A Q Methodology Study: Exploring Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Practices Using Universal Design for Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education Classrooms

Siobhán Canavan

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Dublin City University

Supervisors: Dr Anna Logan and Dr Sinéad McNally

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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 Doctor of Education, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: Siobhán Canavan

ID no.: 20213314

Date: 18th of August 2025

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mum, Josephine (Jo) Canavan (1945–2005),
for her eternal love and for always being by my side.

Solas na bhflaitheas ar a hanam dílis.

Figure D.1: Mum's Montessori preschool in the 1970s

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List of Acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CAST	Center for Applied Special Technology
CFA	Centroid factor analysis
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCU	Dublin City University
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EADSNE	European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education (programme)
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ECE	Early childhood educator
EdD	Doctor of Education
EFA	Education for All
GOI	Government of Ireland
KADE	KenQ Analysis Desktop Edition
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCA	Principal component analysis
Q	Q methodology
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UD	Universal Design
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Glossary

Aistear	Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
Diverse needs	Any need that impacts a child's learning, participation, development, or ability to engage with and benefit from education
Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme	The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) is a free, universal, two-year preschool programme accessible to all children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years and 6 months
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	The provision of care and education for children before compulsory school age includes a wide range of services, settings, and stakeholders involved in caring for and educating babies, toddlers and young children
Inclusive education	A humanistic vision of education rooted in human rights and social justice that affirms every child's right to learn by removing barriers, valuing diversity, and promoting whole-school inclusion
Inclusive education in ECEC	Meaningful participation and a sense of belonging in inclusive ECEC environments
Inclusive practices	A broad range of approaches, actions, and methods aimed at ensuring every individual's right to a high-quality, relevant, and appropriate education
Síolta	Ireland's National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
Social justice in ECEC	Social justice is the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within ECEC, ensuring that all children have equal access to essential needs and opportunities for growth and development
Subjective viewpoint or attitudes	Subjective viewpoints are internally constructed self-reflections of traits, competencies, and attitudes that shape actions and decisions. They are personal attitudes shaped by experience and interpretation and are neither objectively right nor wrong but expressions of individual beliefs
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	A framework that improves teaching and learning strategies by removing environmental barriers and recognising individual learning styles

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Go raibh maith agaibh go léir ó bhun mo chroí.

Abstract

A Q methodology Study: Exploring Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Practices Using Universal Design for Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education Classrooms

Siobhán Canavan

As awareness of learner diversity grows, there is an impetus to adopt and apply inclusive education across the education continuum. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is recognised in literature and policy as a key framework to promote equitable education for all children. However, its implementation in Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings remains limited. Moreover, most research has focused on UDL in higher education, with minimal attention to early childhood education. This study aimed to contribute to understanding the attitudes and beliefs of early childhood educators regarding inclusive pedagogical practices through the lens of UDL. It explored the variability of early childhood educators' attitudes as a first step to adopt UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in Irish ECEC. The study used the UDL Guidelines 3.0 to investigate early childhood educators' approach to creating all-inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) classrooms. The research adopted an exploratory qualiquantological hybrid approach (Q methodology) of insights from quantitative and qualitative methods to gain deep insight into, and understanding of, subjective viewpoints. The research participants were thirty-four early childhood educators with various roles who worked in ECCE classrooms. Each participant completed a Q-sort, which was analysed with Q software, followed by four post-Q online semi-structured interviews. In addition to highlighting a shared consensus on placing the child at the centre of inclusive practices, three distinguishing viewpoints were identified, categorised, and named as *Relational Advocates*, *Collaborative Partners*, and *Compassionate Innovators*. Additionally, using a flexible, alternative, and post-disciplinary research method such as Q methodology allows for objectively and scientifically exploring subjective beliefs and opinions, thereby gaining new knowledge and making a substantial contribution to education research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explored the attitudes of early childhood educators (ECEs) who work with children with diverse needs in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) classrooms. In this context, the study critically examined the attitudes of ECEs to understand their viewpoints and perspectives on inclusive pedagogical practices through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Furthermore, this research investigated ECEs' attitudes to implementing UDL as a suitable inclusion tool in the ECCE classroom.

This chapter discusses the concepts of inclusive education and inclusive education in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It then considers the construct of needs in education, followed by an overview of ECEC in Ireland, the policies concerning inclusion in ECEC and the national frameworks employed in this context to support the ECCE programme. The chapter also presents my positionality, along with the aims and rationale for this study. Finally, it discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding this study.

1.2 Inclusive Education

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2017a) states that the core message of inclusive education is that 'every learner [child] matters and matters equally'(p.12). The challenge lies in translating this message into action because implementing it requires changing attitudes and educational systems across the education continuum. Many contemporary thinkers argue that there is no universally accepted definition of inclusive education within the literature (Winter & O'Raw, 2010; Haug, 2017; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Krischler *et al*., 2019; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). Nevertheless, internationally, Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) broadly defines education as fostering children's personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential while respecting their cultures and values. The Salamanca Statement further emphasises the necessity of accommodating all children, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional conditions (UNESCO, 1994), thereby paving the way for inclusive education for all. Moreover, Ainscow *et al.,* (2006) define inclusive education as a process that focuses on identifying and eliminating barriers to the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners. General Comments No. 1 (2001) and No. 4

(2016) expand this definition by suggesting that inclusive education is crucial for achieving high-quality education for all children (O'Sullivan and Ring, 2023).

Ensuring high-quality education for all children requires addressing inclusion at all levels (whole-system approach) and meeting diverse physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and cultural needs (whole-person approach) to guarantee equal access and participation (United Nations, 2016). From this perspective, inclusive education is seen as a humanistic vision of education, rooted in human rights and social justice. It affirms every child's fundamental right to a fair education and promotes the equitable distribution of resources, supports, opportunities, and privileges within ECEC (UNESCO, 2016). This approach ensures that all children have equal access to essential needs and opportunities for growth and development by identifying and removing barriers, valuing diversity, and advocating a whole-school approach (UNESCO, 2016; Florian, 2019; Ainscow, 2020; Government of Ireland, 2024b). Defining inclusive education remains complex and contested due to the varying theoretical approaches and discourses that underpin inclusion and inclusive practices in education, including the medical, social, human rights, biopsychosocial, and interactionist models (Mitchell, 2018; Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Nevertheless, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) establishes that all children, including children with disabilities, have a right to inclusive education.

In this study, the concept of inclusive education is viewed as a biopsychosocial and interactionist approach, grounded in the principles of social justice, equity, fairness, and equal opportunity. It emphasises every child's right to learn by minimising barriers, recognising diversity, providing support, and promoting whole-school inclusion while valuing interactions and reciprocal relationships among children, families, and the community within and beyond the ECCE classroom.

1.2.1 Inclusive Education in ECEC

Nutbrown (2018) argues that recognising children's fundamental right to education is insufficient for inclusion in ECEC, as it fails to guarantee meaningful participation. She suggests 'social inclusion' (p. 116) to eliminate exclusion and fully embrace inclusion in ECEC. However, the interpretation of social inclusion in this context remains unclear. Undoubtedly, a child's physical presence in an educational setting does not necessarily ensure inclusion (Cologon, 2013). Therefore, genuine inclusion entails active engagement

in learning alongside peers and supportive adults (Ginner Hau, Selenius, & Björck Åkesson, 2022). Moreover, inclusion in ECEC necessitates universal measures to assist children's participation in various activities and learning opportunities (Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022). Participation encompasses both 'attendance', or mere presence, and 'involvement', which refers to engagement with the environment and social interactions (Imms *et al*., 2013; Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022) while also nurturing a sense of belonging (Cullinane, 2023). Consequently, inclusion in ECEC encompasses meaningful participation, inclusive environments, and belonging.

Another aspect of inclusive education in ECEC is equity education. Equitable education is linked to the quality of practice, access, and the fair distribution of resources (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, (EASNIE), 2018). It supports all children in achieving their educational potential, regardless of their circumstances, while promoting their well-being and a sense of belonging (Nutbrown *et al*., 2013; EASNIE, 2018; Cerna *et al*., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD), 2023). Love and Horn (2021) emphasise that high-quality, ECEC-inclusive education is based on instructional practices and institutional processes rather than individualised responses or separate educational settings. This aligns with Logan *et al*.'s (2016) view that inclusive education in ECEC provides rich early experiences and outcomes for all children, regardless of disability. Furthermore, inclusive and equitable education in ECEC encompasses diverse practices that focus on individuals' needs, rather than solely on their disabilities (Nutbrown, Clough, and Atherton, 2013).

Supporting UNESCO's message that 'every learner [child] matters and matters equally' and aiming to ensure that every child matters and is not left behind, inclusive education and equal participation are central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b). The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), Target 4.2 SDG 4, aims to ensure that all young children have access to quality early childhood education and care, thereby supporting their readiness for primary school (UNESCO, 2021a). Notwithstanding this ambitious task of inclusive education for all, the Irish government has sought to guarantee that all children and young people have the support needed to reach their full potential today and in the future (GOI, 2014). The Irish government has also developed and published the First Five policy, a Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028. This strategy establishes that an effective early childhood system ensures that those caring for young children possess the necessary tools and resources

to nurture their development. The First Five strategy is underpinned by a commitment to promoting diversity and social inclusion and also provides for financial support to remove barriers that impede participation in early childhood education (Government of Ireland, 2019).

1.3 Conceptualising Diverse Needs

Some countries use the term *special educational needs* to describe children with impairments (UNESCO, 2017a). In Ireland, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides a statutory foundation for understanding how needs are defined and addressed within educational contexts. The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004, p. 6) defines such needs as follows:

> special educational needs means, in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.

This definition could arguably represent a deficit or medical model approach by which special educational needs are viewed as limitations that hinder a child's ability to engage with and benefit from education, requiring tailored support. Consequently, making negative generalisations about children due to limited capacity and perceived differences may lead to stereotyping children at individual and institutional levels (Cologon, 2013; 2019). In December 2021, the Irish government initiated a comprehensive review of the EPSEN Act 2004 to enhance support for inclusive education and address the needs of staff, students, and families. The review included three surveys, focus groups with diverse perspectives from stakeholders affected by the Act, and feedback days with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), organisations, and individuals. This review is expected to be concluded in early 2025 (Department of Education, 2025). Considering the scope of this review, adjustments to the definition may be necessary, as it is viewed as outdated, deficit-oriented, and a barrier to genuinely inclusive practices (Norwich, 2017; Slee, 2018; Florian, 2019; Ainscow, 2020).

Children with needs beyond those defined as special educational needs, as outlined in the EPSEN Act, are addressed in Cerna *et al*.'s (2021) framework for advancing inclusive education in diverse societies, which suggests that various needs of children may arise from factors such as gender and ethnic origin, immigrant status, special educational needs, and

giftedness (p. 10). This encompasses children from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds; those with developmental disorders, including visual, hearing, or physical impairments; children facing emotional or behavioural challenges and/or communication difficulties; and, finally, children with general learning needs (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020).

Throughout this study, and in light of the definitions provided above, this research adopts and employs the term *children with diverse needs*. Using the term *diverse needs* instead of the more restrictive *special educational needs* expands the focus from merely deficits or impairments to encompass a broader range of factors that influence a child's learning and participation. This term also recognises and acknowledges that children's needs may stem from various factors, including socio-economic background, developmental differences, communication challenges such as autism, or because they are in the early stages of learning the language of instruction of the ECEC setting. Adopting this terminology is flexible and aligns with the focus of this study, allowing ECEs to consider all children from two years and eight months to five years and six months in universal ECCE programmes who exhibit diverse needs and require support at various times for different purposes. Furthermore, this term will enhance the findings by capturing a more holistic picture, thereby informing more inclusive practices underpinned by UDL that accommodate a broader spectrum of children. In the context of this study, the term *diverse needs* refers to any need that impacts a child's learning, participation, development, or ability to engage with and benefit from education.

1.4 Context of ECEC in Ireland

The ECEC sector in Ireland has undergone significant reform over the past two decades, moving from a fragmented system of care and education toward a more integrated, professionalised model (Rogers, 2018; Barnardos, 2022). Historically, ECEC settings were viewed mainly as childcare rather than educational environments. As a result, ECEC policies were primarily influenced by a childcare focus, prioritising the provision of places for children to support parental workforce participation, rather than emphasising early education and developmental outcomes (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). Preschool Regulations were first introduced in Ireland in 1996 and subsequently revised in 2006 and 2016 under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, as well as the development of the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) in 2018 (Barnardos, 2022). These developments and changes have introduced an abundance of policies, some of which are outlined in Table 1.1

below. Moreover, a wide range of support and investments for ECEs', ECEC providers, parents, and families to meet the evolving requirements and expectations were introduced (Barnardos, 2022), most notably the introduction of Síolta, Ireland's National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in 2006, Aistear, Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009, the universal free Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) in 2010, and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which will be discussed in more detail in section 1.5 and the later in section 1.6

In 2015, an inter-departmental group established by the Irish government discovered that coordination and support were sometimes inadequate for children with diverse needs to participate fully in the universal free ECCE programme. Some children faced barriers to access and involvement, while others did not reach their full potential due to gaps in essential support. In light of the findings of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care (DES, 2015), a national model of support was agreed upon to enable children with diverse needs to access and participate in ECCE programmes. This led to the introduction of AIM in 2016, marking a pivotal moment in the development of inclusive practices within Irish ECEC (Walsh, 2017).

Since 2016, inclusion has become increasingly embedded in national policy, strengthening the commitment to full participation for all children, regardless of ability (Robinson, 2022). Furthermore, government funding has increased to support children accessing ECEC in Ireland; for example, in 2024, government funding for children with diverse needs under the AIM was increased by €14 million (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025a).

To further support children with diverse needs who experience disadvantage while attending the ECCE Programme, a new funding model, Equal Start, was introduced in September 2024 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, (DCEDIY) 2024a). This model complements both the ECCE Programme and AIM by providing additional targeted supports (DCEDIY,2024a). Additionally, the Irish Government's allocation of €1.37 billion for ECEC in 2025 will enable it to reinforce and further develop the progress made in recent years in terms of access and inclusion to ECEC (DCDE, 2025b). These changes have created opportunities for ECEs to improve their qualifications to degree level, and for all staff to meet the minimum qualification requirements of level five on the National Framework for Qualifications (Rogers, 2018). However, challenges remain in translating inclusive policy into consistent practice of inclusion across all ECEC settings, particularly concerning staff training and retention, resourcing, and attitudes (Robinson, 2022).

1.5 Educational Policies and Legal Provisions for Inclusion in Irish ECEC

Recent policy developments have further shaped the inclusion landscape and inclusive education in Irish ECEC, reflecting a continued shift towards a rights-based and participatory model of inclusion underpinned by the UNCRC. This is perhaps most notably reflected in the Young Ireland, National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 and the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028. Moreover, the Irish government has published many policies and initiatives to support high-quality, inclusive ECEC settings, as illustrated in Table 1.1 below. Following years of exclusion of children with diverse needs in the Irish education system, the system has evolved into one of inclusion, focusing on the rights of children and their families, as well as the notion that inclusion benefits all children (Ring, 2021, 2023). Table 1.1 presents O'Sullivan and Ring's typology of high-quality inclusive ECEC policy initiatives across three domains: macro (national policy level), meso (national implementation of programmes level), and micro (ECEC level), as well as their interactions. The Participation of Children and Young People in the Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028 and the Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028 policies were added to O'Sullivan and Ring's typology of high-quality inclusive ECEC, as they are new policies. The policies in Table 1.1 references were selected because they provide the structural, legislative, and philosophical context in which ECEs operate, making them essential for interpreting the findings and significance of this research.

Macro-level implementation **National policy level**	**Meso-level implementation** **National programmes**	**Micro-level implementation** **Preschool level**
Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014–2020). Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland (2015). First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and Their Families 2019–2028. Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2021). Nurturing Skills: the Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2022–2028). Participation of Children and Young People in the Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028 Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028	Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006). Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009, 2024). Aistear–Síolta practice guide (2016). Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (2016). Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings (2019).	Free Universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (2010). Better Start Quality Development Service (2013). Tusla Early Years (Preschool) Inspectorate (2014). Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (2016). Better Start Early Years Learning and Development Unit (2015). Department of Education Early Years Inspectorate 2015.

Table 1.1: Adapted version of the key policies and initiatives for high-quality inclusion in ECEC (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023, p. 2)

The macro level outlines the government's broad strategies and frameworks to establish overarching goals for inclusion, quality, and accessibility in ECEC. The meso level emphasises implementing national programmes aimed at achieving policy objectives that guide curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. The micro level highlights specific interventions within ECEC settings, striving to ensure that all children directly benefit from these national policies and practices, thus fostering high-quality, inclusive educational experiences.

While the model clearly organises Ireland's policy landscape and outlines the progression of high-quality inclusive education in ECEC, there is often an overlap between the micro, meso, and macro levels, which influences variability in policy implementation. For example, the First Five strategy drives system-wide ECEC reform at the macro level, enhances affordability through funding schemes at the meso level, and supports quality and inclusion through implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and the Aistear and Síolta frameworks at the micro level (Government of Ireland, 2018). Additionally, the model places a strong emphasis on a top-down approach and does not explicitly address disparities in how these policies are implemented and the challenges faced by ECEs.

1.5.1 The Development of Síolta and Aistear National Frameworks

A recent study published by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found that historically, investment in inclusion and inclusive practices in early years education has been minimal, haphazard, and targeted at primary school education (Curristan, McGinnity, Russell, & Smyth, 2023). The ESRI study also highlighted that, despite investment in the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), expenditure per child in Ireland remains below the EU average. It noted a fragmented system with limited state oversight until the AIM initiative sought to introduce greater structure and inclusion for young children (Curristan *et al*., 2023).

Nonetheless, there have been significant advancements in ECEC, from policies and investments to the development of Síolta, the National Quality Framework, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (French & McKenna, 2022). Síolta was designed to improve the quality of provision in early years settings through its principles, standards, and components of quality (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017).

While initially developed to promote quality ECEC practice, Síolta also encompasses and fosters all-inclusive learning ECEC environments through many of its standards, as illustrated in Table 1.2.

Síolta Standards of Quality	Categories
Standard 1	Rights of the Child
Standard 2	Environments
Standard 3	Parents & Families
Standard 4	Consultations
Standard 5	Interactions
Standard 6	Play
Standard 7	Curriculum
Standard 8	Planning & Evaluation
Standard 9	Health & Welfare
Standard 10	Organisation
Standard 11	Professional Practice
Standard 12	Communication
Standard 13	Transitions
Standard 14	Identity & Belonging
Standard 15	Legislation and Regulation
Standard 16	Community Involvement

Table 1.2: Síolta standards of quality, Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

The standards closely align with inclusive education; for example, Standard 1 (Rights of the Child) safeguards children's rights, promotes participation in their learning and development, and encourages children to exercise choice and active participation. Standard 2 (Environments) promotes the physical and social spaces that are accessible for all children, and Standards 3 (Parents and Families), 4 (Consultation), 5 (Interactions), and 12 (Communication) place significant emphasis on collaboration and respectful and reciprocal relationships. Standards 6 (Play), 7 (Curriculum), 13 (Transitions), and 14 (Identity and Belonging) consider the implementation of the curriculum and ensuring the well-being of each child in the setting. Standards 8 (Planning and Evaluation), 9 (Health and Welfare), 10 (Organisation), and 11 (Professional Practice) consider the structural elements and the necessary skills and knowledge of staff and ECEs working with children, regardless of diverse needs, to ensure a high-quality, inclusive early years service (DES, 2017).

1.5.2 Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in ECEC

Creating an inclusive curriculum involves offering diverse learning opportunities and experiences that celebrate and respect each child's abilities, individuality, and cultural background (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024a), endorsed by the frameworks Aistear and Síolta. Due to the changing nature of society, workforce development, the current research on children's learning and development, and policy changes since the conception of the original Aistear in 2009, the government of Ireland, in conjunction with the NCCA, has updated the framework to recognise and reflect these changes and to facilitate children's holistic learning and development. Aistear caters for children aged from birth to five years (French & McKenna, 2022; GOI, 2024a).

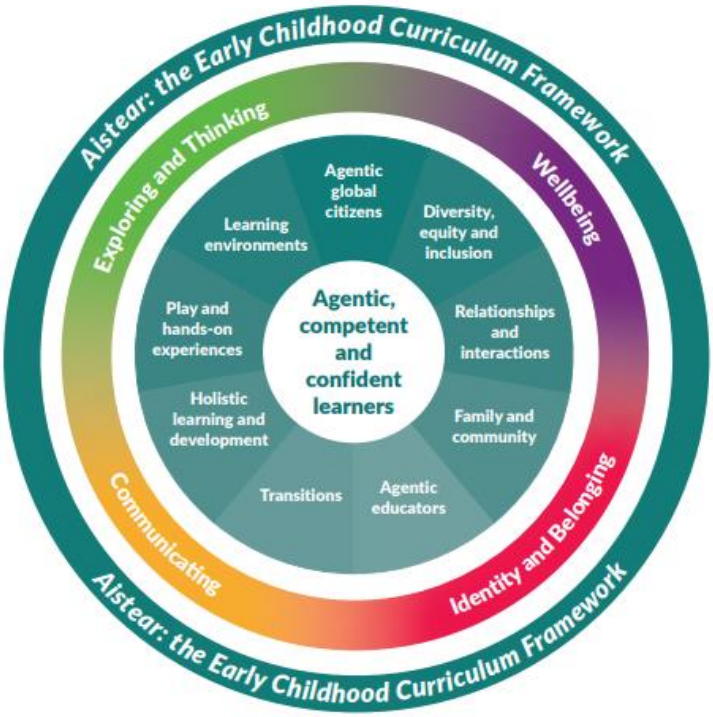

Figure 1.1: Updated Aistear's configuration (GOI, 2024a, p. 15)

Figure 1.1 illustrates Aistear, the Irish term meaning 'journey', which is Ireland's inaugural curriculum framework, published in 2009 (NCCA, 2009). Aistear aims to support and guide children's learning by interconnecting four themes: (1) Exploring and Thinking, (2) Communication, (3) Identity and Belonging, and (4) Well-being. Nine principles are embedded within these four themes, as illustrated above. These principles constitute the framework's foundation and reinforce ECEs' perception of children as 'agentic, competent, and confident' (GOI, 2024a, p. 6). The primary focus of the framework is to support each child's learning and development through a rights-based, emergent, and inquiry-led

curriculum. Aistear also fosters cultural and linguistic diversity, informing practices across various ECEC settings (Government of Ireland, 2024a).

1.6 Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) in Context

In January 2010, the Irish government introduced the first universal, one-year ECCE programme, providing all children with a year of free access to ECCE classrooms. The ECCE programme allows children to participate in a play-based pedagogical programme at no cost to their primary caregivers. A child must be at least two years and eight months old by August 31st and no older than five years and six months by June 30th. According to the DCEDIY, the programme provides children with their first structured early learning experience before transitioning to primary school. It operates three hours a day, five days a week, over 38 weeks from August to June each year (DCEDIY, 2024a).

This scheme was extended in 2016 to two years of free access to ECEC for children aged two years and eight months. This resulted in the expansion of provision generally and a greater diversity in the profile of children attending the ECCE programme (French & McKenna, 2022; GOI, 2024b).

The ECCE programme, supported by the Aistear and Síolta frameworks, emphasises the diversity in children's profiles by recognising that all children possess individual 'needs, interests, ideas, skills, and strengths' (GOI, 2024a, p. 33). However, evidence suggests that targeted intervention and support for some children with diverse needs attending the ECCE programme remain challenging (Ring, 2021, 2023; Curristan *et al*., 2023).

1.6.1 Policies Supporting the ECCE Programme

Following the introduction of the ECCE programme, the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures policy (2014–2020) was published, marking the first central framework to coordinate all policies for children and young people aged 0–24 years. It was a cross-sectoral government policy focusing on two key commitments: (1) ensuring that children's voices are heard, and (2) providing support for their well-being and future success (GOI, 2014). It became an inclusive framework to include ECEC children by establishing investments associated with children and young people aged 0–24 years, emphasising early intervention and prevention in various areas, such as education and health. The DCYA mid-term review 2018 of Better

Outcomes, Brighter Futures noted a failure to meet the targets and expectations outlined in the policy. Furthermore, there was a perceived lack of the necessary commitment required to implement the policy, despite the Irish government's strong emphasis on children's rights and equality, as well as on children's long-term achievements (DCYA, 2018).

The Better Outcomes, Brighter Future policy was later replaced by Young Ireland, National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028. This framework emphasises that young children have the right to express their views and must be supported to participate meaningfully in everyday decisions within ECEC settings. It outlines that ECEs must have the skills, competencies, training, tools, and resources to support their implementation of participatory practices in age-appropriate ways. There is a commitment to developing training tools, guidance, and professional learning (PL) and development programmes to embed inclusion in daily practice. These commitments are closely aligned with existing national frameworks such as Aistear and the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide, which already advocate for child voice as a key component of high-quality, inclusive ECCE classrooms (DCEDIY, 2024b).

Another policy supporting the ECCE programme is the First Five strategy, which outlines a vision for early childhood and a commitment to significant initiatives for children and families, community and health services, parental support, and ECEC services (GOI, 2019). First 5 promotes equal access and participation in high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care. It defines ECEC as 'any regulated arrangement that provides education and care from birth to compulsory primary school age' (p. 26). First Five also aligns with the SDG 4 goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality ECEC and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all (GOI, 2019). As discussed in the following section, it is dedicated to expanding the Access and Inclusion Model in ECCE classrooms.

1.6.2 Access and Inclusion Model

AIM is a national, child-centred model designed to ensure that children with disabilities can participate meaningfully in the ECCE Programme without the need for a formal diagnosis. It reflects a rights-based approach to inclusion and represents a significant policy shift toward equity and universal access in early childhood education (DES, 2015). The AIM policy was introduced to early childhood education in 2016 to ensure adequate care and education for children with diverse needs while addressing gaps in support in the universal

free ECCE programme. The policy aims to empower children to reach their full potential in an inclusive ECEC classroom (DES, 2015).

AIM is the only support offered by the Irish government to support the implementation of inclusive education and practices. AIM is designed to support ECEs in establishing inclusive learning environments and in accessing targeted support for individual learners as required so that children with diverse needs can successfully participate in the ECCE programme (DCYA, 2016).

Figure 1.2: AIM's Levels of Need, from non-complex to complex (DCYA, 2016, p. 3)

AIM has seven levels of support to assist ECEs in creating inclusive environments and applying for targeted support, as shown in Figure 1.2. Each level of support is explained in Table 1.3 below.

AIM support Level	Type of support	Description
Level 1	Universal Support	Promotes an inclusive culture through capacity-building innovations.
Level 2	Universal Support	Provides information and guidance for parents.
Level 3	Universal Support	Ensures qualified and confident ECEs who support all children in reaching their full potential.
Level 4	Targeted Support	Offers expert advice and mentoring from an Early Years Specialist (Better Start).
Level 5	Targeted Support	Provides specialised equipment to support children's needs.
Level 6	Targeted Support	Offers therapeutic services based on individual needs, determined by an early years specialist.
Level 7	Targeted Support	This allows ECEC settings to apply for additional capitation to hire extra staff to support children with diverse needs in the ECCE programme.

Table 1.3: Levels of support provided by AIM

Interestingly, the AIM policy notes that a formal, individual diagnosis is not required to access its provision; however, it strongly emphasises targeted support for children with diverse needs, particularly at levels 6 and 7. The AIM Rules 2024/25 acknowledge that 'a child may need therapeutic support to access and meaningfully participate in preschool [ECCE]' (DCEDIY, 2024c, p. 22). A Better Start early years specialist will arrange for a healthcare professional to provide support at level 6, which may involve tailored one-to-one intervention. Similarly, the specialist may visit the ECEC setting to conduct a service observation review to determine if AIM level 7 support is necessary for a child with diverse needs (DCEDIY, 2024c).

The title of the levels of support is documented as the levels of need, ranging from non-complex to complex, in the policy documents (Figure 1.2), indicating that some children have complex needs and require intervention. While recognising the complexity of implementing the AIM at various levels due to the diversity of children's learning profiles and needs, there are tensions between inclusive education and specialised provision, as Norwich (2024) noted. Norwich raised questions about whether acknowledging differences among children promotes inclusion or exclusion, which he called the 'dilemmas of difference' (p.7). Norwich highlights that treating children the same risks neglecting supports for children with diverse needs, while treating them differently risks stigmatisation. He also identifies tensions between designing a common curriculum versus adapting it for learner diversity, which may still exclude some children, as well as between respecting children's right to participate and make decisions versus the need to protect them (Norwich, 2024).

Nevertheless, Morrissey, King, and Keating (2024) suggest that full inclusion may not be feasible and that inclusion might entail a structured yet flexible curriculum framework with adult support to bridge the gap between inclusion and exclusion in schools. In the context of the ECCE classroom, the synergy between the Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (GOI, 2024a) and the AIM provision could consequently provide a balance of structure, flexibility, and support for the meaningful participation of all children.

To support AIM, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (formerly the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) developed the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (2016). This charter provides a framework for policymakers and ECEs to integrate inclusive principles into policies and daily practices, thereby fostering rich environments for young children (DCYA,

2016, p. iv). The charter also guides ECEs to foster diversity, equality, and inclusion through an anti-bias approach, supporting the implementation of inclusive learning and policies. Beyond outlining broad commitments to equality and diversity, the Charter defines core values, including respect, belonging, and full participation, for all children, regardless of their background, ability, or identity. It provides practical guidance to help educators critically reflect on and adapt their curriculum, interactions, and environments to challenge bias and promote equity.

The Charter also advocates for culturally and linguistically responsive practices, recognising the importance of affirming children's home languages, cultures, and individual identities. Furthermore, it promotes a whole-setting approach to inclusion, ensuring that leadership, pedagogy, and family partnerships are aligned in fostering inclusive learning communities (DCYA, 2016). However, the charter lacks specific guidance on quality teaching and learning practices for children with specific needs, referring ECEs back to the AIM. Moreover, Irish early childhood policies and frameworks lack detailed strategies such as UDL to identify and eliminate educational barriers beyond establishing meaningful participation in diverse ECCE classrooms and providing extended learning opportunities. Nonetheless, the charter emphasises the importance of inclusive and accessible environments, ensuring that all children have equal access to a play-based curriculum.

1.7 Researcher's Positionality

Growing up in a household where my parents were deeply rooted in education and care has shaped me as an educator and taught me invaluable lessons throughout my life. My father was a post-primary school teacher; my mother was a nurse and Montessori teacher. My first exposure to ECEC was when my mother opened her Montessori school for local children from 1971 until 1984. She then opened the first private nursing home in the southeast of Ireland, where I lived until I married. Witnessing my parents' dedication to education and the care of others has profoundly influenced my belief in social justice, setting me on my own professional journey.

From my experience owning and managing my crèche and Montessori school to working in community, special, further, and higher education, I have collaborated with numerous students, children, parents, and highly knowledgeable, caring teachers, lecturers, and special needs assistants about how we can improve the lived experiences of students and children in education. In 2018, my master's degree research focused on the attitudinal perspectives of

academics regarding the implementation of UDL in a university. This research led to changes within the university to actively promote UDL as an equitable and effective pedagogical tool across all faculties. While the university's management was open to supporting students with diverse needs by eliminating educational barriers and fostering an inclusive environment, enabling students to reach their full potential, they quickly realised that there was more the university could do to accommodate students with diverse needs.

Witnessing the difference in my teaching approach using UDL, I observed how students became more motivated, engaged, and eager to learn. I realised that more students were achieving academic success with some modifications to assessments and the teaching and learning environment, notably when I introduced a flipped classroom. This approach fostered an inclusive environment by using diverse teaching methods to cater to all students while following the three principles of UDL: multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement, as best I could. Based on my experiences over the past few years in the education sector, I believe that all learners have the right to education regardless of their diverse needs. In addition, providing an all-inclusive classroom, by breaking down the barriers to learning supports, encourages and fosters successful outcomes for all, leaving no one behind.

1.8 Research Problem

One key pedagogical approach to fostering fair and equitable education for *all* children is the UDL framework. This framework is used to refine school teaching and learning practices to support and establish learner agency (Flood & Banks, 2021; Centre for Applied Special Technology, 2025). In the context of Irish ECEC, the Irish government published policy guidelines on universal design (UD) for the sector, emphasising the significance of the built environment in promoting an inclusive learning experience environment (Grey *et al.*, 2019). O'Sullivan and Ring (2023) suggest that these guidelines are designed to accommodate children's individual physical, psychological, and emotional needs. However, the UD guidelines neglect to fully embrace the true concept of the UDL framework by omitting 'Learning' as a crucial component, despite UDL's increasing presence in national and international educational policies. Furthermore, much of the research has concentrated on UDL in higher education, with limited attention on ECEC, despite calls for educators to plan for and employ varied approaches to teaching and learning that include all children with diverse strengths and needs by utilising UDL (National Council for Special Education,

2025). There is little evidence in the Irish context to draw upon to identify or explore the attitudes of early ECEs on the implementation of UDL in ECEC.

1.9 Research Aims and Rationale

Many of my part-time and evening ECEC students expressed over the past few years that they found working with some children with diverse needs in their classes increasingly challenging. They often sought my advice, as their lecturer, on the best approach and suitable strategies for working with the children. Thinking about the success I gained using UDL in higher and further education, I wondered if this could be transferred to the early years. Therefore, I was keen to explore UDL as a suitable tool in ECEC. After searching the literature, I discovered a gap in the knowledge of implementing UDL in Irish ECEC and Irish ECEs' attitudes to fostering an inclusive environment underpinned by UDL.

To support my students' understanding of diversity and inclusion in ECEC, and to contribute to new knowledge in the field, I first needed to investigate ECE attitudes and beliefs regarding the inclusion of all children and how UDL is understood and implemented as a suitable effective pedagogical tool within their classrooms, as well as how it aligns with current policy and ECEC frameworks. Therefore, this study seeks to address the research gap regarding the implementation of UDL in Irish ECCE classrooms by investigating ECEs' attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices through the lens of UDL as a pedagogical approach. The overarching research question guiding this study is: What is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms?

1.10 Conceptual Framework for this Study

Given that ECEs ' attitudes are central to the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Hanley & Garrity, 2024) and form the primary focus of this study, Q methodology is particularly well-suited to serve as both the research method and conceptual framework. As Baker, Thompson, and Mannion (2006, p. 38) state, Q methodology provides "a means of exploring subjectivity, beliefs and values while retaining the transparency, rigour, and mathematical underpinnings of quantitative techniques." This dual strength makes Q especially effective for systematically capturing and interpreting the subjective viewpoints that underpin inclusive practices in ECCE classrooms.

Exploring educators' attitudes is inherently complex, as subjectivity is shaped by personal values, lived experiences, and professional contexts (Brown, 1980). Q methodology is uniquely designed to engage with this complexity. It is widely recognised as a robust and systematic approach for studying subjectivity (Brown, 1980; Cross, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012), enabling researchers to understand attitudes as holistic and interconnected meanings rather than discrete variables. This approach aligns closely with the study's aim to explore the variability, nuance, and depth of ECEs' views on inclusion through the lens of UDL.

Importantly, Q methodology bridges qualitative and quantitative paradigms by offering a structured yet flexible process for identifying patterns in participant perspectives (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The Q-sorting activity promotes critical self-reflection, encouraging participants to consider how their experiences, beliefs, and classroom practices relate to inclusive principles. Follow-up post-sort interviews deepen this insight by contextualising each participant's subjective viewpoint (Cross, 2005; Harteis, Gruber, & Lehner, 2006). Furthermore, Q supports ethical and inclusive research by amplifying participants' voices without imposing researcher assumptions or value judgements (McKenzie *et al*., 2011; Ramlo, 2025). As Lundberg, de Leeuw, and Aliani (2020) argue, acknowledging subjectivity in educational research is vital for fostering genuine inclusion, as it ensures that participants' lived realities are respected and understood.

In designing this study, I carefully considered using interviews and surveys, known as traditional or R methodology, which can be used to explore attitudes and collect large-scale data (Watts and Stenner, 2012). However, these methods often rely on fixed-response formats and predefined constructs, which can constrain the expression of nuanced perspectives (Godor, 2025). More fundamentally, traditional R methodology tends to view participants as sources of data for analysing population-level variables (Creswell, 2009), rather than engaging with subjectivity as a central focus, which will be discussed in more detail in section 3.3.1. In contrast, Q methodology offered a more authentic and inclusive approach, one that treats participants as co-constructors of meaning. The method's combination of quantitative structure and qualitative depth enabled a richer, more nuanced exploration of diverse viewpoints. Ultimately, Q methodology aligned with both the methodological goals and the ethical commitments of this study, making it the most appropriate and meaningful choice for investigating how ECEs conceptualise inclusion and inclusive practices through UDL.

1.11 Theoretical Framework

Some scholars and stakeholders in education view UDL as a conceptual framework because it provides practical applications and guidelines to help educators design, create, and sustain inclusive learning environments that benefit all learners (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020). Conversely, some see UDL as a theoretical framework, as it presents a theory of inclusive practice, suggesting that educational experiences should be inclusive for all potential learners from the outset (Sewell, Kennett, & Pugh, 2022). Notably, the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) designates UDL as a framework and does not classify it as either conceptual or theoretical. Therefore, it can be inferred that UDL may be regarded as both. Booth and Ainscow's Index for Inclusion (2002) provides parallels by conceptualising inclusion and inclusive practices from a social justice perspective. The Index focuses on engagement, meaningful participation, and accomplishment, similar to the three principles of UDL, which underpin inclusion and inclusive practices for all children, as outlined in Figure 1.3 below. Consequently, this study utilises UDL as the theoretical framework to support the Q methodology. This framework is integral to the study, as it is grounded in social justice. Furthermore, its three principles support the study themes and the subsequent sub-themes identified from the participants' subjective viewpoints, guiding the in-depth evaluation and discussion of this study.

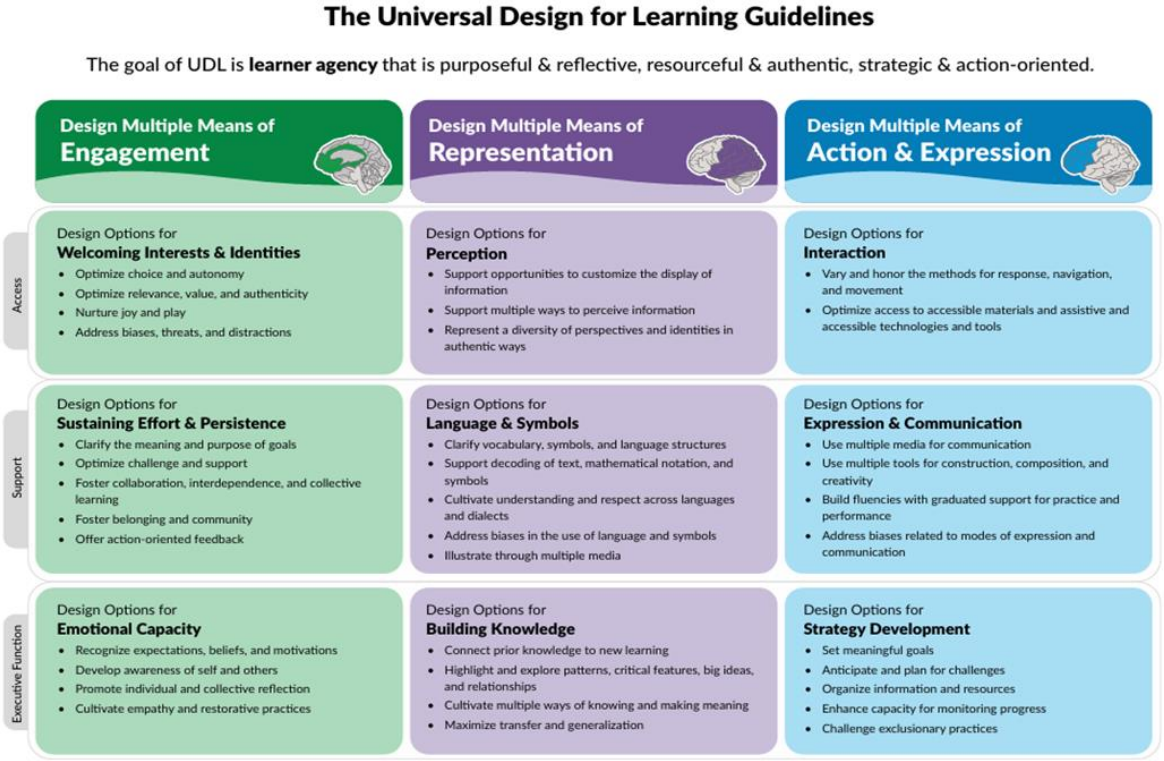

Figure 1.3: Universal Design for Learning 3.0 guidelines (CAST, 2024a).

Figure 1.3 is the fifth iteration of the UDL Guidelines 3.0, published by the Center for Applied Special Technology on July 30th, 2024 (CAST, 2024a). It illustrates the three principles: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression, which outline areas of access, support, and executive functioning (cognitive skills).

Utilising Q methodology as the conceptual framework and UDL as the theoretical framework for this study aims to provide a well-structured and robust approach, as well as a nuanced and diverse perspective on educational research. Q methodology enables a systematic exploration and evaluation of ECEs' subjective viewpoints and attitudes and aligns with my philosophical assumptions, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, UDL provides a theoretical framework for inclusive educational practice, supporting the Q method and, consequently, the findings and evaluation of this study.

1.12 Conclusions

This study explores ECEs' attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom through the lens of UDL. Chapter 1 has discussed the concept of inclusion in the broader context, including policies pertaining to inclusion in ECEC, as well as the aims and rationale for this study. Chapter 2 examines the literature on attitudes, theoretical approaches to inclusion, inclusive practices, and inclusive educational models while considering how Universal Design for Learning can be applied in Early Childhood Care and Education classrooms. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in this study, specifically Q methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to address the overarching research question. Chapter 4 presents the findings generated through the study's structured and rigorous application of Q methodology. It also outlines and interprets the three distinguishing viewpoints that emerged and considers the consensus statements (areas of agreement) shared among ECEs. Then, Chapter 5, will present the findings of the consensus statements and provide a deeper discussion of them and the three viewpoints held by ECE through thematic exploration, supported by relevant literature. Lastly, Chapter 6 presents the implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and further research, along with a short personal reflection.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an analysis of relevant literature on international policy regarding inclusive education, encompassing the understanding of inclusion within policy, and responses to inclusive educational practices. Next, the attitudes and professional values of early childhood educators are examined, including the principles of supporting inclusion in ECEC as well as high-quality and inclusive education. As implementing frameworks of inclusion in ECEC is a key component of inclusive education and practice, the relevant frameworks are examined more comprehensively, discussing their strengths and weaknesses. The subsequent section explores the development of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and high-quality inclusion alongside the Three-Block Model of UDL. This is followed by a comprehensive examination of the core principles of UDL and associated practices, as well as attitudes toward UDL and its implementation, including leadership and professional responsibilities. Lastly, this chapter concludes with some insights drawn from the literature.

2.2 Scope and Search Strategy of the Literature

A comprehensive search strategy was employed to examine relevant literature, policy documents, and research studies on inclusion, inclusive practices, and UDL. No time constraints were imposed, permitting the inclusion of both historical and contemporary studies. However, only English papers were considered for this literature review. Relevant literature was identified using the following electronic index databases: Academic Search Complete, Education Source Ultimate, and EBSCO, as well as the Dublin City University (DCU) search engine, which searches across multiple academic databases, peer-reviewed journals, and the DCU library catalogue.

Non-indexed databases, Google Scholar, Dissertation Abstracts, and Digital Dissertations were also utilised to examine grey literature alongside emerging and unpublished literature, thereby expanding the range of perspectives on inclusion and inclusive practices to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic. National and international publications were incorporated from the Department of Education (DE), NCCA, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), UNESCO,

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), Government of Ireland (GOI), and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

The following keywords and key phrases were used alone and in combination in initial searches: ‘inclusion’, ‘early childhood education’, ‘preschool’, ‘kindergarten’, ‘social justice’, ‘inclusive pedagogies’, ‘inclusive education’, ‘UDL’, ‘UDL in Early Childhood Education and Care’, ‘UDL in Irish Early Childhood Education and Care’, ‘attitudes to inclusive education’, ‘special needs’, ‘special education needs’, ‘models of disabilities’, ‘medical model of disability’, ‘social model of disability’, ‘human rights model of disability’, ‘biopsychosocial model of disability’, ‘interactionist model of disability’, ‘models of disabilities in education’, ‘early intervention’, ‘attitudes to inclusion’, and ‘attitudes to UDL’. After the initial search, the following associated phrases were added: ‘child-centred’, ‘child-centred approaches’, ‘identity and belonging’, ‘equity-based practices’, ‘communities of practice’, ‘professional learning’, and ‘self-efficacy’.

Additional relevant studies were identified by reviewing the reference lists, providing a broad and in-depth perspective that informed the study’s aims. The review process commenced with an initial screening of abstracts, followed by a thorough analysis of full-text articles to uncover recurring themes and key findings. The synthesised information was structured to highlight strengths, limitations, and gaps in existing literature, providing fresh insights and guiding future research. This approach also facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the topic and the identification of areas requiring further research.

2.3 International Policy on Inclusive Education

During the 1990s, the international policy titled ‘World Declaration on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs’ established a foundation for significant global educational initiatives and a vision that emphasises everyone’s right to an education, with a focus on equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning. Its ten Articles, agreed upon by UNESCO member states, outline the goals of educating children, youths, and adults. The Articles also identified ways to recognise barriers to learning, access to education, and national and community-level resources available to overcome those barriers (UNESCO, 1990; Ainscow, 2020).

After ten years of this framework, the Education for All (EFA) movement, comprising 164 governments worldwide, convened in Dakar in 2000 to assess each country’s progress in

meeting children's basic learning needs through an EFA evaluation. At that time, it was recognised that the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs incorporated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UNCRC (UNESCO, 2000). However, the EFA assessment revealed that no country was genuinely committed to providing education for *all*, primarily due to a lack of political will, insufficient financial resources, and the absence of effective strategies to support inclusive education. The EFA also discovered that '60 million girls' were excluded from formal education, along with rural and marginalised populations, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those who were displaced populations (UNESCO, 2000, p. 74; 2002).

Consequently, the Dakar framework ambitiously aimed to ensure that the learning needs of children and adults were met by 2015 through six educational goals. The framework advised that ECEC should expand and improve support to ensure that children's learning and development needs are met, especially those children experiencing educational disadvantage and those with diverse needs (UNESCO, 2000, 2002). Following the Dakar Framework for Action, in 2005, the UNCRC issued General Comment No. 7 on Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, suggesting that all state parties should develop a comprehensive early childhood service framework. Coincidentally, the following year in Ireland, Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006), was established, followed by Aistear, the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education (2009).

In May 2015, UNESCO, the World Bank, and many other supranational organisations organised the World Education Forum 2015. During this forum, over 1,600 delegates made a strong international commitment to the Education Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. Eight SDGs were established to replace the Dakar Framework and were agreed upon (UNESCO, 2016, p. 72). The fourth goal focuses on education and aims to build on the commitment from member states to ensure that *all* girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and education so that they are ready for primary education by 2030 (UNESCO*,* 2016). However, the number of girls excluded from school was estimated to have reached 133 million and boys 139 million globally in 2023 (UNESCO, 2025, p.49).

The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration: Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All (2016) and Inclusive Early Childhood Education: From Commitment to Action (2021c), among other policy documents, aim to support the

commitment to inclusion of *all* children in ECEC, whereby no child is left behind (UNESCO, 2016, 2021a, 2021b). Ireland is committed to the international agenda of ensuring inclusive, equitable ECEC education for *all* children under SDG 4. The Irish government is primarily responsible and has a clear vision to implement SDG 4 (Government of Ireland, 2018). Interestingly, a recent report by the Department of Education Inspectorate in 2024 found that Ireland has made significant advancements in providing quality, inclusive education for children in ECEC settings. The report also found that ECEC staff are committed to inclusive education by creating warm and inviting environments and implementing inclusive practices and play-based curricula (Department of Education (DE), 2024). However, the report highlights that further development is needed to foster stronger cultural and community connections, as well as partnerships with parents. It is also essential that ECEC settings create an inclusive environment that supports children's identity and sense of belonging, alongside investing in leadership and professional development to support inclusion for *all* children (DE, 2024).

2.3.1 Understanding Inclusion within Policy

This section will draw on Irish primary school policies and reference primary schools in Section 2.4 below, owing to the limited policies and insufficient coverage of inclusion in ECEC settings in both Ireland and globally (OECD, 2025).

To support the inclusion of all children and ensure that no child is left behind, policies establish that every child's right to education is upheld and reinforce the principle that all children should have equitable learning opportunities free from prejudice and discrimination (Tiernan, 2022). However, there is a tension between 'rhetoric and practice' (Tiernan, 2022, p. 882). Leijen, Arcidiacono, and Baucal (2021) suggest that public and professional tensions arise from opposing discourses in policies and practices around educators', policymakers', and researchers' understanding of inclusion. They also suggest that inclusive education is a topic of hot debate, with two opposing views: that inclusive education is only for *some* children versus inclusive education for *all* children attending school. Leijen *et al*. (2021) describe these divergent viewpoints as 'wars' (p. 8), with some advocates suggesting that children with specific learning and developmental needs require specialised learning environments led by trained professionals who can offer targeted support (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020) while others suggest that all children should learn together in an inclusive

environment, regardless of their abilities (Winter & O'Raw, 2010; Slee, 2018; Tiernan, 2022).

These opposing discourses imply that inclusive education encompasses a range of professional values, goals, educational settings, attitudes, and types of inclusive practices offered to children. The discourse wars are also reflected in the positions of governments, cultures, and policies in many countries, particularly since the Salamanca Statement of 1994 requested that each member state include inclusive education. Nevertheless, both discourses share the same objective of improving academic success, grounded in the rights of the child (Leijen *et al.*, 2021).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO) SDG 4, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) established that all children should be educated together in their local school in mainstream classes, with the removal of barriers that could hinder their access, participation, and achievements (UN, 2016; UNESCO, 2017a; NCSE, 2019). In the context of Irish ECEC, the DCYA, now known as the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality (2025), noted that inclusion is the process that encompasses the curriculum, a programme, and the learning environment where all children are valued, respected, and equally included, experience a sense of belonging, and have the opportunity to reach their full potential in all aspects of their development (DCYA, 2016).This understanding of inclusion by the DCYA is echoed by the National Council for Special Education:

> All children, including children with special educational needs, have a right to an education that is appropriate to their needs. The aims of education for pupils with special educational needs are the same as applying to all children. (NCSE, 2014, p. 7)

The NCSE also reminds educators, school principals, policymakers, and policy actors that children with diverse needs are 'children first'. They have the right to education and to experience the same opportunities as other children through a holistic approach that encompasses their strengths and capabilities: 'spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social, and physical' (p. 7) in their formative years' experiences. In doing so, children can become active and engaged citizens within their community, develop a passion for learning, and lead fulfilling and prosperous lives (NCSE, 2014). However, there are still numerous barriers to equal access and inclusion in ECEC (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023). Undoubtedly, these barriers impede some children from having the same opportunities as

their peers, and ECEs must create a culture of inclusion to respond to inclusive educational practice (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018), which is examined in Section 2.4

2.4 Response to Inclusive Educational Practice

While the policy may state that all children have the right to education alongside their peers, Slee (2018) found that achieving this right to inclusive education remains 'unfinished business and cannot be business as usual' (p. 7), as there is no consensus on how inclusion is viewed in education regarding increasing access, engagement, and participation, and improving children's learning outcomes and opportunities. Globally, children with diverse needs may be categorised by their diagnoses, grouped, and educated separately from those without diverse needs, resulting in exclusion (Slee, 2018). The practice of diagnostic categorisation is considered 'tautological' and is a 'resource-based response' to provide additional support and resources to children with diverse needs (Florian, 2019, p. 694). Adding labels or diagnostic categorisation, including judgements of children as capable, average, or less capable in the educational context, is highly detrimental and profoundly affects children's learning, attitudes toward learning, and life opportunities (Hart *et al*., 2004; Swann *et al*., 2012). Moreover, an increasing body of literature suggests that inclusive education cannot rely on deficit-based judgements, opinions, and practices (Slee, 2018; Leijen *et al*., 2021; Tiernan, 2022) and must move away from individual children to focus on the learning environment, so that all children are members of a mainstream school community with full access, participation, and engagement within all aspects of education (Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

To truly achieve inclusive education, Tiernan (2022) suggests that ableism must be addressed and that societal views and values must shift to acceptance of individuals, placing diversity at the core of education and its systems (Cologon, 2019). Inclusion in schools requires the direct and vigorous rejection of ontological views of normality and typicality, as well as analytical thinking about being and doing (Cologon, 2019). Put simply, the current context of 'them and us' and its associated practices and experiences should be abandoned, as the reality of inclusion is one of togetherness and belonging. There is no 'other' in inclusion; there is only 'us' (Lalvani, 2019, p. 3).

