“What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?” Are We Asking Children the Wrong Question?

An Exploration of Early Career-Related Learning in an Irish Context

Aisling Murray Fleming

BA Hons, MSc

Thesis submitted to Dublin City University
for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisors:
Dr. Catherine Maunsell, Dublin City University
Dr. Kimberly Howard, Boston University

School of Human Development
Dublin City University

August 2026

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

Signed: Aisling Murray Fleming

ID No.: A21266851

Date: 06/08/2026

Acknowledgements

As I reach the end of this PhD journey, I am filled with gratitude for the many people who have supported and encouraged me along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the school communities, children, parents, guardians and teachers who so generously gave their time and shared their experiences. Without your participation, this research would not have been possible.

My heartfelt thanks go to my supervisors, Dr Catherine Maunsell and Professor Kimberly Howard, for their expertise, encouragement and unwavering support. Your guidance challenged me to grow as both a researcher and a person, and I am deeply grateful for your belief in my work.

To my colleagues across the Institute of Education, thank you for your friendship, wisdom and generosity. It is a privilege to work alongside such inspiring people. A special thank you to my guidance team colleagues, Marie Therese O'Gorman, Claire Considine and Paul King, for your support and for giving me the time and space I needed, particularly during the final months of this journey. To my study buddies, particularly Katie and Louise, thank you for the conversations, endless motivation and constant support that made this journey so much easier.

I am also grateful to everyone who supported this research behind the scenes, especially my wonderful friends and family, who offered practical help, reassurance and kindness, and whose love and belief in me carried me through this journey.

Finally, to Éabha, Caireann and Eimear, thank you for your patience, your laughter and your unconditional love, even when this journey demanded more of me than I ever imagined. This work is rooted in the belief that every child should grow up believing in their potential and the possibilities before them. My greatest hope is that you always believe in yourselves as much as I believe in you, have the courage to embrace new opportunities and build lives filled with purpose, kindness and curiosity. This thesis is dedicated to you.

Table of Contents

Declaration i

Acknowledgements ii

List of Abbreviations vii

List of Figures viii

List of Appendices ix

Abstract x

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1 Rationale and Significance 1

1.2 Research Aims and Questions 4

1.3 Research Approach 5

1.4 Thesis Structure 7

Chapter 2: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework 10

2.1 Conceptual Framework 10

2.1.1 Introduction 10

2.2 The Evolution of Career Development as a Discipline 11

2.2.1 From Vocational Guidance to Career Development 12

2.2.2 Contemporary Perspectives on Career Development and ECRL 12

2.3 Theoretical Framework 13

2.3.1 Theoretical Foundations of Early Career Related Learning 13

2.3.2 Developmental Theories 14

2.3.3 Social and Cognitive Perspectives 15

2.3.4 Systems and Constructivist Approaches 16

Chapter 3: Literature Review 18

3.1 Introduction and Context 18

3.2 Methodological Approach 20

3.2.1 Type of Literature Review 20

3.2.2 SALSA Framework 21

3.2.3 Structuring the Mapping Review Using the SALSA Framework 22

3.3 Application of the Review Methodology 23

3.3.1 Search 23

3.3.2 Appraisal 24

3.3.3 Synthesis 25

3.3.4 Analysis 26

3.4 Thematic Clusters 27

3.4.1 Existing Early Career-Related Learning Practices 27

3.4.2 Conceptual Foundations Shaping ECRL 34

3.4.3 Influences on Early Career-Related Learning 43
3.5 Curriculum Integration 50
3.6 Conclusion 54
Chapter 4: Research Approaches and Processes 56
4.1 Introduction 56
4.2 Research Aims and Objectives 56
4.3 Methodological Framework 58
4.3.1 Research Philosophy 58
4.3.2 Naturalistic Inquiry Framework 60
4.3.3 Case Study Research 61
4.4 Research Approach 62
4.4.1 Research Literature Review 62
4.4.2 Sampling Design and Participant Selection Rationale 63
4.4.3 Ethical Considerations 66
4.5 Research Design and Tools 68
4.5.1 Participatory Research 68
4.5.2 Participatory Case Study 70
4.5.3 Drawing as Research Method 72
4.5.4 Research Advisory Groups 73
4.5.5 Pilot Study 76
4.6 Research Tools 78
4.6.1 Visual Questionnaire 79
4.6.2 Classroom Discussion 79
4.6.3 Online Surveys 80
4.6.4 Focus Group 81
4.7 Data Analysis 83
4.7.1 Phase 1: Classroom-based Research 84
4.7.2 Phase 2: Online Surveys 87
4.7.3 Phase 3: Focus Groups 89
4.8 Validity and Reliability 90
4.8.1 Credibility 90
4.8.2 Transferability 91
4.8.3 Dependability 92
4.8.4 Confirmability 92
4.8.5 Ethical Validity 93
4.9 Conclusion 93
Chapter 5: Findings 95
5.1 Introduction 95
5.2 Voice of the Child – Classroom Findings 95

5.2.1 Visual Surveys 96
5.2.2 Classroom Discussions 102
5.3 Parent/Guardian and Teacher Voice 105
5.3.1 Electronic Surveys 106
5.3.2 Focus Groups 116
5.4 Developing Themes 122
5.4.1 ECRL as a Phenomenon 123
5.4.2 Interests, Aspirations and Future Thinking 124
5.4.3 Gendered Career Thinking 125
5.4.4 Durable Skills 126
5.4.5 Environmental Influences 127
5.4.6 Curriculum Integration 128
5.5 Conclusion 130
Chapter 6: Discussion 132
6.1 Introduction 132
6.2 Interpreting ECRL as a Phenomenon 132
6.3 Developing Themes 135
6.3.1 Interests, Aspirations and Future Thinking 136
6.3.2 Gendered Career Thinking 138
6.3.3 Durable Skills 141
6.3.4 Environmental Influences 143
6.4 The Role of Curriculum in Early Career Related Learning 146
6.4.1 ECRL and the Irish Primary Curriculum Framework 146
6.4.2 Curriculum Integration and Teacher Agency 147
6.5 International Comparisons and Lessons for Ireland 148
6.6 Conclusion 150
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations 152
7.1 Introduction 152
7.1.1 Overview of the Study 152
7.1.2 Limitations 152
7.2 Early Career-Related Learning as a Phenomenon 153
7.2.1 Inspirations, Aspirations and Future Thinking 154
7.2.2 Gendered Career Thinking 155
7.2.3 Durable Skills 155
7.2.4 Environmental Influences 156
7.3 Concluding Summary 157
7.4 Implications and Recommendations 158
7.4.1 Strengthening Alignment between Policy and Practice 158

7.4.2 Implications and Recommendations for Teacher Education and Continuous Teacher Professional Development 161
7.4.3 Implications and Recommendations for Practice 163
7.4.4 Implications for Future Research 169
7.5 Conclusion 172
References 174
Appendices 193

List of Abbreviations

CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRAG	Children's Research Advisory Group
CSR	Case Study Research
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
ECRL	Early Career-Related Learning
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PERAG	Parent and Educator Research Advisory Group
PLS	Plain Language Statement
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SALSA	Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

List of Figures

Figure 1	The SALSA Framework	21
Figure 2	Mapping Review	23
Figure 3	Thematic Clusters	27
Figure 4	Three Key Considerations for Curriculum Integration	51
Figure 5	Lundy Model of Participation (2007)	69
Figure 6	Sample Visual Survey	85
Figure 7	Links between Children's Interests, Skills and Aspirations	97
Figure 8	An Artist (Girl, 7)	98
Figure 9	A Footballer (Boy, 7)	98
Figure 10	Visual Survey (Girl, 9)	99
Figure 11	Visual Survey (Boy, 9)	99
Figure 12	Scientist (Girl, 7)	100
Figure 13	Vet (Girl, 7)	100
Figure 14	Gendered Distribution and Diversity of Career Aspirations	102
Figure 15	Parent/Guardian Reported Age of Children's Initial Career Interest	108
Figure 16	Where Parents/Guardians Think Children Learn about the World of Work	108
Figure 17	Parental/Guardian Preferred Starting Stage for Career-Related Learning	109
Figure 18	Parental/Guardian Confidence in Supporting ECRL	110
Figure 19	Parental/Guardian Perspectives on Considerations/Supports Needed	111
Figure 20	Where Teachers Think Children Learn About the World of Work	112
Figure 21	Teachers' Preferred Starting Stage for Career-Related Learning	113
Figure 22	Teacher Confidence in Supporting ECRL	114
Figure 23	Teachers' Perceived Challenges in Delivering ECRL	115
Figure 24	Teachers' Perspectives on Supports Required for ECRL	116
Figure 25	A Child-Centred Conceptual Framework of ECRL	134

List of Appendices

A	School Principal Information Sheet / PLS	193
B	Board of Management Information Sheet / PLS	195
C	Teacher Information Sheet / PLS	197
D	Parent & Guardian Information Sheet / PLS	199
E	Informed Consent for Parents and Guardians	201
F	Children Information Presentation / PLS	203
G	Informed Assent for Children	206
H	Children's Visual Questionnaire	207
I	Prompts for Classroom Discussion	208
J	Classroom Data Shared with Participating Adult Stakeholders	209
K	Parent/Guardian Online Survey (incl. PLS & Informed Consent)	210
L	Teacher Online Survey (incl. PLS & Informed Consent)	216
M	Focus Group Information Sheet & PLS for Parents/Guardians	220
N	Parent and Guardian Focus Group Informed Consent	222
O	Prompts for Parent/Guardian Focus Group	223
P	Teacher Information Sheet / PLS for Focus Group	224
Q	Teacher Focus Group Informed Consent	226
R	Prompts for Teacher Focus Group	227
S	Researcher's Child Protection Certification	228
T	DCU Research Ethics Committee Approval	229
U	Mapping Review Sample Summary Table	230

Abstract

What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?"

Are We Asking Children the Wrong Question? An Exploration of Early Career-Related Learning in an Irish Context

Aisling Murray Fleming

This doctoral study explores early career-related learning (ECRL) among young children in Irish primary schools. It examines how children engage with ideas about work, identity and the future and the role of parents, guardians and teachers in supporting this early development. Framed within a naturalistic inquiry and participative case-study design, the research adopts an interpretivist–constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology, positioning children, parents/guardians and teachers as co-researchers in meaning-making around ECRL.

A multi-phased, multi-modal Mosaic approach was used, combining visual surveys, classroom discussions, electronic questionnaires and focus groups. Data was gathered from 100 children aged five to nine across three mixed-gender primary schools in urban, suburban and rural contexts, alongside surveys with 50 parents/guardians and 23 teachers. Additional focus groups were conducted with four teachers and six parents/guardians.

The research shows that ECRL emerges naturally through children's everyday experiences, rather than as a discrete or formally taught process, highlighting the importance of intentional, developmentally appropriate integration of ECRL within the Irish primary curriculum to promote curiosity, confidence and equity. By centring children's voices, the study contributes to Irish and international discourse, demonstrating how ECRL can connect policy, practice and lived experience to support lifelong learning from early childhood.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Significance

Career development has long been recognised as a lifelong process, beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout the lifespan (Auger et al., 2005; Cinamon & Yeshayahu, 2020; Gottfredson, 1981; Hartung et al., 2005, 2008; Magnuson & Starr, 2000; Porfeli et al., 2008; Super, 1980; Watson & McMahon, 2018). Despite this theoretical consensus, however, research and interventions have historically focused on adolescents and young adults. As a result, when compared to other life stages, our understanding of career-related learning in early childhood remains comparatively limited. Porfeli, Hartung and Vondracek highlight the significance of this gap, describing early childhood as "a period of life when the foundation is laid for career choices and outcomes in later life" (Porfeli et al., 2008, p. 1). They caution that overlooking this formative period can contribute to the early reinforcement of restrictive norms and stereotypes, particularly gendered career thinking among girls.

This concern is echoed in a growing body of empirical work, including international studies by Education and Employers with older primary school children aged seven to eleven years (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a; Percy et al., 2025) and international reports such as *The Future at Five* (OECD, 2021) and *The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation* (OECD, 2025). These publications consistently demonstrate that career stereotyping emerges at a young age, and that children's career aspirations are often shaped by the age of seven and remain relatively unchanged thereafter. This points, from an economic perspective, to a persistent global mismatch between children's aspirations and labour-market realities. In these contexts, early career-related learning (ECRL) is increasingly recognised as an essential dimension of children's holistic development, influencing their emerging identities, aspirations and understandings of the world of work, long before adolescence or adulthood.

International research demonstrates that children begin forming ideas about future possibilities from an early age, shaped by their experiences, relationships and interactions across family, school and community contexts. These early impressions have been found to exert a significant influence on later educational choices, self-efficacy and levels of engagement (Bandura et al., 2001; Covecevich et al., 2021;

Helwig, 2008; Howard & Walsh, 2011). Collectively, studies in this area highlight the need for deeper insight into how early career thinking develops and how education systems can respond more effectively to support children's emerging aspirations (Auger et al., 2005; Bandura et al., 2001; Covecevich et al., 2021; Dweck et al., 2014). Yet, despite this growing evidence base, career learning in the primary school years remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in the Irish context.

Primary education in Ireland typically commences at four or five years of age, beginning with Junior Infants and Senior Infants, followed by six sequential single-year classes from First to Sixth Class. Pupils generally complete primary schooling at approximately twelve years of age. While the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) provides for compulsory education from the age of six, the vast majority of children now enter formal schooling earlier, reflecting the near-universal participation in one to two years of early childhood care and education (ECCE) prior to primary school. In contrast to many other international education systems that adopt broader cycle-based or grade-band structures, Irish primary schools generally maintain discrete year groupings, although multi-grade classes continue to be a feature of smaller rural schools.

The primary years education programme is broad and holistic in scope, encompassing Gaeilge (Irish); English; Mathematics; Social, Environmental and Scientific Education; Arts Education; Physical Education; and Social, Personal and Health Education. The curriculum is currently undergoing significant redevelopment aimed at modernising pedagogical approaches, strengthening coherence across learning areas and enhancing emphases on inclusion, wellbeing, digital competence and key skills development (NCCA, 2025). From 2026 to 2027, schools will gradually introduce a new primary school curriculum. Over a period of six years, the existing curriculum areas outlined above will be replaced by: Arts Education; Language; Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM); Social and Environmental Education; and Wellbeing.

These reforms reflect a wider national commitment to aligning primary education with contemporary research on effective learning and the evolving demands of a rapidly changing society. At present, however, there is no formal provision for career development in the Irish primary education system, nor are there specific plans for its implementation. Nonetheless, elements associated with guidance and career development are embedded across the broader curriculum. For example, the principles

and themes of Aistear[1] support children's personal and social development, while the emphasis on wellbeing in the primary curriculum encourages pupils to reflect on their choices and consider a range of opportunities (DES, 2023a). Furthermore, Action 2.5 of the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030) articulates a long-term objective to introduce a whole-school approach to guidance at primary level (DES, 2023b).

Against this backdrop of significant curriculum reform and growing recognition of the importance of *durable skills that support lifelong learning, wellbeing, and adaptability*, this study examines how ECRL is experienced and understood by children, teachers and parents in Irish primary schools. Rather than conceptualising career-related learning as a discrete or future-oriented activity, it positions ECRL as a developmental, relational and socially constructed phenomenon embedded in the everyday lives of children. This perspective challenges traditional assumptions that career thinking begins only at post-primary level and instead foregrounds ECRL as foundational to children's broader wellbeing, identity formation and sense of agency (Ellott et al., 2025; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

The rationale for this study arises from the identification of a gap in Irish empirical research on ECRL and from the need to understand how young children's early experiences shape their perceptions of work, self and future possibilities. While policy frameworks such as the Whole School Guidance Framework (NCGE, 2017) at post-primary level, the redeveloped Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a) and the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance 2024-2030 (DES, 2023b) increasingly recognise the importance of wellbeing, agency and future thinking, there remains limited evidence on how career-related learning occurs organically in primary school classrooms and how teachers and families can be supported to nurture it effectively.

This study responds to this dearth of empirical research in the Irish context through adopting a participatory, child-centred approach that positions children as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of adult-designed curricula. It

[1] Aistear: Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to six years, emphasises play-based learning and holistic development across themes of wellbeing, identity, communication and exploration.

foregrounds young children's voices and also explores the perspectives of parents and teachers, thereby capturing the broader ecological influences on young children's emerging career thinking. This study is significant not only in addressing an underexplored area in Irish education but also in contributing to international discourse on ECRL and child participation. The study also examines the relational dimensions of career development. Rather than conceptualising career development as purely individual and self-directed, relational perspectives emphasise that it is socially constructed and co-created through ongoing interactions with others and within broader social contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Schultheiss et al., 2005).

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

The overarching aim of this study is to explore ECRL among young children in Irish primary schools, focusing specifically on those in Senior Infants and Second Class (ages 5–9 years). It aims to investigate whether and in what ways young children engage with ECRL in Irish primary school classroom settings, while also capturing the young children's perspectives, experiences and aspirations related to work and the future. In parallel, the study examines how this learning is perceived and potentially supported by key adults in the child's life, namely parents, guardians and teachers.

Given the exploratory and developmental nature of this study, it is framed through research objectives rather than discrete research questions. This approach allows for a broader examination of ECRL as it emerges within relational and contextual settings (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study is guided by the following four objectives:

1. **To investigate young children's interests, aspirations and early understandings of work and future possibilities** and to consider how these are expressed through classroom interactions and participatory research activities.
2. **To explore the key influences** that inform young children's career-related thinking and future orientations.
3. **To examine how teachers and parents and guardians perceive, interpret and support early career-related learning** and how their beliefs, actions and experiences may contribute to young children's developing ideas about work and the future.

4. **To identify, through engagement with key stakeholders, opportunities and challenges for integrating ECRL within the Irish primary curriculum**, particularly in light of ongoing curriculum reform and an increasing emphasis on wellbeing, agency and holistic development.

1.3 Research Approach

This study adopts a participatory case-study methodology situated within a naturalistic inquiry framework. This approach recognises children as active agents in constructing their own understandings and meanings and is therefore suited to exploring how young children engage with their worlds, including with ECRL (Carter & Coyne, 2018; Rollins, 2024). Naturalistic inquiry places emphasis on context, meaning and lived experience, enabling the research to capture the complexity of how young children encounter and interpret ideas about work and future possibilities as part of their everyday lives. Central to this methodology is a commitment to amplifying children's voices by recognising them as active meaning-makers who construct, negotiate and express understandings in multimodal ways.

Foundational to this concept is Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which affirms that children capable of forming views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, and that these views should be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity. From this perspective, "voice" is understood not merely as verbal expression, but as both a participatory right and a democratic principle that requires genuine consideration and influence, regardless of the form it takes, whether through drawings, classroom dialogue, play-based interactions or other modes of representation.

To support this commitment, creative and participatory research tools, including visual surveys and classroom discussions, were employed to elicit children's perspectives in developmentally appropriate formats that minimise reliance on adult-framed questions (Lundy, 2007a; Lundy et al., 2011; Ward & Lundy, 2024). These child-centred methods allow access to children's internalised conceptions of work, identity and self, revealing how they position themselves in relation to the world of work. Surveys and focus groups with teachers, parents and guardians provided complementary insights into the ecological influences shaping young children's emerging ideas about self and future possibility. Together, these approaches reflect a constructivist orientation, in which

children's learning is understood as relational, socially co-constructed and embedded in everyday interactions with family, school and their wider social environment.

The research is underpinned by a combination of developmental and social cognitive theories that help explain how children's career-related beliefs form and evolve. These theoretical perspectives collectively inform the study's conceptual framework, which assumes that early childhood is a formative stage in which children begin to construct "possible selves" through interaction with their environments (*inter alia* Auger et al., 2005; Cross & Markus, 1991; Gottfredson, 1981; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). Children's developing career aspirations arise from their day-to-day experiences and interests but are equally influenced by the sociocultural messages and representations they encounter across home, school and wider society.

Through integrating a participatory approach to the methodology with a rigorous theoretical and conceptual foundation, the study positions ECRL as a developmental, relational and socially mediated phenomenon. This framework enables a nuanced analysis of how young children aged five to nine express aspirations, encounter gendered and social influences, interpret the world of work and construct early understandings of self and possibility. It further enables insight into how parents, guardians and teachers perceive and enact support for this process, thereby providing a more holistic account of ECRL in Irish primary classrooms.

This study is further informed by the researcher's professional background in education and guidance in the Irish context, including experience working across the lifespan. In particular, prior work with young people not in education, employment, or training, which formed the basis of the researcher's master's dissertation, shaped an interest in how early experiences of learning, aspiration and identity influence later educational and career trajectories. The researcher's positionality is also informed by her experience of motherhood, which heightened her sensitivity to children's everyday learning environments and to the relational contexts in which early ideas about self and future possibility are formed.

This positioning necessitated a reflexive stance, recognising that the researcher's assumptions, values and experiences actively shaped the framing of the study and the interpretation of data. Drawing on established conceptions of reflexivity, the study

acknowledges knowledge as situated and co-constructed, and attends to the relational, ethical and power dynamics inherent in participatory research with children. By making the researcher's positioning explicit, the study enhances transparency and ethical integrity while remaining grounded in children's lived experiences and perspectives.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured across seven chapters, moving from conceptual foundations to empirical exploration and, ultimately, to critical synthesis and application. Collectively, these chapters build a coherent argument that positions ECRL as a developmental, relational and socially mediated phenomenon in Irish primary education. The structure of the thesis is outlined below.

Chapter 1, as presented here, introduces the thesis by outlining the rationale for the study, the significance of ECRL and the conceptual and theoretical foundations that frame the study. It presents the overarching aim, research questions and methodological orientation, before concluding with this overview of the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual and theoretical framework for the study. It begins by tracing the evolution of career development as a discipline, from its origins in vocational guidance to contemporary perspectives that recognise the complexity of ECRL. The chapter then explores the theoretical foundations that underpin the study, including developmental, social cognitive, constructivist and systems approaches. It concludes by synthesising these perspectives to situate ECRL within a coherent conceptual frame.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on ECRL and the key factors that influence it. It examines current practices in ECRL, then explores the major constructs that shape young children's emerging career thinking, including durable skills, identity and self-efficacy, academic tenacity, social-emotional learning, hope and imagination as represented in the contemporary literature. It then considers how these influences manifest in practice, through themes such as interests, aspirations, gendered career thinking and environmental factors. The chapter then considers how these influences could be applied in practice, by examining the role of curriculum intervention. In this context, curriculum intervention refers to the deliberate integration of career-related concepts, experiences and reflective activities in everyday teaching

and learning. This may include the embedding of ECRL within existing subject areas, the use of thematic or project-based approaches, structured opportunities for dialogue about work and futures, and the intentional development of durable skills such as collaboration, problem-solving and self-reflection. Rather than positioning career learning as a discrete or add-on programme, curriculum intervention is understood here as the purposeful design and enactment of learning experiences that expand children's awareness of possibilities, support identity formation and encourage future-oriented thinking within the primary classroom.

