



# Child Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care



## Presentation of Survey Results Report on Output 3

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## Introduction

The *Child Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care* (2017-1-UK01-KA201-036798) project seeks to enhance and extend understandings of the competences required for working in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in diverse contexts. Premised on the importance of the quality of ECEC services for supporting children's holistic development, and recognising the centrality of the workforce in providing quality services, the project focusses on child-centredness as a component of high quality ECEC. Child-centred practice is commonly referred to in ECEC contexts; it is often identified as a path to quality but, despite being a deeply embedded concept, it has different interpretations.

An initial review of the literature (Bogatić et al., 2018) considered the different concepts of child-centredness that have evolved over history. Building on Chung and Walsh's (2000) three notions of child-centredness as the child in the centre of the world; in the centre of learning and as the leader of his/her own learning, the literature review identified eight principles of child-centred practice:

1. Focusing on children learning through play,
2. Respecting children's needs, interests, strengths and capacities,
3. Recognising children's learning strategies,
4. Recognising children's uniqueness,
5. Respecting children as capable learners,
6. Respecting children's participation and decision making,
7. Respecting children's diversity and individuality, and
8. Respecting children's family and culture

The principles reflect the romantic origins of the term child-centredness, derived from the work of Rousseau and more fully realised by the philosophy of Froebel. Froebel proposed that each child should be respected for what they will become, with play-based learning offering the opportunity to support the child's autonomy and active participation (Chung and Walsh, 2000, Campbell-Barr, 2017). Democratic perspectives, derived from recognition for children's rights, offer a complementary perspective of child-centredness that is evident within the principles. However, whilst offering a potentially liberating pedagogy where children are leaders of their learning, developmental perspectives can promote a child-centred approach increasingly operating within the regulatory gaze that seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of quality ECEC for children's development (Bogatić et al., 2018). The project therefore sought to understand *how might different understandings of child-centred practice promote learning amongst diverse groups within early childhood education and care provision?*

Both academics and educators in the six participating countries (Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK) undertook observations to consider how child-centredness operates in practice. The observations offered windows onto different enactments of child-centredness, highlighting the centrality of the educators in facilitating child-centredness. The observations illustrated the different ways that educators interacted with children in support of different enactments of child-centredness. Educators would adjust their roles from being within play activities with children, to being alongside or away from children's play. However, whilst the term child-centred emphasises the individual child, the observations highlighted that educators work with groups of children and therefore could be enacting 30 different interpretations of child-centredness at any one time (Campbell-Barr et al., 2018).

The observations highlighted the playful ways that educators interacted with children, often using voice and body to facilitate interactions, and demonstrated the subtle ways that educators responded to and mirrored the play activities of the children that they worked with. They also illustrated the different interpretations of play that are embedded in child-centredness. The categories of play broadly correspond to the three understandings of child-centredness, but most notably the child as leader of their learning in support of their holistic development. Educators provided resources and set up the pedagogic environment to offer signs to children of ways to play in support of their development.

Despite the richness of the observations, their total number (44) was limited; the design of the project always intended that a survey would be undertaken with educators to explore further their concepts of child-centredness and identify if and where professional development might further support educators in developing their child-centredness. In the succeeding sections of this report we present the methodology for the survey before considering its findings. The underlying aim of the survey was to gather information to support the development of a series of online professional development courses to help educators to reflect on their concepts of child-centredness.

## Methodology

### Questionnaire Design

Following the observations of practice, a project meeting was held in Osijek, Croatia to discuss emerging findings from the observations phase and to consider points to follow up in the survey. Initial discussions considered how best to capture the context and demographic characteristics of respondents in each country in a way that was relevant and meaningful. These discussions highlighted the challenges of developing a survey that could collect common demographic information across different European countries given the variations that exist in ECEC systems across Europe (Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat., 2014). Existing European reports were consulted to explore ways in which demographic data might be worded, such as drawing on the European Qualifications Framework to capture qualification levels in a common way across countries, thus ensuring data was comparable.

The project team then discussed possible questions to capture aspects of child-centred practice. This included a Nominal Group Technique focus group, during which all partners identified individual concepts of child-centredness before discussing them as a group and reducing them to common categories. The categories formed the basis of a series of questions that sought to ascertain respondents' understandings of child-centredness.

Other questions were in relation to the project aim to develop a series of online training courses to support educators in contemplating the term child-centredness in their professional practice. The questions sought to consider both the need for training and perspectives of online training.

Output leads, Early Childhood Ireland, then developed the questions into a draft survey, drawing on the template of an existing successful online workforce survey that had been undertaken in the UK (Georgeson et al., 2014b). The draft survey was circulated to all partners for review, with a specific focus on whether it would be appropriate within their cultural context. An online meeting provided the opportunity to fine tune the questions, including considering the wording. The discussion revealed that there would need to be some differences in categories between the surveys for each country in order to accommodate local variation. The differences are displayed in the below table:

**Table 1. Modification of survey questions**

Qu	Croatia	Italy	Spanish/ Galego	Danish	Irish
2		No 'educarer' option		3 options + other: Leader, pedagogue, pedagogue helper	
4		Options comparable – except 'Spazio gioco' for workplace nursery/crèche?	8 local options plus 'other'	4 local options + other'	As UK, + Manager working directly with children
5			5 local options plus 'other'	3 options, 2 comparable with UK, + 'other'	
11	Slider text modified as all teachers should have BA in ECEC.			Slider text modified 0% - 100% pædagogfaglig	As UK, + Playschool
15				Example added to question (f.eks. kurser, diplom, master etc.)	
29	Na koji način Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje podupire praksu usmjerenu na dijete prema Vašem mišljenju?	In che maniera lei ritiene che i Regolamenti e documenti regionali (per i Nidi), le Indicazioni nazionali per il Curricolo (per la Scuola dell'Infanzia) favoriscono una pedagogia centrata sul bambino?	To what extent do you think children's needs, rights and interests are taken into account when they transfer from the first cycle of ECEC (ages 0-3) to the second cycle (ages 3-6)?	På hvilke måder synes du, at de pædagogiske læreplaner understøtter i at udføre en børnecentreret praksis? In what ways do you think the educational curricula support in performing child-centered practice?	With the reduction in the qualifying age for the ECCE Scheme to 2 years & 8 Months, do you intend to provide places in your ECEC setting for this age group?

Table 1 demonstrates how whilst the majority of questions went forward for direct translation, some had to be adjusted to ensure the wording was appropriate to the context. For example, in Croatia it would not have made sense to ask about qualifications lower than a BA as these are not relevant for working in ECEC in this context.

Following the translations, native language versions of the survey were entered onto Survey Monkey, creating seven versions, one for each of the countries participating in the project with the exception of Spain; here two versions were created, one in Spanish and one in Galician to give equal importance to the local language of the project partners. Each survey was then piloted with local educators and students to ensure the wording made sense and the aim of questions was clear to respondents beyond the confines of the project partners. Following minor adjustments to the wording of some questions the surveys went live in May 2018 and were left open for a month in Croatia, Ireland, the UK and Spain.

The Italian and Danish surveys were left open for an additional month in the hope of increasing their response rates.

## Distribution

Access to the surveys was via web-links that were distributed in different ways in different countries and at a European level. The country specific distribution is detailed below, but to facilitate these methods of distribution the survey was also disseminated via social media, including the Facebook page of the project and the Twitter accounts of the project partners and their institutions (where available). Through social media, organisations such as the European Early Childhood Research Association also posted links to the survey. A challenge in distributing the survey generically was that links to all seven surveys had to be provided. A PDF document listed the various links, but it was recognised that its appearance was potentially confusing. For this reason each country developed their own distribution strategy.

### Croatia

The Croatian survey was emailed to members of a kindergarten association as well as being advertised on relevant Facebook and Twitter accounts. A reminder was issued using the same dissemination techniques. Project partners also talked about the survey at meetings of educators and relevant conferences. Masters students and other postgraduate students were also told about the survey so that they and their colleagues may fill it in.

### Denmark

Danish partners distributed the survey to relevant groups of educators electronically where mailing lists were available and via social media. However, despite several attempts to boost the number of responses the response rate remained low. There was a sense that the survey did not capture the Danish context and that some of the questions (regarding interpretations of child-centredness) may have been seen as misplaced and therefore people did not respond.

### Ireland

The Irish survey was distributed via a link sent out in an email to all well known early childhood specialists as well as a database of educators held by Early Childhood Ireland. Reminders about the survey were then posted onto Early Childhood Ireland's Facebook page as well as being sent out in an 'e-zine' to members. Details of the survey were also shared at a number of seminars and training sessions.

### Italy

The Italian survey was shared via the networks Coopselios, including utilising their mailing lists. In addition, one of the partners contacted colleagues at other universities to ask them to share the survey. In an attempt to ensure representation from areas that are underserved by early childhood education, a mailing list was developed by one of the project partners targeting these areas. However, the timing of the survey in the summer term was seen to contribute to a low response rate as educators were overwhelmed with other tasks. Further, despite attempts to engage with local authorities they were largely unsupportive of the survey. One possibility is that the university partner was not a recognised name within early childhood communities, so people may have overlooked request to support the research.

## Spain

The Spanish survey required that the project partners liaised with the local authority to gain permission to distribute the survey. The local authority then selected schools who would be interested in responding. The survey was sent to the head teachers of these schools who were asked to distribute it amongst teachers. The use of official channels helped to support the relevance and importance of the research and contributed to the high response rate in Spain (see following section).

## UK

The UK survey went live in time for the British Association of Early Education's annual conference. At the conference a presentation was given based on the observation data and audience members were provided with both a link and QR Code to the survey. The British Association of Early Education later distributed the link in a news letter. Similarly, Tactyc (Association for professional Development in Early Years) also distributed a link to the survey. While working in partnership with these two organisations supported the distribution of the survey, it is likely that their membership represent more highly qualified educators than the national average. Additional distribution was facilitated through sending the survey to known associates of the project partners, including the UK Nursery School project partners sharing with their networks. There is the potential that this created a geographical bias in the survey as both UK partners are based in the South West, but such detail was not captured in the survey. Lastly, UK partners promoted the survey via their social media accounts.

## Overview

This section presents the results from the survey questionnaires that were distributed among early childhood educators in the participating countries in 2018. A total of 928 completed questionnaires were received and analysed. The following table shows the number of responses by country. It is worth noting the disparity in sample size between countries; appropriate caution should be adopted when comparing responses between these samples, also bearing in mind the different recruitment strategies employed in the six countries (see methods section).

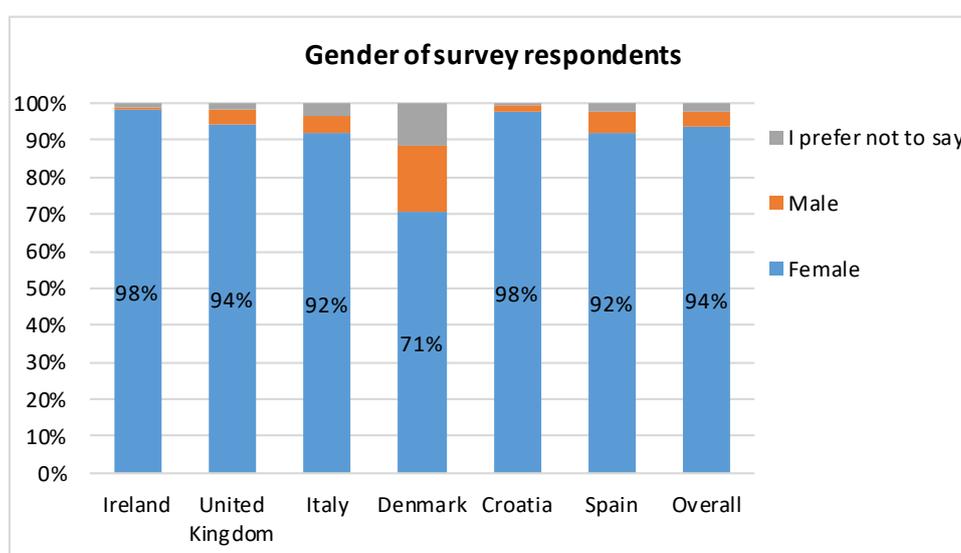
**Table 2: Number of survey responses by participating country**

Country	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Total
Number of responses	151	123	62	17	126	449	928
% of total responses	16%	13%	7%	2%	14%	48%	

Given the transnational dimension of the project, and recognising the significance of country-specific systems in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision, this chapter analyses the survey results across the six participating countries and extracts country-specific data.

### Profile of respondents

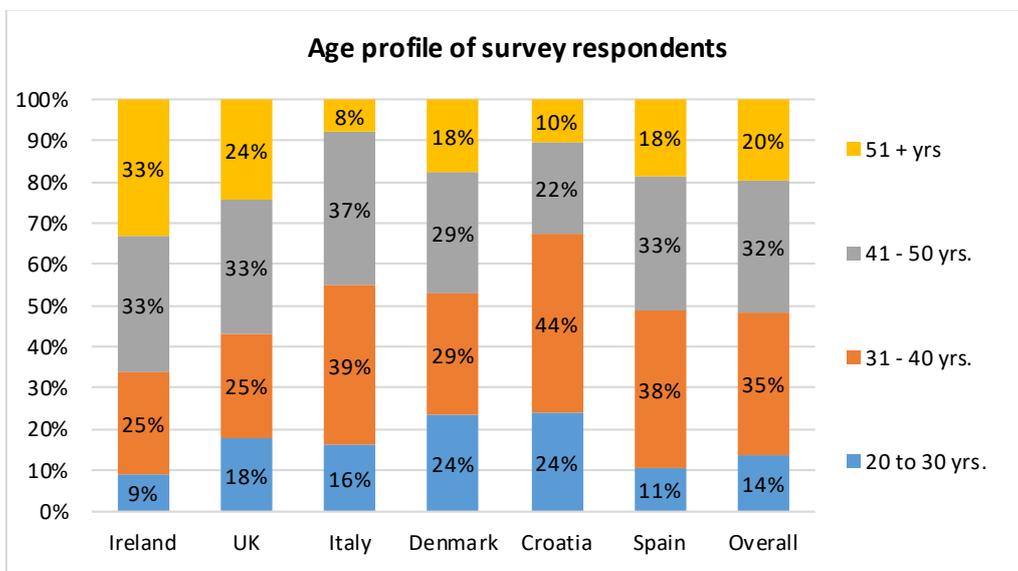
The survey data provides confirmation of the female-dominated nature of the workforce in the ECEC sector. As the following graph shows, this is the case across all countries, with values ranging from 71% in Denmark to 98% in Croatia and Ireland. Given the predominance of female respondents gender does not offer a variable in respect of the data analysis as the number of males is too small.



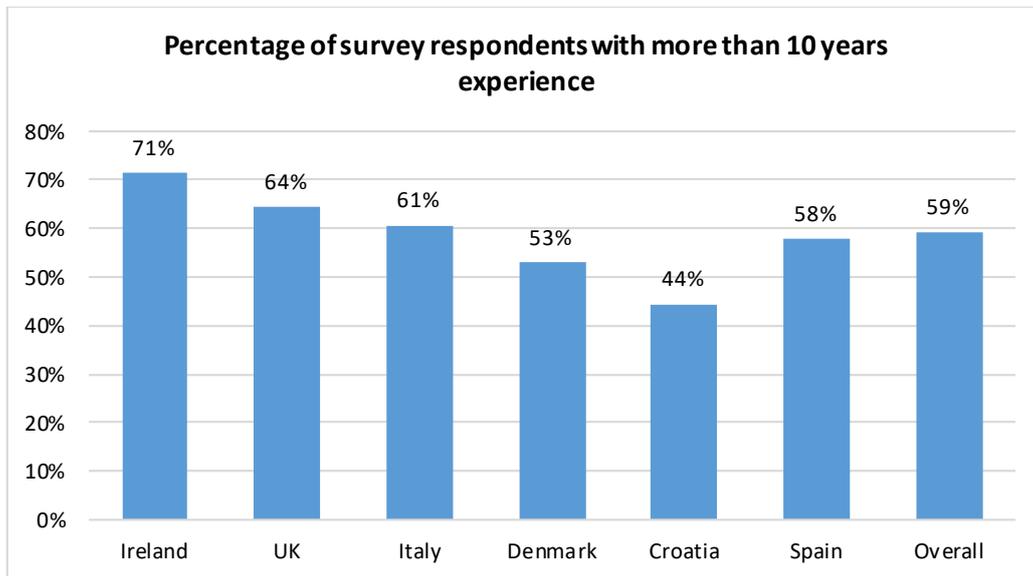
The gendered nature of the ECEC workforce in Europe is a well-established issue. The comparatively higher numbers of men working in ECEC in Denmark has been attributed to professional recognition for the ECEC sector. External to Denmark, the professionalism is associated with good pay and conditions, but within Denmark working in ECEC is still not regarded as well paid with a perception

that there is still some way to go in developing the professionalism of the sector. In many countries in Europe, ECEC struggles to gain the status and pay of other education professions, meaning that it is often an undesirable profession for males. In addition, there are added challenges whereby working with children is associated as being “women’s work” due to historical developments of who is perceived as an appropriate person to work with children. For example, Lazzari (2012) discusses how a maternal discourse within ECEC services in Italy has resulted in a construction of women having a natural disposition to work with young children. The discourse builds on a romantic history of ECEC, where nurturing children is a gendered activity (Caruso and Sorzio, 2015). The traditional approach of early childhood services as the extension of the family role and caring attitude is particularly evident in the private, mainly Roman Catholic services in Italy, frequently assisted by teachers’ associations with gender roles that are evident during in-service training.