Achieving inclusive education requires openness and responsiveness to the full range of human variation, where difference is natural, valued, and welcomed, to create pluralistic and authentic educational environments of belonging (Lalvani, 2019). According to Slee and

Tomlinson (2018), some schools still practice exclusion while showcasing their 'inclusion rooms', units, or special classes with dedicated educators. They separate children with diverse needs from their peers, creating the illusion of inclusion rather than true integration. In Irish ECCE classrooms, some children with diverse needs attend early intervention programmes such as Enable Ireland, Early Start, and specialised preschools funded by the Department of Education for children with autism spectrum disorder from age two and half years old, alongside specialist preschool provisions and therapeutic supports for children with complex profiles (Walsh *et al.,* 2024).

In contrast, some schools fully embrace inclusion, educating all children together based on the principles of social justice and democracy. They are perceived as innovative, creative, and flexible in terms of space, programmes, and teaching styles (Slee, 2018; Slee & Tomlinson, 2018). Arguably, one cannot ignore that some children with diverse needs may require specialised equipment, resources, and support to achieve inclusive education in ECCE classrooms that align with theoretical models of disability (DCYA, 2016).

Over the past 40 years, discourse has emphasised models of disability that have influenced policies, human rights, inclusive practices, and attitudes toward individuals with diverse needs. For instance, specific legislation for children with diverse needs was introduced, most notably the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), which aimed to shift from provision of separation (inclusive education for some) to a model of inclusion (inclusive education for all), where all children have the right to be educated in their local ECEC settings rather than being separated and educated in special schools (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011; Banks *et al*., 2018). However, there are numerous divisions in the conceptualisations of diverse needs, such as the discourse wars encompassing the medical, social, human rights-based, biopsychosocial, and interactionist approaches to disability.

2.5 Confusion and Uncertainty of Inclusion

Due to the polarised discourse on inclusion and inclusive education for *some* or *all* children, as well as the attitudes surrounding the theoretical models of disabilities that shape ECEs' perspectives, professional values, and beliefs, there remains confusion and uncertainty over inclusive instructional practices and interactions with children. This has rendered inclusive and equitable education in ECEC unclear, complicated, and perceived differently across countries (Mitchell, 2018; UNESCO, 2021c). For instance, there is a lack of clarity regarding the philosophical foundations of inclusive education, making it challenging for nations to

reach a consensus on models and practices of inclusive education. This, in turn, influences policy, the implementation of inclusive practices, the learning environment, and attitudes towards inclusion and professional values in each country (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021).

To prioritise the inclusion of all children in ECEC, it may be essential to move beyond reliance on a single theoretical model of disability. Children's learning and development are shaped by biological, psychological, social, and systemic factors (French & McKenna, 2022). Therefore, integrating multiple models of disability may be a more effective, holistic approach to inclusion in ECEC.

Section 2.6 examines the attitudes and professional values that support inclusion and high-quality inclusive education.

2.6 Attitudes and Professional Values of ECEs

In the Irish context, standards for the formation of the early childhood educator are outlined in the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (2018). In this document, there is an emphasis on the ECE as a critically reflective and ethical educator, grounded in professional knowledge, inclusive professional values, and a commitment to ongoing learning. These guidelines outline the importance of relational pedagogy, inclusive practice, and the ability to respond to the diverse needs of all children in line with the rights-based approach enshrined in the national and international frameworks, Siolta, Aistear, and the UNCRC (Minister for Education and Skills, 2019). Moreover, the Workforce Plan 2022–2028 also conceptualises the ECEs as highly skilled, ethical, and relational professionals whose development is critical to delivering inclusive, child-centred, and high-quality education and care through skills, knowledge, competencies, values, and attitudes (Government of Ireland, 2021).

The Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) Report (2012) (Urban *et al.,* 2012) highlights that educators' attitudes are closely aligned with their professional values. These professional values recognise and respond to children's needs, nurturing their full potential and encouraging active participation in ECCE classrooms. ECEs commit to inclusive educational practices and embrace a child-centred, rights-based approach that regards children as capable, active participants and pivotal actors in their own learning (Urban *et al*., 2012). Therefore, ECEs' professional values are reflected in their

attitudes toward individual behaviour, which consequently influence their actions (Boyle, Anderson, & Allen, 2020). To this end, attitudes are central to implementing inclusive practices such as UDL across the education continuum and have direct consequences for teaching practices (behaviours), knowledge, skills, and competencies of educators (Minister for Education, 2019; Hanley & Garrity, 2024).

A study investigating the attitudes of ECEs in Australia toward inclusive practices with children with autism, conducted by Mackenzie *et al*. (2016), found that inclusion in ECEC is not only possible but essential. Moreover, the ECEs' attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices were highly favourable, influenced by a social-relational understanding of children with diverse needs, where they viewed inclusion as a philosophy that values, accepts, and responds to all children. Owing to their attitudes, which aligned with the biopsychosocial perspective, the ECEs recognised the biological, psychological, and societal barriers. They actively worked to remove them, striving for genuine inclusion of children with diverse needs in early childhood settings. However, educators' knowledge, training, confidence, perceptions of children, and the availability of resources and whole-school support all influence their attitudes toward inclusion, inclusive practices, and professional values, which impact the support for inclusion and vary across different countries (Mónico *et al*., 2020). Moreover, explicitly

2.6.1 Evolving Concepts of Inclusion in ECEC

Despite differing attitudes, the foundational concept of inclusive education in ECEC is supported by physical and learning accommodations that cater to children with diverse needs. Over time, this concept has evolved from merely providing accommodations to recognising *all* children and valuing diversity over difference, regardless of diagnostic categorisation or the minority groups to which children belong. Consequently, the vision of inclusion in ECEC is reinforced by social justice and equity, viewing inclusion as a process to tackle inequalities rooted in children's rights through high-quality early childhood education (DCYA, 2016; UNESCO, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Full inclusion and participation necessitate an understanding and fulfilment of children's needs while providing the essential support to foster the success and achievements of all children. Thus, inclusive education in ECEC is intended to be high-quality, universal, and holistic (UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b).

2.6.1.1 High-quality and inclusive education

Delivering high-quality ECEC is not only about providing excellent services and programmes; it is also closely linked to improved learning outcomes, which support children in successfully achieving their developmental goals (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023). Furthermore, quality ECEC programmes ensure that children are active agents in their social and cognitive development and constructors of their own knowledge (Brillante & Nemeth, 2022; GOI, 2024a). O'Sullivan and Ring (2023) emphasise that high-quality inclusive ECEC benefits all children, especially those requiring targeted and bespoke support. This aligns with UNESCO's (2021c) recommendation that bespoke intervention practices, such as curriculum modifications, adaptations to educational materials, and environmental adjustments, should be implemented when necessary to enhance the participation and engagement of children with complex and diverse needs. These interventions should be embedded within children's daily routines in ECEC settings to promote a sense of belonging, ensuring that all children can thrive in an inclusive and supportive learning environment (UNESCO, 2021c).

However, Slee & Tomlinson (2018) argue that individual and bespoke interventions should not be necessary if children are active agents in their social and cognitive development and constructors of their own knowledge. Furthermore, inclusive education should not be founded on deficit-based judgements, opinions, or practices that provide individual or specialised support that leads to discrimination, stereotypes, and exclusion (Cologon, 2019). The focus must shift from individual children to inclusive education services (Winter & O'Raw, 2010; Cologon, 2019; Tiernan, 2022). Nonetheless, ensuring full inclusion of all children and eliminating barriers lies with the ECEC's multilevel systems, policies, and practices, such as inclusive frameworks implemented by ECEs (UNESCO, 2021c). Section 2.7 explores the frameworks implemented in ECEC, including the Building Blocks model and the Ecosystem Model of Inclusion and Universal Design.

2.7 Frameworks of Inclusion in ECEC

UNESCO (2021a) established that recognising the diversity of needs in ECEC is essential and requires different approaches and support by implementing a multilevel system of support for early intervention and UDL. Within a multilevel system of support, UNESCO outlines that ECEC employs differentiated teaching and learning styles, focusing on the range and strengths of supports and resources to meet the diverse needs of all individuals

rather than on the distinctive profiles of individual children. The concept of differentiation and the application of a multilevel system of support emphasise the unique characteristics of children by aligning teaching with their learning experiences (Roberts & Inman, 2023) and by providing tailored intervention practices (UNESCO, 2021a).

However, inclusive education has experienced varying degrees of expansion across countries in both the Global North and Global South. Affluent countries of the Global North have focused on systemic and cultural transformation within schools to promote equitable access and participation in mainstream education (OECD, 2023). By contrast, inclusive education is still emerging in economically constrained countries of the Global South. In these regions, inclusive education is frequently limited to policy rhetoric, hindered by a poorly understood implementation of inclusion and inclusive practice (Artiles, 2020; OECD, 2023). Substantial differences exist between the Global North and South in terms of infrastructure, resource allocation, and mechanisms for monitoring inclusive practices (Artiles, 2020). Nevertheless, Barton and Smith (2015) note that successful access and meaningful participation for children with diverse needs in ECEC require the implementation of a scientifically inclusive framework. Implementing such a framework enhances efforts to equip ECEs with effective professional learning and development, comprehensive school support, and guidance to formulate inclusive policies, enhance data infrastructure, and support institutions in fostering positive attitudes, beliefs, and inclusive cultures toward inclusion in early years education (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Various frameworks support inclusive education, each with its own merits in providing access and enabling participation in education (Sandall, Schwartz, & Joseph, 2001; Sandall *et al.,* 2019). Although frameworks such as the Index for Inclusion, the Inclusive Education framework, and the Relate framework (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; NCSE, 2011; NCSE, 2025) were initially considered for discussion, the scope and focus of this study are limited to early childhood education. Therefore, the Building Blocks Model, UDL, the Three-Block Model of UDL, and the Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education were selected for their early childhood-specific focus, practical relevance, and conceptual alignment with inclusive pedagogies (Katz, 2015; EASNIE, 2017a, 2017b; Sandall *et al.,* 2024; CAST, 2024a). Each model offers a distinct yet complementary lens for understanding and implementing inclusive education in ECCE classrooms and will be discussed below.

2.7.1 The Building Blocks Model of Inclusion

The Building Blocks model of inclusion is an evidence-based framework developed over five years of research at the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion at the University of North Carolina. It follows a multi-tiered system with four hierarchical elements that guide ECEs in supporting *all* children in participation, engagement, and learning (Sandall *et al.,* 2024) (see Figure 2.1 below). The Building Blocks model offers a range of practical, evidence-based strategies that support inclusive teaching, making it highly valuable for educators. Its strength lies in its three core approaches: curriculum modifications, embedded learning opportunities, and child-focused instructional strategies, all of which are designed to benefit all children. The framework is supported by current research and provides accessible tools such as reproducible planning forms and comprehensive training modules, making it a versatile resource for classroom application and professional development. Its user-friendly format ensures that educators can continually revisit the guide to promote friendship, independence, and positive behaviour among young children (Sandall *et al.,* 2019; Sandall *et al.,* 2024).

While the Building Blocks model outlines a multi-tiered system of support, ECEs have only implemented the first two blocks in early childhood settings, and their effectiveness depends heavily on educators' ability and competence to effectively apply the tiers (Lundqvist, 2023). This indicates either a gap in staff understanding, training, or perceived relevance of intensive instructional strategies in fully inclusive settings at blocks three and four.

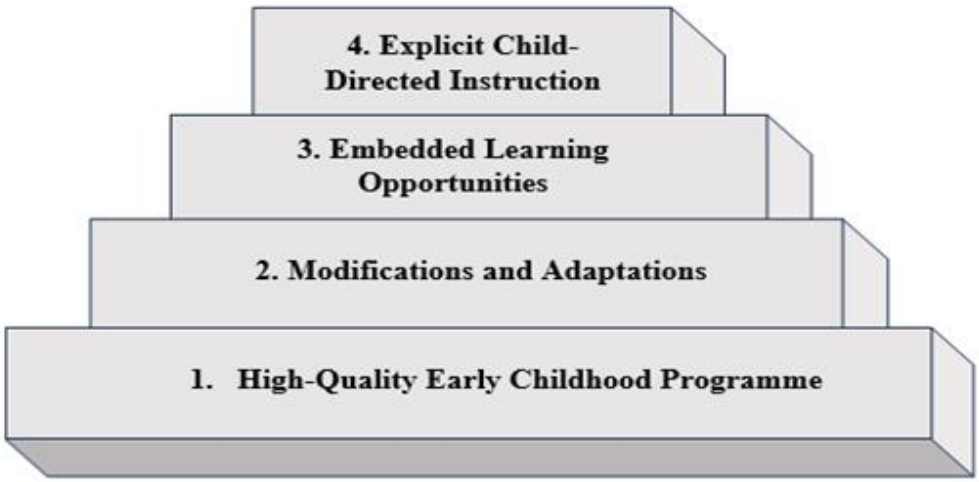

Figure 2.1: The Building Blocks model for effective instruction (Sandall *et al*., 2019)

The first block considers high-quality early childhood programmes that align with children's learning and development, strengths, interests, and needs while being culturally responsive and benefiting all children. Blocks 2, 3, and 4 focus on strategies to support inclusive learning through curriculum design, involving adjustments and modifications, as well as embedded learning opportunities with suitable adult-led instruction throughout the day and free play to enhance learning outcomes (Sandall *et al.,* 2019; Sandall *et al.,* 2024). Furthermore, explicit child-focused instruction incorporates adult-led individualised instruction within daily activities, providing opportunities for children to respond, receive feedback, and provide feedback (Sandall *et al*., 2001; Lundqvist, 2023).

2.7.2 The Ecosystem Model of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The Ecosystem Model of Inclusion is an alternative, inclusive model in ECEC, influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) and developed from data collected across 32 European countries by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2017a). This model provides a structure–process–outcomes framework that guides stakeholders in understanding, implementing, and assessing inclusive early childhood education (EASNIE, 2017a). It connects inclusion to quality ECEC and children's learning outcomes, aiding the preparation, refinement, monitoring, and assessment of inclusion in early years settings (Ginner, Hau *et al*., 2022. The structure represents the national and regional contexts that influence inclusive early childhood education, while the process focuses on children's daily interactions with peers, educators, and their environment. The outcomes reflect how these factors shape children's learning, engagement, and sense of belonging within a rights-based approach to inclusion, as seen in Figure 2.2 below (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009; Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022).

One of the primary strengths of the Ecosystem Model of Inclusion is its multi-level and interconnected structure (EASNIE, 2017a). At the centre of the model are children's experiences of belonging, engagement, and learning, which are surrounded by five orange circles. The five innermost circles encompass daily inclusion practices, including child-centred approaches, assessments, interactions, and support. The next layer highlights classroom structures that promote inclusion, including parental partnerships, leadership, and cultural responsiveness (EASNINE, 2017a). Further layers represent community and cross-sector collaboration, followed by national policies ensuring access to mainstream education, curriculum standards, and teacher training. The outermost layer includes government

interventions, funding, monitoring, and research, reinforcing a comprehensive framework for inclusive early childhood education (EASNIE, 2016, 2017b; Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022).

Another strength is the model's holistic perspective, which enables it to address inclusion not only at the child and classroom levels but also across institutional and governance structures, making it a powerful tool for system-wide change. It encourages meaningful collaboration between educators, families, communities, policymakers and policy actors, recognising that successful inclusion depends on shared values and coordinated action (EASNIE, 2016). Furthermore, it is designed to be adaptable, allowing local and national systems to tailor its components according to their specific priorities while maintaining the model's core principles. However, the model is not without its limitations (EASNIE, 2016, 2017b).

Its comprehensive and layered design, while a strength in theory, may pose challenges in practice, especially in under-resourced or fragmented systems where coordinating across levels is difficult to maintain. The model also requires strong policy support, aligned governance, and sufficient funding, all of which may be inconsistently available depending on the national context. Additionally, implementation across all five dimensions has not been evidenced in ECEC settings, suggesting variability in its practical uptake (EASNIE, 2017b).

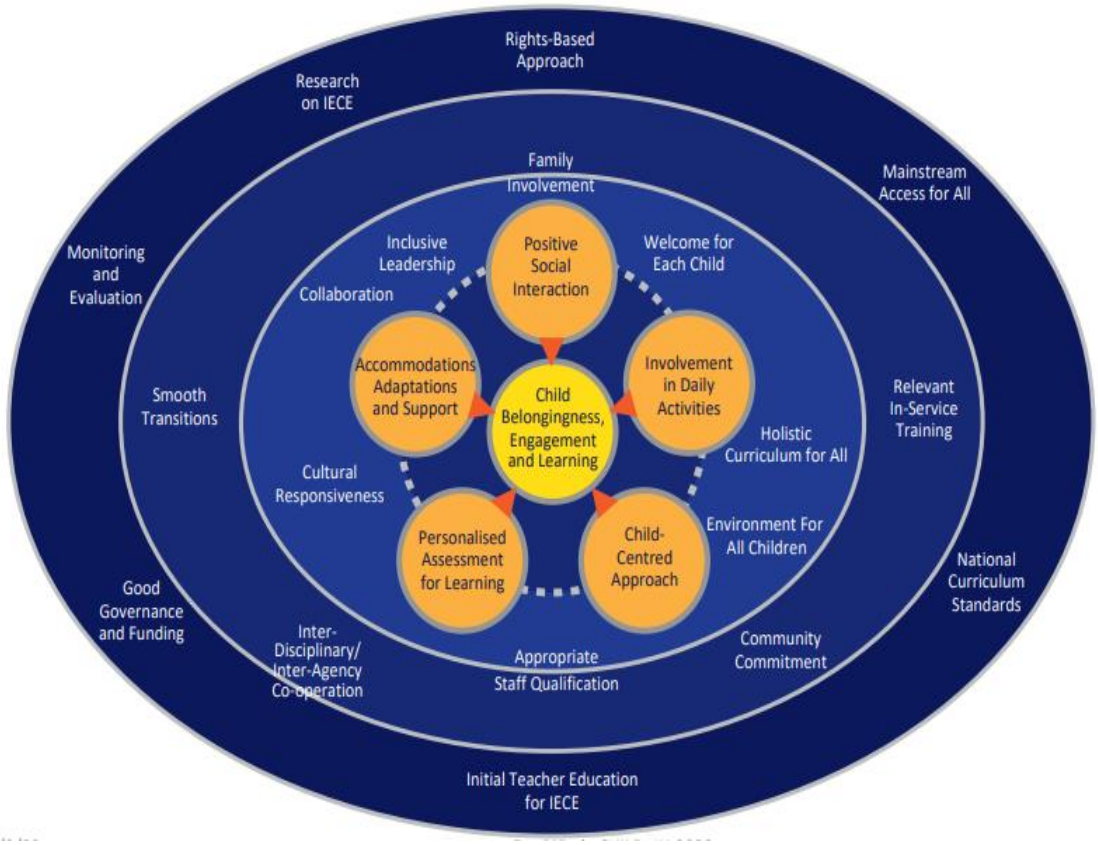

Figure 2.2: The ecosystem model of inclusion in early childhood education (EASNIE, 2017b, p. 37)

2.7.3 Universal Design

Another inclusive framework is Universal Design (UD). Ronald Mace, an American architect and wheelchair user, was inspired by architectural models that promote the development of inclusive and accessible outdoor spaces, buildings, communications, and products for all people, leading to the creation of the UD framework (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012). UD encourages architects to consider people's diversity during the design process rather than merely developing bespoke responses or adapting to individual needs and requirements for access to environments, spaces, and products (Connell *et al*., 2001). UD involves the arrangement and design of an environment so that everyone can fully access and utilise it, regardless of age, size, or ability (Grey *et al*., 2019).

Moving beyond UD and concentrating on the physical environment, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasises the active teaching and learning process within the educational sphere. Over the past 20 years, numerous developments have occurred in UD-influenced frameworks, all with a strong emphasis on education to create a suitable learning environment for the increasingly diverse student population across the education continuum.

UD-influenced frameworks include Universal Design of Instruction, Universal Instructional Design, and Universal Design in Education (Quirke McGuckin & McCarthy, 2023). All approaches share a common philosophy of inclusion, arguing that educators must adapt their teaching and learning methods and change attitudes, opinions, and perceptions to promote inclusive education, thereby creating an inclusive learning environment (Quirke & McCarthy, 2023). Although the government of Ireland has provided UD guidelines for the ECEC sector (Grey, 2019), it has overlooked the 'learning' element, despite learning being a crucial component of UDL (Chardin & Novak, 2021) and the growing recognition of the UDL framework in national and international educational policies (Flood & Banks, 2021). Section 2.8 examines the development of UDL, specifically Universal Design for Learning and High-Quality Inclusion, and the implementation of the Three-Block Model of UDL.

2.8 The Development of Universal Design for Learning

In 1998, Meyer and Rose established UDL at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). It is recognised as a 'promising framework' (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014, p. 274) to generate active and inclusive learning environments for students and children with diverse needs (Meyer, *et al*., 2014; Scott, 2018; Chardin & Novak, 2021). Notably, the CAST UDL model is continually updated to reflect current knowledge and understanding of the range of diversity in classrooms, as well as the social and equality issues that educators encounter (Quirke *et al.*, 2023). One such update is the fifth iteration of the framework known as the UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024a). Extensive research conducted by CAST found that the previous UDL framework 2.2 was overly focused on adult-led guidelines and checklists, aiming to create expert learners rather than encouraging students to actively explore and construct their own learning (CAST, 2024b). Furthermore, CAST found that the phrase 'expert learner' implied that learning was a final destination and did not acknowledge that the learning process is ongoing and involves collaboration and the sharing of knowledge (CAST, 2024c). In addition, executive functioning, which was a single guideline in the 2.2 UDL version, is now embedded and interconnected throughout the 3.0 framework with the vision and goal of building learner agency (Novak, 2024).

The new UDL guidelines, revisited from Chapter One (section 1.10), encourage educators to reflect weekly on their teaching practices and experiences to identify and address potential barriers to learning within their programmes (CAST 2024a). In turn, educators can identify the most significant level of learning needs of the class or individual children and focus on

gradually implementing UDL principles (Tobin & Behling, 2018; Chardin & Novak, 2021). There are three core principles at the heart of the CAST model of UDL: (1) multiple means of engagement, (2) multiple means of representation, and (3) multiple means of action/expression (CAST, 2018, 2024d; Johnson & Cornelius, 2019; Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022; Quirke, *et al*., 2023). Additionally, the UDL framework 3.0 provides guidelines that clearly outline its goals and core principles, assisting inexperienced educators who wish to implement it in their classrooms. See Figure 2.3 below.

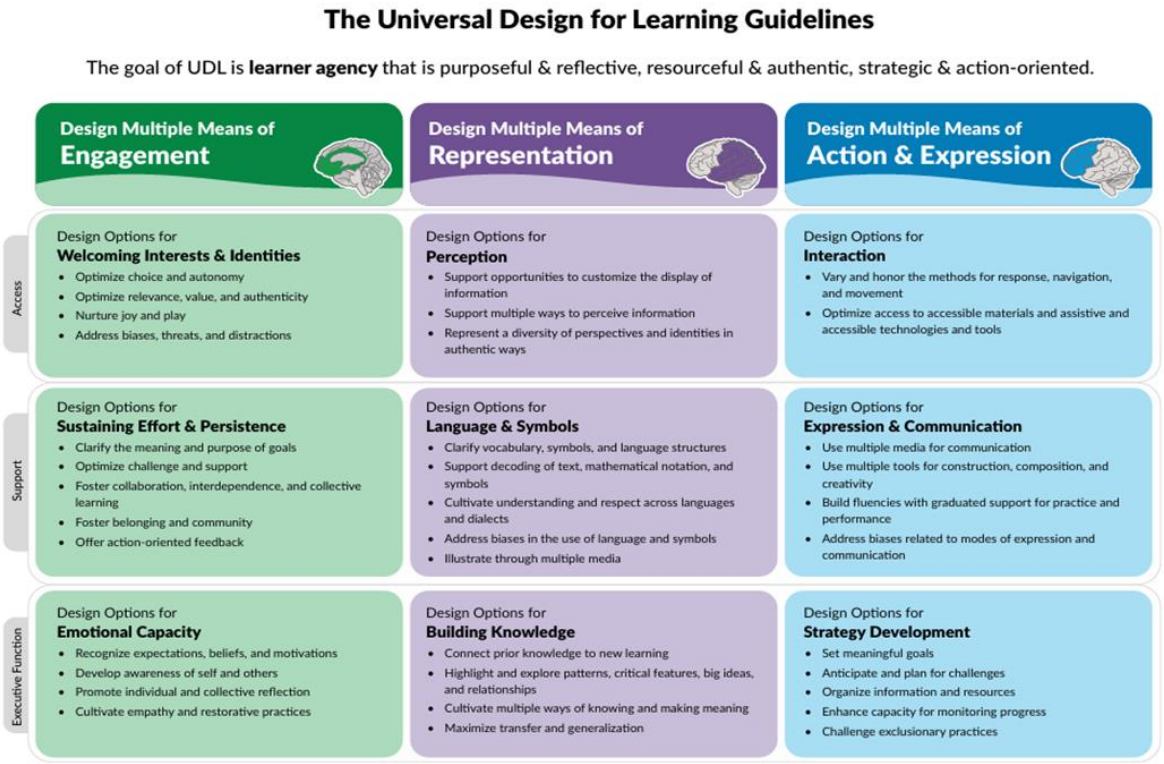

Figure 2.3: Graphic organiser of the fifth iteration of the UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024a)

Figure 2.3 visually represents the three core principles of UDL. Engagement signifies the 'why' of learning, representation the 'what', and action and expression the 'how'(CAST 2024b). The organiser visually structures these principles into guidelines and considerations, guiding educators in creating equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for students, from planning and thinking about UDL to its implementation (CAST, 2024a). It is important to note that these guidelines and considerations are adaptable in their application and are not intended to be rigid or fixed. Instead, they aim to encourage educators in their approach to inclusive practices, ensuring that all children are given every opportunity to reach their full potential in a supportive, inclusive environment, regardless of their needs, and to become expert learners (Meyer & Rose, 2012; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Educators who

already implement inclusive teaching practices often utilise some aspects of the UDL principles by coincidence and without intention (Katz, 2015; Lowrey, 2021). However, to successfully implement UDL, educators must deliberately and intentionally rethink their methods and practices to foster a fully high-quality, inclusive learning environment (Quirke *et al*., 2023).

One of the most prominent strengths of UDL is its ability to enhance children's engagement and motivation by offering multiple means of engagement, allowing learners to interact with content in ways that align with their interests and strengths (Capp, 2017). UDL also supports the diverse needs of all learners, both with and without disabilities, by providing flexible options for accessing, processing, and expressing knowledge, thus removing common barriers to learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014; Quirke *et al*., 2023). Moreover, Capp's (2017) review found that UDL contributes to positive academic outcomes and fosters equity by ensuring that all children have access to the curriculum, thereby promoting inclusive and fair learning environments.

Importantly, the framework encourages educators to reflect on their instructional practices, shifting from a reactive to a proactive approach in addressing learner variability (Chardin & Novak, 2021). UDL is also noted for its flexibility and scalability, as it can be implemented across the entire education continuum and various subject areas without replacing existing models (Capp, 2017). Finally, children reported increased satisfaction under UDL-based instruction, appreciating the autonomy, choice, and relevance it brought to their learning experiences (Chardin & Novak, 2021). However, there are discrepancies in educators' understanding and implementation of UDL, with many equating it to general good teaching or intuitive practice (Katzs, 2015; Lowery, 2021). According to Lowery (2021), this discrepancy in understanding and implementation is too ambiguous and raises concerns, as some educators treat UDL as encompassing all instructional efforts, making it too broad and difficult to study systematically.

2.8.1 Universal Design for Learning and High-Quality Inclusion

In Ireland, UDL is predominantly implemented in higher education institutions and is beginning to emerge in primary and ECEC settings, owing to its recognition in national and international educational policies (Flood & Banks, 2021). UDL embraces education for *all* and facilitates children's diverse needs to access the general curriculum (Hall *et al*., 2012; Capp, 2017; Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, & Vantieghem, 2021a). UDL strives to ensure high-quality education for educators and students by employing a flexible curriculum framework that focuses on eliminating barriers to learning through adaptable teaching methods and resources (Hall *et al*., 2012). Such is the emphasis on inclusive education in ECEC, where the success and achievements of children with diverse needs are closely connected to the quality of education offered (EASNIE, 2017b; Cerna *et al*., 2021; French *&* McKenna*,* 2022).

The term 'universal' may seem to many to mean 'one size fits all'. However, in the context of UDL, the universal aim is to ensure that *all* children have fair and equal access to a learning environment that supports their achievements and outcomes, including participation in multi-level activities that align with their needs (Hall *et al*., 2012; Ginner Hau *et al*., 2022). Providing an environment that enables children to participate in multi-level activities requires educators to provide interventions: For example implement and adjust activities and routines accordingly (accommodations) to ensure that learning is scaffolded appropriately and effectively to meet the needs of all children through the core principles of UDL (Horn, Palmer, Butera*,* & Lieber, 2016; Chardin & Novak, 2021; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022).

2.8.2 Three-Block Model of UDL

To enhance the application of CAST's traditional UDL framework for accessing the curriculum and removing learning barriers, Katz developed the Three-Block Model of UDL, which incorporates a whole-school, relational approach to inclusive education (Katz, 2012). The distinction between CAST's UDL and the Three-Block Model is that the latter provides a comprehensive foundation for inclusive education and practice, spanning early childhood (ECCE classrooms) to Year 12 (sixth class), whereas the former focuses on the entire educational continuum (Katz, 2012). Additionally, Katz's model promotes inclusive communities and offers comprehensive support to educators, students, and schools, with a

strong emphasis on fostering student belonging and well-being, as illustrated in Figure 2.4 (Katz, 2012, 2015).

Katz's Three-Block Model of UDL offers several key advantages in promoting inclusive education. It is grounded in the principle of maintaining high expectations for all children while providing tailored support that meets the diverse needs of children (Sokal & Katz, 2015). The model's strength lies in its three interrelated components: Social and Emotional Learning, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Systemic Support, which work together to foster both academic success and student wellbeing. Evidence from the Three-Block Model inclusive classroom settings demonstrates that the model leads to improved academic achievement, particularly among children with diverse needs (Katz, Sokal, & Wu, 2021). Children in the classrooms also report a stronger sense of belonging, increased engagement, and deeper connection to learning (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Additionally, the Three-Block Model promotes differentiated and inclusive teaching practices, enabling all learners to access and participate meaningfully in classroom learning (Katz, Sokal, & Wu, 2021).

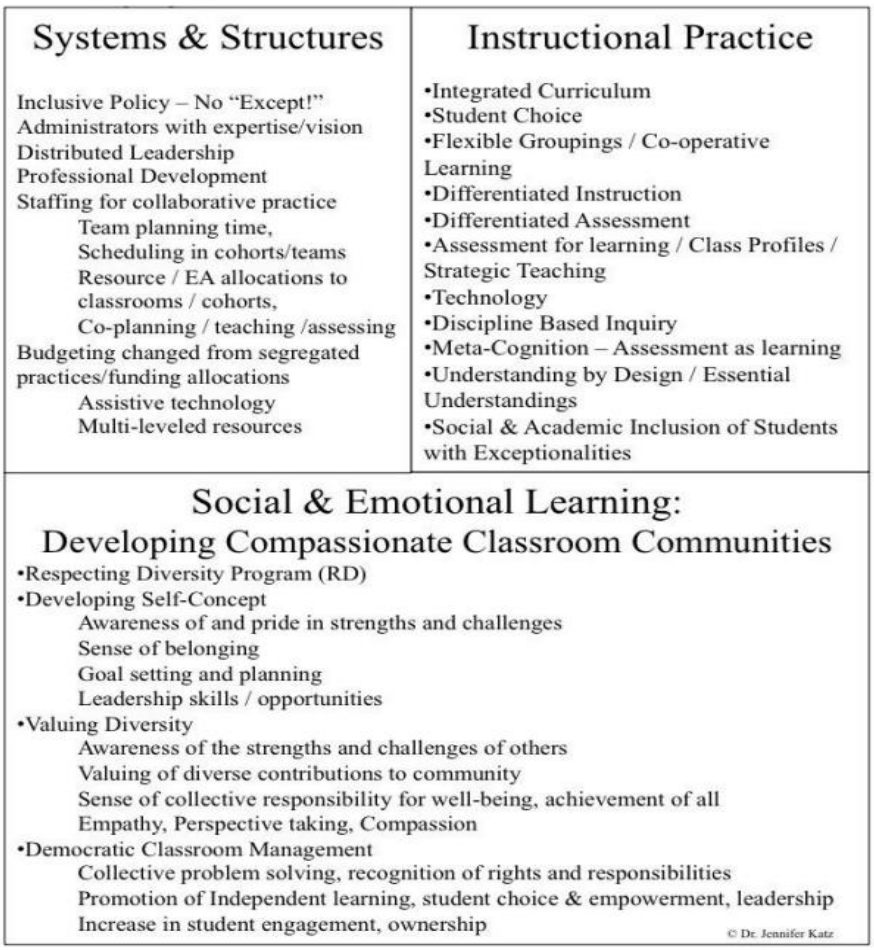

Figure 2.4: The Three-Block model of UDL (Katz, 2015, p. 5)

Figure 2.4 illustrates the breakdown of UDL theory and practice into three sections, known as blocks (Katz, 2015, p. 5). Block 1, creating compassionate learning communities, fosters inclusive cultures and a supportive classroom climate where students feel safe, respected, and valued. This block aims to respect diversity and cultivate self-awareness and social responsibility. It enables ECEs to amplify children's voices, collaboration, and engagement in decision-making. Block 2, creating inclusive instructional practices, focuses on designing the curriculum and instruction to be accessible, engaging, and differentiated. This block aims to implement the three UDL principles. Block 3, creating systems and structures, represents the creation of systems and structures that advocate for inclusive policies, support collaborative planning and communities of practice, and organise various resources for children with diverse needs. Katz suggests that her UDL model maintains and promotes high expectations and support for all children, including those with diverse needs, which aligns with the core principles of UDL (Katz, 2012, 2015).

Nevertheless, while the Three-Block Model of UDL offers a promising framework for inclusive education, several challenges can limit its effective implementation. One key issue is the model's demand for systemic support and resources (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Blocks 1 and 2 focus on social-emotional learning and inclusive pedagogy and are difficult to sustain without the foundational systemic structures outlined in Block 3. These include collaborative planning time, administrative support, and the allocation of appropriate resources. Without such backing, implementation risks becoming fragmented or unsustainable (Sokal & Katz, 2015).

Another notable challenge is the need for sustained professional learning and development. Educators require in-depth training and ongoing support to implement the model effectively, yet in settings with limited continuing professional learning opportunities or funding the Three Block Model of UDL may be compromised (Katz, Sokal, & Wu, 2021). Additionally, without leadership support, flexible funding structures, or autonomy over scheduling, it becomes challenging to effectively embed the model within institutional systems that align with the core principles of UDL (Katz, Sokal, & Wu, 2021).

In the Irish context, the AIM aligns most strongly with Block One of Katz's Three-Block Model of UDL, which focuses on inclusive systems and structures (Katz, 2015). AIM provides a rights-based, whole-setting approach through universal and targeted supports (DCYA, 2016), reflecting Katz's emphasis on collaborative, policy-driven inclusion. While AIM offers specialist support and additional assistance, it aligns only partially with Block

Two, which centres on inclusive instructional practice. AIM does not explicitly address differentiated pedagogy, assessment, or curriculum design. Similarly, its alignment with Block Three is implicit rather than explicit: for example, AIM promotes and supports inclusion, belonging, and participation; it lacks a structured social and emotional learning framework to support children's identity, agency, and emotional well-being. Overall, AIM reinforces the foundational structures necessary for inclusion (DCYA, 2016) but offers limited guidance on pedagogical strategies and emotional development, highlighting the need to complement the model with approaches that fully address Blocks Two and Three of Katz's UDL framework (Katz, 2015).

Section 2.9 discusses the core principles of UDL; multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression alongside associated practices in ECEC that encompass child-centred practice, learner agency, the role and competency of ECEs, and professional learning development.

2.9 Core Principles of UDL and Associated Practice

'The goal of UDL is learner agency that is purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic, strategic and action-oriented' (CAST, 2024a). It is vital that ECEs place the child at the centre of their practice to achieve UDL's goal of supporting learner agency (Horn *et al*., 2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). Placing the child at the centre of practice and policies is a pillar in providing high-quality, inclusive education (UNESCO, 2016). Supporting this goal involves adopting positive attitudes, upholding professional values, and employing practical approaches (Katz, 2012; Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2019; Hanley & Garrity, 2024; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023). Furthermore, it is essential to foster an environment that supports children's holistic development and enables them to reach their full potential (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024). Such goals emphasise creating inclusive and engaging learning spaces where children feel valued and respected (Council of the EU, 2019). The Council of the EU unambiguously states, 'Early childhood education and care services need to be child-centred, actively involve children and acknowledge children's views' (2019, p. 189). Furthermore, all children must be regarded as equal contributors to their learning and development within education policy and practice underpinned by children's rights (Ring, Harte, & Harmon, 2021).

The UNCRC explicitly mentions that children's 'best interests' must be a 'primary concern' (Article 3) and that children's voices must be considered in all matters affecting them

(Article 12) (UNCRC, 1989). Aistear places children at the centre of their own learning and development, a practice supported and encouraged by Síolta (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2017; GOI, 2024). Consequently, a fundamental aspect of establishing high-quality, inclusive ECEC environments is the ECE's willingness to listen to children's voices and respond appropriately and effectively (Heaney & Feeney, 2021), which also lies at the heart of the core principles of the 3.0 UDL framework.

Another vital aspect of learner agency is the ability, attitudes, and competencies of ECEs to reach all learners in relation to the classroom environment. The UDL framework aligns with how ECEs proactively plan for children accessing the curriculum, considering the physical, social-emotional, health, and instructional aspects of their environments to ensure that every child is supported from the start (Conn-Powers *et al*., 2006). Along with the UDL framework, there is a plethora of research to suggest that educators' positive attitudes, specialised and additional training, collaboration, and resources, age and experience support the preparedness and the successful implementation of an all-inclusive early childhood learning environment (Conn-Powers *et al*., 2006; O'Toole & Burke, 2013; Ring *et al*., 2019; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022; Hanley & Garrity, 2024).

Due to the varied perceptions among educators regarding children with diverse needs, there is a growing demand for more inclusive training, professional learning, and development, as well as context-specific policies, to effectively implement and support inclusive environments (Mónico *et al*., 2020; Balik & Özgun, 2024). Some educators are apprehensive about their knowledge and ability to adequately prepare the learning environment, despite their willingness to engage with children with diverse needs (Mónico *et al*., 2020). Educators may find it challenging to promote and implement inclusive practices due to a rigid curriculum (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Moreover, the heavy burden of paperwork associated with inspections and inspectorate reporting requirements in Irish ECEC, as well as staffing crises, hinders ECEs' ability to provide inclusive environments for all children (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024). Nevertheless, the three principles of UDL help educators achieve their goal of creating and nurturing inclusive learning environments, which will be discussed below.

2.9.1 Multiple Means of Engagement

Despite the challenges of creating fully inclusive early learning environments, the principle of multiple means of engagement seeks flexible and inclusive teaching strategies that

recognise and respond to the dynamic nature of student motivation and engagement in learning by considering the 'why' behind learning (Griful-Freixenet *et al*., 2021a, CAST, 2024d). The 'why' dimension examines the factors that influence learning, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of students' motivation and their preferences regarding what and why they learn (Geary, 2009). Multiple means of engagement support the why of learning by using a variety of ways to engage individuals' interests and motivation to learn something new in the classroom (Darragh, 2007; Capp 2017; Griful-Freixenet *et al*., 2021a; Griful-Freixenet *et al*., 2021b). Some children may enjoy discovering something new, while others might prefer the familiarity of repeating tasks, whether alone or in groups. No single method of engagement applies to all children in every situation (Horn *et al*., 2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022), thus providing various options for capturing interest. (Quirke *et al*., 2023; CAST, 2024e).

Under CAST's considerations and guidelines, 'recruiting interest' (CAST, 2018) is closely associated with access and how educators offer accessible information and innovative methods to present materials that engage children's interests. CAST recommends offering choice and autonomy to support educators in this task, providing relevant activities that align with children's interests and minimising threats and distractions (CAST, 2018).

2.9.1.1 Multiple means of engagement and Irish ECCE classrooms

In the context of ECCE classrooms, and as espoused by Aistear and Síolta, providing multiple means of engagement assists in and supports emergent and inquiry-based learning (Ring *et al*., 2019) that involves child-led learning and choices, whereby children make connections as they encounter the world around them (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024). Under this principle, ECEs are advised to deliberately plan and develop strategies that include the children in their learning process of each activity; for example, following the children's lead, scaffolding learning, making connections between children's prior experiences and the existing environment, and providing a variety of learning indoor and outdoor activities through play, taking risks, enabling discovery learning and supporting interests across the curriculum (NCCA, 2009; Horn *et al*., 2016; GOI, 2024).

The UDL principle of engagement, particularly in its focus on sustaining effort and persistence, as well as welcoming diverse interests and identities, suggests methods to maintain engagement by optimising choice and autonomy through open dialogue while fostering collaboration, interdependence, and collective learning experiences (Horn *et al*.,

2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). The UDL framework also recommends establishing clear learning goals and objectives, adapting materials to present challenges, and enhancing mastery through feedback, thereby creating a sense of community and fostering feelings of belonging and understanding of oneself and others (CAST, 2024a). In the ECCE classroom, sustaining children's attention and participation requires that ECEs allow them to express themselves through various forms of play, offer choices, provide feedback, and engage in age-appropriate activities (French & McKenna, 2022).

A study by Cassidy *et al*. (2022) found that children's voices give them a sense of power, allowing both children and ECEs to be rights holders and to be seen as competent and agentic actors. Consequently, providing choices and listening to children's voices promotes and recognises agency and identity for all, which must be nurtured, valued, and respected (Cassidy, *et al.,* 2022) However, understanding how to facilitate children's voices and choices in ECEC remains challenging for ECEs who are unfamiliar with the UNCRC, including ECEs who have not previously considered incorporating children's voices into their practice (Cassidy, *et al.,* 2022). ECEs must shift their attitudes and opinions from believing that adults control when, how, and where children participate in ECEC to considering how effectively they can fulfil the role of inclusive practices through effective listening to children (Cassidy, *et al.,* 2022). Kazmierczak-Murray, O'Mahony, and Carey (2024) note that it is essential to recognise and understand that there are a variety of ways in which children communicate, and children should participate in decision-making regarding everyday environments and situations, including ECEC. Moreover, the ability of children with diverse needs to make choices and decisions is an essential component of participation and engagement (Kazmierczak-Murray, O'Mahony, and Carey, 2024).

Another aspect of the UDL principle of engagement is the idea of fostering a sense of belonging and community, as well as nurturing joy and fun in the classroom (CAST, 2024a). Some children with more complex needs may feel isolated and socially rejected by their peers (Ferreira *et al*., 2017). For other children, irrespective of their diverse needs, interacting and forming friendships foster joyful learning experiences, particularly when they find meaning in their activities, especially during inclusive and cooperative play (Krone & Yu, 2019). Children become engaged, make connections, develop their own curiosities, and interact with learning in a fun and exciting way. They feel a sense of belonging, which enables them to take risks and explore new ideas (Thunder *et al*., 2023).

Similarly, Nelson (2021) suggests that a child's sense of belonging is critical for their learning and development. When children feel they belong, they are more engaged and motivated (Nelson, 2021). Furthermore, when children with diverse needs feel included and have opportunities to develop autonomy, decision-making skills, and persistence, they become more resilient (Nelson, 2021). Nelson posits that employing the UDL framework shifts the focus from fixing children to enhancing the learning environment, and designing the curriculum in accordance with the three UDL principles reduces barriers to inclusion.

Nelson's conclusion is supported by findings that inclusive practices utilising the UDL framework benefit all children. However, she cautions that many educators find it challenging to implement the principle of multiple means of engagement, as it necessitates a shift in mindsets, training, and classroom structure. In working within this principle, educators must consider the whole child, including their developmental needs, to foster a sense of community and belonging, similar to the principles outlined in Síolta and Aistear, the national frameworks (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2017; GOI, 2024). Additionally, they must foster nurturing relationships, cultivate empathy and compassion, and develop restorative practices in conjunction with professional reflection (Nelson, 2021; CAST, 2024a). However, there is limited empirical research to support Nelson's suggestions, findings or conclusions. Moreover, she did not consider or acknowledge the diverse needs of children within their unique contexts, such as family, development, communication, learning, and overall health.

In contrast, Síolta and Aistear focus on personal development, encompassing psychological well-being (thoughts and emotions), physical well-being, and identity and belonging. ECEs are also encouraged to foster reciprocal relationships with children, families, and communities through positive and meaningful interactions that are respectful, valued, inclusive, and empowering (DES, 2017). Moreover, collaboration and reflection by educators are essential for addressing children's needs and achieving successful learning outcomes (Lakkala & Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2021). ECEs play a crucial role in creating various opportunities for co-constructing learning, enabling children to freely express themselves through playful and joyful experiences, collaborate, and take ownership of their learning by allowing them to choose their own trajectories in their education (Gerogeson *et al*., 2023. In turn, ECEs provide children with a heightened sense of well-being, academic success, autonomy, engagement, and fun (NCCA, 2009; Hanley & Feeney, 2021; French & McKenna, 2022; GOI, 2024).

2.9.2 Multiple Means of Representation

Providing multiple means of representation encompasses the 'what' of learning (Griful-Freixenet *et al*., 2021a). The 'what' dimension encompasses a range of learned habits and automatic responses to everyday concepts, acquired through informal experiences, as well as knowledge developed through formal education (Griful-Freixenet *et al*., 2021a). Learning occurs in various ways for different children, and biological, cognitive, emotional, and experiential differences among children influence their learning (Alexander, Schallert, & Reynolds, 2009). Providing multiple means of representation, in line with the UDL guidelines and considerations of perception, language, and symbols, effectively facilitates knowledge transfer and learning (CAST, 2024f). Various means of representation also support the inclusion of diverse content, encompassing different people, cultures, identities, and perspectives (CAST, 2024f).

2.9.2.1 Multiple means of representation and Irish ECCE classrooms

To support children in becoming agentic, competent, and confident learners (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024), often referred to as expert learners, the UDL guidelines promote offering multiple ways for learners to access, remember, and retrieve information that is presented. Therefore, educators should present information in various formats that can be adjusted as needed, allowing children to easily access and comprehend it. Through multiple means of representation, barriers to learning can be reduced (Quirke *et al*., 2023). Moreover, this principle aligns with the philosophy of total communication, an inclusive approach that incorporates speech, gestures, sign language, visual aids, and assistive technologies to support children with a range of communication differences (Chardin & Novak, 2021).

In the context of ECEC, applying UDL through a total communication lens enables educators to provide equitable access to learning for children with speech, language, or neurodivergent communication profiles. Additionally, young children comprehend information differently when it is presented (Geary, 2009). Some children may grasp information more efficiently by seeing it, while others may comprehend it more readily through touch, hearing, or a combination of all three (Horn *et al*., 2016). For instance, using visual schedules, augmentative and alternative communication tools, and simplified language structures supports understanding and expression for children with communication needs. Such inclusive strategies not only remove barriers to participation but also foster a sense of

belonging and agency (Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). Providing multiple means of representation in an ECCE classroom can be achieved by ECEs planning, organising, and directing inclusive learning while maintaining a well-prepared environment. This principle can be achieved through individual or group conversations, photographs, visual timetables and scheduling, reflecting on children's learning, structuring the environment, and modelling (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024).

2.9.3 Multiple Means of Action/Expression

Providing multiple means of action or expression considers 'how' learners engage with and interact with their environment, approach learning, and demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Educators need to design learning experiences and opportunities that accommodate and respect these various forms of action and expression. Individual learners approach learning differently; for instance, some may prefer to express themselves through mark-making, while others do so through speech. Additionally, action and expression require strategy, practice, and organisation, further highlighting the unique ways in which learners navigate these processes (Meyer & Rose, 2012).

As learners are unique, there is no singular means of expressing knowledge; under this third principle of UDL, educators should offer choices to learners in how they express their understanding and knowledge. For example, the UDL Guidelines 3.0, under action and expression, provide interaction options, expression and communication options, and strategy development options (Quirke *et al*., 2023; CAST, 2024g). Therefore, the physical learning environment is crucial for accessing the curriculum and its materials. Some barriers to learning are addressed through UD and classroom design, such as ramps, lifts, space, specialised equipment, and seating arrangements; others involve anticipating and planning for challenges, enhancing the capacity for monitoring processes, challenging biases and exclusionary practices, and building support for practices and learner performances (CAST, 2024a).

2.9.3.1 Multiple means of action and expression and Irish ECCE classrooms

In the ECCE classroom, multiple means of action/expression are demonstrated through Aistear's themes of Communication, and Exploring and Thinking, whereby children should be provided with ample opportunities for active learning during play and hands-on experiences. The children participate daily in arts and crafts, singing, dancing, gross and fine

motor skills activities, interactive play, and storytelling. By exploring their environment, 'children use their senses, minds, and bodies' to extend their funds of knowledge and executive function skills through hands-on experiences (NCCA, 2009, p.43). Therefore, ECEs must provide time, space, and numerous opportunities for physical activity, effective communication, and executive function, enabling all children to interpret and impart knowledge in various ways (Horn *et al*., 2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). Section 2.10 explores the implementation of UDL, encompassing both positive and negative attitudes toward UDL and its application in ECEC, as well as views on AIM.