Building on the conceptual and empirical foundations established in the preceding chapters, Chapter 4 outlines the research approaches and processes that guided the empirical investigation. It begins by introducing the research aims and objectives and describing the methodological framework, including the research philosophy, naturalistic inquiry stance and participatory case-study design. The chapter details the sampling procedures, ethical considerations and the type of research tools employed, such as visual questionnaires, classroom discussions, online surveys and focus groups. The phases of data collection and approaches to data analysis are outlined, followed by a discussion of trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and ethical validity. The chapter concludes by summarising the methodological strengths and limitations of the study.

Chapter 5 presents the key findings of the study, placing the child at the centre of the analysis. It foregrounds children's voices, drawing on visual data and classroom discussions to illuminate how they articulate their interests, aspirations and early understandings of work. It then incorporates findings drawn from the perspectives of parents, guardians and teachers through survey and focus group data. The chapter synthesises these insights into a series of emergent themes and concludes with a summary of the key findings.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed discussion of the findings in light of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks offered earlier in the thesis. It interprets ECRL as a developmental and relational phenomenon and explores each of the emergent themes in depth. The chapter examines the role of the Irish primary curriculum in shaping opportunities for ECRL, considers teacher agency in curriculum integration and draws

on international comparisons to identify potential lessons for the Irish context. It concludes by synthesising the conceptual implications of the findings from this study.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents the conclusions and recommendations arising from the research. It begins with an overview of the study and its limitations before revisiting the core themes of ECRL identified earlier. The chapter outlines implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future research, including reflections on the dissemination of findings and the successful securing of funding for the development of a digital resource informed by the study. It concludes with a reflection on the significance of the research and its contribution to understanding ECRL in both international and Irish-specific contexts.

Chapter 2: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations that underpin the study. It situates ECRL within the broader evolution of career development as a discipline, before examining the key theoretical perspectives that inform this study. The discussion progresses from early vocational and developmental models towards social, cognitive, systematic and constructivist approaches, reflecting an increasing recognition of context, relational influence and child agency. In doing so, the chapter provides the interpretive framework through which ECRL is understood as a developmental, relational and socially mediated process within primary education and children's lived experiences.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

In this study, the conceptual framework functions as a map of the key ideas and assumptions that guide the research. It establishes how ECRL is understood, defines its scope within primary education and clarifies the educational and policy contexts in which it is situated. By articulating these core concepts, the framework provides coherence and direction for the subsequent theoretical and empirical analysis.

2.1.1 Introduction

The conceptual framework underpinning this research combines several foundational ideas. First, career development is widely understood as a lifelong process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that shape their evolving sense of self and work (*inter alia* DES, 2023; OECD, 2025; Savickas et al., 2009; Super, 1980, 1990). This perspective emphasises that career learning does not begin at the point of occupational decision-making but unfolds continuously from early childhood through adulthood (Gottfredson, 1981; Helwig, 2008; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Savickas et al., 2009; Super, 1990).

Second, international research demonstrates that early intervention, specifically the provision of structured and meaningful career-related learning experiences for children and young people, can mitigate the development of gender and social stereotypes that may later influence academic performance, subject selection and career trajectories.

Third, ECRL within primary education is not concerned with making specific career decisions. Rather, it focuses on enabling children to develop durable skills, self-awareness and an understanding of the breadth of opportunities available to them (Ellott et al., 2025; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). These goals are typically pursued through subject-based activities embedded in the curriculum and enacted through the purposeful design of learning experiences that foster curiosity, confidence and reflection, while expanding children's awareness of possibilities, supporting identity formation and encouraging future-oriented thinking within the primary classroom.

In the Irish context, the significance of this approach is reflected in the *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030)*. Under Pillar 1, Objective 2, the policy commits to ensuring greater awareness of and access to lifelong guidance so that individuals can make meaningful, well-informed and conscious decisions about their education and careers in an ever-changing world. In this framework, Action 2.5 specifically calls for the introduction of a "whole-school approach" to guidance at primary school level (DES, 2023b, p. 4).

In the Irish educational context, a whole-school approach to guidance refers to the coordination and integration of guidance activities across the entire life of a school rather than confining guidance to isolated sessions or a single specialist role. Under this model, career guidance is understood as a school-wide responsibility that involves all members of the school community, including school management, teachers, support staff, students, parents/guardians and external stakeholders. It means that guidance is woven through the curriculum, school structures and planning processes so that it contributes to students' overall growth and decision-making capacities at all stages of their education. This policy direction reinforces the importance of embedding ECRL from the early stages of the educational journey and situating it within the broader continuum of lifelong career development.

2.2 The Evolution of Career Development as a Discipline

To understand ECRL, it is essential first to situate it in the broader historical and theoretical development of the careers field. Career development as a discipline has relatively recent origins, emerging from the vocational guidance movement in the early

twentieth century in the United States. This movement arose in response to the social and economic challenges of rapid industrialisation and was grounded in a strong social-justice ethos. Early reformers such as Frank Parsons sought to support young people and new migrants in navigating the transition from education to employment (Brown, 2016; Herr, 2013). Parsons' seminal work *Choosing a Vocation* (1909) provided the first systematic model of career assistance and was based on three key principles: (i) understanding oneself, (ii) understanding occupations, and (iii) recognising the relationship between the two. These ideas laid the groundwork for future career development theory and practice. Although his work was primarily focused on improving educational outcomes and eradicating child labour, Parsons' inclusion of children as young as eight years old positions his approach as an early model of ECRL.

2.2.1 From Vocational Guidance to Career Development

Following Parsons, the early decades of the twentieth century saw the expansion of vocational guidance through the development of psychometric testing and matching models. These approaches, exemplified by the trait and factor tradition, assumed that individuals could be scientifically matched to suitable occupations based on measurable characteristics (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017). While these models established the professional foundations of the field, they also reflected an industrial-era focus on predictability and stability, conditions that are increasingly absent in contemporary labour markets (Arthur et al., 1999).

By the mid-twentieth century, career theory had evolved beyond vocational matching to a developmental perspective. The work of theorists such as Ginzberg et al. (1951), Super (1954, 1957, 1990), Roe (1957) and Holland (1959, 1997) shifted attention towards lifelong processes of growth, decision-making and self-concept formation. These developmental models emphasise that career development is a lifelong process influenced by psychological, social and environmental factors, with its foundations established in childhood. This recognition of childhood as a formative stage in career development marked a pivotal conceptual turning point and laid the foundations for modern understandings of ECRL (Hartung et al., 2005; McMahon & Watson, 2008; Watson & McMahon, 2018)

2.2.2 Contemporary Perspectives on Career Development and ECRL

Contemporary theorists, including Savickas (1997), have expanded career development models to align with the realities of a globalised and rapidly changing world of work. Theories of career construction emphasise personal agency and adaptability, viewing individuals as the authors of their career narratives across the lifespan. Similarly, integrative approaches in the field, including social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), began to advocate for a multidimensional understanding of career development that combines developmental, psychological and contextual influences. In this context, the concept of ECRL has emerged as a response to the growing recognition that career learning begins long before formal decision-making occurs. ECRL is understood as a set of intentional, age-appropriate learning experiences that help children develop self-awareness, curiosity and an understanding of the world of work (Ellott et al., 2025; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a). It encompasses exposure to diverse occupations, opportunities to challenge stereotypes and the development of durable skills and aspirations through classroom, home and community experiences.

ECRL builds on the historical foundations of vocational guidance while reflecting a more holistic and inclusive approach to career learning. It shifts the focus from matching and selection to exploration, reflection and agency, viewing children as active participants in shaping their career understanding. The conceptual framework therefore positions ECRL within the continuum of lifelong career development, recognising early childhood as a critical stage for fostering equitable and informed future pathways (Helwig, 2008; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Super, 1990).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Theoretical Foundations of Early Career Related Learning

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws on developmental, social cognitive, constructivist and systems theories of career development. These frameworks offer explanations for how children come to understand work, self and opportunity in their social and educational environments. Collectively, they provide the interpretive lens through which the literature on ECRL is analysed and understood in this study.

2.3.2 Developmental Theories

Developmental approaches have been central to the evolution of career theory and continue to shape contemporary perspectives on ECRL. These approaches share a common assumption that career development is a lifelong, dynamic process that begins in childhood and is influenced by interactions between the individual and their environment. Donald Super's *life-span, life-space theory* is particularly influential in conceptualising career development as unfolding across the life course, with distinct stages reflecting evolving self-concepts and social roles. Super (1957, 1975, 1990) identified the growth stage, typically encompassing early and middle childhood, as a critical period during which individuals begin to develop self-awareness, interests, attitudes and values through experiences within family, school and broader social contexts. This emphasis foregrounded childhood as a foundational phase for later career development. Similarly, Ginzberg and colleagues (1951) proposed that career development progresses through sequential stages, beginning in childhood with a largely exploratory and tentative orientation towards work and future possibilities.

When taken together, these early developmental theories represented a significant conceptual shift by positioning career development as an ongoing process rather than a single point of occupational choice. Despite their enduring influence, such theories have been critiqued for their limited attention to contextual, cultural and structural factors, often reflecting Western, middle-class assumptions about opportunity, choice and linear progression. This limitation is evident in the evolution of Super's work. While the life-span, life-space rainbow model (Super, 1980) emphasised developmental stages and life roles, it did not explicitly account for broader career determinants. In response, Super (1994) later expanded his framework through the archway or segmented model, incorporating structural and environmental influences as determinants of career development.

Building on this developmental emphasis, Anne Roe (1957) and John Holland (1959, 1973) further advanced career theory by explicitly linking career preferences to personality and psychological characteristics. Holland's *theory of career choice*, first proposed in 1959, posits that vocational interests are an expression of underlying personality traits and that individuals are more likely to experience satisfaction and stability when their work environments align with these traits. The theory categorises

both individuals and occupational environments into six distinct types, commonly referred to as the RIASEC categories: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Holland's theory (1959) remains one of the most widely applied frameworks in career education and guidance. Its accessibility has supported its use with children and adolescents, particularly in fostering self-reflection, interest awareness and early career exploration.

Nevertheless, personality-based approaches have been criticised for their potentially deterministic implications and for underplaying the role of social context and change over time. Arthur et al. (1999) argue that while career theory and the world of work evolved across the twentieth century, vocational guidance and psychometric matching approaches made "uneasy accommodations with emerging ideas about human potential" and remained "wholly dependent on predictability and stability, qualities distinctly lacking in the emerging employment world" (p. 163). Their critique highlights the limitations of models grounded in static assumptions about personality and occupational fit, particularly within increasingly dynamic and socially complex labour markets.

Despite such critiques, developmental and personality-based theories continue to inform educational practice and policy, particularly in the design of interventions that support children's self-awareness, aspiration-building and engagement with the world of work. In ECRL, these developmental theories have contributed enduring insights into the importance of early experiences in shaping career-related learning, while also highlighting the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive frameworks that reflect diverse life trajectories and sociocultural realities.

2.3.3 Social and Cognitive Perspectives

Later theorists broadened the developmental focus to include learning, cognition and context. Krumboltz et al.'s (1976) *social learning theory of career decision-making* drew on Bandura's principles of social learning, to propose that individuals acquire career-related learning, preferences and beliefs through processes of observation, reinforcement and direct experience. From this perspective, peers, key adults and environmental influences play a significant role in shaping career-related learning, highlighting the theory's particular applicability to childhood, when learning is deeply shaped by social interaction and lived experience (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018;

Bregman & Killen, 1999; Fernandez & Menon, 2022; Howard et al., 2015; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Building on these foundations, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) proposed social cognitive career theory, which further advanced developmental understandings of career behaviour by emphasising the dynamic interaction between personal agency and contextual factors. Lent and Brown (2013) went on to highlight the reciprocal relationships between self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, personal goals and environmental supports and barriers. In ECRL, this framework helps to explain how children actively construct and modify their career beliefs in response to feedback and modelling from parents/guardians, teachers, peers and wider social influences, as well as through their own successes and setbacks.

Linda Gottfredson's *theory of circumscription and compromise* (1981) is particularly significant for understanding ECRL, because it explicitly centres childhood as a critical period in the formation of occupational aspirations. Gottfredson proposed that children progressively eliminate career options they perceive as incompatible with their developing self-concepts, especially in relation to gender norms, social class and perceived accessibility. As children mature, these processes of circumscription are followed by compromise, whereby aspirations are adjusted to align with perceived opportunities and barriers. This model was the first of its kind to highlight the role of social context in shaping children's emerging sense of what is possible and desirable, stressing the importance of early educational interventions that promote inclusivity, broaden horizons and actively challenge limiting stereotypes (Gottfredson, 1981).

Collectively, these social cognitive theories enrich contemporary understandings of ECRL by foregrounding the interaction between individual development and social structures. They reinforce the view that children's career-related learning is a socially situated process shaped by many influences.

2.3.4 Systems and Constructivist Approaches

More recent frameworks adopt systemic and constructivist perspectives, reflecting a growing recognition of the complexity and contextual nature of career development. The systems theory framework (Patton and McMahon, 2014; McMahon and Watson, 2018) conceptualises career development as the outcome of dynamic interactions between interrelated individual, social and environmental systems. This model aligns

closely with ECRL, as it accounts for the complex web of influences, including family, school and community, that shape children's emerging career identities over time. Constructivist and narrative approaches extend this perspective by emphasising meaning-making and personal agency in career development. Savickas and colleagues' *career construction theory* (2009), for example, conceptualises career development as an evolving life story actively authored by the individual. In the context of ECRL, these perspectives position children as active agents who construct understandings of work and self through exploration, dialogue and reflection. This emphasis on agency aligns with contemporary educational approaches that prioritise children's voice and participation, such as the *Lundy model of participation* (Lundy, 2007a; Lundy et al., 2011; Ward & Lundy, 2024).

Together these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for examining ECRL. Developmental theories illustrate when and how career learning begins, social cognitive models explain how learning processes and self-beliefs evolve, while systemic and constructivist approaches foreground the ways in which children's career thinking is shaped by social systems, interpersonal relationships and the stories they construct about themselves and their futures. Integrating these perspectives supports a holistic understanding of ECRL as both a developmental and socially situated process.

This theoretical framework underscores that career-related learning is not an isolated educational intervention, but a continuous and dynamic process shaped by multiple interacting influences across children's lives. It affirms that career learning begins early, is embedded in social environments, and is strengthened when educational practices recognise and build upon children's natural developmental processes. As such, this framework provides the interpretive foundation for the analysis and discussion that follow throughout the study, informing how ECRL is examined in both policy and practice.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction and Context

As set out in Chapter 1, the overall aim of this research is to explore ECRL among young children in Irish primary schools and to investigate whether and how young children engage with ECRL in classroom settings and at home. It seeks to capture young children's own perspectives, experiences and aspirations related to work and the future. In parallel, the study examines how this learning is perceived and potentially supported by key adults in the child's life, namely teachers, parents and guardians.

This chapter reviews the literature underpinning the evolution of career development as a practice, its roots and influences, and its relevance to ECRL, particularly in a primary school setting. It is through this literature review that potential commonalities in practice can be identified, as well as any perceived gaps in the extant literature. This chapter further informs the research design that underpins this doctoral study. Against this backdrop, the review moves from the foundations of the careers field to childhood relevance and then to the immediate influences on ECRL.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the subject, ECRL, it is important to first review the emergence of careers as a discipline. The word *career* is described and widely accepted in academic terms as "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur & Hall, 1989, p. 8), with Herr and colleagues stating, "careers are...dynamic and unfold throughout life" (Herr et al., 2004, p. 42). The range of terminology used to describe the field of careers and its associated activities is varied and often dependent on geographical location and context. McCowan et al. (2017) divide the terminology into two threads: "career education", referring to the "learning and educative aspects of careers work", and "career guidance", interchanged with "career development", to describe the provision of "advice and direction" (p. 4). In Ireland, and similarly in the UK, the terms *career guidance* and *guidance counselling* are often used interchangeably. In contrast, Canada commonly uses the term *career guidance and education* to describe comparable practices, and in the United States, *career counseling* is one of many terms employed.

Regardless of the terms or title employed, there is a general acceptance that the discipline refers to a lifelong process of managing learning, work and transitions, as described by

the EU Council Resolution in 2008 and in various publications by the Irish government, including a definition coined by the National Guidance Forum in 2007:

> In the context of lifelong learning, guidance refers to a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used. (EU, 2008)

And in the recent and first of its kind in Ireland, the *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030)*:

> Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society. (DES, 2023b)

Because this research focuses on young children's career-related learning and development, the terms *career development*, *career learning* and *ECRL* are used, individually and in combination, to describe the activities being explored. The previous chapter examined the evolution of career learning, establishing that its origins date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. While ECRL, as a targeted intervention, was not explicitly written about until the 1950s, the literature does acknowledge the importance of childhood, in relation to career development, much earlier.

A criticism of research in childhood career development to date includes a lack of research informing early career development and career-related learning: "while there is general recognition that career development is part of the learning process of children, the interactional nature of this process is more hypothesized about than researched" (McMahon and Watson, 2005, p. 120). More recent literature (Ellott et al., 2025; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Mann et al., 2018, p. 2025; Moore et al., 2022a; OECD, 2025) notes the disjointed nature of research on the application of career development in childhood and calls for a more practical approach to interventions for early career learning and development.

This literature review is underpinned by the conceptualisation of career development as a lifelong and socially situated process (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Savickas et al., 2009; Super, 1990). These perspectives guide the interpretation of the literature by emphasising that children's career-related learning emerges in dynamic systems of relationships,

experiences and environments, rather than as isolated cognitive outcomes. The opening section of this review outlines the methodology used to review the literature on the emergence of the careers field, including the development of theories and their application in educational settings. It then examines how the evolution of career theory is relevant to childhood. The chapter proceeds to analyse the influences on ECRL, then considers the factors that shape early career development as identified in the literature, together with the principal models and frameworks used in international contexts.

3.2 Methodological Approach

This section details the methodological approach guiding the review process, situating it within the study's broader epistemological and ontological positioning. It outlines how the Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis (SALSA) framework and mapping review design were integrated to ensure rigour, transparency, and conceptual coherence in synthesising the literature.

3.2.1 Type of Literature Review

The literature on career development is both extensive and conceptually diverse, underscoring the importance of adopting a transparent and methodologically coherent approach to reviewing existing scholarship. Grant and Booth (2009) identify fourteen distinct types of literature review, each aligned with different methodological purposes and epistemological orientations. Among these, mapping reviews are described as approaches that "map out and categorize existing literature from which to commission further reviews and/or primary research by identifying gaps in research literatures" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 94). Such reviews are designed to address broad research questions by describing the overall landscape and distribution of research within a field, rather than evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions (Miake-Lye et al., 2016).

While the present review incorporates elements of mapping in identifying and categorising key themes in ECRL, its purpose extends beyond descriptive mapping. Instead, it adopts the SALSA framework (Grant & Booth, 2009), which provides a structured yet flexible process for conducting literature reviews in conceptually complex and multidisciplinary fields. SALSA is not a distinct review type but a methodological framework that enhances transparency and rigour across four

interconnected stages of systematic searching, critical appraisal, thematic synthesis, and analytical interpretation. Given the developmental, relational and policy-oriented dimensions of ECRL, a structured narrative synthesis supported by SALSA is more congruent with the aims of this study than a purely descriptive mapping approach. This framework enables both comprehensive coverage of the field and critical, interpretive engagement with its theoretical and conceptual foundations.

3.2.2 SALSA Framework

The Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis (SALSA) framework provides such a structure, offering a systematic methodological approach for conducting literature reviews. Developed to enhance rigour and clarity in reviewing existing research, the framework guides the researcher through distinct yet interconnected stages. The Search phase involves identifying relevant literature using predefined criteria; Appraisal focuses on evaluating the quality, credibility and relevance of selected sources. Synthesis entails integrating findings to identify patterns, themes and gaps in the evidence base. The final stage, Analysis, interprets the synthesised evidence to generate meaningful insights.

Collectively, these stages ensure that the review process remains systematic, transparent and analytically rigorous, contributing substantively to knowledge development in the field (Booth et al., 2022; Grant & Booth, 2009). The use of SALSA is congruent with the study's relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, as it facilitates a naturalistic, context-sensitive and interpretive synthesis consistent with a participatory case-study design.

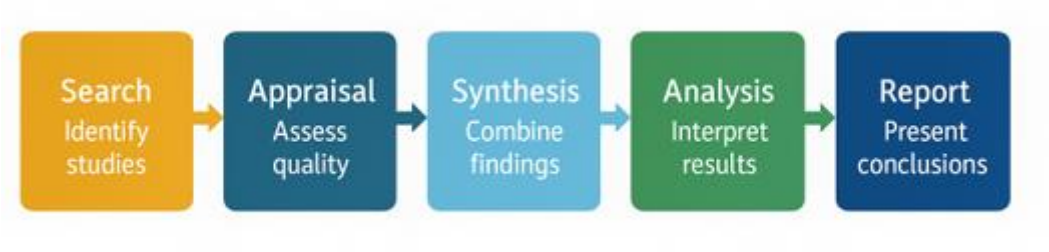


Figure 1: The SALSA Framework

3.2.3 Structuring the Mapping Review Using the SALSA Framework

Building on the structured process provided by the SALSA framework, a mapping review design was adopted to guide the organisation and classification of the literature. While SALSA ensured transparency and rigour across the stages of search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis, the mapping review approach shaped how the evidence base was structured and interpreted. Developed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre at University College London's Institute of Education, mapping reviews facilitate the systematic categorisation of research while identifying gaps that may warrant further primary investigation (Booth et al., 2022; Grant & Booth, 2009).