If the survey responses reflect the age profile of the sector’s workforce, Croatia has the youngest age profile, while Ireland has the oldest. As the following graph shows, in Croatia 68% of respondents were aged up to 41 years, while the corresponding figure for Ireland is 34%, and across all six countries just under half (49%) of respondents is aged up to 41 years.



The responses indicate a correlation between age and length of experience of working with young children in ECEC settings. As the following graph shows, just under 60% (59%) of all survey respondents have at least ten years’ experience in the sector. The rate is highest in Ireland (71%) and lowest in Croatia (44%). As noted already, these are the two countries with the oldest and youngest age profiles among respondents respectively. As this graph and the previous one show, Spain is the country with the values that are closest to the overall dataset, which is driven, in part, by the relatively large size of the sample from Spain, particularly from Galicia.

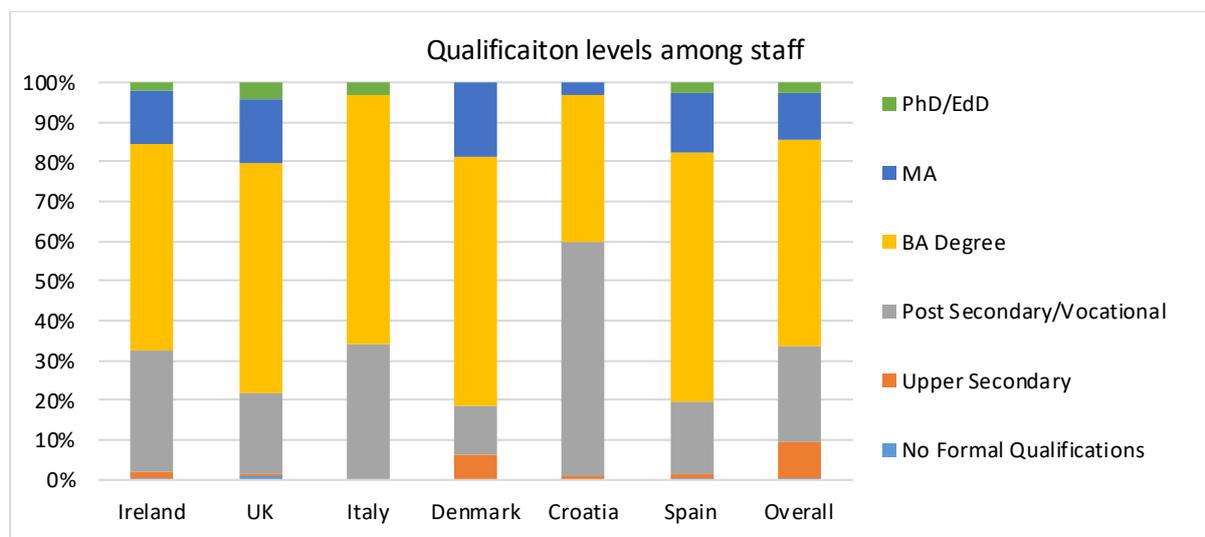


The experienced nature of the sample should be borne in mind when considering later aspects of the report. Previous research with ECEC educators in the UK has indicated that experience is often associated with confidence in professional practice (Georgeson et al., 2014a).

## Qualifications, Experience and Professional Development

The survey responses also indicate some association between age of staff members, their length of experience and their qualifications. As the following graph illustrates, the vast majority of respondents (98.5%) have post second-level qualifications. However, the results pertaining to qualifications are interesting when considered in context against national qualification requirements. As identified in an earlier report (Bogatić et al., 2018), qualifications to work in ECEC vary considerably across Europe and have changed with time in individual countries and this appear to be evident within the qualification data.

In Croatia, while there is a requirement for a degree to work in ECEC, those who gained qualifications prior to this requirement are still eligible to work in ECEC. Given that our respondents from Croatia are largely experienced educators, the high level of post-secondary/vocation respondents is in keeping with the changes to their qualification requirements. Denmark has the highest proportion of degree holders (81%), followed by Spain (80%) and the UK (78%). As discussed, the distribution of the UK survey is likely to have resulted in a higher proportion of respondents with degrees than is representative of the county's ECEC workforce. The results also reflect the varying qualification requirements in Ireland. In Ireland, under the Child Care Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, all staff working directly with children must hold a minimum of QQI Level 5 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education. Prior to this, the only requirement to work with children was that one had to be 'a competent adult'. There is, however, a recognition, in Ireland, of the importance of professionalising the sector, with moves towards degree-level and higher qualifications. As a result, 80% of the Irish ECEC workforce are estimated to have achieved qualifications at degree level. Therefore, the Irish responses to the survey may not reflect the sector as a whole.



Note: The Italian survey did not provide for a differentiation between BA and MA. Therefore, this graph includes those with postgraduate qualifications among BA degree holders, in the case of Italy.

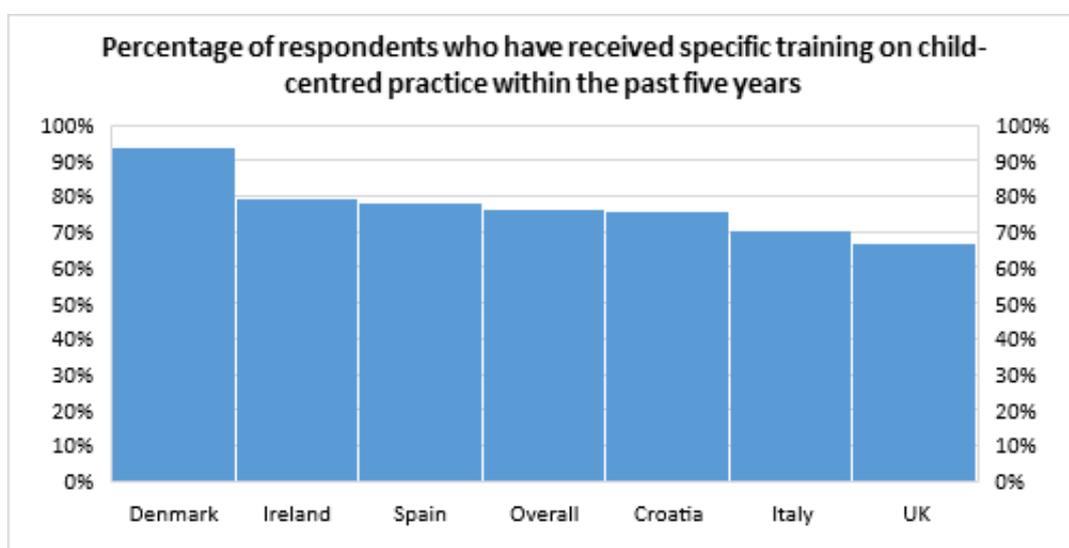
## Child-centredness

When asked if their qualifications have helped them to develop child-centred practice, the vast majority of respondents (83%) responded affirmatively, indicating that their qualification had either helped 'a lot' or 'a moderate amount,' as the following table shows:

**Table 3: Extent to which qualifications have helped staff to develop child-centred practice**

	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Overall
A lot	65%	65%	33%	0%	20%	41%	44%
A moderate amount	29%	26%	43%	100%	56%	40%	39%
A little	6%	6%	16%	0%	23%	18%	15%
Not at all	1%	3%	9%	0%	2%	2%	2%

The proportion of respondents indicating that their qualifications have had positive impacts (as measured by those stating 'a lot' or 'a moderate amount') range from 76% in Italy and Croatia to 100% in Denmark. In contrast, the countries with the highest proportion of participants responding negatively (as measured by those stating 'a little' or 'not at all') is highest in Croatia (25%) and Italy (25%), followed by Spain (20%). While the Croatian responses may be associated with the shorter periods of experience, this factor is, according to the survey, not significant in Italy. Whilst the sample sizes should be considered in reading the data, the results suggest that other factors are driving the relatively lower extent to which Italian educators feel their qualifications help them to develop child-centred practice. For example, in Italy, a relatively low ratio of child-centred practice is promoted in post-secondary degrees. Further, there is no specific curriculum for working with children 0-3 in many University Courses (it is planned to start a specific curriculum in 2020). Both of these potential explanations appear to have some support when considering the lower proportion of Italian workers who have completed specific training on child-centred practice within the past five years, as the following graph illustrates.

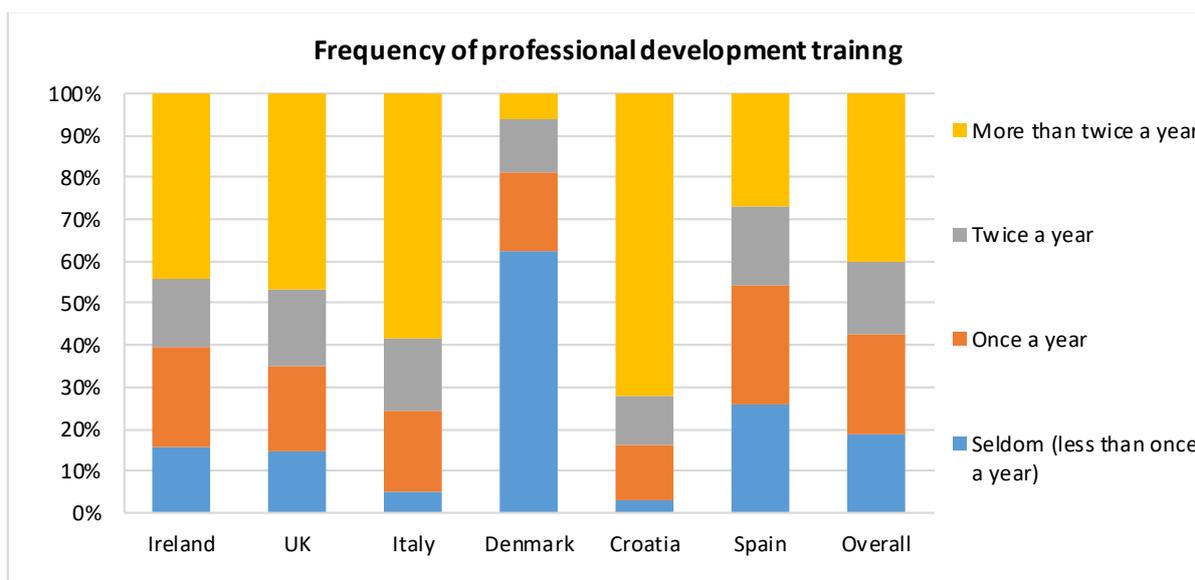


Italy has the second lowest proportion of survey respondents who have undertaken child-centred training in the past five years; the figure there stands at 70%, relative to an overall value of 76% across the six countries. The lowest rate is in the UK (67%), while the highest is in Denmark (94%). The figures will reflect national requirements to undertake (or not) professional development following gaining initial qualifications. The low percentage of respondents who have been on child-centred specific training in the UK could be attributed to both professional development being optional for those working in ECEC and reduced levels of funding to support professional development from central and local government. Reduced funding may mean that educators are more likely to prioritise statutory training. Further, these figures do not preclude other training that may have been provided, such as curriculum development, child health, wellness or other aspects of ECEC.

### Professional Development

There is almost universal agreement among respondents that professional development training is important; 98% indicated that it is either ‘very important’ or ‘important’. Values in Ireland and the UK stand at 99%; 98% in Spain and Croatia; 97% in Italy and 94% in Denmark.

Survey respondents were also asked how frequently they engage in professional development training. As the following graph illustrates, Denmark is the outlier in terms of the responses, and it has the lowest level of frequency. Staff in Croatia (72%) and Italy (59%) are most likely to have training more than twice per year. The response for Denmark maybe explained by the relatively low response rate, whereas in Croatia and Italy, the requirements for professional development will play a part.



The following table synthesises responses in respect of the factors that would motivate those in the sector to engage in professional development training<sup>1</sup>. The factors are listed here in descending

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire stated: What issues might influence your engagement with professional development training? Please select as many as are applicable. A list of options was provided as follows: Focus on improving practice; Motivation to learn; Cost; Timing (in relation to working day); Requirement of Role; Employer incentives; and Frequency of attendance.

order – from the factor that would most influence their decision to engage i.e., ‘focus on improving practice’ to the factor that would least affect their decision i.e., ‘frequency of attendance’. The percentages in the table refer to the proportion of respondents who indicated that a particular factor (on the list in the questionnaire) might influence them.

**Table 4: Issues that might influence engagement with professional development training**

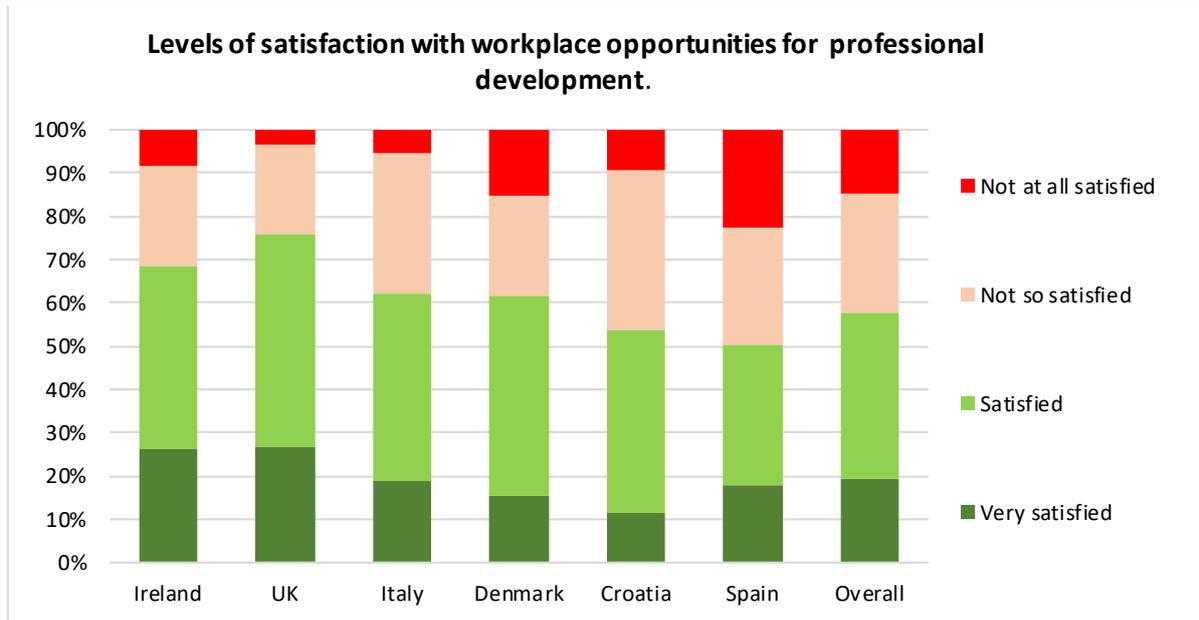
	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Overall
Focus on improving practice	50%	45%	66%	44%	67%	87%	71%
Motivation to learn	43%	30%	53%	44%	57%	88%	66%
Cost	55%	70%	21%	25%	46%	25%	38%
Timing (in relation to working day)	70%	71%	33%	19%	52%	5%	32%
Requirement of Role	35%	30%	24%	63%	25%	12%	22%
Employer incentives	21%	13%	3%	31%	25%	11%	15%
Frequency of attendance	33%	27%	22%	6%	19%	2%	14%

As the table shows, the most significant factor is ‘focus on improving practice’. This was identified by 71% of all respondents as an issue that might influence their engagement in professional development training. It was the most significant factor for both Italian and Croatian respondents and the second-most significant factor for Spanish respondents. Indeed, almost nine in ten (87%) respondents in Spain identified it as an influencing factor. Across the entire sample, the second-most significant factor was ‘motivation to learn’ – identified by two-thirds of all respondents.

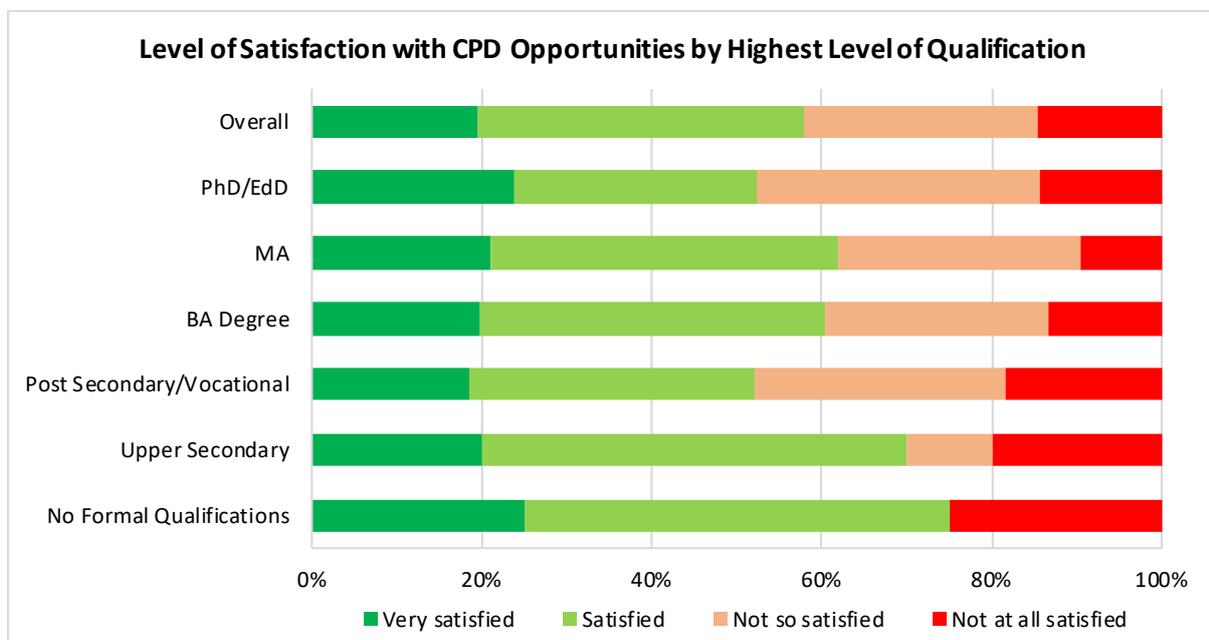
The table identifies considerable cross-country variability in terms of the factors that might influence engagement with training. In Ireland, the most significant factor (identified by 70% of respondents) is ‘timing, in relation to the working day’. This is followed by ‘cost’ (55%) and ‘focus on improving practice’ (50%). In the UK, the ‘timing’ is also the most significant influence (71%), followed by cost (70%) and ‘focus on improving practice’ (45%). For both Ireland and the UK, this could be attributed to the high proportions of private sector providers and market based ECEC provision. The UK has also seen increased pressure on finances and reduced opportunities for training following national austerity measures. Further, the earlier identified financial pressures on ECEC providers in the UK may reduce opportunities for training. In Italy, ‘focus on improving practice’ is most frequently cited (by 66% of respondents), followed by ‘motivation to learn’ (53%). In Denmark, ‘requirement of the role’ is the most significant factor (63%), followed by ‘focus on improving practice’ and ‘motivation to learn’ (44%). The sequence with which factors emerge from the Croatian sample is broadly reflective of the overall pattern across the entire six-country sample; in Croatia, the top two factors are ‘focus on improving practice’ (67%) and ‘motivation to learn’ (57%). These two variables are also the top factors for Spanish respondents, and emerge as being much more significant there than any of the other potential influences.