2.10 UDL Implementation

Lakkala and Kyrö-Ämmälä (2021) found that the successful application of UDL was linked to leadership, resource allocation, and time for collaboration that promote inclusive teaching practices. They also found that implementing UDL encompassed a range of strategies that involved the educator's mindset and cooperation, including professional and parental partnerships, as well as institutional support. Similarly, Fovet (2021), a renowned advocate for the implementation of UDL in higher education, notes that UDL cannot be effectively implemented and fully embedded within teaching and learning practices without effective leadership. He argues that there ought to be a positive attitude toward UDL from educational leaders, alongside support for colleagues' ability to explore new approaches to inclusion. Whether a top-down or bottom-up approach is used to implement UDL and inclusive practices, there must also be buy-in from all school personnel and organisations (Fovet, 2021). Fovet notes there is little evidence to suggest that the implementation of UDL favours a top-down approach; therefore, UDL implementation is the responsibility of everyone, including educators, school personnel, policymakers, and educational systems, although he recognises that leadership facilitates significant shifts in attitudes toward effectively implementing UDL.

2.11 Attitudes toward Implementing UDL

Over the years, much of the literature has focused on the effectiveness of the UDL framework, endorsing its implementation and asserting that it promotes flexible and adaptable education alongside inclusive learning environments (Meyer *et al*., 2014; Flood, 2021; O'Brien & Fitzgerald, 2023; Quirke *et al*., 2023). Due to the lack of empirical research and literature on attitudes toward UDL, a scoping review was conducted by Han and Lei

(2024), covering the period from 2014 to 2023. The review examined the attitudes of educators and students toward UDL from 16 studies, spanning early childhood education (primary schools) to secondary education. The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report themes in the data. Seven studies were conducted in North America, specifically the US and Canada. Five were conducted in the Asia-Pacific region: four in Australia and one in Japan. Three were conducted in the Middle East, encompassing Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, while one was carried out in Europe (Spain).

Han and Lei's (2024) findings highlight that educators regard UDL as a learner-centred approach applicable to all learners, regardless of diverse needs, and believe that UDL benefits all learners. They emphasise the need for educators to reframe and adopt attitudes that embrace and foster diversity in learning. They also emphasise that educators believed that the three principles of the UDL framework could guide their practices in meeting students' learning needs and outcomes. According to the study, many educators found UDL to be fundamental and beneficial in creating an inclusive classroom environment. However, while some educators attempted to implement UDL, they still held certain misconceptions regarding inclusion and perceived UDL as merely good teaching practice. The findings also underline the need for pre-service and in-service educators' training on the benefits of the UDL framework as more than merely a pedagogical tool. Nevertheless, Han and Lei (2024) found that UDL is considered an innovative theoretical and practical framework. Interestingly, they concluded that they were the first to summarise and interpret the attitudes of educators and students, revealing that many students and educators held positive attitudes and beliefs about UDL.

Other positive attitudes toward UDL emerged from the presenters at the UDL International Symposium: Learning Together (2023). One presenter, Tucker-Smith from CAST, suggested that UDL cultivates equitable spaces, providing engaging and empowering learning environments for all students (Tucker-Smith, 2023). She also suggested that UDL promotes the notion that every student is a capable learner and views learning as an ongoing process that builds on learner agency. Additionally, UDL aims to challenge biases in people's attitudes, focusing on universality and catering to the diversity of populations (Quirke, 2023). Arguably, the views and recommendations of Tucker-Smith and Quirke can be regarded as favourable toward UDL, considering they are prominent contemporary scholars advocating for the implementation of UDL practices in educational settings.

2.11.1 Evidence, Attitudes, and Ambiguities of UDL

Advocates and supporters of UDL claim that the framework is grounded in neuroscience and developmental psychology. It is contended that the UDL approach to instructional design in teaching and learning is grounded in scientific evidence (Darragh, 2007; Hall *et al*., 2012; Meyer *et al*., 2014; Flood, 2021). These claims have been disputed by Edyburn (2010, 2020, 2021), a contemporary thinker who argues that the effectiveness of UDL as a sound pedagogical framework is based not on evidence but on promise and a belief system. Additionally, Lowery (2021), notes that over 30 years of UDL, the UDL community has not made significant progress, as there has been no new information on its effectiveness. She explains that operating from a belief system appears religious, which is inadequate; therefore, UDL requires additional empirical evidence to substantiate it as a significant and essential approach to inclusive education and a sound pedagogical framework.

Interestingly, Lowery *et al*.'s (2017) research and part of the aforementioned scoping review highlighted some discrepancies in educators' narratives regarding their perceptions of the UDL framework. The participants demonstrated the successful application of UDL in removing barriers through deliberate preparation. For example, the language that participants used to express their attitudes toward UDL sometimes reflected a synonymous use of differentiation or individualised planning for some children. There were varying attitudes toward UDL regarding the understanding of the framework, with one participant equating the framework with effective teaching that does not require any special preparation or consideration: 'UDL is just good teaching. We've been doing it for years, but now it has a name and guidelines to follow; it is what really good educators have always been doing' (p. 235).

Lowery *et al*.'s findings suggest that educators' attitudes reveal that much of the implementation of UDL tends to originate from what educators intuitively do on their own. Different educators have varying attitudes toward the philosophy of UDL and its application, as noted also in Han and Lei's (2024) scoping review. Nevertheless, Lowery's (2021) concern is that educators' attitudes toward UDL are seen as 'everything they do' in the classroom. She stresses that such an attitude is unacceptable, as UDL should not encompass all of educators' practices and is too ambiguous to be adequately studied (Lowery, 2021). She cautions that if the opportunity to research UDL is missed, the community risks UDL being perceived as merely an educational fad, a risk also identified by Edyburn (2010, 2020).

Edyburn (2020) suggests that the lack of a clear operational definition of UDL, the failure to distinguish the elements of the framework, insufficient recommendations on the amount of UDL intervention needed for successful engagement, and the absence of suitable research in the field contribute to the perception that UDL is merely a passing trend.

2.11.2 Attitudes toward Implementing UDL in ECEC

While ECEs recognise the importance of inclusion by embracing diversity and ensuring equal access to ECEC (Balik & Özgun, 2024), little is known about ECEs' attitudes toward implementing UDL in ECCE classrooms, as suggested by Han and Lei (2024). A study conducted by Visković (2021) across five ECEC settings in Croatia, involving 146 ECEs, examined inclusive pedagogical practices and their impact on quality ECEC education, particularly regarding the role of educators in promoting inclusiveness through elements of UDL. This quantitative research assessed inclusive practices, encompassing educational strategies, teacher–child interactions, curriculum values, parental collaboration, and professional development. While this study did not formally apply the UDL principles in a structured manner as part of its methodology, it did incorporate the UDL principles within the broader context of inclusive pedagogical practices as a predictor of quality early childhood education from the perspectives of the ECEs.

From the viewpoint of inclusive practices that align with UDL, Visković's (2021) study revealed positive attitudes toward adapting teaching strategies based on children's unique needs while respecting the diversity of learning in the classroom. This viewpoint aligns with the UDL principle of multiple means of representation, where ECEs present information in different ways to accommodate children with diverse needs (Horn *et al*., 2016). The ECEs also valued adapting learning activities based on children's interests (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024a). This suggests that their inclusive practices reflect multiple means of engagement, whereby ECEs promote motivation by providing children with choices, appropriate learning experiences, and opportunities based on the children's emergent interests (Visković's; 2021).

However, the research uncovered conflicting views regarding flexible learning environments associated with UDL, particularly concerning multiple means of action and expression. Some ECEs were hesitant to implement inclusive practices, doubting the significance of designing learning environments that cater to all children, and did not fully grasp or apply the principles of UDL. Visković also found that ECEs with lower levels of education questioned the importance and value of UDL, as they were reluctant to motivate children,

provide feedback, or tailor activities to meet the needs of children using UDL principles. In contrast, ECEs with higher levels of education employed UDL more effectively. They were more receptive to parental knowledge, which aided in supporting, planning, and evaluating their curriculum, designing their classrooms, and addressing the needs of *all* children. This suggests that attitudes toward UDL in ECEC, whether positive or negative, were highly contingent upon the level of education of the ECEs and the systems and structures in place to promote inclusion for all.

A further study by Katz (2015) on the implementation of her Three-Block Model of UDL in K-12 classrooms involved 48 educators from Canada. The attitudes of these educators following the implementation of her model indicated that young children were more socially active, had more friends, and engaged in more positive interactions. Educators also noted an improvement in the overall school atmosphere and believed that the model had significantly reduced children's negative behaviour, leading to increased positive interactions among children in a safer and more favourable environment. This alleviated educators' burnout and led to increased happiness for them. As a result, educators felt that teaching had become far more enjoyable and fulfilling. Those interviewed by Katz indicated that using UDL enabled them to be more reflective about their inclusive practices, which heightened their job satisfaction.

Despite the positive attitudes toward implementing the Three-Block Model, the educators in Katz's study also expressed challenges that impacted the sustainability of the approach. They felt that assessment posed an ongoing challenge, as the pre-designed rubrics were difficult to apply due to the complexity of children's needs in the classroom. Additional challenges that hindered implementation included the need for extra time, collaboration, and resources; a change of mindset from other educators; clear guidelines from policies, government, and school personnel; and continuous professional learning and development in UDL (Katz, 2015).

2.11.3 Attitudes to Implementing the Access and Inclusion Model in ECEC

As mentioned, one of the key messages outlined in UNESCO's policy regarding suitable educational approaches in ECEC is that implementing UDL along with multi-tiered systems (targeted supports) is recommended. The policy also notes that some children in ECEC have specific and individual needs, and from this perspective, ECEs should provide a range of strategies and targeted support to meet the needs of *all* children, similar to AIM. Therefore,

ECEs must understand how these approaches can be integrated to promote high-quality, inclusive learning environments for *all* children (Coogle, Storie, & Rahn, 2022).

One could argue that using AIM fosters and sustains inclusion for all children, supporting an effective multi-tiered system in ECCE classrooms. For instance, AIM challenges and transforms attitudes and behaviours toward inclusion in ECEC. Children's lived experiences are enriched by learning about acceptance and inclusion through AIM (Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey, 2019). Positive and reciprocal relationships are evident among numerous stakeholders, leading to greater ability to access information, resources, and support (Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey [RSM], 2019). Moreover, a three-year evaluation report for AIM found that, when surveyed, 96% of ECEC providers in the study expressed support for the model. They noted that it had a positive impact on inclusion in their settings, providing children with opportunities for meaningful participation (Robinson *et al.*, 2024, p. 22). Therefore, AIM is viewed as a highly professional, collaborative, and partnership approach across various disciplines, from education to health.

Interestingly, in recognition of the government's investment in supporting inclusive and equitable education in ECEC, the AIM policy won the Zero Project Awards 2020, a global accolade for innovative practices and policies that promote implementation of the UNCRPD and aim to break down social, economic, and cultural barriers for all persons with disabilities (Zero Project, 2021). By contrast, the RSM report (2019), named after its authors Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey, highlights the concerns of ECEs regarding their ability to effectively meet all children's needs. For instance, many respondents emphasised the necessity for improved collaboration between cross-government departments (Health Service Executive and Better Start) in delivering therapeutic support. They also expressed challenges in allocating funding for additional staff. They indicated that providing an all-inclusive education for children with complex or medical needs (multiple, chronic, significant health issues) presents considerable difficulties (Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey, 2019).

The ECEs in the RSM report questioned the practicality of delivering such a service that necessitates nursing interventions. Additional concerns raised by ECEs included the lack of professional learning opportunities for implementing inclusive practices and interventions, a gap also noted in Flood and Banks' (2021) study. Roberts and Callaghan (2021) surveyed the attitudes of 194 ECEs toward Ireland's AIM policy. Their findings highlighted the importance of inclusive education involving genuine participation rather than merely placing

children with diverse needs in ECEC settings. While 37 educators highlighted the need to adapt curricula and daily activities to meet the diverse needs of children, only 20 adhered to an emergent curriculum, a concept that aligns with Aistear and Síolta. This implies a significant challenge in identifying and creating an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, 34 educators reported difficulties designing and implementing activities that accommodate all children, a concern that resonates with previous studies (Nutbrown *et al*., 2013; Kenny, McCoy, & Mihut, 2020; Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021).

Another concern was the widening participation gap (Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey, 2019). Some ECEC settings refused to enrol children with diverse needs, while others faced difficulties navigating the AIM application process (Rhodes *et al.,* 2019). As a result, many vulnerable children did not receive adequate support. Ultimately, despite the AIM's intent, to date the policy has failed to ensure meaningful participation for some children with diverse needs, leaving families and educators to struggle with how to effectively meet these needs (Roberts & Callaghan, 2021), thereby raising questions about the leadership, professional responsibilities and the need for policy-level intervention to ensure that all ECEs have access to high-quality, relevant, and sustained pre-service training and qualifications for inclusion (Hanley & Garrity, 2024). Moreover, while AIM is effective in principle and enjoys extensive support, there are systemic shortcomings, including poor inter-agency collaboration, insufficient professional development, and administrative hurdles that limit its practical success (Roberts & Callaghan, 2021). These findings emphasise the need for strengthened governance, targeted capacity building, and streamlined processes to realise AIM's goals of meaningful inclusion truly (Robinson *et al*., 2024).

2.12 ECEC Leadership and Professional Responsibilities

While the introduction of various inclusion frameworks and the positive attitudes mentioned above are essential to inclusive education, it is also crucial to recognise that inclusion and the implementation of pedagogical practices throughout ECEC are the responsibility of all stakeholders: ECEs, the Irish government, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, policymakers, and other relevant parties. Intentional leadership is necessary to empower ECE colleagues to develop and implement inclusive practices, irrespective of different frameworks in ECEC, through professional reflection, collaboration, modelling, and cultivating an inclusive culture (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018).

While inclusive culture is somewhat challenging to define, ECEs' responsibility in fostering it involves respecting diversity, promoting partnerships and inclusion, facilitating open communication, and advocating for equal opportunity for all children (DCYA, 2016) They are responsible for recognising children's uniqueness, fostering self-awareness, and promoting decision-making (DCYA, 2016). Such responsibilities are fundamental to inclusion and ensuring the high quality of ECEC settings (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018). Equally important are maintaining a positive outlook, having self-efficacy, and being motivated to educate and care for children, which are essential for implementing inclusive teaching practices rooted in the principles of UDL and embedded within educators' educational philosophy (Meyer *et al*., 2014).

Schaub and Lütolf (2024) discovered that positive attitudes and self-efficacy (the confidence to implement inclusive practices) are vital for the effective implementation of inclusive practices in ECEC, thereby supporting leadership and professional responsibilities. ECEs who had personal interactions with children with diverse needs and their families were more likely to maintain positive attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices (Schaub and Lütolf; 2024). Interestingly, the researchers also discovered that the ECEs' self-efficacy influences attitudes more than attitudes influence self-efficacy. Nonetheless, they noted that the self-efficacy among ECEs was lower than their overall attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices. Additionally, ECEs require ongoing professional learning (PL) and the establishment of communities of practice to feel confident and capable of fostering inclusive environments. Engaging in PL is a key component for educators adapting to the ever-evolving inclusive educational landscape and successfully integrating new tools for inclusive practices, including acquiring further knowledge of diversity, collaboration, and actively learning from peers (Stark, Sayers, & Angell, 2024).

It is widely recognised that PL enhances teaching practices and improves children's outcomes (Banks & Smyth, 2011; King, 2016). PL fosters attitudinal shifts, encouraging educators to move from providing individualised instruction for some students to embracing an inclusive learning environment while building their confidence in supporting diverse learners (Brennan & Gorman, 2023). Educators' specific PL requirements influence their motivation to engage in sessions at a given time (King, 2016). However, Stark *et al*. (2024) caution that completing PL does not necessarily lead to changes in teaching practices if it is perceived solely as a means of delivering knowledge and skills rather than a collaborative and supportive process. Barriers to participation in PL include financial constraints, time

limitations, lack of childcare, challenging working conditions, and the absence of recognition or monetary incentives (Stark *et al*., 2024). Nevertheless, participating in PL supports educators with the skills, competencies and knowledge required to foster an inclusive culture and implement inclusive practices (Breen *et al*., 2019; Roberts & Callaghan, 2021). As part of PL and practice, educators should draw on evidence-based research to develop, strengthen, and assess their inclusive teaching methods (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020).

2.13 Conclusions

Research has shown that many challenging issues are associated with defining inclusive and equitable education globally (Mitchell, 2018; UNESCO, 2021c). Compounding the highly contextual and situational challenges of inclusive education are the ontological views of various educational stakeholders, including educators, which influence their philosophical beliefs and perspectives on what inclusive education encompasses, most notably, whether inclusive education is intended for *all* or for *some*. Literature suggests that educators' ultimate objective is to provide an education to children so they can reach their fullest potential and become competent, capable, confident, and agentic learners, as outlined in Aistear (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024). Inclusive education is founded on children's right to receive a fair and equitable education, irrespective of their social or personal circumstances. However, challenges emerge from attitudes, values, and beliefs of inclusion, which influence inclusive pedagogical practices and behaviours (O'Toole & Burke, 2013; Hanley & Garrity, 2024). While there is a shared belief that each child has the right to an education and that it is the educators' responsibility to deliver this inclusive education, a conflict remains regarding whether children with complex needs would benefit from attending specialised settings with trained professionals providing targeted support (Leijen *et al*., 2021). Others argue that all children should be educated together to foster a sense of acceptance and belonging. From this perspective, it may be considered unacceptable to view inclusion as 'different' by adopting a 'them and us' mentality (Cologon, 2019), which may lead to social exclusion, stereotyping, biases, discrimination, and opposing views. In the context of ECCE classrooms, valuing diversity and acknowledging that *all* children should be educated together in high-quality ECCE settings is supported by a biopsychosocial model underpinned by children's rights, which may remove the barriers to learning faced by children (Barton & Smith, 2015; DE, 2024; Singha, 2025).

However, there is considerable confusion and uncertainty regarding inclusive practices, much like the attitudes and perspectives surrounding inclusion in various educational contexts. Some research suggests that interventions resembling a multi-tiered system should not be employed (Slee & Tomlinson, 2018). The focus should instead shift away from the individual child and their diverse needs (Winter & O'Raw 2010; Tiernan, 2020). Others believe that different approaches and supportive interventions are essential to achieving full inclusion successfully with an emphasis on the services and instructional practices provided in early childhood education (Horn *et al*., 2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022).

While this literature review focuses on educators' attitudes toward inclusion and UDL, it reveals that perspectives on inclusion and pedagogical practices are interconnected. Consequently, the frameworks employed in ECCE classrooms are shaped by the UDL framework, which is favoured in international policies and is advancing rapidly within the Irish education system (Flood & Banks, 2021). ECEs' professional values and knowledge significantly shape and affect their skills, attitudes, and behaviours regarding inclusion and their teaching methods. In Irish ECCE classrooms, AIM is used and supported by the Irish government through its funding. While the literature suggests that AIM is very valuable and promotes inclusion, some might view it as a deficit model (levels 4 to 7) in which ECEs make judgements with the support of Better Start personnel on the levels of targeted support required for children with diverse needs. Despite some positive views of AIM, negative findings and attitudes have been reported (Rhodes *et al*., 2019).

This literature review also found that there are numerous opposing views on the implementation of UDL in schools. Some regard UDL as essential for supporting learning for all children, and UDL-inspired classrooms are perceived as providing genuine opportunities and experiences for every child (Meyer *et al*., 2014). For example, the literature revealed that educators believed that children's learning outcomes were enhanced through the practical application of UDL, negative attitudes among children were reduced, and children had the opportunity to capitalise on their strengths and abilities (Katz, 2015). Other proponents of UDL emphasised that it benefits the entire class, promoting collaboration and peer-to-peer learning, allowing children to experience a sense of belonging and place (UNESCO, 2018; Lalvani, 2019; Nelson, 2021).

Other educators believe that UDL fosters a love of learning within an engaging environment (Katz, 2015). Most importantly, the framework promotes a shift in mindset toward creating

and sustaining rich and meaningful opportunities for all by fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere (Fovet, 2021). However, many assert that the efficacy of UDL as a robust pedagogical framework remains unproven and is rooted in an ideology with religious overtones. Implementing UDL as a suitable and practical framework for inclusion requires empirical research (Lowery *et al*., 2021). The varied understanding and perspectives on UDL undermine the framework's proper application, leading to its perception as a superficial approach that is overly complex, poorly structured, and an educational fad (Edyburn, 2010, 2005). Nevertheless, the ECEs utilising Katz's Three-Block Model reported experiencing reduced burnout and enhanced job satisfaction due to the framework's facilitation of positive interactions among children within a safe and supportive learning environment. ECEs emphasised the need for time, additional resources, a positive mindset, clear guidelines, government support, and instructional knowledge to ensure sustainability (Katz, 2015).

Overall, the literature review emphasised the need for clarity regarding inclusion and inclusive education to resolve discourse conflicts and change attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive practices. Moreover, regardless of the inclusive framework used in ECCE classrooms, ECEs must have the knowledge, skills, and understanding of inclusion, but more importantly, maintain a positive attitude towards inclusive education to ensure no child or ECE is left behind. While systemic barriers, such as inadequate staffing and limited interagency collaboration, are well-documented, they are not the most frequently cited challenges by educators. Instead, attitudes, although less visible, significantly influence how inclusive frameworks like AIM and UDL are interpreted and implemented in practice (Lakkala and Kyrö-Ämmälä; 2021; Hanley & Garrity, 2024). Therefore, inclusion is not merely a policy or resource issue but is rooted in relational, value-based beliefs. This reinforces the rationale for this study's focus on educators' attitudes towards inclusive practice in Irish ECCE classrooms and highlights the importance of examining ECEs' attitudes towards inclusive practices. This literature review has also shaped the research design, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction and Background

This chapter outlines the Q methodology approach for this study, which was designed to facilitate the sharing of subjective viewpoints. It includes the techniques and instruments used to explore the overarching research question: What is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an effective pedagogical tool in Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) classrooms?

Secondary questions relating to the overarching question are:

- How do individual Q-sorts relate to all the other Q-sorts?
- What are the distinguishing arrays (viewpoints) between the Q-sorts?
- What is the consensus (agreement) between the Q-sorts?
- What are the potential implications of educators' varying attitudes toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogy tool in ECCE classrooms?

This chapter is organised into eleven sections, including the current introductory one. The second section outlines the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study. The third section provides an overview of and discusses the limitations of Q methodology. The fourth section details the strategies of inquiry, and the fifth section addresses my positionality. The sixth section clarifies the differences between R-oriented methods (traditional research methods) and Q. The seventh section presents the research design utilised in this study. The eighth section discusses the analysis and interpretation methods employed. The ninth section considers ethical considerations, the tenth section examines validity and reliability, and finally, the eleventh section offers a conclusion.

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions Underpinning this Research

Crotty's (1998) framework of the Four Elements of the Research Process supported the philosophical assumptions that guided this research and scaffolded my learning to identify the relationships between each element, as seen in Figure 3.1 below.

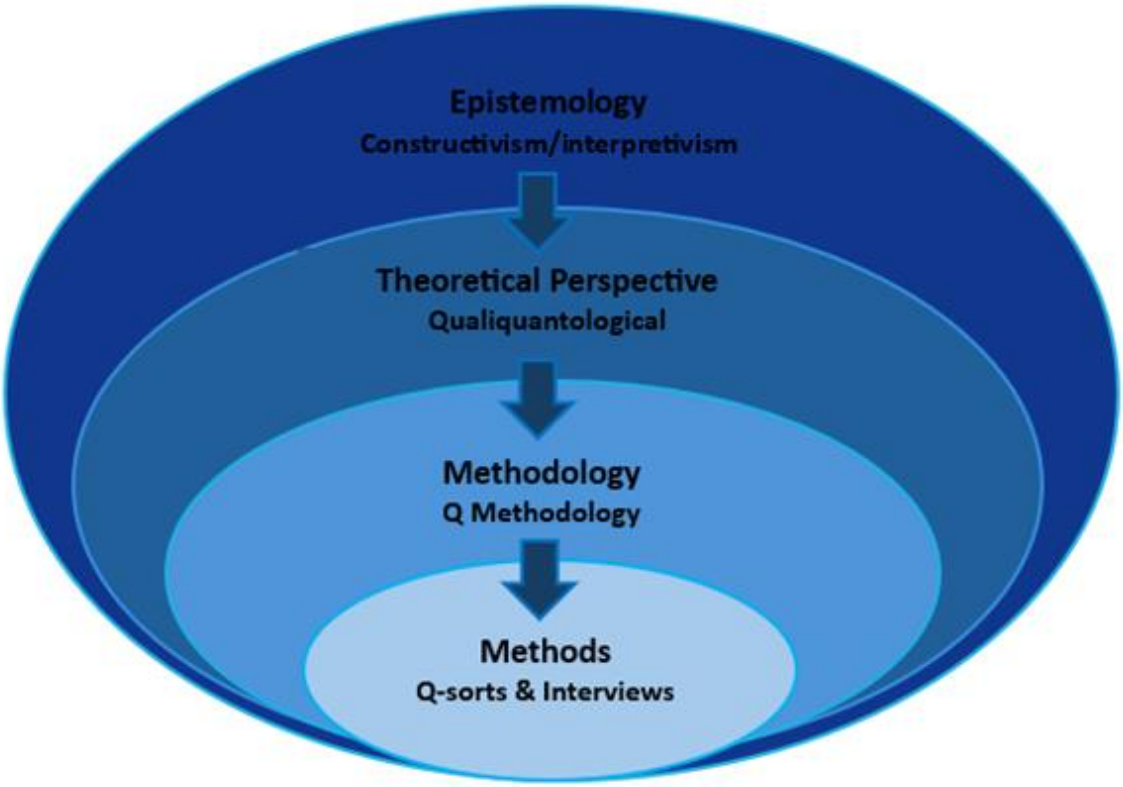

Figure 3.1: Four elements of the research process (adapted from Crotty, 1998)

Philosophical assumptions are described as world views and beliefs rooted in one's position in the world (Given, 2008; Creswell, 2009). The philosophical assumptions echo the researcher's realities, including their social, cultural, and personal experiences which determine the 'ontology (the nature of the reality), epistemology (how we know what we know), methodology (the process of research), (Creswell, 2009, p. 37) and research methods (qualitative or quantitative), which are undertaken to make sense of phenomena or occurrences (Given, 2008; Singh, Sbppse, & Gate, 2019).

In the context of this research, my ontological assumption is that multiple realities exist owing to each person's lived experiences; therefore, significant aspects of their reality are constructed through subjective feelings, opinions, and beliefs. I believe there is not one objective truth but various perspectives that coexist in society. My epistemological assumption is that I will gain knowledge through exploring individual and shared subjective viewpoints from early childhood educators' (ECEs') lived experiences of inclusion and implementing UDL in early childhood classrooms rather than separately measuring objective facts that traditional methods of research offer (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). I believe that Q methodology, known as a qualiquantological approach, would complement this educational research because of its hybrid methodological procedure of

quantitative and qualitative methods that integrate elements of each to leverage their strengths to scientifically explore the subjective opinions of ECEs (Stenner & Stainton Rogers, 2004).

I also believe that quantitative and qualitative methods 'can inform the other and guide the other', causing a 'fluid interdependence between research paradigms' (Salomon, 1991, p. 16). Put simply, employing a Q methodology for this research by using different research instruments (Q-sorts and online semi-structured interviews) to collect data and explore subjective viewpoints would achieve a 'powerful and important' representation of the participants' reality to answer my research question, while providing equitable opportunity for participation in research by using Q (Lundberg, de Leeuw, & Aliani, 2020, p. 1). Equitable opportunity in this context involves a participant-centred approach where the focus is on individuals expressing their viewpoints, which are treated as equally valid.

It is important to me, as a researcher, to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how ECEs view and experience inclusion and inclusive pedagogical practices in their classrooms through inclusive, participant-centred research that illuminates ECEs' personal opinions and views. Thus, using Q allows this study to remain connected to the participants and to interpret and share their individual perspectives with integrity to answer the research question (Hughes, 2012; 2016).

3.3 Overview of Q Methodology

William Stephenson (1902–1989), a physicist and psychologist, developed Q in 1935. He was employed as an assistant to Charles Spearman and Cyril Burt at University College London. Spearman knew him as the 'most gifted and creative student', who added fundamental new knowledge to factor analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 7). Stephenson wrote about his new methodology in the journal *Nature* (1935) and subsequent papers over the following three years. Q is considered an innovative adjustment of Spearman's traditional factor analysis methods (Watts & Stenner, 2012; Ramlo, 2016a) and a framework for the scientific study of subjectivity that 'includes self-referential meaning and interpretation' (Ramlo, 2015, p. 73).

In other words, Q investigates individuals' or groups' 'self-involving domains' (personalities, opinions, values, attitudes, decision-making, and socialisation) (Brown, 1980, p. 58) whereby the participants' subjective viewpoints are communicated and constructed

through personal reflection and perspectives (Baker *et al*., 2006). The participants refer to themselves and reflect on a set of statements that align with their past, present, or ideal experiences or views. Q methodology can allow quieter voices to be heard or amplified, due to its participant-centred approach and research design (Hughes; 2012; 2016; Hempel, 2021); For example, the participants articulate their subjective viewpoints through the Q sorting process, and the statements can be represented as visuals to overcome any language barriers if required (Hemple, 2021). These viewpoints can be expressed and developed from the standpoint of self-referentiality (personal reflection and perspectives) (McKeown & Thomas, 2013), which is one of the fundamental differences between R (conventional or traditional methods) and Q research (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013), which will be explained below.

3.3.1 Distinctions between R and Q

Q methodology is fundamentally different from R because it places subjectivity at the heart of research, allowing individuals to express complex, nuanced perspectives through an interactive approach (the Q-sort) (Wats & Stenner, 2012; Godor, 2025). Traditional (R) methods, by contrast, reduce subjectivity by focusing on objective measurement and statistical relationships between variables, which are better suited for testing generalisable hypotheses or trait-based outcome models (Stephenson, 1952; Brown, 1980). Q is a comprehensive methodology that offers a unique data collection process, analysis, and interpretation throughout each stage of a Q study. Research suggests that Q is more aligned with qualitative research methods and a constructivist paradigm (Stenner, 2009), while other research suggests it is well-suited to mixed-methods research (Ramlo & Newman, 2011). Nevertheless, it is agreed that the Q methodology offers a systematic and objective study of people's attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and views on any topic of interest in the fields of political science, education, psychology, and health science (Brown, 1980; Ramlo & Newman, 2011; Molenveld, 2020; Dieteren *et al*., 2023; Godor; 2025). Moreover, Q uses elements of qualitative analysis and quantitative factor analysis to identify viewpoints of agreement and disagreement (Molenveld, 2020). Q methodology is considered to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative methods, while maintaining precision and clarity, and utilising the foundations of statistical analysis (Baker *et al*., 2006).

Although Q and R methods may employ similar statistical techniques, they are designed to address distinctly different research questions. One examines variables across individuals

(R), while the other examines individuals' perspectives across variables (Q). Therefore, they are 'incommensurate' (p. 21) and do not serve the same scientific purpose (Brown & Montgomery, 2025). In the field of education, Q methodology enables researchers to gain rich insights into the varied viewpoints of educators, students, or other stakeholders. Such understanding is crucial for developing context-specific teaching methods and educational interventions (Godor, 2025). Moreover, unlike surveys that reduce responses to predefined categories, Q allows participants to critically reflect and rank statements, revealing deeper patterns in their beliefs that are both statistically and interpretively robust (Brown, 1980; Watts and Stenner, 2012).

Therefore, Q methodology was used in this study instead of questionnaires or traditional R methods because it enabled a systematic exploration of the complexity and nuance inherent in subjective viewpoints. Through engagement with the Q-set statements, participants in this study were scaffolded to reflect on multiple constructs simultaneously, such as beliefs, knowledge, preferences, and experiences. This process supported them in articulating a coherent viewpoint, while also revealing the relative importance of, and interrelationships between, these constructs. In doing so, the participants were able to make sense of their thinking and deepen their understanding of attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive practices in ECCE classrooms. However, like all research methods, it too has limitations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.3.2 Limitations of Q Methodology

Q methodology is considered time-consuming for both the researcher and the participants (Gallagher & Porock, 2010; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). For example, defining the concourse and ensuring that the Q-set is well balanced takes time and consideration. If the Q-set is not well balanced, it may cause the results to be incomplete, negatively impacting the data's trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Conducting the Q-sort also takes time and much reflection from the participants (P-set) (Brown Walker *et al*., 2018).

Other limitations of Q include the fact that results cannot be generalised to the population due to the small, purposeful sample, and the factor analysis can seem complicated and complex to the novice Q researcher (Ramlo, 2015). Lundberg *et al.* (2020) highlight ambiguity in the classification of Q as a mixed method, causing ongoing debate among Q researchers. Moreover, for some researchers, Q has an unfamiliar epistemological stance and

terminology (Lundberg *et al.,* 2020). Finally, Brown *et al.* (2015) suggest that many misconceptions surround the use of Q methodology owing to a lack of familiarity with the research method; for example, Q lacks scientific rigour, does not work with large samples, and is too complicated. One could argue that these misconceptions could be attributed to the limitations, as they may influence a researcher's decision to favour traditional methods over Q. The limitations of this research study will be discussed in the Conclusion Chapter.

3.4 Strategies of Inquiry

Stenner and Stainton Rogers (2004) introduced the term *qualiquantology* to describe Q as an approach that blends qualitative and quantitative methods. This concept highlights the diverse viewpoints' fluid and interconnected nature, recognising that people's attitudes are subjective, dynamic, and not easily categorised. Through Q methodology, researchers can explore the richness of subjective perspectives, including those that diverge from dominant or conventional views, while applying the' structure and analytical rigour of quantitative methods (Baker *et al*., 2006; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Given the complexity of subjective experience and the aim and focus of exploring ECEs' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, I adopted a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, aligning with the core principles of Q methodology (Ramlo & Newman, 2011; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

A constructivist paradigm holds that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions with the world. This worldview aligns closely with my roles as both a lecturer for potential early childhood educators and a researcher, particularly in the field of early childhood education and inclusion, where multiple interpretations and evolving understandings are essential. Constructivism recognises that meaning is not fixed but is shaped by personal, social, and cultural contexts and can be questioned, adjusted, or replaced (Pope, 2003; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). As such, it supports the idea that each participant's attitude, belief and perspective is a valid and meaningful construction of their reality, which is foundational to Q methodology (Hughes, 2016). Q values and investigates these subjective constructions, making constructivism a natural fit.

Interpretivism, closely linked to constructivism, also underpins this study. It focuses on understanding how individuals interpret their social world based on lived experience (Swanson, 2005). This is particularly relevant for exploring ECEs' attitudes toward inclusive practice and frameworks such as UDL as these beliefs, shaped by personal and professional

experiences, cannot be objectively measured. Instead, Q methodology enables participants to express how they construct meaning, making it well-suited to an interpretivist approach.

As mentioned, Q methodology combines qualitative insight with quantitative analysis, making it both interpretive and structured. This supports the use of abductive reasoning, which involves generating the most plausible explanation from available data (Ramlo & Newman, 2011; Wolf, 2014). As Peirce noted, abduction is a logical process for forming new hypotheses based on emerging patterns in the data (Bellucci & Pietarinen, 2020). In this study, abductive reasoning guided the interpretation of both Q-sorts and post-Q interview data to construct meaningful explanations of ECEs' viewpoints on inclusion. To support the abductive reasoning, this study also used induction as 'abduction searches for theories... and induction for facts' to explain the findings (Reichertz, 2014, p. 131).

My epistemological stance also includes constructive alternativism (Kelly, 1958), the idea that knowledge is not fixed and individuals can choose or revise interpretations based on new experiences. This flexibility is central to both my research approach and my professional practice. It allowed me to remain open to participants' differing or evolving views on inclusive pedagogy. Constructive alternativism also empowered participants, validating their ability to reshape their own perspectives. This dynamic and reflective process supports Q's capacity to capture subjective experience and contributes to a richer, more responsive understanding of inclusion in early childhood education.

3.5 Positionality

According to Bayeck (2022), 'positionality can shift depending on where the researcher stands at a specific moment, time, or space' (p. 1), meaning that a researcher can move from an insider to an outsider position at any moment or in any context or environment in which they find themselves. An insider researcher has commonalities with their participants, such as background, culture, or education, whereas an outsider researcher does not affiliate with their participants (Bayeck, 2022).

I was the principal investigator in collecting and analysing the data for this study, and as a previous early childhood educator, I was embedded in my research; therefore, my positionality influenced my understanding and interpretation of the research as an insider researcher. In Chapter 1, I mentioned that education was a core value in my upbringing because my mother was a Montessori teacher with her own Montessori preschool for over

twenty years, and my father was an assistant principal of a large post-primary school. Consequently, my parents' experiences in education influenced my goals, motivation, and career path, and I became the owner–manager of a Montessori ECEC establishment. Afterwards, I worked in a special school for children and young people for sixteen years and taught adults who had returned to education. From these experiences, much of my work in education and practice is underpinned by social justice. Moreover, at the time of this study, I was lecturing students of ECEC in higher education. Therefore, I had commonalities with my participants.

It was essential for me to recognise and critically reflect on how my own worldviews and values shaped my choices and actions. Additionally, I needed to examine how my professional roles and past experiences in education could influence my perspective on implementing UDL in ECCE settings. To maintain awareness of my positionality and possible biases, I engaged in both individual and collaborative reflective practices (Olmos-Vega *et al*., 2023). For instance, I may have held an inherent belief that inclusion is always beneficial, which could lead me to unintentionally prioritise evidence that supports this view while overlooking challenges or alternative perspectives that might impact my interpretation and understanding of the research.

3.6 Reflexivity

Engaging in reflexivity assisted me in clarifying how the research results were constructed and interpreted, and informed my complex decision-making throughout this research (Bayeck, 2022; Olmos-Vega *et al*., 2023). To achieve this, I maintained a reflective journal and a Q journal throughout the research process (Appendix A), which played a crucial role in deepening my self-awareness and enhancing the reflexivity of the study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Keeping a reflective journal throughout the research process helped me become more aware of my assumptions, values, and emotions, especially when I felt overwhelmed or uncertain about the research or methodology. It provided space for me to critically reflect on how my positionality influenced my engagement with the data and interpretation of participants' viewpoints, which was particularly important given the subjective nature of Q methodology. The journal also served as a practical tool for tracking my thoughts, documenting key decisions, and making sense of challenges as they arose. At times, it offered clarity, helping me stay grounded and connected to the research's purpose (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

To further support my reflection on my research, I contacted my supervisors when issues arose, or clarification was required. I also collaborated with critical friends from my Saturday morning writing workshops, which involved six other EdD students and my area of professional focus EdD colleagues. We discussed challenges and how to overcome them, sharing experiences and what had worked well and what had not. I also joined an international Zoom Q community that comprised of many seminal authors of Q and students, including Professor Diane Montgomery, who became my mentor. The Zoom Q community met every Monday evening, where we discussed all aspects of Q and any challenges we had. For each session, I also kept a journal (Appendix A) where I recorded advice given or questions about Q that emerged as I was conducting my research so that I could inquire about them during the Zoom meeting. For example, I wondered how long to wait before conducting the post-Q interviews and whether to show participants their ideal Q-sorts or their individual Q-sorts (Appendix A). I wanted to hear the views of the Zoom Q members so I could decide how to proceed with the interviews. There were a variety of opinions on framing the interviews, which I noted in the journal, as well as the advice from each member who contributed to the discussion. This information was invaluable to me as it influenced my decision to interview the participants within one month of them conducting their Q-sort. The information from the members also supported my decision to show the participants their individual Q-sort and ask them about their preference for where they ranked their statements.

Engaging with all aspects of my reflexivity gave me the confidence to conduct a Q study as intended by its founder, Stephenson, and a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Q process.

Q methodology	**R-oriented methods**	**Sources**
Conceptual/viewpoint Generalisation	Relationships between Variables	(Watts & Stenner, 2005, 2012)
Participant-centred approach/Self-directed	Researcher-led	(Ockwell, 2008; Curry *et al*., 2013)
Subjective viewpoints	Pre-conceived hypotheses	(Ockwell, 2008; Curry *et al*., 2013)

Table 3.1: Comparing R-oriented methods and Q methodology (Molenveld, 2020, p. 340)

3.7 Comparing R and Q Methods

There are many tools to measure objectivity, whereas Q is the only technique for measuring subjectivity (by defining viewpoints, attitudes, and beliefs) (Ramlo, 2022a). It is important to note that Q is distinct from R-oriented methods (traditional methods), since Q researchers do not typically express a hypothesis. Q uses conceptual generalisation to measure subjectivity, in which theories or broader perspectives are generated from subjective viewpoints. As such, Q is a participant-centred approach. This contrasts with the researcher-led approach of R, in which the relationships between variables are identified, as illustrated in Table 3.1.

Other distinguishing features of Q methods that differ from R traditional methods, as outlined in Table 3.2 below, are the ways in which subjects and variables are conceptualised. Subjects are the Q statements, and the variables are the Q-sorts completed by each sorter (participant). Q methodologists try to identify patterns of responses across the variables for each subject by examining the significance of sorter 1's Q-sort (variance) and how it relates to the significance of sorter 2's Q-sort for the same Q statement (subject), and so on. Q methodology analysis uses inverted factor analysis, whereby the patterns are looked for across the statements to find the patterns of responses from the Q-sorts. Therefore, these response patterns are a shared understanding and agreement among a group of people's opinions (sorting patterns) (Webler, Danielson, & Tuler, 2009).

This shared understanding is known as 'inter-subjective orderings of beliefs' (Webler *et al*., 2009, p. 8). Inter-subjective orderings of beliefs are demonstrated by the collective yet unique viewpoints that lead to understanding the world and social interactions. In R research, the participants are the subjects, and the questions in a survey are the variables. R researchers examine the subjects individually to establish the valuation of one variable, how it relates to the second variable's valuation, and so on (Webler *et al.*, 2009). Table 3.2 overleaf highlights the key differences between the R and Q methods, as outlined by Webler *et al.* (2009).

	R Method	Q Method
Variable	Survey question	A completed Q-sort by each sorter in a P-set
Subject	Respondent/participants	Q statements
Population	All possible respondents	Concourse (all possible Q statements)
Goal	Find patterns in how respondents answered different, distinct questions	Find patterns in where Q statements appear in Q-sorts
Factor analysis	Normal	Inverted (by-persons)

Table 3.2: Differences between R and Q methods (Webler *et al.*, 2009, p. 7)

Q studies involve key terms and unique terminology critical to understanding and applying this methodology effectively. Table 3.3 defines these.

Q methodology	Q methodology is a unique research approach that systematically explores subjective viewpoints (Watts & Stenner, 2012)
Q-set/Q-sample	The collection of different statements that the participants will organise and sort (Watts & Stenner, 2005)
Concourse	A broad range of information related to the topic of interest that consists of a set of statements or images (McKenzie *et al.,* 2011)
P-set (sorters)	Participants who perform the Q-sorting (McKeown & Thomas, 2013)
Q-sort	Participants (P-set) review each numbered statement in the Q-sample and arrange them on a grid provided by the researcher, based on their personal preferences, likes, and dislikes (Ramlo, 2022b)
Q-grid	A predefined grid with a scale ranging from 'least like my view' (1) to 'most like my view' (11) (Damio, 2016).
Conditions of instruction	Instructions for participants (P-set) to sort the statements (Q-sort) in order of their preference (Brown, 1980)
Factor array/ Composite array	An ideal Q-sort that has been abstracted from the Q-sorts that significantly loads on each factor and is used for interpretation (McKeown & Thomas, 2013).
Distinguishing statement	A statement where the factor scores differ significantly at the 0.05 level between at least one pair of factors, thus defining exclusive and unique viewpoints (Akhtar-Danesh & Wingreen, 2022)
Consensus statement	A statement where the factor scores do not differ significantly between any pair of factors at the 0.01 level, indicating agreement between the factors (Akhtar-Danesh & Wingreen, 2022)
Correlation coefficient matrix	Points to the strength of a relationship between two variables in a table format (Hadd & Rodgers, 2021)
Factor analysis	A statistical technique that illustrates the relationship between correlated variables. The relationships can be positive or negative (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Principal component analysis (PCA)	A statistical method that simplifies data into a single optimal mathematical solution while keeping key information from the original dataset (Watts & Stenner, 2012)
Factor loading	The relationship (correlation) between a Q-sort and the factor itself (Akhtar-Danesh, 2018)

Table 3.3: Definition of key terms

3.8 Research Design

This research employed Q methodology, a non-experimental, ex post facto research design that was exploratory. Non-experimental research approaches explore variables that naturally exist between people without any intervention from the researcher and are often identified through correlations or through examining differences between existing groups (Coolican, 2013). Ex post facto is described as the exploration and analysis of a study following its completion without any interference from the researcher or manipulation of variables (Salkind, 2010).

In the context of this research, Q allowed me to explore subjective attitudes toward implementing UDL in Irish ECCE classrooms from the perspectives of early childhood educators (ECEs) by identifying diverse opinions and commonalities (patterns of responses) and gaining an insight into the educators' experiences on applying an inclusive pedagogy in their everyday practices from a quantitative and qualitative stance. There are seven steps to the Q technique (Figure 3.2), which will be discussed below.

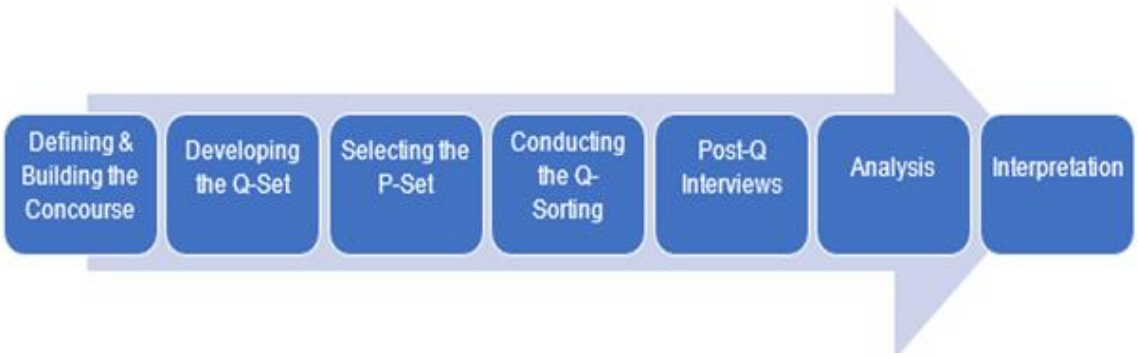

Figure 3.2: Q methodology seven-step technique

3.8.1 Defining and Building the Concourse

Having defined the concourse by identifying a topic of interest (implementation of UDL), I began to build it by gathering information representing the implementation of UDL in

educational settings. Two types of concourses were considered: naturalistic and ready-made. A naturalistic concourse is a set of stimulus statements that naturally occur from participant responses in questionnaires, focus groups, or interviews, whereas a ready-made concourse is constructed under theoretical grounds from existing print media, social media, reports, websites, literature, and/or guidelines (Watts & Stenner, 2012; Damio, 2016). Due to the time constraints for this study, I developed a ready-made concourse to address my overarching research question. To do this, I explored:

- Existing and relevant literature and books on the topic of UDL and inclusion in educational settings by searching the following online databases: Academic Search Complete, Taylor and Frances, Sage Journals Online, Education Research Complete, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. Keywords in the search included 'inclusion in early childhood education and care or inclusive education in early years education, UDL in early childhood education, attitudes to UDL'. The same keywords were used to search the Dublin City University (DCU) Library search engine.
- The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) website, UDL 2.2 guidelines and checkpoints.
- Loui Lord Nelson's The UDL Gears (2023) and her podcasts.
- Aistear (2009), Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged 0–6.
- Information from a showcase event at Trinity College Dublin: UDL – Making It Work for You (2023).
- Information from the 1st UDL International Symposium: Learning Together, at Maynooth University (2023).
- Personal comments about UDL from X (Twitter) and the UDL symposiums.
- 'Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning' on YouTube by The Universal Design for Learning Implementation and Research Network.

Although some literature used in concourse development may seem arbitrary, it was selected to capture the breadth of discourse on the topic, not statistical representativeness. This aligns with Q methodology's emphasis on representing diversity of opinion, as the goal of a Q concourse is not to achieve exhaustiveness but to capture the diversity of discourse surrounding a topic (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

The exploration of the literature, guidelines, social media, websites, and symposium information to form the first-order concourse (Brown, 2019) yielded 105 statements (Appendix B). The statements represented a broad range of characteristics of implementing

UDL in an educational setting. The number of statements was reduced to a more manageable amount to create the second-order concourse or Q-set, and some were changed from factual to self-referencing, which will be discussed below (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Brown, 2019).

3.8.2 Developing the Q-Set

There is no single right way to design a Q-set, and the literature has limited guidelines (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Nevertheless, I developed the Q-set from the statements gathered from the first-order concourse. I decided to colour-code the statements to represent UDL in the context of ECEC and eliminate repetition (Appendix C). This involved four steps, as outlined in Table 3.4.

Step 1	Colour-coded statements from the concourse concerning general attitudes toward: ✓ UDL – in blue ✓ Implementing UDL – in green ✓ ECE's role in implementing UDL – in pink
Step 2	Re-read all the statements. Divided them into smaller categories: ✓ Positive attitudes toward UDL ✓ Negative attitudes toward UDL ✓ Positive attitudes toward the expectations of UDL ✓ Negative attitudes toward the expectations of UDL ✓ Early childhood educators' knowledge and skills to implement UDL ✓ Attitude to the positioning of UDL in ECEC
Step 3	Divided the smaller categories into the three principles of UDL: ✓ Multiple means of engagement ✓ Multiple means of representation ✓ Multiple means of action/expression
Step 4	Eliminate repetition

Table 3.4: Steps for developing the Q-set

I sent the first draft of the statements to one of my colleagues and supervisors for feedback. Following their feedback (Appendix D), which noted some duplication of statements, I refined the statements further. They also advised eliminating some statements, merging others, and changing some of the language for more clarity of meaning in the Irish context. For example, my colleague stated (in blue text):

22. Collaboration between teachers, therapists, and families is vital for successful UDL implementation. ([Statements] 22 and 68 feel similar—68 is more language-friendly for ECEC.)

14. It is essential that differentiation be a fundamental practice in ECCE classrooms. (I'm not sure about this term; it is rarely used in ECEC, more of a primary Education term and approach) (I think statement 61 says it better.)

After further refinement, I ended up with sixty-seven statements but needed to reduce them further. However, I quickly realised that many of the statements I extracted for the Q-set were mostly about applying UDL in the classroom and did not represent the broader characteristics of UDL from my concourse. I sought advice from Diane Montgomery, one of my critical friends, and a mentor and expert in Q methodology; she suggested that the statements must be visceral (emotional), vernacular (plain language), and varied (diverse). Diane also suggested omitting the word 'UDL' in the statements, rewording them to start with a verb to make them self-referencing, and using the Fisher Block Design to get a broad representation of the first-order concourse for my Q-set.

The Fisher Block Design (1935) is a balanced block approach typically used in experimental design research (Montgomery, 2022). In a Q study, it is used to organise statements (Q-set) into groups or blocks based on specific characteristics to reduce variability, ensure balance, and represent the concourse accurately (Sylvester, 2019). In addition, the Fisher Block Design does not reflect the researcher's assumptions or preferences and thus reduces their biases. Using this balancing block approach (Table 3.5), I could develop a balanced Q-set and broadly represent the first-order concourse so that the statements were not all related to UDL or its implementation in the classroom.

Categorising similar statements into blocks was a purposeful rather than a haphazard approach to developing the Q-set's structure, which is a critical component of a Q study (Ramlo, 2024). A balanced Q-set does not mean dividing statements equally into positive and negative categories. Instead, it should reflect various characteristics or themes relevant to the topic, address the research question, and allow participants to express their views freely without feeling restricted or frustrated (Watts & Stenner, 2012). To do this, I revisited the statements in my first-order concourse. I then theoretically categorised the statements for further enhancement and edited them to remove any vagueness or duplication. This helped

develop the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the statements, ensuring I remained aligned with the study's focus. By categorisation, my bias was reduced (Damio, 2016).