A mapping review was particularly suited to this study, as it provides a structured yet flexible means of gaining a broad understanding of a complex and wide-ranging field. Unlike scoping reviews, which often seek to explore a general topic area, mapping reviews are guided by a defined review question and aim to organise evidence in a way that reveals patterns, trends and gaps in the literature. This distinction was important given the diversity of theoretical perspectives, methodologies and contexts represented in the career development field. Although mapping reviews do not typically prioritise detailed quality appraisal or in-depth interpretive synthesis, their capacity to systematically organise and classify a broad body of evidence makes them well suited to studies seeking to establish conceptual clarity across an emerging or multidisciplinary area (Cooper, 2016; Grant & Booth, 2009).

In this study, the mapping review supported a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the literature on careers and ECRL, offering a transparent foundation upon which subsequent analytical and interpretive stages were constructed. Figure 2 visually represents the mapping review process, structured in alignment with the SALSA framework and illustrating the progression from broad evidence identification to thematic clustering and interpretive analysis.

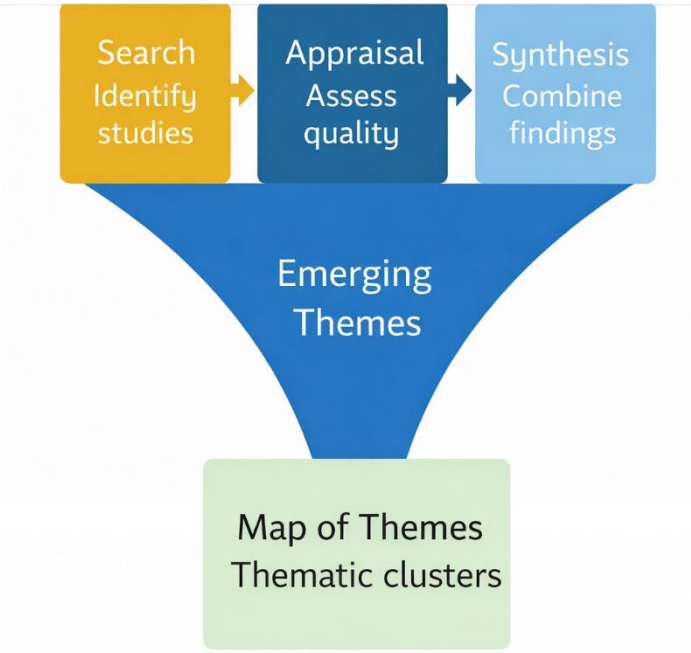


Figure 2: Mapping Review

3.3 Application of the Review Methodology

This section details the implementation of the review methodology, outlining the sequential stages of search, appraisal, synthesis and analysis into thematic clusters. Each stage reflects the structured yet interpretive approach underpinning the study.

3.3.1 Search

The search stage of this literature review was guided by the overarching aims of this study, which sought to explore the scope of ECRL among young children in Irish primary schools and to investigate the ways in which young children engage with such learning. To achieve these aims, a comprehensive search strategy was designed to identify relevant research across a broad range of disciplines. Key concepts and related search terms included *career-related learning*, *early career-related learning*, *children careers education* and *children career development*.

The initial searches were conducted across three major academic databases, ERIC, EBSCO and Scopus, accessed through Dublin City University's library. Each database was selected for its distinctive contribution to the topic. ERIC provided extensive coverage of education-based research, EBSCO captured psychological and

developmental perspectives and Scopus offered a multidisciplinary view of the field. To enhance the comprehensiveness of the search, the researcher manually screened reference lists and set Google Scholar alerts to capture recently published and emerging work. The literature search covered literature from 1950 to October 2025. The starting point was chosen to reflect the emergence of modern career theory in the early 1950s, marked in particular by the publication of Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad and Herma's seminal volume, *Occupational Choice: An Approach to a General Theory* (1951), widely regarded as the first book devoted exclusively to career theory.

To ensure a broad and balanced evidence base, database searches were supplemented with targeted exploration of books, organisational reports, and policy documents relevant to career-related learning and guidance in primary education. This strategy enabled the inclusion of both academic and grey literature, providing a comprehensive overview of research, policy, and practice within the field. Following completion of this systematic search process, the next stage involved critical appraisal of the identified studies to assess their relevance and suitability for inclusion in the mapping review.

3.3.2 Appraisal

The appraisal stage involved the application of clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure alignment with the research question. This process was informed by the principles of the mapping review approach and drew on criteria outlined by Hughes et al. (2016) in *Careers Education: International Literature Review*. Inclusion criteria encompassed both empirical and conceptual studies that had undergone peer review and addressed children's career learning and development in primary or elementary education contexts.

Following implementation of the initial search strategy, studies were screened at title and abstract level, with full-text review undertaken where necessary to confirm suitability for inclusion. Study selection was further guided by criteria relating to publication date, language, and country of origin. Only studies published in English from 2000 onwards were included, except where earlier publications contributed to an understanding of the historical development of career learning. This twenty-five-year time frame was deemed sufficient to capture significant developments in theory, policy and practice, particularly those associated with technological change and globalisation.

The review was also limited to research conducted in countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This decision was made to ensure comparability and relevance of findings, as these countries have broadly similar economic structures, education systems and policy priorities to Ireland. Exclusion criteria were applied to remove studies that fell outside the scope of the research. For example, studies focusing on the career development of professionals working with children were excluded, as were those concerned exclusively with post-primary or adult populations.

After applying these criteria and removing duplicate records, approximately 270 journal articles, book chapters, and reports were identified for further consideration. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and eligible full texts were reviewed in detail. Consistent with the study's interpretivist epistemology and relativist ontological stance, decisions regarding inclusion, appraisal, and thematic coding were researcher-led and guided by informed judgement rather than purely mechanical criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022). In line with the principles of the SALSA framework, the processes of search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis were conducted iteratively and reflexively, allowing conceptual patterns and contextual nuances to inform the development of the analytic map (Grant & Booth, 2009). Recurring ideas and concepts were subsequently coded thematically, forming the foundation for the synthesis and interpretive analysis presented in the following sections.

3.3.3 Synthesis

Following the search and appraisal stages, the synthesis process focused on organising, categorising and mapping the studies that met the inclusion criteria. The purpose of this stage was not to assess the quality of individual studies in depth but to identify the key patterns, trends and themes that characterise the existing body of research on ECRL. The synthesis sought to provide a structured and comprehensive overview of the field by determining where research has been concentrated and where significant gaps remain. All selected studies were reviewed in full and coded according to a set of pre-established categories, including author, year of publication, country of origin, educational context, methodological approach and key thematic focus (see Appendix U). This process supported the development of an evidence map that represented the scope of existing literature both conceptually and visually.

The thematic clustering of studies was developed using an abductive approach. This involved moving iteratively between the study's theoretical framework and the patterns that emerged from the literature in order to develop a coherent understanding of the field (Booth et al., 2022; Grant & Booth, 2009). Rather than relying solely on predetermined categories derived from the conceptual framework, or allowing themes to emerge entirely inductively from the data, the analysis combined insights from existing theories of career development and ECRL, with recurring ideas identified across the reviewed studies. In this way, themes were refined through ongoing and reflective engagement with both theory and evidence.

As the review progressed, categories were refined and reorganised in response to deeper engagement with the literature. The process was guided by both the theoretical framework and emerging patterns in the evidence. Such an approach is consistent with the study's interpretivist epistemology and relativist ontology, as it acknowledges that meaning is constructed through interaction between researcher, theory, and text, rather than discovered as objective fact. Through this process of thematic coding and categorisation, it was possible to identify the main methodological approaches adopted in the field, including qualitative case studies, mixed method designs and survey-based investigations.

The synthesis produced a detailed account of how ECRL has been conceptualised, implemented and studied in primary education. It demonstrated areas of convergence, such as the shared recognition of the importance of early exposure to career-related activities, as well as areas of divergence, including variation in pedagogical approaches and policy frameworks. The analytic map developed through this process provided the foundation for the subsequent stage of analysis, which explores the implications of these findings for policy, practice and future research.

3.3.4 Analysis

The analysis stage of SALSA involved interpreting the patterns, themes and relationships identified through synthesis to generate meaningful insights into the extant research on ECRL. In the context of a mapping review, this stage moved beyond the categorisation of studies to examine how thematic clusters related to one another, where

concentrations of research were evident and where gaps or underexplored areas remained.

Analysis therefore extended beyond description to consider how the literature collectively contributes to understanding the purpose, practice and impact of both career development and ECRL in primary education. The mapped evidence was interpreted in light of the research aims of this study, enabling the identification of areas of consensus, divergence and omission in the examined body of work. Each cluster is examined in turn, reflecting the patterns that emerged through the literature search, screening and iterative coding stages. Figure 3 visually represents these thematic clusters and their interrelationships within the broader evidence map.

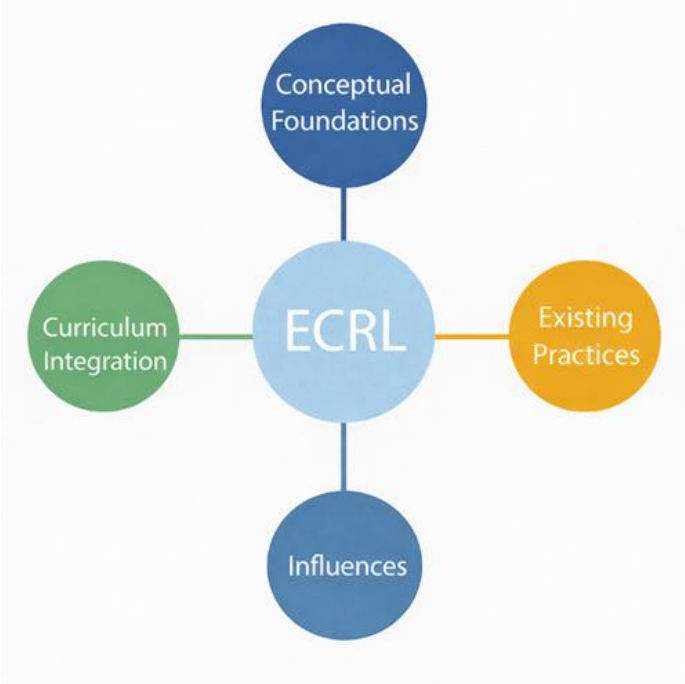


Figure 3: Thematic Clusters

3.4 Thematic Clusters

Building on the analytic mapping process, this section examines the thematic clusters in depth to explore how the field has developed and how research has shaped current understandings of ECRL. It also highlights areas where further conceptual clarity and empirical research are needed, offering a clearer account of how ECRL has been understood across theory, research and practice.

3.4.1 Existing Early Career-Related Learning Practices

ECRL has been defined as "early childhood activities in primary schools designed to give children from an early age a wide range of experiences of and exposure to, education, transitions and the world of work" (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 7). Recent research by Education and Employers and the Teach First charity, two non-profit organisations located in the UK, extends this definition by identifying several key elements that contribute to effective ECRL in primary education. These include embedding ECRL meaningfully in the curriculum, engaging external stakeholders, beginning interventions early and tailoring activities to be developmentally appropriate (Percy & Ameagh, 2021). A consistent emphasis is also placed on the need for ongoing professional development for teachers and school staff, recognising that sustained and impactful career learning depends significantly on educator competence and confidence. Crucially, the research highlights that these efforts are most successful when schools value the importance of ECRL and integrate learning into routine classroom practices, rather than treating such support as supplementary or incidental.

As there is no formalised ECRL taking place in Irish primary schools, it was important to review early career-related practices and studies in other countries before beginning to investigate what informal or incidental learning, if any, is happening. This section reviews a selection of recent evidence-based early ECRL interventions in international settings, particularly those in countries with a similarly structured education system to Ireland: UK, Australia, Canada and Malta. Each country's programmes were examined to identify their reported strengths and limitations, to inform both the research design and analysis of this study.

UK & Internationally – Drawing The Future

The Drawing The Future study (Chambers et al., 2018) took place from September to December 2017. It is one of the most cited large-scale pieces of evidence on children's early career aspirations, and while it is presented as an empirical project, it does rest on a set of implicit theoretical underpinnings drawn from developmental and social learning perspectives. Children (ages 7–11 years) from 146 primary schools across the UK and Channel Islands were asked to draw a picture of what they wanted to do when they were older. They were then asked where they had heard about that job. They were also asked to record their age, gender, favourite school subject and ethnicity alongside

their drawing. The children's geographical region and socio-economic status (based on their eligibility for the UK's Free School Meals programme) were also noted.

The research method for the Drawing The Future study (i.e., the use of drawing) was selected because "it is a method previously shown as effective in researching children's perceptions of the world of work", and the researchers felt that drawing "can provide a focus that enables children to interact on their own terms", while "psychological research and academic studies shed light on the advantages of using illustrations and provide a strong methodological basis for using them to survey primary-age children" (Chambers et al., 2018, pp. 13–14). The final report was compiled using data collected from 13,070 primary school children. Among the key findings was that children's aspirations appear to be shaped by their gender as well as by role models (i.e., people they see or know). The study also identified a mirroring of the careers selected by seven-year-olds with those selected by seventeen-year-olds, showing that children may subconsciously make decisions about their future at a young age and may not deviate from these choices at a later stage.

The project was extended internationally to include the responses of almost 7,000 children from nineteen further countries (Australia, Austria, Albania, Belarus, Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Iceland, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Portugal, Philippines, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland, Uganda and Zambia). The report concluded that while children's career aspirations and the factors influencing these ambitions differ depending on their location, there were common themes across the collected data. In particular, results from the study concurred with previous research in concluding that aspirations "are highly gendered and show some evidence of being influenced by socio-economic background" (Chambers et al., 2018, p. 78).

Following on from Drawing The Future and implementation of early career-related activities (Inspiring the Future) across the UK, Percy and Ameagh (2021) carried out a further study with 10,000 children and 1,000 teachers. The findings illustrated that ECRL had a positive impact on academic performance and gender-stereotyping among children, regardless of their socio-economic background.

In 2025, Employers and Education launched a Primary Futures Report for Northern Ireland, the first of its type on the island of Ireland. The report showed similar findings to other countries, with 1,476 children from thirty-six primary schools participating and

results highlighting that there is a “need to do more to broaden children’s horizons starting at a young age” (Percy et al., 2025, p. 14). These findings strongly align with Gottfredson’s *Theory of Circumscription and Compromise* (1981), which posits that children begin narrowing their occupational choices from an early age based on gender, social background and perceived attainability. The repetition of patterns between seven- and seventeen-year-olds in the study suggests that children’s career thinking develops earlier than is often assumed.

Australia – BECOME and Little Ripples

The results of Australia’s participation in the Drawing The Future research study prompted the National Careers Institute to support early intervention initiatives in primary education. In 2021, *Little Ripples* was launched as a national programme designed to encourage parents, guardians and educators to engage children in positive conversations about work, learning and aspirations. Developed collaboratively by the National Careers Institute and the Career Industry Council of Australia, the initiative positions parents as children’s first and most influential career role models and seeks to equip them with the tools to foster curiosity, confidence and self-awareness. The programme provides freely accessible resources, including downloadable “conversation cards” and, from 2022, a series of e-books that specifically address diversity, inclusion and careers identified on Australia’s national skills shortage list. These materials are designed to support parents and guardians in initiating early, developmentally appropriate discussions that broaden children’s horizons, challenge gender bias and promote more equitable perceptions of the world of work.

Little Ripples exemplifies a practical intervention informed by contemporary career development theory and empirical research on children’s ECRL. The resources are directed at parents, guardians, teachers and community who wish to support children in exploring what they enjoy and what they are good at, the opportunities available to them and the connections between culture, careers and Australia. Its emphasis on children forming ideas about who they might become reflects developmental career models such as Super's (1957) growth stage and constructivist theories like Savickas (1997), while its focus on the influence of role models and the home environment resonates with Gottfredson's (1981) *Theory of Circumscription and Compromise*. The

programme demonstrates how career-development concepts can be translated into accessible, child-centred practice to support ECRL in primary education.

Introduced in Australia in 2017 and revised in 2021, BECOME is a career education initiative for pre-secondary (upper-primary) children from ten years of age. A core tenet of the programme is the assertion that career education needs to move away from a "decision-time-support" model, whereby advice or guidance is only offered at critical junctures, such as at the end of second-level education. Instead, BECOME calls for career-related learning to commence early, recur frequently and be seamlessly integrated with other learning or curriculum subjects.

The programme suggests three areas of focus: (i) awareness (of self and the world of work); (ii) aspiration (students begin to narrow their focus on careers of interest); and (iii) agency (which encourages the design and implementation of an inquiry-based approach to careers). While designed for upper-primary students, there are examples of teacher-led classroom lessons, activities and discussion points and a supporting mobile application that could potentially be adapted to younger students. The BECOME initiative reflects the developmental logic proposed by Super (1990), particularly the "growth stage" in which children form self-concepts and begin to link these with emerging interests and values. Its emphasis on agency and recurring engagement also resonates with Bandura et al.'s (2001) theory of self-efficacy as a shaper of children's career aspirations.

Canada

Cahill and Furey (2017a, 2017b) and Godden et al. (2024) carried out pan-Canadian research projects investigating career development practices in Canadian elementary schools. Both studies found that there is an appetite among children, parents/guardians and educators[2] to begin career-related learning in elementary (primary) school. They used questions that explore these areas by asking the children to consider what activities they enjoy and what they think they are good at. In their study *The Early Years – Career Development for Young Children*, Cahill and Furey worked with young children (ages 3–8 years), using art and storytelling, to establish their understanding of work, their dreams for their futures and their interests and hobbies. The findings of the research,

[2] In this study, *educators* refers to preschool and primary teachers, early childhood educators and day-care workers (Cahill & Furey, 2017a).

conducted from 2014 to 2016, on young children's career development were then used to create a resource book for educators and one for parents/guardians.

Cahill and Furey position their work in a developmental theoretical framework, drawing on the conceptual foundations established by key theorists in career development from the mid-twentieth century onward. They note that research from the 1950s through to contemporary studies has consistently highlighted the formative years of childhood as integral to overall career development. Foundational theorists such as Ginzberg et al. (1951) emphasised that career choice evolves through identifiable developmental stages; Gottfredson (1981) proposed that children's understanding of work and self-concept emerges through processes of circumscription and compromise; Bandura (1977, 2001) introduced the influence of self-efficacy and social learning on career-related behaviour; and Savickas (1997, 2009) advanced a constructivist approach, viewing career development as a lifelong process of meaning-making and adaptability.

Cahill and Furey also look to Howard and Walsh (2011) and their *Career Construction in Childhood and Adolescence* model, which synthesises developmental and constructivist perspectives to illustrate how children's career understanding progresses through distinct yet overlapping phases. Importantly, Howard and Walsh (2011) recognised the central role of parents and educators in shaping children's career conceptions, integrating these influences as core components of the model. This approach was subsequently adopted by Cahill and Furey, who drew on similar principles in their research and practice. The practical tools presented in their publications were informed by survey data from parents and educators and by insights gathered through focus group discussions with children, educators and parents, ensuring that the materials reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in children's early career learning.

Exploring Possibilities by Godden et al. (2024) focused on pre-secondary children aged nine to twelve years, examining themes such as self-perception and self-efficacy in relation to career learning. The authors describe their research as grounded in a broad body of prior scholarship that has investigated the role of career-related learning and early career development in elementary and primary education. They highlight studies exploring the importance of early experiences and their impact on future career planning (Magnuson & Starr, 2000), the development of career adaptability in

childhood (Hartung et al., 2008) and how young children envisage their futures and form aspirations (Chambers et al., 2018). They also discuss other research which has investigated the influential role of parents in children's early career development (Chavaudra et al., 2014) and the contribution of educators as some of the earliest facilitators of career learning (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a, 2019).

Collectively, this body of work contributes to an expanding evidence base that positions childhood as a formative period in which self-concept, interests and social influences begin to interact in ways that shape later career trajectories. In the research carried out as part of their study, Godden et al. (2024) encouraged the participating children to reflect on their own skills, identifying areas in which they felt confident as well as those where they felt less assured. The primary outcome of the study was the development of a practical toolkit of resources designed to support educators and parents/guardians in initiating meaningful conversations with children about careers and the world of work.

Both *Exploring Possibilities* and the earlier work of Cahill and Furey share the perspective that ECRL is not about prompting children to decide on a specific future occupation, but rather about supporting them to learn about themselves and their strengths, interests and emerging sense of possibility. These studies emphasise that fostering self-awareness and curiosity at an early age can be effectively integrated in existing teaching and learning frameworks, thereby enhancing both academic and personal development in ways that will, as Godden et al. note, "serve them well on their life journeys" (2024, p. 123).

Malta

Primary school career learning in Malta, as outlined in *Career Learning and Development: A Framework for Schools* (Gravina & Camilleri, 2020), is understood as a developmental and learner-centred process rather than as preparation for specific jobs. In the primary years, ECRL has begun to be embedded through Personal, Social and Career Development, focusing on building foundational competences in personal exploration, learning management and early career awareness. Emphasis is placed on developing a positive self-concept, interpersonal skills, reflective capacity and an understanding of how learning connects to future possibilities. The framework highlights that ECRL at this stage should help children appreciate their strengths,

recognise the relationship between school performance and future choices, challenge stereotypes and begin to explore the world of work in age-appropriate ways.

Importantly, Malta firmly positions career development as a lifelong, contextual and experiential process, supported by collaboration between teachers, subject specialists, who deliver Personal, Social and Career Development, and wider stakeholders. In this regard, education officers in the Maltese government are currently developing dedicated resources and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for teachers, with the aim of supporting consistent implementation and rolling out provision across all sixty primary schools nationally (Gravina, personal communication, 2026).

Conclusion

Considered cumulatively, these international practices demonstrate how early and contextually grounded interventions can translate theoretical models of career development into practice in classroom settings. Programmes such as Drawing The Future, Little Ripples and BECOME demonstrate the application of developmental, social learning and constructivist theories in fostering children's self-awareness, agency and aspiration. While Malta is at an earlier stage in developing a more systematically embedded approach to ECRL, taken together, these initiatives reveal significant opportunities for authentic and age-appropriate exploration, while also highlighting persistent disparities and inequities in both implementation and access. The following section examines the core influences on ECRL and explores how engagement with these factors may strengthen equity, coherence and sustainability in emerging approaches to ECRL.