Respondents were asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with opportunities for professional development training in their workplaces. As the following chart illustrates, the majority (58%) is satisfied – ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’, while 42% are dissatisfied. The highest level of satisfaction (combining the two positive categories) is in the UK (76%), followed by Ireland (69%), Italy and

Denmark (62% each), Croatia (54%) and Spain (50%). In Ireland in 2014, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs introduced a 'Learner Fund' to provide subsidy funding to support educators to obtain a qualification in ECEC. This may account for the satisfaction levels identified in Ireland.



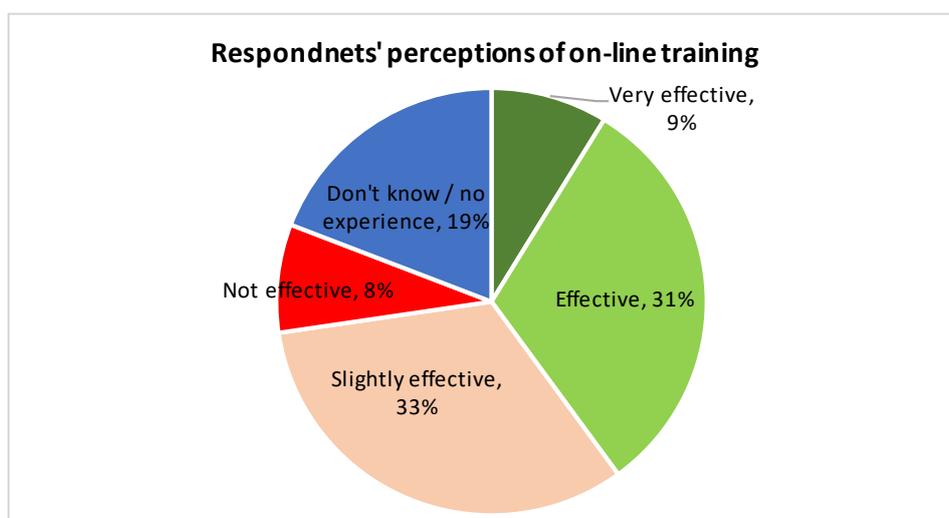
As the following bar graph shows, those with the lowest qualifications are more satisfied with the opportunities for professional development. However, 'level of qualification' is not statistically significant as a determinant of satisfaction levels.



## Online Training and Access to Professional Development

The questionnaire provided opportunities for respondents to expand on their perceptions and recommendations in respect of professional development training. They noted that even when employers have offered training, challenges could arise in respect of getting time off and arranging relief cover. Some suggested that evening / weekend and on-line course would improve access and uptake.

The survey also sought information on respondents' experiences of on-line training. The following pie-chart provides an overview of the responses across respondents from the six countries. This reveals that respondents are almost evenly split in terms of their assessment of on-line training, with 40% stating that they found it 'very effective' or 'effective', while 41% stated that it was 'slightly effective' or 'not effective'.



### Planning for future training and development

In enabling the project partners to plan for the future delivery of training, the survey questionnaire dealt with the potential barriers that might need to be overcome<sup>2</sup>. As the following table shows, 'time' is the most significant barrier to enabling engagement in professional development training. Cost is the second-most significant barrier.

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents were presented with the following question: From the list below, can you identify any barriers for you to engage in professional development training? *Select as many as are applicable.*

**Table 5: Barriers to engagement in professional development training**

Barriers	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Overall
Time	89%	82%	67%	46%	64%	86%	81%
Cost	82%	85%	43%	77%	70%	53%	64%
Lack of information about available training	29%	28%	9%	15%	2%	33%	25%
Accessibility	46%	28%	16%	23%	56%	1%	21%
Transport	14%	15%	7%	31%	18%	17%	16%
Technology	8%	6%	0%	0%	2%	6%	5%
Not motivated to engage	5%	0%	5%	8%	2%	4%	4%
I have sufficient knowledge	2%	2%	3%	8%	0%	1%	1%

As the table shows, there are geographical convergences and divergences in respect of the barriers that would need to be overcome. In Ireland, Spain and Italy, ‘time’ is the most significant barrier – identified by 89%, 86% and 67% of respondents respectively in those three countries. ‘Time’ emerges as the second-most significant barrier in the UK (identified by 82% of respondents there). ‘Cost’ is the most significant barrier in the UK, Denmark and Croatia - followed by time. While ‘time’ and ‘cost’ are the two predominant barriers across all countries, their significance varies geographically. ‘Cost’ is a potential barrier for over three-quarters of respondents in Ireland, the UK and Denmark (the more northerly countries); while in Italy, ‘cost’ was a factor for a minority (43%) of respondents and for a slight majority (53%) in Spain. In Denmark ‘time’ is a factor for a minority (46%) of respondents.

The findings in relation to cost may relate to the different national context and the support that is offered to fund professional development opportunities. For example, in Ireland, it has already been noted that the Learner Fund was introduced. Further, in 2017 a fully funded (LINC) higher education blended-learning programme was designed for workers within the Early Years sector, to promote the inclusion of children with additional needs offering additional opportunities for professional development. In Italy, training is differentially funded in relation to the nature of the services: the public sector provides regular courses as part of the teachers’ professional duties. On the contrary, in the private sector, the teachers often choose and pay for any in-service training courses they consider relevant for their profession.

The following comments from UK-based respondents provide a representative summation of views expressed:

- Opportunities without payment are of little use.
- In this sector, time spent in training is not paid for which I think is unfair but is standard within this sector in this country.
- I have worked in other industries where training is usually always done during working hours, and the course paid for, especially if mandatory for job.
- I am the owner, but like my team, I am restricted by what I can afford to do. [There is the] cost of training but more important, cost of replacing anyone who is doing training.

Similarly, an Irish respondent remarked, “most training relevant to ECCE is on during times when a session is working so staff can't get time off to attend important CPD”.

The third-most significant factor that could be a barrier to engagement in training is 'lack of information about available training.' This is more prevalent in Spain (33%), Ireland (29%) and the UK (28%) than elsewhere. The following comment, from a Spanish respondent captures the changing sets of circumstances that affect access to training, "There was a specific training plan until the year 2015 that no longer exists. Now the training is not centred on 0-3, it is scarce and being in working hours is often not possible to participate". A number of Spanish / Galician respondents also referred to the absence of training opportunities, as one stated rather starkly, "training offers are scarce or practically non-existent". Some also referred to their employers' lack of interest in promoting training. Further analysis of the comments seem to suggest that those working with children 0-3 were more likely to complain about the rates of training. However, it should be noted that funding for training in ECEC has been cut nationally in Spain. Thus whilst local governments may want to or be aware of the need for training, they are often subject to budget cuts 'from above'. Further, it may be that having training that occurs 'off-site' during working hours is a challenge for some educators.

A majority of respondents (56%) in Croatia and almost half (46%) in Ireland identified 'accessibility' as a potential barrier, while this is a consideration for only 1% of respondents in Spain, 16% in Italy and 23% in Denmark. Transport is also a notable factor in Croatia – identified by 31% of respondents, while the corresponding figure across the entire sample is 16%.

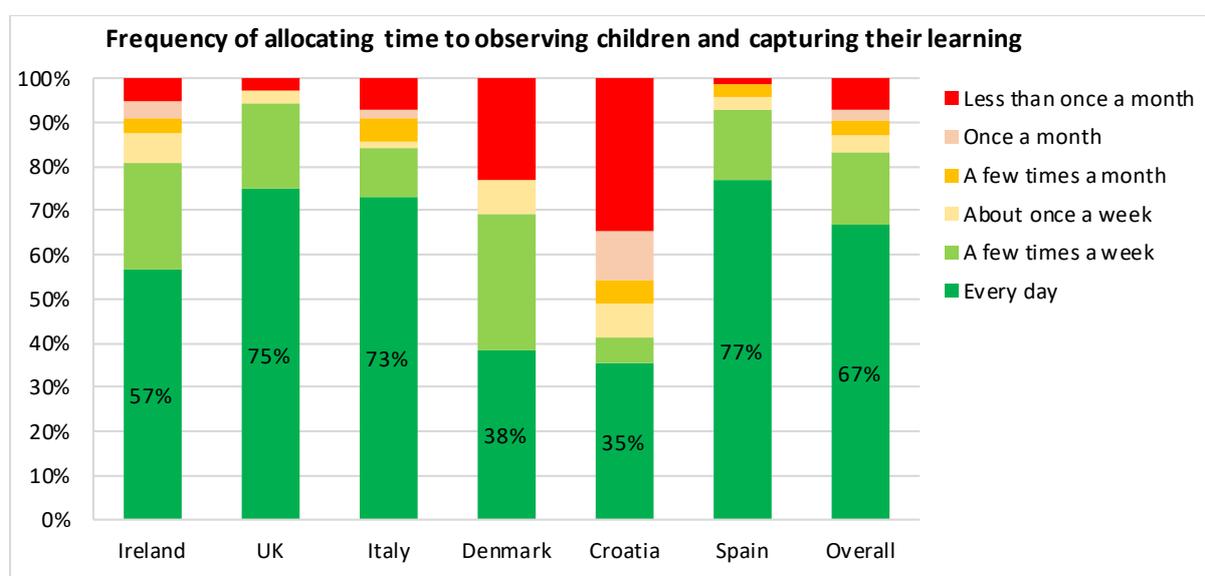
'Technology' is a barrier for 5% of the respondents, with the highest percentage (8%) being in Ireland, followed by the UK and Spain (6%) each. Some Spanish respondents also reported that they are based in rural areas, and can face challenges associated with distance / connectivity in accessing training courses.

The results show that the other options presented to respondents, namely 'lack of motivation' and 'already having sufficient knowledge' are not perceived to be barriers in the rollout of training. A number of respondents in Spain (particularly in Galicia) referred to the barriers faced by those who live / work in rural areas, while other Spanish responses noted how training courses can facilitate professional networking. Galician respondents were statistically more likely to refer to rurality. Respondents from Ireland also raised distance, costs and the lack of broadband. Meanwhile, a number of UK-based providers referred to the changed role of local authorities (LA) in respect of supporting the ECEC sector. As one respondent stated, training "used to be provided by the LA, [but] their role has been reduced to statutory functions only". Others referred to the financial cutbacks imposed on local authorities, and the knock-on effects these have had in reducing the professional development offering. Respondents who were less than satisfied about training opportunities also tended to comment on the quality of programmes on offer. The following statement by one Croatian respondent is typical of such sentiments, there are "very few opportunities for reflecting, commenting on own practice and improving it. Most lectures, workshops, have no continuity in implementation, but they are one-off events".

## Building On and Enhancing Current Practices

The survey elicited information on current practices within childcare settings. Respondents were asked about their engagement with children and about their attitudes towards, and perceptions of children.

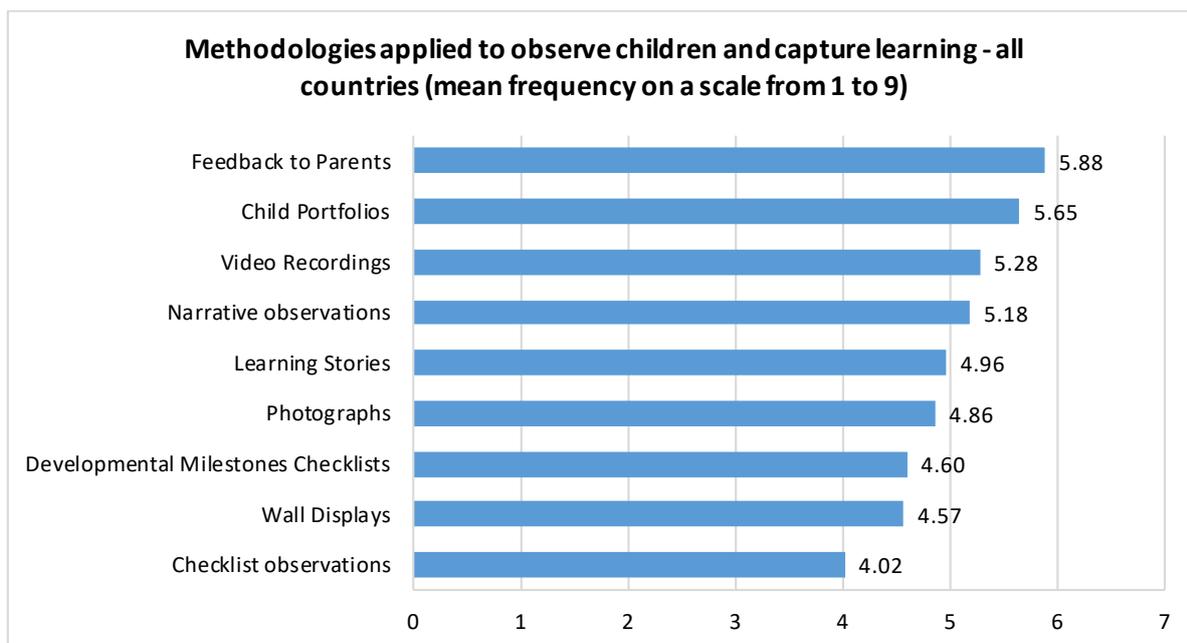
Among the practices about which respondents were asked was the frequency with which they allocated time to observing children and capturing their learning. The responses suggest that in respect of this aspect of engagement with children, practices are broadly similar in the UK, Italy and Spain, with over 70% of respondents observing children and capturing their learning every day. In these three countries and in Ireland, the proportion of respondents who do so on at least a weekly basis stands at over 80%. The survey responses from Denmark and Croatia suggest less frequent engagement in observing children and capturing learning. The results from Croatia seem particularly surprising given that there is an expectation that educators observe everyday and may indicate that educators are demarcating their ‘observations’ by other means and/or terms.



Observation for informing pedagogical practice has a long standing tradition in ECEC. However, the high proportion of staff who report observing children every day in the UK may reflect statutory requirements to record children’s progress and development as a part of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.

The questionnaire also asked about the various methodologies used, and the contexts in which workers observe children and seek to capture their learning. It provided a list of possible contexts (as presented in the following set of graphs), and respondents indicated on a scale from one to nine how frequently, if at all, they apply each of the nine listed methodologies. A score of nine would indicate most frequently chosen method, while a score of one would indicate little or no observation and / or capture of learning using that method. As the following graph shows, across respondents from the six countries covered in this study, the most frequently applied methodology is ‘feedback to parents’ (with a mean frequency score of 5.88). This is followed sequentially by the use of ‘child portfolios’,

‘video recordings’ and ‘narrative observations’. As the graph also shows, ‘checklist observations’ are the least frequently-used approach.