Nine thematic categories emerged from the statements: children's goals, partnership with parents, children's choices, the ECEC environment, individual difference, professional development, leadership, reflective practice, and curriculum design, all underpinned by UDL principles, as illustrated in Table 3.5.

A: Children's goals (7)	**B:** Partnership with parents (3)	**C:** Children's choices (3)
D: ECEC environment (7)	**E:** Individual difference (10)	**F:** Professional development (5)
G: Leadership (4)	**H:** Reflective practice (2)	**I:** Curriculum design (6)

Table 3.5: Balanced block design

The letters A–I indicate the blocks, and the numbers indicate the number of statements related to the characteristic of UDL in each block, totalling forty-seven statements in my Q-set (Appendix E). I then refined the forty-seven statements by omitting the words UDL where appropriate, as this study was not an exploration of UDL per se, but rather of ECEs' opinions of inclusive practices through the lens of UDL. I also added a verb at the beginning of each statement so that participants could self-reference about their inclusive practices, and I would thereby obtain subjective opinions. For example,

> Statement 13: *UDL has the potential to foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive*.
>
> Changed to: *Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive*.
>
> Statement 39: *It is important to reflect on my practice to identify challenges and barriers in children's learning and development*.
>
> Changed to: *Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation and develop strategies to eliminate them by reflecting daily*.

Table 3.6 represents a sample of the statements extracted from the first-order concourse. Full set in Appendix E.

UDL Characteristics	Corresponding Statements
Children's goals	Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured.
Partnership with parents	Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress, and refer them to specialists when needed.
Children's choices	Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices.
ECEC environment	Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive. Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom.
Individual difference	Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom.
Professional development	Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive practices. Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities.
Leadership	Confident in providing leadership to other colleagues regarding inclusion, inclusive practices, and working with children with diverse needs. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom.
Reflective practice	Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive practices better and adapt my teaching.
Curriculum design	Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all.

Table 3.6: Sample of statements from each block

3.8.3 Conditions of Instruction

The conditions of instruction were required to frame or structure the Q study, as they, not the concourse, are the foundations of the study. The conditions of instruction are a proposition guide given to participants whereby they are asked to sort the set of statements

(Q-set) based on their views and opinions. For this study, the condition of instruction was: 'What are your views about your ECCE classroom?', which was provided to the participants on the Condition of Instruction information sheet (Appendix F). As part of this information sheet, the participants were also informed that they would be provided with sorting instructions (Appendix G), which outline the steps to be taken when conducting the Q-sort. The participants (P-set) placed the set of statements along a continuum from least like their view to most like their view. In Q methodology, this rank ordering of statements is typically completed on a Q-grid ranging from −5 to +5 (Damio, 2016).

3.8.4 Q-Grid

A Q-grid is a forced quasi-normal distribution to allow the participants (P-set) to determine the relevance of each statement and subsequently make finer distinctions between the statements. The forced distribution enabled the P-set to judiciously reflect on each statement, thus revealing more responsive behaviour and greater clarity of subjective views and opinions of the P-set (Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). However, I was concerned that using a grid ranging from −5 to +5 and thereby placing some statements in a minus position on the grid might be interpreted by participants as a negative statement or a view that they do not favour at all, as opposed to being on a continuum of least like their view to most like their view. Therefore, I designed the grid to reflect views ranging from 1 (indicating least like) to 11 (most like) the participant's views and opinions (Watts & Stenner, 2012). See Figure 9 below. However, for the factor analysis and interpretation of the data, I revert to -5 to +5 because KADE software does not give an option of 1- 11 and records the data and displays the ideal Q-grids as -5- to +5

The Q-grid for this study was designed to fit within the dimensions of an A4-sized page, with numbers ranging from 1 (least like my view) to 11 (most like my view), indicating a lower salient value for no. 1 and the highest salient value for no. 11. Forty-seven cells were allocated throughout the grid for the participants to place the statements in order of preference, with decreasing numbers of cells that resembled an upside-down pyramid (Figure 3.3).

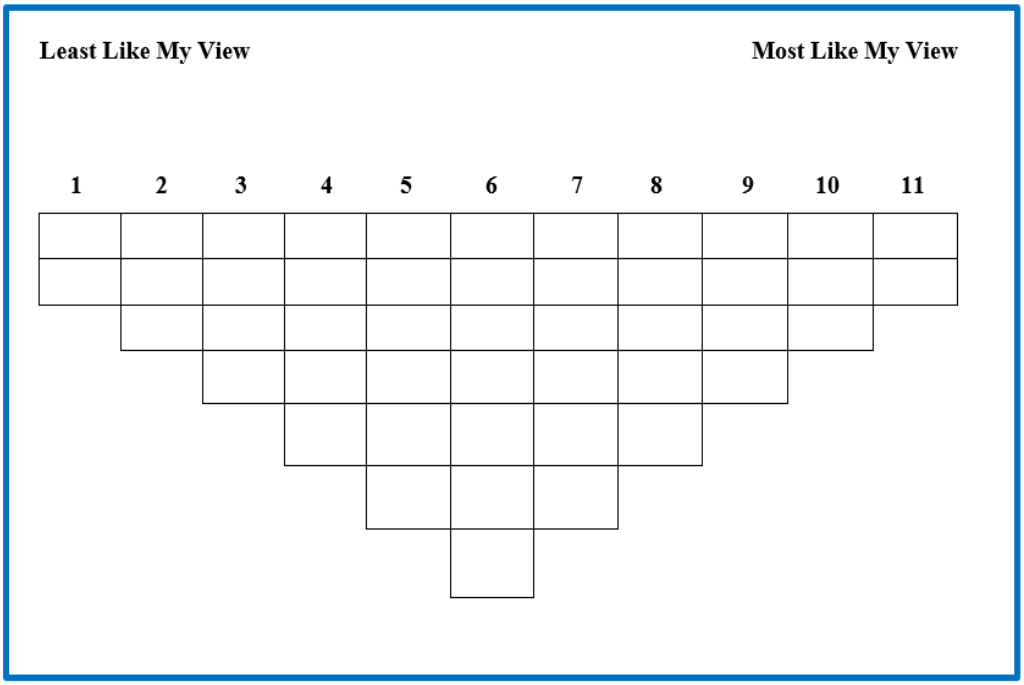

Figure 3.3: Q-grid design

Initially, the participants were expected to sort the Q-set online using the Q software. However, this software uses Firebase, which could breach data protection and was not in line with DCU data protection guidelines (DCU, 2020). Therefore, following consultation with my supervisors, it was decided that each participant would conduct the Q-sorting manually, take a picture of it, and email it to me. As the statements were too long to place on the grid, I added a corresponding number to each, and the participants recorded this on the Q-grid to indicate which statements they were referring to.

3.8.5 Selecting the P-Set (Participants)

The participants are referred to as the P-set (participants) in a Q study. Typically, the P-set is not randomly selected; the participants are purposefully selected through convenience sampling, because they must hold views and opinions (distinct viewpoints) on the topic of interest. Furthermore, the number of participants for the P-set should be lower than the number of statements in the Q-set (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It is important to note that the participants (P-set) in a Q study are not the samples but the variables (see Table 3.2) due to the by-persons analysis, which will be explained in the analysis section. Using the participants as the variables is one of the fundamental principles in a Q study and is methodologically and philosophically significant (Brown Walker, Lin, & McCline, 2018).

For this study, I selected ECEs as participants due to their firsthand experience and unique perspectives on inclusion and inclusive practices in ECCE classrooms. Their insights directly address the research question (Fonger *et al*., 2017). Therefore, the participants were a purposive, convenient sample of thirty-four ECEs who work in Irish ECCE classrooms teaching and caring for children aged between two years and eight months and five years and six months who avail of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. The ECCE programme provides free early childhood care and education for all children in this age range (DCEDIY, 2023).

I contacted ECEC professional bodies such as Early Childhood Ireland, the Association of Childhood Professionals, and Early Childhood Network Ireland and reached out to my professional network through my work colleagues, inviting them to share my recruitment advertisement and letter (Appendix H). As outlined in Table 3.7, a broad range of ECEC personnel working in the ECCE classroom were interested in participating in the study.

Role of the P-Set	**Number of Participants**
ECEC role unknown	7
Assistant teacher/educator	10
Room leader	4
Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) educator	4
Supervisor	1
Assistant manager	1
Manager/owner	7
Total	34

Table 3.7: Overview of the P-set

Table 3.7 shows the number of participants in each role. The role of seven (n = 7) participants within the ECCE classroom was unidentified.

3.8.6 Piloting Study

The Q study was piloted by four early childhood educators who were emailed a link to a participant's folder in Google Drive along with a feedback sheet. The feedback from the pilot study was important so that modifications could be made before the study was administered (Watts & Stenner, 2012; Balloo, Pauli, & Worrell, 2018). In the participant's folder were the Q-set (Appendix E), Condition of Instruction (Appendix F), Sorting Instructions (Appendix G), Q-grid, Plain Language Statement (Appendix I), and Consent

Forms (Appendix J). Feedback from the pilot studies (Appendix K) indicated that the Condition of Instruction, Sorting Instructions, and Plain Language Statement were clear, understandable, and easy to follow.

There was a little confusion when the Consent Form had to be signed by a witness. Therefore, I removed the request for a witness's signature. The Q-set (list of statements) was all understandable; however, one person found one statement a little unclear. Therefore, this statement was amended for more clarity. All participants in the pilot study indicated that they enjoyed conducting the Q-sort and that it made them reflect on their practice. However, it took people longer than the anticipated fifty minutes.

3.8.7 Conducting the Q-sort

Twenty participants in the P-set requested hard copies of the documents; therefore, I made hard copies, delivered them to the interested participants, and returned a week later to collect documentation and the completed Q-sorts. The others in the P-set were emailed the link to the participant's folder with all the documents. The Condition of Instruction (Appendix F) and the Sorting Instructions (Appendix G) were in the participants' online folders. Individual participants were asked to rank the Q statements into the Q-grid and respond with *least like my view* to *most like my view,* and in line with the Condition of Instruction.

First, the participants were asked to cut out each statement, read them, and divide it into three groups: the pile on the right was 'most like' their view, and the pile on the left were those statements that were 'least like' their view and the pile in the middle were for statements that there was not a strong feeling about. Next, the participants were asked to pick two statements from the pile most like their view and place them in the spaces in the far-right column (column 11) of the Q-grid, followed by picking two statements from the pile that are least like their view and placing them in the spaces in the far-left column (column 1) of the Q-grid. The participant worked back and forth from right to left, placing the statements onto the Q-grid until all the statements had been put into all the spaces. Then, the participants were asked to review the positions of the statements on the Q-grid and rearrange them if necessary until they felt the position of the statements represented their opinions and views. Lastly, they were asked to remove each statement one by one and replace it by inputting the number corresponding to each statement on the Q-grid and record brief notes on the rationale for placing the statements in the outermost columns (1,2, 10, & 11) to use for a possible interview. Finally, they were asked to complete a multiple-choice demographic survey in

Google Forms (Appendix L), return a photo of their ideal Q-grid with all the spaces filled with the numbers representing each statement, and the consent form by email to me (see Appendix G).

3.8.8 Post-Q Online Semi-Structured Interviews

After the participants had completed the Q-sorts, I created a spreadsheet with the codes of the study participants, their Q-sorts, and the forty-seven statements (Appendix M). I then uploaded the data into KenQ Analysis Desktop Edition (KADE) (2024), an open-source application for data analysis in Q methodology. KADE automatically performs factor analysis to identify the participants' viewpoints, which will be discussed in the Findings Chapter. Three distinguishing viewpoints were identified and reviewed. In addition, participants who loaded on each factor were identified as potential participants to interview. Conducting post-Q interviews validates the assumptions and the interpretation of the viewpoints. Also, post-Q interviews can confirm the veracity and rationale for why the participant placed the statements where they did on the grid (Brown, 1980). Post-Q interviews provide rich supplementary data to the research related to the participant's viewpoints and minimise the researcher's preconceptions during the interpretation phase (Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012).

Typically, participants with the highest and purest loading on each factor would be invited to be interviewed. In other words, interviews would be conducted with the participants who most associated with the particular viewpoint and had no significant association with another (Brown, 1980; Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). However, sixteen participants indicated on this study's consent forms that they did not want to be interviewed after conducting the Q-sort. Thus, I could only invite two participants with viewpoints one and two for a post-Q semi-structured interview. An interview guide (Appendix N) with individually focused questions was prepared for each semi-structured online interview. The interviews lasted 25–30 minutes. Individual post-Q online interviews were conducted through DCU Zoom, and the auto-transcribe feature was used during Zoom meetings.

3.8.9 Data Collection

Data collection was sequential from March to mid-August 2024 and in two phases. The P-set were selected to conduct the Q-sorts, the study was piloted, and the data from the P-set demographic online survey was collected as part of phase one from March to April 2024. As part of phase two, I explored and analysed the quantitative data and prepared for post-Q online semi-structured interviews from May to mid-June 2024. Lastly, from mid-June to August 2024, I conducted four online semi-structured interviews and analysed the quantitative data for a deeper interpretation analysis. Phase one informed phase two, as illustrated in Figure 3.4.

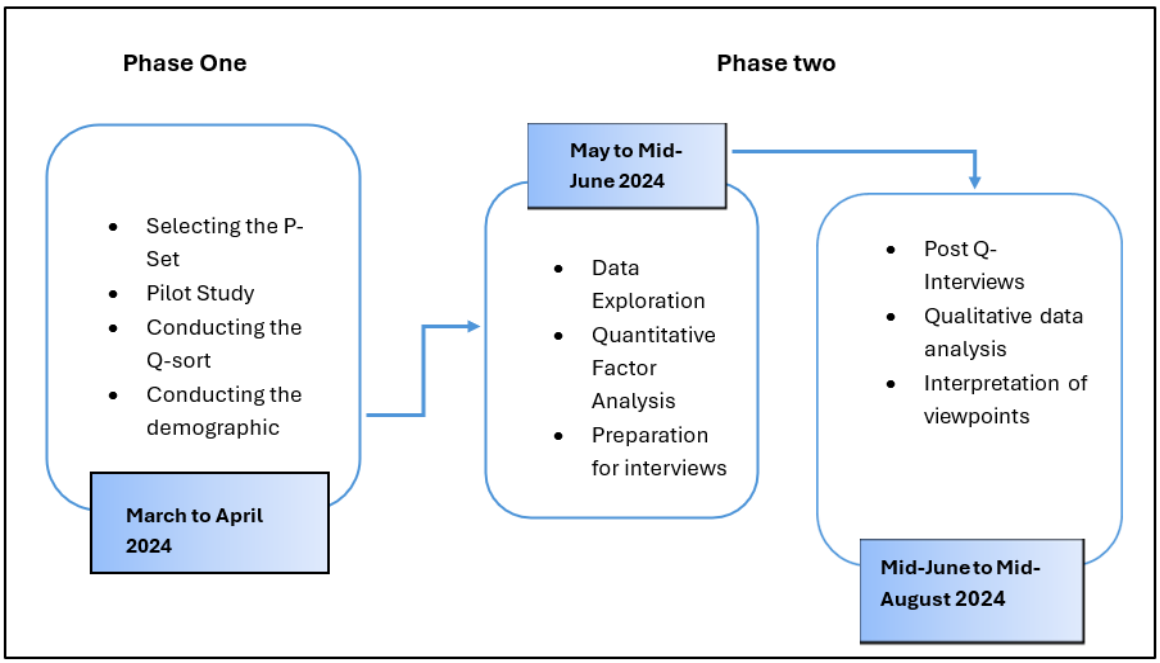

Figure 3.4: Data collection

Figure 3.4: outlines the sequential two-phase data collection process from March to August 2024, illustrating how phase one informed phase two.

3.9 Data Analysis

I needed to stay true to Stephenson's invention of the holistic and gestalt process and his idea of methodological holism. To do this, I considered the participants' whole viewpoint as my primary concern. During the analysis and interpretation, I explained the entire statement configuration represented in the relevant factor arrays as part of the quantitative analysis and the semi-structured interviews as part of the qualitative analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

3.9.1 Quantitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

The distinguishing difference between Q and R factor analyses (traditional methods) is what is being factorised. Q factor analysis identifies clusters of participants whose patterns of responses are similar or different; therefore, the participants become the variables, known as by-person factor analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). Q-factor analysis focuses on explaining common variance among variables. Built on prior assumptions, R factor analysis clusters items in a dataset, such as personality traits, and it uses factorising tests that quantify the relationship between latent factors and observable variables (Morea, 2022). In comparison, Q reveals individual differences without prior assumptions from a bottom-up approach (Watts & Stenner, 2012; Gao & Soranzo, 2020).

3.9.2 Q Methodology Software

The analysis began by using KADE v1.3.0 (2024), an online open-source Q software package specifically designed for conducting Q factor analysis of various sorts. Q methodology software, such as KADE, uses a Fortran (numerical and scientific computing) program configured for Q-sort data and aligns with Stephenson's scientific protocols and the methodological principles of Q (Brown, 1980). This involved seven steps: 1) input, 2) data, 3) correlations, 4) factors, 5) rotation, 6) loadings, and 7) outputs, as illustrated in Figure 3.5 overleaf. Each step is explained in greater detail in the next section.

The outputs from KADE deliver the same data tables as other widely used applications for Q methodology, such as PQMethod (Schmolck, 2014). However, KADE has many unique features that other online open-source Q software packages do not. For example, KADE displays tables illustrating the importance of statements within and between factors and has interactive visualisations that simplify the manipulation and interpretation of the data collection and adjustable settings. If required, the software also displays a scree plot or a scatter plot and visualisations of the factor analysis (composite arrays) (Banasick, 2019).

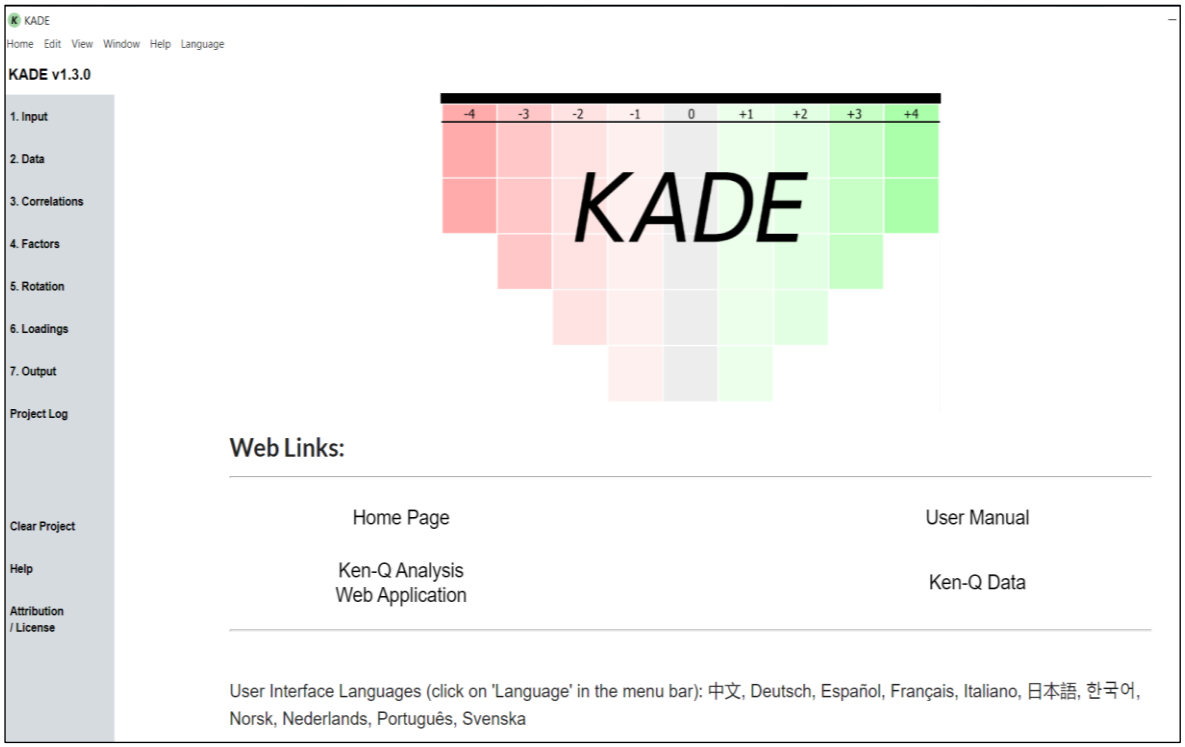

Figure 3.5: KADE v1.3.0 interface (Banasick, 2024)

Figure 3.5 represents the KADE v1.3.0 interface, which is available in many languages. On the left-hand side, each step of the quantitative data analysis is provided for the researcher to follow systematically. The KADE interface is accessible through a web browser such as Chrome, Safari, or Firefox without installing additional software. It is also linked to its homepage, a user manual, and other Q methodology tools for additional support if required.

3.9.3 Input and Data

The quantitative data was analysed using KADE (Banasick, 2024). To begin the process of quantitative data analysis and produce the findings for this study, a spreadsheet (XLSX file) was prepared that included the project name, the results of thirty-four individual Q-sorts, patterns/numbers indicated by the KADE guidelines (2024), and the forty-seven statements. I then uploaded the spreadsheet to the software as advised by the KADE guidelines and continued working through each step (Banasick, 2024).

3.9.4 Correlations

Once all the data was inputted into KADE, the quantitative analysis began with the production of a correlation matrix, which is the first step in Q methodology's statistical

process (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). This matrix, illustrated in Figure 3.6, is a statistical technique that measures the nature and extent of the interrelationship between each Q-sort and all the other Q-sorts in the study. Following this, factor analysis was conducted in KADE, producing a correlation matrix between the sorts (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012), which will be discussed in the next section.

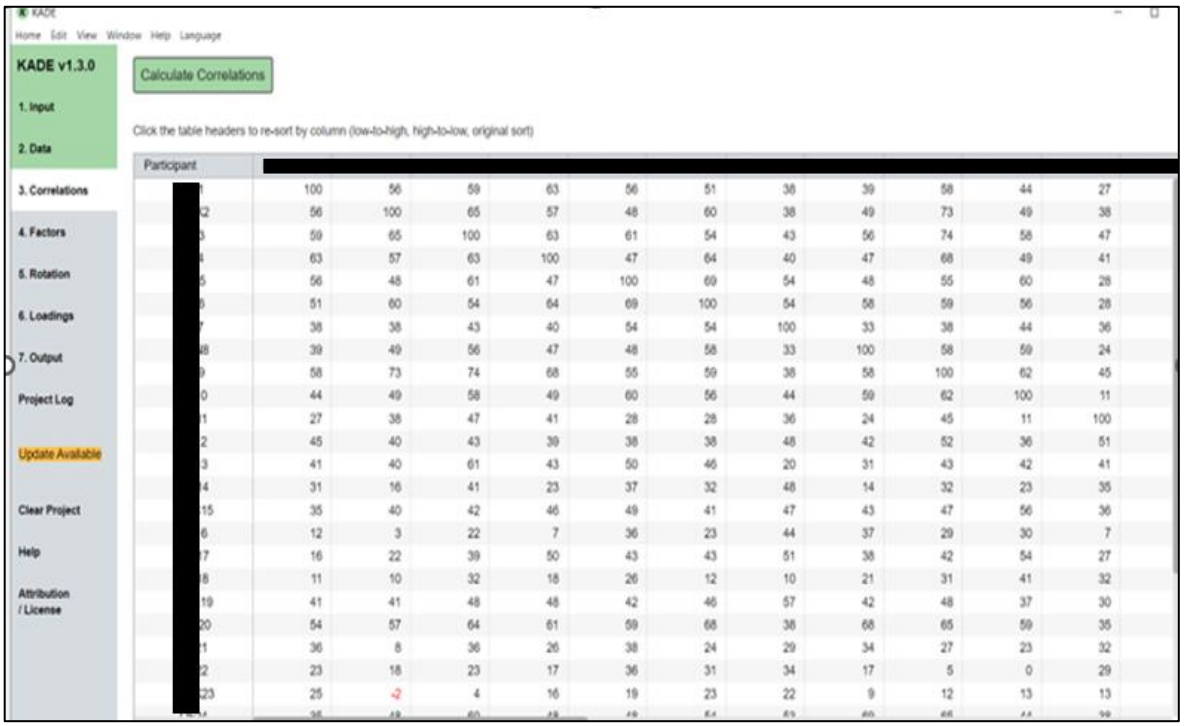

Figure 3.6: Correlation matrix between sorts

Figure 3.6 shows the degree of similarity and the extent of the interconnectedness between each participant's Q-sort and those of all the other participants in this study.

3.9.5 Factor Analysis

Next, a correlation coefficient matrix was produced using a multivariate data reduction approach of factor analysis to produce the factor matrix, which shows the relationship of each complete sort to the factor (Zabala *et al*., 2018). In essence, using a multivariate data reduction approach of factor analysis allowed the examination of the dimensions of the dataset to identify similar response patterns and reduce them into smaller patterns so that interpretation is easier. The correlation coefficient matrix points to the strength of a relationship between two variables and spans along a scale using eigenvalues ranging from −1 (direct negative relationship) to +1 (direct positive relationship) (Hadd & Rodgers, 2021).

The software then prompted me to use principal component analysis (PCA) or centroid factor analysis (CFA) to produce the correlated coefficient matrix.

Watts and Stenner (2012) advise using PCA to obtain 'a single, mathematically best solution' (p. 99) to produce the correlated coefficient matrix. It should be used until novice Q researchers are comfortable using CFA. Therefore, I chose PCA because it provided an optimal single mathematical solution from the dataset. However, Ramlo (2016b) cautions Q researchers about the potential loss in terms of theoretical reasoning when using PCA to find one best solution, as CFA offers infinite best solutions without a cut-off point. Consequently, CFA appeals to Q methodologists and is the preferred choice of factor analysis used in Q studies, because researchers have the autonomy to explore the process of factor rotation guided by intuition, judgements through abductive reasoning, and theoretical significance as opposed to mathematical criteria (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Ramlo, 2016b). Nevertheless, as a novice Q researcher, I followed the advice of Watts and Stenner (2012) and explored the best factor solution using PCA from a theoretical perspective.

Using PCA, the unrotated eight-factor solutions were produced from the dataset by factor analysis of the correlation matrix. As illustrated in the scree plot in Figure 3.7, most variables loaded (correlated) highly on the first factor and subsequently less on the remaining factors, making the results difficult to interpret according to the diverse viewpoints that were likely present in the data. Therefore, the eight factors needed to be rotated by reducing the number of factors with a clear, simpler factor structure for interpretation using a factor rotation method (Akhtar-Danesh, 2018).

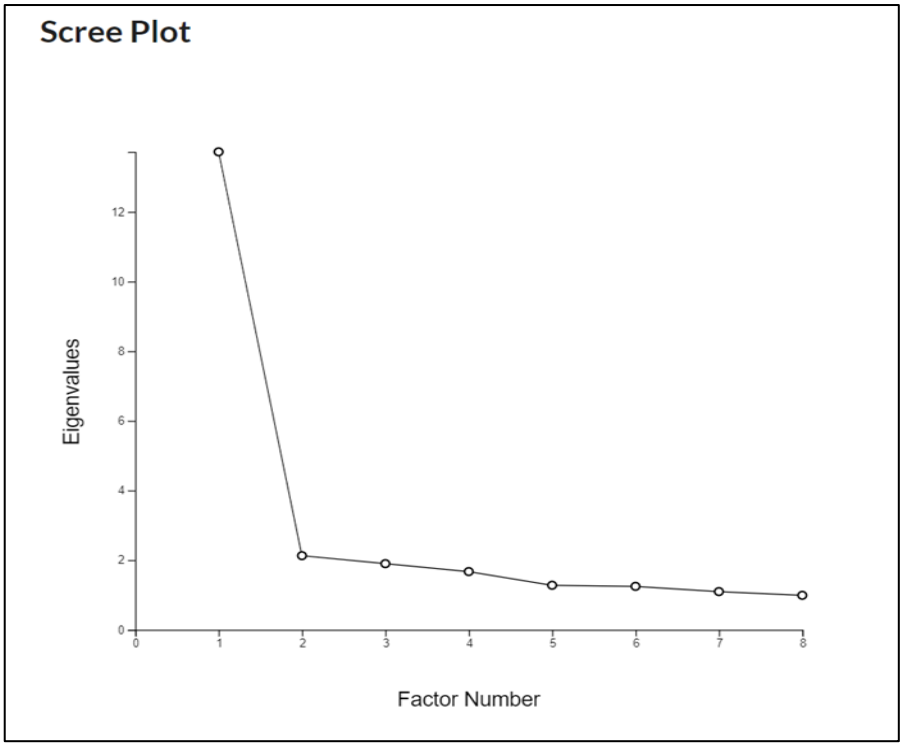

Figure 3.7: Eight-factor solution scree plot

Figure 3.7 presents the scree plot for the eight-factor solution in this study. It demonstrates that most variables (Q-sorts) loaded highly on factor one, with a decreasing correlation of subsequent factors.

3.9.5.1 Factor Rotation

After examining the eight-factor results, I decided to use a three-factor solution with Varimax rotation as the factor rotation method to obtain more interpretable findings. Choosing varimax rotation in its simplest structure allowed for a reduction in the number of variables with high loadings on each factor and helped to identify clearer associations between factors and subsets of Q-sorts. The rotation adjusted the factor structure to highlight more distinct factors, making it easier to interpret variables that loaded highly on some factors and lower on others (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

3.9.5.2 Factor Loadings and Extraction

The next step was to determine which Q-sorts (variables) were statistically significant in loading (correlated) in each factor, and which Q-sorts were appropriate for defining sorts to yield the most distinctive subjective viewpoints. In other words, a defining sort in a factor is determined by participants (P-set) who placed a statement in a position on their Q-grid that

is significantly distinct from all the other participants who placed the same statement in a different position on their grids. These patterns of responses were then calculated within and between each factor to identify distinctive subjective viewpoints. They were measured by eigenvalues (statistical significance), which helped define the factors (Coogan & Herrington, 2011), as explained below.

I calculated the patterns of responses within factors and across factors to identify distinctive subjective viewpoints (see calculation below). To do this, I used the formula $p < 0.01$ is $2.58(1 /\sqrt{N})$, where N equals the number of statements in the Q-set, to find the statistical significance also known as the eigenvalues of each relationship of a sort to a factor (Brown, 1980; Coogan & Herrington, 2011; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

$= 2.58 \times (1 \div \sqrt{47})$
$= 2.58 \times (1 \div 6.8556)$
$= 2.58 \times 0.14586$
$= 0.3763$ rounded up to 0.38

Using $+0.38 = (p < 0.01)$ calculated as the significant level, some of the sorts were confounding (participants whose sorts achieved significance on one or more factors); therefore, it was difficult to identify the participants whose sorts were clearly defined. Consequently, raising the significance criterion level to +0.45 or above would maximise the number of participants defined on a single factor (Watts & Stenner, 2005). In Q studies, the eigenvalues are not relevant in the same way as in R methodology (Ramlo, 2020). Typically, factor loadings that do not reach an eigenvalue over +1 are not extracted in R analysis. By contrast, eigenvalues in Q studies are used to identify commonalities and differences within and between factors (viewpoints). Factor loadings with eigenvalues less than +1 are considered equally important in defining viewpoints (Damio, 2018). Q methodologists are not interested in the mathematical criteria for enumeration purposes (generalisability) or statistical considerations (eigenvalues) but only in exploring the factor solution that best represents the viewpoints from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, the eigenvalues may be used for theoretical significance instead of mathematical significance (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Ramlo, 2020). Therefore, I manually flagged twenty-three sorts that reached a significance of over +0.45 for each factor, as demonstrated in Table 3.8 below. Eleven sorts were not used as defining sorts, as they did not show significance over +0.45 on any one factor.

Num...	Participant	FG	Factor 1	F	Factor 2	F	Factor 3	F
2	[redacted]	F1-1	0.8086	☑	0.1364	☐	0.0023	☐
26		F1-2	0.7962	☑	0.1556	☐	0.1389	☐
9		F1-3	0.7909	☑	0.1611	☐	0.2989	☐
3		F1-4	0.7771	☑	0.2626	☐	0.1942	☐
29		F1-5	0.7594	☑	0.2156	☐	0.116	☐
4		F1-6	0.7285	☑	0.2152	☐	0.1742	☐
31		F1-7	0.7055	☑	0.3732	☐	0.1382	☐
20		F1-8	0.6747	☑	0.2456	☐	0.3576	☐
1		F1-9	0.6668	☑	0.3689	☐	-0.0129	☐
10		F1-10	0.6426	☐	0.0118	☐	0.5189	☐
13		F1-11	0.6359	☑	0.1304	☐	0.0918	☐
8		F1-12	0.6309	☑	0.1045	☐	0.3756	☐
6		F1-13	0.623	☑	0.3636	☐	0.2653	☐
24		F1-14	0.5753	☑	0.3447	☐	0.2635	☐
12		F1-17	0.4837	☑	0.4724	☐	0.0705	☐
18		F1-18	0.3341	☐	-0.1049	☐	0.2948	☐
22		F2-1	0.0299	☐	0.7965	☑	-0.1662	☐
27		F2-2	0.5873	☐	0.6058	☐	0.0603	☐
7		F2-3	0.2455	☐	0.5718	☐	0.4836	☐
19		F2-4	0.3651	☐	0.5545	☑	0.3549	☐
21		F2-5	0.2157	☐	0.5326	☑	0.0635	☐
14		F2-6	0.031	☐	0.5219	☑	0.4911	☐
30		F2-7	0.4352	☐	0.5215	☑	0.177	☐
28		F2-8	0.4086	☐	0.4679	☐	0.3029	☐
25		F2-9	0.3468	☐	0.4492	☐	0.2267	☐
23		F2-10	-0.0071	☐	0.4482	☐	0.2059	☐
11		F2-11	0.3976	☑	0.418	☐	0.0597	☐
17		F3-1	0.2716	☐	0.0711	☐	0.8173	☑
16		F3-2	-0.0778	☐	0.2414	☐	0.7167	☑
15		F3-3	0.4214	☐	0.1761	☐	0.6073	☑

Table 3.8: Flagging defining sorts

3.9.6 Outputs

At this point in the analysis, factors were constructed and presented as a composite array or viewpoint. The terms *composite arrays* and *viewpoints* are used interchangeably in the next section.

After the defining sorts were extracted, the standard scores (Z-scores) were calculated for each statement within each factor. The Z-score revealed the relationship between each statement in each factor and was calculated by the distance (standard deviation) either above or below the mean of a dataset using the formula $Zi = (Xi - \mu) / \sigma$ (Zi is the Z-score for the statement i, Xi is the score assigned to statement i, μ is the mean score in each factor, and σ is the standard deviation) (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). These resultant Z-scores were organised according to the sorting grid to formulate composite arrays (viewpoints) for each factor. Other statement comparisons of Z-scores were calculated to highlight the distinguishing statements (those statements most like that array than any other array), consensus statements (those statements without a significant difference across the arrays), and statement comparisons array to array. The correlation between factor scores of all of the statements (the calculation for the relationships between the arrays or viewpoints) demonstrated the similarity among the arrays. This dataset helped determine the significance level used when choosing defining sorts for the factor.

3.9.7 Quantitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

Three distinct viewpoints were produced in the format of composite arrays for interpretation. Each individual statement was placed (ranked) on a Q-grid to represent the ideal or model viewpoint. By using abductive reasoning, I interpreted the composite arrays by examining where the statements were ranked on the Q-grid and asking myself why the cohort of participants might have that particular viewpoint and what it might mean in the context of a theoretical perspective (Watts & Stenner, 2012). To support my interpretation and build the initial holistic narrative of each viewpoint, I used crib sheets to interpret the composite arrays, as Watts and Stenner (2012) advised.

The crib sheet method is a framework that supports rigorous, systematic analysis applied to each composite array to make sense of each viewpoint. Generating crib sheets for the factors involves two stages. The first draft of the crib sheet comprises four categories. First, the highest and lowest ranked statements in a factor are listed to identify significant issues that differentiate between the other factors in the study and which factor is polarised (extreme differences) relative to the other factors. The second draft entails identifying other highly ranked statements or useful statements to support interpretation. However, I found it challenging to use the crib sheets to interpret the findings and the three distinguishing viewpoints holistically. Therefore, I decided to use Montgomery's guidelines, outlined in Albright's article 'Lessons Learned: Some Guidelines to Factor Interpretation' (2019), as illustrated in Figure 3.8, which seemed more straightforward and provided me with a better understanding of the factors so that I could try to interpret the viewpoints accurately.

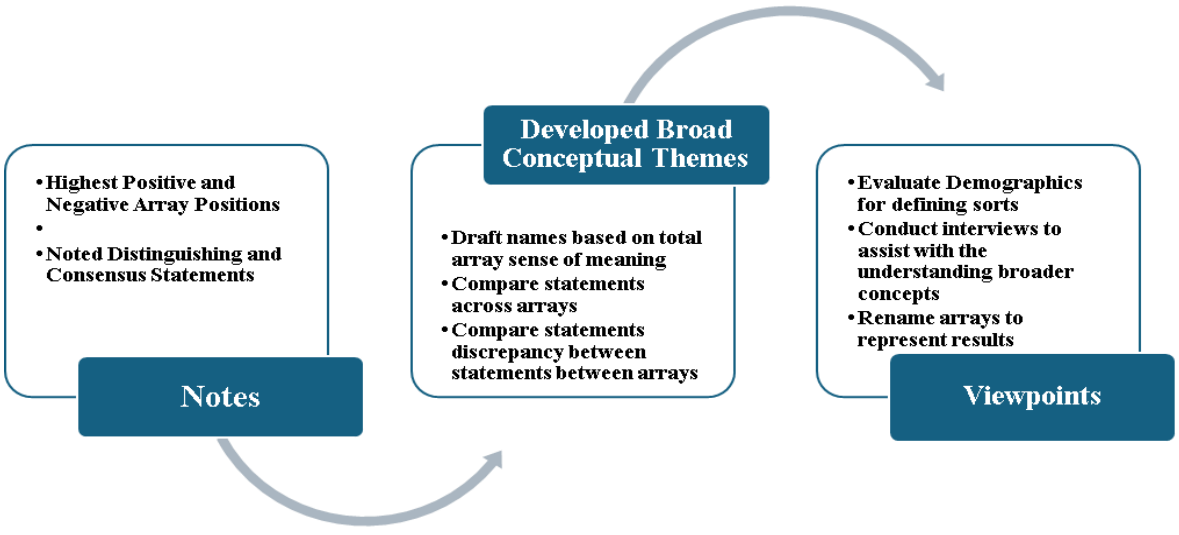

Figure 3.8: Quantitative interpretation (Albright, 2019)

Following Montgomery's interpretation guidelines (Albright, 2019) to holistically understand and interpret each viewpoint, I wrote each statement in the composite array and placed them on the wall.

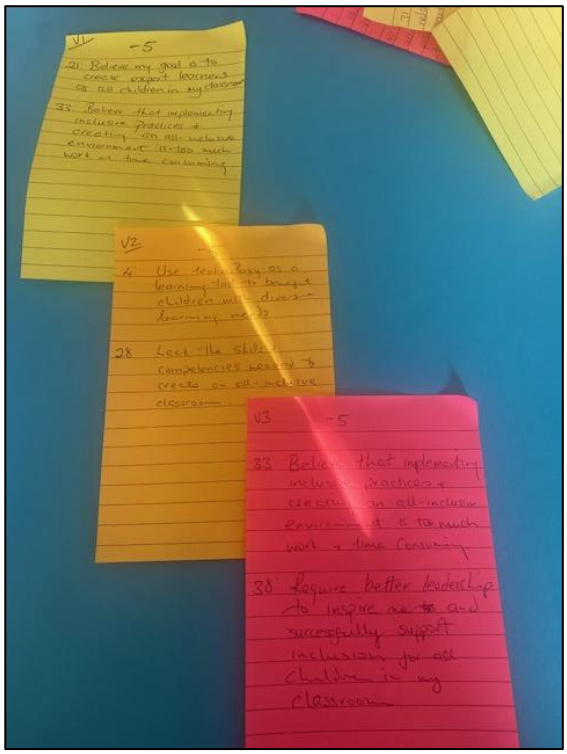

Figure 3.9: A visual representation of written statements

Figure 3.9 represents the written -5 statements for the three composite arrays before they were placed on the wall.

Starting with composite array one, I noted the statements with the highest and lowest array positions to establish the most like and least like the participants' views that defined viewpoint one. Then I noted the distinguishing and consensus statements and how they might relate to the most like and the least like participants' views, and took notes on my initial thoughts. I grouped the statements into broad conceptual themes associated with the ECEs' viewpoints. Initially, I thought these educators viewed their inclusive practices as a slow pedagogical approach and named the composite array *slow pedagogy*. However, after a deeper analysis of the statements using abductive reasoning, comparing statements across the arrays, and considering the consensus statements and data gathered from the online post-Q interviews, I found that these educators were very relational and viewed and treated all children similarly, regardless of any diverse needs, which is explained in more detail below.

I then decided to rename the composite array *the Relational Advocates* to represent the profile of the educators who defined this viewpoint.

The same process was undertaken for composite arrays two and three. My initial thoughts for composite array two were that this cohort of educators was very collaborative and worked in partnership with parents, which underpinned their inclusive practice. A deeper analysis confirmed these initial thoughts, and I named composite array two *Partnerships and Collaboration*, but then changed the name to *Collaborative Partners*. My initial thoughts on composite array three were that the educators in this array were pragmatic, and their inclusive practice was strengthened by evidence, so I originally named this composite array *Evidence-based Practice*. However, after examining the array more closely, I discovered that the compassion and empathy of the educators, along with their innovative ways to improve their inclusive practices, were a stronger characteristic. Consequently, I renamed the composite array *Compassionate Innovators*.

To help me get a clear picture of the quantitative data for interpretation, I noted and recorded the highest positive and negative array positions (−5, −4 and +4, +5) of each distinct viewpoint. Then I noted and recorded the distinguishing and consensus statements. I read and reread all the statements aligned with each distinct viewpoint to make meaning of the data, while observing the statement's position on the ideal Q-grid and taking notes to identify broad themes for each factor array (Appendix L). Next, I completed a second iteration to identify overarching themes and patterns and added draft names to each distinguishing viewpoint using descriptive labels to capture their holistic meaning. I compared statements across and between the arrays to try to understand unique and shared viewpoints, as illustrated in Figure 3.10. On an Excel spreadsheet, I noted and recorded the demographic details to further enrich my understanding of the data. Finally, I revisited the themes, factor names, and overall interpretation as new insights emerged, ensuring they aligned with the data, and I renamed the factor arrays to represent the results.

Figure 3.10: A visual representation of quantitative data

Figure 3.10 is a visual representation of the quantitative data designed to help me isolate and examine distinguishing and consensus statements for better understanding. Differently coloured Post-its were used to enhance organisation and clarity.

Following the interpretation of the quantitative data, I conducted four semi-structured interviews to support and validate, or not, my interpretation of the three viewpoints. Two interviews supported viewpoint one, and two interviews supported viewpoint two. Unfortunately, the three educators who defined viewpoint three did not want to be interviewed. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then used Naeem *et al.*'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis process to analyse the interview data and to see if the themes aligned with the quantitative data presented in the composite arrays as the three most distinct viewpoints.

3.9.8 Qualitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

The qualitative data collected during the online post-Q interviews with the participants further guided the factor array interpretations. As mentioned, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with participants (two with viewpoint one, two with viewpoint two). The rich data on individual participants' viewpoints in the context of their unique

backgrounds and circumstances (Morea, 2022) was analysed partly using Naeem *et al*.'s (2023) systematic thematic analysis process.

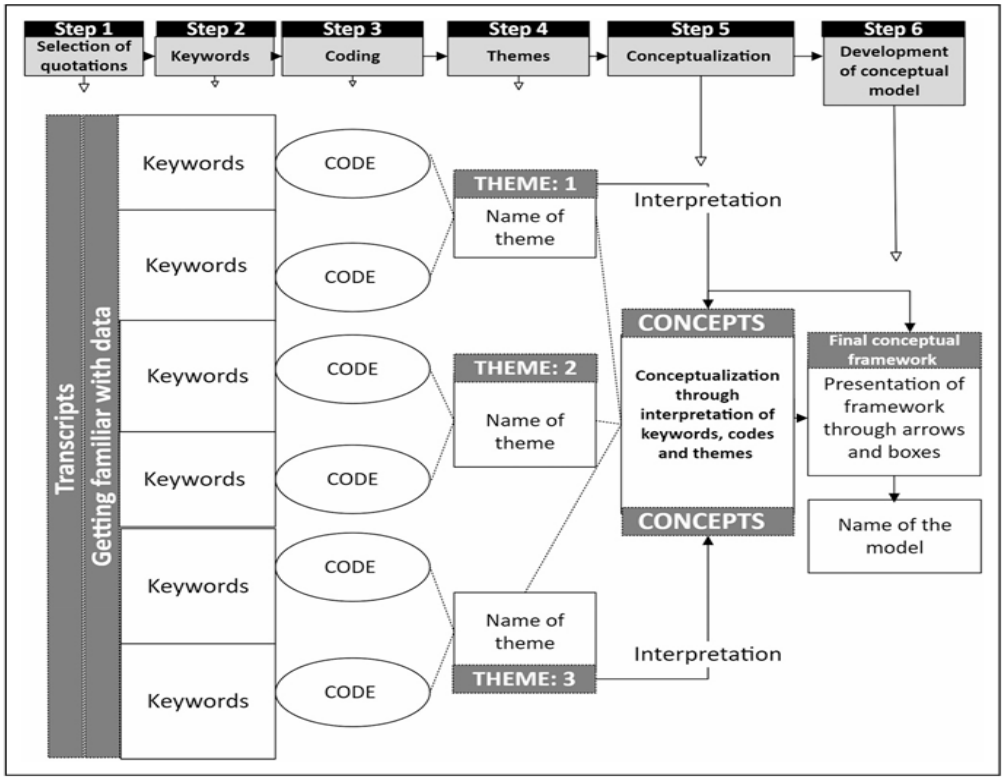

Figure 3.11: A systematic thematic analysis process (Naeem *et al.*, 2023, p. 4)

As outlined in Figure 3.11, this six-step approach also helped me to understand the rationale for participants placing their individual statements on their grid, revealing the underlying opinions and beliefs about inclusive pedagogies in the ECCE classroom.

Step 1: Selection of Quotations	The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and I re-read the transcripts a few times to familiarise myself with the data.
Step 2: Keywords	Keywords and phrases aligned with the concepts of the particular viewpoints were noted, such as collaboration, relationships, strengths, equality, and needs.
Step 3: Coding	The keywords and phrases that supported the viewpoints were highlighted (Appendix O). While I was open to some keywords and phrases that did not align with the concepts and viewpoints, none were found.
Step 4: Themes	While some themes were identified using Montgomery's guidelines (Albright *et al*., 2019), I was able to build on those themes identified in the interviews, identify new themes, and align them with the statements in the ideal factor arrays (viewpoints).

Table 3.9: Thematic analysis

For this study, Naeem *et al*.'s process was used slightly differently (Table 3.9), as the conceptualisation (step 5), and conceptual model (step 6) were already identified from the quantitative analysis: 1) Relational Advocates, 2) Collaborative Partners, and 3) Compassionate Innovators as the viewpoints. Therefore, I completed step 1 (Selection of Quotations), step 2 (Keywords), step 3 (Coding), and step 4 (Themes). I omitted step 5 (Conceptualisation) and step 6 (Conceptual Model).

It could be argued that analysis and interpretation of the viewpoints were already provided within the quantitative phase of the research (Gallagher & Porock, 2010). However, the interviews validated my preliminary results, contextualised the quantitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the viewpoint held by ECEs, and were used as supplementary data. In turn, the interview data created rich narratives as part of my findings (McKeown & Thomas, 2013).

During the interpretation of this study, an interpretive/constructive approach was taken to interpret the meaning from the ideal or model Q-sorts and to provide rich, nuanced insights into the complexities of human experience, offering a deeper understanding of how people perceive, navigate, and make sense of their social worlds (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 19) from the perceptions of the ECEs. In other words, an interpretive/constructive approach supported me in understanding and interpreting the ECEs' subjective viewpoints because it described and explained the individual and social behaviours of the educators.

In addition, the interpretive/constructive approach emphasised how events (inclusive pedagogical practices) happened naturally and how they were different from each other (viewpoints) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The approach was flexible, allowing me to construct meaning from the participants' lived experiences using the data gathered during the semi-structured online interviews and by observing the pattern of responses in the composite arrays (Appendix P).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were of the utmost importance throughout this study. I was guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) under their five principles (2018):

- Social science plays a vital role in supporting a democratic society and should reflect a broad range of values, viewpoints, funding sources, and research approaches.
- Researchers must uphold all individuals' and communities' rights, autonomy, and dignity while recognising and respecting diversity.
- Social science research must be carried out honestly and honestly, using the most suitable methods for the research objectives.
- Social researchers are responsible for considering the wider social impact of their work, both during the research process and when sharing results.
- Social science should strive to produce meaningful benefits while actively working to reduce potential harm.

Before this study began, the DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC) assessed and approved the research. To support my knowledge of ethical protocols, I completed the DCU Research Integrity Training Programme 2022/23 and followed the DCU (2021) Code of Good Research Practice. The following documents were submitted as part of the REC approval:

- Plain Language Statement (Appendix I)
- Participants' Informed Consent Forms (Appendix J)
- Recruitment letter and advertisement (Appendix H).

Voluntary consent was obtained in writing from all participants of this study (Appendix J), whereby all the participants agreed to take part in this study by their own choice. All participants were given a Plain Language Statement describing the study's nature and purpose. The Plain Language Statement outlined that participation was voluntary and that

participants could withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. It also described what would be asked of them and how the data would be protected and stored.

It was envisaged that there would not be any potential risks to the participants; however, if there were minimal risks, this was addressed as part of the REC approval process. During the online interviews, I reminded the participants that their contribution to the research was voluntary, they could stop the interview at any stage, and they didn't have to answer any question posed to them. Confidentiality and anonymity were also addressed. When the participants emailed me their consent forms and their Q-sorts and completed the demographic survey, these were coded with the participants' initials and the emails were deleted. When detailing the findings, the participants' initials were changed to a corresponding number, and the word 'sorter' was used.

All consent forms and Q-sorts were uploaded to my DCU Google Drive, which was password-protected. Interview transcripts and data gathered were also uploaded to Google Drive, and only my supervisors and I had access to the information. A plan was put in place from the outset to dispose of the research data in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) outlined in the Data Protection Commission's (2023) Principles of Data Protection and DCU's (2020) Data Protection Guidance.

3.11 Validity and Reliability

In traditional research (R methodology), validity largely depends on the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of the scores from research instruments that support meaningful and appropriate inferences or decisions made by the researcher and participants (Oluwatayo, 2012; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). It is important to ensure that the presentation of the research instruments is relevant and appropriate to the research and is clear and unambiguous (face validity). In addition, the researcher provides a fair representation of the broader issues under investigation while choosing elements to be examined comprehensibly (content validity), and there are logic connections that show the extent to which inferences are drawn from the practical operations of the constructs to the theoretical underpinnings of the research (construct validity). Finally, the researcher must be confident that the instruments that are used for assessment or measurement must reflect proficiency and accuracy and are known to be valid (criterion-related validity) (Oluwatayo, 2012).