3.4.2 Conceptual Foundations Shaping Early Career-Related Learning

While the international examples discussed in Section 3.2 demonstrate that early and contextually grounded interventions can effectively translate career development theory into practice, they also reveal that many programmes focus on *what* children should experience rather than *how* these experiences can cultivate the enduring capabilities essential for lifelong career development. The relationship between ECRL and its key influencing factors has become a central focus of contemporary research on childhood career development. As established throughout this chapter, there is growing scholarly consensus that children begin forming ideas about work, skills, and possible futures

from an early age, long before formal careers education is introduced. This process is shaped by a dynamic interplay of individual, social and contextual influences, which together inform how children perceive their abilities, interests and opportunities. This section explores the key themes in the ECRL literature, highlighting the core factors that shape children's early career learning and the ways in which these influences interact within educational and social contexts.

Durable skills

The intrinsic influence of the fields of human development, economics and psychology on career development has already been reported upon in this chapter. By that same token, a growing body of research emphasises that in addition to cognitive knowledge, a range of individual attributes, such as behaviours, attitudes and personality traits, play a critical role in both educational and vocational attainment (*inter alia* Dweck et al., 2014; Farrington et al., 2012; Han et al., 2022; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kautz et al., 2014). The literature, however, reveals significant inconsistency in how these attributes are defined and categorised. While the term *non-cognitive skills* has been widely used to refer to this broad set of traits, it is far from universally accepted. In education and psychology fields, more recent publications have seen alternative terms used, including *socio-emotional skills*, *soft skills*, *transversal competences*, *social competences*, *twenty-first-century skills*, *key competences*, *generic competences* and *life skills* (Shapiro et al., 2011 as cited by Cinque et al., 2021).

The wide range of terms used across different fields is also reflected in career literature. This reflects not just differences in academic preferences but also concerns around the term *non-cognitive*. Some researchers argue that it is unhelpful because it defines these skills by what they are not, rather than by what they are (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Farrington et al., 2012). It is also increasingly recognised that there is no clear divide between cognitive and non-cognitive skills, with a report from the European Commission stating: "although some studies draw a conceptual distinction between non-cognitive skills and cognitive skills, it is not possible to disentangle these concepts fully" (Cinque et al., 2021, p. 24).

More recently, the emerging concept of *durable skills* has appeared in the academic literature, particularly in higher education and workforce development research, dating from around 2021 onwards (Cole et al., 2021; Hutson et al., 2022, 2023; Hutson &

Ceballos, 2023; Robinson, 2023). For the purpose of this study, the author has adopted the use of the term *durable skills* to cover terms including and not limited to *soft skills*, *non-cognitive skills* and *twenty-first-century skills*. This section investigates the relationship between ECRL and the development of durable skills, integrating insights from international research, theoretical frameworks and implications for educational practice.

As already examined, more than a century ago Parsons (1909) proposed three key principles to guide career decision-making: (i) a clear understanding of oneself, (ii) knowledge of various occupational fields, and (iii) sound reasoning about the relationships between these elements. While initially developed for adult vocational guidance, these principles remain relevant today, particularly in educational contexts that seek to foster children's emerging sense of identity, agency and future aspirations from an early age. When framed appropriately, they can inform child-centred pedagogies that recognise the capacity of even young learners to reflect on their interests, explore diverse possibilities and make meaningful connections between self and society.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, careers are dynamic and evolving, and career development is increasingly understood as a lifelong process, particularly in relation to developing knowledge of oneself. There is growing recognition in the literature (*inter alia* Bandura et al., 2001; Farrington et al., 2012; Han et al., 2022; Krumboltz et al., 1976; Savickas et al., 2009; Super, 1957, 1975, 1980) that academic knowledge alone is insufficient. Although durable skills have traditionally been under-recognised in formal assessments, this does not diminish their importance, with Kautz et al. (2014) arguing that a sole focus on cognitive performance overlooks the broader set of capabilities that contribute to an individual's long-term success and wellbeing:

> *Achievement tests do not adequately capture non-cognitive skills such as perseverance ("grit"), conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy, resilience to adversity, openness to experience, empathy, humility, tolerance of diverse opinions and the ability to engage productively in society, which are valued in the labour market, in school and in society at large. (p. 9)*

The authors highlight that durable skills are often more predictive of positive life outcomes than cognitive ability alone. As such, there is a growing consensus that education systems should adopt a more holistic approach that values and nurtures the

development of both cognitive and durable skills. This is echoed in many recent contributions to research. A longitudinal study by Han et al. (2022) investigated how high school students' durable skills, specifically self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, sense of belonging and academic goal engagement, predicted their academic performance and retention in higher education. Their findings indicate that early assessment and support of durable skill development could significantly impact student outcomes. This conclusion is consistently supported by recent academic literature (Hutson et al., 2022, 2023; Hutson & Ceballos, 2023; Kannangara et al., 2020; Malanchini et al., 2024; Oliveira & Araújo, 2022a; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Santilli et al., 2017), by non-profit educational organisations such as America Succeeds (Cole et al., 2021) and by policymakers (Cinque et al., 2021; OECD, 2025; WEF, 2025).

Durable skills, such as the development of self-concept, self-efficacy and sense of identity, form a foundational basis for how children engage with ECRL and begin to envisage potential career pathways. The following sections examine these durable skills and consider the interrelationships among them, highlighting their influence on a child's overall development, as well as their possible personal, academic and vocational outcomes.

Identity, Self-Efficacy and Possible Selves

The formation of identity during childhood, particularly as it relates to career development, has been recognised as a central component of broader identity construction. Erikson (1968) describes identity formation as a critical developmental task, especially during adolescence. Building on this, Stringer et al. (2011) define career identity as "the sense of self derived from one's development of an occupational career" (p. 158), which they regard as a significant facet of overall personal identity. While Erikson emphasised adolescence, Donald Super extended the developmental lens to earlier stages. He proposed the "growth stage", spanning from birth to approximately fourteen years, as the period during which self-concept, attitudes and early vocational awareness begin to emerge (Super, 1975, 1980, 1990). Super also contended that during this stage, children develop a foundational understanding of themselves in relation to the world of work, forming preliminary beliefs about their strengths, interests and potential career pathways.

These theoretical perspectives are supported by Bandura's (1977, 1995, 2012) influential work, in which he defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to organise and execute actions required to achieve specific outcomes. Bandura (1977) identified four primary sources from which self-efficacy is developed: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and emotional states. Importantly, self-efficacy has been shown to influence not only career choices and decisions but also personal values, interests and the pursuit of long-term goals (Bandura et al., 1996; Betz & Hackett, 1986; Hackett, 1995; Lent et al., 1994). Once established, self-efficacy can determine the level of effort, persistence and resilience that an individual applies to career-relevant activities based on their anticipated outcomes.

Closely connected to self-efficacy is the concept of "possible selves", introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986), which refers to future-oriented representations of the self that include both aspirations and fears. Oyserman et al. (1995) contend that these possible selves are deeply influenced by social contexts, role models and the availability of opportunity structures. They further contend that if these possible selves are positive and well developed, they can serve as powerful motivators of behaviour and academic engagement. Super's (1980, 1990) self-concept theory further supports the view that individuals pursue careers that reflect their evolving self-understanding, shaped through developmentally appropriate tasks and life experiences. Individuals with a well-formed vocational identity are more likely to persist in their career pursuits and actively seek environments aligned with their values and abilities (Eccles, 2009; Hirschi, 2011).

This level of intentionality is indicative of high self-efficacy in career decision-making, defined as confidence in one's ability to make and pursue informed career decisions, even in the face of uncertainty (Gianakos, 1999; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). The strength and stability of one's self-identity are therefore crucial in sustaining motivation, making aligned career choices and navigating developmental transitions (*inter alia* Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Betz & Hackett, 1986; Gianakos, 1999; Holland, 1997; Howard & Dinius, 2019; Super, 1990). In this context, career decision-making efficacy becomes both an outcome of early self-concept development and a driver of future career behaviours. Furthermore, the concept of resilience, described as the ability to avoid negative developmental outcomes despite exposure to risk (Worrell & Hale, 2002) adds another critical dimension to understanding how children navigate

early career-related challenges. According to Yavuz (2022), providing early opportunities for career exploration can enhance students' academic performance by supporting them in connecting their self-concept and education to potential career paths. This link between career-related learning, self-concept and academic outcomes is explored in the next section.

Academic Tenacity, Career Resilience and Adaptability

Contemporary research in the area of career development now positions constructs such as self-efficacy, identity consistency, adaptability and resilience within broader frameworks such as academic tenacity and career resilience. Dweck et al. (2014), in a report commissioned by the Gates Foundation, define academic tenacity as a set of durable factors that promote long-term learning, goal commitment and the perseverance necessary for academic and personal success. This perspective maintains that children must be supported to engage beyond short-term academic tasks and instead connect learning to meaningful, future-oriented goals. Kannangara et al. (2020) support this view, arguing that academic achievement is influenced by a combination of interrelated characteristics. Wigfield and Eccles (2002), in their foundational text *Development of Achievement Motivation*, note that by the age of seven years, many children have already formed firm beliefs about what they are "good" or "bad" at. These early judgements, they argue, are rooted in children's experiences and can significantly influence future motivation, interest and perceived competence.

Wigfield and Wagner (2005) later expanded this work by drawing connections between motivation-related constructs, such as competence beliefs and task value, and self-identity constructs, like self-concept and possible selves. Career theorists such as Gottfredson (1981), Krumboltz (1996) and Lent et al. (1994) have emphasised the influence of belief systems on expected outcomes and goal-setting. Mueller and Dweck (1998) provide further evidence that children, even in the preschool years, can begin to form negative motivational beliefs, highlighting the critical window for early intervention. Similarly, Gutman and Schoon (2012) found that young children are capable of understanding the instrumental value of education in achieving future aspirations, reinforcing the importance of early, holistic development in this domain.

These findings highlight that durable skills such as self-efficacy, motivation, resilience and adaptability are central to what is now conceptualised as career resilience. Career

resilience is defined as “the ability to adapt to change, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive” (London, 1997, p. 34) and refers to a person’s capacity to maintain vocational motivation and a coherent sense of identity in response to evolving labour market conditions and life challenges (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012). This construct includes both internal factors, such as confidence, emotional regulation and self-belief, and external supports, such as access to role models, positive learning environments and social capital. Bimrose and Hearne argue that the “dual phenomena of resilience and career adaptability” are in fact required to successfully navigate twenty-first-century career paths (2012, p. 339). They, alongside others, such as Super (1990) and Savickas (1997), describe career adaptability as the proactive capacity to anticipate and prepare for change. Bimrose and Hearne describe the two constructs of career resilience and adaptability as complementary to one another. They state that together, they can offer individuals “a way to understand their situation and consider how they might move forward constructively in progressing their careers” (2012, p. 343).

Recent studies have also highlighted the wider benefits of career adaptability, showing that it contributes not only to career success but also to overall wellbeing and life satisfaction. One such study, carried out with adolescents in different cultural contexts, found that career education initiatives that focus on strengthening career adaptability can foster hope, optimism and positive expectations for the future, thereby enhancing overall life satisfaction among adolescents. The study recommends that work to support the development of adaptability and future-oriented thinking should begin early, as part of broader efforts to support children’s psychological and emotional resilience (Santilli et al., 2017).

In a context where linear and secure employment pathways are becoming increasingly uncommon, there is a growing imperative to reconceptualise career-related learning in a way that prioritises these adaptive capacities. Sultana (2024), however, offers a critical analysis of terms such as *resilience* and *adaptability* in his 2024 article “Four ‘dirty words’ in career guidance: From common sense to good sense”. He argues that these terms, although frequently framed as positive and empowering, are deeply embedded in neoliberal discourse that shifts responsibility for systemic failure onto individuals. Sultana calls for a more socially aware and politically engaged use of such terms in career guidance and education.

This critique is particularly salient in the context of ECRL, which engages young children as they begin to form their sense of identity and orientation towards the future. It is imperative that concepts such as academic tenacity, career resilience and adaptability are not presented as core personal traits that children must cultivate in order to cope with adversity. Such an approach risks framing educational and socio-economic disadvantage as personal failure, ignoring the systemic barriers that shape opportunity and access. As Sultana warns, this mode of "responsibilisation" not only reinforces individual blame but also fails to challenge the structural conditions that actively "vulnerabilise" young people (Sultana, 2024, pp. 6, 9).

Social-Emotional Learning

The American-based Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) define social and emotional learning (SEL) as: "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2020, p. 4). The CASEL SEL framework is organised into five broad, interrelated competencies, each encompassing multiple specific skills: (i) self-awareness, (ii) self-management, (iii) social awareness, (iv) relationship skills, and (v) responsible decision-making.

Using a lifespan developmental lens, this chapter has examined a range of durable skills and identified significant areas of overlap between these skills and elements of career-related learning. This is particularly true in relation to SEL and the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that underpin effective functioning across personal, academic and vocational contexts (Howard & Ferrari, 2022). Competencies such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, goal-setting, empathy, communication and decision-making are central to both SEL frameworks, such as that proposed by CASEL (2020), and contemporary models of career development (Krumboltz, 1996; Savickas et al., 2009).

Howard and Ferrari (2022) further argue for an integrated approach to education that unites career development with social-emotional learning, stating: "A holistic approach to youth development suggests that, given the interconnected nature of development in the domains of career development and social-emotional learning, children and youth would be better supported if we provided education in both domains in an integrated

way" (p. 372). Moore and Hooley (2012) and Sultana (2024) point out that if an integrated approach to SEL and ECRL is to be adopted, it must also be underpinned by a critical awareness of social justice. This, Sultana (2024) posits, will ensure that individuals are not merely socialised into existing structures but are supported in developing the capacity to critically reflect on and reshape their worlds.

Hope and Imagination

A growing body of research highlights the critical role of hope and imagination in shaping children's development. Similarly, hope is also increasingly recognised as a foundational construct in career development theory and practice, particularly in lifespan and developmental frameworks. Snyder and colleagues define hope as a cognitive-motivational construct and puts forward that hope is not merely an emotional state but a critical psychological resource that shapes how individuals engage with their futures (Snyder et al., 1997, 2003). They posit that hope includes three components: (i) goals, the determination to identify aims, (ii) the belief in one's ability to initiate and sustain action towards achieving said goals (agency thinking), and (iii) the ability to find ways to achieve them (pathways). Their research argues that hope helps individuals set goals, find ways to achieve them and maintain the motivation to pursue them, especially in the face of adversity (Snyder et al., 2003).

Building on this, Hartung et al. (2008) discuss the detrimental effects of a lack of hope, noting its influence on attitudes, behaviours and outcomes. Worrell and Hale (2002) put forward that for young people in marginalised or vulnerable contexts, hope can serve as a protective factor, mitigating the effects of disadvantage and sustaining motivation towards future goals. Expanding on this, Niles et al. (2025) claim that the three components of hope (agency thinking, pathways thinking and goals) are essential for positive motivation and behaviour. They illustrate this by describing an individual who anticipates failing a test and, due to a lack of hope, delays studying. This lack of agency and of perceived pathways not only diminishes young people's motivation but also contributes to the very outcome they fear, thereby reinforcing a cycle of disengagement and underachievement.

While extant career-development literature shows that higher levels of hope correlate with stronger career planning, greater career decision-making abilities, self-efficacy and more proactive behaviours (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Niles et al., 2025; Snyder et al.,

1997, 2003), there is little research explicitly around children or ECRL. Peila-Shuster (2018) proposes hope as a foundational construct for enhancing ECRL, particularly through its potential to foster agency and future-oriented thinking in young learners. Supporting this view, Niles et al. (2025) identify hope as a protective factor for children and young people, one that can be intentionally nurtured and sustained throughout development. Their findings underscore the value of embedding hope-focused practices within ECRL to help support aspirations and engagement with future possibilities.

In recent years, the concept of career imagination has added depth to this conversation by linking hope to broader sociocultural influences. In *Imagining Women's Careers*, Cohen describes career possibilities as "circumscribed, indeed both constrained and enabled, by what is seen to be possible at any given time" (2014, p. 167). She contends that individuals' visions of what is achievable in their careers are shaped by social location, identity and worldview. While her analysis focuses specifically on adult women's experiences in the workforce, her framework has broader relevance for understanding how children construct their own imagined futures. This perspective reinforces the need to foster hopeful and expansive career narratives from an early age, particularly for children from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds.

The existing literature highlights the importance of examining the durable skills that underpin children's capacity to engage meaningfully with ECRL, and the potential of ECRL to foster these skills to benefit all learning and development. Cultivating an understanding of how ECRL supports enduring capabilities, such as self-awareness, self-concept formation, academic tenacity and social and emotional competence, is essential for ensuring that early interventions support not only immediate engagement but also sustained educational and career development over time. Viewed this way, durable skills serve as a scaffold that enables ECRL to bridge children's everyday experiences and their career understandings and aspirations.

3.4.3 Influences on Early Career-Related Learning

ECRL is influenced by a range of interconnected factors that shape how young people begin to form ideas, attitudes and aspirations about work and future pathways. Trice et al.'s (1995) study on the origin of elementary school students' aspirations provided partial support for four major career development theories, namely Ginzberg's *Theory of Occupational Choice*, Roe's *Theory of Early Determinants of Vocational Choice*,

Havighurst's *Developmental Task Theory* and Gottfredson's *Theory of Circumscription and Compromise*, while also revealing notable contradictions. Consistent with Ginzberg et al. (1951), children's interests played a central role in their choosing and rejecting occupations, though their aspirations showed more coherence than he predicted, and fathers' occupations were not a dominant influence. Roe's (1957) idea that family structure shapes career orientation received limited support, while Havighurst's (1964) claim that children identify with parents' work was supported in younger grades but declined as children got older, without offering any statistical significance.

Gottfredson's (1981) propositions about age-related concerns with gender roles and prestige received some confirmation, but overall the findings highlighted the need for more detailed theory and research on the cognitive, social and emotional influences shaping career development in childhood. Howard et al. (2015) noted that children's career aspirations are shaped by a wide range of influences. Existing research has shown that personal characteristics, family background, environmental contexts and broader systemic factors all play a role in shaping children's preferences for future occupations. The following sections explore these influences.

Interests

The extent of an individual's interest has consistently been identified as a significant factor influencing learning. In particular, interest has been shown to affect attention, goal-setting and the depth of learning achieved (Hidi & Renninger, 2006a; Renninger & Hidi, 2022b). It is reasonable to assert that interest, given its foundational role in learning, is also central to ECRL. Despite its importance, however, interest has traditionally been conceptualised in educational and career development literature as a static trait rather than a dynamic and evolving process (Hanna et al., 2025; Renninger & Hidi, 2016, 2022b). Hidi and Renninger's extensive research on interest, spanning more than two decades, challenges the notion of interest as a fixed trait. Their work highlights that even young children actively attempt to regulate their engagement when confronted with boredom, demonstrating an early sensitivity to the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006a; Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

Addressing this gap in conceptualisation, they proposed a four-phase model of interest development (Hidi & Renninger, 2006b; Renninger & Hidi, 2022a). The model conceptualises how interest emerges and evolves through sustained interaction between

the learner and their environment. Crucially, this framework recognises that interest is shaped by a combination of internal factors and external influences, including teacher practices, curriculum design and opportunities for learner autonomy. Building on this foundation, Quinlan and Renninger (2022) affirmed that the model applies across the educational lifespan from early years to higher education. Their study calls for longitudinal research to better understand how subject interest, particularly when nurtured through curriculum and career-related learning opportunities, can inform the development of career goals and influence decision-making. These findings present a strong argument for embedding interest development in early educational frameworks.

Aspirations and Future Thinking

Existing theories of early career development among primary-aged children consistently depict a developmental trajectory in which children's career aspirations become progressively more realistic and specific over time. These theoretical frameworks, however, differ in their accounts of how and when this process occurs (Archer & DeWitt, 2016; Auger et al., 2005; Bandura et al., 2001; Flouri & Panourgia, 2012; Gottfredson, 1981; Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Percy et al., 2025; Trice, 1991). Notably, these models have been critiqued for focusing primarily on describing children's occupational aspirations, rather than exploring more deeply how they evolve. As Trice and Tillapaugh observe, "these theories have been criticized for largely describing what children's occupational aspirations are but not where they originate nor how they change over time" (1991, as cited in McMahon & Watson, 2005, p. 128).

Subsequent research has begun to address this gap, demonstrating that children as young as six start to form ideas about the types of work they perceive as suitable or desirable for themselves, and that these ideas are shaped by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and exposure to role models (Archer et al., 2014; Gutman & Akerman, 2008). There is also a consensus in extant literature that while aspirations may not be fixed, they are developmentally significant and influence later educational engagement and choices, including subject preferences and participation (Dweck, 2002; Gottfredson, 1981). These early expressions of future thinking serve as a cognitive framework through which young learners interpret educational experiences and imagine their place in the world of work (Chambers et al., 2018; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Howard et al. (2015) found that children are capable of articulating influences on their career thinking, supporting the value of age-appropriate, exploratory career education in primary settings. They suggest that ECRL should encourage reflection not only on interests and abilities, but also on the broader social and contextual influences shaping choices. This is particularly salient as recent research highlights the continued popularity of highly visible but statistically unattainable careers among children, with the aspiration to become a professional athlete emerging as particularly prevalent, especially among boys (Chambers et al., 2018; Davenport & Padwick, 2025; OECD, 2025; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). This trend raises important questions about the role of media, gender norms and perceived attainability in shaping children's early career preferences.

Recent longitudinal evidence further refines our understanding of children's aspirations by determining that they are characterised by both stability and flux. Davenport and Padwick's (2025) three-year longitudinal study of 78 children aged seven to eleven years in north-east England found that while 38% of the children retained at least one career aspiration over time, 60% changed at least one aspiration during the study period. This research further highlights that early aspirations are neither fixed nor random, but instead evolve as children encounter new experiences, information, and social influences. Importantly, the study also found that children's aspirations were drawn from a relatively narrow pool of occupations closely linked to their interests and hobbies and the jobs they observed in their immediate environments, reinforcing the role of exposure in shaping future thinking. This body of evidence suggests that encouraging broad, flexible and evolving future thinking is a central component of effective ECRL, with longitudinal evidence reinforcing the importance of early and sustained provision that supports exploration and keeps children's thinking and choices open for as long as possible.

Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping refers to the attribution of characteristics, roles and behaviours to individuals based solely on their perceived gender, shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations (Brussino & McBrien, 2022). These stereotypes can profoundly influence children's perceptions of self and future, particularly in relation to career-related learning. A growing body of international and longitudinal research indicates

that gendered career expectations begin early and persist into adolescence, thereby reinforcing long-term patterns of occupational segregation (Chambers et al., 2018; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). Children begin developing gendered behaviours and preferences remarkably early: Gottfredson (1981, 2002) suggests that by the age of two years, children show sex-differentiated behaviour, with gender self-labelling typically occurring by age three. She contends that from the ages of five to six years, children start to conceptualise gender roles and internalise sex-role stereotypes. Empirical studies support this developmental trajectory, showing that even preschoolers (ages 3–5 years) possess an awareness of occupational status and what is considered gender-appropriate work (Cinamon & Yeshayahu, 2020; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

This early formation of career perception aligns with Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise, wherein children eliminate career options perceived as incompatible with their gender identity. Gendered career expectations are not formed in isolation; rather they are continuously reinforced by multiple social contexts, including the family, education systems, media and broader societal structures (OECD, 2012, 2024). Research indicates that boys tend to aspire to roles in engineering, construction or sports, while girls more often choose caring professions such as teaching or veterinary science (Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018; OECD, 2021, 2025; Percy et al., 2025). These preferences often mirror the gender composition of adults in children's immediate environments, including parents, other family members, teachers and community members.

TV and the internet are also important to consider, as research shows that media plays a powerful role in entrenching traditional gender roles (Fernandez & Menon, 2022). In children's literature, television and films, male characters are disproportionately represented in leadership, scientific and physical roles, while female characters are more commonly depicted in supportive, domestic or nurturing roles (Nesbitt et al., 2022). Educational materials and classroom resources similarly lack diverse representations of gender in various professions, limiting children's exposure to alternative possibilities. The scarcity of professionals in non-traditional roles visiting schools compounds this issue, making it difficult for children to envision themselves in roles that deviate from normative gender expectations.

The pervasive nature of these gendered perceptions was starkly illustrated in the short film *Redraw the Balance* produced by the UK non-profit organisation Education and Employers (2016), in which 66 children were asked to draw a firefighter, a surgeon and a fighter pilot. Of the drawings, 61 depicted men and only five depicted women. This prompted the large-scale international study *Drawing The Future*, conducted by Education and Employers in collaboration with TES Global,[3] National Association of Head Teachers (UK), OECD and University College London's Institute of Education. The study (see section 3.4.1) engaged 20,000 children aged seven to eleven years across twenty countries. Findings revealed that the career aspirations of seven-year-olds closely mirrored those of seventeen-year-olds, suggesting that such perceptions are deeply entrenched from a young age (Chambers et al., 2018). Family, media and school emerged as the primary influences on career aspirations, and a significant misalignment was identified between children's aspirations and projected labour market needs.

Given the early onset and persistence of gendered career thinking, interventions in ECRL must extend beyond merely introducing children to a wider range of occupational roles. They must also actively challenge the assumptions that cause children to rule out certain careers as unsuitable or inaccessible. According to Auger et al. (2005), Percy and Ameagh (2021) and Davenport and Padwick (2025), meaningful interventions must explore not only what children wish to become, but also what they consciously avoid. In doing so, educators and policymakers can begin to disrupt internalised stereotypes and expand the range of possibilities that children perceive as viable, including non-gender-conforming careers.

Environmental Influences

Career development literature has acknowledged the influence of environmental factors on career decision-making since the mid-twentieth century, with Roe (1957) among the first theorists to cite parents as a key influence. Super, (1957, 1980) emphasised parents as children's first career reference group, while Holland (1959) found that parents' interests, competencies and opportunities also influenced children's career choices. Hoyt (1984b) also strongly recognised parental influence, writing that parents generally

[3] TES is an education company that is widely used by teachers in Ireland, the UK and internationally to access classroom resources and educational materials.

desire their child to “grow up to become a happy, self-sufficient adult who makes positive contributions to society” (p. 216).

Building on this foundation, subsequent research has consistently highlighted the critical role of family, particularly parents, in shaping children’s career aspirations (Archer et al., 2014; Auger et al., 2005; Bregman & Killen, 1999; Cinamon & Dan, 2010; Hughes et al., 2022). As early as the 1950s, research found that children as young as ten or eleven look to their parents for guidance in forming realistic aspirations (Ginzberg et al., 1951), while Super (1957) similarly emphasised the role of parents as key role models in shaping children’s understanding of societal norms and career expectations. Echoing this perspective, Gottfredson (1981) contended that children between the ages of nine and thirteen years often eliminate career options deemed unacceptable by their families. More recent empirical studies also suggest that parental expectations and support consistently shape children’s career development in predictable ways (Hartung et al., 2005; Whiston & Keller, 2004).

Kintrea and colleagues’ study found that influences on aspirations could be categorised into three domains – family, place and school – and that there is a “clear alignment between what the parents say they want for the young people and what the young people aspire to themselves” (2011, p. 9). They also found that children’s early aspirations are socially patterned rather than individually determined, emerging from family values, cultural identity and lived experience of opportunity and constraint. This finding was comparable to research by Flouri et al. (2015). Their study, the first of its kind to explore simultaneously the role of neighbourhood, school and family on the career aspirations of children in the UK, found that children were significantly influenced by family, socioeconomic status and/or ethnicity.

In a similar vein, research by Fisher et al. (2018), using data from the USA, demonstrated that parents’ educational attainment strongly influences their understanding of the labour market. They posit that this can impact children’s career aspirations and that children’s access to role models, who can potentially provide support, guidance and future opportunities, is largely shaped by chance factors such as birthplace, classroom peers and parental networks. As a result, parental social capital plays a significant role in shaping children’s career aspirations. This finding builds on a 2016 international literature review which found that teachers, parents, guardians and

other key adult stakeholders were “consistent features of effective careers education” (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 56). Similarly, Chambers et al. (2018) found that when young people were familiar with someone in the occupation they depicted in drawings of their future careers, parents and extended family members were the most influential factor.

While much of the research highlights the positive influence of parents on children’s career development, some scholars caution against potential pitfalls. Parents are themselves shaped by the context of their work and career environments, which can affect family dynamics and children’s development (Vondracek et al., 2019). Moreover, parents and guardians may unintentionally transmit stereotypes and biases about careers (Ellott et al., 2025). This has clear implications for ECRL, underscoring the importance of early, inclusive approaches that broaden horizons, counter structural disadvantage and engage families and communities alongside schools.

3.5 Curriculum Integration

Beane (1997) defines curriculum integration as organising learning around significant problems and issues in students’ lives, in ways that connect subject knowledge to meaningful real-world contexts. Research, however, does not identify a single “best” form of curriculum integration, nor does it demonstrate that integrated approaches are inherently superior to disciplinary ones.

In their report *Conceptualising Curriculum Integration: A Synthesis of Theory, Research and Practice*, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to inform the ongoing development of the Irish Primary Curriculum Framework, Burke and Lehane (2023) examine international and Irish perspectives on curriculum integration and discuss how curriculum design has been shaped by several influential models. They note that although these models can complement each other, unintentional mixing of approaches may create confusion and contribute to a gap between the prescribed curriculum and the curriculum that learners actually experience. Burke and Lehane identify three core dimensions that require careful attention when planning for integration: (i) purpose, (ii) sources of knowledge, and (iii) responsiveness (see Figure 4, *Burke & Lehane, 2023, p. 103)*. They recommend that Irish primary curriculum frameworks should explicitly reference these

dimensions to support teachers in understanding not only what curriculum integration is, but also why it is used and how it can be effectively enacted.

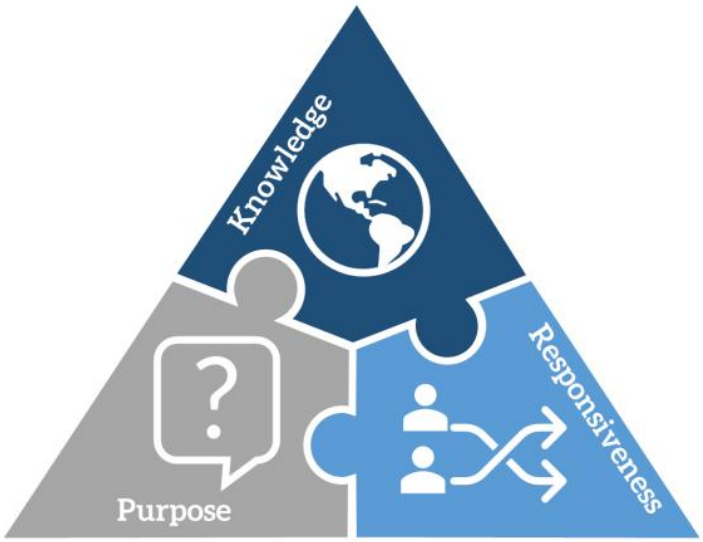


Figure 4: Three Key Considerations for Curriculum Integration

When considering purpose, the literature proposes that curriculum integration can serve multiple purposes and that its value depends on how clearly those purposes are defined (Beane, 1997; Burke & Lehane, 2023; Hudson, 2012). While integration is sometimes used simply to meet curriculum demands or to ease concerns about coverage, it can also support deeper learning by enabling exploration of complex ideas, developing competencies, or foregrounding democratic, child-centred values. Figure 4 illustrates how teachers draw on multiple and varied sources of knowledge when integrating learning, including disciplinary content, multidisciplinary connections and transdisciplinary themes. Effective integration depends on both teachers and learners having the agency to select and organise these knowledge sources.

This aligns with Bernstein's conception of flexible framing and more recent international perspectives on curriculum design (Pluim et al., 2020). While such flexibility is essential, it also increases the complexity of planning and assessment and therefore requires strong professional support, useful exemplars and dedicated time for sense-making. Burke and Lehane further posit that integration may arise from structured planning or emerge organically from children's interests and classroom interactions. Both approaches are valid, depending on purpose, but genuine teacher agency requires scope for adaptability and professional judgement rather than rigid planning requirements (Molla & Nolan, 2020).

ECRL as Part of the Curriculum

To succeed in school, children must develop proficiency across a broad range of tasks and knowledge domains. This requires opportunities to engage with a wide range of activities and subjects so that students can experience inherent enjoyment, inspiration and intrinsic motivation in the learning process rather than relying solely on external rewards (Dweck et al., 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). This broader conception of educational success aligns closely with the Department of Education and Youth's *Reflections on Inclusion in the Irish Education System*, which defines an inclusive system as one in which "all children and young people can access supportive, engaging and appropriately challenging learning experiences that enable them to have daily life-enhancing encounters and fulfil their potential" (UNESCO, 2009, as cited by DEY, 2024, p. 75).

Positioning ECRL within the primary curriculum reflects this inclusive vision by ensuring that all children, regardless of context or school, have structured opportunities to explore future possibilities and develop a sense of agency in relation to their learning. International policy discourse similarly reinforces the need for holistic approaches to education. Since UNESCO's founding in the 1940s, global education agendas have increasingly emphasised that academic attainment alone is insufficient and that education systems must support children's social, emotional, moral and civic development. An international review conducted by the Brookings Institution (Datnow et al., 2022), examining seven education systems, including Ireland, demonstrated that academically focused systems can be redesigned to attend to holistic student development.

In this context of reform, ECRL can play a key role in ensuring that children experience education not as a purely academic obligation, but as a meaningful foundation that supports their holistic development and fosters a sense of possibility about their future (Cinamon & Yeshayahu, 2020; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). This is an important consideration, given that Oliveira and Araújo (2022), in their review of nineteen studies published over the previous five years, found that career exploration, academic learning and academic success have largely been conceptualised and studied separately. They argue that many children have a limited understanding of the role that education plays in their future and often struggle to see how curriculum content relates

to their working lives. This, they contend, reinforces the misconception that school and career are separate domains rather than interrelated components of a developing life path.

A number of studies demonstrate a clear relationship between early career development and students' academic achievement and overall school success (Dweck et al., 2014; Lapan et al., 2002, 2012). Reiss and Mujtaba (2017) maintain that schools have a central responsibility to introduce young people to the full range of options available to them after they leave education because many families are unable to provide this guidance. They note that careers education in the UK holds low status and is affected by frequent shifts in policy and funding, with the consequence that many young people make subject choices for post-sixteen study that they later regret.

Sowa et al. (2025) add to this by reporting that most interventions examined in their systematic review included sector-specific objectives, with a strong emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics–related topics and skills. These programmes were frequently delivered ad hoc, which created inequity in terms of access to high-quality provision and reinforce the need for more coherent, inclusive and systemically embedded approaches to ECRL. In this context, contemporary policy and research on college and career readiness counselling, including the work of Lapan and colleagues (Lapan, 2004; Lapan et al., 2002, 2012), offer a valuable macro-level framework for understanding why ECRL in primary school is both necessary and developmentally appropriate.

Although much of this scholarship focuses on adolescents, in the publication *Career Development Across the K-16 Years*, Lapan (2004) demonstrates that the core principles map directly onto the foundations that ECRL seeks to build from early childhood. His emphasis on comprehensive, developmentally sequenced career-development curricula that are designed to foster self-regulated learning, strengthen motivation and cultivate future-oriented thinking, aligns closely with ECRL's focus on nurturing children's emerging interests, self-beliefs and sense of possibility from the earliest years of schooling. Lapan's argument that career readiness is contingent on intertwined cognitive, psychosocial and career-development processes reinforces the need for early, holistic approaches that do not treat career learning as a discrete later-stage intervention. Similarly, the role that Lapan attributes to strong relationships, school connectedness

and responsive educational environments mirrors the relational and socially constructed nature of ECRL, wherein children's early aspirations are shaped by everyday interactions with teachers, parents and communities. This argument strengthens the rationale for career-related learning to begin long before secondary school.

While these suggestions offer a promising direction for introducing ECRL, the implementation of this type of learning is not without significant challenges that warrant careful consideration. Ellott et al.'s study (2025) maintains that many elementary educators find it difficult to embed career development meaningfully in existing curricula. They highlight the importance of practical, age-appropriate strategies that strengthen foundational career skills while remaining aligned with classroom learning. The study also emphasises that career-related learning is most effective when it is woven throughout everyday subjects, so that children can understand how their learning connects to real-world contexts. Further evidence from Percy and Ameagh (2021) shows that early exposure to diverse role models and authentic encounters with the world of work can broaden children's horizons, challenge stereotypes and significantly improve their understanding of how subjects such as mathematics, language and science relate to future careers. In their study with approximately 10,000 children, 82% reported a clearer understanding of how curriculum subjects are used in a variety of jobs, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrated notable gains in confidence and aspiration.

Taken together, these findings suggest that beginning career-related learning early, through integrated curriculum experiences, encounters with a wide range of role models and opportunities for structured exploration, can enhance educational attainment, broaden aspirations and lay strong foundations for later transitions. ECRL aligns closely with Burke and Lehane's (2023) three dimensions of curriculum integration because it is driven by a clear educational purpose, draws on diverse sources of knowledge, and benefits from responsive teaching that builds on children's emerging interests. Framing ECRL through this lens positions it as a natural and meaningful component of an integrated primary curriculum.

3.6 Conclusion

This literature review establishes ECRL as a context-dependent, socially negotiated phenomenon that is co-constructed through relationships and everyday experiences across home, school and community. The extant literature positions ECRL as an emerging and evolving field at the intersection of education, psychology, and social policy. It highlights the transformative potential of early interventions to broaden children's horizons, nurture durable skills and challenge pervasive stereotypes. Simultaneously, the review also reveals persistent theoretical and practical gaps, particularly in relation to the inclusion of children's voices and contextual realities in career-related learning.

By exploring these emergent themes and gaps, this research seeks to advance understanding of ECRL as it may be experienced in an Irish context. The study adopts a naturalistic inquiry framework within a participatory case study design to foreground the children's voices and those of their parents, guardians and teachers. This approach is underpinned by an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, which recognises that meaning is produced through interaction, and a relativist ontology that acknowledges the existence of multiple, context-specific realities. These methodological choices are directly informed by the reviewed literature on gender, environment, durable skills and curriculum, as they relate to ECRL. Chapter 4 outlines this research design, including the context, participants, ethical considerations, data-generation strategies and analytic procedures employed to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

Chapter 4: Research Approaches and Processes

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodological framework chosen to explore ECRL among children in Irish primary schools. It introduces the researcher's epistemology and examines why qualitative research, due to its ability to capture the depth and complexity of human experiences, was deemed the most suitable methodology for this study. The chapter then looks at the research design. The multi-phased study was conducted across three primary schools in the Greater Dublin area and involved 100 children, 50 teachers and 23 parents. The research design sought to prioritise the voices of all participants and in particular the voice of the child participants. The chapter also examines the selection of research tools and why visual questionnaires, classroom discussion, surveys and focus groups were considered the most appropriate tools to capture the perspectives of all participant stakeholders in this research study.

Following from this introduction, Section 4.2 will present the research aims and how they influenced the selected research design and processes. The philosophical paradigm and the rationale underlying this research and the methodological approach will be explored in Section 4.3. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 will outline the research approach, including sampling, and the rationale for the selected research tools. Each of these research tools is then examined more specifically in Section 4.6.

Subsequent sections will review the data analysis methodology employed, review the validity of the research and conclude the chapter.

4.2 Research Aims and Objectives

This study focuses specifically on the experiences of young children in Senior Infants and Second Class (ages 5–9 years). It aims to investigate whether and in what ways young children engage with ECRL in classroom settings, while also capturing their perspectives, experiences and aspirations related to work and the future. In parallel, the study examines how this learning is perceived and potentially supported by key adults in the child's life, namely teachers and parents or guardians. Given the limited

empirical attention afforded to this area, particularly in the Irish context, the dual focus of the study is designed to identify current gaps in understanding, as well as opportunities for enhancing support for ECRL in both school and home environments. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute child-centred, contextually grounded insights that can potentially inform policy and practice in the field of lifelong guidance in Ireland.

The importance of research-informed policy in this area has only recently been formally recognised in Ireland's first lifelong guidance strategy, *The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030)*. Published in December 2023, this document outlines eight objectives, including Objective 5: "Further develop evidence-based policies that will help to improve the quality and impact of lifelong guidance" (DES, 2023b, pp. 2, 6–7). This emphasis on evidence-based practice to inform policy development highlights the need for empirical research in areas of career development that remain underexplored, including ECRL.

While calls for evidence-based practice can be seen in healthcare literature as far back as the 1970s (Ward et al., 2015), its application to the career development field has emerged more gradually. Although evidence-based practice is now increasingly endorsed in career guidance research and policy, its translation into practice remains complex. As Robertson notes, "its implicit medical model is problematic to apply to the social nature of the field" (2020, p. 353). This concern underscores the need for a methodological approach that is not only empirically robust but also epistemologically congruent with the socially constructed and context-dependent nature of career learning in childhood.

Accordingly, it became a central objective of this research to adopt a methodological framework that foregrounds participant voice, particularly that of the child, and engages with context in a meaningful and reflective manner. Such an approach is essential for generating the rich, situated insights required to inform responsive and grounded policy and practice. In light of these considerations, this study adopts a qualitative, child-centred methodological approach grounded in the principles of naturalistic inquiry. These approaches will be examined in greater depth throughout this chapter.

As the overarching aim of this doctoral research is to examine ECRL in an Irish context, the research is structured in two phases. The first phase focuses on exploring

the presence and characteristics of career-related learning from the perspective of young children in classroom contexts. This will be achieved through classroom-based enquiry methods designed to foreground the child's voice. The second phase will involve sharing and discussing these findings with parents, guardians and teachers to examine their understanding of ECRL, to examine their responses to children's perspectives, and to explore how, if at all, such learning may be further supported at school and at home. This two-stage design ensures that both child and adult perspectives are captured, enriching the study's potential contribution to research, policy and practice in lifelong guidance.

4.3 Methodological Framework

Developing a robust and rigorous methodological framework involved establishing a series of steps for systematically planning and conducting research, tailored to the specific aims and objectives of exploring ECRL within the Irish context. The research design underpinning this study is as follows: interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, qualitative methodology and participatory case study approach. The following sections discuss these steps and how they guided the research process.

4.3.1 Research Philosophy

Earlier chapters of this dissertation discussed the emergence of "careers" as a discipline and how its evolution has been influenced by many fields of study, including psychology, sociology, education and organisational management. This has led to many approaches to research and multiple philosophical standpoints, also known as research paradigms, appearing in the extant careers literature. Quantitative methods were the predominant methodological approach in the early career-development literature, particularly within frameworks grounded in positivist traditions, such as Holland's theory of vocational choice. These approaches emphasised measurement, prediction and the identification of stable personality–environment fit (Holland, 1997).

As the field shifted from linear career choice models to more dynamic and holistic career development theories, this reliance on quantitative methods increasingly attracted criticism for neglecting the contextual, relational and emotional dimensions of career experience (Patton & McMahon, 2014). In response, researchers began to advocate for

more interpretivist and constructivist methodologies that better capture the subjective and evolving nature of careers (Cohen et al., 2004; Robertson, 2020; Savickas, 2003).

Aligned with these developments, this study is underpinned by a subjectivist or relativist ontological position, which asserts that reality is not singular, fixed or objective, but rather multiple, dynamic and socially constructed. From this perspective, reality is understood to emerge through individuals' lived experiences and is shaped by their personal interpretations, cultural contexts and social interactions. Such an ontological stance aligns with the core principles of qualitative inquiry and is particularly appropriate for research involving young children, whose perspectives and experiences are embedded in fluid and context-specific environments. It was with this understanding of reality that the research design for this doctoral study was developed, ensuring that the methodological choices remained consistent with the view that knowledge is co-constructed and contextually situated.

Creswell (2007) puts forward that research design is the plan or strategy used to answer the research question, and this is underpinned by philosophy, methodology and methods. He argues that a crucial factor is the philosophical standpoint embraced by the researcher. This philosophical standpoint or research paradigm influences choices in data collection and subsequent methods of analysis. Creswell further suggests that all research must begin "with the researchers considering what they bring to the inquiry, such as their personal history, views of themselves and others and ethical and political issues", and only then can the researcher begin to look at research paradigms (Creswell, 2013, pp. 16–17).

While there are many studies exploring epistemological perspectives, there was less available published scholarship discussing the factors that researchers consider when making their epistemological and methodological decisions. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that all research is inherently interpretive, shaped by the researcher's own perspectives, beliefs and assumptions about the world and the ways it should be understood and examined. Because the present author is a careers practitioner and a researcher investigating the field of career development, it is acknowledged that any viewpoints put forward in this research will have been shaped by the researcher's own experiences, beliefs, values and cultural background as well as those of the research participants. This understanding of research as socially situated and interpretive informs

the philosophical positioning of the study. Aligned with a relativist ontological stance, this study is grounded within a qualitative research paradigm that draws on both interpretivist and constructivist perspectives.