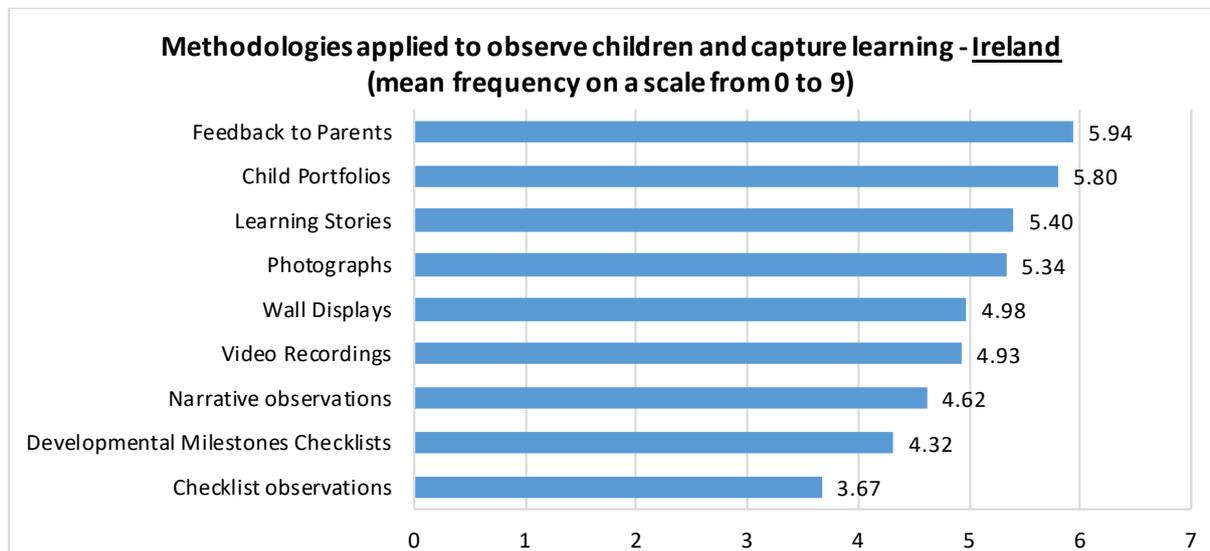
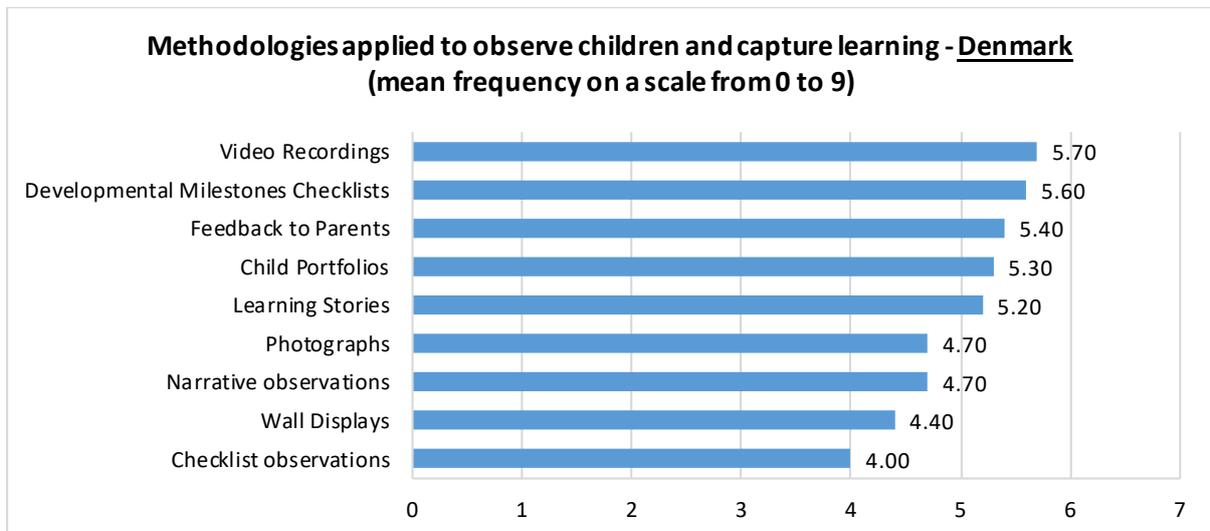
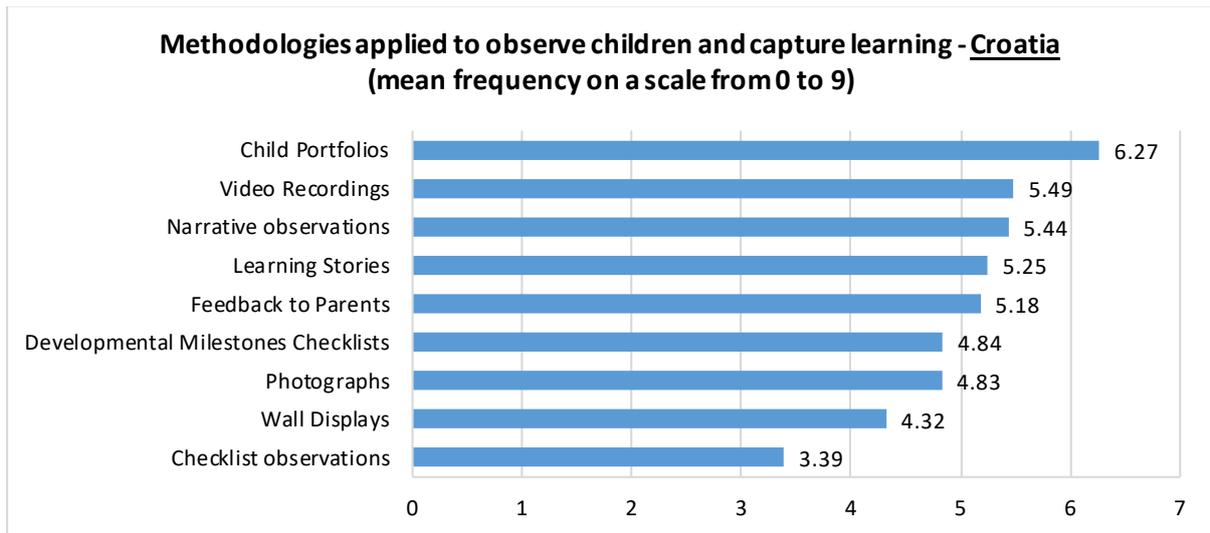
As the following set of graphs shows, there are some inter-country differences with respect to the frequency with which respondents reported applying particular methodologies. In respect of some variables, inter-country differences are statistically significant, but any association between country and methodology applied is generally weak, as the following table shows.

**Table 6: Summary output of crosstabulations between methodology and country**

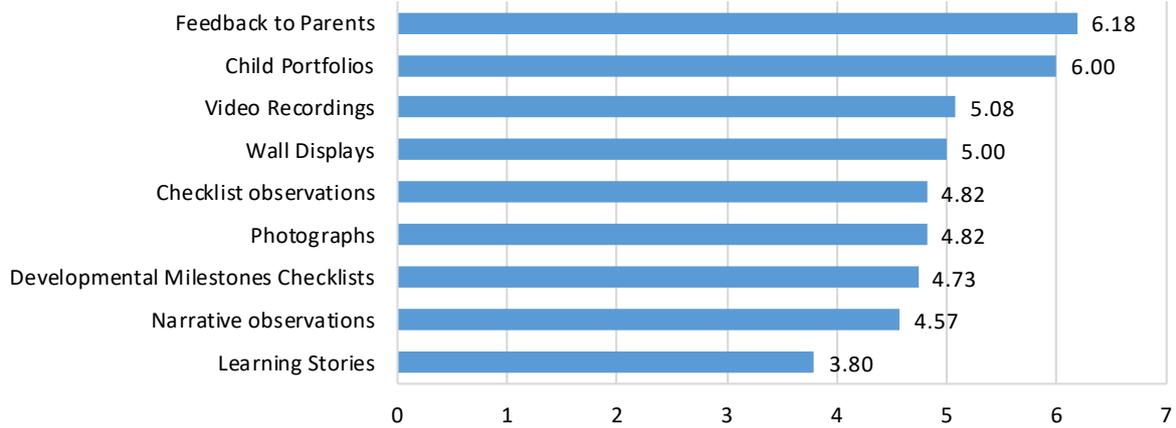
Variables crosstabulated by country	Relationship	Strength of relationship	Cramer's V	Highest frequency	Lowest frequency
Feedback to parents	Significant	Weak	0.307	Italy	Croatia
Child portfolios	Not significant	N/A	N/A	Croatia	Denmark
Video recordings	Not significant	N/A	N/A	Denmark	Ireland
Narrative observations	Significant	Weak	0.154	Croatia	Italy
Learning stories	Significant	Weak	0.136	Ireland	Italy
Photographs	Not significant	N/A	N/A	Ireland	Spain
Developmental milestones	Significant	Weak	0.138	Denmark	Ireland
Wall displays	Significant	Weak	0.124	Italy	UK
Checklist observations	Significant	Weak	0.139	Italy	Croatia

The table shows that in respect of three of the possible methodologies, there is no significant relationship i.e., country has no bearing on respondents' practice / methodologies. Where a relationship was found to exist (in the other six cases), a further set of statistical tests was run to establish the strength of such relationships. In all cases, relationships were weak, indicating that country has some, although little, bearing on the frequency with which the various methodologies are applied.

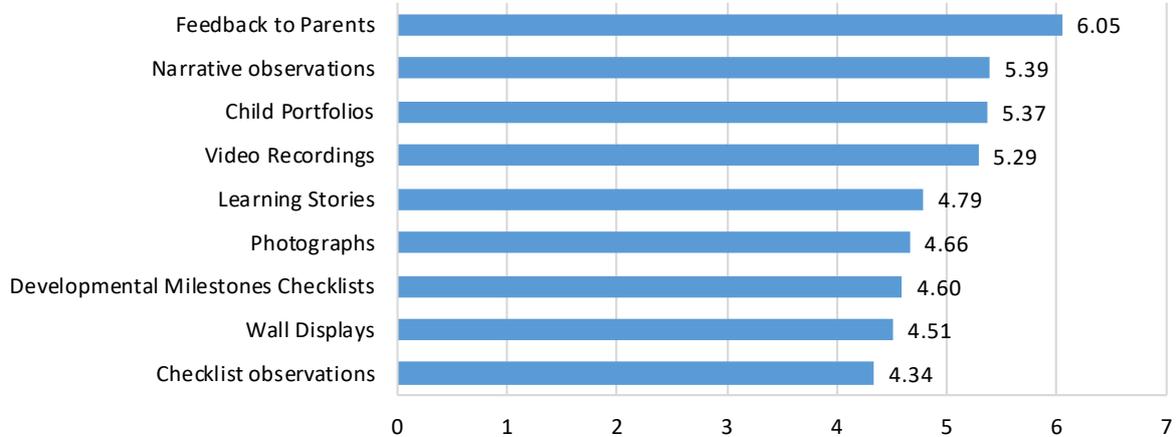
The following set of graphs presents the responses on frequency of application, country-by-country.



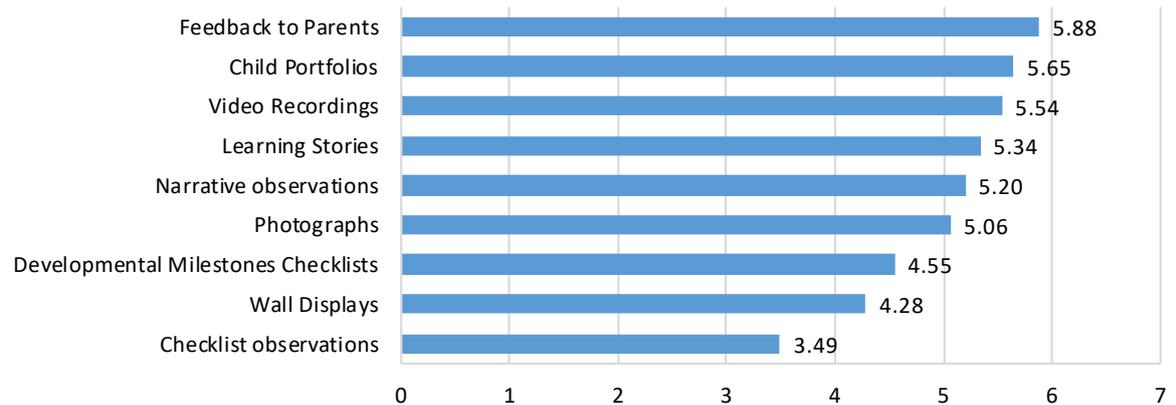
**Methodologies applied to observe children and capture learning - Italy**  
**(mean frequency on a scale from 0 to 9)**



**Methodologies applied to observe children and capture learning - Spain**  
**(mean frequency on a scale from 0 to 9)**

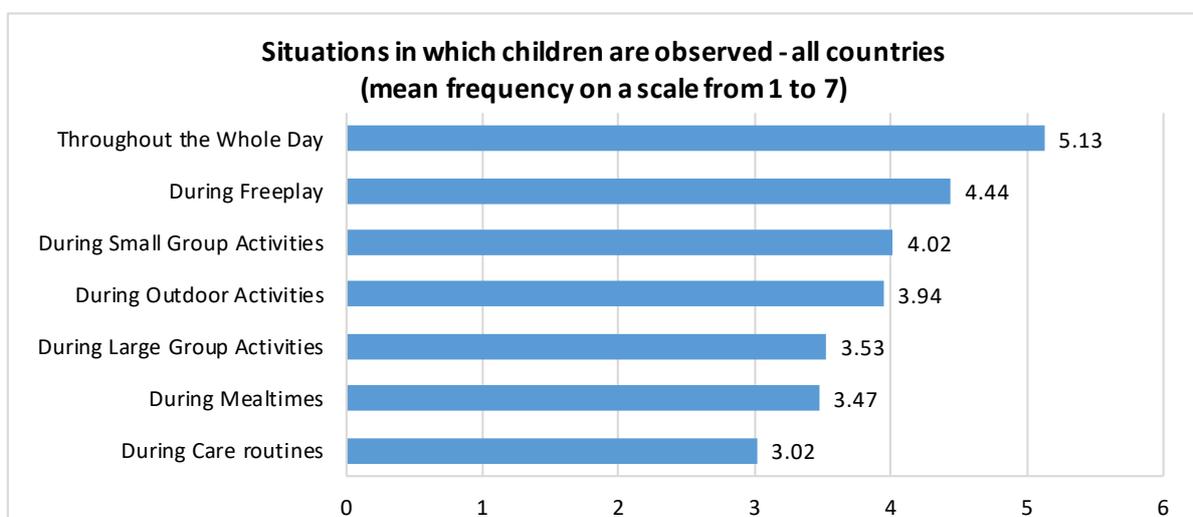


**Methodologies applied to observe children and capture learning - United Kingdom**  
**(mean frequency on a scale from 0 to 9)**



The graphs for the individual countries indicate that across all countries, the difference between the least and most used forms of observation is relatively small, with the averages generally being around five. The findings suggest that educators are adopting a range of approaches to observation and capturing learning.

In addition to exploring the general level of frequency with which workers observe children and capture learning, the questionnaire looked at a range of possible situations in which staff engage with children, and asked them about the frequency with which they undertake observations in these specific contexts. The options presented to respondents were: ‘throughout the whole day’ and six other specific situations namely, during freeplay; during small group activities; during outdoor activities; during large group activities; during mealtimes<sup>3</sup>; and during care routines. The following bar-graph synthesises the responses across the six participating countries. It shows that staff are more inclined to observe children ‘throughout the whole day’ to a greater extent than in any singular context or situation. Of the specific contexts presented in the survey questionnaire, the one in which staff most frequently observe children is ‘during freeplay’; this is followed by ‘during small group activities’ and ‘during outdoor activities’. They are least likely to engage in observation during ‘care routines’.



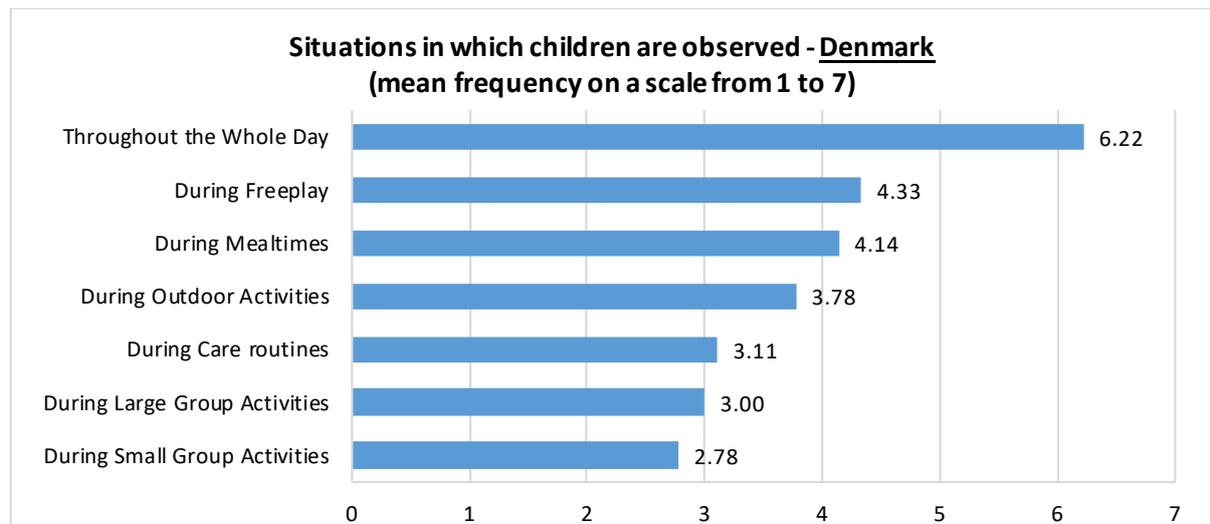
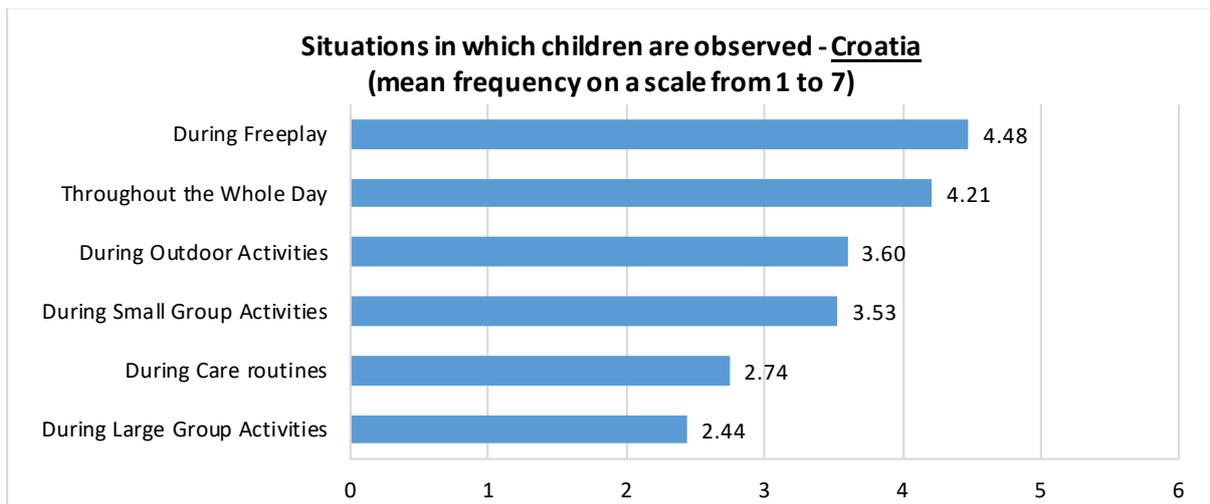
As was the case with the previous set of questions (general frequency of observation), there are some inter-country differences in respect of the situations in which respondents reported that observation happens. As already noted, practice reported by Croatian respondents tends to avoid observing children during mealtimes. In general, however, country is only a weak determinant of respondents’ practice in respect of where and when children are observed. The following table synthesises a set of crosstabulations that was undertaken to check for any influence of country on observation settings.