Reliability in quantitative research is based on the 'dependability, consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents' (Cohen *et al*., 2007, p. 146). In other words, if the research was replicated with similar participants in a similar context, the research would yield similar data, and therefore, results would be alike. Reliability in qualitative research mostly relates to dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereby the researcher debriefs with peers, checks validation with participants, or writes reflexive journals (Cohen *et al*., 2007). However, validity and reliability are less significant in Q methodology than in traditional research methods, because participants are expressing their subjective views through self-referencing, which will be explained below (Dziopa & Ahern, 2011; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Objectivity in R methodology is paramount, and accurate measurements are essential to achieving the research objectives and goals. Therefore, these measurements must be free of any errors (reliable) and must genuinely reflect the constructs they aim to address and assess (validate). Nevertheless, Brown (1993) explains that the operation of Q is completely subjective, as it represents points of view; therefore, the 'issues of validity consequently fade since there is no external criterion by which to appraise a person's own perspective' (p. 107). This also applies to post-Q interviews, which are not designed to test accuracy but rather to enhance interpretive depth and ensure that the emergent factors authentically reflect participants' lived realities.

Put simply, in a Q study, the goal is to analyse the participants' subjective viewpoints. Consequently, the validity and reliability are associated with the individual and are concerned with the principle of self-reference, which is a method of impression (personal opinion) and cannot be incorrect (Brown, 1980). If an individual's subjective perspective is considered valid, and since reliability cannot exist without validity, demonstrating the former is adequate to establish the latter (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, Q methodology is not intended for large participant samples; therefore, the findings of Q studies do not claim to be generalisable (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q is designed to focus on exploring diverse perspectives within a specific group, offering depth over breadth or prevalence. Furthermore, standard measurements to provide findings that represent the population's overall distribution of opinions are not considered within this Q study (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Therefore, I cannot claim that the attitudes of all ECEs regarding UDL were obtained.

While Q integrates qualitative and quantitative research (qualiquantology) there are many concepts of validity and reliability related to R methodology, and it was important to me to uphold these concepts during the organisational process and the design construct for this study. For example, the plain language statement, consent forms, conditions of instruction, and sorting instructions were approved by my supervisors and the REC before conducting this research to address any ambiguity (face validity). Developing the concourse and deciding on the final statements for the Q-set were underpinned by relevant literature, UDL guidelines, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged birth to five years. In addition, I used the Fisher Block Design, aiming to minimise the impact of my biases and to provide a fair representation of the concourse (content validity). During the quantitative phase of the research, I used factor analysis to cluster distinguishing viewpoints and to identify consensus among them while separating other viewpoints that did not impact this research. From the results of the quantitative phase and yielding the composite arrays, I endeavoured to connect and define the viewpoints by drawing inferences from a theoretical perspective (construct validity).

To support the reliability of this research, the participants were given Conditions of Instruction, further minimising any biases or preconceived opinions. During the post-Q interviews, the participants explained their rationale for placing the statements on the grid, thereby improving the study's transparency and rigour. Using the interview data to further explore the viewpoints minimised errors in the initial interpretation of the composite arrays and ensured that I had correctly interpreted the participants' viewpoints (Gallagher & Porock, 2010). To further ensure the authenticity and trustworthiness of this study, from the research design to the findings, I fully informed myself about all aspects of Q methodology to the best of my ability. I joined the international Q community of researchers and experts. Over the past twenty-four months, as mentioned, I met every Monday evening on Zoom and received advice, guidance, and mentoring on conducting a Q study from the members. I also regularly debriefed with my supervisors and critical friends and wrote a reflexive journal.

3.12 Conclusions

This chapter provided an overview of the methodological approach used for this study, including the philosophical assumptions and a brief description of the Q methodology that aligned with the assumptions discussed. In addition, it addressed the research design, ethical considerations, validity and reliability, and the limitations of conducting a Q study. The next

chapter will present the findings of this study, outlining and interpreting the three distinguishing viewpoints held by ECEs while taking into account the conscious statements. This will be followed by the Discussion chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This study explored subjective attitudes through the lens of UDL to gain deeper insight into the variability of early childhood educators' viewpoints related to implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in Irish early childhood classrooms. Using Q methodology, participants (P-set) ranked statements (Q-set) based on their inclusive teaching priorities through the UDL framework. Four semi-structured post-sort interviews were conducted to supplement the findings. The primary research question guiding the study was: What is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms?

The Findings Chapter outlines the results of the study's systematic and rigorous process of generating results. The Chapter also considers the consensus statements (agreements) and presents the findings of three distinct subjective viewpoints (composite factor arrays) that emerged from participants' Q-sorts. Since the primary focus of a Q study is to explore and identify distinguishing viewpoints, this chapter integrates and presents statistical analysis with narrative interpretation to examine and explain ECEs' subjective viewpoints, as detailed in the interpretation section. I will discuss the findings of the consensus statements thematically and with reference to relevant literature in the Discussion chapter.

4.2 Reporting of Findings

Demographic information from the online survey revealed that the participants in the P-set who worked in the ECCE classrooms had various positions within the ECEC settings, as illustrated in Table 4.1. X indicates sorts that define each factor and * indicates sorters (participants) who completed the online post-Q interview. O/M indicates owner/manager; AE, assistant educator; RL, room leader; AIM, AIM educator; S, supervisor; AM, assistant manager; and U, unknown position.

Participant	Type of educator	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
29	O/M	**0.80X**	0.13	0.09
2	AE	**0.79X**	0.13	0.03
9	RL	**0.79X**	0.13	0.30
26	U	**0.78X**	0.15	0.16
3	U	**0.76X**	0.27	0.22
4	AE	**0.71X**	0.22	0.20
*31	O/M	**0.69X**	0.37	0.15
20	AE	**0.64X**	0.26	0.39
24	AE	**0.63X**	0.24	0.22
*8	O/M	**0.62X**	0.08	0.39
13	U	**0.62X**	0.14	0.11
1	RL	**0.62X**	0.42	0.04
6	AM	**0.61X**	0.36	0.28
12	AIM	**0.56X**	0.36	0.00
11	O/M	**0.47X**	0.31	0.00
22	AE	0.06	**0.78X**	-0.17
33	AIM	0.20	**0.62X**	0.41
21	U	0.21	**0.55X**	0.07
*19	AE	0.38	**0.52X**	0.35
*30	S	0.44	**0.51X**	0.18
15	AIM	0.42	0.15	**0.60X**
16	O/M	-0.10	0.26	**0.73X**
17	RL	0.29	0.03	**0.79X**
Per cent of explained variance		28	14	12
Number of defining sorts		15	5	3

Table 4.1: Factor matrix

The statistical analysis output showed that the proportion of common variance (the degree to which each sorter sorted their Q-sort corresponding to each viewpoint) for viewpoint one was 28, for viewpoint two it was 14, and for viewpoint three it was 12. In addition, this study found that fifteen participants (n = 15) from the P-set defined viewpoint one, five (n = 5) defined viewpoint two, and three (n = 3) defined viewpoint three.

Table 4.2 shows that this study found a correlation between factor one and factor two, which was 0.5442, indicating a moderate positive relationship between viewpoints one and two. The correlation between factor one and factor three was 0.473, indicating a lesser positive relationship between viewpoints one and three. Therefore, the sorts that strongly defined viewpoint one also moderately shared some commonality with those sorts that defined viewpoint two. In contrast, the commonalities were not as strong as those sorts that defined factor three.

The correlation between factor two and factor three was 0.3405, indicating a moderate positive relationship between viewpoint two and three; however, while viewpoint two had

fewer commonalities with viewpoint three, their viewpoints were more distinct from each other than their relationship with viewpoint one.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1	1		
Factor 2	0.5442	1	
Factor 3	0.473	0.3405	1

Table 4.2: Correlation between factor scores

4.3 Composite Arrays

The three composite arrays were central to interpreting the data because they highlighted the most and least agreed-upon statements, helped identify distinguishing and consensus viewpoints, and allowed me to meaningfully name and describe each viewpoint based on the collective attitudes of participants. As mentioned, in section 3.9.6, the z-scores quantify the average ranking of each statement in the Q-set (Table 4.3) within a factor and are used to construct the composite arrays by translating these scores into positions on the Q-sort grid.

Visual composite arrays (factor structure) are presented below. Distinguishing statements are represented by light and dark grey shading on the respective cells for each distinguishing statement, and the fourteen consensus statements found across all the composite arrays are indicated on the grid with blue shading.

No	Statement
1	Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity.
2	Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured.
3	Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom.
4	Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs.
5	Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness.
6	Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care.
7	Involve all parents in their children's learning and development and provide opportunities for them to engage.
8	Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies.
9	Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative behaviour among children in my classroom.
10	Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices.
11	Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs.
12	Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.
13	Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom.
14	Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices.
15	Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts.
16	Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes and try again.
17	Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding of inclusive practices, ensuring I always learn new knowledge.
18	Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication.
19	Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed.
20	Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment.
21	Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom.
22	Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children.
23	Facilitate sustainable opportunities for children to learn about inequity and discrimination.
24	Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity in my classroom.
25	Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy.
26	Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive practices.

27	Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom.
28	Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom.
29	Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive classroom and inclusive practices.
30	Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments and practices.
31	Interested in Irish research relating to inclusion and inclusive practices to inform practice.
32	Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom.
33	Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming.
34	Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive practices.
35	Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities.
36	Confident in providing leadership to other colleagues regarding inclusion, inclusive practices and working with children with diverse needs.
37	Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to cater to young children's various learning styles, needs, and abilities.
38	Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom.
39	Enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and inclusive practices in my classroom.
40	Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive practices better and adapt my teaching.
41	Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation and develop strategies to eliminate them by reflecting daily.
42	Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on rights-based participation and social justice.
43	Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support confidence and connectedness with the children and their families.
44	Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation and engagement of children in my classroom.
45	I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom.
46	Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom.
47	Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all.

Table 4.3: Q-set, list of statements

Table 4.3 consists of the forty-seven self-referencing statements that were used as the final Q-set for the participants to sort.

Composite Q sort for Factor 1

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
21. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my	46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the	27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs	31. Interested in Irish research relating to inclusion and	17. Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding	6. Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children	40. Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive	20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but	1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging,	32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed	12. Foster a positive learning environment where all
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and	28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an	23. Facilitate sustainable opportunities for children to learn about	34. Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive	25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require	19. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's	24. Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity	43. Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships	8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their	18. Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal	11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and
	47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying	3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with	30. Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments	36. Confidant in providing leadership to other colleagues	45. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs	16. Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things,	7. Involve all parents in their children's learning and	37. Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to	5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is	
		4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with	38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and	22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children.	35. Enjoy attending professional development and learning	41. Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation	2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and	10. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and		
			14. Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices.	26. Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive	39. Enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and	15. Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to	29. Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive			
				42. Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on	9. Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative	44. Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation				
					13. Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom					

Legend

- Distinguishing Statement at P <0.05
- Distinguishing Statement at P <0.01
- Consensus statements

Figure 4.1: Composite Array 1

Viewpoint one found eleven distinguishing statements, illustrated in dark grey in Figure 4.2, that had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.01$. Four distinguishing statements (light grey) had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$. Six statements (statements 40, 41, 15, 20, 33, 12) had Z-scores that were higher than the other statements in the composite arrays, and four statements (statements 21, 47, 23, 42) had lower Z-scores. Fourteen consensus statements were found across all the composite arrays (blue).

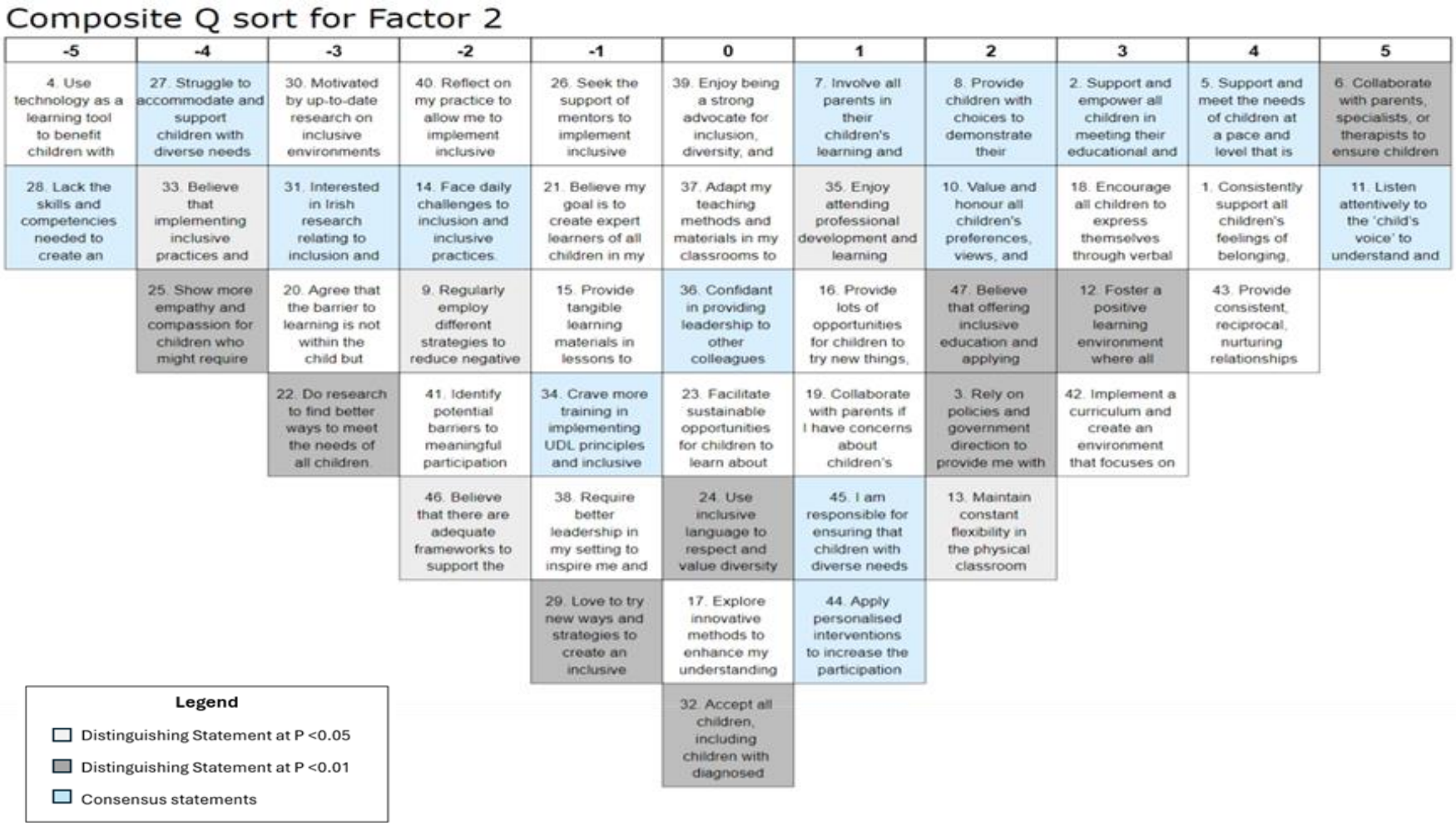

Figure 4.2: Composite Array 2

Viewpoint two found fourteen distinguishing statements. Nine distinguishing statements (dark grey) had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.01$. Five statements (light grey) had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$. Seven statements (statements 33, 6, 35, 47, 3, 13, 46) had Z-scores that were higher than the other statements in the composite arrays, and six statements (statements 25, 22, 9, 29, 24, 32) had Z-scores that were lower. Consensus statements are represented in blue shading.

Composite Q sort for Factor 3

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and	27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs	16. Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things,	14. Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices.	1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging,	10. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and	29. Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive	8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their	25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require	2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and	11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and
38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and	3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with	35. Enjoy attending professional development and learning	41. Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation	40. Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive	30. Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments	45. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs	39. Enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and	19. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's	24. Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity	32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed
	46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the	20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but	34. Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive	47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying	44. Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation	6. Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children	22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children.	5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is	26. Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive	
		28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an	31. Interested in Irish research relating to inclusion and	36. Confidant in providing leadership to other colleagues	13. Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom	18. Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal	17. Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding	4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with		
			15. Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to	23. Facilitate sustainable opportunities for children to learn about	12. Foster a positive learning environment where all	21. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my	42. Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on			
				43. Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships	9. Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative	7. Involve all parents in their children's learning and				
					37. Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to					

Legend

- Distinguishing Statement at P <0.05
- Distinguishing Statement at P <0.01
- Consensus statements

Figure 4.3: Composite Array 3

The composite array for viewpoint three found seventeen distinguishing statements. Thirteen distinguishing statements (dark grey) had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.01$. Four statements (light grey) had a statistical significance level of $p < 0.05$. Eight statements (statements 25, 30, 39, 24, 22, 26, 17, 4) had Z-scores that were higher than the other statements in the composite arrays, and seven statements (statements 16, 1, 38, 18, 12, 15, 10) had lower Z-scores. As for composite arrays 1 and 2, fourteen consensus statements (blue) were found across all the composite arrays.

Although fourteen consensus statements across the composite arrays demonstrated a shared understanding and agreement between the participants' viewpoints, the statements were placed slightly differently on the three grids (array position), except for statement 11. The composite array shows that statement 11 was consistently positioned at +5, suggesting that this was most like the participant's views. However, they might have placed statement 11 on +5 for different reasons, which will be discussed in the next chapter along with the other consensus statements.

Consensus Statement and Number ***Position Array:*** ***Viewpoints:***	***1***	***2***	***3***
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured.	+2	+3	+4
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness.	+4	+4	+3
7. Involve all parents in their children's learning and development and provide opportunities for them to engage.	+2	+1	+1
8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies.	+3	+2	+2
10. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices.	+3	+2	0
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs.	+5	+5	+5
14. Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices.	-2	-2	-2
27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom.	-3	-4	-4
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom.	-4	-5	-3
31. Interested in Irish research relating to inclusion and inclusive practices to inform practice.	-2	-3	-2
34. Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive practices.	-2	-1	-2
36. Confident in providing leadership to other colleagues regarding inclusion, inclusive practices and working with children with diverse needs	-1	0	-1
44. Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation and engagement of children in my classroom.	+1	+1	0

45. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom.	0	+1	+1

Table 4.4: Consensus statements

4.3.1 The Relational Advocates

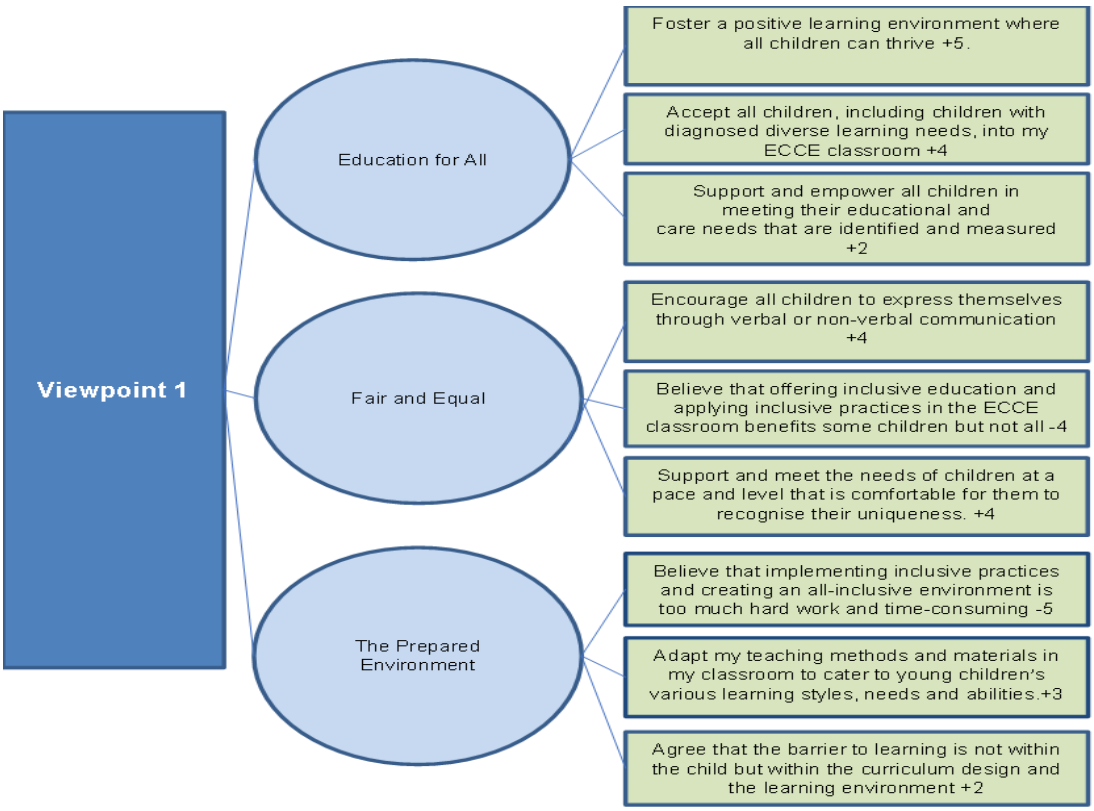

Figure 4.4: Thematic map for viewpoint one

Figure 4.7 The thematic map for viewpoint one illustrates the themes featured in the pale blue oval shapes from the interviews, which align with some of the statements in the light green rectangular boxes. The interviews reinforced the positionality of the cohort of educators who held this viewpoint, and the findings from these will be presented below.

The Relational Advocates

Fifteen early childhood educators defined this composite array. Information gathered from the demographic survey indicated that four of them were owners/managers, four were room leaders, three were AIM educators, one was an assistant manager, and three had unknown roles. Seven educators reported working in full-time daycare, two in part-time daycare, and three in sessional daycare, and the roles of three educators were unknown. The experience

levels were reported as three educators having 0–2 years of experience, two having 3–5 years, one having 5–10 years, six having over 10 years, and three were unknown.

Statement number and statement	Array position	Z-scores
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive	**+5**	**1.817**
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs*	+5	1.789
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning need, into my ECCE classroom	+4	1.521
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+4	1.249
1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity	+3	1.212
10. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices*	+3	1.032
21. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom	**-5**	**-1.727**
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming	-5	-2.149
47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices benefit some children, not all	-4	-1.693
46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom	-4	-1.331

Table 4.5: Most-like and most-unlike statements for the Relational Advocates

Note: Bold represents distinguishing statement at $p < 0.01$ and * indicates consensus statements here and in subsequent tables.

When asked in the survey if any children in their ECCE classroom received AIM support, eleven educators reported having children with diverse needs who received targeted one-to-one support at AIM level seven. One educator indicated no AIM support in their classroom, while three educators did not specify, as they did not complete the demographic survey. The children receiving AIM support at level seven ranged from one to more than ten per classroom. Additionally, twelve out of fifteen educators who aligned with viewpoint one suggested that other children in their classrooms, also ranging from one to ten, would benefit from one-to-one AIM support but were not currently receiving it. Further information from the survey revealed that five of the fifteen educators said they had heard about UDL, and

four regularly implemented it. The interpretation of this composite array showed three major areas that helped me to understand this viewpoint: education for all, fairness and equality, and the prepared environment.

4.3.1.1 Education for All

The educators were child-centred; they had a profound concern for all children in their classes and realised the importance of establishing an effective learning environment to support the inclusion of everybody in their classrooms. They ensured that all children were accepted, educated, and cared for, regardless of any diverse needs, and grounded their teaching in interpersonal connections with the children through relational pedagogy.

The following statements in Table 4.5 are most like and most unlike for the Relational Advocates. Higher array position and Z-score determine most-like statements, and lower array position and Z-score determine most-unlike statements.

4.3.1.2 Fairness and Equality

During the post-Q interview, sorter 8 and sorter 31 supported the viewpoint that education is for all based on fairness and equality. Sorter 8 said, of children with diverse needs: *'They love to be with their peers. They may not play the same as the rest of them, but they still love to be with their peers, and they deserve to be with them.'* Sorter 31 stated, *'Obviously, every child has to be valued individually, whether they have additional needs, and everybody is important . . . everybody is equal in our eyes.'*

Sorter 8's opinion was that children deserve to be educated together and that educating all children in the classroom fosters inclusivity and supports their demonstration of social responsibility, empathy, and acceptance toward one another. Sorter 8 noted that children with diverse needs *'teach them [typically developing children] compassion, care, and acceptance. And they teach them the most important lessons'*.

Within this viewpoint, the Relational Advocates considered all children equally and believed that all children have needs. There was no distinction between children with diverse needs and typically developing children, and no emphasis on a rights-based or social-justice curriculum. They displayed strong professional values, as they respected all children by listening to the children's voices in the classroom. By listening to the children, these educators assisted and supported all children in achieving their goals and learning outcomes.

They strongly believed that education and caring for the 'whole child' are important through a child-led approach. The Relational Advocates also worked in partnership with the children so that they could demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and competencies. This helped them identify and measure all children's learning and development. To support this viewpoint, sorters 31 and 8 found they improved their practices by interacting with and listening to the children, underpinned by a strength-based approach, and introducing new learning over time:

> *You have to listen to their voice because, in situations, their voice shows their needs, their abilities, their capabilities, and their interests. So that's what we lead on, because it is very play-based. It's not a tight curriculum that we follow. . . . Every child needs to be helped.* (Sorter 31)

> *You start at the very, very beginning with everybody. You never assume anybody, even . . . you don't assume that they know what you mean. You work on their strengths, and then you build on the things they can't do, too, but you do that gradually . . . additional needs can't communicate their needs in the same way. So they present an extra challenge . . . but other typically developing children come in, maybe not labelled with additional needs but can have very high needs too*. (Sorter 8)

In addition, the Relational Advocates did not create or aim for expert learners but provided a space for all children to grow naturally and develop positive dispositions without pressuring them to become proficient in knowledge and skills beyond their capabilities. In addition, learning was accomplished when children actively participated in their learning and when they were happy and content within the environment. This belief was endorsed by Sorter 31 when she stated:

> *That's [expert learners] not really something that should be aimed for. Who decides what an expert learner is? . . . I'm still learning, so it's not something that we focus on, and it is all about being present and being involved and enjoying the learning and making it interesting. . . . They're coming out with a degree at the end of it on dinosaurs, that's not the aim of the game. It is all fun, and it's all to do a process. . . . Once they are happy within the environment and what they're doing, the learning comes naturally to them because they're enjoying it. Once they are comfortable and they're able to recognise that [they are expert learners].* (Sorter 31)

Table 4.6 presents a list of statements from viewpoint one that supports education for all through fairness and equity, allowing all children to grow and develop uniquely.

Statement number and statement	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive	**+5**	**1.817**
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs*	+5	1.789
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning need, into my ECCE classroom	+4	1.521
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+4	1.249
18. Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication	+4	1.471
1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity	+3	1.212
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured*	+2	0.67
42. Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on rights-based participation and social justice	**-1**	**-0.593**
21. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom	**-5**	**-1.727**

Table 4.6: The Relational Advocates' statements to support fairness and equity through individual growth and development

4.3.1.3 The Prepared Environment

The Relational Advocates were not overly confident in providing leadership to colleagues regarding inclusion and inclusive pedagogies. However, it was found that they did not require better leadership to promote inclusion or inclusive practices. Sorter 8 strongly suggested that leadership was imperative for creating an all-inclusive classroom, and that everybody must take ownership and be responsible for including all children in their classroom. Therefore, to promote inclusion and inclusive practices, management must support them:

> *Somebody has to lead the way. If we don't see it at a leadership level, then you're not going to see it filter down. . . . If you don't take ownership of that responsibility, then you're not going to have an inclusive classroom, because it has to start with you [educators] taking responsibility . . . then if you ever take responsibility, then you facilitate it.* (Sorter 8)

The Relational Advocates' view was that they championed inclusion through positive relationships in a prepared environment and did not seem to have difficulties managing the

daily challenges of inclusion and inclusive practices owing to the support of the AIM educator in the classroom. They did not struggle with supporting children with diverse needs and could easily assess where children were positioned within their learning and development by offering choices and encouragement, which was supported by the sorters:

> *We do have that with AIM, so that has definitely supported it [inclusion]. . . . We could definitely give them more time and facilitate them better now with AIM support.* (Sorter 8)

> *If you didn't have the AIM person in place, it wouldn't benefit that child and, hence, would absolutely be detrimental to the whole classroom and to every other child. So the AIM is very much, in my opinion, to be a whole-classroom-based resource. . . . It makes it an enjoyable and educational experience for everybody, you know, inclusion for all.* (Sorter 31)

From the Relational Advocates' perspective, the learning environment was central to creating a space for all children to grow and develop to the best of their capabilities and individual uniqueness. The Relational Advocates subscribed to the view that it was important for educators to create time, space, and a place for children when supporting and meeting all their needs. They believed children should not be rushed, and that each child should be recognised for being themselves, thus giving them a strong sense of identity and belonging within their own rhythm of learning and development. Furthermore, they held the view that when children were permitted space and time to grow as individuals, they acquired a wealth of knowledge, joy, friendships, and a truly enriching ECCE experience:

> *They love, they love the chats. They love that you're interested in what they're showing you as well. . . . They have gained huge knowledge, enjoyment, friendship, and a whole kind of wholesome picture, I hope.* (Sorter 31)

In addition, the Relational Advocates' viewpoint was that the educators must prepare the learning environment and be organised to cater to all the children's needs and interests, a view endorsed by sorter 31: *'I do think we need to definitely be organised. We do need to facilitate them, have things ready and guide them and show them what we're doing.'* Sometimes, that means adapting teaching methods and materials to suit the children. The Relational Advocates wanted the children to make meaningful connections by providing choices and allowing them to make mistakes and try again. Eventually, as suggested by sorter 31, the children will realise through peer-to-peer interactions that there is a better way of doing things:

> *We might see it as a mistake, but in there, they're looking at their masterpiece, thinking, Wow, aren't I good? So allow the mistakes, allow all that, and naturally, through peer groups and things like that, they're seeing what others do.* (Sorter 31)

Furthermore, Relational Advocates believed that new learning involves children's ability to make mistakes through strong, trusting relationships that reassure, support, and encourage all children to try again. Sorter 8 suggested, *'They have to be willing to take risks and challenge themselves; you have to let them know that it's okay to make mistakes.'*

Table 4.7 outlines a list of statements from viewpoint one that support fairness and equity to allow all children to grow and develop uniquely through the role of the educator and the prepared environment.

Statement number and statement	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies*	+3	1.074
37. Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classroom to cater to young children's various learning styles, needs, and abilities	**+3**	**1.063**
16. Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes, and try again	+1	0.594
27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom*	-3	-1.02
14. Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices*	-2	-0.956
38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom	-2	-0.903
36. Confident in providing leadership to other colleagues regarding inclusion, inclusive practices, and working with children with diverse needs*	-1	-0.316
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming	-5	-2.149

Table 4.7: Relational Advocates' statements to support fairness and equity through the role of the educator and the prepared environment

The Relational Advocates maintained the belief that the challenges and barriers to learning stemmed from external factors beyond the children themselves. The post-Q interviews revealed that difficulties and barriers were related to the learning environment and curriculum. Educators expressed that a structured curriculum design hindered learning and development. In addition, sorter 31 pointed out that the expectations of the Department of

Education and Tusla Inspectorate are also viewed as barriers (Tusla is the national child and family agency):

> *The barriers are not within the child, but within the curriculum design, because if we base it on curriculum design only, it stunts where they want to go with it . . . it's within what we show them . . . the curriculum can sometimes block them. . . . We should not necessarily [be] getting fixated on topics curriculum-based, things that we feel you should be getting to all the time.* (Sorter 31)

> *If you follow a very strict curriculum that just sets times for everything, then that's where the problem, I think, comes in.* (Sorter 8)

> *Obviously, the paperwork and everything that we have to constantly have for, whether it be for Tusla or Department of Education for our DES [Department of Education and Skills] inspections.* (Sorter 31)

This viewpoint maintained that there were inadequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in ECEC. The educators seemed disappointed that there were inadequate frameworks to support such inclusion and reported relying on policy and government direction to support them in implementing inclusion. They felt strongly they had the skills and competencies to create an all-inclusive learning environment and were not especially interested in research or training in inclusive pedagogies or UDL. These skills and competencies were gained through experience, and an unenthusiastic attitude to and lack of motivation to complete additional training seemed to be associated with benefits and rewards:

> *You do have experience, and you need the experience . . . we do figure it out over time. It's not the way it should be. . . . I'm not asking anyone to go back and do another level 6. There's nothing new there; it's not fair. I just think sometimes the educators are forgotten in it all, you know, and there's no trade-up for them. People forget how much work goes into all these things [training].* (Sorter 8)

Table 4.8 below displays statements from viewpoint one that support the barriers to inclusion and inclusive practices.

Statement number and statement	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment	+2	1.023
35. Enjoy attending professional learning and development opportunities	0	0.037
46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in ECCE classrooms	-4	-1.331
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom	-4	-1.521

3. Rely on government policies and direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom	-3	-1.125

Table 4.8: Relational Advocates' statements supporting barriers to inclusion and inclusive practices

4.3.2 Collaborative Partners

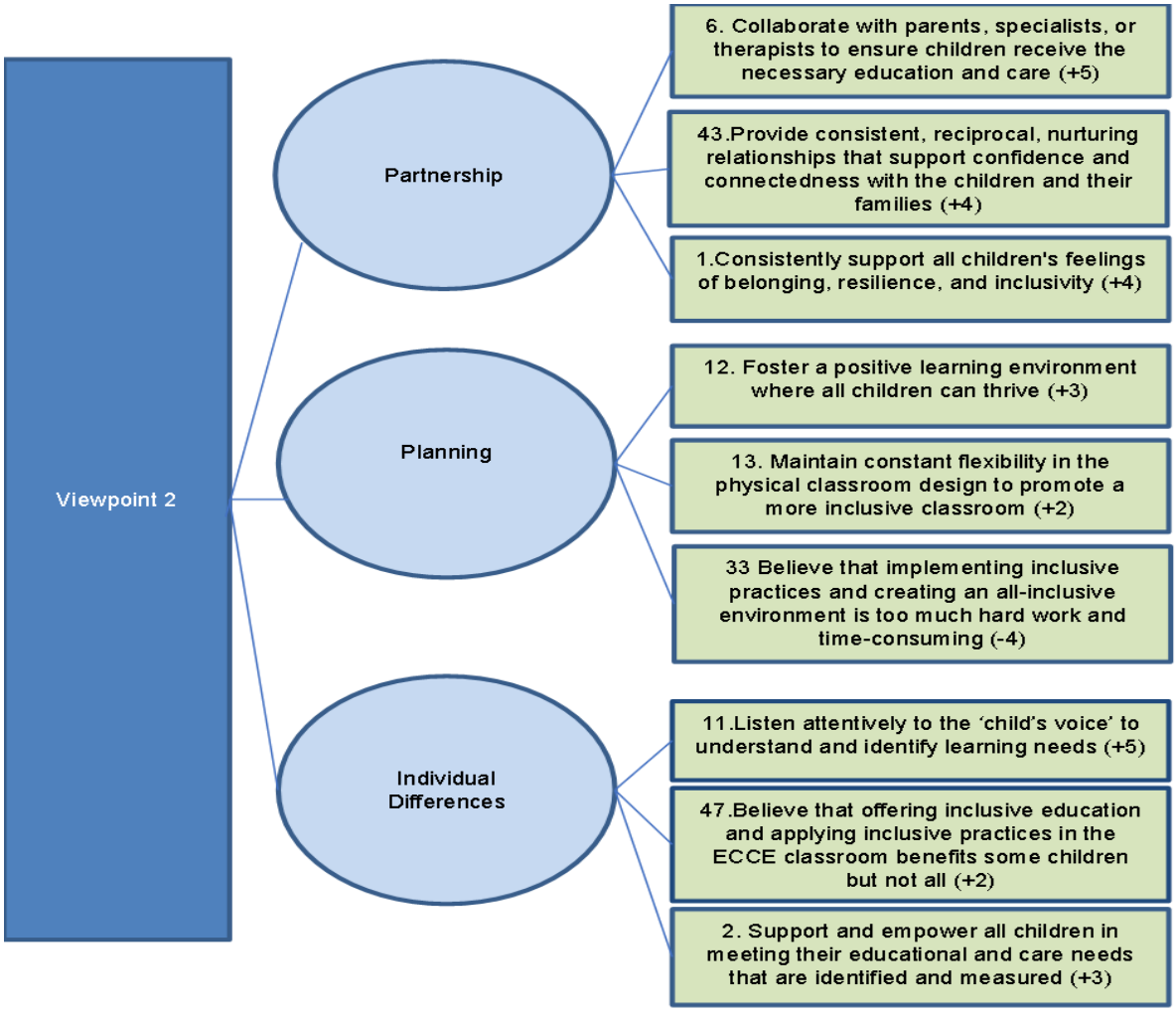

Figure 4.5: Thematic map for viewpoint two

Figure 4.5 illustrates the themes in the pale blue oval shapes from the interviews for viewpoint two that align with some of the statements shown in the light green rectangular boxes that supported the interpretation of viewpoint two. The interviews reinforced the

positionality of the cohort of educators who held this viewpoint, which will be presented below.

Five early childhood educators defined this composite array as *Collaborative Partners*: two were assistant educators, one was a supervisor, one was an AIM educator, and one was unknown. Three educators reported working in full-time daycare and one in sessional daycare. One educator revealed that they had 0–2 years of experience working in the ECCE classroom, while another had 3–5 years and two had 10+ years. Four of these educators reported that they had between one and five children with diverse needs receiving targeted support from AIM in their ECCE classrooms. Three of the five educators said that they had heard about UDL, and two reported regularly implementing it. It was unknown the type of ECEC service, the level of experience, the number of children with diverse needs or receiving AIM support, and the knowledge of UDL by one participant in this cohort, as they did not complete the demographic survey. The interpretation of this composite array found three significant areas that helped me understand this viewpoint: partnership, planning, and individual differences.

The educators reported ensuring that each child's unique needs were met through careful planning; however, they seemed concerned that some children with diverse needs were not receiving adequate support in the classroom. Partnerships and collaboration underpinned their inclusive practices. The following statements in Table 4.5 were most like and most unlike for Collaborative Partners. Higher array position and Z-score determine most-like statements, and lower array position and Z-score determine most-unlike statements.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
6. Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care	**+5**	**1.69**
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs	+5	1.638
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness	+4	1.558
1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity	+4	1.442
43. Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support confidence and connectedness with the children and their families	+4	1.251
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured	+3	1.149
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive	**+3**	**1.098**

47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefit some children but not all	**+2**	**0.992**
3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom	**+2**	**0.928**
40. Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive practices better and adapt my teaching	-2	-0.629
41. Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation and develop strategies to eliminate them by reflecting daily	-2	-0.808
22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children	**-3**	**-1.382**
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment	-3	-1.308
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming	-4	-1.456
25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy	**-4**	**-1.614**
4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs	-5	-1.641
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom*	-5	-1.926

Table 4.9: Most-like and most-unlike statements for the Collaborative Partners

4.3.2.1 Partnership

From the perspective of Collaborative Partners, building inclusion and inclusive partnerships with a purpose was important. Their perspective was extremely collegial, and they reported commitment to a robust connection to families and professionals through collaboration and teamwork. The educators relied on the cooperation of parents and professionals to inform them of children's needs and accommodations. Moreover, they felt that cooperation enhances their inclusive practices and ensured that children with diverse needs received adequate education and care to reach their full potential. As one sorter stated:

> *Well, partnership with parents plays a huge role in a child's education. If you have a good partnership between parents and the staff, the educator can enhance how the child learns, the learning environment, and all that can help the child . . . to get a feel from the parents. . . . The educator can meet those children's needs better once they know.* (Sorter 19)

Another sorter noted:

> *We will collaborate a lot with the community nurse if we have any concerns, and when children start . . . any other of these other agencies. So we'd ring, we'd talk . . . if it's speech and language, we would collaborate a lot with the speech and language [therapists]. . . . I think it's very important to keep that good relationship going . . . there's not a week goes by, we wouldn't be in touch with . . . early intervention for the Child Disability Network. . . . We would be in touch with psychologists as well.* (Sorter 30)

The Collaborative Partners also felt it was important that parents are included in the ECCE classroom and their child's education. This view was endorsed by sorter 19 when she said, *'With partnerships with parents and the trust and all that kind of thing, they're [educators are] doing things to include everybody.'* Another sorter expressed in their interview that all parents are welcome to receive relevant information regarding suitable services, access, and inclusion support and child development advice. Thus, partnership with parents supports trust, appreciation, friendship, and acceptance among the ECEs and the local community.

> *We would just talk to parents, explain about the AIMs programme, give them a lot of information, and give advice around the community nurse, you know, for the developmental check-ups. . . . We also have an open-door policy, so the children or parents are always welcome to come in. We get on very well with the parents. . . . I love meeting new parents . . . we've made some great friendships. . . . Some parents will come to you for advice, and if it's a thing that we don't know, we'd say we'll find out.* (Sorter 30)

In addition, this viewpoint posited that the educators value partnerships with the children by listening and allowing them time and space to express their desires. Furthermore, by listening to the children, the educators could identify any concerns that might inhibit learning and development or children's happiness in the ECEC classroom:

> *I think that in order for a child to be happy and get on well, the educator has to listen to the child's voice and see what the child wants and needs. If you listen to the child's voice, it might show up some red flags. If there are any, there may not be any, but you can foster a positive working environment then, once you know . . . by listening to them, and that you get to calm them down.* (Sorter 19)

Table 4.10 below presents statements from viewpoint two that support the view of collaboration and a partnership approach with children, their families, and professionals.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
6. Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care	**+5**	**1.69**
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs*	+5	1.638

5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+4	1.558
1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity	+4	1.442
43. Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support confidence and connectedness with the children and their families	+4	1.251
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured*	+3	1.149
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive	**+3**	**1.098**
7. Involve all parents in their children's learning and development and provide opportunities for them to engage*	+1	0.823
9. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed	+1	0.475

Table 4.10: Collaborative Partners' statements supporting collaboration and a partnership

4.3.2.2 Planning

Collaborative Partners emphasised that they carefully plan the learning environment to accommodate children with diverse needs, particularly through play. They felt that their main goal was to support the children in becoming independent and developing social skills. From the beginning, the educators received relevant information from the parents regarding the children's needs and carefully observed and reflected on the children's progress. They arranged the ECCE classroom according to the children's needs and interests. Primarily, they believed in focusing on the children's strengths and using scaffolding to introduce new concepts and extend learning. This view was validated by sorters 30 and 19:

> *We just watch and observe and watch the children progress. . . . Supporting the children to be little independent people, we do that. . . . At the start of the year, we do short-term and long-term plans . . . we give the children a couple of months to settle in, and we get to know their likes or dislikes, where they are, and what they need. . . . We will put a plan in place to support, till she can reach where— not where she should be, but where she'd like to be. (Sorter 30)*

> *Looking and reflecting on a child can develop new skills for that child to improve on their existing skills. . . . That is the only way you can help a child advance, you know, by reflecting on what they know and bringing on a bit more, and you know, teaching them new things.* (Sorter 19)

The Collaborative Partners also believed that the classroom routines must be flexible to assist children with diverse needs when they feel overwhelmed or upset. Sorter 30 mentioned that she changed and rearranged the learning environment to accommodate children if necessary and believed it was important to create opportunities for children to master new skills through specific play activities and encouragement:

> *We try to encourage them as well, and there is a lot of encouragement in the room. We know when and when not to do certain activities if we think that somebody is going to be really, really upset about certain things. We change the environment around us to suit certain children, and we change the outdoor environment as well to suit other children. We change the routine. We change certain things at mealtimes just to suit the children. We change our break times and certain things.* (Sorter 30)

By adding labels, photographs, and symbols and having a well-laid-out classroom with specialised equipment and appropriate play areas, sorter 30 felt that the children gained independence and social skills and noted that:

> *We encourage them to do everything for themselves . . . they tidy up after themselves. . . . Everything's labelled in the room, and there is a place for everything. . . . There are photographs; we'd photograph everything. The rooms are laid out. . . . There are a lot of symbols . . . we would have a lot of equipment.* (Sorter 30)

To support children in problem-solving skills, sorter 30 emphasised that they *'use the conflict resolution steps, and we try to get them to resolve it themselves'* and encouraged the children to convey their feelings, articulate their thoughts, and therefore gain a sense of confidence in the classroom. Sorter 19 suggested that appropriate play activities supported children in self-expression and the opportunity to work through difficult moments:

> *Maybe you have a child that has sensory needs, so you'll provide more sensory activities . . . you'd nearly see from what they design or make in their tuff tray, a lot of what's going on in their background would come out that way. You see it in play . . . the children express themselves through play.* (Sorter 19)

Collaborative Partners were not motivated by or interested in researching to explore innovative strategies to enhance their inclusive practices. Moreover, they were not interested in using technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse needs; as one sorter pointed out, *'We don't have the technology. . . . I'm actually glad we don't have it . . . a lot of children are stuck in front of screens all the time'* (Sorter 30).

Table 4.11 presents a list of statements from viewpoint two that support the view of Planning.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+4	1.558
1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity	+4	1.442
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive	**+3**	**1.098**
42. Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on rights-based participation and social justice	+3	1.066
8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies	+2	1.052
13. Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom	+2	0.856
44. Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation and engagement of children in my classroom	+1	0.186
30. Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments and practices	-3	-0.952
22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children	-3	-1.382
27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom	-4	-1.42
4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs	-5	-1.641

Table 4.11: Collaborative Partners' statements to support planning

4.3.2.3 Individual Difference

This perspective also suggested that Collaborative Partners viewed children individually and that educators were aware of children's differences, particularly those with diverse needs. They felt it was important to immediately include children with diverse needs in all aspects of the ECCE classroom from the beginning and to inform typically developing children of the needs and difficulties of their peers. To support children with diverse needs, sorter 30 valued the assistance of other children, as she felt this promoted an understanding of diversity and relationships and seemed to foster a positive learning environment:

> *I know some children that do come in that have certain additional needs and that, but we involved them straightaway. We explain [about the needs] to all the other children . . . those children are brilliant at picking up things and realising and know that things are different. . . . We actually get the [typically developing] children to help as well . . . and they love that.* (Sorter 30)

While the class had assistance from the AIM educators, one sorter was concerned and frustrated by the lack of support from the professionals specifically appointed to improve inclusive practice and inclusion within ECEC. She felt that they might be overstretched or uninterested. The educators felt they did not lack the skills and competencies to implement an all-inclusive learning environment, as they all are qualified in ECEC; however, additional support was required for some children.

> *I know it is out a while. It [AIM support] doesn't seem to be working anymore. We don't seem to be getting the support as we did a long time ago. Now we don't know whether it's the people, the coordinators that are employing, or they're overworked. They [AIM coordinators] are not telling you anything new, and because we have the experience and know a little bit ourselves of how to support children, but there are some children we don't know how to support . . . I'm actually at a loss myself now with two children, and I don't seem to be getting anywhere with the AIMs coordinator.* (Sorter 30)

Collaborative Partners somewhat agreed that the learning barrier was within the child, and that offering inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive learning environment would only benefit some children. Their levels of compassion and empathy were the same for all children; however, they felt they could not accommodate some children's needs without specific support and resources, as confirmed by sorter 30:

> *I'm just at a loss, because I genuinely don't think we can give him what he needs. We're doing the best, and the coordinator [external support representative] comes out, if she just sees, like he could be just smiling, and she'd say, 'Ah, he's grand.'* (Sorter 30)

Regardless of additional support for children with diverse needs, the Collaborative Partners believed in the importance of following Irish government directives and relying on Irish government policies to support inclusive practices. One sorter suggested that following directives and relying on policy is good practice: *'We would go by Tusla's policies. We follow them religiously. They are God . . . they are very important . . . we would get a lot of visits as well from Tusla . . . we have to comply, which is good, it's good practice'* (Sorter 30).

Table 4.12 is a list of statements from viewpoint two that support the view of individual differences.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+4	1.558
18. Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication	+3	1.135
47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefit some children but not all	**+2**	**0.992**
3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom	**+2**	**0.928**
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom	**0**	**- 0.147**
9. Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative behaviour among children in my classroom	-2	-0.776
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment	-3	-1.308
25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy	-4	-1.614
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom*	-5	-1.926

Table 4.12: Collaborative Partners' statements supporting individual differences

4.3.3 Compassionate Innovators

Three educators defined this composite array: one was an AIM educator, one was an owner/manager, and one was a room leader. The three educators reported working in a sessional service. One had 0–2 years of experience, one had 3–5 years, and one had 5–8 years. The three educators had children with diverse needs receiving targeted support from AIM ranging from levels 3 to 4. All three educators had heard about UDL before and have consistently implemented it in their classrooms.

The interpretation of this composite array revealed two key areas that helped me to gain insight into this viewpoint: compassion and innovation. These educators nurtured inclusion with compassion, altruism, and understanding. They worked within a rights-based approach, placing huge value on the respect and dignity of all children in their classrooms. They were

interested in and carried out innovative and creative methodologies to ensure that all children reached their full potential. They worried about the appropriate method to support all children's learning and development; therefore, they explored and researched inclusion and inclusive practices to optimise their knowledge of inclusion to create all-inclusive classrooms. Table 4.6 illustrates the most-like and most-unlike view for Compassionate Innovators.

The following statements in Table 4.6 are most like and most unlike for Compassionate Innovators. Higher array position and Z-score determine most-like statements, and lower array position and Z-score determine most-unlike statements.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs*	+5	1.545
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom	+5	1.387
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured*	+4	1.339
24. Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity in my classroom	+4	1.216
26. Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive practices	**+4**	**1.14**
25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy	**+3**	**1.105**
19. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed	+3	1.085
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness*	+3	1.05
4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs	**+3**	**0.982**
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom*	-3	-1.497
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment	-3	-1.112
35. Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities	**-3**	**-0.776**
16. Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes and try again	**-3**	**-0.762**
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming	-5	-2.336
27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom*	-4	-1.71
3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom	-4	-1.772
38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom	**-5**	**- 2.336**

Table 4.13: Most-like and most-unlike statements for Compassionate Innovators

4.3.3.1 Compassion

From the viewpoint of Compassionate Innovators, they accepted all children into their classrooms. The Compassionate Innovators expressed kindness and empathy and a willingness to accept all children into their classrooms. Many of the statements they placed at + refer to valuing, honouring, supporting, respecting, listening to, and caring for children. They tried to make sure that all the children had a sense of belonging by constantly using inclusive language and supporting their development of resilience to make them feel included. They took extra care and time by being more compassionate and empathetic to those children who required additional support and scaffolding. They valued diversity and uniqueness within the classroom and allowed children to flourish and grow at their own pace. In part, they enjoyed advocating for inclusion and diversity within their classrooms; however, they did not necessarily feel it was their responsibility to ensure that all children were fully integrated into their classrooms.

Table 4.14 presents a list of statements from viewpoint 3 that support the view of Compassion.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-scores*
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs*	+5	1.545
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom	+5	1.387
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured*	+4	1.339
24. Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity in my classroom	+4	1.216
25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy	**+3**	**1.105**
39. Enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and inclusive practices in my classroom	+2	0.934
45. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom*	+1	0.536

Table 4.14: Compassionate Innovators' statements supporting compassion

4.3.3.2 Innovation

The Compassionate Innovators believed they did not require more competent leadership in the classroom to motivate them to create all-inclusive learning environments. However, they agreed that they looked for guidance and advice from mentors to aid the successful implementation of inclusive learning in their classes. They also agreed that they were open to extending their knowledge and exploring fresh insights into innovative methods to enhance their understanding of inclusion and inclusive practices. Compassionate Innovators maintained the position that they partly thrived on experimenting with new and novel strategies to establish a responsive learning environment. They felt that integrated technology was a suitable learning tool for children with diverse needs.