An interpretivist stance underpins the aim to understand how young children make sense of ECRL within their educational settings, recognising that meaning is socially constructed and contextually situated (Cohen et al., 2018). Simultaneously, a constructivist orientation acknowledges that children actively construct their own understandings of the world through interaction with peers, teachers and wider social influences (Carter & Coyne, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Rollins, 2024). These paradigms are complementary in their recognition of multiple, subjective realities and in their shared emphasis on the importance of participant voice. By adopting this dual framework, the study seeks not only to interpret the meanings that young children assign to career-related knowledge, but also to explore the processes through which these meanings are constructed. This approach is particularly appropriate given the developmental stage of the participants and the limited research on this topic, both internationally and in the Irish context. It allows for a nuanced, child-centred enquiry that values the lived experiences of participants while remaining sensitive to the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which these experiences are formed.

Following on and keeping in line with this epistemological stance, the researcher opted to use naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as the methodological framework for the study. This framework provides a practical application of both interpretivist and constructivist principles in real-life settings, emergent research design and participant-centred engagement. It involves studying phenomena in their natural contexts without manipulation, thereby allowing rich, authentic insights to emerge through close interaction with participants, as will be explored in more detail in the next section.

4.3.2 Naturalistic Inquiry Framework

As discussed in the previous section, this study adopts a naturalistic inquiry framework and a participatory case study design; together these methodologies ensure that the complexity and nuance of the participants' lived experiences are captured as wholly, authentically and ethically as possible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced naturalistic inquiry as a methodological approach to explore phenomena in their natural settings while prioritising participants' meanings and lived experiences. Within this framework,

the epistemological paradigms of interpretivism and constructivism converge to support a research approach that centres participant perspectives and recognises the importance of context, environment and the inherently dialogic nature of knowledge creation.

The framework's rejection of detached objectivity in favour of deep, situated understanding is particularly well suited to research with children, where eliciting authentic voices and capturing nuanced, evolving interpretations are central. This approach allows researchers to engage meaningfully with young participants in educational settings, responding to their realities in ways that are both ethical and contextually grounded. The flexibility and emergent design inherent to naturalistic inquiry accommodate the complexity and diversity found in school environments (Greene & Hogan, 2020). It facilitates a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and institutional factors that influence ECRL, which remains an underexplored area in Irish educational research. Accordingly, naturalistic inquiry provides both the philosophical and the practical tools to illuminate nuanced, situated understandings of children's experiences, contributing meaningful insights to policy and practice.

4.3.3 Case Study Research

Cohen et al. (2018) note that "arriving at a single definition of case study is elusive and unnecessary" (p. 375); however, many case study theorists agree that case study research (CSR) is particularly appropriate in contexts where a phenomenon is not yet well understood. A case study design facilitates in-depth, contextualised exploration of complex issues in their natural settings, allowing for the generation of rich, detailed data that directly supports the aims of this study (Crowe et al., 2011; Hudon et al., 2021; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The capacity of CSR to examine phenomena in context and to explore how and why particular experiences occur (Yin, 2018) makes it especially well-suited to addressing the complex, nuanced and participant-centred questions posed in this research.

In her publication "Review of the Literature on Case Study Research", Brown (2008) states: "Case study as a research strategy has been explored in depth by three writers in particular, Merriam (1998), Yin (1981, 1984, 1994, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2005) and Stake (1978/2000, 1994, 1995, 2005, 2008)". While each of these researchers has individual viewpoints about the use and application of CSR, they have several commonalities, including their reference to a 'bounded system' or 'case' as the focus of

the study and that a case study methodology can highlight features that broader methodologies might not (Merriam, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Case study design facilitates the collection and triangulation of multiple sources of data, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2021). Moreover, the flexibility inherent in a case study methodology aligns well with participatory and child-centred approaches, which advocate for the inclusion of children as active contributors in the research process (Christensen & James, 2017; Lundy, 2007). In this way, the case study method supports the interpretivist commitment to exploring the richness and complexity of lived experience, while also accommodating a constructivist orientation acknowledging that children actively construct their own understandings of the world by using ethical and methodological frameworks that respect children's rights and voices in research.

Bryman and Bell (2019) put forward that in a case study, the 'case' is the subject of study, and the researcher seeks to provide a detailed and thorough understanding of it by engaging with the lived experiences of participants. Through the application of a case study methodology and qualitative data collection methods, including visual surveys, classroom discussions, questionnaires and focus groups, this research seeks to generate rich empirical insights into the complex phenomenon of ECRL as experienced by the participants. While the literature differs as to whether case studies can only be qualitative or can be quantitative (Merriam, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), Stake differentiates the two approaches by arguing that quantitative researchers are seeking "explanations" while qualitative researchers are seeking an "understanding" of "the complex interrelationship among all that exist" (1995, p. 37). One criticism found in the literature regarding the case study methodology is the argument that it can lead to a lack of generalisability. This issue regarding the external validity of the study is examined further in Section 4.8.

4.4 Research Approach

4.4.1 Research Literature Review

Chapter 3 detailed the consistent calls for further research and focus on child career development in the available literature (Godden et al., 2024; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Skorikov & Patton, 2007;

Watson & McMahon, 2004, 2018, 2022). Two international reviews, carried out by Hughes and colleagues (2016) and the OECD (2025), also concluded that more than three decades of research clearly supports the view that career-related learning should begin in primary school and continue throughout the lifespan. However, they also highlighted a notable lack of high-quality intervention studies specifically targeting primary-aged learners (Hughes et al., 2016; OECD, 2025). Given the absence of formalised ECRL provision in Irish primary schools, it was necessary to first examine how such practices are implemented internationally. This review, outlined in Chapter 3, informed the development of this study's research design. By exploring evidence-based interventions in countries with similarly structured education systems, the study was able to draw on established frameworks and identify relevant methodological approaches for investigating existing, informal or emergent ECRL practices in the Irish context.

4.4.2 Sampling Design and Participant Selection Rationale

As previously established, the overall aim of this research study is to explore ECRL in an Irish primary school context. In order achieve this, the researcher felt it was imperative to capture the voice of all ECRL stakeholders: children, teachers, parents and guardians. In particular, amplifying children's voice formed the central tenet of this research, because "good information on childhood must start from children's experience" (Mayall, 2001, as cited by Greene & Harris, 2011, p. 10). Therefore, Phase 1 of the research was designed to explore the children's viewpoints of ECRL. Any findings from Phase 1 could then form the basis of the research carried out with their parents/guardians and teachers in Phase 2.

Vasileiou et al. (2018) cite many experts in the field of qualitative research when they suggested that there is no ideal sample size. Their empirical study directs researchers to choose a sample that is a large enough cohort to allow for the discovery of new understandings, but not so large that a deep dive into the phenomenon is not possible. In line with this perspective, the practical aspects of this study's sample size were carefully weighed to guarantee both a depth and a richness of data. Other considerations included determining the most effective means to attain diversity and variability, while balancing practical limitations such as time, resources and feasibility.

Considering the feasibility factors of time and distance, it was decided to recruit participant primary schools within a reasonable distance of Dublin City University (DCU), where the researcher is based. Phase 1 of the research would be conducted with children from these schools, and Phase 2 would seek the participation of their parents/guardians and teachers. Purposeful or purposive sampling is a widely used technique in qualitative research to aid the selection of participants who have direct experience, knowledge or involvement with the phenomenon being studied. Purposive sampling is intentional and strategic, ensuring that the sample is information-rich and can provide deep insights into the research topic. With 455 mainstream primary schools in the Dublin region, this sampling approach was further refined by applying convenience sampling. Here, the researcher engaged schools within her professional and personal network to recruit those who were readily available and interested in participation.

Because the Dublin region is divided into urban, suburban and rural areas, the researcher opted to recruit one school from each, to attain as much diversity and variability as possible among the sample population. Approximately 20 per cent of the overall school population in Ireland are part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, an action plan for educational inclusion designed to support schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Participation in the programme is automatic based on information from the national Census and the school's enrolment. Of the primary schools located in the Dublin region, almost 40 per cent are part of the scheme (*List of Schools into DEIS*, 2022)). As this is a significant number, the researcher ensured the inclusion of a DEIS school as one of the three schools in the sample group.

The next consideration was which class groups should form part of the research sample group. Through an extensive review of careers research focused on primary education, the researcher identified a strong emphasis in international research on early intervention as a key factor in expanding the impact of career-related learning. This finding informed the researcher's decision to focus on the early years of primary education. There is also a consensus in extant literature that children, particularly in earlier years of primary school, are generally keen to gain social approval and meet what they perceive as others' expectations of them (Davies & Brember, 1998; Gottfredson, 1981; Yee et al., 2022).

This is important, as it highlights how the early years of primary education represent a developmental period in which children's self-concepts, aspirations and understandings of what is possible are especially open to influence. When children are strongly motivated by social approval and by perceived expectations from significant others, including parents, guardians and teachers, they are more likely to internalise messages about ability, suitability and future pathways (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Ginevra et al., 2024; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). As a result, experiences during this stage can have a disproportionate impact on how children begin to imagine themselves in relation to learning and future work, making early primary education a particularly critical window for career-related learning interventions (Chambers et al., 2018; Ellott et al., 2025; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019). Furthermore, research conducted by Davies and Brember (1998) in the UK found that the self-esteem of children (aged around 7 years) was negatively impacted following national testing, while Carless and Lam (2014) found that testing can pose challenges to confidence and self-esteem for some children.

The first standardised tests in Irish primary schools were introduced in the 1970s, and mandatory testing and reporting requirements were launched in 2012. O'Leary and colleagues' research suggests that this has led to "far greater attention being paid to the outcomes of standardised testing by teachers, principals, managers, parents, policy-makers and...pupils" (2019, p. viii). The literature review section of this dissertation highlighted that self-efficacy and self-esteem are both important components of children's academic confidence and academic achievement. Earlier in this section, international research was presented highlighting that children may unconsciously form decisions about their future from an early age and may not deviate from these choices later in life.

These research findings collectively informed the selection of Senior Infant classes (children aged 5–7 years) and Second Class (7–9 years), therefore capturing children's views, hopes and feelings both before (Senior Infants) and after (Second Class) the introduction of weekly classroom assessments and mandatory national standardised testing in schools. A final consideration during the selection of class groupings was comments made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding the need to adopt a constructive approach, recognising "even the youngest child" as an active member of society "with their own concerns, interests and points of view"

(UNCRC, 1989, p. 3). All of these deliberations led to the decision to conduct the research with children in Senior Infants and Second Class (aged 5–9 years) in three schools located in three areas of Dublin and surrounding areas.

4.4.3 Ethical Considerations

This doctoral research adopted a rigorous and careful approach to the ethical considerations of carrying out research with young children. The researcher has participated in child protection training previously but elected to complete a refresher e-learning programme in advance of conducting any research in a school environment (Appendix S). The researcher also has National Vetting Bureau[4] approval through DCU in place. As this project is supported by DCU, the researcher sought ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC). The REC webpage states that their role "endeavours to ensure that all research carried out by DCU researchers is ethically sound and adheres to the highest standards of research integrity" (DCU REC, 2025). As part of this process the researcher submitted all research plans and intended research tools for review by the committee. Approval was granted in April 2024 (DCUREC/2024/058 – Appendix T).

After ethical approval was granted, the recruitment of schools constituted the next stage of the research process. Schools known to the researcher through personal and professional networks were initially contacted via email (Appendix A). Where a school principal responded positively to the request, formal permission was subsequently sought from the school's board of management (Appendix B). Upon receipt of board approval, all Senior Infant and Second Class teachers in the participating schools were invited to take part in the study (Appendix C). Because only one class from each of Senior Infants and Second Class was required per school, random selection was employed where more than one teacher volunteered to participate.

Once the class selection was finalised, the classroom teachers acted as gatekeepers by distributing an information letter (Appendix D) and consent form (Appendix E) to all parents and guardians. In accordance with national and international child protection policies and guidelines, every effort was made to adopt a child-centred and inclusive

[4] The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 provide a statutory basis for the vetting of persons carrying out relevant work with children or vulnerable persons.

approach ensuring that the rights of all children were considered and upheld, including those not participating directly in the research (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Although the identities of children without parental or guardian consent were noted, all students took part in the classroom-based activities to avoid singling out or excluding those without consent, thereby preventing any potential feelings of distress or marginalisation. In line with ethical research practices, no data was collected from these children.

An additional ethical consideration related to the "voluntary, flexible and ongoing nature of children's consent" (Horgan et al., 2023, p. 105), which had to be balanced against the schools' expectations that all children would engage in classroom activities. To mitigate this issue, children would be invited, but not required, to complete the visual survey, and alternative tasks would be made available by the classroom teachers for those who did not wish to take part. As an added measure, the decision to offer their work for collection by the researcher would be left to each student. A similar approach was adopted with the classroom discussions, which would be recorded using a handheld microphone. Children who did not wish to contribute or be recorded could simply pass the microphone to the next participant. These procedures were designed to respect children's autonomy and comfort, while meeting the dual ethical obligations to both the research and the classroom environment.

On the day of data collection, the researcher met with each participating class in their classroom, with the class teacher present. The research was introduced through a short presentation using age-appropriate, child-friendly language (Appendix F). Each child was then invited to complete a visual assent form (Appendix G) to indicate their willingness to take part. Both the presentation and assent form were guided by *Creating Child-Friendly Versions of Written Documents: A Guide* (Lundy, 2012), which is grounded in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). These articles affirm children's right to express their views on matters affecting them and to receive accessible information. This approach and its relevance to participatory research will be explored further later in this chapter.

4.5 Research Design

4.5.1 Participatory Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) highlight the interrelatedness of the various activities that constitute qualitative research, emphasising how each is shaped by the researcher's own context, beliefs and values. As such, epistemological considerations inevitably influence, both consciously and unconsciously, the researcher's approach to research design, data collection and analysis. Participatory research distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative research through its commitment to conducting research *with* participants, rather than *on* them. This chapter has already outlined the researcher's ontological position of relativism, as well as the adoption of interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies. The interpretivist approach seeks to understand the phenomenon of ECRL in its social and cultural context, while constructivism supports the application of that knowledge in the lived experiences of the research participants. In alignment with these philosophical assumptions, the study employs a naturalistic inquiry framework and a case study research design, which were deemed the most suitable research design for capturing the complex and nuanced perspectives of all stakeholders, especially children, involved in ECRL. The next step in the research process involved designing data collection tools that authentically reflect these ontological and epistemological views.

Carter and Coyne (2018) contend that participatory research should be understood as an approach to conducting research rather than a specific method. They emphasise the importance of context when selecting research methods, suggesting that methodological choices must be sensitive to the research setting and participants. Christensen and Prout (2002) identify four distinct perspectives when conducting research with children: (i) the child as object; (ii) the child as subject; (iii) the child as social actor; and an emerging view that positions (iv) the child as participant and co-researcher. They advocate for the adoption of *ethical symmetry*, a principle that treats the rights, experiences and participation of children with the same respect and ethical consideration as those of adults.

Over the past two decades, there has been a notable shift in literature towards involving children more directly in the research process. This shift has contributed to the development of innovative and inclusive methodologies, such as participatory research,

which seek to elicit children's insights by recognising their capacity to contribute meaningfully to knowledge production. These approaches centre children's lived experiences and voices, challenging traditional power dynamics in research and reinforcing the principle that children are not merely passive subjects of study but active contributors, especially in matters that affect their lives.

Given that the first phase of this research was conducted in the early years of primary schools, the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007a) was adopted as a guiding framework. The model offers a structured approach to conceptualising a child's right to participation as laid out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). This framework has been formally endorsed by the Irish government in the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015) and by key state agencies such as the NCCA (2023a) in the ongoing redevelopment of the primary curriculum.

The Lundy model (Figure 5) conceptualises participation through the four interrelated components of *space*, *voice*, *audience* and *influence*. Each element must be considered to ensure that children's participation is meaningful and rights-based.

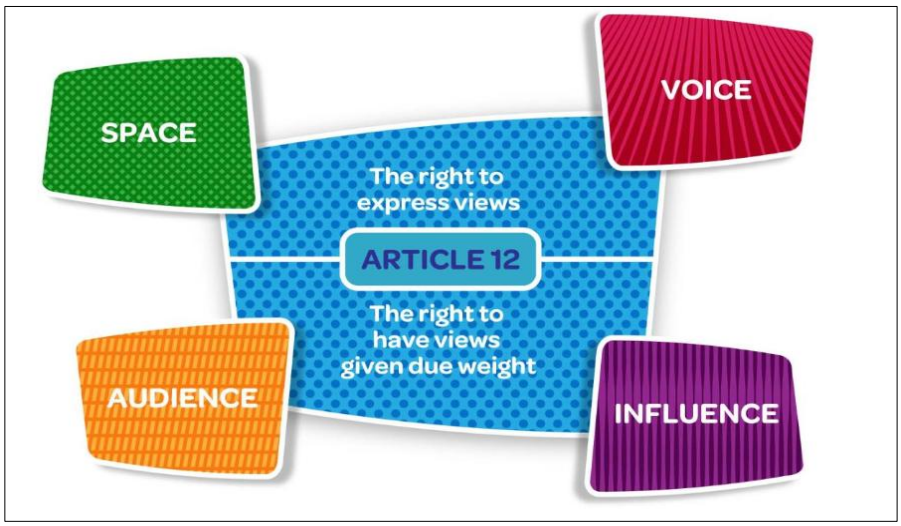


Figure 5: Lundy Model of Participation (2007)

A key element of this study was ensuring that a safe, familiar and supportive *space* could be provided for children to articulate their perspectives and experiences of ECRL. This was facilitated using age-appropriate, participatory methods that allowed children to express themselves in their own words. The children played an active and agentic

role in the research process, and their *voice* is recognised as expert in the matter of their career-related learning, experiences and understandings. Their views were presented to an *audience* of their parents/guardians and teachers in the ensuing phase of research. It is hoped that, in keeping with the principle of *influence*, the children's opinions and observations will enable the adults in their lives to recognise and respond to the children's ECRL insights in a more informed way.

While participatory research is widely regarded as a positive and progressive development (*inter alia* Christensen & Prout, 2002; Hutchings, 1996; Lundy et al., 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012), it would be remiss not to consider both the "power relationships and the complexity of representation" (Horgan, 2017, p. 248) inherent in conducting research with children. Lundy (2007) suggests that researchers adopting a rights-based approach do so in recognition of children's entitlement to participate in research, thereby directly addressing the inherent power imbalance that exists when an adult engages in research with a child. Her model offers an unequivocal recognition of the child as a rights-holder and a subject matter expert in their own lived experience, as a right of the child as opposed to a gift from the adult (Lundy, 2007).

In an attempt to mitigate an issue of representation and inclusion, this study aimed to involve as diverse a population as possible, within the practical and ethical constraints of the research context. The design of the research tools included non-verbal, creative methods in an attempt to ensure that the perspectives of children who may not feel confident or comfortable contributing in classroom discussions were still captured. Nonetheless, the researcher acknowledges that it is not possible to eliminate all barriers to participation. This is further addressed later, as part of a broader reflection on the constraints and limitations of the study.

4.5.2 Participatory Case Study

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the decision to adopt a qualitative case study design is closely aligned with the dual paradigms of interpretivism and constructivism, as well as the guiding principles of naturalistic inquiry. This design offers flexibility, responsiveness and ethical attentiveness in engaging with all stakeholders, particularly children, as knowledgeable and active contributors to the research process. As Matthews (2007) writes, "proponents of participatory research urge caution with

quantitative methods" (as cited in Lundy & McEvoy, 2009, p. 47), particularly when the objective is to foster authentic engagement and agency.

These methodological considerations, combined with limited empirical ECRL research, particularly in an Irish context, led to the selection of a case study as the most appropriate research strategy. Case study research (CSR) is grounded in qualitative enquiry and seeks to explore complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts. A critique of conventional CSR is that it tends to be researcher-led, positioning participants primarily as sources of data rather than as co-creators of knowledge (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Given that this study aims to foreground the voice of the child participants, a participatory case study approach was adopted to address this limitation. This approach actively invites participants, particularly children, not just to share their experiences but to engage in shaping the research process itself. Participatory CSR therefore aligns more closely with this study's child-centred ethos and its underpinning interpretivist and constructivist paradigms.

Participatory case studies are rooted in the principles of participatory research and are explicitly collaborative in nature, engaging participants as co-researchers throughout the research process (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The researcher undertook this approach from the initial identification of the aims and objectives of this study through to research design, using children's research advisory groups (CRAGs) and later parent and educator research advisory groups (PERAGs). This participatory ethos was sustained throughout data collection, with children independently creating drawings and later leading classroom discussions.

A phased research design ensured that children's voices were communicated back to parents, guardians and teachers, enabling a dialogic process of meaning-making and reflection. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) claim that participatory research challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge by valuing the lived experiences of those most affected by the issues being studied. This approach aligned closely with the aims and objectives of the study, because by involving research participants in all elements of the research study, the findings are more likely to be relevant to and grounded in the lived experiences of the children and their parents, guardians and teachers.

4.5.3 Drawing as Research Method

Literat (2013) observes that while the use of visual methods in qualitative research is well established, their application has increasingly shifted towards more participatory approaches. She further notes that although there is a growing body of literature focused on research *with* children rather than *on* children, considerably less attention has been given to identifying the most effective methods, particularly when working with younger participants. Nieuwenhuys notes that "the preferred activities of children such as games, storytelling and drawing may be more effective in bringing out the complexities of their experience" (1997, p. 242).

Building on this, Chandler (2007) introduced the concept of "drawing-telling" to describe a process in which children use drawings to convey ideas and narratives, often accompanied by verbal or non-verbal explanations. This view is supported by Eldén, who posits that "visual research using drawing methods with children seems to be particularly sensitive to discussions of 'children's voices' and authenticity" (2013, p. 67). Tay-Lim and Lim (2013) observe that drawings have traditionally been employed in research and educational contexts for assessment or diagnostic purposes, rather than as tools for meaning-making. However, their work demonstrates that drawing can be used to facilitate children's voices in meaningful ways, allowing children to express their experiences with greater autonomy.

This perspective is echoed by Rollins (2024), who asserts that children, regardless of their context or background, improved their communication through drawing. She introduces the concept of the "campfire effect" to describe how the act of drawing creates a conversational space where conversation is enhanced in both quality and quantity. Rollins describes how, "much like sitting around a campfire, 'sitting around the drawing' allowed the drawing and not the child, to serve as the object of focus for both the child and the researcher" (2024, p. 84). This shift in focus reduces the pressure placed directly on the child, thereby fostering more open and comfortable communication.