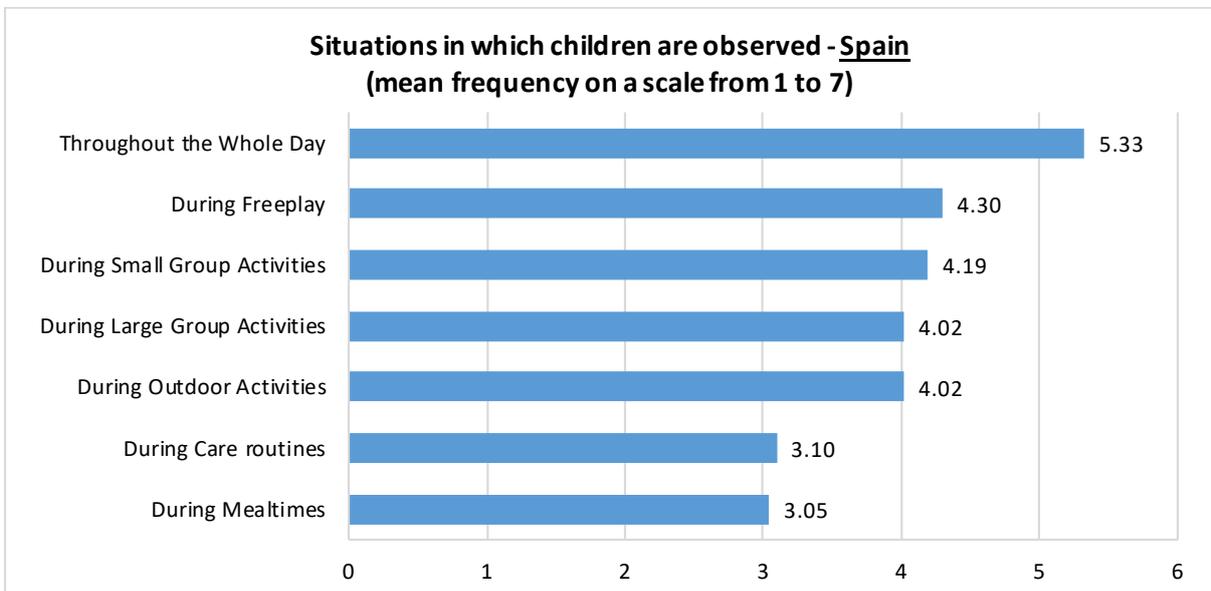
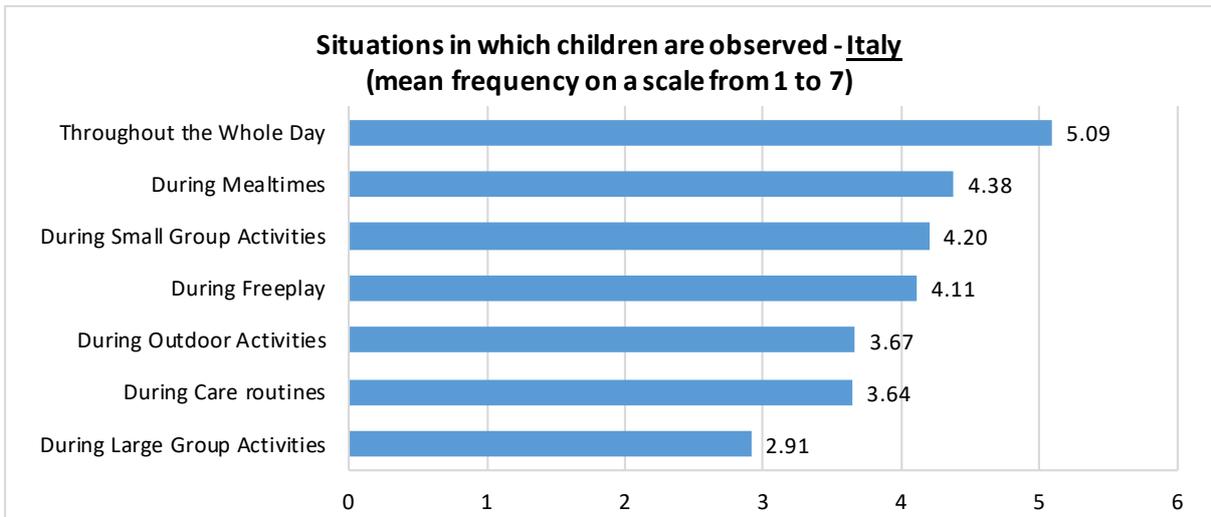
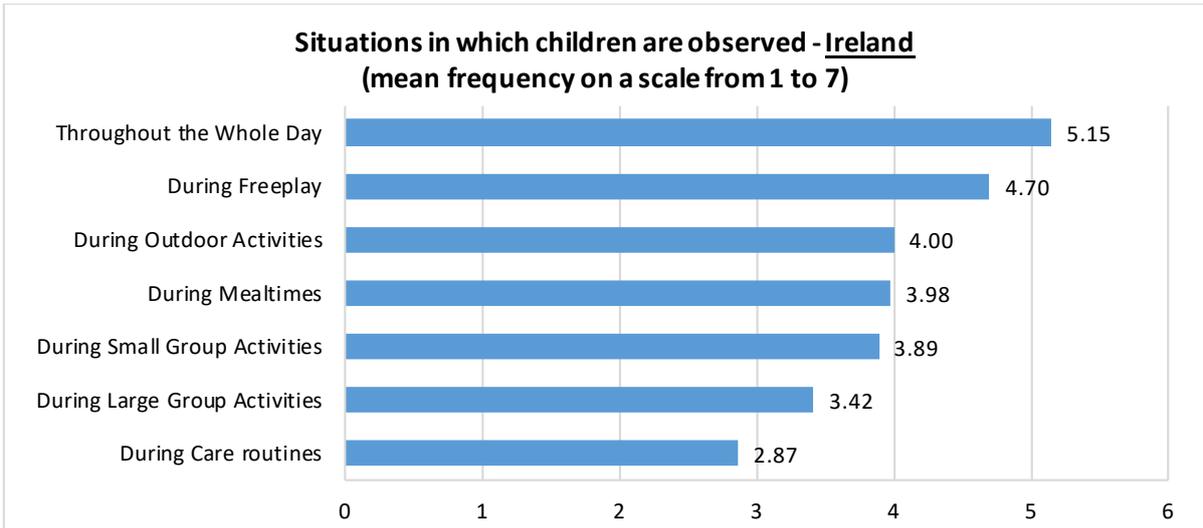
<sup>3</sup> At the request of the Croatian partners, this was excluded from the Croatian questionnaire.

**Table 7: Summary output of crosstabulations between observation contexts and country**

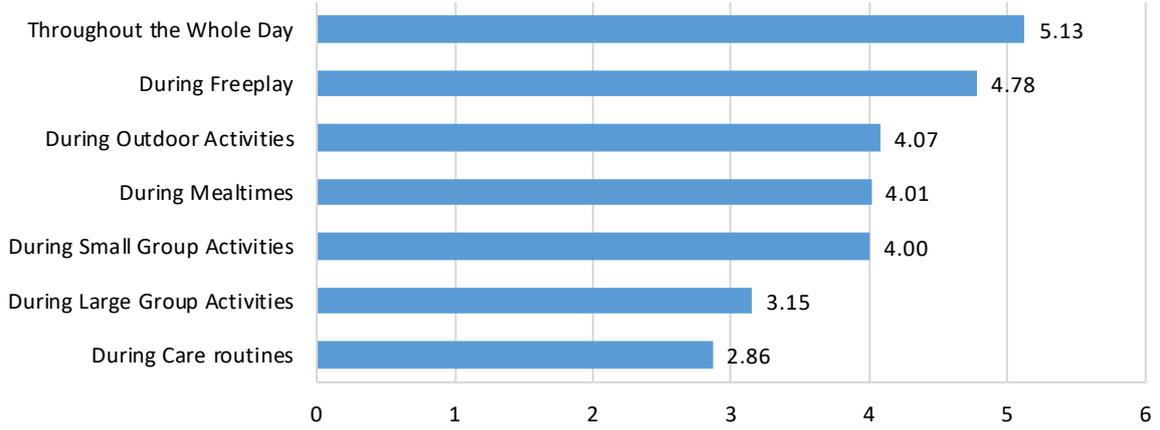
Variables crosstabulated by country	Relationship	Strength of relationship	Cramer's V	Highest frequency	Lowest frequency
Throughout the whole day	Significant	Weak	0.253	Denmark	Croatia
During freeplay	Significant	Weak	0.133	UK	Italy
During small group activities	Significant	Weak	0.149	Italy	Denmark
During outdoor activities	Not significant	N/A	N/A	UK	Croatia
During large group activities	Significant	Weak	0.172	Spain	Croatia
During mealtimes	Significant	Weak	0.199	Italy	Spain
During care routines	Significant	Weak	0.17	Italy	Croatia

The following set of graphs presents the responses on observation contexts and approaches, country-by country.



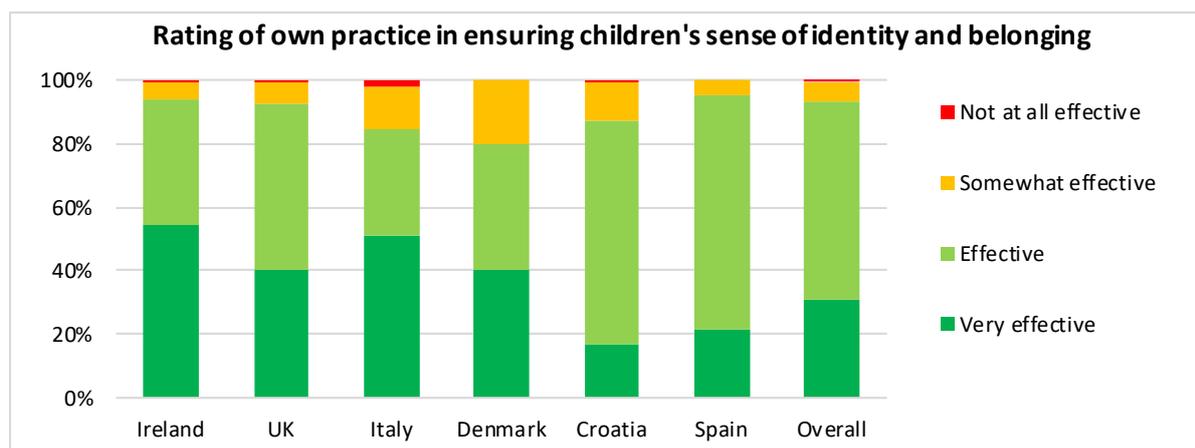


**Situations in which children are observed - United Kingdom  
(mean frequency on a scale from 1 to 7)**



## Concepts of Child-centredness

Respondents were also asked to reflect on their own practice and to assess its effectiveness in ensuring children's sense of identity and belonging. As the following graph illustrates, the vast majority of workers, across all six countries, have a positive perception of their effectiveness in this regard. On average, 92% of respondents believe their own practice to be either 'very effective' or 'effective'. Values are slightly higher in Spain, Ireland and the UK, than in Italy, Croatia and Denmark. As was the case in respect of the responses to the previous question (on practice), this may be due, in part, to the relatively small size of the Danish sample.



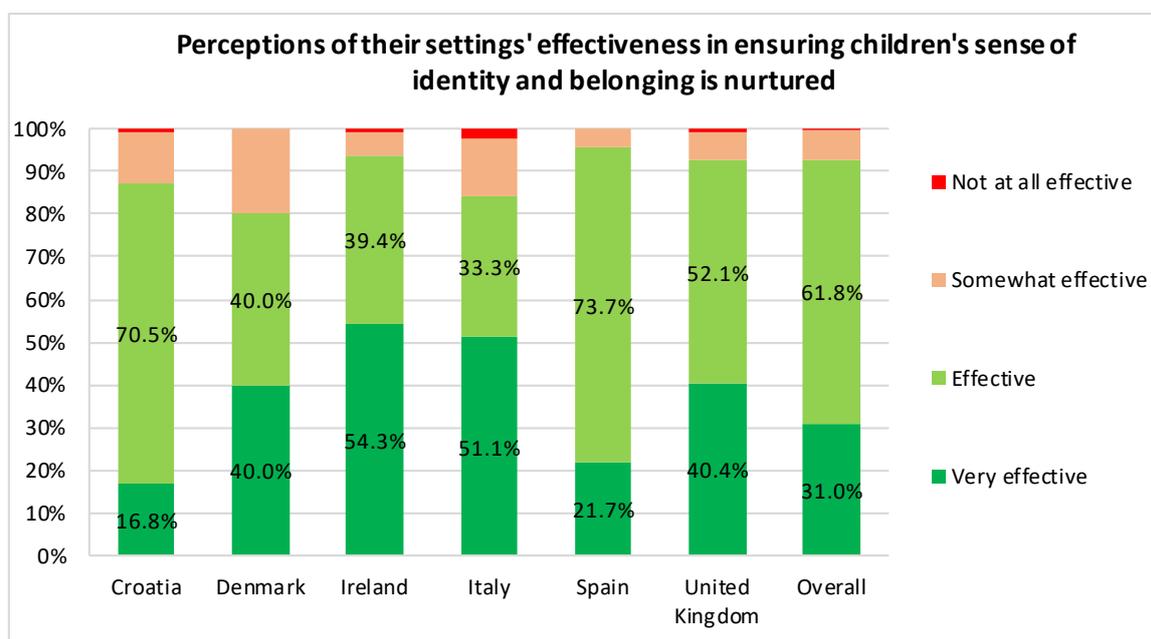
When invited to comment on their answers, a number of respondents referred to the factors that promote and support children's individuality. These included the following: the scale and ethos of the setting, collaboration among staff, partnership / relationship with parents and catering for children with special needs. As one respondent noted, "a small setting definitely helps promote children's individuality and identity alongside feeling welcome and belonging". Other emblematic comments were as follows: "we try to be child-lead, child-centred - with the children taking ownership of their environment and the activities that they want to do" and "all children's families and communities are positively acknowledged and welcomed. Children experience learning opportunities based on their interests and linked to the home. Within our centre, children learn to understand the rules and boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour and to respect needs, rights and beliefs". Another remarked, "we aim to find out as much as we can about the child and their family and use this in our setting". This statement echoes a comment from Italy: "the relationship is a fundamental part of our educational practice... among them, with the parents and with the other adults in the child's life. But also, the relationship between... families themselves. We support the relationship as a necessary tool for learning, and therefore for the development of each one's identity and the sense of belonging to the group". The influence of curricular and methodological approaches is evident in a number of comments, including this observation from Ireland, "identity and belonging are visible in our Centre through our displays, which our parents and children contribute to. We use *Aistear* and *Síolta*<sup>4</sup> and

<sup>4</sup> *Aistear* is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. *Síolta* is the National Quality Framework for the Early Years in Ireland. Information about *Aistear* and *Síolta* is available from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: <https://www.ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/aistear-siolta-practice-guide>

make the links for all to see”. Another Irish respondent referred to the Better Start<sup>5</sup> Initiative, and the desirability of being more inclusive of ethnic minorities, such as Irish Travellers.

Respondents also noted the need to be ever attentive to this aspect of their work, and some comments referred to the importance of paying greater attention to inclusion and diversity and to interacting with families. As one respondent noted, “there is always room for improvement, and increased capitation to reduce staff child ratios would certainly help”. Similarly, a Galicia-based respondent commented, “I think it can always be improved. They are young children who are beginning relationships with others and becoming aware of their identity. Work on empathy, the help between them and not always on the part of the adult, the recognition of emotions, the respect, the calm, the dialogue as much with the speech as physically. Help them understand the respect for both themselves and others”. Respondents, from across all countries, commented on the importance of on-going professional development and investment in staffing. As one respondent noted, “you can always move forward and improve, always... this attitude of respect and consideration already implies an inclusion and promotion of one's own identity”.