In addition, the educators did not believe that establishing all-inclusive learning environments was laborious or tiresome. They believed that their goal was to create expert learners, and they viewed the challenges to learning and development as external and beyond the child. However, they somewhat felt that offering an all-inclusive learning environment and implementing inclusive practices only benefited some children. Moreover, they felt that there are inadequate frameworks to support inclusion in ECCE classrooms. They suggested that they did not rely on governmental directives or policies to furnish them with the skills and competencies to enact inclusive practices to create inclusion in their classes. Furthermore, they did not overly enjoy attending professional development and learning or desire UDL or inclusive methodology training. To some extent, they believed that they possessed the skills and competencies required to establish fully inclusive ECCE classrooms.

Table 4.15 presents a list of statements from viewpoint three that support the view of Innovation.

Statement number and statements	*Array position*	*Z-score*
26. Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive practices	**+4**	**1.14**
4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs	**+3**	**0.982**
17. Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding of inclusive practices, ensuring I always learn new knowledge	**+2**	**0.838**
22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children	**+2**	**0.92**

29. Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive classroom and inclusive practices	+1	0.618
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom*	-3	-1.497
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment	-3	-1.112
35. Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities	**-3**	**-0.776**
3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom	-4	-1.772
46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom	-4	-1.869
38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom	**-5**	**- 2.336**
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming	-5	-2.336

Table 4.15: Compassionate Innovators' statements supporting innovation

4.4 Conclusions

This study highlighted three distinct viewpoints from a sample of childhood educators who work in Irish ECCE classrooms. The first viewpoint (Relational Advocates) felt that all children have the right to be educated together, regardless of diverse needs. Their inclusive practices are underpinned by interactions with all the children and by preparing a learning environment that is fair and equal to all. The second viewpoint (Collaborative Partners) felt that cooperation with families and professionals is the foundation of their inclusive practices and a source of knowledge for supporting children with diverse needs and abilities in the classroom. Their viewpoint also identified that they recognised children with diverse needs as different. Finally, the third viewpoint (Compassionate Innovators) found that these educators are compassionate and empathetic to the needs of all the children in their classroom. These educators developed innovative methods and strategies to create expert learners through research and exploration.

This chapter outlined my use of the Q method using KADE and the online semi-structured post-Q interviews to present my findings. The following chapter will revisit these viewpoints and the findings of the consensus statements, discussing them in more depth, thematically, and with reference to relevant literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study explored subjective attitudes and viewpoints through the lens of UDL as an effective and equitable pedagogical tool for inclusion, aiming to gain deeper insight into and understanding of the variability in subjective attitudes and opinions regarding inclusion and the inclusive practices of ECEs in Irish early childhood classrooms. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this research employed an approach to explore human subjectivity, not within the confines of broader traditional research methods but through Q methodology, a robust and systematic approach for studying subjectivity (Baker *et al*., 2006; Lundberg *et al*., 2020; Brown & Montgomery, 2025). This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024a), the Aistear (NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024), and Síolta (DES, 2017) and frameworks, which support the themes and sub-themes. UDL is fundamental to this study because its theoretical and practical strategies provide a flexible overarching framework for implementing inclusive pedagogies. The discussion chapter will also take into consideration the findings concerning leadership, AIM, and professional learning and development.

First, the findings regarding the consensus statements are presented and considered in relation to the overarching theme of placing the child at the centre, referencing the following sub-themes: the voices and choices of children, fulfilling developmental needs, personalised interventions, maintaining a positive outlook, self-efficacy and motivation, and leadership and professional responsibility. Subsequently, findings pertaining to each of the distinctive viewpoints are discussed in greater detail, focusing on the sub-themes: a sense of community, children's identity, the classroom environment, equity-based practices, and support for inclusive provision. Finally, a section on the contribution to knowledge will be followed by conclusions.

Figure 5.1 below illustrates the overarching theme from the consensus statements of placing the child at the centre of practice. Three oval shapes at the top represent the three principles of UDL: multiple means of engagement (green oval), multiple means of representation (purple oval), and multiple means of action and expression (blue oval). These shapes are all connected, placing the child at the centre of practice. The rectangular box at the bottom

represents the essential components of child-centred approaches, as identified in the consensus statements.

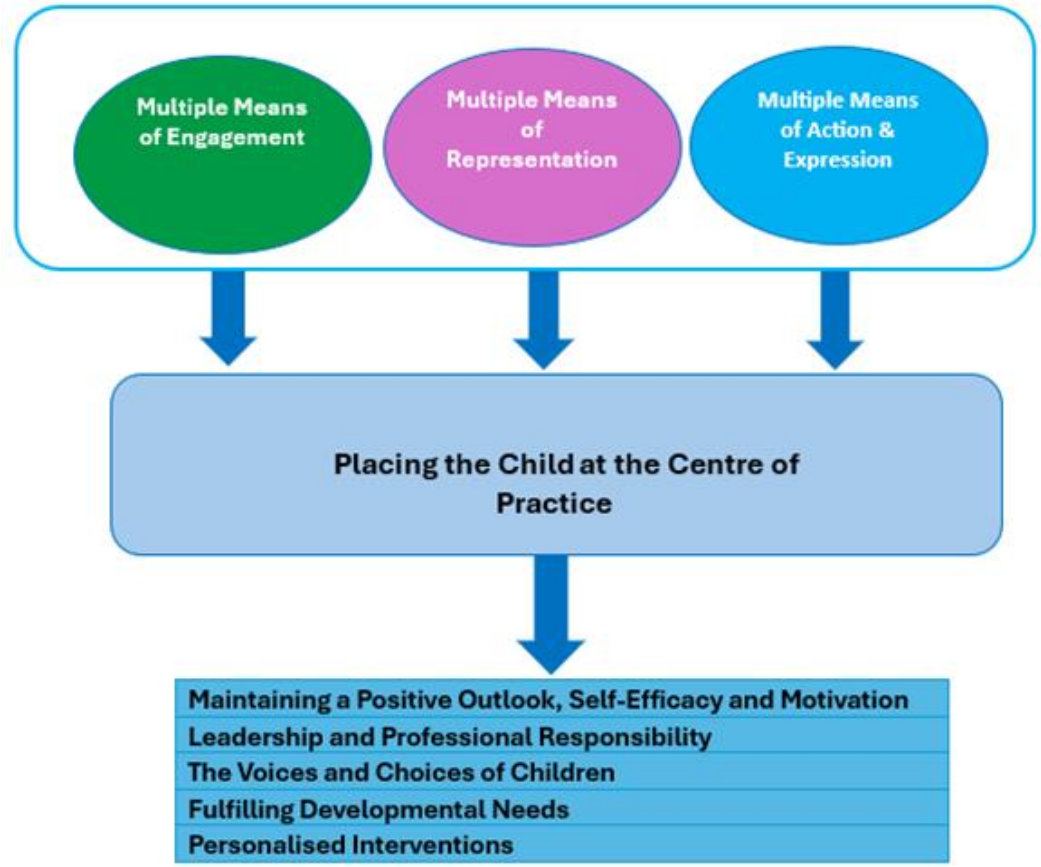

Figure 5.1: Placing the child at the centre of practice

5.2 Consensus Statements

In Chapter 4, Table 4.4 outlines the 14 consensus statements, the number of each statement, and the position array of the Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators. The consensus statements highlight the central theme of placing the child at the centre of practice, along with sub-themes of maintaining a positive outlook, self-efficacy and motivation, leadership and professional responsibility, the voices and choices of children, fulfilling developmental needs, and personalised interventions. The central theme and sub-themes were identified by analysing and interpreting the patterns of consensus statements among participants and their views on the ideal Q-grids, as well as the post-Q interviews, which were considered the most suitable. The themes and sub-themes will be discussed with reference to the literature, UDL, Aistear, and Síolta. The central theme and its sub-themes, interpreted based on the consensus statements, will be discussed below.

5.3 Placing the Child at the Centre

Placing the child at the centre of practice is a fundamental pillar for delivering high-quality, inclusive ECEC (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023), and it is the central theme reflected in the consensus agreement among ECEs in this study. Placing the child at the centre of practice closely aligns with ECEC policies and frameworks such as First 5, AIM, Siolta and Aistear and is supported by the three principles of UDL. Implementing child-centred approaches also aligns with the goal of UDL, which promotes learner agency (CAST, 2024a). The central consensus theme of placing the child at the centre of practice was characterised into sub-themes in the context of multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2024a). Guided by the holistic view of the consensus statements, which identify the overarching theme of placing the child at the centre of practice, the following sub-themes emerged: maintaining a positive outlook, leadership and professional responsibility, self-efficacy and motivation, the voices and choices of children, fulfilling developmental needs, and personalised interventions. To support the discussion, the sub-themes were mapped to the UDL Guidelines 3.0, as illustrated in Figures 5.2–5.5.

5.3.1 Maintaining a Positive Outlook, Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Figure 5.2 below illustrates the UDL principle of multiple means of engagement represented in the green oval shape. Indicated by the blue arrow on the left, this principle influences and relates to the emotional capacity within the guidelines and is linked to the sub-theme of a positive outlook, self-efficacy, and motivation within the blue box on the right-hand side.

Figure 5.2: The relationship between multiple means of engagement and the sub-theme of maintaining a positive outlook, self-efficacy, and motivation

The study's findings are largely consistent with the notion that attitudes of inclusion impact educators' use of inclusive pedagogy (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Hanley & Garrity, 2024). A holistic view of the 14 consensus statements (see Table 4.4) outlined in the data outputs revealed that the cohort of participants seemed to hold positive attitudes to inclusion, some to a greater degree than others. Many contemporary thinkers clearly indicate in the literature that positive attitudes toward inclusion are the building blocks for the successful implementation of inclusive early childhood education and practice (Katz, 2015; Visković, 2021). Schaub and Lütolf (2024) note that ECEs who hold positive attitudes toward children with diverse needs feel self-efficacious in their abilities to support inclusion in their classrooms and are willing to meet the needs of all children.

Not only did the participants in this study indicate that they held positive attitudes towards inclusion, but they also felt a sense of self-efficacy in their capabilities to support children with diverse needs by implementing inclusive practices. However, there was evidence to suggest that the Collaborative Partners' sense of self-efficacy and positive attitudes may have been misplaced. For instance, Sorter 30, one of the Collaborative Partners, felt she lacked the skills and competencies necessary to create a suitable learning environment for some children with diverse needs. When interviewed, she said she was currently 'at a loss' and struggling to meet the needs of two children with complex needs in her classroom. She expressed frustration over the lack of external support available to ECEs in her setting, which seemed to hinder children's full participation in the classroom and affect her positive attitude toward inclusion. Nevertheless, a positive outlook, self-efficacy, and motivation for teaching are fundamental for implementing inclusive teaching practices rooted in the UDL characteristics, as reflected in educators' educational philosophies, particularly in multiple means of engagement and their design options for emotional capacity (Meyer *et al*., 2014; GOI, 2024a). Therefore, ECEs must recognise their expectations, beliefs, and motivations and support children in developing an awareness of themselves and others, as outlined in the UDL guidelines, thus building children's emotional capacity (Meyer *et al*., 2014).

Despite a shared view of placing the child at the centre of practice, this study raises concerns that not all participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of building children's emotional capacity aligned with the UDL principle of multiple means of engagement, AIM, Aistear, or Siolta. For example, the Collaborative Partners displayed the highest level of confidence in their ability to foster an inclusive environment, ranking Statement #28 (see Table 4.4) at array position −5 on the Q-grid. This placement indicates that they strongly

believed they had the necessary skills and competencies to support children with diverse needs and abilities. However, they placed Statement #32 (see Table 5.2) at array position 0, indicating a neutral stance or uncertainty about consistently accepting children with diverse needs into their classrooms. Therefore, this confidence appeared somewhat inconsistent with their neutral array position of 0 on accepting all children into their classrooms, as evident from Statement #32 (See Table 5.2). Additionally, Sorter 30 acknowledged the challenges in meeting the needs of some children, suggesting a possible gap between their perceived capabilities and the practical realities of creating all-inclusive classrooms.

The Relational Advocates and the Compassionate Innovators also ranked Statement #28 highly (at −3 and −4, respectively), indicating that they, too, felt equipped with the necessary skills and competencies to foster an inclusive classroom environment. Their placement of Statement #32 at +4 and +5 (see Table 5.2) further suggests a strong commitment to welcoming all children into their classroom. This reflects a greater sense of capability and skills in accommodating children with diverse needs, consistent with inclusive pedagogical principles outlined in the literature (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Hanley & Garrity, 2024; Schaub & Lütolf, 2024). This also reflects the Relational Advocates' and Compassionate Innovators' recognition of children's emotional capacities as fundamental to supporting multiple means of engagement, also outlined within UDL principles, AIM, Aistear and Siolta (NCCA. 2009; DCYA; 2016; CAST, 2024a; GOI, 2024a).

One element that encourages positive attitudes toward inclusion is professional learning (PL), which motivates educators to adapt their classroom practices and acquire new knowledge through collaboration and active learning (Stark *et al*., 2024). The sub-theme of motivation for this study relates to ECEs' interest in PL and current research concerning inclusion and inclusive practices, such as the implementation of UDL. It is largely agreed upon that PL changes teaching practices and improves children's successful outcomes (Banks & Smyth, 2011; King, 2016). PL fosters attitudinal changes, shifting from a focus on delivering bespoke instruction for a select few to embracing an inclusive learning environment for all children while also enhancing feelings of self-confidence in supporting every child in the classroom (Brennan & Gorman, 2023), a crucial aspect of UDL principles (Meyer *et al*., 2014). Educators' motivation also influences their participation in PL at a particular time. Interestingly, after completing PL, there is no guarantee that educators will change their practices if PL is viewed as a tool to impart knowledge and skills, rather than as a supportive and collaborative process (King, 2016).

Barriers to participation in PL included cost, time, lack of childcare to attend PL sessions, working conditions, and lack of recognition and monetary rewards (Stark *et al*., 2024). The evidence from participants' consensus in this study regarding PL echoed the findings of Stark *et al*. (2024). For instance, during an interview with one of the Relational Advocates, Sorter 8 noted a lack of motivation due to the absence of recognition for the work involved in participating in PL, compounded by the lack of financial gain for ECEs. However, her response did not acknowledge the importance of how these barriers ultimately impact children's rights, particularly in relation to ensuring access to agentic, well-informed, and highly qualified educators who are equipped to respond to children's diverse needs within inclusive educational settings.

The Relational Advocate Sortor 8 also felt that the course content of the current PL programme - Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC), which has been available to Irish ECEs since 2016, remains largely unchanged, without offering additional information to enhance inclusive practices in her classroom. She believed that self-efficacy stemmed from experience rather than participating in the PL currently offered, a belief that is not supported by the literature (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024). This reluctance toward PL indicated a narrow view, in which PL was perceived as an opportunity for information gathering and knowledge building rather than a time for support from and collaboration with others in the field. Significantly, these feelings aligned with the consensus statements of the Collaborative Partners, who felt to some extent that they did not crave more professional learning, as outlined by the position array of statement #34 at −1, followed by Relational Advocates and Compassionate Innovators at −2 array position (see Table 4.4). This consensus did not support the importance of ECEs' ongoing commitment to PL as outlined in Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (Minister for Education and Skills, 2019).

Sorter 8 stated that much of her inclusive knowledge and understanding derives from practical experience, which risks reinforcing existing practices rather than fostering innovation and new practices based on current research. However, she did mention that hands-on experience is not a substitute for PL. There was little motivation or interest among the participants in this study in current Irish research on inclusive practices to enhance classroom practices, as indicated by the position array of statement #31 (see Table 4.4). The Relational Advocates and Compassionate Innovators placed the statement on array position

−2, while the Collaborative Partners placed it on −1. This is a significant finding, given that educators are expected to draw upon evidence-based research to inform, improve, and evaluate their inclusive teaching strategies (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). The literature also suggests that ECEs who participate in PL are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to effectively create a culture of inclusion in ECCE classrooms and enhance their leadership skills and professional responsibilities in implementing inclusive pedagogies and practices (Breen *et al*., 2019; Roberts & Callaghan, 2021). However, this was not the opinion of the participants in this study. Crucially, this view about the lack of interest in current research and PL from the participants in this study raises concerns about the perceived relevance and responsiveness of PL currently offered to ECEs.

5.3.2 Leadership and Professional Responsibility

Figure 5.3 visually represents multiple means of action and expression within professional and leadership roles, as well as the relationship between leadership and professional responsibility. The left-hand side illustrates the principle of multiple means of action and expression in the blue oval, with a blue arrow signifying the connection of this principle to the UDL guideline on strategy development, and another blue arrow that indicates the link to the guideline concerning the sub-theme of leadership and professional responsibility in the rectangular box on the right.

Figure 5.3: Relationship between multiple means of action and expression, and leadership and professional responsibility

Another characteristic of successfully implementing UDL and other inclusive ECEC frameworks, such as Aistear, is the ability of educators to provide intentional leadership of inclusive practices among colleagues, parents, and other professionals (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Lakkala & Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2021). Delivering intentional leadership through the lens of UDL, particularly through the key principle of multiple means of action and expression, enhances planning and classroom instruction by supporting strategy

development and drawing on educators' existing knowledge and evidence-based practice (Katz, 2012). Leadership and responsibilities of the ECEs, underpinned by strategy development, include setting meaningful goals, anticipating and planning for challenges, organising information and resources, enhancing capacity for monitoring progress, and challenging exclusionary practices (CAST, 2024a). Despite higher education being Fovet's (2021) primary focus, he suggests that at an organisational level, inclusive and intentional leadership is essential for implementing UDL and influencing positive attitudes. Therefore, leaders are required to encourage, support, and facilitate alternative approaches to fostering an inclusive learning environment.

The three viewpoints in this study collectively agreed that they were not overly confident in providing leadership that fosters inclusive practices among colleagues, as illustrated by the position array of the statement #36 on their ideal Q-grids: −1, 0, −1 (see Table 4.4). Sorters 8, one of the Relational Advocates, strongly emphasised the critical role of intentional leadership in fostering inclusive classrooms during the online interview. According to her, inclusion and the implementation of inclusive practices require a top-down approach, with ECEs taking professional responsibility for inclusive pedagogy as a vital enabler of success. Sorter 8's view contrasts with the literature, which suggests that there is inconclusive evidence regarding whether a top-down or bottom-up approach is more effective for implementing UDL successfully in an educational setting, as acknowledged by Fovet (2021). The sorter's attitude towards leadership, combined with the consensus view of participants' lack of confidence in providing it, suggests a possible inconsistency in how intentional leadership for inclusive practices is understood and implemented among the participants.

Regardless of whether a top-down or bottom-up approach is adopted, taking professional responsibility for each child's educational experience in the classroom, in accordance with the UDL principle, leads to successful outcomes for *all* children (Katz, 2015; Lakkala & Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2021). Furthermore, by embracing professional responsibility within the UDL framework, where educators understand the needs of the children, educational barriers can be effectively eliminated (Horn *et al*., 2016; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). In contrast to the Collaborative Partners and Compassionate Innovators, who partially accepted responsibility for providing an inclusive classroom, the Relational Advocates displayed a neutral attitude, potentially indicating uncertainty or variability in their grasp of professional responsibility.

These findings suggest that ECEs should assume greater responsibility for ensuring the meaningful participation of children with diverse needs through observation, proactive or intentional planning, action, and evaluation, that aligns with the principles of Aistear, the standard of Síolta, and UDL (Capp, 2017; Lakkala & Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2021; GOI, 2024a). The findings do not suggest that ECEs have abandoned their professional responsibilities in embracing children with diverse needs in ECCE classrooms, nor their commitment to inclusive practices. This is because statements in a Q-sort, influenced by subjective viewpoints, convey different meanings to participants based on their lived experiences (Wolf, 2004). Nevertheless, this finding reflects how professional responsibility is understood in Irish ECCE classrooms and raises questions about the adequacy of current training and support structures.

Contrary to research that suggests ECEs face daily challenges in implementing inclusive pedagogies to meet the needs of children (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020), it was surprising that findings from consensus statements #14 and #27 (see Table 4.4) revealed that the participants did not encounter daily obstacles or struggles to meet the needs of children with diverse needs in their classrooms. This may be due to the additional support the AIM educators provide in the classrooms. ECEs may believe that the professional responsibility for ensuring the successful inclusion of children with diverse needs lies within the remit of the AIM educator, particularly as ECEC services receive funding under AIM level 7 for an additional staff member, which reduces the child-to-staff ratio to help individual children access the ECCE programme (DES, 2015; DCEDIY, 2024c). However, this view might suggest that inclusion relies on external support rather than being part of daily collaborative practice.

Nevertheless, AIM is regarded as a positive support for many children with diverse needs in the ECCE classroom, allowing them to participate meaningfully in their education. Having an AIM educator in the ECCE classroom was identified in the literature as the most beneficial aspect of this model, as their presence had a positive impact on the children and inclusion in ECEC (Robinson *et al*., 2024). The interview data from this study, which aligns with the research of Robinson *et al*. (2024), revealed that having an AIM educator in the classroom is essential for children's full inclusion and active participation in the ECCE classroom.

An example of these perspectives is shared by Sorters 8 and 31 on the role of AIM in advancing inclusion within the ECCE classroom. Sorter 8 highlighted how AIM had significantly supported, facilitated, and progressed inclusive practices, mainly by providing

additional time and resources for the children. Sorter 31 viewed the AIM educator as an essential classroom-based resource, stressing their critical role in creating an all-inclusive learning environment. She emphasised the potential negative impact on the entire class if this support were removed, suggesting that AIM is pivotal for individual children and fostering a holistic, inclusive environment. Additionally, Sorter 31 described how AIM transforms children's educational experiences into joyful and inclusive opportunities. Ergo, reinforcing the view that the presence of an AIM educator sustains and shapes the dynamics of inclusion in the ECCE classroom rather than being enacted through the team's regular, inclusive teaching strategies. While this study revealed that an AIM educator is essential for the participation and inclusion of children with diverse needs, it is inconsistent with the findings of the three-year evaluation report conducted by Rhodes, Salustro, & McGladrey in 2019, which suggests it may not be sufficient, as many ECEs noted in the report that AIM was not effectively meeting the needs of all children in the ECCE classroom.

5.3.3 The Voices and Choices of Children

Figure 5.4 illustrates the relationship between two UDL principles: multiple means of engagement and representation and the sub-theme of children's voices and choices. The left side of the figure illustrates the principles of multiple means of engagement, represented in the green oval, and multiple means of representation, in the purple oval. Both UDL principles are linked within their respective sections: welcoming interests and identities, sustaining effort and persistence, and emotional capacity in green boxes, perception, language and symbols, and building knowledge in purple boxes, to highlight the relationship between each principle and guideline. Arrows depict their connection to the sub-theme, children's voices and choices, represented in a rectangular box on the right.

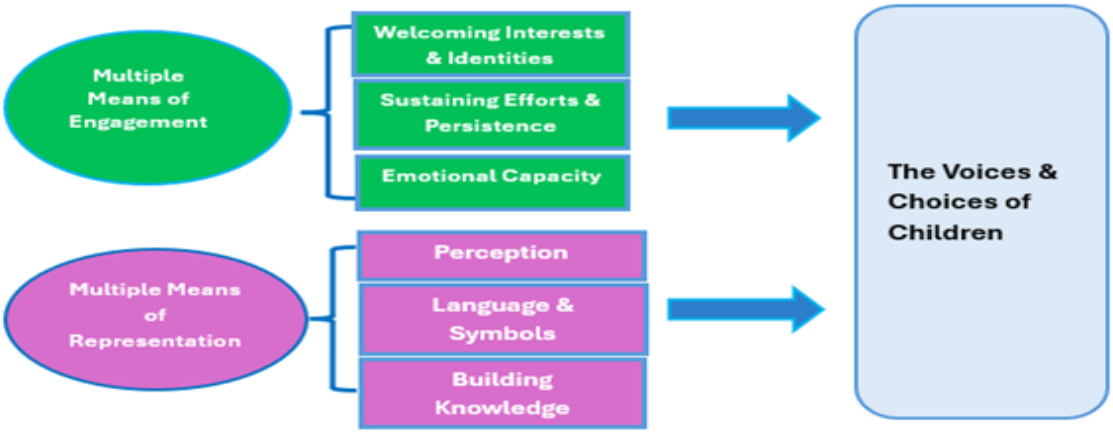

Figure 5.4: Relationship between multiple means of engagement and representation and the voices and choices of children

One aspect of meeting the needs of all children by engaging them is listening to and offering choices during their daily activities and routines. This includes sharing individual and group interests that encourage interdependence and collective learning while recognising their uniqueness, as supported by the UNCRC. Providing choices involves offering a variety of materials and innovative methods for children to express and understand their knowledge (CAST, 2024a). Similarly, listening to children's voices and granting them choices enables active participation in the ECCE classroom, where they enjoy the autonomy to make decisions about their learning, thereby fostering their development as agentic global citizens and promoting a sense of identity and belonging (GOI, 2024).

The findings from the consensus statements appeared to align with children's rights as established by the UNCRC and underpinned by Aistear, Síolta, and the UDL guidelines, particularly statements 5, 8, 10, and 11 (see Table 4.4). The ECEs strongly agree on adopting a child-centred approach, especially by listening to children's voices. Interestingly and significantly, the highest level of agreement from all three viewpoints, recorded as +5 in the position array, was in response to statement #11, 'listening attentively to the child's voice to understand and identify learning needs'. Listening to children indicates that the ECEs in this study highly value open communication and utilise effective skills to explore and define learning needs. However, the post-Q interview data revealed that while the interviewees listened attentively to children's voices, they did so for different reasons. For example, Sorter 31, a Relational Advocate, listened to the children to identify their needs, abilities, capabilities, and interests. Meanwhile, Sorter 19, a Collaborative Partner, listened to the children's voices to identify areas of concern and well-being, as well as to support children's self-regulation.

While the participants listened to children's voices, they agreed that they only partially considered (+3, +2, 0 position array) the children's preferences, views, and choices, as suggested by consensus statement #10; value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices (see Table 4.4). Therefore, simply listening to the children's voices might be seen as tokenistic, superficial and not fully aligned with children's rights. Interpreting the consensus statements more broadly in this context suggests that the participants in this study recognise the importance of listening to children's voices, albeit for different reasons, yet do not fully understand children's rights. According to the literature fully upholding children's rights involves listening to children's voices and providing them with genuine choices, which is a key strategy for meaningful participation and engagement that is not optional but vital for inclusion (Ring *et al*., 2019; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022; GOI, 2024a).

Moreover, listening to children's voices supports children's engagement, builds educators' confidence, and enables them to commit to supporting shared decision-making and participation processes over time (Katz, 2015; Hanley & Feeney, 2021; Kazmierczak-Murray *et al*., 2024; DCEDIY,2024b). Listening to children's voices must be nurtured, valued, and respected, as evidenced by this study's finding of statement #11 placed at the +5 position in the array. Moreover, educators must empower children to be instigators of their own voice and acknowledge that the purpose and goals of experiences do not always need to be set or initiated by adults, a point also evident in this study's findings (Cassidy *et al.*, 2022).

Under the principle of multiple means of representation, guidelines for perception, language and symbols, and building knowledge are enhanced by providing choices that cultivate various ways of knowing and making meaning (CAST, 2024a). The findings, as indicated in consensus statement #11 (see Appendix E), also suggest a strong association between the three principles of UDL. The post-Q interviews revealed that listening attentively to the child's voice was aimed not solely at understanding and identifying learning needs, as previously mentioned, but also at supporting interactions, expression, and communication, as well as strategy development (multiple means of action and expression), knowledge-building (multiple means of representation), and sustaining effort, persistence, and emotional capacity (multiple means of engagement) (CAST, 2024d). In other words, employing inclusive, child-centred pedagogies within the three principles of UDL helps ECEs recognise and address the developmental needs of young children highlighted in this study, which aligns with the biopsychosocial model of disability (Howe & Griffin, 2020; Singha, 2025).

5.3.4 Fulfilling Developmental Needs

Figure 5.5 presents a visual representation of the relationship between the three principles of UDL and the sub-theme of fulfilling developmental needs. Multiple means of engagement are represented in the green oval; multiple means of representation in the purple oval, and multiple means of action and expression in the blue oval on the left. They are individually connected to the UDL guidelines: multiple means of engagement are connected to the elements of welcoming interests and identities, sustaining effort and persistence, and emotional capacity, depicted in green boxes; multiple means of representation are connected to the guidelines of perception, language and symbols, and building knowledge, illustrated in purple boxes; and multiple means of action and expression connect to the guidelines of interaction, expression and communication, and strategy development, represented in blue boxes in the middle. Three blue arrows connect this sub-theme, fulfilling development needs, represented in the blue box on the right.

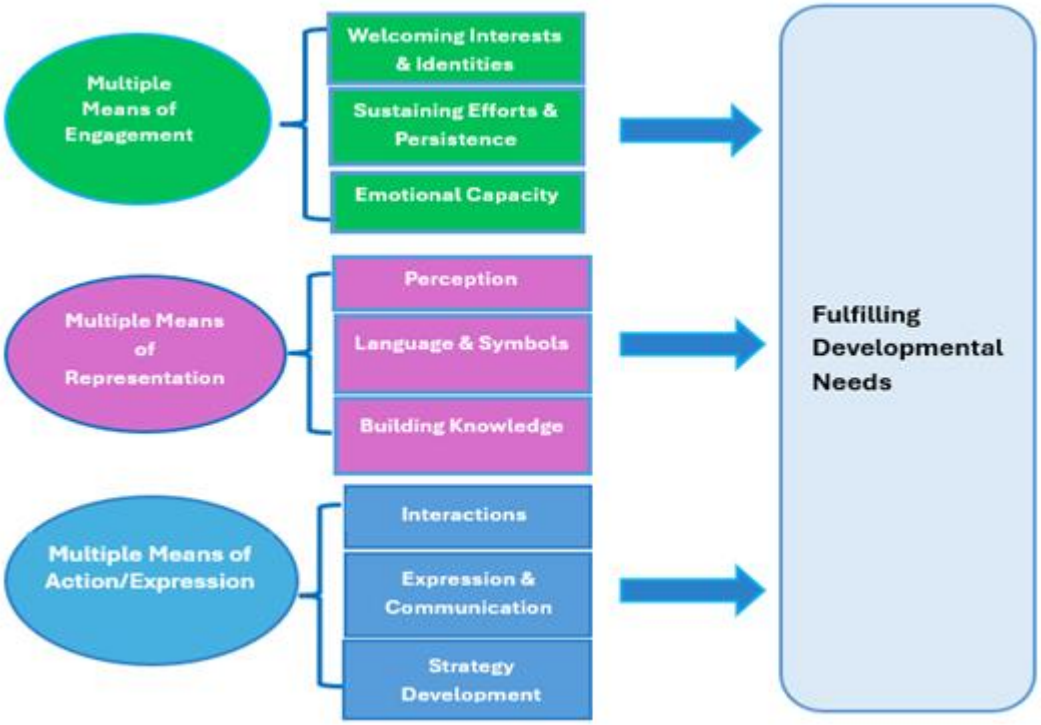

Figure 5.5: Relationship between multiple means of expression, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression and fulfilling developmental needs

Another aspect of multiple means of engagement under the guideline 'welcoming interests' emphasises the notion of 'nurture joy and play', which focuses on promoting joyful and playful experiences for both children and educators (CAST, 2024a). A plethora of research highlights the benefits of creating joyful and playful experiences through interactions for

children, thereby enhancing their overall development (NCCA, 2009; Hanley & Feeney, 2021; Thunder *et al*., 2023; GOI, 2024). Joyful and playful experiences promote a fair and more equitable approach to inclusion by engaging children and facilitating greater active participation (Thunder *et al*., 2023). Aistear's themes of exploring and thinking, and well-being, highlight the importance of joyful and playful experiences as a critical pedagogical approach to supporting children's learning and engagement (NCCA, 2009; French & McKenna, 2022; GOI, 2024). Nevertheless, it was evident in this study that the ECEs also placed the children at the centre of their practice by fostering fun and playful learning experiences through empowerment and supportive and safe environments. Sorter 31 said that when children are happy in the classroom, learning comes naturally to them.

Similarly to Gerogeson *et al*. (2023) research , the participants not only placed children at the centre of practice but also enabled them to develop their identities and competencies at their own pace, acknowledging that the developmental trajectories of some children may differ from those of their peers For example, consensus statement #5 (See Table 4.4) regarding children acknowledging their authenticity and individuality, as supported by ECEs at their natural pace, indicated firm agreement. Relational Advocates' and Collaborative Partners' position array for statement #5 was +4, with slightly less agreement from Compassionate Innovators at +3. Statement #2 indicated favourable agreement among the ECEs to support and empower all children to meet their educational needs, as shown by the position of the statement on the ideal Q-grid: Relational Advocates placed it on +2, Collaborative Partners on +3, with more robust agreement from Compassionate Innovators on +4.

Meeting the development needs of all children is deeply embedded not only in the UDL principles but also in the updated Aistear (GOI, 2024), whereby the role of the ECE is to empower each child to be agentic and reach their full potential by facilitating, enriching, and enhancing their holistic learning and development, fostering high levels of well-being and active participation through a slow pedagogy (GOI, 2024a). Moreover, the UDL guidelines and principles suggest recognising, promoting, and valuing individualism and optimising the learning environment. Educators are encouraged to cultivate various pathways of knowing and making meaning through accessing and providing materials, including implementing appropriate personalised interventions and tools, if necessary (CAST, 2024d), such as AIM.

5.3.5 Personalised Interventions

As outlined in the literature review, high-quality ECCE programmes empower children to actively participate in their social and cognitive development, enabling them to construct their own knowledge and reach their optimal potential (DCYA, 2016; Robert & Callaghan, 2021). Due to the lack of clarity on the philosophical underpinnings of inclusive education in the literature (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021), it was not surprising that there were lower levels of agreement among the participants when they placed statement #44 relating to bespoke interventions provided for children to participate and engage successfully in ECCE classrooms at position array (+1, +1, 0) (see Table 4.4). This position implied that ECEs do not necessarily apply personalised interventions for children with diverse needs. These findings align with Florian and Black-Hawkins's (2011) view that students identified as having additional needs are at risk of exclusion. Moreover, that educators should move away from a pedagogical approach that focuses on meeting the needs of most children while providing something 'additional' or 'different' for those facing educational challenges. Instead, they advocate for creating rich learning opportunities accessible to all children, eliminating the stigma and difficulties associated with labelling some as different (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

This viewpoint also aligns with the UDL principles, particularly those which recommend that inclusive support should not be linked to individual children with diverse needs but rather be implemented within the educational environment (Winter & O'Raw, 2010; Slee, 2018; Cologon, 2019; Lalvani, 2019). Nonetheless, the demographic survey in this study found that 17 ECEs utilised the AIM to receive targeted support at level 7 by gaining an additional educator to support children with diverse needs. These findings suggest that a biopsychosocial approach to inclusion, combined with targeted support within a multilevel system, is supported by the UDL framework. Therefore, educators should engage in ongoing professional learning to enhance their intentional leadership skills, deepen their understanding of effective individual and group supports for children with diverse needs, and clarify their professional responsibilities as inclusive educators. Such professional development would also support educators in navigating the complexities of inclusion by introducing the biopsychosocial approach as a framework for identifying and removing barriers to participation. This, in turn, would support the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogy and practices in ECCE classrooms through authentic and genuine child-centred approaches.

5.4 Distinguishing Viewpoints

This study identified three distinguishing viewpoints from the factor arrays: (1) Relational Advocates, (2) Collaborative Partners, and (3) Compassionate Innovators. From the analysis of the distinguishing statements of the ideal Q-grids for each distinguishing viewpoint, lensed through UDL underpinned by social justice as the overarching theme, five sub-themes were identified: Sense of Community, Children's Identity, Classroom Environment, Equity-based Practices, and Assistance for Inclusive Provision.

To support the interpretation of the overarching themes, I also examined practices that integrate inclusion in ECCE classrooms, drawing on the Aistear and Síolta frameworks, as illustrated in Table 5.1. After analysing and interpreting the data through UDL, Aistear, and Síolta, the three-factor arrays (composite arrays) representing the ECEs' viewpoints were thoroughly considered, analysed, and interpreted, leading to the identification of these sub-themes as the most suitable. The sub-themes notably highlighted the differences in attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices, as reflected in the ECEs' ideal Q-sorts (see Figures 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5), which address the research question and are discussed below.

Table 5.1 illustrates the connection between the sub-themes of the distinguishing viewpoints and the Síolta and Aistear frameworks currently employed in ECCE classrooms to promote inclusion and inclusive practices. The overarching theme is UDL, positioned at the top of the table. The table is then divided into three columns: navy for the sub-themes, maroon for the Síolta framework, and orange for the Aistear framework. The sub-theme heading identifies the themes explored in this study: a sense of community, children's identity, classroom environment, equity-based practices, and support for inclusion. The middle column connects the sub-themes to the Síolta standards, as indicated by their names and numbers. The third column, under Aistear, associates the sub-themes with the principles and themes outlined in the framework, represented by 'T' for themes and 'P' for principles.

Universal Design for Learning		
Sub-Theme	**Síolta Framework**	**Aistear Framework**
Sense of Community	• The Rights of the Child (1) • Interactions (5) • Communication (12) • Community Involvement (16)	• Well-being (T) • Identity and Belonging (T) • Communication (T) • Relationships and Interactions (P) • Family and Community (P)
Children's Identity	• Parents and Family (3) • Identity and Belonging (14)	• Agentic Global Citizens (P) • Holistic Learning and Development (P) • Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (P) • Identity and Belonging (T)
Classroom Environment	• Environments (2) • Health and Welfare (9) • Organisation (10)	• Learning Environments (P) • Exploring and Thinking (T) • Holistic Learning and Development (P) • Transitions (P)
Equity-based Practices	• Play (6) • Curriculum (7)	• Play and Hands-on Experiences (P) • Agentic Educators (P)
Assistance for Inclusion	• Planning and Evaluation (8)	• Transitions (P) • Wellbeing (T) • Relationships and Interactions (P)

Table 5.1: Sub-themes of the distinguishing viewpoints linked to Síolta (2006) and Aistear (GOI, 2024)

Additionally, while sub-themes identified in this study correspond with the themes, principles of Aistear, and standards of Síolta, they collectively align with the UDL framework by creating inclusive, responsive, and empowering learning spaces. These sub-themes support engagement by fostering a strong sense of belonging and emotional safety, encouraging children to take risks and participate fully. They promote representation by valuing diverse identities and experiences, ensuring that all children see themselves reflected in the learning environment. Action and expression are enhanced as children are given varied, meaningful opportunities to communicate, contribute, and take ownership of their learning.

Across the horizontal bands of UDL (see Figure 2.3), these sub-themes enhance access by removing physical, social, and attitudinal barriers; provide support through culturally responsive practices and inclusive teaching strategies; and build executive function by supporting children in developing agency, self-regulation, and decision-making skills within a supportive community. Ultimately, these sub-themes support the central goal of UDL to

develop a 'learner agency that is purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic, strategic and action-oriented' (CAST, 2024a).

It is essential to distinguish between Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators before examining their perspectives across the composite arrays, as outlined in Table 5.2 below. Table 5.2 illustrates 30 distinguishing statements in this study across composite array one, Relational Advocates (RA); two, Collaborative Partners (CP); and three, Compassionate Innovators (CI). The numbers on the left indicate the distinguishing statements, while the middle column corresponds to the statements associated with those numbers. The far-right column displays the position array of each distinguishing statement, with bold numbers indicating the most distinguishing position array associated with each statement. Statements 12, 22, 25, and 47 are the most distinguishing statements across all three composite arrays.

No.	**Statement**	**RA (position array)**	**CP**	**CI**
1	Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity.	+3	+4	**-1**
3	Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom.	-3	**+2**	-4
4	Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs.	-3	-5	**+3**
6	Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care.	0	**+5**	+1
9	Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative behaviour among children in my classroom.	0	-2	0
12	Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.	**+5**	**+3**	**0**
13	Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom.	0	+2	0
15	Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts.	**+1**	-1	-2
16	Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes and try again.	+1	+1	**-3**
17	Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding of inclusive practices, ensuring I always learn new knowledge.	-1	0	**+2**
18	Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication.	+4	+3	**+1**
19	Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed.	0	+1	+3
20	Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment.	**+2**	-3	-3
21	Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom	**-5**	-1	+1
22	Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children.	**-1**	**-3**	**+2**

24	Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity in my classroom.	+1	**0**	+4
25	Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy.	**-1**	**-4**	**+3**
26	Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive practices.	-1	-1	**+4**
29	Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive classroom and inclusive practices.	+2	**-1**	+1
30	Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments and practices.	-2	-3	**0**
32	Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom.	+4	**0**	+5
33	Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming.	**-5**	-4	-5
35	Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities.	0	+1	**-3**
37	Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to cater to young children's various learning styles, needs, and abilities.	**+3**	0	0
38	Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom.	-2	-1	**-5**
40	Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive practices better and adapt my teaching.	**+1**	-2	-1
41	Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation and develop strategies to eliminate them by reflecting daily.	**+1**	-2	-2
42	Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on rights-based participation and social justice.	**-1**	+3	+2
43	Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support confidence and connectedness with the children and their families.	+2	+4	**-1**
47	Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all	**-4**	**+2**	**-1**

Table 5.2: Distinguishing statements across the composite arrays

5.4.1 Sense of Community

The Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators each viewed children's sense of community differently. For example, Relational Advocates believed diversity was the norm. They place it at the heart of their classrooms, ensuring that *all* children, including those with diverse needs, are welcomed, valued, and respected through positive relationships as outlined in the ECEC frameworks (NCCA, 2009; DCYA, 2016; DES, 2017; GOI, 2024). They felt inclusion implied togetherness and belonging, where there is no 'other', only 'us'. Differences were viewed as usual, accepted, valued, and welcomed, creating the true meaning of belongingness and challenging the 'them' versus 'us' perspective.

This view promotes inclusivity in line with Cologon's (2019) call to shift societal views toward greater acceptance of *all* children, particularly those with diverse educational needs.

A child's sense of belonging must encompass more than merely being physically present and engaging with their peers; when differences are not perceived as deficiencies, children become more resilient and motivated (Nelson, 2021; French & McKenna, 2022). Consequently, the Relational Advocates created all-inclusive learning environments that were fair and equal for *all* children, underpinned by an equity-based approach to education.

The Relational Advocates' commitment to creating an inclusive classroom where children engage in meaningful participation was evident. Their opinion was clear and displayed a solid agreement when they placed statement #12, about fostering a learning environment where all children can flourish and thrive, on the +5 position array (see Table 5.2) on their ideal Q-grid. This solid agreement was confirmed by Sorters 8 and 31 during the online semi-structured interviews, when they emphasised that *all* children were equal and that children with diverse needs had a right to be educated alongside their peers.

This view was also evident when this cohort of educators placed statement #32 on +4 (see Table 5.2), confirming their belief that *all* children are equal by accepting them into their ECCE classroom. Their positive, reciprocal relationships with children consistently supported all children's feelings of belongingness, resilience, and inclusivity, as illustrated by statement #1 at position array +3 (see Table 5.2). To further support their view on creating an all-inclusive environment and providing children with a sense of community, they strongly believed that implementing inclusive practices for children with diverse needs was not overly demanding or time-intensive, as evidenced by placing statement #33 in the −5 position in the array (see Table 5.2).

The Compassionate Innovators also placed diversity at the heart of their classrooms through their inclusive practices. Like the Relational Advocates, they strongly agreed (−5) that implementing inclusive practices to create an inclusive environment was not overly demanding or time-intensive (statement #33, see Table 5.2). The difference of opinion lies in supporting children's sense of community and cultivating a positive classroom environment to enable them to reach their full potential. The Compassionate Innovators slightly disagreed (−1) with supporting children's sense of community (statement #1see Table 5.2). Perhaps this cohort's views were that children already feel a sense of community because they demonstrate their respect for diversity in the classroom, as illustrated by their use of appropriate language, as shown in their placement of statement #24 at the +4 position in the array. Furthermore, they somewhat viewed that offering inclusive education and

implementing inclusive strategies benefited *all* children, as indicated by statement #47 on the −1 position array (see Table 5.2).

What set the Collaborative Partners' viewpoint apart from others was that these ECEs believed that not all children belonged in the ECCE classroom, and they did not accept every child. This suggests that the ECCE classroom is intended for some children but not all, creating 'them' and 'us' perspectives as indicated in the literature (Lalvani, 2019). This view was also supported by their agreement (+2) that providing inclusive education and implementing inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefited only some children (statement #47, see Table 5.2). The Collaborative Partners' opinions demonstrated moderate agreement about creating a diverse classroom where children can reach their full potential, as indicated by placing statement #12 at position array +3. Viewing children with diverse needs as 'different' was confirmed by Sorter 30. According to her, at the start of the school year, the ECEs in her setting explain the needs and differences of children with diverse requirements to their typically developing peers.

Nevertheless, this view does not suggest that this cohort of ECEs purposely creates separation and division between children. They recognise and acknowledge differences, encouraging children to support and assist their peers when needed, thereby promoting a more inclusive and collaborative classroom environment that fosters an understanding of social inclusion. While this is a complex situation, it must be recognised that children with diverse needs often experience isolation and exclusion from their peers (Ferreira *et al*., 2017). Conversely, positive interactions between children with and without diverse needs enhance friendships, social engagement, successful learning, and self-esteem (Krone & Yu, 2019).

In the context of UDL, successfully adopting its three principles supports ECEs in creating a sense of community and belonging by including *all* children (Conn-Powers *et al.*, 2006; Darragh, 2007; Nelson, 2021). The findings from these three viewpoints are consistent with the current literature, which reveals the tension between opposing discourses and differing opinions among policymakers, educators, and researchers regarding their understanding of inclusion. Some view inclusion as a universal right for *all* children, believing they should be educated and cared for together, while others see it as a right that applies only to *some* children (Leijen *et al*., 2021). This view of community influences educators' inclusive practices based on their views of children's identities in their classrooms (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Hanley & Garrity, 2024).

Within Irish policies such as Aistear and AIM, as well as international rights-based standards, recognising diversity as a norm and fostering all children's sense of community are vital (DCYA, 2016; NCCA, 2009; GOI, 2024a). This approach, supported by the Relational Advocates' perspective and aligned with Irish and international policies, presents a transformative view of inclusion based on reciprocal relationships, which is aspirational and possibly idealised. However, it may conceal the real challenges in providing targeted support for children with diverse needs. More importantly, the Relational Advocates' perspective risks overlooking support for children with diverse needs to feel a sense of community and belonging, as it treats *all* children equally. Conversely, while the Collaborative Partners acknowledged differences and promoted social understanding, their viewpoint has the potential to exclude, isolate, and stereotype children with diverse needs (Norwich, 2024), impacting children's sense of identity.

5.4.2 Children's Identity

How children are viewed is at the essence of inclusion and inclusive practices (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018). Through the principles and themes of Aistear and the standards of Síolta, *all* children are regarded as agentic, competent, and confident, irrespective of their strengths, abilities, interests, or needs. However, a child's identity is complex; while labelling or diagnostic categorisation can result in increased resources and support, it can also reinforce stereotypes, discrimination, and exclusion (Norwich, 2017;2024) and may profoundly foster negative attitudes toward learning and opportunities (Hart *et al*., 2004; Swann *et al*., 2012). This study highlighted conflicting views of children's identity, one in which they are seen as agentic with optimal potential, and another in which they are seen as vulnerable and dependent because of their diverse needs, which influences practices of inclusion, which is consistent with the literature (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018).

The Relational Advocates' viewpoint suggests that *all* children are equal because they all have strengths, abilities, needs, and individual requirements. Sorter 31 supported this view by highlighting that *all* children require support in their learning and development, suggesting she viewed children as agentic regardless of needs. This cohort of ECEs reinforced this view when they placed statement #25 regarding ECEs showing greater empathy and compassion for children who required more time and attention at the −1 position array (see Table 5.2), indicating that they are equally sensitive and considerate toward all children in their classrooms, regardless of their needs.

Another prominent perspective from the Relational Advocates was related to creating expert learners in the ECCE classroom (statement #21, see Table 5.2). According to research conducted by CAST when updating the UDL Guidelines 3.0, the term 'expert learner' implies something exclusive and an end to the learning process. It also undermines the children's and ECEs' co-construction of learning and fails to recognise the innate ability of children to learn. Therefore, educators found the term 'expert learners' challenging to comprehend when teaching students (CAST, 2024b). This cohort firmly agreed that their goal was not to create expert learners, placing statement #21 on −5 (see Table 5.2). The term 'expert learner' was discussed during the online interview with Sorter 31, when she implied that the term is undefined, that creating expert learners was far beyond children's capabilities, strengths, and expectations, and that everyone was constantly learning, implying that learning had no endpoint.

The Collaborative Partners, by contrast, felt they demonstrated little empathy and compassion toward children requiring extra attention and support, placing statement #25 at −4 (see Table 5.2). While this could be interpreted as suggesting that this cohort of ECEs is less sensitive to the diverse needs of children, it could also be seen as an indication that they are, in fact, very aware and compassionate toward children's diverse needs, as outlined in the post-Q interview. One of the Collaborative Partners, Sorter 30, empathetically described her accommodation practices during the interview, such as altering her break times and the classroom structure to suit 'certain children', implying a greater level of empathy and compassion for the children. However, she also implied that these children required protection by implementing the accommodations. She said there were 'certain children' whom she felt she had failed to support because they needed specialised expertise. This finding indicates that some children were vulnerable and dependent because of their diverse needs (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018).

In addition, this cohort disagreed slightly with the belief that their goal was to create expert learners (−1), while the Compassionate Innovators somewhat agreed (+1) (see Table 5.2). The Compassionate Innovators agreed that they showed more empathy and compassion to children with various needs (+3) (see Table 5.2), demonstrating that they are by nature compassionate; however, this view demonstrated that they feel some children are dependent and needy (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018). The new UDL Guidelines 3.0 have included identity as part of learner variability. They advise that identity, including disabilities, must

be recognised and acknowledged within the classroom environment to sustain children's engagement and empower learner agency (CAST, 2024a).

5.4.3 The Classroom Environment

There were differences in all three viewpoints relating to the classroom environment. The participants indicated that they viewed and prepared the learning environment differently, and their attitude toward models of disabilities was diverse. Interestingly, the Relational Advocates agreed that barriers to children's learning arose from the classroom environment and the curriculum rather than from within the child. This view was illustrated when they placed statement #20, which considered the barriers to learning connected to children's disability and the learning environment, at +2 position array (see Table 5.2). Supporting this attitude and belief, the Relational Advocate Sorter 8 noted that the problem lies with an overly prescribed curriculum, causing a barrier to all children's learning. This view was shared by Sorter 31, another Relational Advocate, when she suggested that designing a rigid curriculum and becoming overly focused on topics for children to acquire knowledge is a problem. She stated that it causes challenges as it 'stunts' and 'blocks' children's learning autonomy. Sorter 31 also highlighted that a tightly structured curriculum and classroom were necessary for the Irish DE Inspectorate as evidence of the day-to-day procedures and the implementation of Aistear, and must be documented. The findings from this viewpoint implied that the barriers to children's learning, regardless of diverse needs, are multifaceted, outside of the child's disability, and somewhat out of the control of the ECEs.