Across the existing literature, there is a consensus that drawing can enhance both representation and voice, by offering children a non-verbal mode of engagement in the research process. The idea of "draw and talk" is cited by numerous researchers (*inter alia* Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Rollins, 2024; Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013), who highlight

the value of engaging with children while they draw. This dynamic often increases, rather than inhibits, children's willingness to contribute. As such, the current study incorporated classroom discussions alongside drawing activities, an approach explored further later in this chapter.

Drawings, in particular, provide a developmentally appropriate medium for younger research participants, offering a less intimidating and more creative space for expressing thoughts, feelings and experiences (Malchiodi, 1998). As such, they mitigate adult-centric power dynamics and enable children to contribute on their own terms (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Eldén, 2013; Literat, 2013). This is an important consideration in participatory research, and addressing issues of power and voice in an equitable manner was a central concern throughout this study's design and implementation. Moreover, visual methods can promote inclusivity, offering greater accessibility to children with limited literacy, with communication difficulties, or for whom English is an additional language (Malchiodi, 1998). In this way, such methods not only enhance the richness of the data collected but also uphold the ethical imperative of giving all children an equitable opportunity to participate in research that affects them (Literat, 2013; Lundy, 2007a; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009a; Malchiodi, 1998).

These insights from existing research highlight the value of drawing as a meaningful and participatory research method that supports the articulation of young children's perspectives in ways that are both ethically sound and developmentally appropriate. In line with these findings, this study integrated classroom-based discussions alongside drawing activities to support children's expression in multiple forms. This approach is examined in greater detail later in the chapter.

4.5.4 Research Advisory Groups

As already described, participatory case studies are collaborative in nature and engage participants as co-researchers throughout the research process, including the study's design, to ensure adequate representation of participant stakeholders' voices. To validate and enhance the rigour of the research tools, the researcher convened research advisory groups to provide feedback and guidance during the design phase of the study.

Children's Research Advisory Group

The inclusion of a children's research advisory group (CRAG) in this study underlines a deliberate commitment to participatory research principles and to positioning children as active contributors and co-researchers, as laid out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in line with the work of Lundy and McEvoy (Lundy, 2007a; Lundy et al., 2011; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009b, 2012). From a methodological perspective, the CRAG contributed to the development, refinement and validation of research tools, ensuring that the chosen methods were age-appropriate, engaging and accessible and highlighting issues that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Once drawing had been identified as the primary research tool for working with the children, the researcher created a template visual questionnaire. To ensure that the tool was as child-centred as possible, a CRAG was established (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). The CRAG members were not research participants but rather children who were known to the researcher. They were from Senior Infants and Second Class and were invited to take part as co-researchers. The group consisted of three girls and two boys. They met on a single occasion, during which the researcher explained the study using an early version of the introductory presentation (see Appendix F). At that time, the presentation included a voiceover and was intended to be shown to children by their classroom teacher. This approach aimed to minimise classroom disruption, by requiring only one visit by the researcher. All five children in the CRAG expressed a preference for the researcher to visit in person. As one co-researcher remarked, "Then we will know your face and your voice" (boy, aged 6 years). Following this, the group reviewed the assent form (Appendix G). None of the children had previously been asked to sign a form, and the process generated significant excitement. One child (girl, aged 8 years) later reported to her mother that they had engaged in "important work" and were even required to sign it.

The administration of the visual survey (Appendix H) to the CRAG offered valuable insights into timing, varying levels of engagement and the importance of conversation while the children were drawing. These findings reinforced the value of incorporating classroom discussion as part of the research process. As noted by Mercieca and Jones (2018), research advisory groups can support the inclusion of children's perspectives on

both what questions should be asked and how they should be phrased. The CRAG were read a list of proposed questions intended for the classroom discussions and were then invited to suggest additional or alternative questions that might be more meaningful or appropriate following the drawing activities.

Input from the CRAG significantly enhanced the relevance, clarity and sensitivity of each of the research tools. Following a review of the prompt questions for the classroom discussion (Appendix I), further amendments were suggested by the children in the CRAG to enhance clarity. For example, a question that was initially phrased, “Do you know what a job is?” led to “Yes” and “No” answers. Once this was noted, the researcher asked the CRAG for their suggestions as to the phrasing, and the group proposed changing the question to “Can you explain what a job is?” This prompted great conversation among the CRAG participants. Furthermore, the CRAG put forward additional exploratory questions for the classroom discussion. For example, the question “What do you not like in school?” was supplemented with “How does it make you feel?”, while “Name some jobs you know” was expanded to include “Do you know anyone who does this job?”. These changes led to immediate and more personal engagement with the topic from the CRAG participants and shaped the researcher’s approach to the classroom discussions.

The CRAG also helped address the ethical concern of adult-centric power dynamics, by offering children an opportunity to influence the design of research in a way that aligns with their lived experiences (Horgan, 2017; Lundy, 2007a). Overall, the CRAG supported both the epistemological aims of participatory research and the ethical obligation to conduct research with, rather than on, children. It is felt this approach made the data-gathering more inclusive and empowering for the children taking part, as they moved from data providers to co-constructors, offering informed and insightful feedback based on their experiences.

Parent and Educator Research Advisory Group

In a comparable manner to the CRAG, the researcher assembled a parent and educator research advisory group (PERAG) comprising six parents of primary-school-aged children, three of whom were also primary school teachers. This group convened once via the Zoom platform, reflecting practical considerations of expediency and participant convenience. Research tools were explored with the PERAG, including interviews

versus online surveys and potential questions for the focus groups. There was a consensus that for work-related activities, which is how the research with teachers was perceived, an online survey would be the preferred option. The teachers in the group felt strongly that they could engage in this when they "had a free moment" as opposed to trying to cover a class or use their personal time to participate in a focus group or interview.

In contrast, when discussing their roles as parents or guardians, members of the PERAG were largely supportive of the option to participate in either an online survey or a focus group, or both. They felt that this format would allow participants not only to ask questions about potential findings but also to voice opinions and hear the perspectives of others concerning children's ECRL. One member of the group commented that he had learned a great deal about careers simply by listening to other participants. This was an unanticipated benefit of the focus group format of the PERAG and one which had not previously occurred to the researcher.

4.5.5 Pilot Study

Many studies emphasise the numerous benefits associated with conducting pilot research (Aziz & Khan, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Morin, 2013; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). These include identifying potential issues with proposed methodologies or instruments, mitigating risks and improving the likelihood of success in the main phase of the research. In the context of this study, the use of a CRAG was instrumental in the initial development of the research tools. The practicality and effectiveness of these tools in a classroom setting, however, required further exploration through a dedicated pilot study.

For the pilot, a DEIS school was selected that is located close to another school already recruited to participate in the study. An invitation letter was sent to the school principal, and the researcher sought the necessary permissions from the board of management and the classroom teacher for the targeted year groups (Senior Infants and Second Class). Following this, plain language statements and consent forms were distributed to parents, guardians and classroom teachers.

On the day of the research visit, only five of seventeen consent forms had been returned for the Senior Infant class. The school staff had previously indicated the likelihood of

such challenges. In line with the study's inclusive design, the planned activities were conducted with the entire class; however, data collection was limited to children for whom parental consent had been obtained. As a result, a considerable amount of valuable data could not be captured. A similar issue occurred in the Second Class group, where only eight of sixteen consent forms were returned. In one instance, a parent explicitly requested that their child not participate in the activities, due to religious objections. Managing this group presented additional challenges compared to the younger cohort, as the older children were more aware of their exclusion from the data collection, making efforts to minimise their feelings of exclusion less effective.

Three key learnings developed through the pilot study. Firstly, regarding the accessibility of plain language materials, the language required by the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) for plain language statements and consent forms often remains inaccessible, particularly for individuals with lower levels of literacy or for those whose first language is not English. Secondly, the pilot highlighted the importance of attending to classroom context and scheduling. School environments can be dynamic and unpredictable, and careful consideration must be given to the timing of research activities. Scheduling needs to align not only with the general school calendar but also with the particular routines and practices of individual classes. For example, one data collection session experienced low attendance as it followed the class's annual school tour. This was a challenge noted by school staff as relatively common. Thirdly, the pilot revealed the need for the use of differentiated tools. Levels of engagement and task completion abilities varied significantly, both between and within classes. These differences influenced the quantity and quality of the data collected.

The pilot study highlighted several critical considerations in implementing research tools in classroom settings and emphasised the importance of adaptability and contextual sensitivity in research design. Although not all challenges could be fully addressed, the following accommodations were introduced before starting Phase 1 of the study:

1. Accessibility of plain language materials: In light of the challenges that some parents and guardians appeared to face in interpreting the written documentation, it was decided that they would also be given access to the child-friendly introductory video originally created for use with pupils (see Appendix

F). This measure aimed to support comprehension and promote more informed consent.

2. Classroom context and scheduling: The researcher became increasingly attentive to the timing of each research visit, taking care to avoid break times, scheduled events and other known sources of disruption.
3. Implementation of differentiated tools: Following the pilot, it became apparent that providing additional non-research-related tasks, such as colouring sheets for early finishers, helped maintain engagement and reduce restlessness. This approach also allowed more time and flexibility for children who required additional support in completing the primary research activities.

4.6 Research Tools

When conducting research in classroom settings, particularly with young children, traditional data collection methods such as structured interviews or written surveys may not always be the most appropriate or effective approach. Clark and Moss (2008, 2017) introduced the Mosaic approach as a child-centred, participatory framework that advocates for the collection of data through multiple methods or "individual tiles", each offering a unique insight into the child's perspective. The strength of the Mosaic approach lies in its recognition that children express themselves in diverse and often non-verbal ways. During the analysis phase, these individual data pieces are brought together to form a comprehensive picture or "mosaic" of the children's experiences.

This method not only respects the varied communicative capacities of young children but also aligns with ethical and inclusive research practices by positioning children as active participants in the co-construction of knowledge. In line with this approach, a range of research tools were carefully considered and employed to support meaningful, age-appropriate and participatory engagement. These tools were underpinned by the principles of ethical, participatory and child-led research and were designed to create space for authentic expression within familiar learning environments.

In keeping with the participatory ethos of the study and the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007a), findings from the children's contributions (Appendix J) were subsequently shared with an *audience* of key adult participant stakeholders (parents, guardians and teachers) through the use of online surveys and facilitated focus

groups. This two-stage process enabled a dialogic exchange, allowing adults to respond to children's perspectives while also enriching the broader understanding of the research context. The following section outlines the research tools in greater detail, illustrating how each method contributed to capturing, representing and communicating the voices of children in the study.

4.6.1 Visual Questionnaire

Podobnik et al. state that young children's drawings are contextual and can be classified as 'relaxation drawing' or 'analytical drawing'. They further state that children draw analytically "as intentional cognitive tools to express and articulate their understanding of certain phenomena" (2024, p. 190). The visual questionnaire used in this study was adapted from Drawing The Future (Chambers et al., 2018), which carried out research with children aged seven to eleven years. Ensuring to follow guidelines advised by children and captured in research by Lundy (2012), child-friendly imagery was chosen and approved by the CRAG. All wording was kept succinct and made as accessible as possible to introduce the research, the assent form, the visual questionnaire and the classroom discussion prompts. The questionnaires consisted of three boxes. Each box had a heading with room underneath for a drawing:

I. Things I like to do

II. Things I am good at

III. Me when I am older at work

The headings were formulated with consideration for themes which emerged in the literature review, including interests, academic tenacity, self-esteem and self-efficacy, career imagination and career aspiration. As the questionnaire is quite directive, it will fall under Podobnik et al.'s (2024) description of analytical drawing. They suggest that dialogue with children during and after they draw is an important part of understanding the context and interpretation of the drawing. This research, alongside the children's research advisory group, influenced how the surveys would be administered in the class and the classroom discussion that followed.

4.6.2 Classroom Discussion

The classroom discussion was intended to delve deeper into the children's drawings as well as their broader understanding of work and career. A list of prompt questions was drawn up and then appraised by the CRAG. While using the prompt questions with the CRAG, it became challenging to manage discussion, a difficulty that was intensified in the larger pilot group. Lundy et al. reported a suggestion from one of their CRAGs, to employ a 'circle time' model as a tool to allow children time to be heard, uninterrupted, if they were holding the 'talking object' (2011, p. 724) .

This approach was implemented for the classroom discussion part of the research process. It had several immediate advantages. A microphone connected to a recording device was how the data from the discussion was to be collected; because children appeared to understand and respect the 'circle time' process, the microphone was adopted as the 'talking object'. The child holding the microphone would speak, and once finished, would pass it along to a classmate. Equally, if a child did not want to participate, they could just pass the microphone along. This method also supported the inclusivity aspect of the exercise. If a child who did not have consent to participate was holding the microphone, they were permitted to speak; however, their contributions were not recorded, as the researcher paused the handheld recording device to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. This meant that all children who wanted to take part could do so without violation of their parents' and guardians' wishes.

4.6.3 Online Surveys

Online surveys were selected as a data collection method for parents, guardians (see Appendix K) and teachers (see Appendix L) due to their practicality, accessibility and capacity to accommodate diverse participant needs. In educational research, online surveys are increasingly recognised for their ability to reach a broad and geographically dispersed population, while enabling respondents to engage with the research at a time and pace that suits their individual schedules (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The decision to use online surveys in this study was further influenced by the recommendations of the PERAG, as well as by research which supports the validity of qualitative data collected via questionnaires. Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007) argue that such data can contribute as much to a study as information gathered through interviews. Similarly, Sue and Ritter (2012) highlight the speed, cost-effectiveness,

convenience and ease of administration and completion as key advantages of online surveys.

The design of the survey was informed by established principles of questionnaire construction in educational research, with an emphasis on clarity, accessibility and the production of meaningful data (Cohen et al., 2018). Particular care was taken to ensure the survey was suitable for adult respondents from diverse educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. While qualitative research traditionally prioritises open-ended responses, the inclusion of closed-ended items facilitated the quantification of key variables and the identification of general patterns across respondents. Open-ended questions, meanwhile, allowed for the collection of more nuanced, qualitative insights. This combination of question types is widely supported in the literature as offering both breadth and depth in the exploration of participant perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

All questions were phrased using simple, clear language, avoiding educational jargon or technical terminology. This was particularly important for the parent and guardian version of the survey, in recognition of the varying levels of literacy and familiarity with career- or education-related language among the general population. As Sue and Ritter (2012) observe, the most effective questionnaire items are "short, unambiguous and meaningful to the respondent" (p. 51). To minimise participant burden and encourage survey completion, the overall length and complexity of the questionnaire were carefully managed to ensure it was respectful of participants' time.

The sequence of questions followed a logical progression, beginning with general reflections on the data collected from the visual surveys and classroom discussions with children, as a short summary of findings presented at the beginning of the survey. This was followed by more specific items relating to the respondents' own perspectives and experiences. Pilot testing of the survey with members of the PERAG informed further refinements to the language, sequencing and layout. The surveys were delivered electronically using Google Forms, which provided ease of access across multiple devices and supported efficient data collection and organisation. Anonymity was assured for all participants, and the survey platform enabled the researcher to download and analyse responses while maintaining participant confidentiality.

4.6.4 Focus Group

To meet the research aims of this study, focus groups were selected as an additional method of data collection for parents, guardians and teachers, building on many of the same considerations that informed the selection of the initial sample and the design of the survey instruments. While online surveys were used to gather a broad and diverse range of individual perspectives, focus groups offered a valuable opportunity to generate deeper, dialogic insights, particularly in response to the emerging themes identified through earlier phases of the research. Although Guest et al. (2017) lament the relative lack of empirical research directly comparing the data quality of interviews and focus groups, they highlight that focus groups uniquely "capitalise on group dynamics to stimulate discussion" (p. 693). This interactive aspect was of particular relevance in this study. During the PERAG, one participant reflected on how listening to other parents' perspectives helped them think differently about their own views and experiences. This observation supported the decision to use focus groups with adult participant stakeholders, as it was anticipated that a shared discussion about children's ECRL, combined with anonymised findings from the children's responses and the online survey, could provide an opportunity for meaningful exchanges and reflective dialogue among participants.

Focus groups are also recognised for their suitability in research that seeks to explore how meaning is constructed socially and collectively, rather than individually (Morgan, 2017). In this part of the study, parents, guardians and teachers were encouraged to respond not only to the research findings presented to them, but also to one another's interpretations. This allowed for the exploration of points of consensus and divergence, as well as the surfacing of values, assumptions and experiences that might not emerge through other data collection methods (Barbour, 2014). The use of focus groups was therefore well aligned with the study's participatory ethos and its aim to understand how adult participant stakeholders perceive and respond to children's perspectives on work and career-related concepts.

Ethical considerations were central to the design and delivery of the focus groups. Participation was entirely voluntary, with parents or guardians who wished to take part in a focus group invited to provide their email addresses during the online survey. In line with the recommendations of the PERAG, and to accommodate varying schedules

and caregiving responsibilities, participants were offered a choice between a morning and an evening session. Those who opted in were issued with a plain language statement and a consent form (see Appendix M). Once consent was confirmed, participants were emailed a secure Zoom link for their chosen session (Focus Group 1 or 2), hosted via DCU's Zoom platform. In designing the focus group sessions, attention was paid to ensuring a supportive, respectful environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their views. For ethical and privacy considerations, the sessions were not recorded but transcribed using Zoom's secure transcription function, with detailed contemporaneous notes taken to support accuracy. The automatically generated transcripts were carefully reviewed and verified by the researcher before analysis.

The researcher acted as a facilitator, presenting key findings from the research with children in a neutral and accessible way, followed by a series of guiding questions. These were informed by earlier advisory group discussions and pilot feedback and designed to prompt reflection without leading responses. The use of focus groups in this phase of the research was not only methodologically appropriate but also ethically considerate and epistemologically aligned with the participatory aims of the study. The discussions that took place in these groups were designed to build on earlier findings, offer parents and guardians a platform to voice their responses, and contribute to a richer, more dialogic understanding of how ECRL is perceived by adult participant stakeholders.

4.7 Data Analysis

Several qualitative analytic approaches were considered, including grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory. However, given the study's interpretivist orientation and its aim to explore patterns of meaning across multiple stakeholder groups, a thematic approach was most deemed appropriate. The analysis was therefore guided by a thematic approach, underpinned by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2022, 2023). This method was selected for its conceptual and methodological flexibility and for its suitability in exploring meaning-making within a naturalistic inquiry framework informed by interpretivist and constructivist perspectives. RTA is grounded in the assumption that meaning is actively constructed through interaction between the researcher, participants, data and context.

This assumption aligns closely with a relativist ontology, which recognises the existence of multiple, context-specific realities.

RTA is a particularly appropriate analysis approach for participatory case study research, as it positions the researcher as an active and reflexive agent in the analytic process, rather than as a neutral observer (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This reflexive stance is especially important in research involving children, where close engagement with participants and sensitivity to power relations are central methodological considerations (Horgan, 2017). RTA allows for transparency regarding how the researcher's theoretical positioning, professional background and interactions with participants shape the development of themes, thereby enhancing analytic rigour rather than detracting from it. It also supports the identification and interpretation of patterns of meaning across the range of data collection tools used, including the visual questionnaires, classroom discussions, open-ended survey responses and focus group transcripts – a key consideration in participatory research.

All qualitative data was analysed inductively, meaning that themes were derived from the data rather than based on pre-existing categories or assumptions. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: (i) familiarisation with the data; (ii) generation of initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes; and (vi) producing the final report. These phases were applied iteratively, allowing the researcher to revisit earlier stages as necessary, particularly as new insights developed through the comparison of data across participant groups (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.7.1 Phase 1: Classroom-based Research

Visual Questionnaires

As discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, when conducting research in classroom settings, particularly with young children, traditional data collection methods such as structured interviews or written surveys may not always be the most appropriate or effective approach. In this study, the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2008, 2017) was adopted to guide multi-modal data collection. This method involved the use of drawings (gathered through visual surveys, see Figure 6), which were at times accompanied by written and verbal reflections (gathered during classroom discussions).



Figure 6: Sample Visual Survey

These multiple modes of expression provided an opportunity to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of children's perspectives than might be achievable through more traditional data collection methods alone (Chandler, 2007; Eldén, 2013; Nieuwenhuys, 1997).

The children's drawings produced through the visual surveys were analysed using a visual narrative analysis approach, supported by transcripts from the accompanying classroom discussions. The researcher examined the drawings for recurring symbols and themes, while also attending to the ways in which children narrated or explained their images through written explanations or during the accompanying recorded classroom conversations. RTA was employed to identify patterns of meaning across the full dataset, allowing the researcher to move beyond individual narratives to explore shared thematic patterns, common influences and recurring constructions of aspiration, identity and work across the child participant stakeholders.

This integrated analysis of visual and verbal data allowed for a deeper interpretation of the meanings conveyed by the children, consistent with the participatory and multimodal ethos of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2017). The approach recognises that children's drawings are not merely artistic expressions but are embedded with personal and unique narratives that reflect their understanding of the world around them. Clacherty (2024) took a similar approach using drawings to explore the experiences of refugee children, describing a visual narrative method in which

children's drawings were embedded in broader narrative contexts rather than being treated as stand-alone artefacts.

The preliminary analysis of the drawings was content-driven, following the visual narrative procedure outlined by Simon et al. (2022). The researcher visually scanned each drawing over multiple rounds to identify all discernible activities, objects and meanings. The coding process was carried out manually using memo-writing, rather than computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to maintain a close interpretive engagement with the drawings themselves. Through this iterative and reflective process, aligned with the principles of RTA, both recurring and unique codes were developed and refined across successive reviews. This supported methodological rigour and critical reflexivity, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Nowell et al., 2017). Identified descriptive codes were systematically recorded on a spreadsheet for organisation and subsequent analysis.

Classroom Discussion

Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 163) emphasise the importance of a transcript that "records in written form all verbal utterances from all speakers, both actual words and non-semantic sounds". In line with the participatory orientation of the study, care was taken to ensure that the data analysis of the classroom discussion remained grounded in the children's voices and experiences. The use of verbatim quotations in the findings chapters reflects a deliberate commitment to foregrounding the voice of the participants and in particular those of the children, while maintaining ethical standards of anonymity and sensitivity. All transcripts from the classroom discussions were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The use of transcription software was deemed unsuitable, as available applications were unable to reliably differentiate between individual children's voices and frequently failed to capture complete sentences. Manual transcription was therefore necessary to ensure accuracy and to preserve the integrity of the children's contributions.

