hit and miss, to be honest. I mean, it's great when we have those sessions that interesting and like, not fun, but gets you excited about the job, but sometimes it can feel a bit repetitive, ya know? I think it would be nice to have a mix of in-house and external opportunities to keep things fresh.

Participant 5: Yea same here. We have our own training team within the organisation, so I do most of my training in-house. We also have a dedicated team member who looks after the quality side of things and she regularly check-in with staff around different things with the children like activities, themes for the month, resources we might need and of course making sure we do our observations.

Participant 4: I can see how it would be really useful to be able to offer in-house training to my staff, but again, it's just difficult to get the girls to do anything after working hours and I can't close the service for them to do it during work. Although, I think personally I would miss hearing the ideas and practices from other services, so I don't think I would offer only in-house training. Training with others is important too.

Participant 3: I agree with participant 4 about the closing part. We are unable to close the service either. However, I did get a trainer in on a Saturday to do a few hours on Outdoor Play. We asked the staff if they would prefer to do it after work or on a Saturday. They chose the Saturday. Because we have core funding, we were able to pay the staff for doing the training on the Saturday.

Participant 6: I have never done training in-house. I have always done it somewhere in a hotel. I prefer it in person. I hated during covid when all training was online. I'd imagine that's maybe where in-house training came from. Only mixing with your own staff. I don't know. I am just thinking out loud. Sorry.

Facilitator: No worries. Would anyone like to add anything else or can we move on? Move on, ok, great. According to the questionnaire results, "I have always engaged in regular CPD, it's just part of the role" is the most common reason why ELC Professionals engaged in CPD in the past year. Why do you think this is?

Participant 4: That's me. I love training. I always have. I love learning. The young girls that I have working with me though probably wouldn't have the same attitude, they are very protective of their free time.

Participant 1: I have to agree with your staff though, I work very long hours during the week, I hate having to give up a Saturday to do training. I will do it though if I have to and prefer to do it when there are other girls from the service doing it too.

Participant 4: Do you not find though you get a bit energised and excited about the job again when you do training?

Participant 1: Sometimes I suppose.

Facilitator: Does anyone else see CPD as just part of the job and that is why you engage in CPD.

Participant 2: I suppose my employer does and that's probably one of the reasons why they developed the training team. It certainly has helped the staff do more training. For me I would

have done a lot of training anyway for lots of different reasons but being able to do it in house helps a lot. There is no travel involved, like to a hotel or that.

Participant 5: Do you not miss training with others though. I like seeing what other services are doing or approaching different things.

Participants 2: Maybe sometimes, it helps though that we get staff from some of the other services joining us sometimes.

Participant 4: I certainly wouldn't want to do all my training with just me and my staff, I like even meeting other managers on training. Being a manager can be a lonely job sometimes, and networking on training can be a great support.

Participant 5: I agree, there are a few managers on the course I am on, and they are always chatting away about different things. Mostly giving out if I'm honest.

Facilitator: can I steer ye back to the question at hand: Would anyone else like to add anything specifically about CPD being just part of the job.

Participant 3: I suppose it's difficult to agree or disagree as there are probably lots of other reasons why people do training. I know now that I am a new supervisor, I tend to zone in on the courses that are going to help me in my role, before when I was working with the children, I would have focused on courses to help me improve in that role and learn new things.

Participant 1: I have to agree with ya there because it depends what going on for you in the job.

Facilitator: Anything else? Ok, can we move onto the next question? Ok great. "There is not enough staff to cover my absence" and how CPD interferes with work schedules are common barriers that came up on the questionnaire. Can you think of any ways that we can overcome this.

(All participants nodding and agreeing)

Facilitator: I can see all of you agree with this. Is this something you have experienced?

Participant 5: For me it wasn't so much as interfering with work schedule, training that I would have liked to do clashed with my college days, so I suppose there is not much that could be done about that. Maybe if it was online and recorded that would have been helpful.

Participant 6: That's a good idea, I have missed out on loads of courses because I couldn't go. I just hope they become available again when I have a bit more free time after I am finished my course.