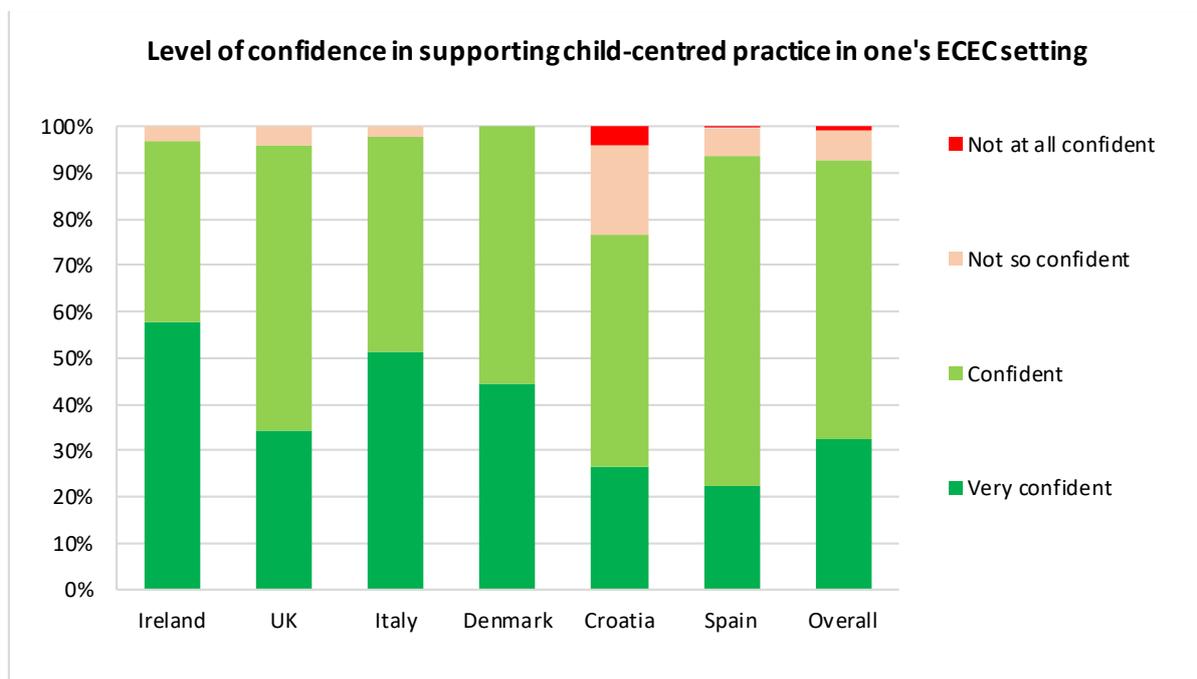
The majority of respondents (93%) believed that their setting is either effective or very effective in ensuring that children's sense of identity and belonging is nurtured. The following graph shows the responses by country. The highest percentage is in Spain (95.4%), while Ireland and the UK also record rates that are in excess of 90%.



As the following graph shows, survey respondents exhibit a high level of confidence in their ability to support child-centred practices in their own ECEC settings, with 93% stating that they are either ‘very confident’ or ‘confident’. As the graph illustrates, the level of confidence is almost universally high across respondents from different countries, although it is lowest in Croatia, where 19% of

<sup>5</sup> Better Start Quality Development Service is a national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in Early Years Education and Care (ECEC). Information is available on: <https://betterstart.pobal.ie/Pages/Home.aspx>

respondents stated that they are ‘not so confident’ and a further 4% stated that they are ‘not at all confident.’ Age and experience may be determinants of these sentiments, because, as noted earlier, ECEC staff in Croatia are generally younger and have less experience in the sector than is the case in the other five countries included in this survey.



The following two crosstabulation tables show the relationship between ‘level of confidence’ and ‘age cohort’ (of respondent) and ‘years of experience working in an ECEC setting’. They suggest that older and more experienced personnel are more confident. The findings suggest that any training around child-centred practice should be targeted at those who have less experience in the sector and that the notion of more confident and experienced educators working with those who are less experienced is not inconsistent with this.

**Table 8: Age Cohort by How confident do you feel you are in terms of supporting child-centred practice in your ECEC setting?**

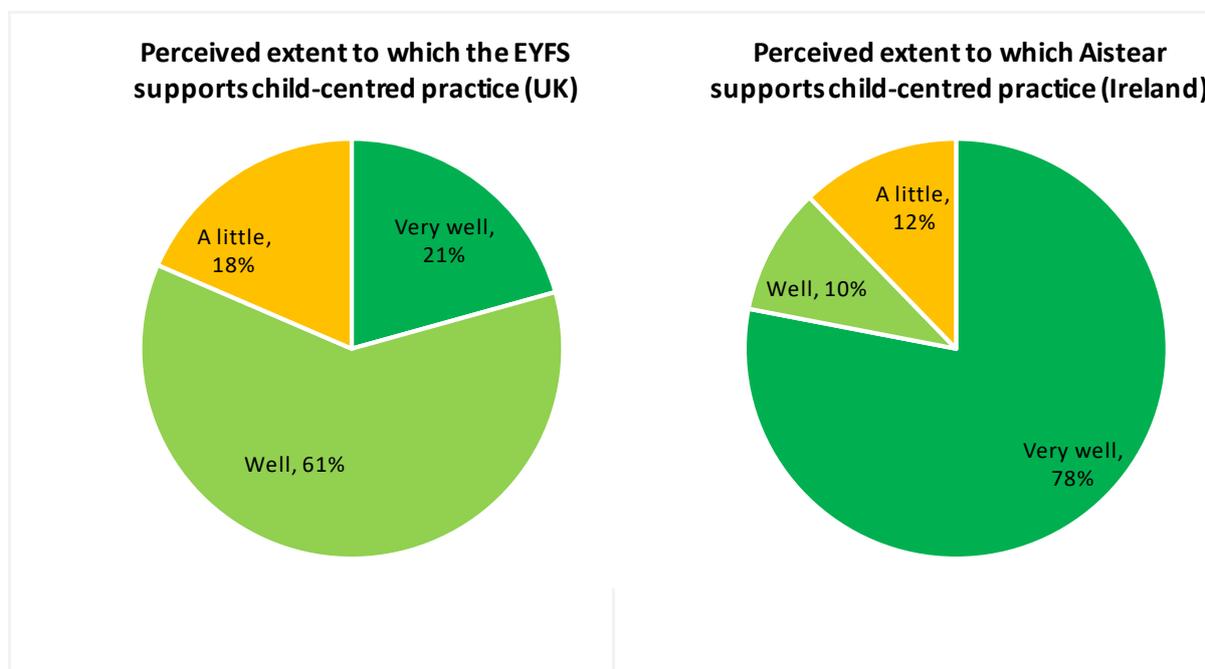
	20 to 30 years old	31 - 40 years old	41 - 50 years old	51 + years old	All age cohorts
<b>Very confident</b>	29.1%	28.1%	33.9%	41.1%	32.5%
<b>Confident</b>	61.2%	62.2%	61.2%	53.2%	60.0%
<b>Not so confident</b>	8.7%	8.6%	4.5%	5.7%	6.8%
<b>Not at all confident</b>	1.0%	1.1%	0.4%		0.7%

**Table 9: Years of Experience by How confident do you feel you are in terms of supporting child-centred practice in your ECEC setting?**

	<b>up to 1 year</b>	<b>1 - 2 years</b>	<b>2 - 5 years</b>	<b>5 to 10 years</b>	<b>more than 10 years</b>	<b>All Respondents</b>
<b>Very confident</b>	39.1%	28.0%	25.0%	25.9%	36.6%	32.5%
<b>Confident</b>	34.8%	56.0%	65.2%	65.1%	58.5%	60.0%
<b>Not so confident</b>	21.7%	16.0%	9.8%	7.2%	4.7%	6.8%
<b>Not at all confident</b>	4.3%			1.8%	0.2%	0.7%

## Country Specific Questions

The survey questionnaire included country-specific questions in respect of curricula. UK-based respondents were asked to comment on the extent to which the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (EYFS) supports child-centred practice<sup>6</sup>. Ireland-based respondents were asked the same question in respect of *Aistear*. The following pie-charts present the results.



The respective responses from Ireland and the UK may reflect the extent with which the curriculums have been contested in their respective countries. In the UK, the EYFS has been the attention of significant debate, whereby there are concerns that there is a loss of a play-based philosophy in favour of more formal approaches to learning, particularly for children accessing their ECEC entitlement in a reception class in a school (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). (Also see the later section [Values and Perceptions](#)). Debates on the curriculum in Ireland are less pronounced, with the addition of a positive outlook on how the perspectives of educators were taken into account when developing it.

*Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. Aistear describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding) that are important for children in their early years and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. Traditionally Irish ECE provision had many curricular approaches, still has, however Aistear*

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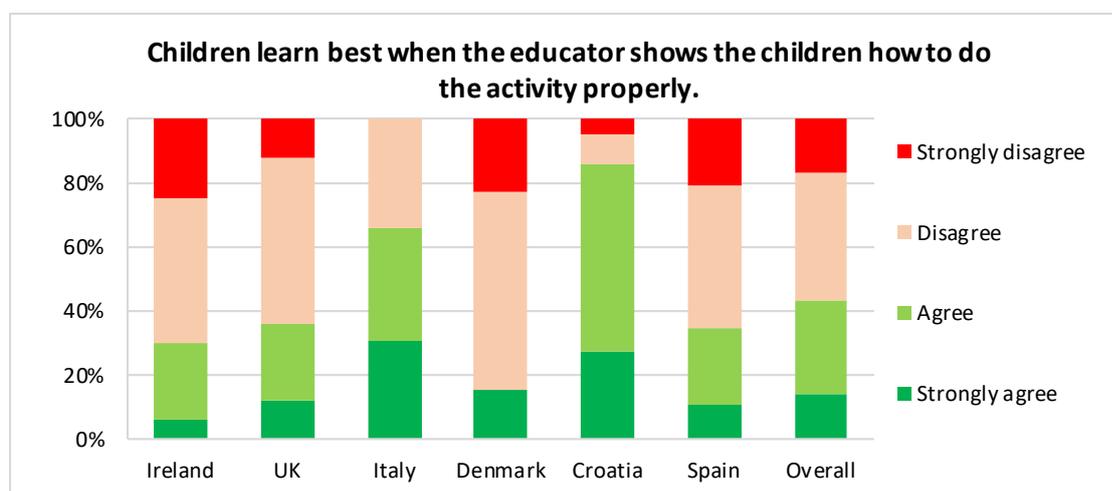
<sup>6</sup> The Early Years Foundation Stage applies to England only, with Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all having the own curricula. However, given how the questionnaire was disseminated, it is anticipated that many of the respondents were English.

*brought various elements of each together in an approach that had play at its heart. Aistear comes with a set of resources (on-line) which educators can use, a practice guide was developed and it showed examples of evidence based practice, how to relate theory to practice and gave guidance to ECE settings who's philosophy was play based.*

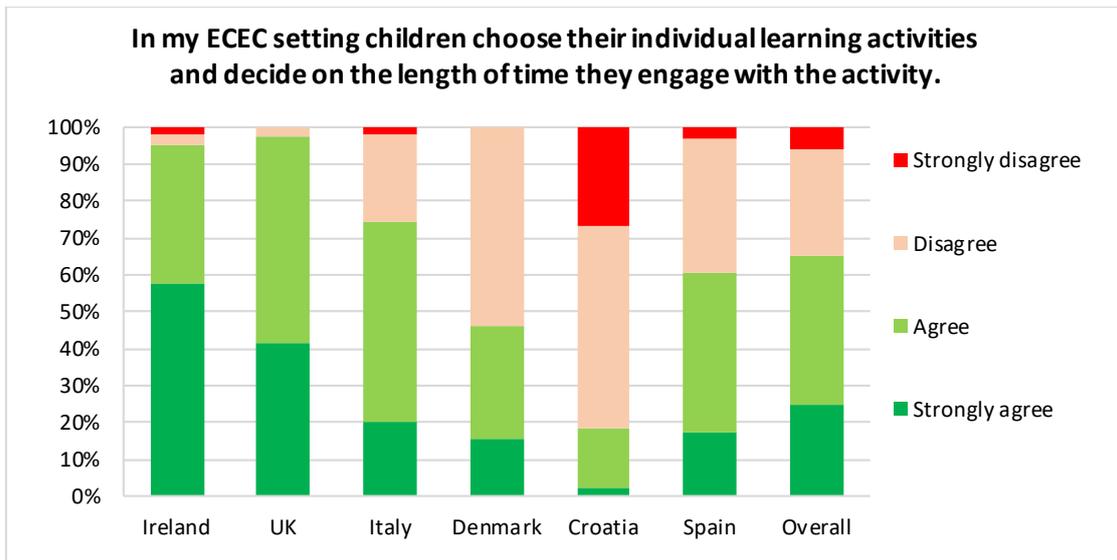
(NCCA, 2019)

The survey also examined practitioners' attitudes to ways in which children learn. To this end, the questionnaire included a series of statements, and respondents were invited to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The following set of graphs presents the results by country.

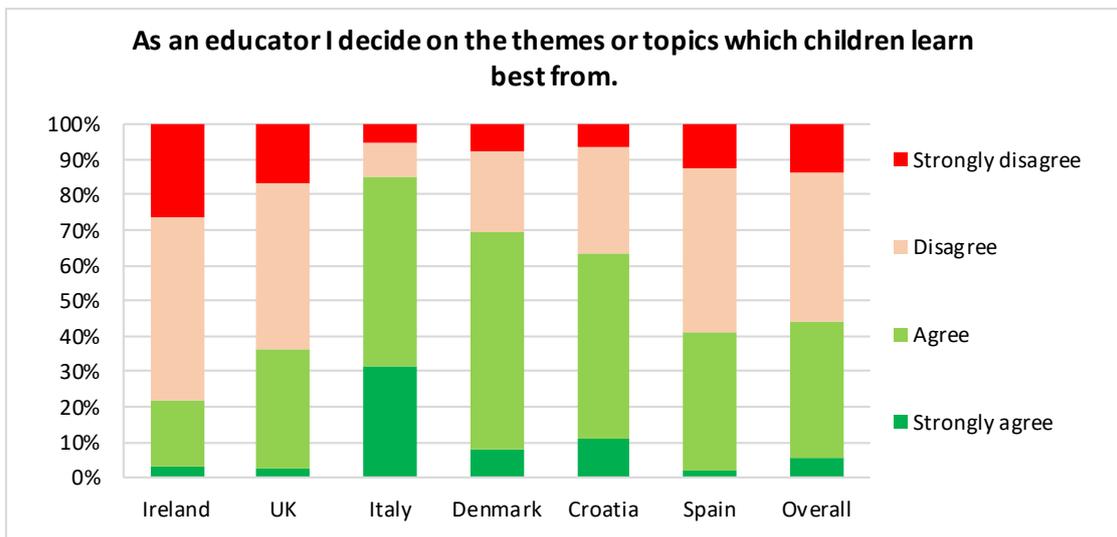
When asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Children learn best when the educator shows the children how to do the activity properly', respondents were rather divided; 43% agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 57% disagree – 17% of them strongly. Levels of agreement were highest among respondents from Italy (66%) and lowest in Denmark (15%), Ireland (30%), Spain (35%) and the UK (36%). The high response in Italy may reflect that there are many different pedagogical philosophies found across the country and that child-centred may be differentially interpreted. Whilst the Reggio Emilia approach has found international recognition for its support of child-led explorations, in many other settings children choose from parallel play routines.



There was also considerable dispersion in respect of responses to the statement 'In my ECEC setting children choose their individual learning activities and decide on the length of time they engage with the activity', as the following graph illustrates. Almost two-thirds of respondents agree with this statement. Levels of agreement are highest, and they exceed 95% in both Ireland and the UK, and stand at 74% in Italy. In contrast, only a minority of respondents in Denmark (46%) and Croatia (18%) agree with it. Just under two thirds (65%) of Spanish respondents agree.

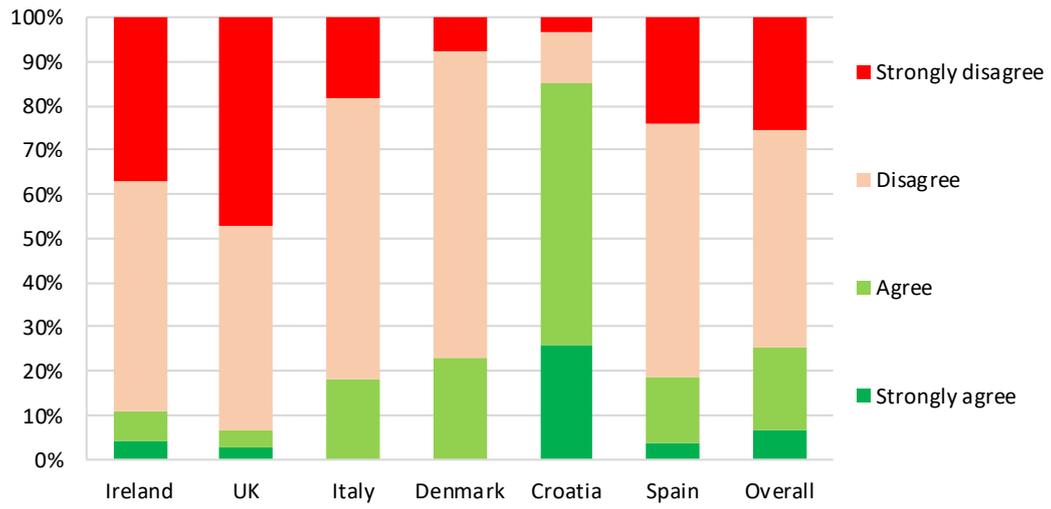


As shown in the following graph, a slight majority (56%) of respondents disagree with the statement ‘As an educator I decide on the themes or topics which children learn best from’. Levels of disagreement are highest in Ireland (78%), the UK (64%) and Spain (58%). In contrast, the majority of respondents in Italy, Croatia and Denmark agree with it. Levels of agreement (combining ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’) are as follows: Italy (85%), Denmark (69%) and Croatia (63%).