On the other hand, the Collaborative Partners and Compassionate Innovators slightly agreed that obstacles to learning originate from the child rather than being solely attributed to the learning environment, as indicated by the ECEs placing statement #20 on −3. The difference of opinions was reflected in the ECEs' practices relating to professional reflection, classroom organisation and teaching, and learning methodologies, thus shaping their learning environment. For example, the Relational Advocates slightly agreed (+1) that they participated in daily reflective practice to identify and eliminate potential barriers to full inclusion and to refine and adapt their inclusive practices, which were reflected in the position array of statements #40 and #41 (see Table 5.2), consequently enhancing the learning environment. Furthermore, during the online interviews, Sorter 31 noted the importance of maintaining and preparing the environment. She believed the ECEs must be organised and 'have things ready' in advance to guide children's learning and development

and to demonstrate clear instruction. Sorter 8 highlighted the significance of providing a safe, rich, and stimulating environment that allows children to take risks, stretch their capabilities, and know that it is okay to make mistakes.

In line with the view of the Relational Advocates, it was not surprising that these ECEs had a neutral stance (0), which reflected the feeling of impartiality in maintaining flexibility in the physical design to promote a more inclusive environment, as shown in the position array of statement #13(see Table 5.2). Inferences drawn from these findings suggest that the opinions of the Relational Advocates were due to being organised and having a well-prepared environment.

By contrast, Collaborative Partners agreed that they do not necessarily (−2) participate in reflective practice to identify and eliminate potential barriers or to improve their inclusive practices. However, they moderately agreed (+2) that they sustain ongoing flexibility in the physical design to support inclusion (statement #13, see Table 5.2). This finding was confirmed by Sorter 30 as she explained that they use observations to facilitate children's learning and development and implement plans such as changing the indoor and outdoor environment to accommodate 'certain' children. Sorter 30 also noted that everything in the environment is photographed and labelled, and specialised equipment is used. While the Collaborative Partners were flexible in the classroom design, Sorter 30 also identified that they have a very structured and organised learning environment by suggesting that the rooms are very well laid out, everything has its place to support children's independence skills, and they do not use any technology.

On the other hand, Compassionate Innovators agreed (+3) that their use of technology is an educational tool to support children's learning (statement #4, see Table 5.2), and they expand their knowledge by exploring innovative strategies to improve their understanding of inclusive pedagogies (statement #17, see Table 5.2), making the learning environment accessible to all. Yet these ECEs somewhat agreed (−3) that they do not provide children with the opportunity to try new things, make mistakes, and try again (statement #16, see Table 5.2), which is imperative to creating rich, stimulating environments for all children (NCCA, 2009). They shared a similar view to the Relational Advocates about upholding flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom, which contradicts the other findings for this cohort. However, this might be because of the design of the Q-grid, and they prioritised other statements as being more important.

Having said that, the UDL framework can be enacted in the classroom environment in various ways, from instruction practices to curriculum and classroom design, to ensure optimum inclusion and participation for *all* children (Conn-Powers *et al.*, 2006; Darragh, 2007; Ring *et al*., 2019). Based on the three perspectives on the classroom environment, it could be argued that all three cohorts are, in their own way, applying UDL strategies. These ECEs foster active learning and meaningful participation in the classroom environment through appropriate opportunities, materials, and curriculum to enable the children to reach their full potential (Ring *et al.*, 2019; Brillante & Nemeth, 2022). Nevertheless, moving beyond the implementation of UDL and considering the impact of differing viewpoints on the classroom environment reveals deep tensions between inclusive pedagogical ideals and systemic accountability pressures, especially regarding curriculum implementation and inspection standards.

The Relational Advocates view structural constraints, such as overly prescriptive curriculum and documented practices, as barriers to inclusion. This highlights a possible gap between Aistear's intended flexibility as an emergent, play-based curriculum and how it is understood and carried out in practice, especially for documentation and accountability purposes. Such tensions may lead to decreased job satisfaction among educators and contribute to pedagogical dissonance, where the demands of practice conflict with their professional values, attitudes and beliefs.

The views of the Collaborative Partners and Compassionate Innovators appear more ambivalent. The flexibility of Collaborative Partners in classroom design seems to be selective, prioritising the accommodation of "certain" children over the creation of universally inclusive environments. The Compassionate Innovators reveal further contradictions: while they value innovation and technology, they place relatively less emphasis on risk-taking and trial-and-error learning. Therefore, the Compassionate Innovators may need to focus on PL to support the creation of enriching learning environments involving practical experiences that promote inclusive education aligned with ECEC inclusive frameworks and policies, especially for children who thrive in exploratory and adaptable settings.

5.4.4 Equity-Based Practices

The updated draft of Aistear (GOI, 2024a) advises that diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical messages expressed throughout its nine principles. These principles aim to create a

fair, equitable, and empowering learning environment that supports children's meaningful participation. Equity-based practices and behaviours using the UDL framework infuse the value of equity and inclusion across the three principles of UDL (CAST, 2024a).

Relational Advocates', Collaborative Partners', and Compassionate Innovators' viewpoints align with an equity-based approach to early childhood education and care. The divergent opinions of the three viewpoints were in their approach to equity-based practices and the resources available to them within and beyond the classroom. Relational Advocates viewed the equity-based practice as relational. Taking a holistic view of their ideal Q-grid, seven out of nine self-reflecting statements that included nurturing behaviours and inclusive practices such as support, encouragement, listening, fostering, and valuing were placed between +3 and +5, strongly indicating they fostered relationships with all children grounded in trust, respect, and caring dispositions, which according to Hanley & Feeney, (2021) is essential to inclusive pedagogy and inclusion. Similar to Nelson's (2021) research, Sorter 31 explained during the online interview, children 'love' interacting and communicating with the ECE. She felt that children gained enriching and wholesome experiences through loving, reciprocal relationships with adults and peers. Sorter 31 also implied that this relational pedagogy provided an emotionally safe environment for children to make mistakes, take risks, and extend their learning.

The Relational Advocates were not dependent on government policies to support their equity-based practices, as they placed statement #3 on position array −3 (see Table 5.2). This view was supported by Sorter 8 when she acknowledged that their skills and competencies in equity-based practices were gained through experiences and over time. Sorter 8 also noted that they work within a strength-based approach, build on children's existing knowledge, and gradually introduce new concepts holistically that are comfortable for children. Inferences can be drawn from these findings that together, the Relational Advocates and the children, through interactions, carefully negotiate learning that is flexible to adjust or influence, depending on the children's interests, abilities, and needs. This flexible approach reflects the principles of inclusive pedagogy described in the literature (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; CAST, 2024a; GOI, 2024a). (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; CAST, 2024a; GOI, 2024a) and the ECEs are not reliant on intervention from national directives.

Conversely, the Collaborative Partners strongly agreed that they relied heavily on working with parents, professionals, and policies to support their equity-based practices. Building partnerships with parents is a central pillar of Aistear and one of the key principles for

fostering an inclusive culture (NCCA, 2009; DCYA, 2016; GOI, 2024). The Collaborative Partners strongly felt the importance of partnership and collaboration when they positioned statement #6 at array +5 in regard to their collaboration with stakeholders to support children's learning opportunities (see Table 5.2). Verifying this finding, Sorter 19 emphasised when interviewed that 'partnership with parents plays a huge role in a child's education' and is necessary to meet the child's needs better, once ECEs gain a deeper understanding of children's requirements. Also, Sorter 19 noted that the ECEs can offer effective practices, a suitable learning environment, and necessary accommodations through collaboration with parents and professionals.

To further support the Collaborative Partners' view on equity-based practices, they agreed that they rely on government policies and direction to gain skills and on implementing inclusive pedagogies when they placed statement #3 on +2 (see Table 5.2) . During the online interview, Sorter 30 equated the Tusla policies to 'God' and noted that they follow them 'religiously' to aid and support educators in implementing appropriate inclusive practices and care for children with diverse needs. This suggests that she followed government policies with a sense of duty and consistency, shaping her knowledge and skills in inclusive practice and her approach toward the children.

However, whether national directives are relied upon or not can have both positive and negative impacts on inclusion and inclusive practice. For example, avoiding reliance on such directives can encourage professional judgement and reflection, where skills and competencies are built through experience. Conversely, too much dependence on national directives might undermine educators' confidence to make pedagogical decisions based on their professional judgement. This finding emphasises the need for a balanced approach between national guidance and professional judgement in fostering inclusive practice. While reliance on inclusive frameworks and policies offers structure and consistency, over-dependence may diminish educators' confidence to act on their professional judgement, equally, without clear guidance, inclusive practice risks becoming fragmented and inconsistent, influenced by leadership, attitudes, and access to professional learning (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018).

On the other hand, the Compassionate Innovators' views indicated that they greatly relied on mentorship to support their equity-based practices, as they placed statement #26 on +4. In addition to seeking mentorship, they demonstrated that they explored innovative methods and research to support their understanding of inclusive practices, learning new knowledge,

and finding better ways to meet the needs of all children by placing statements #17 and #22 on +2 (see Table 5.2). This cohort of ECEs felt they were open to various methods and external resources to support inclusive practices while also exploring suitable and appropriate equity-based practices, such as technology (statement #4, see Table 5.2), as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs to ensure they reach their full potential. Therefore, these ECEs appeared to be more innovative and progressive, utilising evidence-based practice to inform their inclusive pedagogical approaches, underpinned by transformative social innovation. Notwithstanding the importance of equity-based practices, according to the DE, an inclusive assistance provision is needed, namely, the Access and Inclusion Model. Such assistance empowers all children to engage fully in every aspect of the curriculum while enhancing learning and fostering each child's unique abilities and development (Interdepartmental Working Group, 2015).

5.4.5 Assistance for Inclusive Provision

While this study found that the Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators have their distinct viewpoints on inclusion and inclusive pedagogies used in their classrooms, it is important to consider the entire configuration in keeping with Stephenson's 'methodology of holism' (taking a holistic view across the composite arrays) to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 149). For example, statement #46 (see Table 5.2) about adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the assistance for inclusive provision was statistically non-significant and did not play a critical role in defining the difference between the viewpoints. Nevertheless, it was ranked at (−4, −2, −4), suggesting that Relational Advocates and Compassionate Innovators strongly agreed that inadequate inclusive frameworks exist, and that Collaborative Partners moderately agreed. Therefore, this belief determined the implementation of inclusive practices based on experiences, skills, and knowledge, as identified by this study. The belief that there was a lack of inclusive frameworks is consistent with the findings of the end-of-year-three evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model, whereby advice and recommendations were made for additional strategies and resources which may accommodate and fulfil the needs of children (Robinson *et al*., 2024).

Taking a holistic view of the opinions of the three cohorts, this study found, based on the interview data, that the Relational Advocates fully supported the AIM provision and achieved successful outcomes for all children using its framework, as discussed in the section

on consensus. In contrast, the *Collaborative Partners* did not fully support the AIM despite being extremely collaborative with parents and other visiting professionals. During the interview, Sorter 30 emphasised that the AIM used for providing inclusion no longer seems to be as effective as it previously was. She also emphasised that they are not receiving the support they had when AIM was first introduced to the ECCE classroom, implying that, from her perspective, the AIM framework, in its current structure, requires modification. Sorter 30 also expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the external support provided to ECEC under the AIM provision. According to her, the external support available does not meet her expectations of having the necessary resources to effectively address the needs of the children in her care. She found the expert advice unhelpful, lacking new insights or supporting frameworks beyond what she and her colleagues already knew, which evoked feelings of abandonment. She was uncertain whether the issue lay with the experts' remit or the system she worked in. Despite the opinions on the provision of AIM, the findings from the ECEs in each composite array indicated that the current supporting frameworks for inclusion in their ECEC classrooms were limited and inadequate.

Nevertheless, AIM was introduced as a progressive, multi-tiered support framework to promote inclusion in ECCE classrooms (DCYA, 2016). However, findings from the three viewpoints reveal significant tensions between AIM's intended purpose and how it is experienced and accessed in practice. While AIM was initially effective, it appears to have failed to evolve alongside the expanding knowledge, skills, and professional needs of ECEs. For instance, one of the Collaborative Partners, Sorter 30, described the external expert advice as offering little beyond what educators already knew, thus highlighting systemic shortcomings, including weak inter-agency collaboration and administrative barriers that hinder its practical implementation (Roberts & Callaghan, 2021).

As a result, AIM risks becoming disconnected from the realities of more experienced and qualified educators, serving primarily only to provide additional staffing at Level 7 rather than offering meaningful professional and practical support to educators. Unsurprisingly, across all viewpoints, ECEs expressed concerns that the existing ECEC inclusive frameworks are insufficient to support meaningful inclusion in ECCE classrooms. This highlights a broader issue of how national frameworks engage with educators' professional expertise and suggests the need for more differentiated, responsive, and collaborative support mechanisms. Moreover, ECCE policy should prioritise the integration of UDL principles alongside AIM and Aistear, positioning them within a biopsychosocial framework

and a multi-tiered system of support to promote genuine participation and ensure high-quality, inclusive learning experiences for *all* children.

5.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the broader field of research by providing empirical insights into ECEs' attitudes towards inclusion and the implementation of UDL, an area that remains underexplored. Beyond informing my own professional practice, the findings have implications for national policy, particularly in shaping professional learning programmes, guiding the evolution of inclusion supports such as AIM, and promoting the integration of UDL as a systemic, multi-tiered, biopsychosocial approach to inclusive pedagogy.

Moreover, these findings make a significant contribution to the Irish ECEC policy and practice landscape by shedding light on the complexity and diversity of ECEs' attitudes towards inclusion. Although the findings are not intended to be generalisable, this research identified a typology of viewpoints (Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators) and their variation in attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive practices among the participants. These findings highlight three distinguishing viewpoints, displaying that inclusion is not universally understood or implemented. However, the findings showed that the three cohorts of ECEs largely reflect the commitment outlined in Irish education policy, where they were willing to promote 'the values of diversity, equality and inclusion . . . and provide opportunities for all children to thrive in early education through the promotion of positive identities and abilities' (DCYA, 2016, p. 10) albeit through different lenses.

This study also highlights a significant policy-practice gap: while these frameworks and ECEC policies endorse inclusive, rights-based, and child-centred approaches, educators' interpretations and classroom implementations vary considerably, influenced by personal beliefs, professional values and skills, and contextual constraints. Through the typology of attitudes, this study revealed a need to move beyond documentation and truly embrace Aistear as a flexible, play-based emergent curriculum to support *all* children in the ECCE classroom.

The ECTs' consensus agreement towards professional learning revealed a disconnect between the lived experiences of the ECEs and the national policy ambition that ECTs will commit to PL. Therefore, there is a considerable need for responsive, relevant, and engaging

professional learning programmes that explicitly link innovative strategies to inclusive values and promote collective and individual reflective practices to eliminate learning barriers. Without this, ECEs may adopt tools without transforming pedagogy or building professional learning communities.

Furthermore, policy actors and policymakers should not assume that ECEC policies are understood or implemented consistently across different settings. Clear guidance in policy and professional learning is essential to illustrate what effective inclusive practice involves, such as defining child-centredness, demonstrating intentional leadership, fulfilling professional responsibilities, and supporting the professional attitudes that underpin effective UDL and inclusive education. By doing so, education stakeholders can develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to promote inclusive education through innovation, collaboration, and relational pedagogy. This approach encourages equity and authentic child-centred practices, allowing all children to participate meaningfully in the ECCE classroom, regardless of their diverse needs.

5.6 Conclusions

This chapter outlined three distinct viewpoints from the attitudes of ECEs regarding inclusion-based pedagogical practices through the framework of UDL, aiming to answer the overarching research question: What is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms? Fourteen consensus statements (agreements) were examined by discussing the patterns of similarities in the composite arrays. Following this, a cross-factor comparison of the three viewpoints was presented, highlighting the differences between each composite array, which addressed children's sense of community and identity, the classroom environment, equity-based practice, and support for inclusive practices. Chapter 6 will draw significant key findings from this discussion, offering recommendations and considerations for future research, policy, and practice, as well as presenting the research limitations and including a personal reflection, thereby concluding this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This research study employed Q methodology to explore subjective attitudes and viewpoints through the lens of Universal Design for Learning as an effective and equitable pedagogical tool for inclusion, aiming to deepen understanding of the variability in subjective attitudes regarding inclusion and the inclusive practices of early childhood educators in Irish classrooms. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the study. Then the key findings on the variability in attitudes are considered in relation to the research questions, to highlight the connections, distinguishing viewpoints, and consensus between the Q-sorts. Next, the potential contributions to and implications for professional knowledge, practice, and research are considered, followed by an outline of the study's limitations. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on my research journey and its impact on my professional values, beliefs, and practices, followed by a brief concluding statement.

6.2 Overview of This Study

One important teaching strategy for promoting fairness and equity in education is the UDL framework, which addresses the often complex and debated issue of educational inclusion for all children (Katz, 2012; Flood & Banks, 2021). While high-quality, inclusive early childhood education is a child's fundamental right (UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023), attitudes toward inclusion significantly affect perceptions of children with diverse needs, and subsequently the implementation of inclusive practices (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018; Slee, 2018; Cologon, 2019; Lalvani, 2019). However, the literature acknowledges a limited body of work that explores and interprets educators' attitudes toward the implementation of UDL in their classrooms (Han & Lei, 2024).

This research study began by exploring the literature on UDL to define and develop the concourse and by creating a Q-set (statements) as part of the conceptual framework (see Figure 3.2 in section 3.8). The research design employed quantitative measures to identify distinguishing viewpoints and consensus agreements among ECEs through factor analysis, resulting in factor arrays for interpretation. It also employed qualitative research through post-Q semi-structured interviews to enrich the interpretations of the factor arrays and to gain a deeper understanding of the ECEs' viewpoints.

Quantitative data was analysed using the Q methodology software KADE v1.3.0 (2024) (Banasick, 2024) and interpreted according to Montgomery's guidelines (Albright, 2019) (see Figure 3.6 in section 3.9.4). Qualitative data were analysed using the systematic thematic analysis process developed by Naeem *et al*. (2023) (see Table 3.8 in section 3.9.5.2). The research was conducted over two years. Phase one of data collection took place from March to April 2024, and phase two of data collection occurred from mid-June to mid-August 2024 (see Figure 3.4 in section 3.8.9).

The findings from this study have implications for policy, practice, and future research, contributing to the understanding of a selection of educators' viewpoints and supporting the advancement of inclusive practices in early childhood education. The findings also contribute to the existing literature, outlining the distinct viewpoints and consensus agreements among Irish ECEs regarding inclusive practices.

6.3 Key Findings

The research question guiding this study was: What is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms? The key findings relating to the variability in attitudes are considered in this section with reference to the four secondary research questions, which highlight the connections, distinguishing viewpoints, and consensus between the Q-sorts and the implications for the implementation of UDL.

6.3.1 How Are Individual Q-Sorts Related to All the Other Q-Sorts?

The analysis of 34 individual Q-sorts formed the basis for identifying three distinct shared viewpoints: Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators. Each Q-sort represented a unique participant's subjective view on inclusion and inclusive practices. Through factor analysis, patterns of similarity were identified and grouped into broader categories (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Additionally, 14 consensus statements reflected shared agreements, identifying that ECEs strongly agreed on placing the child at the centre of their practice, which is a fundamental pillar of delivering high-quality, inclusive ECEC (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023), regardless of the three distinct viewpoints. However, deeper analysis highlighted that although the participants agreed on the importance of child-centred practice, there was inconsistency in how this principle was understood and implemented. Nevertheless, the viewpoints highlight shared ways of thinking across participants while still

acknowledging diversity within the group. One viewpoint does not hold greater significance than another (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

6.3.2 What Are the Distinguishing Arrays (Viewpoints) between the Q-Sorts?

Relational Advocates seemed to demonstrate a child-centred approach underpinned by a strong commitment to the well-being, belonging, and development of every child in their classroom, outlined in the ECEC frameworks. They recognised the critical role of fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment, ensuring that all children, regardless of their diverse needs, were accepted, supported, and actively engaged. Their practice was firmly grounded in relational pedagogy, emphasising the importance of strong interpersonal connections as a foundation for meaningful teaching and learning. Relational Advocates believed that all children have needs and did not distinguish between those with diverse needs and those without. Another key finding was that this cohort of ECEs believed it was essential for educators to create time, space, and a suitably prepared environment for children when supporting and meeting all their needs, but were not overly interested in PL, reflection, or policy directives Relational Advocates also believed that the support of the AIM educator in class enhanced their inclusive practices, benefiting all children in the class. While accepting, supporting and actively engaging all children in the ECCE is vital for inclusion, their viewpoint may oversimplify the complex realities of inclusive education in ECCE classrooms, and these educators may not seek the additional supports and resources required for children with diverse needs. Furthermore, a lack of engagement in PL, reflective practice, and policies may directly affect the successful outcomes of all the children in their classrooms.

The second viewpoint identified by this study was that of *Collaborative Partners.* The attitudes of the Collaborative Partners indicated that fostering inclusion and establishing purposeful, inclusive partnerships were essential. Their approach was highly collegial, reflecting a strong commitment to building meaningful connections with families and professionals through teamwork and collaboration. ECEs valued the input of parents and specialists, supporting them to better understand each child's needs and necessary accommodations. They believed that such cooperation significantly enhanced their inclusive practices, ensuring that children with diverse needs received the support needed to thrive and reach their full potential. This viewpoint reflected an individualised perspective on children, particularly those with diverse needs. ECEs acknowledged the importance of early and full

inclusion of children with diverse needs in all aspects of the ECCE classroom. They also emphasised the value of informing typically developing children about their peers' challenges and needs to foster understanding and empathy from the outset, promoting social inclusion. Nevertheless, this viewpoint seems to reinforce the individualised, deficit-based understandings of inclusion and is overly reliant on external supports for children with diverse needs. While interprofessional collaboration is also vital for the successful implementation of inclusion, it is important that these educators engage in teamwork to build inclusive strategies, reflection, PL, professional autonomy and agency to fully embrace inclusive education through the lens of UDL, Aistear and AIM.

The third viewpoint identified in this study was that of *Compassionate Innovators*. The Compassionate Innovators found that strong classroom leadership was not essential to motivate their inclusive practices, although they welcomed guidance from mentors to support implementation. They remained open to expanding their knowledge and exploring innovative strategies to enhance inclusive practices. These educators embraced experimentation and saw technology as a valuable tool for supporting children with diverse needs. They did not view creating inclusive environments as burdensome; instead, they focused on developing expert learners and attributed learning challenges to external factors rather than the child. Moreover, they acknowledged that inclusive practices may not benefit all children equally and highlighted the lack of supportive frameworks in ECCE. They expressed little reliance on government directives or policies for building inclusion. They showed limited interest in formal training, believing they already possessed the necessary skills to create inclusive classrooms through innovation, compassion, and experimentation. While this viewpoint is proactive and offers a transformative way of thinking about inclusion, it also raises concerns about the sustainability of inclusive practices, as these educators seem to be disengaged from PL, intentional leadership and policy structures and directives.

6.3.3 What Is the Consensus (Agreement) between the Q-Sorts?

Positioning the child at the centre of practice was consistently emphasised as essential and a key finding for inclusion by all the ECEs represented in the factor arrays (viewpoints). They all strongly agreed on the importance of listening to the child's voice. However, their agreement was not as strong on the importance of offering choices to children. Other elements of fostering inclusion and demonstrating inclusive practices that were agreed upon

included addressing developmental needs through fun and playful opportunities, empowering children, and fostering supportive and safe environments that ensured children had a sense of well-being and belonging. The ECEs agreed that they did not necessarily implement personalised interventions, which seemed to move beyond the medical model approach and align with UDL principles and Aistear. While these consensus statements may seem to promote inclusion in ECCE classrooms, they also conceal underlying contradictions, superficial interpretations, or implementation challenges that require further research.

6.3.4 What are the potential implications of educators' varying attitudes toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogy tool in ECCE classrooms? Hi

One of the key findings of this study is that ECEs' varying attitudes towards implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool have significant implications for inclusive practice in ECCE classrooms. These differences may lead to inconsistent implementation, resulting in unequal learning experiences for children to access inclusive classrooms, participate meaningfully, and receive responsive pedagogy. Such variations seem to be influenced more by individual educator attitudes than by systemic use of inclusive frameworks such as UDL and Aistear. The typology of attitudes revealed diverse interpretations of inclusion and varying levels of engagement with UDL principles and inclusion in ECEC classrooms, highlighting a lack of shared understanding of how these frameworks translate into practice.

This variability may ultimately limit the potential of UDL to serve as a transformative and equitable tool, especially when used alongside current ECCE frameworks within a biopsychosocial model of inclusion. The findings, therefore, emphasise the need for tailored, reflective professional learning opportunities and programmes that actively support educators in understanding inclusive practices and embedding UDL into everyday teaching. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of stronger policy coherence and intentional leadership to ensure inclusive practices, professional values, and attitudes are translated into meaningful and sustainable pedagogical actions across all ECCE settings.

In summary, this study aimed to answer the overarching research question, 'what is the variability in attitudes of early childhood educators toward implementing UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms?' framed in terms of four related sub-research questions as discussed above. Using Q highlights the extent of commonality and differences in ECEs' attitudes, showing both shared perspectives and subtle, nuanced variations in how they appear to understand and express their views on inclusive practices

implicitly through the lens of UDL. The variations in attitudes become most evident through the findings addressing sub-questions one to three, thereby answering the overarching research question. However, while the study also highlights important implications for inclusive practice in early childhood education and care, further research may be necessary to explicitly explore attitudes towards UDL as an effective pedagogical tool in ECCE classrooms. In other words, some aspects of sub-question four may need additional investigation to be fully addressed.

6.4 Contribution to Early Childhood Education and Inclusive Pedagogy

This was the first study to explore ECEs' attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive practices in ECCE classrooms using Q methodology within the Irish context. It provides a timely and valuable contribution to early childhood education by presenting new empirical insights into ECEs' views on, understanding of, and the application of UDL as an inclusive pedagogical tool. Through Q methodology, the study identified a typology of educator attitudes (Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators) that reveal the complexity, diversity, and range of inclusive attitudes in ECCE classrooms. Although the participants shared inclusive values, these values seem to be interpreted and enacted differently depending on individual attitudes, professional experiences, and contextual realities. These insights promote a more nuanced understanding of inclusion, highlighting both a shared aim and a varied approach to practice.

In the Irish ECEC sector, the study revealed that national frameworks such as Aistear, Síolta, and AIM seem to be understood and implemented inconsistently. Therefore, there is a potential policy-practice gap, especially concerning the coherence of professional development, curriculum flexibility, and the exercise of intentional leadership for inclusion. As mentioned, this emphasises the need for reflective professional learning programmes. These PL programmes should consider the three attitudes identified in this study that focus on various dimensions of practice and respond to the day-to-day pedagogical realities of ECEs, who have a range of qualifications.

The study further promotes inclusive pedagogy by framing UDL as a systemic, biopsychosocial model that can complement and reinforce existing national frameworks and strategies. Its focus on flexibility, responsiveness, and equity aligns with wider educational efforts goals, including Ireland's commitment to SDG 4 and inclusive quality education for

all. The integration of UDL into Irish ECEC policy and practice could offer a more coherent and unified approach to achieving inclusive learning environments that are sustainable and equitable.

Furthermore, this research emphasises the necessity for clearer policy guidance and leadership to assist ECEs in consistently implementing national frameworks. It also underlines the importance of integrating inclusive practices throughout all aspects of pedagogy, not only through designated supports like the AIM educator but also within the collaborative culture and daily routines of ECCE classrooms. More broadly, the study contributes to the field of inclusive education by demonstrating that inclusive practice is shaped by intersecting personal, institutional, and policy-level factors. Although there was a strong consensus on child-centredness, emotional development, and children's voice, these principles were not always fully put into practice or aligned with a rights-based understanding of inclusion.

By identifying the typology of educator attitudes, the study makes a significant contribution to inclusive pedagogical theory and practice, providing a clearer understanding of how attitudes, structures, and systems interact to foster truly inclusive early childhood education and inclusion across the entire continuum of education.

6.5 Limitations of This Study

A key limitation of this study was that participants conducted their Q-sort independently, without the researcher present. This approach was adopted to mitigate the risk of social desirability bias influencing where participants might place their sorted statements if the researcher were present. However, conducting the study in person would have offered a better opportunity to gather qualitative data simultaneously, which could have further enriched the study's findings.

A second limitation was the time required for some ECEs to organise and conduct the Q-sort. As part of the participants' folders, ECEs received 47 statements, which required cutting out individually, making the process more time-consuming for the participants.

An additional limitation was the design of the Q-grid. Participants were asked to arrange the statements according to their preferences on the Q-grid using a forced quasi-normal distribution. Typically, Q-grids use a point scale of −5 to +5. However, I felt that the participants might interpret the minus numbers on the grid as something negative or a

practice they do not implement. To mitigate this potential limitation, I decided to use a point scale of 1 to 11. However, the design of the grid might have led participants to place a statement on a higher or lower number than intended.

Lastly, 16 participants did not consent to a post-Q interview. Among these were the three ECEs who represented the Compassionate Innovators. Post-Q interviews provide valuable insights into participants' views and mitigate researcher bias during interpretation. Post-Q interviews can also clarify the reasoning behind participants' statement placements and confirm their accuracy (Brown, 1980; Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). Nevertheless, two viewpoints were verified, and post-Q interviews confirmed the rationale for placing statements on the Q-grid, validating their accuracy. The quantitative data for all three viewpoints provided clarity and analytical robustness (Baker *et al*., 2006).

6.6 Recommendations for Research

Drawing directly from the findings, several key recommendations emerge to guide future research in this field.

Firstly, although participants agreed on placing the child at the centre of practice, inconsistencies appeared in how this was put into practice, especially regarding emotional development and participation. Future research should explore how child-centredness is understood and applied in everyday practice, and how it aligns with rights-based frameworks such as Aistear and the UNCRC. This would help determine whether inclusive values are genuinely embedded or mostly rhetorical.

Secondly, the findings also highlight the need for further research into professional learning. Participants displayed varied motivation and engagement with current inclusive research, revealing a gap between policy and everyday practice. Future studies should assess collaborative, context-sensitive, and research-informed professional learning models to determine which best support inclusive pedagogy and sustained professional learning and development.

Longitudinal studies are necessary to evaluate AIM's responsiveness to educators' needs, and complex classroom environments and its alignment with frameworks such as UDL and Aistear.

While identifying a typology of attitudes sheds light on how ECEs understand inclusive practice, further investigation into how these perspectives explicitly influence inclusive practices and UDL implementation is necessary.

Q methodology proved valuable in revealing nuanced viewpoints. Future research should build on this approach to explore attitudes across a wider range of stakeholder groups, including children, families, and policymakers, thereby deepening our understanding of inclusion through a multi-voiced perspective.

Finally, inclusion must be understood intentionally and systemically. Future research should investigate how intentional leadership, organisational culture, and inter-agency collaboration support sustainable inclusive practices. Longitudinal and comparative studies could observe how professional attitudes change over time and their effects on equitable outcomes for children.

6.7 Implications for Future Policy

The findings of this study revealed tensions between the intended goals of ECEC policies and how they are understood in practice. Therefore, I recommend the following.

- Develop an integrated, multi-tiered framework that explicitly aligns AIM, Aistear, and UDL to guide inclusive pedagogy and reduce fragmentation.
- Address the responsiveness gap to PL and adopt a strategic approach to design and delivery to support the development of critically reflective educators and strengthen professional identity, as outlined in the Award Criteria and Guidelines (Minister for Education and Skills, 2019).
- The typology of viewpoints revealed in this study highlights the importance of relational pedagogy and advocacy, as well as collaborative and innovative practice, all of which are essential in building capacity for inclusion in early childhood education. The novel framing and positive terminology of the typology could usefully inform the future development of ECEC policy, shaping how inclusion is understood, talked about, and enacted in both policy and practice.

6.8 Implications for Professional Practice

As a lecturer teaching in early childhood degree programmes, the findings of this study highlight several implications for developing inclusive pedagogical practices and enhancing programmes, such as bridging the gap between theory and practice, embedding reflective practice, and introducing the concept of the biopsychosocial model of inclusion, which are outlined below.

- Design appropriate professional learning tasks that combine practical experience with research-based pedagogy.
- Establish professional learning communities that include modelling, mentoring, and collaborative inquiry.
- Encourage students to participate in peer dialogue and reflective discussions grounded in current inclusion research.
- Incorporate the biopsychosocial approach into coursework to promote a comprehensive understanding of learner diversity and demonstrate how this model supports multilevel systems and aligns with UDL and AIM implementation.
- Address the confidence gap in leading inclusive practice by embedding leadership development in coursework and placements.
- Promote leadership aligned with UDL principles and Aistear (planning, modelling, and advocating for inclusion).

6.9 Researcher's Reflection

This research significantly contributes to my understanding of inclusive ECEC within the Irish context. Throughout this research process, I gained insights into the discourse wars surrounding inclusion. I grappled with my own internal struggle regarding the meaning of inclusion and how it is perceived and practised in ECEC. Conducting the Q study and meeting individuals with diverse needs and UDL advocates at conferences has transformed my views on inclusion and inclusive practices. Initially, I leaned more toward the social model approach to inclusion and did not favour targeted supports for children, believing they were more exclusionary than inclusionary. I also overlooked the biopsychosocial model of inclusion, which aligns with the three distinguishing viewpoints in this study and supports the implementation of UDL. Despite differing attitudes found in this study, ECEs' primary concern was the well-being and development of children, enabling them to reach their full

potential. It was heart-warming to learn that each cohort of ECEs placed a huge value on child-centredness, which guided their inclusive practices.

In my future research, I aim to explore the biopsychosocial lens, as it offers a balanced approach to understanding inclusive education for children with diverse needs. This perspective provides a means to connect traditional models of disability with more contemporary frameworks that consider the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors influencing inclusion. Building on the findings of this study, I also aim to develop a UDL framework aligned with Aistear. This tool will be designed to support students and ECEs to enhance their intentional, inclusive teaching strategies.

This study also had a profound impact on my professional learning and development. Conducting a Q study was challenging but extremely worthwhile, both professionally and personally. Utilising Q provided me with the opportunity to systematically explore people's viewpoints and how they prioritised and structured their perspectives. Q allowed for deeper insights into the lived experiences of ECEs by examining thoughts, feelings, and reactions that traditional qualitative or quantitative research alone might not have provided. From building the concourse and developing the self-reflective statements and the unique analysis, using Q has prompted me to reflect on my professional and inclusive practices. The knowledge gained from this study will enable me, as a lecturer in higher education, to impart insights that support student ECEs in creating fair and equitable ECCE classrooms while making a strong commitment to social justice. Moreover, I feel more confident in leading and supervising future Q studies and expanding my network beyond the Zoom Q community to share the benefits and limitations of using Q, and to promote it as an effective and inclusive method for educational research.

6.10 Concluding Statement

This study marks an important first step in exploring the variety of ECEs' attitudes towards implementing UDL in the Irish context. Although the findings are not meant to be generalised, they provide valuable insights into how inclusion is understood, interpreted, and practised by educators. Importantly, the research emphasises that inclusion, when viewed through a biopsychosocial lens and supported by UDL, AIM, and national frameworks like Aistear and Síolta, can lead to more consistent, equitable, and socially just early childhood education.

The use of Q methodology was instrumental in achieving this aim. Its distinctive 'qualiquantological' approach (Stenner & Stainton Rogers, 2004) enabled the study to systematically explore and interpret the subjectivity of ECEs, capturing how they think, feel, and reflect on inclusive practices. By enabling participants to sort, reflect and comment on statements representing multiple perspectives, Q methodology revealed three distinct viewpoints: the Relational Advocates, Collaborative Partners, and Compassionate Innovators. Each viewpoint provides a deep understanding of how inclusive values are influenced by experience, context, and belief. Consequently, all three viewpoints are essential to effective inclusion. This method added rigour and depth to the research, bridging the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of educational inquiry.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of ongoing research into the relationship between inclusive pedagogies and educator attitudes, not only in early childhood settings but across the wider education sector. To go beyond superficial engagement with inclusion, future research must examine how policies, professional development, and systemic support can turn inclusive ideals into meaningful everyday practice. If inclusive education is to be achieved genuinely and sustainably, efforts should focus on developing clear, context-responsive guidelines and creating environments that enable educators to adopt inclusive pedagogies confidently and with conviction, ensuring nobody is left behind.

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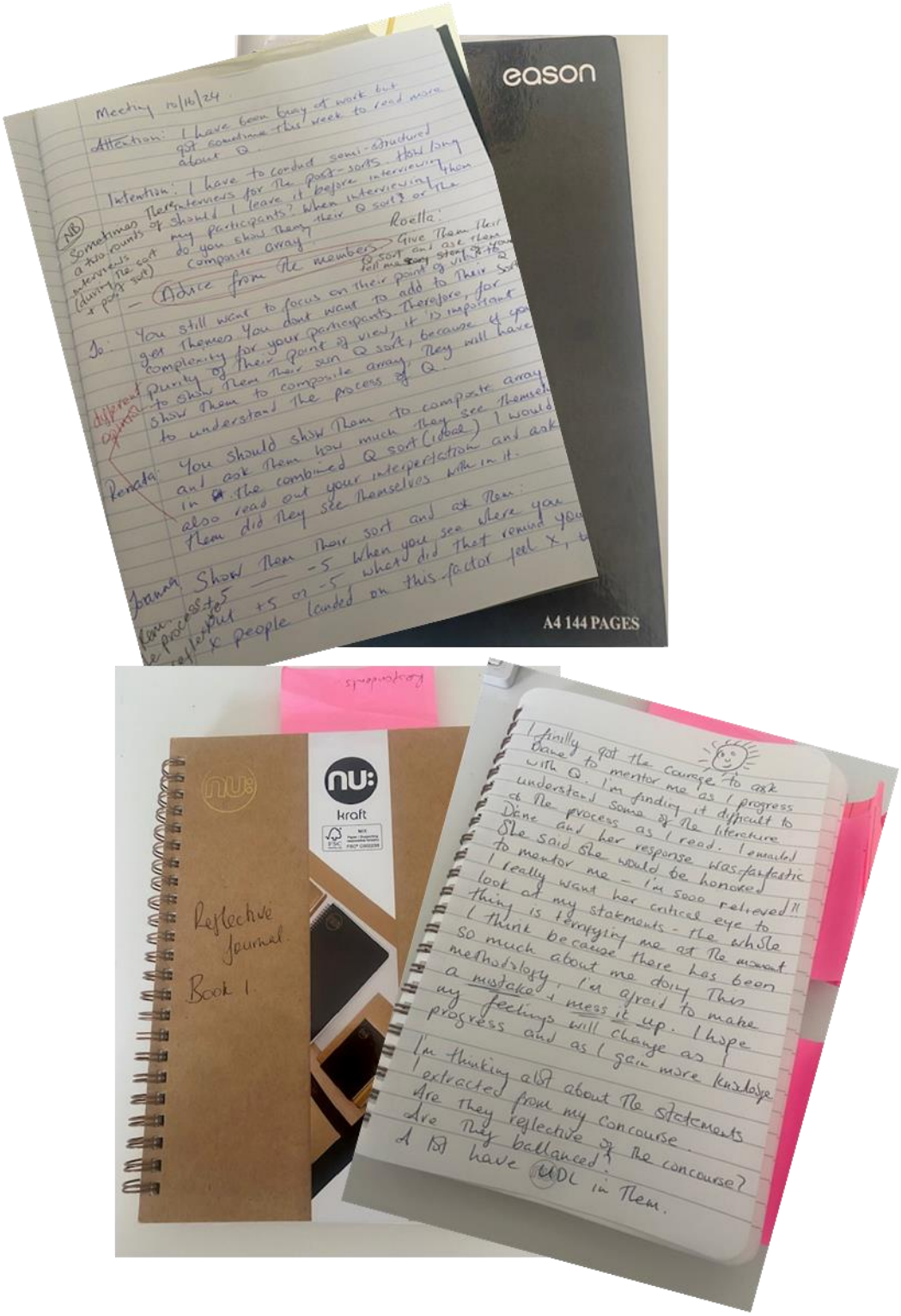
Appendix A: Q Journal & Reflective Journal



Appendix B: Developing the Concourse: Draft Statements

General attitudes to UDL

1. **UDL principles should be at the core of ECCE classrooms**. (UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript with Janelle Bersch, Emily Wilgus, and Heidi Schroeder)
2. **UDL strategies can effectively support all children**. (Measuring the Implementation of UDL in Classrooms and Schools: Initial Field Test Results; 2020) Basham *et al*., (2020)
3. **UDL provides various ways for children with diverse learning needs to engage and access the ECCE curriculum** (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?) Flood & Banks (2021)
4. **UDL in ECCE classrooms supports and empowers all children in meeting their learning goals**. (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?) Flood & Banks (2021)
5. **UDL on reducing children's stress, improving confidence, and changing attitudes towards their learning** (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?) Flood & Banks (2021)
6. **The one-size-fits-all approach is suitable for both instruction and the ECEC learning environment**. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/12/23/teacher-a-one-size-fits-all-approach-to-instruction-is-stifling-our-classrooms/)
7. **UDL and best practices in ECEC go hand in hand**. (Circle Is for Everyone: Using UDL to Promote Inclusion During Circle Times: Young Exceptional Children Volume 26, Issue 1, March 2023, Gauvreau, *et al.,* 2023)
8. **Using technology as a learning tool can benefit children with diverse learning needs in ECCE.** (Circle Is for Everyone: Using UDL to Promote Inclusion During Circle Times: Young Exceptional Children Volume 26, Issue 1, March 2023, Gauvreau, *et al.,* 2023)
9. **Implementing UDL alone does not enhance the inclusion of all children in ECCE classrooms.** (Universal Design for Learning in its 3rd decade: a focus on equity, inclusion, and design. Rao *et al.,* 2023)
10. **Providing choices in how children demonstrate their understanding is important in the ECCE classroom**. (UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript with Episode 4 – Laura Taylor November 21, 2018)
11. **Early Childhood Educators already implement inclusive practices, which could be seen as UDL.** (UDL in 15 Minutes Transcript with Episode 4 – Laura Taylor November 21, 2018)
12. **UDL is not everything we do in the classroom** (Lowery, A. Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning (10th June 2021) [Online Video]. Available**:** **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E**)
13. **It is important to have a rigid curriculum suitable for all children in the ECCE**.
14. **It is essential that differentiation should be a fundamental practice in the ECCE classrooms** (Differentiation Through Choice as an Approach to Enhance Inclusive Practice, REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland, Vol. 32.1 (2019), 11–20 by A Brennan).

15. **UDL does not help reduce educational inequities among children in the ECCE classroom** (Universal design for learning: not another slogan on the street of inclusive education, Disability & society 2023, Vol. 38, No. 1, 194–200, Amani Karisa)
16. **Early childhood teachers should receive training in implementing UDL principles** (An Inclusive Education or an Inclusive Society, Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes, 2024, NCSE)
17. **Flexibility in the physical classroom can promote a more inclusive ECCE classroom** (An Inclusive Education or an Inclusive Society, Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes, 2024, NCSE)
18. **UDL promotes a deeper understanding of concepts for all children in the ECCE classroom.** (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?) Flood & Banks (2021)
19. **Assessment should be " flexibly designed to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills in a variety of ways"** (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education? Flood & Banks (2021) p.2)
20. **Implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom is unsuitable for teaching all children** (Kathey Howery, & Cynthia Okolo, A. Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning (10th June 2021). Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
21. UDL fosters a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.
22. **Collaboration between teachers, therapists, and families is vital for successful UDL implementation** (Ring et. al, (2015) Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings: Literature Review)
23. **UDL can enhance early childhood teachers' ability to meet the needs of all children in the ECCE classroom**. (Right From the Start Universal Design for Preschool, Stockall *et al.,* 2012)
24. **There are many barriers to implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom** (Special Edition – The UDL Gears, Lori Lord Nelson, UDL in 15 mins, 2023)
25. **Implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom is a fad and a waste of time** (Ten Years Later: Would You Recognize Universal Design for Learning If You Saw It?) Edyburn (2010, 2021)
26. **There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of UDL principles among early childhood teachers**. (Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education?) Flood & Banks (2021)
27. **UDL guidelines are extremely ill-structured and incredibly complicated.** (Kathy Howery, & Cynthia Okolo, A. Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning (10th June 2021). Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
28. **There is no clear direction for using the UDL guidelines and checkpoints.** (Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
29. **UDL is too complicated, and I am not interested in implementing it in my classroom.** (Eric Moore, Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
30. **"UDL is all things to all people and has no meaning."** (Eric Moore, Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video] 58.1 minutes. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)

31. **"There are different approaches to UDL that have value."** (Eric Moore, Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video] 58.40 minutes. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E).
32. **Collaboration with colleagues is necessary before implementing UDL in the classroom**. (Lowery, A. Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
33. **Implementing UDL reduces inappropriate behaviours of children in the ECCE classroom.** (Anstead, M. E. (2016) Teachers Perceptions of Barriers to Universal Design for Learning. Doctoral thesis. Waldren University)
34. **The UDL guidelines are complex and not well-organised, which can make them difficult to use effectively.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
35. **Many early childhood teachers and leaders lack understanding and knowledge of UDL.** (Frederic Fovet 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023).
36. **UDL is a belief system without scientific evidence.** (Lowery, A. Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
37. **UDL must be clearly identified as a core approach to inclusive education**. (Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
38. **There is not enough evidence to support the implementation of UDL**. (Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
39. **I am not interested in implementing UDL in my classroom.** (Critical Issues in Universal Design for Learning 10th June 2021 [Online Video]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPOjs2I822E)
40. **UDL is about children's feeling of belonging, resilience and inclusivity.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
41. **UDL implementation requires careful consideration of what we are doing in our classrooms.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
42. **UDL is a sustainable approach for inclusion in our classrooms.** (Patricia Mc Carthy An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
43. **UDL seeks to challenge our attitudes to inclusivity, our biases, and our unconscious bias.** (Cristina Devecchi, Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
44. **UDL recognises that sometimes we are legally obliged to provide accommodations.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
45. **Implementing UDL suggests that the learner has problems and difficulties.** (Patricia McCarthy, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
46. **UDL is always changing and evolving.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)

47. **UDL provides opportunities for children and educators.** (Mary Quirke, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
48. **Implementing UDL only for children with diverse needs (particular groups) creates exclusion.** (Patricia McCarthy, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
49. **Implementing UDL is a challenge because of other educational structures.** (Patricia McCarthy, An Introduction to UDL, How and Why You Need to Think about it 31st MAY 2023 Online)
50. **The goal of UDL is to create expert learners.** (Nicole Tucker Smith, 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
51. **Implementing UDL in the classroom creates engagement and an empowering learning environment for students.** (Nicole Tucker Smith, 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
52. **UDL is a purposeful, motivational, resourceful, strategic, and goal-directed approach to teaching and learning.** (Nicole Tucker Smith, Jennifer Levine and Bill Willmott, 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
53. **UDL promises unlimited learning.** (Nicole Tucker Smith, Jennifer Levine and Bill Willmott, 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
54. **There are more ways to meet the needs of all children than implementing UDL.** (Nicole Tucker Smith, Jennifer Levine and Bill Willmott, 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
55. **UDL is a buzzword.** (Frederic Fovet 1st International UDL Symposium, Maynooth, 2023)
56. **"UDL implementation is a learning process, one that takes engagement, motivation, grit, resourcefulness, and creativity."** (Katie Novak, X (Twitter) 27th Jan. 2024)
57. **When we integrate the UDL Guidelines into our lessons, we support emotions necessary for learning by providing flexible options that help students gain access to resources that support the demands of the task.** (Katie Novak, X (Twitter) 20th December 2023)
58. **"UDL is essential for some but beneficial for everyone."** (Siobhan Canavan, X. 9th June 2023)
59. **"UDL suits the idea of early intervention."** (The beauty of universal design for learning (UDL) and why everyone in early childhood education and intervention should be using it, Thecla K Moffat. 2022 P.68)
60. **You need to be a reflective practitioner to implement UDL.** (The beauty of universal design for learning (UDL) and why everyone in early childhood education and intervention should be using it, Thecla K Moffat. 2022 P.68)

General attitudes to implementing UDL. (Generated from CAST Guidelines)

61. I adapt my teaching materials to cater to the various learning styles, needs, and abilities of all young children with diverse learning needs.
62. I provide visual and auditory aids for different learning styles.
63. I offer hands-on materials for all children to explore concepts through touch and sensory engagement.
64. I create a classroom environment that promotes curiosity, exploration, and play, allowing children to discover and learn through their interests.

65. I incorporate projects where children can explore a variety of subjects based on their individual preferences and choices.
66. I encourage children with diverse learning needs to express themselves through art, dramatic play, or simple verbal or non-verbal communication.
67. I identify and provide support for children with diverse learning needs, including those with developmental differences, through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).
68. I collaborate with specialists or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary care.

Based on Six Steps to Inclusive Preschool Curriculum: A UDL Based Framework for Children's School Success (Horn *et al*., 2016)

69. I observe and listen to children's conversations to identify children's emergent interests.
70. I use tangible learning materials in lessons to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts.
71. Children are involved in small groups, large groups and independent time throughout the day to represent multiple learning contexts.
72. I recognise that children are individuals and support their learning by meeting their needs at a pace and leave that is comfortable with the child.
73. I provide direct individualised support and scaffolding for children who need it.
74. I modify materials and lessons so that children can participate independently.
75. I plan with the team on how to implement positive behaviour strategies to create an inclusive learning and caring environment.
76. I regularly review my inclusive teaching and learning strategies to ensure that my classroom is inclusive to all children's learning and development.
77. I regularly engage in reflective practice to identify challenges and barriers to children's learning and development.

Incorporating Aistear, the national curriculum, and the CAST, UDL framework

78. I engage in continuous professional learning and development to successfully implement inclusive practices in my classroom.
79. I arrange my classroom environment to ensure that it is welcoming and that all children feel a sense of belonging.
80. I use integrated technology tools that support different learning styles.
81. I encourage a play-based approach to ensure exploration and creativity.
82. I involve parents in their children's learning process.
83. I Implement teaching strategies that connect with students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and interests.
84. I use inclusive language that respects and values diversity.
85. I implement various assessment methods to identify children's successes and challenges.
86. I rely on interactions with the children to identify children's learning outcomes.
87. I rely on interactions with the children to identify children's learning and care needs.
88. I use interactions to keep children interested and stimulated in their learning.

89. My curriculum is flexible to support differentiated learning.
90. I create accessible learning experiences that accommodate the diverse needs of all children in the classroom.

Loui Lord Nelson, Ph.D The UDL Gears.

91. I believe that every learner can learn in the ECCE classroom.
92. I believe that every learner can learn in the ECCE classroom.
93. I value every single child.
94. I have high expectations for every child in the ECCE classroom.
95. I believe that every child should learn alongside their peers.
96. I view myself as a learner.
97. I am empathetic to the needs of all children.
98. I know children must try new things, make mistakes, reflect, revise and try again.
99. I believe early childhood teachers should seek mentors to support the success of implementing inclusive practices in ECEC.
100. I constantly seek new ways to advance my own learning of inclusive practices.
101. I constantly seek ways to improve my relationship with children in my classroom.
102. I constantly seek to build positive relationships with the caretakers of all the children in my class.
103. Cultivate a sense of belonging for all learners.
104. Know that barriers to learning are in the lesson and the learning environment.
105. I know that the barriers to learning are not with the child or children.