Participant 4; Staff is a huge issue in the sector at the moment, so unfortunately, I need to prioritise keeping my staff happy and keeping them in the job, then making them go on training. If I had relief staff, it would be easier to send the girls during the day or let them finish up early to attend in the evening. But the fact remains, there is no staff to be got. Noone wants to work in childcare anymore. The pay is just not good enough.

Participant 3: Agreed. We have a lot of trouble lately hiring staff. It's a constant battle trying to keep rooms open and staying in ratio, so I can understand how that would be a huge barrier for people. It doesn't help that sometime training is held during the day when we can't send staff.

Participant 1: Oh, it's so annoying when it's on during the day isn't it. Like there is no staff to cover me for lunch sometimes, how can we be expected to attend for training for like 3 hours during the day.

Participant 2: I agree. Which is why we do it in the evenings after work. Those hours get paid as well, so I think if all services were paying their staff for extra hours to do training it would help.

Participant 1: Not all services will do it though. I do it on my own time and at my own expense sometimes if I have to get a bus or pay for parking. It's what turns me off going on training half the time. I know it will be beneficial, not its just unfair that I don't get paid for it. I don't even get extra time off.

Facilitator: So, do you think if all staff got paid for training, would that help?

Participant 1: I think it would,

Participant 2. Yea

Participant 4: Maybe

Facilitator, So the next questions is. The majority of respondents regardless of their current qualification level will likely not engage in a higher qualification in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education. What do you think the reasons are?

Participant 4: Because they won't get any more money.

Participant 5: Well part of the reason I am doing my level 8, as I was told by my boss that I would be able to get more money, something to do with salary scales for working in childcare.

Participant 4: I know but it's not as much as primary school teachers, who also just have a degree.

Participant 6: Some of the girls are doing my course to get into teaching, because the hours are shorter, they don't work during the summer and its paid more, especially if you get a permanent job.

Participant 4: I don't think everyone wants to be a primary school teacher, I think they just do it to get the more money, which I don't think is a good move other, not everyone is cut out to be a teacher, just like everyone if not cut out to work in childcare. You should only do a job because you love the job.

Participant 1: Thats all well and good but bills still need to be paid, with my wages I don't think I will ever be able to own my own house. I like working in childcare, I just wish I was paid better, and there was more staff, so I didn't have to work as many hours. If someone rings in sick, I have to work 9 or 10 hours a day, which can be a regular occurrence.

Thanks everyone. We are now moving onto the final question of the evening, which is do you have a message for policymakers regarding the Development of a national IT system for CPD?

Participant 1: I would say that it needs to be user-friendly and accessible. We already have demanding jobs, so the system should be easy to navigate and not add unnecessary stress. It should also be available on different devices I live on my phone, so it would be handy if it was on the phone access.

Participant 2: Absolutely agree! I think it's important for them to design it with the needs of the likes of me and the rest of us here.

Participant 3: As a supervisor, I believe the national IT system would be very beneficial. We could see all the CPD options in one place, track our staff's progress, and make our jobs way less stressful. However, I agree that it needs to be kept simple and user-friendly.

Participant 4: Yea it might be a good idea. If it could be accessed in a flexible way, it might be easier to get my staff to engage in CPD. A reward for completing CPD, might be a little motivator also.

Participant 5: Yea flexibility would be important but also a variety of cps opportunities webinars, online resources, and the ones like the Sensory processing disorder programme that I did with Betterstart, where you click through the material yourself. That would help different learning preferences and provide flexibility for people like me with busy work and home life.

Participant 6: No glitches please. The Hive can be a nightmare for being slow and unresponsive.

Facilitator: Alright, everyone that bring a wrap to the focus group I want to extend a huge thank you to each and every one of you for taking the time to participate and share your valuable insights. Your perspectives on CPD experiences, motivations, and barriers will greatly contribute to my research project.

Now, I'd like to assure you that your participation and the data collected during this session will be managed with the utmost care and confidentiality. Any personal information shared during this discussion will be anonymised and only used for use in my dissertation.

Once again, thank you all again. I really appreciate the time you have taken out of your busy schedules. If you have any further questions or would like to stay informed about the study's progress, please don't hesitate to reach out. Have a great evening!

End of recording