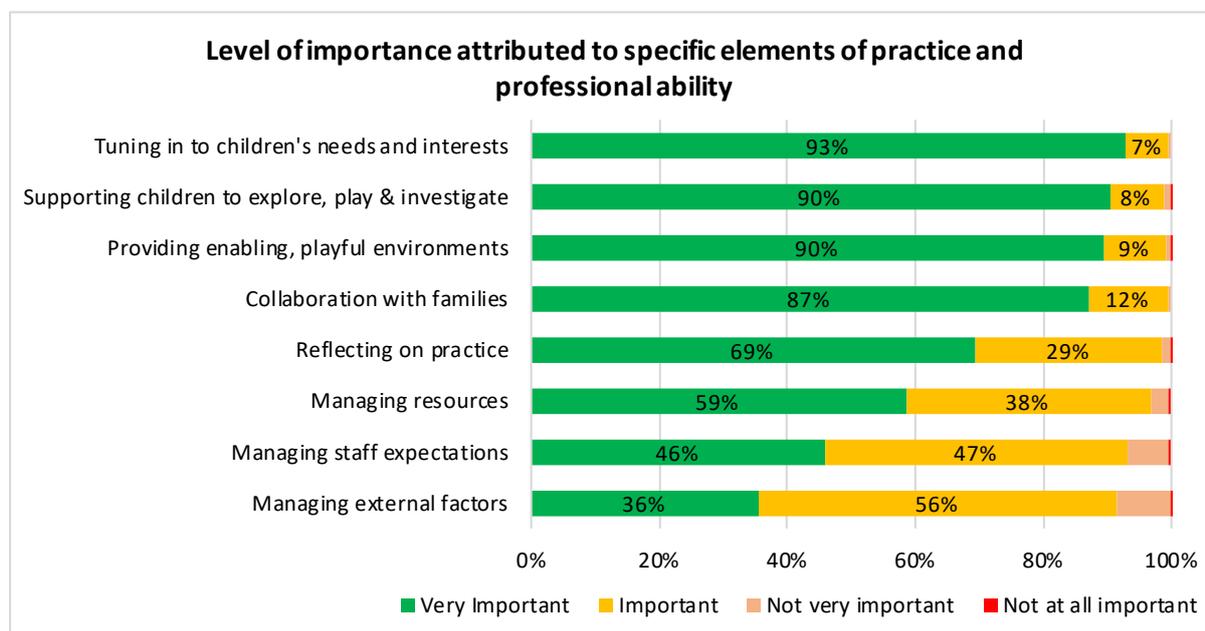
The following graph indicates greater cross-country convergence – with the exception of respondents from Croatia – in respect of the statement: ‘All of my ECEC setting activities are whole group activities’. One quarter (25%) of respondents agree with this statement. In Croatia, the level of agreement stands at 85% (more than three times the survey average), while in the other countries, the corresponding values are as follows: Denmark 23%, Spain 19%, Italy 18%, Ireland 11% and the UK 6%. In the UK, almost half of all respondents (47%) strongly disagree with this statement.

**All of my ECEC setting activities are whole group activities.**



## Promoting Child-centred practice

In further exploring the methodologies that pertain in ECEC settings and the capacity of staff to promote child-centred practices, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the level of importance they attribute to various tasks and approaches. The following graph captures the responses across the entire survey sample. In respect of each variable, inter-country differences are not significant.

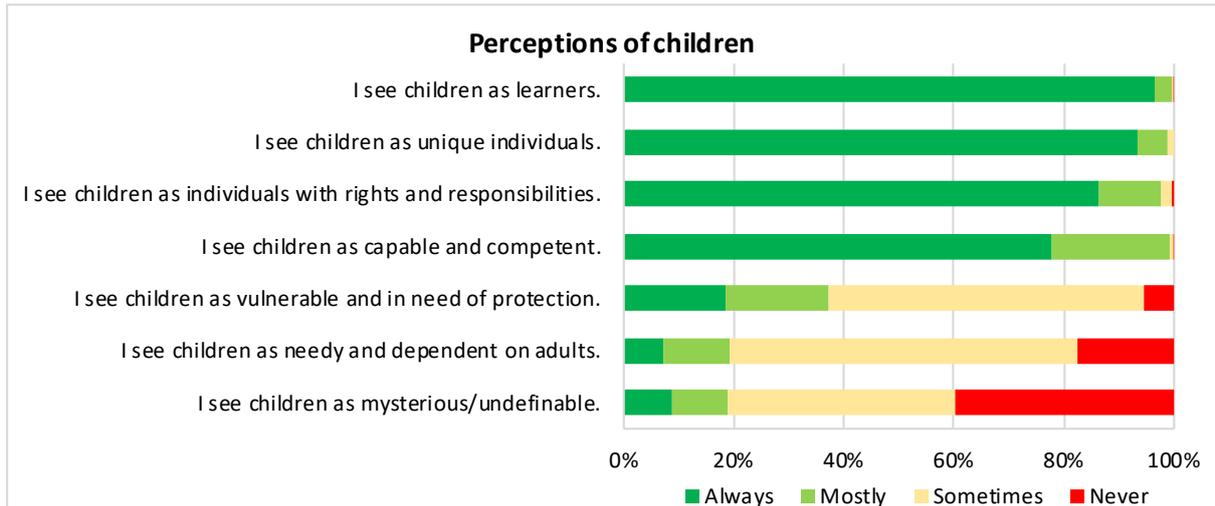


As the graph clearly illustrates, the vast majority of respondents attribute a high level of importance to 'tuning in to children's needs and interests', 'supporting children to explore, play and investigate' and 'providing enabling, playful environments.' At least 90% of respondents consider these to be very important. Just under 90% (87%) view 'collaboration with families' as being very important. Over two-thirds (69%) perceive 'reflecting on practice' to be very important. As comments provided towards the end of the survey questionnaire revealed, this figure might be higher were staff to have more time for reflection. The final three aspects – all relating to management (resources, staff expectations and external factors) relate more directly to supervisors and centre managers than to hands-on educators.

### Values and Perceptions

The survey included a series of statements (developed following the discussion of observation data) to which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (on a scale as follows: always; mostly; sometimes; never). The results demonstrate that almost all respondents – either always or mostly - perceive children as:

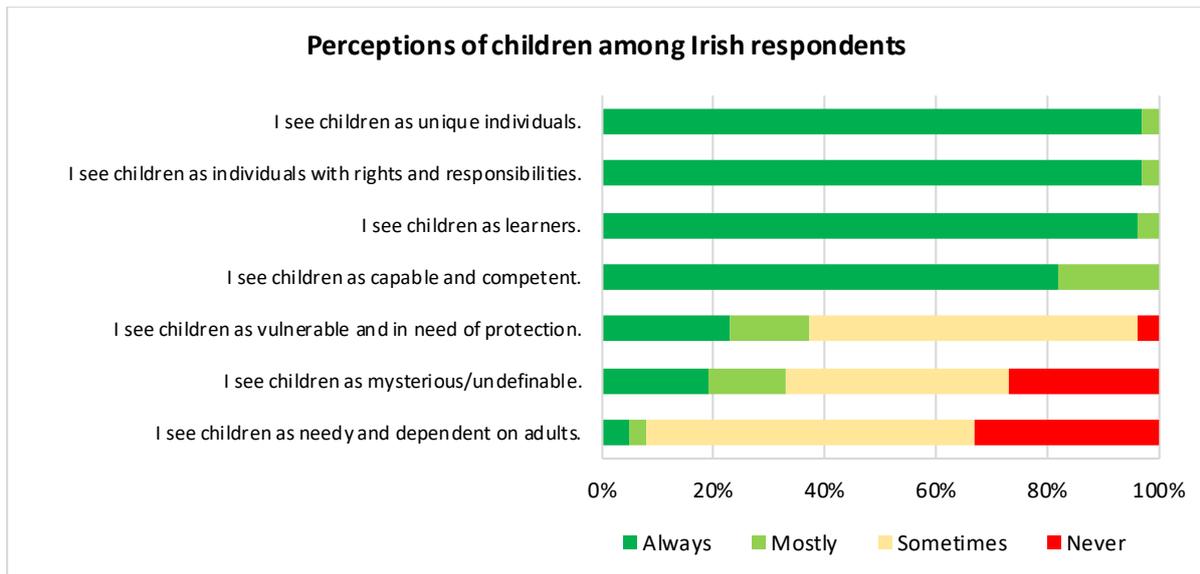
- learners;
- unique individuals;
- individuals with rights and responsibilities; and
- as being capable and competent.



The results also reveal that over one-third (37%) of respondents either always or mostly, perceive children to be vulnerable and in need of protection. A further 57% believe that children are ‘sometimes’ vulnerable and in need of protection. Fewer than 20% of respondents see children as ‘needy and dependent on adults’ or as being ‘mysterious / undefinable’. Almost 40% of respondents believe that children are never ‘mysterious / undefinable’. The differentiation in the responses indicates that respondents were thinking about the questions, offering confidence in the findings.

When asked to expand on their views of children, some respondents questioned the wording of the indicators. As one UK-based respondent stated, “children always need protection and safeguarding, but that doesn't mean all children are in a vulnerable position. Children should always be capable and competent, but some have been taught to rely on parents / carers to do things for them and there will always be things that children may need help with while they are learning to do things independently”.

The following series of bar graphs presents the country-level responses in respect of respondents’ perceptions of children. These reveal that there are no significant differences between countries. The bar graphs are interspersed with comments that respondents made. These qualitative data complement the quantitative data presented in the graphs.



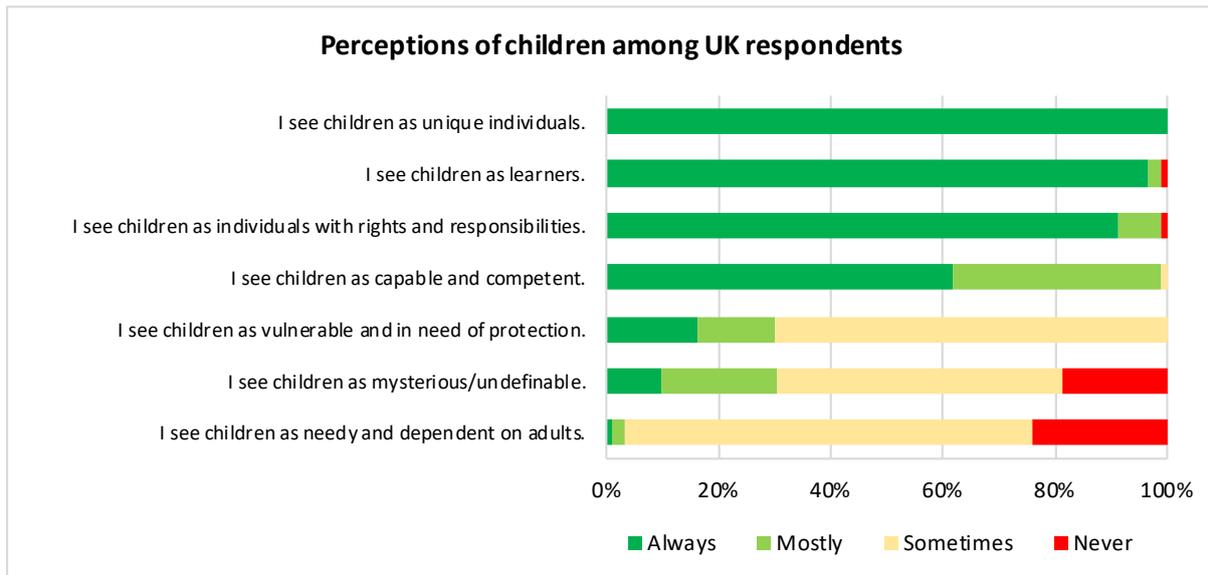
The Irish responses are consistent with those of the dataset as a whole. They reveal that over 90% of workers always see children as unique individuals, as persons with rights and responsibilities and as learners. Over 80% always see children as being capable and competent, with the remainder (18%) reporting that they mostly see children in this light. Over half (59%) report that they sometimes view children as being vulnerable and in need of protection, while 23% always see children in this light, and 14% mostly see them as such. One in three (33%) of respondents perceive children to be mysterious / undefinable – either always or mostly, while a further 27% never see children in this light. Irish respondents are not inclined to see children as needy and dependent on adults, with 33% claiming that they are never as such, and 59% report that they sometimes see children in this light.

One summative comment noted that

*“I believe that child-centred practice is very important. All children are different, have different interests and learn in different ways. Adults have a wealth of knowledge and information to share with children and need to find appropriate opportunities to do this. Young children need to play for their well-being and to support their holistic development. This is the most important part of child centred practice. Fun and happiness are just as (or more) important as learning. When children are busy and happy they are naturally learning”.*

In their comments, Irish respondents referred to the child to staff ratios and the need for greater government investment in the sector. As one stated, “it can also be quite challenging if the majority of children are young in a room with 22 children. However, it is important to reflect and make changes to support the different types of play and different stages of development”. Another specifically recommended that, “the staff to child ratio should be put back to one staff member for 8 children, which would support child-led practice - enabling educators to facilitate each child's emerging interests”. Several respondents commented on the challenges associated with catering for mixed aged groups, particularly given the near universal rollout of the ECCE (free pre-schooling), as one comment stated, “we do not work alone. What I think, know or believe has to be put in the context of the setting and of Irish Early Years, with its focus on private settings. I find this focus partially incompatible with child-centred approaches”.

The following bar graph presents the views of UK-based respondents.



Responses from the UK cohort are broadly similar to those derived from the six-country sample. They reveal that ECEC workers almost universally perceive children to be unique individuals, learners and persons with rights and responsibilities – always. Almost all respondents perceive children to be capable and competent; 62% always see children as such, with a further 37% doing so mostly. The importance of play and creativity comes across in a number of comments from the UK. One respondent outlined that, “I feel it is the practitioner’s responsibility to provide a playful environment with activities which encourage children to be active and curious learners. When the staff know the children well, they are able to provide activities which interest the child so that they are able to learn”. There is also an emphasis on empowerment, as indicated by the following comment: “we, as a setting, believe very strongly in following the children’s lead, and plan around this. The children’s needs, wellbeing and learning are at the centre of everything we do within the school and we invite and encourage their families and carers to be a part of this”.

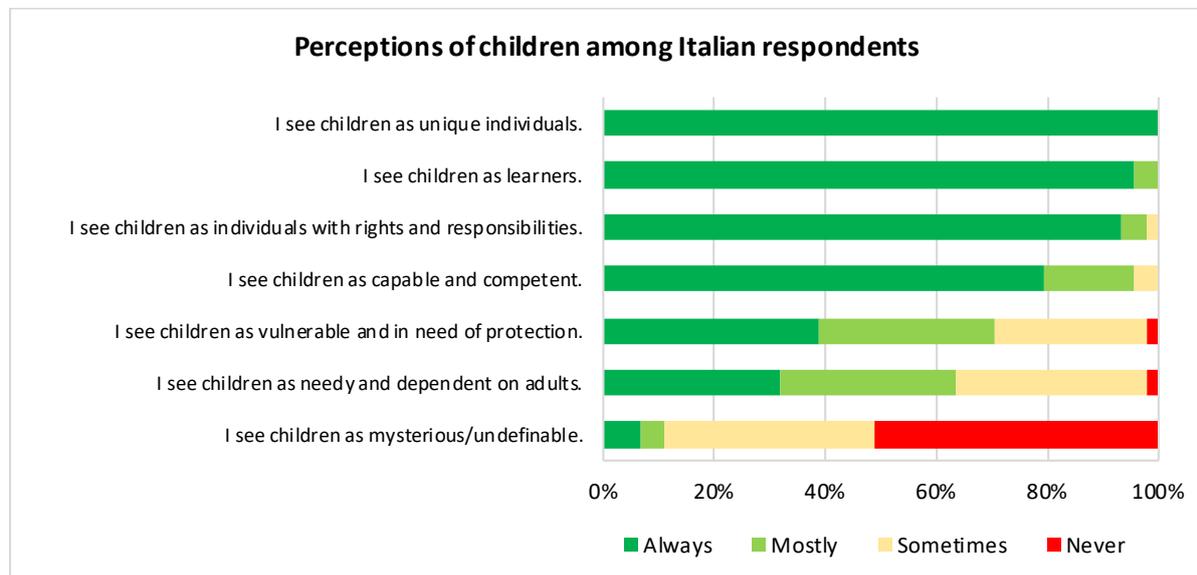
A significant majority (70%) contend that children are sometimes vulnerable and in need of protection. Just over half (51%) perceive children to be sometimes mysterious/ undefinable, while 18% never see children as such. Almost three-quarters (73%) see children as sometimes being needy and dependent on adults, while 24% state that they never see children in that light.

In their comments, many of the UK-based respondents referred to the parameters associated with curricular arrangements, specifically the EYFS. As one noted,

*“I think the EYFS could support child-centred practice very well, but the use of the age and stage bands (from Development Matters) seems, in practice, to constrain practice. Instead of being led by the child and being open to the many different paths that children could take in their learning journeys, the perceived need to prove progress drives practitioners to use ‘Development Matters’ as a form of tick box check list. Which category a child fits into on this tick box check list seems to have become all important and the fine nuances of each individual and the journeys they are making in their learning seems [to] be being lost”.*

While there is a perception of the EYFS being constraining (and this has been identified more widely), the question on the use of checklists in the survey demonstrated a wide range of responses as to how useful checklists are. Overall checklists came at the bottom of the list of methodologies applied to observe children and capture learning (see table on page 22).