Appendix C: Sample: Colour Coding of Statements

General Attitudes towards UDL Blue
Attitudes towards Implementing UDL Green
Attitudes towards Early Childhood Teachers' Role in Implementing UDL – Pink

1. UDL principles should be at the core of teaching and learning practices in ECCE.
2. UDL strategies can effectively support all children in ECCE classrooms.
3. UDL provides various ways for children with diverse learning needs to engage and access the ECCE curriculum.
4. UDL in ECCE classrooms supports and empowers all children in meeting their learning goals.
5. UDL reduces children's stress by improving confidence and changing their attitudes towards learning.
6. The one-size-fits-all approach suits instruction and designing the ECEC learning environment.
7. UDL and best practices in ECEC go hand in hand.
8. Using technology as a learning tool can benefit children with diverse learning needs in ECCE.
9. Implementing UDL alone does not enhance the inclusion of all children in ECCE classrooms.
10. Providing choices in how children demonstrate their understanding is important in the ECCE classroom.
11. Early Childhood Educators already implement inclusive practices, which could be seen as UDL.
12. UDL is not everything we do in the classroom.
13. It is important to have a fixed curriculum suitable for all children in the ECCE.
14. It is essential that differentiation should be a fundamental practice in the ECCE classrooms.
15. UDL does not help reduce educational inequities among children in the ECCE classroom.
16. Early childhood teachers should receive training in implementing UDL principles.
17. Flexibility in the physical classroom design can promote a more inclusive ECCE classroom.
18. UDL promotes a deeper understanding of concepts for all children in the ECCE classroom.
19. Assessment should be "flexibly designed to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills in a variety of ways"
20. Implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom is unsuitable for teaching all children.
21. UDL fosters a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.
22. Collaboration between teachers, therapists, and families is vital for successful UDL implementation.
23. UDL can enhance early childhood teachers' ability to meet the needs of all children in the ECCE classroom.
24. There are many barriers to implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom.
25. Implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom is a fad and a waste of time.
26. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of UDL principles among Irish early childhood teachers.
61. I adapt my teaching materials to cater to the various learning styles, needs, and abilities of all young children with diverse learning needs.
62. I provide visual and auditory aids to cater for the various learning styles, needs, and abilities of all young children.
63. I offer hands-on materials for all children to explore concepts through touch and sensory engagement.
64. I create a classroom environment that promotes curiosity, exploration, and play, allowing children to discover and learn through their interests.
65. I incorporate projects where children can explore a variety of subjects based on their individual preferences and choices.

66. I encourage children with diverse learning needs to express themselves through art, dramatic play, or simple verbal or non-verbal communication.
67. I identify and provide support for children with diverse learning needs, including those with developmental differences, through Individualised Education Plans (IEPS).
68. I collaborate with specialists or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary care.
69. I observe and listen to children's conversations to identify children's emergent interests.

Appendix D: Feedback on Draft Statements from a Colleague

Most like my view

4. UDL in ECCE classrooms supports and empowers all children in meeting their learning goals. (really clear and strong)

91. I believe that every learner can learn in the ECCE classroom.

92. I have high expectations for every child in the ECCE classroom.

61. Teaching materials in ECCE classrooms must be adapted to cater to the various learning styles, needs, and abilities of all young children.

64. It is important to create a classroom that promotes curiosity, exploration, and play that allows children to learn through their interests. (I imagine EC teachers will feel comfortable with this wording- it feels familiar and aligns with good practice)

70. Tangible learning materials in lessons help to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts.

73. Providing individual support and scaffolding is important to children who need it.

95. I am empathetic to the needs of all children.

96. Children must try (should have lots of opportunities to try) new things, make mistakes, reflect, revise, and try again.

35. Many Irish early childhood teachers and leaders lack understanding and knowledge of UDL. (really clear)

11. Early childhood teachers already implement inclusive practices, which could be seen as UDL.

41. UDL implementation requires careful consideration of teaching and learning practices in the ECCE classroom.

17. Flexibility in the physical classroom design can promote a more inclusive ECCE classroom.

10. Providing choices in how children demonstrate their understanding is important in the ECCE classroom.

8. Using technology as a learning tool can benefit all children with diverse learning needs in ECCE.

82. Parents must be involved in their children's learning.

68. Early childhood educators should collaborate with specialists or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care.

22. Collaboration between teachers, therapists, and families is vital for successful UDL implementation. (22 and 68 feel similar- 68 is more language friendly for ECEC)

83. Implementing inclusive teaching strategies connects with students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and interests.

84. Using inclusive language respects and values diversity.

49. Implementing UDL is a challenge because of other educational structures and barriers, such as inspections, staff shortages, and high levels of paperwork.
48. Implementing UDL only for children with diverse needs or minority groups creates exclusion.
66. Children with diverse learning needs should be encouraged to express themselves through art, dramatic play, or simple verbal or non-verbal communication.
71. Involving children in small groups, large groups, and independent time throughout the day represents multiple learning contexts.
72. Supporting and meeting the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them is a recognition of their individuality (uniqueness).
90. Creating accessible learning experiences accommodates the diverse needs of all children in the ECCE classroom.
77. It is important to reflect on practice to identify challenges and barriers in children's learning and development.
98. I constantly seek new ways to advance my own learning of inclusive practices.
94. I view myself as a learner (this feels very different to all the other statements- not sure how it connects to the other statements – statement 98 connects better)
60. I need to be a reflective practitioner to implement UDL successfully (being a reflective practitioner helps me to successfully implement UDL)
37. UDL must be clearly identified ('should be identified' makes more sense to me) as a core approach to inclusive education in pre-primary schools in policies.
21. (implementing UDL has potential to) UDL fosters a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.
43. UDL seeks to challenge my attitudes to inclusivity, biases, and unconscious bias.
52. UDL is a purposeful, motivational, resourceful, strategic, and goal-directed approach to teaching and learning.
28. There is no clear direction for using the UDL guidelines and checkpoints.
40. UDL is about (supporting) children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity.
74. I modify materials and lessons so that children can participate independently. ('so that children can actively participate' would be important to me, rather than independently participate)
97. Early childhood teachers should seek mentors to support the success of implementing inclusive practices in ECEC. ('benefit from the support of mentors/ benefit form seeking the support of mentors when implementing inclusive practices…)
16. Early childhood teachers should receive training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive practices.
78. Continuous professional learning and development are required to implement inclusive practices successfully. ('CPL and d opportunities are necessary to be able to implement inclusive practices successfully)

56. UDL implementation is a learning process that takes engagement, motivation, grit, resourcefulness, and creativity.

33. Implementing UDL reduces negative behaviour (that's a large claim) among children in the ECCE classroom.

42. UDL is a sustainable approach to inclusion in our classrooms.

89. A flexible curriculum supports differentiated learning.

14. It is essential that differentiation (not sure about this term; it is rarely used in ECEC, more of a primary Ed term and approach) should be a fundamental practice in the ECCE classrooms. (I think statement 61 says it better)

9. Implementing UDL alone does not enhance the inclusion of all children in ECCE

Least like my view:

15. UDL does not help reduce educational inequities among children in the ECCE classroom.

45. Implementing UDL suggests that the learner or the child has problems and difficulties

46. UDL is always changing and evolving

27. UDL guidelines are extremely ill-structured and incredibly complicated

36. UDL is a belief system without scientific evidence.

55. UDL is a buzzword

50. The goal of UDL is to create expert learners.

25. Implementing UDL in the ECCE classroom is a fad and a waste of time.

29. UDL is too complicated, and I am not interested in implementing it in my classroom.

54. There are more ways (phrasing confusing- 'additional ways/ other ways/ better ways/ alternative ways… I am not sure what it is getting at)to meet the needs of all children than implementing UDL.

75. Planning with colleagues to implement positive behaviour strategies creates inclusive learning and care environments.

85. Implementing various assessment methods identifies children's successes and challenges (I don't agree- I think it is about choosing appropriate assessment methods that will support you to understand/ identify their successes and challenges))

86. Interactions with children, stimulates their learning and development and identifies learning outcomes and needs (possibly does, but not always)

93. Every child should learn alongside their peers in the ECCE classroom.

What I think… Vague/ don't understand./ is this relevant	
5.	UDL reduces children's stress by improving confidence and changing their attitudes towards learning. (seems like a sweeping statement… or generous claim to reduce stress –' following a UDL approach has potential to reduce stress…')
44.	UDL recognises that sometimes, I am legally obliged to provide accommodations for children's learning and development. (I need more context… is this talking about how UDL has a set of principles that don't always align with legal obligations for supporting those with special needs/ additional needs- the wording of 49 gets that across better)
18.	UDL promotes a deeper understanding of concepts (what concepts? Something is missing here) for all children in the ECCE classroom.
6.	The one-size-fits-all approach suits instruction (what does this mean in this context?) and the design of the ECCE learning environment.
99.	Barriers to learning are in the lesson and the learning environment.(I don't understand this)
100.	The barrier to learning is not within the child. (maybe it needs to be elaborated- merge with 99?)

Appendix E: Final Set of Statements (Q-set)

1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity.
2. Support and empower all children in meeting their educational and care needs that are identified and measured.
3. Rely on policies and government direction to provide me with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in my classroom.
4. Use technology as a learning tool to benefit children with diverse learning needs.
5. Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness.
6. Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care.
7. Involve all parents in their children's learning and development and provide opportunities for them to engage.
8. Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies.
9. Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative behaviour among children in my classroom.
10. Value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices.
11. Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs.
12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.
13. Maintain constant flexibility in the physical classroom design to promote a more inclusive classroom.
14. Face daily challenges to inclusion and inclusive practices.
15. Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts.
16. Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes and try again.
17. Explore innovative methods to enhance my understanding of inclusive practices, ensuring I always learn new knowledge.
18. Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication.
19. Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed.
20. Agree that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment.
21. Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom.
22. Do research to find better ways to meet the needs of all children.
23. Facilitate sustainable opportunities for children to learn about inequity and discrimination.
24. Use inclusive language to respect and value diversity in my classroom.
25. Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and energy.
26. Seek the support of mentors to implement inclusive practices.
27. Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom.
28. Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom.

29. Love to try new ways and strategies to create an inclusive classroom and inclusive practices.
30. Motivated by up-to-date research on inclusive environments and practices.
31. Interested in Irish research relating to inclusion and inclusive practices to inform practice.
32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom.
33. Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming.
34. Crave more training in implementing UDL principles and inclusive practices.
35. Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities.
36. Confident in providing leadership to other colleagues regarding inclusion, inclusive practices and working with children with diverse needs.
37. Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to cater to young children's various learning styles, needs, and abilities.
38. Require better leadership in my setting to inspire me and successfully support inclusion for all children in my classroom.
39. Enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and inclusive practices in my classroom.
40. Reflect on my practice to allow me to implement inclusive practices better and adapt my teaching.
41. Identify potential barriers to meaningful participation and develop strategies to eliminate them by reflecting daily.
42. Implement a curriculum and create an environment that focuses on rights-based participation and social justice.
43. Provide consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support confidence and connectedness with the children and their families.
44. Apply personalised interventions to increase the participation and engagement of children in my classroom.
45. I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom.
46. Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom.
47. Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all.

Appendix F: Condition of Instruction

What are your views about your ECCE classroom?

Thank you for participating in this research. Please sort these statements in order based on your views and opinions about your ECCE classroom. Sorting instructions are provided in this email. Please read and follow the steps involved in the sorting instructions. Your thoughtful and consistent responses will contribute to our understanding of the diverse attitudes and perspectives related to inclusion and inclusive practices based on the features of UDL in ECEC.

Thank you,

Siobhán

Appendix G: Sorting Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please make sure you have a copy of the Statements and a copy of the Q-grid. You should have a list of 47 Statements with a corresponding number for each statement. Each describes characteristics that may be related to practices in the ECCE classroom.

Step 1: Please cut out each Statement, read through them, and sort them into three (3) piles according to the question: What are your views of your ECCE classroom?

The pile on your right are those statements that are most like your view, and the pile on the left are those statements that are *least like* your view. Place any Statement you don't have a strong feeling about in a middle pile.

Step 2: Now that you have three piles of Statements, start with the pile to your right, the "*most like"* pile, and select the two (2) Statements that are most like your view and place them in the two (2) spaces in the far-right column (column 11) of the Q-grid.

Step 3: Next, from the pile on your left, the "*least like* " pile, select the two (2) Statements that are least like your view and place them in the two (2) spaces at the far left (column 1) of the Q-grid.

Step 4: Now, go back to the "*most like*" pile on your right, select the three (3) Statements from those remaining in your most like pile that is most like your view and place them into the three (3) open spaces in column 10.

Step 5: Now, go back to the "*least like* " pile on your left and select the three (3) statements from those remaining in your most unlike pile that are most unlike you and place them into the three (3) open spaces in column 2.

Step 6: Working back and forth, continue placing the Statements onto the Q-grid until all the Statements have been placed into all the spaces.

Step 7: Once you have all the Statements placed on the Q-grid, feel free to rearrange them until the board best represents your opinions and views.

Step 8: Remove each statement one by one and replace it by inputting the number corresponding to each statement on the Q-grid. Numbers and not statements should now represent your views.

Step 9: Please record brief notes of your reasons for placing the statements on columns 1, 2, 10 and 11 and keep them safe for a possible interview during phase two of this research.

Step 10: Please fill in the short 7 questions on the survey, which will take five minutes, by clicking on the following link. https://forms.gle/My7BmDwyhgqEGi1JA

Finally, return a photo of the Q-grid with all the spaces filled with the numbers representing each Statement, the demographic survey, and the consent form by emailing to me at siobhan.canavan5@mail.dcu.ie

Checklist:

1. Sign the consent form.
2. Complete Q-Sort
3. Photo of completed Q-Sort
4. Complete Survey
5. Email your signed consent form and a photo of your completed Q-Sort to Siobhán.

If you have any difficulties, please feel free to contact me on [redacted] or by email.

Again, thank you for your participation.

Kindest regards,

Siobhán

Appendix H: Recruitment Letter and Advertisement

Dear Organisation.

My name is Siobhán Canavan, and I am currently enrolled on the Doctor of Education programme at Dublin City University and conducting research. For my doctoral research, I hope to collect data on early childhood teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their inclusive practices to explore their readiness to implement Universal Design for Learning in pre-primary schools. My supervisors, Dr Anna Logan and Dr Sinead McNally, will oversee all my research elements. It is hoped that the findings from my research will benefit teachers in implementing suitable inclusive pedagogical practices, such as UDL, in early childhood education and care settings. I would be very grateful if you would assist me in recruiting participants for my research. I hope to recruit 25 to 30 participants. If you agree, please share the advertisement and my details below. Additionally, if you require further information, please don't hesitate to contact me through email at siobhan.canavan5@mail.dcu.ie or by phone at [redacted]

Kindest regards,

Siobhán

Recruitment Advertisement

We want your support and to hear your views on inclusion and the inclusive practices that you are implementing in your ECCE classroom.

If you are interested in participating, please click on the link below. If you would like more information, please email Siobhan Canavan at siobhan.canavan5@mail.duc.ie.

Appendix I: Plain Language Statements

Plain Language Statement

Research Title: Research Title: *A Q methodology Study: Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Practices Using Universal Design for Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education Classrooms*.

University: DCU Institute of Education – School of Inclusive and Special Education

Principal investigator: Siobhán Canavan

Supervisors: Dr Anna Logan & Dr Sinead McNally.

Dear Participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study exploring early childhood teachers' attitudes (ECT) towards inclusion and implementing inclusive practices to indicate their readiness to apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Irish pre-primary schools. UDL is a framework that embraces education for all and facilitates children's access to the general curriculum, including children with diverse needs. In addition, UDL seeks to ensure that all children will have fair and equal access to the learning environment. Teachers implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms facilitate children's achievements and outcomes.

We aim to investigate how teachers feel about using inclusive practices and inclusion based on the features of UDL from the teachers' viewpoint. Also, we hope this research will contribute to the knowledge of inclusive practice used in pre-primary schools (Early Childhood Education and Care settings) and develop a suitable UDL model of practice for staff working with children with diverse learning needs. To participate in this study, you do not have to be implementing or have any knowledge of UDL in your Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme.

Siobhán Canavan, BA, (Hons). MA. Mont. Dip. is conducting the research as part of her Doctoral studies in Education at Dublin City University (DCU), School of Inclusive and Special Education. The research will be supervised by Dr Anna Logan (School of Inclusive & Special Education, DCU) and Dr Sinead McNally (School of Language, Literacy & Early Childhood Education, DCU). We are inviting early childhood teachers who educate and care for children with diverse learning needs who attend the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme to participate in this study.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey for approximately 5 minutes, conduct a Q-sort, and, if needed, participate in an online interview. As part of the survey, you will be asked about your qualifications, the type of service you work in, and your job title to generate data about the research participants. Following the short survey, you will be asked to sort and place a set of statements on a grid. This will take approximately 45- 50 minutes. Where you place the statements will be your choice, ranging from '*Most like my view to Most Unlike my view'*, which will form the semi-structured interview questions. Sorting the set of statements can be done at a time that suits you, and if you agree to an

interview, this will be online over Zoom and recorded, where you will discuss the reasons for arranging the statements on the grid.

There are no foreseen risks associated with participating in this research. The researchers have made every effort to minimise the risk to you. However, there is always a small chance that a participant may become uncomfortable while participating in research. If so, you can withdraw at any stage. During the interview stage of the research, if you would prefer not to answer any questions, you can skip them. You can withdraw from participating at any point during the research, and your decision will be respected without question.

There are potential benefits to the participants if they agree to participate in this research. The research will give a voice to participants on their inclusive practices and allow them time to reflect on their practice. The findings from the research will appear in a thesis which may be published. The findings will be used to inform articles that may be published in academic journals and possibly develop a UDL framework for early years settings, which will support and assist teachers and educators in implementing inclusive education for all children in their care.

It is up to you to decide whether you want to participate. If you decide that you would like to take part, you will be given this Information Sheet to keep and be asked to sign a Consent Form. Additionally, you will be given a condition of instructions, sorting instructions, a set of statements and a Q-grid by email.

Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time and without a reason. If you wish to withdraw consent at any stage, any data relating to you will be destroyed if you so wish. Also, every effort will be made to protect participants' confidentiality; all participants' information will be anonymised, and data will be confidential. No real names will be used within this research, and no participants will be identifiable. Only consent forms will have your name and signature, which will be kept in the researcher's Google Drive, separate from any other data you provide and without the possibility of linking these, which is password-protected. Data will only be available to the researcher and supervisors, kept for the time necessary to conduct the research, and then destroyed under GDPR.

If you have any queries at any point during or after the research, the researchers will be at hand to address the issue. If you would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact the principal researcher, Siobhan Canavan, anytime. If you have any questions about this research and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Secretary of DCU Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Thank you kindly for your time and consideration of participating in this study.

Principal researcher:

Siobhán Canavan MA. BA (Hons). Mont. Dip.

Email: siobhan.canavan5@mail.dcu.ie Tel: [redacted]

Appendix J: Informed Consent Forms

Research Title: *A Q methodology Study: Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusive Practices Using Universal Design for Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education Classrooms.*

Purpose of the research

We are researching how early childhood teachers feel about inclusion and using inclusive practices to indicate their readiness to implement UDL in early years education and care settings from the viewpoint of teachers. We hope this research will contribute to the knowledge of inclusive practice used in pre-primary schools (Early Childhood Education and Care settings) and develop a suitable UDL model of practice for staff working with children with diverse learning needs.

Requirements of participation in this study

- Participation in the research will involve sorting a set of statements and conducting a short survey.
- In a later phase of the research, you may be invited to participate in an online Zoom interview with the researcher. These interviews aim to explore the choice of preference as to why the participant placed the statements on the grid. The interviews will be audio-recorded so that we can accurately reflect and report on what you say.

Confidentiality and Rights

- Every effort will be made to protect your identity.
- Participants' names will not be used in the study or any research publications or presentations.
- Although interviews will be audio-recorded with an audio recording device, recordings will not be shared with anybody. Your name or other personal information will not be used in any written report. This guarantee of anonymity is promised within the legal limits to data anonymity.
- You are not obliged to participate. You are free to refuse to answer any questions, and you are free to withdraw from the research at any stage. If you are happy to participate in the research, please complete the consent form below.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement.

Yes No

I understand the information provided.

Yes No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this research.

Yes No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.

Yes No

I agree to complete the sorting of a set of statements.

Yes No

I agree to take brief notes on the reasons why I placed the statements at the extreme end of the Q-Grid.

Yes No

I agree to complete the participant's survey.

Yes No

If required, I agree to partake in an interview with the researcher in the second phase of the research to give a deeper insight and understanding of my responses to the Q-sort.

Yes No

I agree to the interview being audio recorded for later analysis by the researcher.

Yes No

I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

Yes No

I understand the data protection information provided.

Yes No

I give permission for the researcher to retain fully anonymised data collected as part of this research for five years.

Yes No

I give permission for the researcher to use excerpts from the data collected during the interviews for the final thesis, journal articles and presentations for five years following completion of the research.

Yes No

I would like a summary of the findings. If yes, please provide your email address below.

Yes No

I would like additional support when conducting the Q-sort. If yes, please provide your email address below.

Yes No

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researchers have answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature:

_____

Name in Block Capitals:

_____

Email address: _____

Date: _____

Please return this consent form to siobhan.canavan5@mail.dcu.ie

Appendix K: Summary of the Feedback from the Pilot Research – 29/2/24

Research Instrument	Participants' Comments	Amendments
Condition of Instructions	Very clear. (P1) Very clear and to the point. (P2) At first, I felt a little confused. Once I followed each step, it became more obvious what to do. (P3) Really clear. (P4)	
Plain Language Statement	Very clear. (P1) Very clear and to the point. (P2) Very informative and piqued my interest. I would love to know more about it and your findings. (P3). Very clear and easily understood. (P4)	Rephrase the sentences about 'features of UDL' as this might interfere with the question regarding implementing UDL in the survey.
Informed Consent	I was confused. Should I sign it twice when it looked for a signature and then a participant signature, and can the witness be anyone? (P1) Very clear and to the point. I had to request access to sign it. (P2) I was confused about having a witness. Do they witness you signing the consent form, or must they be with you while conducting the research? (P3) Is there a need for a witness to sign, too? This might be off-putting for participants. (P4)	Delete the witness's signature. This is strange; nobody seemed to have this problem.
Sorting Instructions	Very clear and easily understood. (P1) Very clear. (P2) Informative and easy to follow once started. (P3) The steps were well laid out and were easily understood. (P4)	
Q-Set (Statements)	Statements were easily understood. Some were easier to have a definite no or yes to. I	Change statement 35: Enjoy

	found some were along the same thread. (P1) Very clear. One statement was a little unclear 35. – *Enjoy attending professional development and learning opportunities*. I was unsure if this meant in general or in relation to inclusion. (P2) I found these very interesting. I sat for a moment to think about some of the statements, such as number 20. I felt a strong connection with this statement. (P3) I understood each statement, and it made me think a lot about my practice. (P4)	attending professional development and learning opportunities **to support my professional practice.**
Experience in conducting the Q-sorting	I enjoyed doing the Q-sorting. It was like a tool or a guide someone might benefit from for reflective practice. (P1) I really enjoyed the experience. The physical experience encouraged me to spend more time thinking about the statements. I would have liked to have a hard copy pack of the materials as I had no access to a printer. (P2) I enjoyed participating in this pilot research study. It was highly informative and made me reflect on my practices. (P3) P4 did not conduct the Q-set as she has been sick and was unable to do so.	All participants really enjoyed the experience of conducting a Q-sort and found it benefited them in relation to thinking and reflecting on their practices.
Timeframe	15 minutes to sort the Q-Set. (P1) It took slightly longer than anticipated because I wrote out all the statements and Q-Grid. However, this process made me even more familiar with the statements. (P2) At first, when I read how long it may take, I thought I would be quicker. As I worked on this, I realised it was time-consuming as I wasn't sure about where I wanted to put the statements, but I was enjoying it; therefore, I spent a little more time on it than I should have. (P3)	Varied timeframe - Depending on the participant's interest and personal reflection/ thinking time
Other comments	I enjoyed the Q-set. It was a new experience for me. I would recommend it as an alternative to other surveys/ questionnaires. Rather than just circling boxes or grading	Very positive

	them, it was a tactile experience in really reflecting upon practice. (P1) Really enjoyed the process. I found more statements were most like my thoughts, but I ended up putting them further towards the most unlike side to fill the grid. (P2) None. (P3) It seems a very interesting study, and I am really looking forward to hearing how you get on—the best of luck with it. (P4)	

Appendix L: Google Forms Survey

A Q Methodological Study: Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Attitudes Towards Their Readiness to Implement Universal Design for Learning in Irish Pre-primary Schools.

All research data will be anonymised, and the researcher will use individual codes for each participant after she receives the survey responses. Your email address will then be deleted.

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

_____

2. **Do you have an Early Childhood Education and Care qualification?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Other:

_____

3. **Please indicate your qualifications by ticking all that apply.** *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Level 5
- ☐ Level 6
- ☐ Level 7 (Ordinary Degree)
- ☐ Level 8 (Hons Degree)
- ☐ Level 9 (Masters Degree)
- ☐ PhD/EdD
- ☐ Other:

_____

4. **What type of service do you work in?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Sessional pre-school service
- ◯ Part-Time Day Care service
- ◯ Full Day Care service
- ◯ Pre-school service in a Drop-in-Centre
- ◯ Temporary pre-school service
- ◯ Other: _____

5. **What is your role in the ECCE classroom or setting?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Assistant Teacher/Educator
- ◯ Room Leader
- ◯ AIM Support
- ◯ Assistant Manager
- ◯ Owner/Manager
- ◯ Other: _____

6. **How long have you been working in Early Childhood Education and Care settings?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-2 years
- ◯ 3-5 years
- ◯ 5-8 years
- ◯ 8-10 years
- ◯ 10+ years

7. **Do you implement the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

8. **How many children in your ECCE classroom are receiving AIMs support?** *
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0
- ◯ 1-2
- ◯ 3-4
- ◯ 4-5
- ◯ 5-6
- ◯ 6-7
- ◯ 7-8
- ◯ 8-9
- ◯ 9-10
- ◯ 10+

9. **How many children with diverse learning needs do you educate and care** * **for in your ECCE classroom who are not receiving AIMs support and would benefit from it?**
Tick all that apply.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 10 +

10. **Have you heard about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Early Childhood Education and Care?** *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

11. **Do you implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your classroom?** *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

12. **What extent do you implement UDL in your classroom?**

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

13. **Do you have an Early Childhood Education and Care qualification?** *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

14. **Please indicate your qualifications by ticking all that apply.** *

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Level 5
- [ ] Level 6
- [ ] Level 7 (Ordinary Degree)
- [ ] Level 8 (Hons Degree)
- [ ] Level 9 (Masters Degree)
- [ ] PhD/EdD
- [ ] Other: _____

15. **What type of service do you work in?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Sessional pre-school service
- ◯ Part-Time Day Care service
- ◯ Full Day Care service
- ◯ Pre-school service in a Drop-in-Centre
- ◯ Temporary pre-school service
- ◯ Other: _____

16. **What is your role in the ECCE classroom or setting?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Assistant Teacher/Educator
- ◯ Room Leader
- ◯ AIM Support
- ◯ Assistant Manager
- ◯ Owner/Manager
- ◯ Other: _____

17. **How long have you been working in Early Childhood Education and Care * settings?**

Mark only one oval.

- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-8 years
- 8-10 years
- 10+ years

18. **Do you implement the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

19. **How many children in your ECCE classroom are receiving AIMs support?***

Mark only one oval.

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 4-5
- 5-6
- 6-7
- 7-8
- 8-9
- 9-10
- 10+

20. **How many children with diverse learning needs do you educate and care * for in your ECCE classroom who are not receiving AIMs support and would benefit from it?**

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] 0
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] 9
- [ ] 10 +

21. **Have you heard about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Early Childhood Education and Care?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

22. **Do you implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your classroom?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Don't know

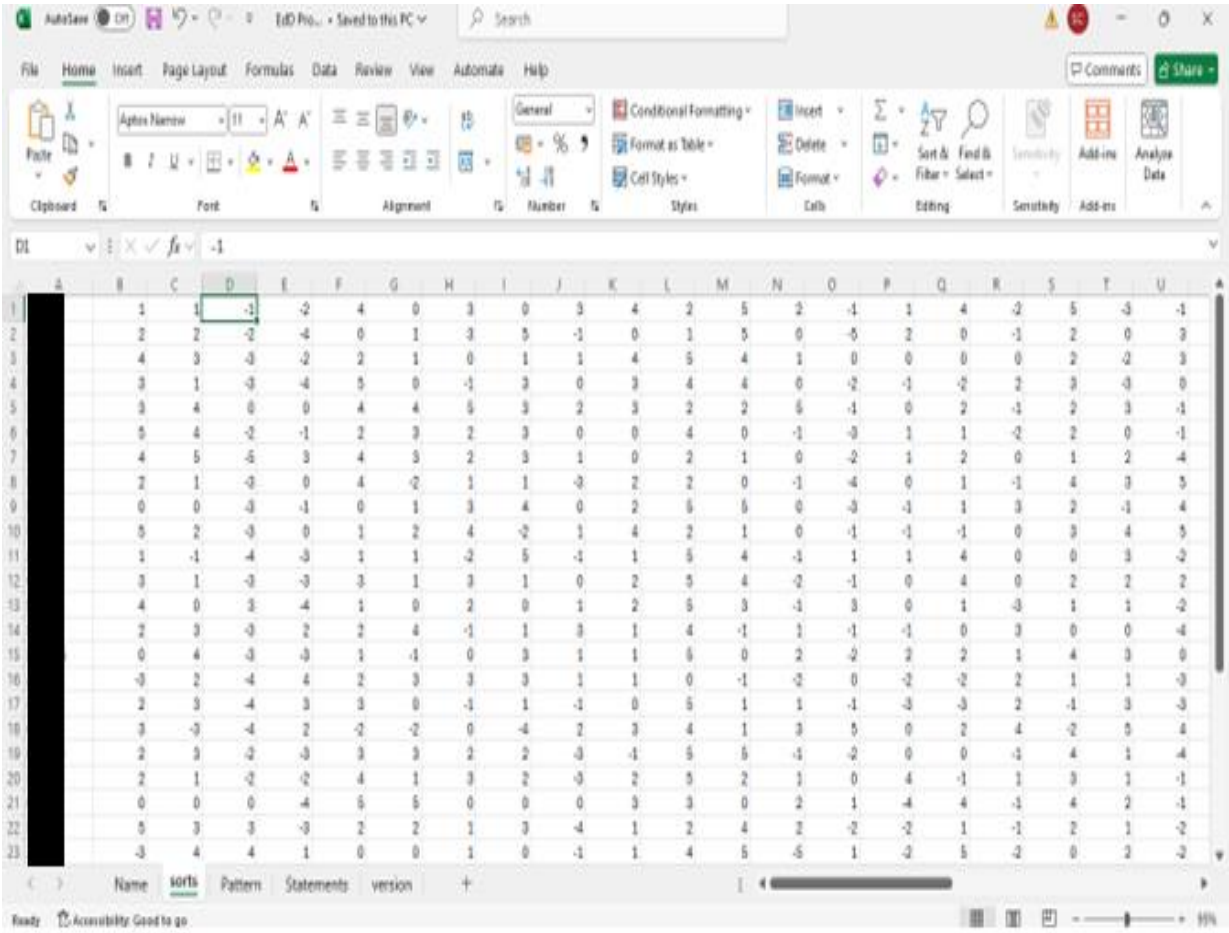
23. **What extent do you implement UDL in your classroom?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Always
- ◯ Sometimes
- ◯ Never

Google Forms

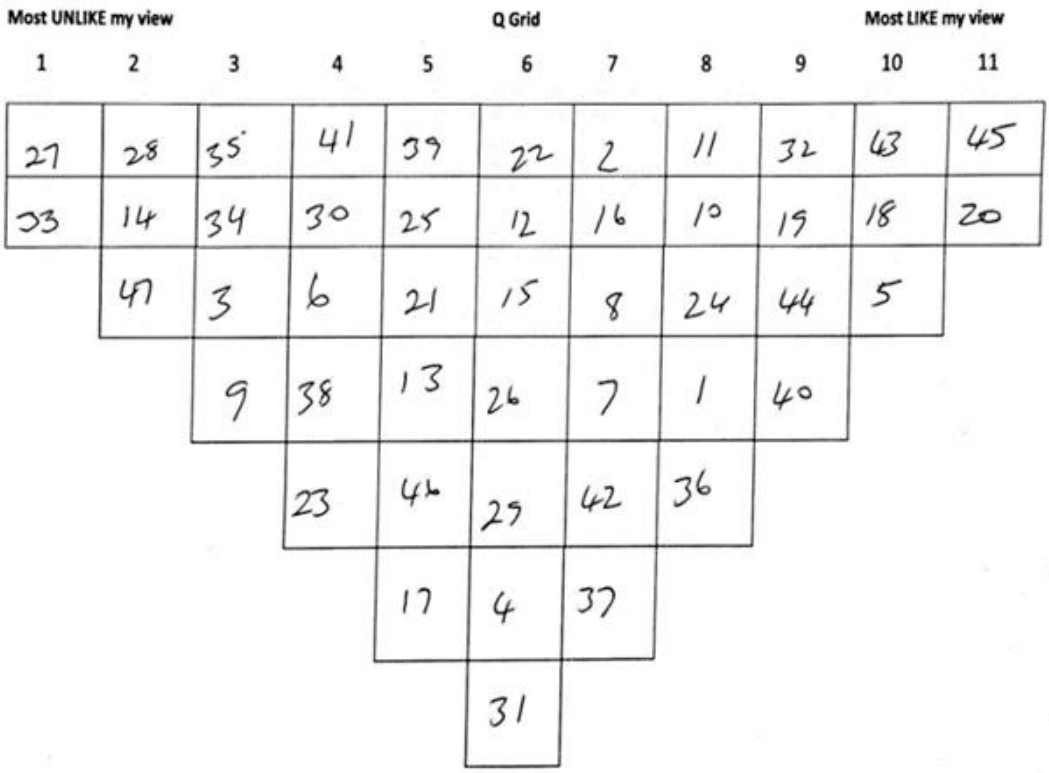
Appendix M: Q-Sort Data Inputted to KADE



Appendix N: Sample: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Factor Array 1

Sorter 8



Q1: When you read statement 45, place it on No.11. (I am responsible for ensuring that children with diverse needs are fully integrated into my classroom). Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

Q2: Other people who had a similar sort didn't place 45 at No.11; can you tell me why that might be the case?

Prompt: Governments, Room Leaders, or other educators, the children themselves, it's not in policies

Q3: Statements regarding **all children** are high on your grid. For example, statement 32 (I accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom) and statement 10 (I value and honour all children's preferences, views, and choices) you placed on No. 8 and 9. Can you tell me your views on this?

Prompt: What does accepting, supporting, empowering, valuing, and honouring **all** children mean to you/ your practice/ the children?

Q4: You had a very strong view that the barrier to learning is not within the child but within the curriculum design and the learning environment *(20);* because you placed this statement on No. 11. Can you tell me about that?

Prompt: In your opinion, what are the barriers to the curriculum and the learning environment?

Q5: You placed statements 27 (Struggle to accommodate and support children with diverse needs in my classroom) and 33 (Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming) at 1, indicating that you find creating an all-inclusive environment and supporting children with diverse needs is relatively easy. Can you tell me more about that?

Prompt: what are the practices, approaches, or accommodations that support this view?

Q6: You placed statement 5 (Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness) at No.10, indicating it is most like your view. Can you tell me your thoughts and more about your views on this statement?

Prompt: In your opinion, how can this be achieved in practice?

Q7: You placed statement 16. (Provide lots of opportunities for children to try new things, make mistakes and try again). Statement 8: (Provide children with choices to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge, skills, and competencies) on No. 7. Can you tell me your views about these statements?

Prompt: Why do you think it is important for children to demonstrate their knowledge and skills or learn from mistakes?

Q8: You placed statement 28. (Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom) on No 2, indicating that you feel proficient in the knowledge and skills to include all children in your classroom. Can you tell me how you feel about this statement?

Prompt: In your opinion, where did you gain these skills and competencies? (experiences and/or additional training).

Q9: Q6: You placed statement 21. (Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom) at No. 5. Can you tell me your thoughts about that statement because other people who had a similar sort didn't place 21 at No.5; can you tell me why that might be the case?

Prompt: what is your interpretation of 'expert learners?

Q10: Are there any other statements I should have included in the Q-sort?

Q11: How did you find conducting the Q-sort?

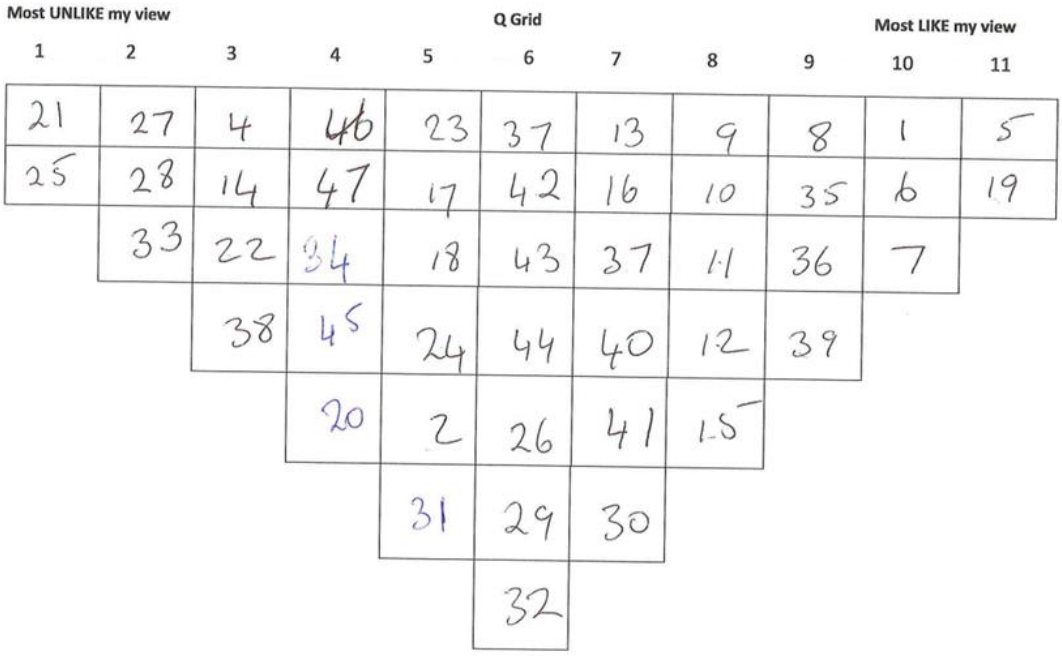
Prompt: Could I have done anything to make completing the Q-sort better or easier for you?

Q12: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much.

Factor Array 2:

Sorter 30



Q1: You placed statement 19. (Collaborate with parents if I have concerns about children's progress and refer them to specialists when needed) on No 11 and statements 6. (Collaborate with parents, specialists, or therapists to ensure children receive the necessary education and care) and statement *7.* (Involve all parents in their children's learning and development and provide opportunities for them to engage) at No 10. indicating that collaboration and developing partnerships are important to you. Can you tell me about that and your views on these statements?

Prompt: in your opinion, what does it mean in practice and to you to collaborate and have a partnership approach?

Q2: At no 1, you placed statement 25. (Show more empathy and compassion for children who might require more time and Energy) Statement 21 (Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom) indicates that these statements are least like your view. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Prompt: In your opinion, why do children who require more time and energy not need more compassion and empathy?

What is your interpretation of 'expert learners'?

Q3: You indicated that you enjoy being a strong advocate for inclusion, diversity, and inclusive practices in your classroom (39) by placing that statement on No. 9. Can you tell me your views about that?

Prompt: What does that mean to you personally and professionally?

Q4: Some educators place a high value on supporting and empowering all children in meeting their educational and care needs identified and measured (2), but your opinion is different because you placed that statement on No 5. indicating that it is somewhat like your view. Can you tell me about that?

Prompt: In your opinion, is it important to identify and measure children's needs to support and empower them to succeed? If so, why? If not, why?

Q5: You placed statement 9. (Regularly employ different strategies to reduce negative behaviour among children in my classroom), statement 11 (Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs) and statement 15. (Provide tangible learning materials in lessons to support children in making meaningful connections to concepts) on No 8. Can you tell me more about this?

Prompt: In your opinion, how can these practices enhance your professional practice, the children, their needs, and their successes/failures?

Q6: You placed statement 46. (Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom) and statement 47. (Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all) on No 4. Can you tell me your thoughts about that?

Prompts: What do you think is required regarding policies/ frameworks in the ECEC to support the inclusion of all children?

In your opinion, why does offering inclusive only benefit some children?

Q7: The 37 statement was recorded twice, and Statement 3 was omitted by error, but it was changed to Statement 37 to go on No. 6, and Statement 3 was to go on No. 7 as per earlier correspondence. Therefore, you have suggested that you rely somewhat on policies and government direction to provide you with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in your classroom (3). Can you tell me about this?

Prompt: How do policies support your practices of inclusion?

Q8: You placed statement 37 (Adapt my teaching methods and materials in my classrooms to cater to young children's various learning styles, needs, and abilities) on No. 6. Which indicates that your view is neutral. Can you tell me more about this?

Prompt: How do you feel about adapting your teaching methods and materials?

Q9: Are there any other statements I should have included in the Q-sort?

Prompt: Could I have done anything to make completing the Q-sort better or easier for you?

Q10: How did you find conducting the Q-sort?

Q11: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you.

Appendix O: Sample: Step 1

(from Albright *et al*., 2019)

Highest Positive and Negative Array Positions for Factor 1

	Believe that there are adequate frameworks to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE classroom.
Believe that implementing inclusive practices and creating an all-inclusive environment is too much hard work and time-consuming.	Lack the skills and competencies needed to create an all-inclusive classroom.
Believe my goal is to create expert learners of all children in my classroom.	Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all
-5	-4

	**Support and meet the needs of children at a pace and level that is comfortable for them to recognise their uniqueness.
**Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive.	Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom.
**Listen attentively to the 'child's voice' to understand and identify learning needs.	Encourage all children to express themselves through verbal or non-verbal communication.
+5	+4

Major Theme	**Sub Theme**	**Supporting Statements No.**	**First Glance/notes**	**Thoughts/Questions**
Relational	Inclusion for **All** children and families	12 (+5) 32 (+4) 18 (+4) 47 (-4) 21 (-5)	The word **all** is featured in many of the statements, suggesting that this type of teacher's viewpoint sees all children as equal without discrimination. They accept all children in their classroom	What is their understanding of expert learners? What is their goal for all children?

			and feel that all children should be catered for regardless of any diverse needs. Their goal is not to create expert learners but to provide a space for all children to grow and develop without inequality and discrimination. They value and respect all children and don't see the difference. These teachers create a space for all children to grow and develop in a positive environment. They are interested in the children's abilities and learning styles and prepare the environment for all the children. It is important to them to create a time, space, and place for children that supports and meets all their needs. The children are not rushed, and each child is recognised for being themselves, thus giving them a strong sense of identity and belonging within their own rhythm of learning and developing. There is a strong focus on listening to the children and providing choices for them. They have strong professional values that involve respecting the children's views, opinions, and skills to support and empower them to obtain	Why do they not facilitate opportunities for children to learn about inequality and discrimination? What practices do they implement to support them in providing accommodations for children with diverse needs in their classrooms? How do they create a positive environment so all children can grow and develop? What are the professional values needed to create their positive learning environment? What are the practices they implement to allow the children to proceed slowly and being unhurried?
	Slow pedagogy 'Being with' children 'time', 'space' and 'place	12 (+5) 37 (+3) 5 (+4)* 8 (+4)* 14 (-2)* 2 (+2) 27 (-3) 11 (+5)* 42 (-2)* 23 (-3)		

			successful outcomes for each child.	

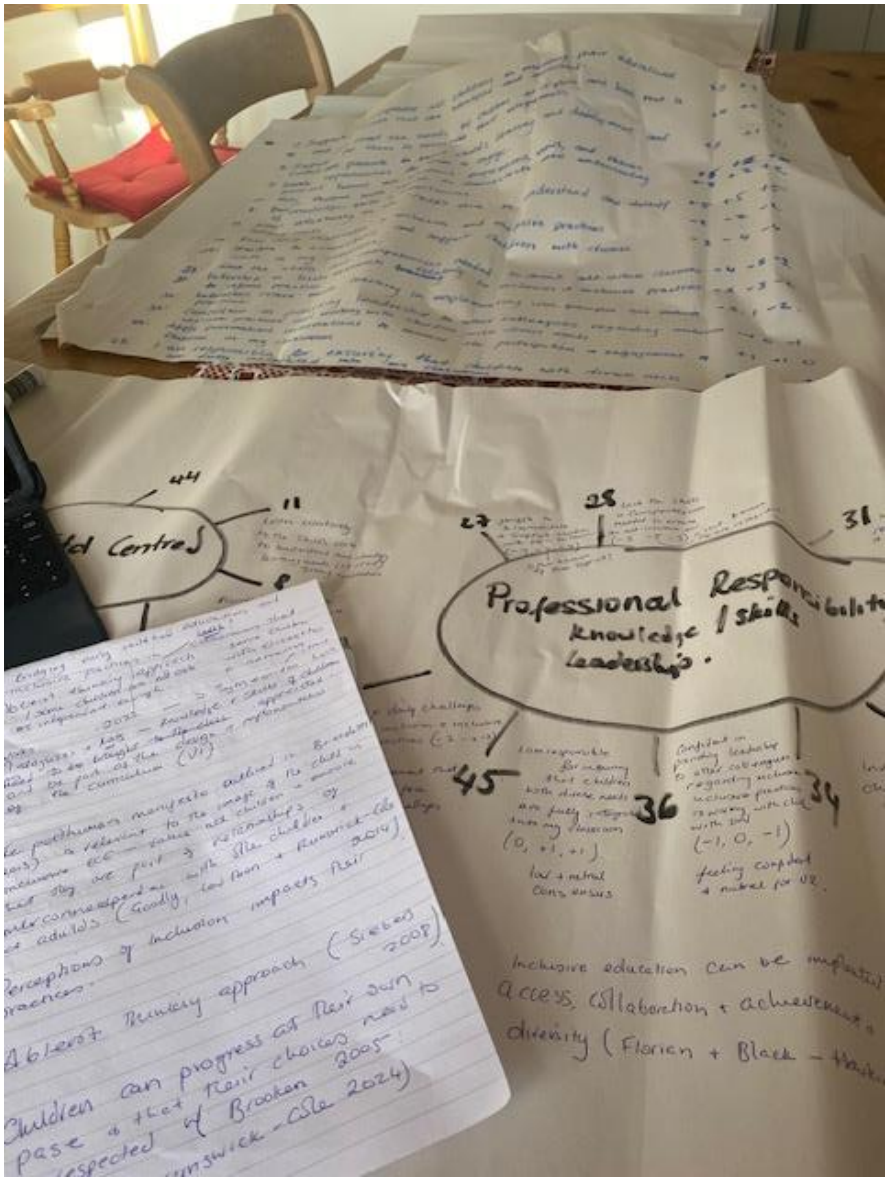
Sample: Inductive Thematic Analysis (Naeem *et al.*, 2023).

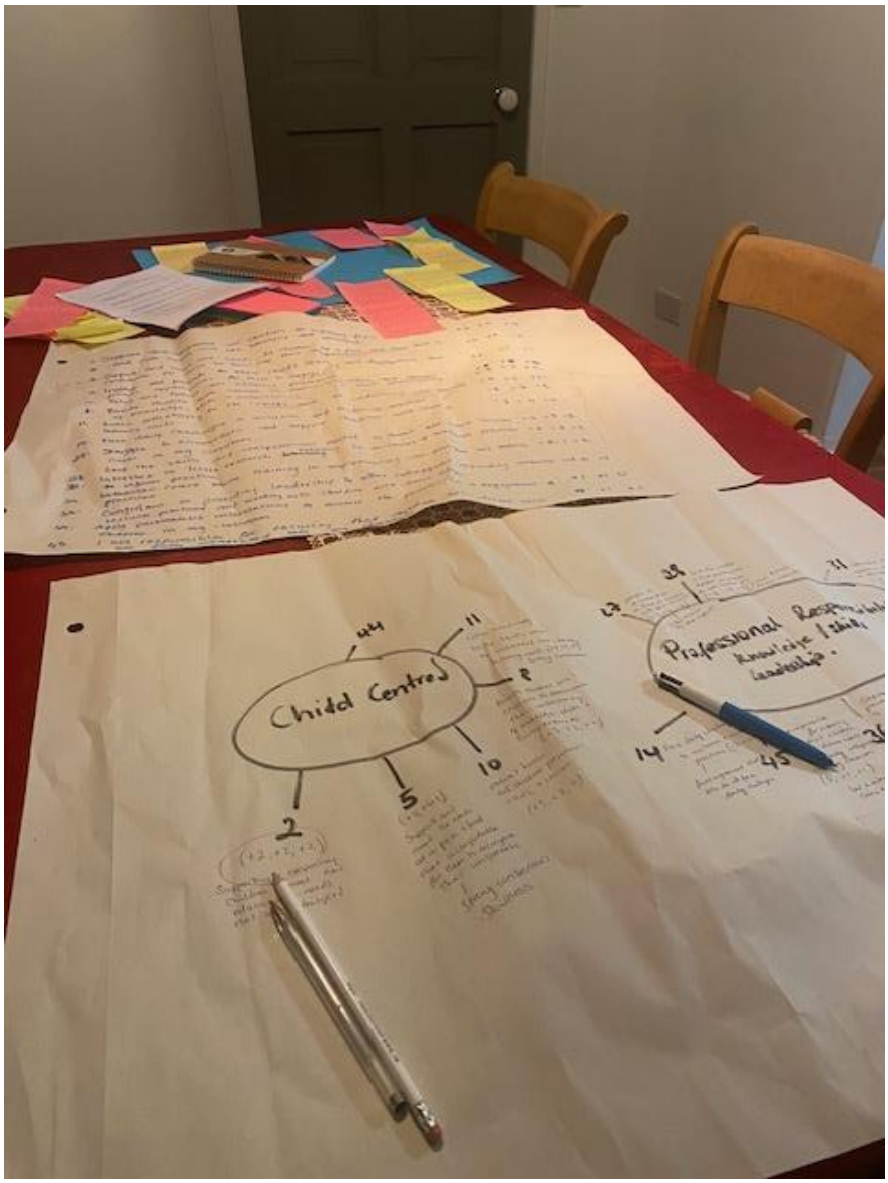
Viewpoint 1:

Step 2, 3 & 4: Keywords, Codes & Themes (Statements)

Keywords	Codes	Themes/Statements
leadership level filter down ownership responsibility inclusive classroom	Ownership & Responsibility for Inclusion	12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive. (+5)
All children they're all important every child valued equal	Education for All	32. Accept all children, including children with diagnosed diverse learning needs, into my ECCE classroom (+4)
they contribute teach compassion care acceptance important lessons	Valuing Diversity Within the Classroom.	12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive. (+5)
very high needs ranged in ages & abilities ability with words and communication can't communicate an extra challenge not labelled very high needs too all children need to be helped	All Children Have Needs.	47.Believe that offering inclusive education and applying inclusive practices in the ECCE classroom benefits some children but not all (-4)
love to be with peers deserve inclusion for all	Fairness and Equity	12. Foster a positive learning environment where all children can thrive. (+5) 1. Consistently support all children's feelings of belonging, resilience, and inclusivity (+3)

Appendix P: Observing Patterns of Responses and Making Sense of the Data




Child Centred
44
11
8
10
5
2
Professional
14
45