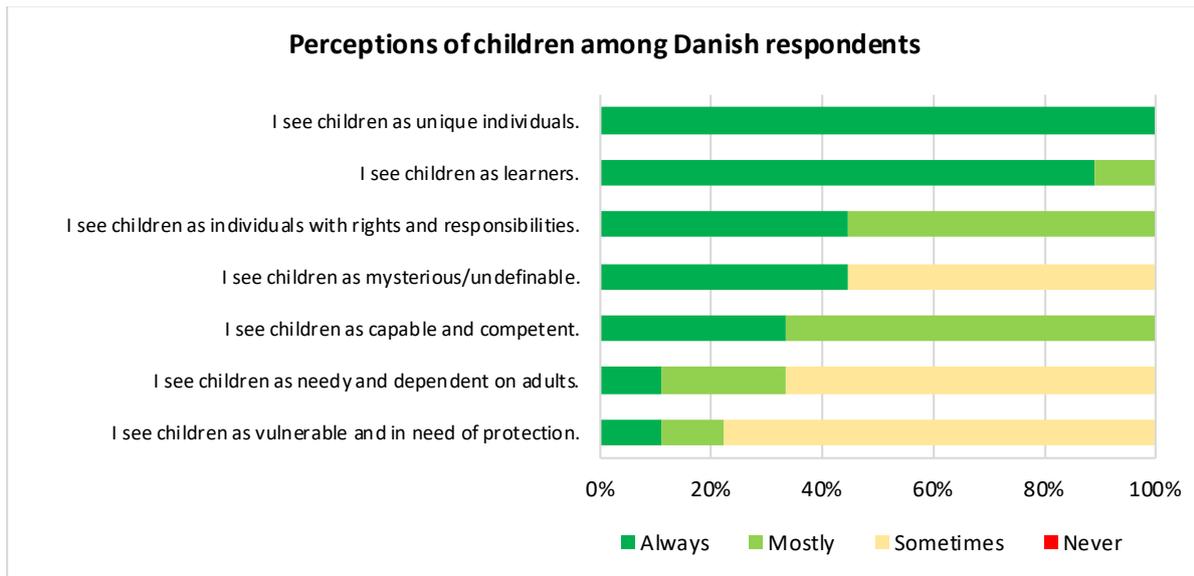
The following graph presents the results from the Italian sample. It reveals a pattern (in terms of sequence) that is broadly similar to the overall responses, with the vast majority of workers perceiving children to be unique individuals with their own needs, potential and competencies.



While one-fifth (20%) of all respondents (and 30% in Ireland) perceive children to be mysterious / undefinable, the corresponding figure in Italy is 11%, and over half (51%) of Italian respondents never see children as such.

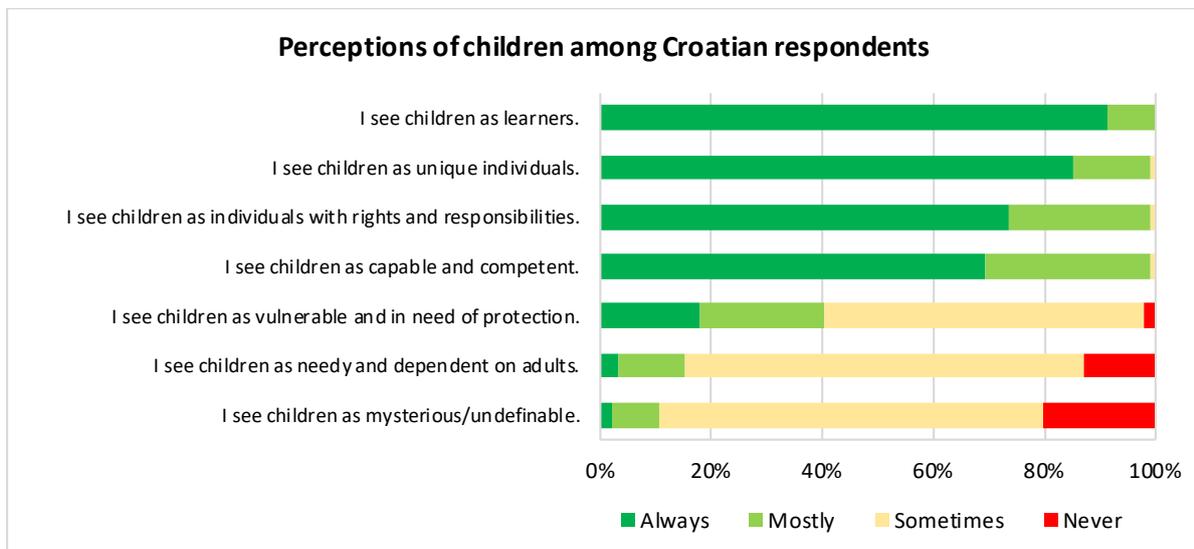
In their comments, Italian respondents referred to reminding oneself of children’s rights, and of devoting more time to engaging with children. They also referred to reflective praxis. As one stated, “we must periodically stop and think and make a check on our way of working by asking ourselves a few questions: am I entering into relationships with these children? Can I be empathic? How and where can I improve?” They also noted the practicalities associated with being more child-centred, and they mentioned the importance of investments in training and staffing. One respondent summed up these sentiments, stating “often the resources available (time, personal, economic) do not allow you to carry out the work as you would like - enhancing the individuality and the centrality of the child”.

The following bar-graph presents the perceptions among providers in Denmark.



As with the previously presented countries, there is, in Denmark, a universal or near universal perception of children as being unique individuals and learners with rights and responsibilities. The main divergence between the Danish sample and that across the other five countries arises in response to the notion of children as being mysterious and undefinable. Across the six countries, just 9% of respondents always see children as such, while in Denmark the corresponding figure is 44%. Less than a quarter of Danish respondents (22%) either always or mostly perceive children as vulnerable and in need of protection, while across the six-country sample, this figure stands at 37%.

The following graph presents the Croatian responses in respect of respondents' perceptions of children.

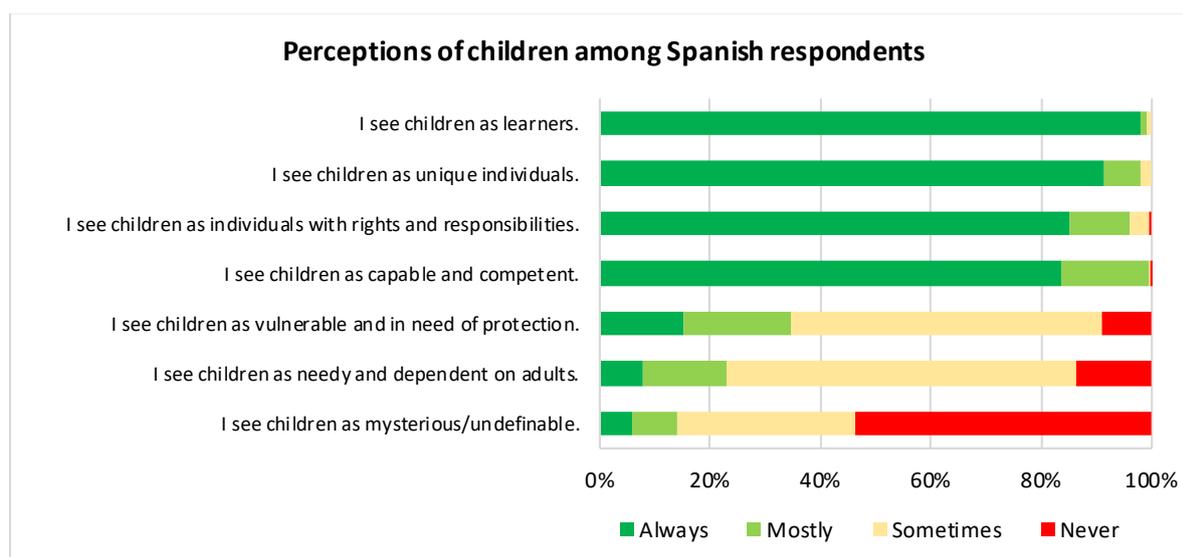


The main Croatian responses are consistent with those from across the other five countries, reflecting a widespread perception of children as unique and individual learners, and as persons with rights,

responsibilities, capacities and competencies. Just over 40% of workers, either always or mostly, see children as being vulnerable and in need of protection. A smaller percentage (15%) always or mostly sees children as needy and dependent on adults, while just 11% always or mostly see them as mysterious / undefinable. One-fifth (20%) of respondents never see children as such, with the majority (69%) believing that children are sometimes mysterious / undefinable.

Croatian responses to the open-ended questions also reflect an emphasis on child empowerment and active learning, with staff reporting that they select topics based on children’s interests. As one stated, “activities... and time are exclusively selected by children”.

The following are the Spanish results in respect of workers’ perceptions of children:



The Spanish results provide further confirmation of the widespread perception of children as unique and individual learners, with rights, responsibilities, capacities and competencies. Over 80% of respondents always see children in that light, with a further 18% (on average) mostly perceiving children as such. One emblematic comment made by a Galicia-based respondent stated, “it is essential that the system adapt to the child and not the other way around”. Another remarked that the system ought to devote more attention to evaluating children’s individual needs and competencies.

The majority (57%) of respondents report that they sometimes see children as being vulnerable and in need of protection, while over a third (34%), either always or mostly, see children as such. A larger majority (64%) state that they sometimes see children as needy and dependent on adults, while just under a quarter (23%) state that they always or mostly see children in that light. A slight majority (54%) of the Spanish respondents claim that they never see children as mysterious / undefinable. In contrast, 6% always do and a further 8% mostly do.

The following are indicative of workers’ reflections on their own practice and their perceptions of children:

- I think I have a lot to learn, but I am concerned about respecting the children: I get to know them and families and I am concerned to meet them too; I try to count on the opinion of the families and encourage them to participate in the life of the school, to participate in truth, not only to provide materials or visit us on occasions;
- I notice that every boy and every girl is unique, and that is how it should be. I try that my ideal child prototype does not lead me to label anyone;
- I try to keep in mind that the child is the centre of learning, proposing stimulating and engaging games and activities for him, and thus building his or her learning. Of course, there are situations in which the adult acts or we do not take into account what the child would like; and
- I seek to respect their biological rhythms and their particular interests and understand individualized teaching how to offer each child what they need and not all the same.

The Spanish (and Galician) responses to the open-ended questions also reveal support for active and child-centred learning, but a recognition of a need for greater investment in, and support for the childcare sector. Some referred to the need for changes in their own settings, so that children are better supported and nurtured. As in other countries, notably Ireland and the UK, respondents specifically cited the need for investment in staff training and in reducing child to staff ratios. They also put forward system-specific suggestions as follows:

- In the second cycle centres, there should be support staff with adequate training (case of child education technicians);
- The whole group should be re-thought of, and be aware of being the group of professionals working at birth to three (regardless of what contract / centre types); and
- Children's schools for those aged from birth to 3 should be treated with the same rights and duties that are presented in schools for those aged 3 to 6. Every learning is significant for children.

## Conclusion

This report has presented the findings of an inter-country survey among early childhood educators in six EU member states: Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK). The same survey instrument was applied in all locations, allowing for adaptations in respect of language and country-specific terminology. Over nine hundred responses were received as follows: 126 from Croatia; 17 from Denmark; 151 from Ireland; 62 from Italy; 449 from Spain and 123 from the UK. The respondents are indicative, rather than scientifically representative, of those working in the sector, but broadly reflect the composition of the wider early childhood workforce in the respective countries. The findings provide notable insights in respect of the sector's characteristics and dynamics, and specifically in respect of child-centred practices; professional development; accessing training; enhancing current practices; reflective praxis; and the understanding and application of child-centeredness.

The survey results indicate that the vast majority (83%) of respondents believe their qualifications have enabled them to be more child-centred in their work. Over three-quarters (76%) have completed specific training on child-centred practice within the past five years, with values ranging from sixty-seven percent in the UK to ninety-four percent in Denmark. However, the sample is also largely well qualified with a high degree of experience. Crosstabulations suggested that older and more experienced personnel are more confident, indicating that the provision of continuous professional development (CPD) would be well targeting at younger staff and those early on in their careers.

There is near universal agreement among survey respondents that CPD is important, with over four-in-five (81%) engaging in CPD, at least once per annum. The two most-frequently cited motivating factors in respect of participation in CPD are a 'focus on improving practice' and 'motivation to learn'. Cost and timing also emerge as significant factors, most notably in Ireland and the UK. The majority (58%) of respondents indicate that they are satisfied with opportunities for professional development, with values ranging from fifty percent in Spain to seventy-four percent in the UK. The data revealed that those with the highest qualifications are more satisfied with the opportunities for professional development.

The survey findings indicate that respondents are almost evenly split in terms of their assessment of on-line training. In all countries, and across the sample as a whole, the two biggest barriers to availing of training are 'time' and 'cost'. The comments provided by survey respondents suggest that these two factors are inter-related; they pointed out that in other sectors, accredited training can be undertaken during the working day, while in the ECEC sector, providers face barriers in respect of organising rosters and securing relief staff. Large proportions in Croatia and Ireland note the significance of accessibility barriers. The survey findings also cited the importance of information provision, particularly in Ireland, Spain and the UK. Some Spanish / Galician respondents also referred to a lack of training offerings.

The responses reveal convergences and divergences in respect of practices within the early years' sector. In Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK, a majority (>80%) of practitioners devote time each week to observing children. Over three-quarters of practitioners in Spain and the UK engage in observation on a daily basis, while the corresponding figures for Croatia and Denmark are below forty percent. However, given that observation is a requirement in Croatia, it maybe that educators chose to classify this practice in a different way, but this is an area for further research.

Practitioners use a broad range of methodologies to observe children and to capture their learnings. The most frequently used is that of providing 'feedback to parents', followed by 'child portfolios' and 'video recordings'. While there are inter-country differences in respect of the methodologies used, divergences are not strong. The most frequently used methods, by country, are as follows: child portfolios in Croatia; video recordings in Denmark; and feedback to parents in Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK. The survey findings also show that staff are more inclined to observe children 'throughout the whole day', to a greater extent, than in any singular context or situation. Croatia is the only exception in this respect, with observations there being most likely to occur 'during free play'.

The survey also garnered insights into practitioners' understandings and their application of child centeredness. This is an important concept for them, and the vast majority perceive their practices to be effective in promoting it. They identified the main factors that contribute to child-centred practices as including: the scale and ethos of the setting; collaboration among staff; partnership / relationship with parents; and catering for children with special needs. Over ninety percent of respondents are confident that their ECEC setting is supportive of child-centred practice. The rate is lower (77%) in Croatia. Older and more experienced staff members exhibit higher levels of confidence, thus again suggesting a greater training need, in this respect, among younger and newer personnel.

The research findings provide insights into value perspectives and philosophical underpinnings across the six participating countries. Practitioners in Croatia and Italy tend to favour more instructive approaches, while those in the other countries disagree with the statement that 'children learn best when the educator shows the children how to do the activity properly'. Almost all practitioners in Ireland and the UK, and majorities in Italy and Spain agree with giving children choice in respect of choosing individual learning activities and the length of time they devote to such activities. In contrast, most practitioners in Croatia and Denmark disagree with such an approach. Practitioners in Ireland, Spain and the UK are also less likely to decide on the topics from which children learn best. In Italy, in contrast, the vast majority (85%) of practitioners agree with the educator, rather than the child, selecting the topics. In four of the participating countries, less than a quarter of respondents assert that all activities in their settings are group based, while in Croatia, the corresponding figure is more than three times higher (85%).

While there are disparities in respect of practices and approaches to child-centeredness, there is more convergence than divergence, across countries, in respect of the values that underpin methodologies. There is universal importance on 'tuning in to children's needs and interests', 'supporting children to explore, play and investigate' and 'providing enabling, playful environments'. Almost all (87%) of practitioners also consider it very important to engage in collaboration with families, while over two-thirds (67%) believe it is very important to reflect on practice. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that almost all respondents – either always or mostly - perceive children as: learners; unique individuals; individuals with rights and responsibilities; and as being capable and competent. A minority (37%) of respondents see children as 'always' or 'mostly' being vulnerable and in need of protection. Fewer than one-in-twelve (8%) see children as being needy and dependent on adults.

The survey findings serve to identify a number of training needs, notably in respect of advancing child-centred practices and observing child development. In practical terms, the results indicate that practitioners value training and CPD, and are favourably disposed towards them. The delivery of training will require structural and systemic, rather than attitudinal, changes, so that practitioners, and in particular newer and younger personnel, are enabled and supported to avail of development and progression opportunities. The survey results suggest that while a transnational training portfolio and set of methodologies would have application across the various geographies, covered here, these

will need to have bespoke elements, in order to respond effectively to local circumstances and the training needs of particular cohorts.

### Implications and Next Steps

The next stages of the *Child Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care* (2017-1-UK01-KA201-036798) project are to develop a series of online, open access, courses to support educators in reflecting on the concept child-centredness and considering what it means in the practice. The findings from the survey indicate that targeting newly qualified and younger members of staff would be most beneficial, but that encouraging more experienced educators to work with younger staff could offer useful insights. Therefore, the training will look to develop content that can be shared and discussed within team, as well as promoting a buddy system whereby participants are encouraged to share their learning with a colleague.

Given the levels of confidence among the sampled respondents, it is hard to ascertain clear indications as to the areas of child-centred practice that would be best focused upon in the online training. The findings indicate that 'tuning in to children's needs and interests', supporting children to explore, play and investigate' and 'providing enabling, play environments' are regarded as very important among the respondents, suggesting that these areas should be considered in the training. Further, the findings indicate that reflecting on the role of the adult is another aspect that should be addressed in the online training. The latter is also supported by the observation data collected in an earlier stage of the project (Campbell-Barr et al., 2018), while the literature review indicated the need to explore the three broad concepts of child-centredness (Bogatić et al., 2018). Based upon these conclusions, the project will progress to develop three online, open access courses based upon the three broad concepts of child-centredness, picking up on the role of the adult in 'tuning in' to children and constructing the pedagogic environment.

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