Field notes taken during these sessions were used to support the transcription process and to aid in the contextual interpretation of tone, affect and relevant non-verbal cues. These steps helped to preserve the integrity of the children's contributions and supported a nuanced and ethically informed approach to analysis. Once transcribed, the

data from the classroom discussions was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022, 2023) six-step process of RTA. Braun and Clarke (2022, 2023) propose that the use of RTA enables the researcher to engage in a systematic process of coding, whereby segments of data are identified and labelled, creating codes. These codes serve as the foundational building blocks for the development of broader patterns, which are then organised into themes through an iterative process of refinement and interpretation. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its suitability for exploring meaning across a dataset, especially in studies informed by participatory and child-centred methodologies. An inductive approach was employed, meaning that codes and themes were derived from the data itself, rather than from pre-determined categories. This approach allowed the children's own language, expressions and meanings to shape the analytical process.

The researcher began by reading and re-reading the transcripts to become more familiar with the data, then generated initial codes through manual coding. These codes reflected recurring ideas, emotions and responses communicated by the children in both direct speech and more subtle expressions. Where appropriate, the researcher also noted instances of collective dialogue or peer interaction, which were seen as important elements of meaning-making in the group setting. Subsequent phases involved grouping codes into potential themes and reviewing these against the full dataset to ensure consistency and depth. The final themes were defined and named through an iterative process, supported by memo-writing and critical reflection.

4.7.2 Phase 2: Online Surveys

Following the initial phase of classroom-based data collection, findings were presented to the two key adult participant stakeholder groups, parents/guardians and teachers, through separate online surveys. The aim of these surveys was to invite participants to reflect on and respond to the children's views on career-related learning, as gathered through the visual surveys and classroom discussions. This two-stage, dialogic approach aligns with the core principles of participatory research, wherein children's contributions are not only acknowledged but actively engaged with by the adults in their educational environments (Clark & Moss, 2008, 2017; Lundy, 2007b; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). The surveys were designed and administered using Google Forms. Each began with a concise, accessible summary of key findings from the children's

classroom-based discussions. This introductory section was followed by a combination of closed-ended questions (such as Likert-scale items and multiple-choice questions) and open-ended prompts, designed to capture both structured and nuanced reflections from adult participant stakeholders.

Quantitative Analysis

Data obtained from the closed-ended questions was analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentage distributions. This provided an overview of general response patterns and enabled broad comparisons between the parent/guardian and teacher cohorts. While this data added structure to the overall analysis, no inferential statistical techniques were employed, and, as such, the study is not positioned as a mixed-methods design. Rather, the inclusion of quantitative elements served to support the triangulation of data, offering an additional layer of interpretation that contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Maxwell, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). Quantitative insights were also used to inform and contextualise the subsequent thematic analysis of the qualitative responses.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data, derived from the open-ended survey questions, was also analysed using the six-phase process for RTA (Braun & Clarke 2022, 2023). This approach was consistent with the analysis method used for the classroom data collection with the children participant stakeholders. An inductive strategy was employed, whereby codes and themes were derived directly from the data, meaning that themes were generated from the data rather than imposed beforehand. This ensured that participant responses were interpreted in a manner grounded in their own language and context. RTA was conducted manually, in keeping with the study's commitment to maintaining close, reflexive engagement with the data. The researcher undertook repeated readings of the full dataset, developing codes iteratively and refining them through continuous interaction with the material.

Emerging patterns were reviewed both within and across the teacher and parent/guardian responses, with particular attention paid to points of alignment and divergence between the two groups. Detailed consideration was given to how each group interpreted the children's views presented at the beginning of the survey. In many cases, adult participants expressed surprise at the children's sophisticated understanding

of career-related concepts and highlighted the value of being able to respond to those views. This reflective dimension of the analysis resonates with participatory research frameworks that advocate for dialogue between adult and child stakeholders, enabling shared understanding and collaborative meaning-making (Christensen & James, 2017; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

4.7.3 Phase 3: Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted: one with parents and guardians and a second with teachers. The focus groups were held following the completion of online surveys and served to deepen the dialogic engagement central to the participatory ethos of the study (Lundy, 2007; Clark & Moss, 2017). The focus groups enabled participants not only to respond individually, but also to listen to and interact with the views of others, thereby allowing for the co-construction of meaning in a social context (Morgan, 2017).

In keeping with the methodological approach adopted for the classroom discussions, the focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Supplementary notes were taken during the sessions to support transcription and to capture important contextual details such as non-verbal cues, tone, and instances of humour, hesitation and so on (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Guest et al., 2017). The transcribed data was also analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023). This approach mirrors the analytical procedures used for the classroom discussions and the qualitative responses in the online surveys. Again, an inductive strategy was employed, ensuring that the coding process was grounded in the participants' own language and conceptual frameworks, rather than being shaped by pre-existing theoretical constructs.

Beginning with a period of immersion in the data, an in-depth analysis was undertaken, whereby the researcher read and re-read the transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the content. Initial codes were generated manually and refined iteratively, with close attention paid to the ways in which meaning was produced both individually and collectively during the group exchanges. This manual process supported the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data and facilitated the development of themes that were nuanced and contextually embedded. The focus groups provided rich and layered data. Teachers and parents/guardians often responded not only to the findings from the children's data, which were presented at the start of each session, but

also to one another's interpretations of those findings. This added a dynamic and interactive dimension to the analysis. As Barbour (2014) notes, focus groups are particularly valuable when the research aim is to explore consensus and divergence within a group and to uncover the ways in which shared understandings are constructed through discussion.

4.8 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, particularly when adopting a child-centred approach, the traditional constructs of validity and reliability are reconceptualised as trustworthiness and authenticity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four key criteria to evaluate trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria have become widely accepted benchmarks for assessing the rigour of both interpretivist and constructivist enquiry (Adler, 2022; Denzin et al., 2024; Shenton, 2004), reflecting a broader epistemological shift away from positivist assumptions towards contextually grounded, participant-centred approaches to evaluating qualitative research. Denzin et al. (2024) also contend that a well-designed case study can demonstrate methodological rigour through data triangulation. By drawing on multiple data sources, such as the visual surveys, classroom discussions and focus groups employed in this study, the validity of the research is strengthened through convergence and corroboration of evidence.

4.8.1 Credibility

This criterion refers to the extent to which the findings of the qualitative research are perceived as accurate, trustworthy and believable from the perspective of the participants. Since the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participants' point of view, it is only the participants who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. The internal validity of this research was established through a process of ongoing participant validation and alignment with Lundy's (2007) model of participation, which foregrounds the importance of space, voice, audience and influence to ensure meaningful engagement with children as co-researchers.

In Phase 1, fieldwork was conducted with children in their classroom settings, providing a familiar and inclusive *space* where children felt safe and empowered to

express their perspectives. After completing the visual surveys, the children were invited to listen back to recorded classroom discussions, allowing them to confirm, clarify, or expand upon their contributions. This gave the children an opportunity to validate their contribution. Following the analysis of the visual data, the children's drawings and perspectives were shared with their parents/guardians and teachers, thus providing an audience for their views beyond the research setting.

In Phase 2, the online surveys designed for adults were directly informed by the data gathered from children, ensuring that the children's voices were the centre of the research carried out with the adults. The results from the online surveys with the parents/guardians and teachers were then integrated with the children's findings to inform and structure the focus group discussions. The commitment to this iterative, feedback-driven approach was to ensure that emerging themes remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences and therefore enhanced the credibility of the research. Credibility was further established through prolonged engagement with the participating schools (over two academic years) and a triangulation of data sources (e.g., collected data, transcripts, observational notes, etc.).

4.8.2 Transferability

As discussed in earlier sections, a criticism of case study design is the argument that the approach can lead to a lack of generalisability. This concern for the external validity of the study and whether the results can be meaningfully transferred to other groups or contexts is countered by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who state that in qualitative research, generalisability is viewed differently and instead the research focuses on transferability, providing rich, detailed findings so that others can determine whether findings are relevant to their own contexts. By offering detailed accounts of the research environment, participant characteristics and social contexts, while maintaining ethical standards and protecting the identity of the schools and research participants, the study enhances its potential for transferability, particularly in comparable educational settings where ECRL is of interest but "the person who wishes to 'transfer' the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgement of how sensible the transfer is" (Farrelly, 2013, p. 150).

4.8.3 Dependability

Dependability concerns the stability, consistency and transparency of the research process over time. Shenton (2004) acknowledges that establishing dependability in qualitative research can be challenging but contends that researchers should, at a minimum, strive to enable another researcher to repeat the study in similar conditions. In keeping with this argument, dependability in this study was supported by maintaining a clear and detailed audit trail, documenting the research design, data collection strategies and the rationale behind key decisions throughout both the planning and execution phases. This audit trail included methodological adaptations, field notes and coding frameworks, which were systematically recorded to promote transparency. The iterative nature of the research process, particularly in response to participant feedback and developing themes, was also captured. In addition, regular supervisory meetings provided a safe and structured space for reflective dialogue, peer review and methodological accountability. This external engagement further enhanced the overall dependability of the study.

4.8.4 Confirmability

In qualitative research, establishing confirmability involves demonstrating that interpretations and conclusions are grounded in the data and are not unduly influenced by the researcher's own perspectives. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that the primary tool in establishing confirmability is the use of an audit trail, as is outlined in the above section. They also recommend two additional strategies, triangulation and the use of a reflexive journal. In this study, confirmability was enhanced through the use of data triangulation across multiple sources, including children's visual surveys, classroom discussions, online surveys and focus groups. The convergence of consistent themes across these diverse datasets provided strong evidence that the findings accurately reflected participants' views. A further layer of confirmability was supported by using participant validation techniques, such as allowing children to listen back to classroom recordings and by inviting adult participants to comment on the children's interpretations. These processes helped ensure that meaning-making was collaborative and iterative. Finally, regular input and feedback from academic supervisors provided an external audit, supporting the objectivity and integrity of the research process.

4.8.5 Ethical Validity

Ethical considerations, as outlined earlier in this chapter, contribute an additional dimension to the trustworthiness of this study. Particular attention was given to ensuring that the methods and interpretations employed were not only methodologically rigorous but also ethically responsive to the needs and rights of child participants. This included obtaining assent alongside informed consent, recognising children's evolving capacities and their right to participate voluntarily. Furthermore, efforts were made to incorporate participant feedback into the research findings where appropriate, thereby ensuring that children's voices were meaningfully reflected in the study's conclusions. These practices strengthened both the ethical integrity and epistemological credibility of the research, reinforcing its alignment with a child-centred, participatory ethos.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the comprehensive research design and methodological processes underpinning this study on ECRL in an Irish primary school context. Guided by a relativist ontological stance and a dual interpretivist and constructivist epistemological approach, the research adopts a naturalistic inquiry framework and a participatory case study approach, in alignment with the study's philosophical commitment to co-constructing knowledge with participants, particularly children.

The chapter began by situating the research in the broader academic context, detailing the study's aims and objectives and explaining the use of qualitative approaches to explore this relatively under-researched topic. The methodological framework was carefully constructed to centre on the voice of the child participants, using participatory methods that adhere to the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007a) and reflect a rights-based approach consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007b). A multi-phase research approach was employed, including visual surveys, classroom discussions, online surveys and focus groups. The use of children's and parent/educator research advisory groups further strengthened the participatory ethos, contributing to both the ethical robustness and methodological validity of the research tools. A pilot study allowed for reflection, refinement and responsiveness to the classroom context, enhancing the appropriateness and accessibility of the methods. Finally, the chapter also addressed the analytical strategies used, including thematic analysis, and outlined how

the research adhered to the criteria of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Ethical validity was foregrounded throughout, reinforcing the study's commitment to child-centred, respectful and inclusive research practices.

The following chapter presents the findings of this research, organised thematically and illustrated with data from across the three phases of the study. Participant representation is constructed through selected comments and drawings, which are included not for impact or richness alone, but because they are analytically representative of the themes developed through RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022, 2023). Extracts were chosen to clearly illustrate the patterned meanings identified across the dataset, while also ensuring variation and nuance where relevant.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key themes that were generated through the multi-phased data collection process. It is situated within a naturalistic inquiry framework, emphasising contextually grounded understanding and inductive meaning-making. Guided by interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies, and grounded in a relativist ontological stance, the findings presented here are understood as co-constructed interpretations rather than objective truths. In this participatory case study design, the voices of children are foregrounded, followed by the perspectives of their parents, guardians and teachers, in the co-construction of shared meanings around ECRL.

The first section provides an analysis of the data gathered through the visual surveys and classroom discussions, offering insights into children's perceptions and understandings. The themes presented in this section represent an interpretative synthesis of these perspectives, situated in their specific social and educational contexts and analytically connected to the study's broader theoretical framework. This is followed by a presentation of the data generated from the teacher and parent/guardian surveys, highlighting the developing themes and key discussion points that informed the focus group sessions. The chapter concludes with the findings from the focus groups, which synthesise and extend the earlier insights, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of ECRL in the participating schools.

5.2 Voice of the Child – Classroom Findings

A primary objective of this study is to capture the young children's perspectives, experiences and aspirations related to work and their futures. As outlined in Chapter 3, the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2017) was adopted to guide multi-modal and participatory data collection**.** This approach incorporated drawings (gathered through visual surveys), accompanied by written and verbal reflections during classroom discussions, allowing children to express meaning through multiple modes. A total of 100 young children participated in this study, comprising 50 boys and 50 girls between the ages of five and nine years, spanning Senior Infants to Second Class. The research was conducted across three mixed-gender schools located in the Greater Dublin Area.

These schools were purposefully selected to capture a range of geographical and socio-educational contexts, with one situated in an urban setting, one in a suburban community and one in a rural location. This diversity in school contexts was intended to provide insights into how children's ECRL may be influenced not only by age and gender but also by the different environments in which the children live and learn.

Consistent with the naturalistic and participatory orientation of this study, the classroom findings are presented as contextually situated interpretations that developed through authentic interactions in children's familiar environments. This aligns with the study's interpretivist and constructivist epistemological stance, in which meaning is co-constructed through dialogue, visual expression and reflection, acknowledging the multiple realities that children bring to their understanding of work and the world around them. The following sections present the findings from the visual surveys, drawing on children's illustrations and accompanying written reflections, before exploring the classroom discussions, focusing on the children's narratives and the shared meanings that developed through dialogic engagement.

5.2.1 Visual Surveys

Each child was invited to draw three pictures: (i) something they like to do, (ii) something they are good at, and (iii) themselves at work when they are older. The children's drawings produced through the surveys were analysed using a visual narrative analysis approach by identifying recurring symbols and themes, while also considering how the children narrated or explained their images through written notes and recorded classroom conversations (Clacherty, 2024; Simon et al., 2022).

This integrated analysis of visual and verbal data enabled a richer interpretation of the meanings conveyed, consistent with the participatory and multimodal ethos of the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2017). In this framework, children's drawings are understood not simply as artistic expressions but as artefacts embedded with personal narratives that reflect their perspectives and understanding of the world around them. The following section presents the key themes that developed through this analysis, beginning with children's reported interests and skills before turning to their career aspirations.

The data extrapolated from the visual surveys (see Figure 7) shows that boys most often chose football, with 27 out of 50 (54%) saying they liked it, 25 (50%) feeling good at it and 22 (44%) seeing it as a career. Gaming was less common but still had seven linking it to a career. Among girls, art was most frequently represented, with 15 out of 50 (30%) liking it, 13 (26%) feeling good at it and 10 (20%) considering it as a career. Creative play was enjoyed by 12 girls (24%), but none viewed it as a strength or career choice, while gymnastics showed the opposite pattern, with more girls (24%, n = 12) feeling they are good at it than liking it (10%, n = 5) and only one girl linking it to a career.

The drawings revealed distinct patterns in children's interests (Things I Like to Do) and perceived skills (Things I Am Good At), with several activities showing clear gender differences. Boys showed a strong preference for football, with 27 (54%) identifying it as an interest, compared to zero girls. Gaming was similarly male-dominated, with nine boys (18%) reporting it as an interest and something they perceived themselves to be good at. By contrast, girls drew art (30%, n = 15 girls, versus 2%, n = 1 boy), creative play (24%, n = 12 girls, versus 8%, n = 4 boys) and gymnastics (10%, n = 5 girls, versus 2%, n = 1 boy) as things they like to do and are good at.

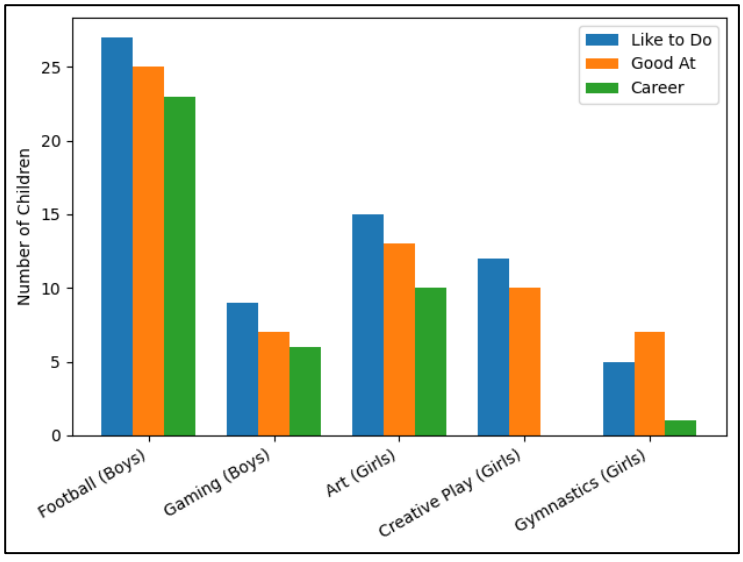


Figure 7: Links between Children's Interests, Skills and Aspirations

The connection between interests and career choices was particularly striking, with many of the children's career aspirations reflecting the same gendered patterns evident in their reported interests and skills. As illustrated in Figure 7, the aspiration to become a footballer was expressed exclusively by boys, with 22 (44%) identifying this as their future career (see Figures 9 and 11 for examples). Similarly, boys with an interest in

gaming extended this into aspirations for computing or gaming-related professions. Girls who reported an interest in art often aspired to art-related careers, with 10 (20%) drawing themselves as artists (see Figures 8 and 10 for examples).

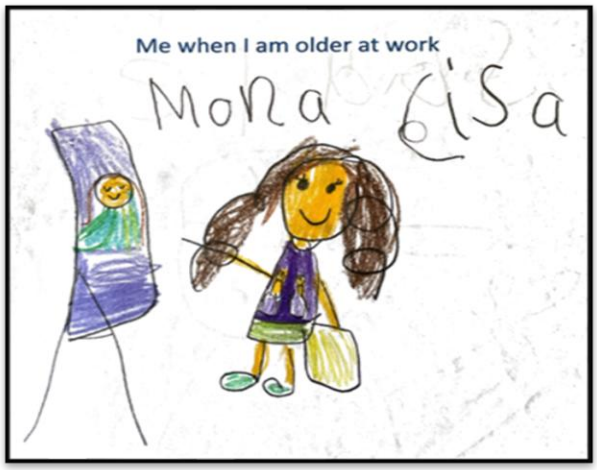


Figure 8: An Artist (Girl, 7)



Figure 9: A Footballer (Boy, 7)

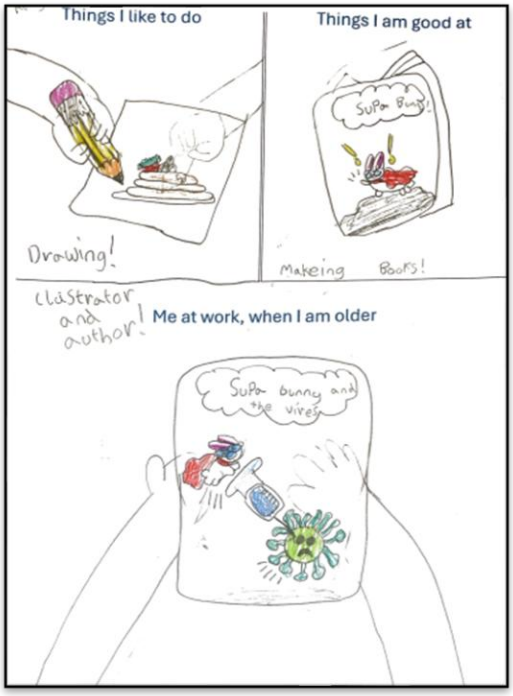


Figure 10: Visual Survey (Girl, 9)



Figure 11: Visual Survey (Boy, 9)

Careers in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM), however, outweighed art-related aspirations among the girls. Four out of 50 (8%) indicated a desire to become scientists, another four (8%) drew themselves as doctors, two (4%) as nurses and another four (8%) as veterinarians (see Figures 12 and 13 for examples). In

total, this means that 16 (32%) of the 50 participating girls aspired to work in a STEM-related career. Only three boys (6%) of the 50 participating in this study aspired to STEM-related careers (one dentist and two doctors).



Figure 12: Scientist (Girl, 7)



Figure 13: Vet (Girl, 7)

Of the 100 children who completed the visual surveys, only two (2%) indicated they had no idea about their future careers, meaning that 98% of children, despite their young age, were already beginning to consider and articulate specific career pathways. These findings suggest that children's career aspirations are closely aligned with their current interests and perceived skills and that both are strongly shaped by gendered patterns. As illustrated in Figure 7, boys tended to identify with sport- and technology-related pathways, while girls gravitated towards perceived creative and care-oriented roles. The relative certainty with which children expressed their choices, alongside the

clear overlap between interests, skills and careers, highlights the importance of early experiences in shaping developing career aspirations. This is discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

While certain careers were selected by sizeable proportions of the cohort (e.g., footballer among boys, STEM-related professions among girls), there was also a notable range of individual career choices represented across the sample. Figure 14 demonstrates a substantial number of occupations selected by one or two children only, indicating both the diversity of children's imagined futures and the highly individualised nature of many aspirations at this age. This preponderance of single selections suggests that, alongside dominant gendered patterns, children are drawing on a wide range of occupational images and influences. Such diversity may reflect exposure to family roles, media representations, community contexts and school-based learning experiences, reinforcing the complexity of early career formation and the coexistence of both patterned and personalised trajectories.

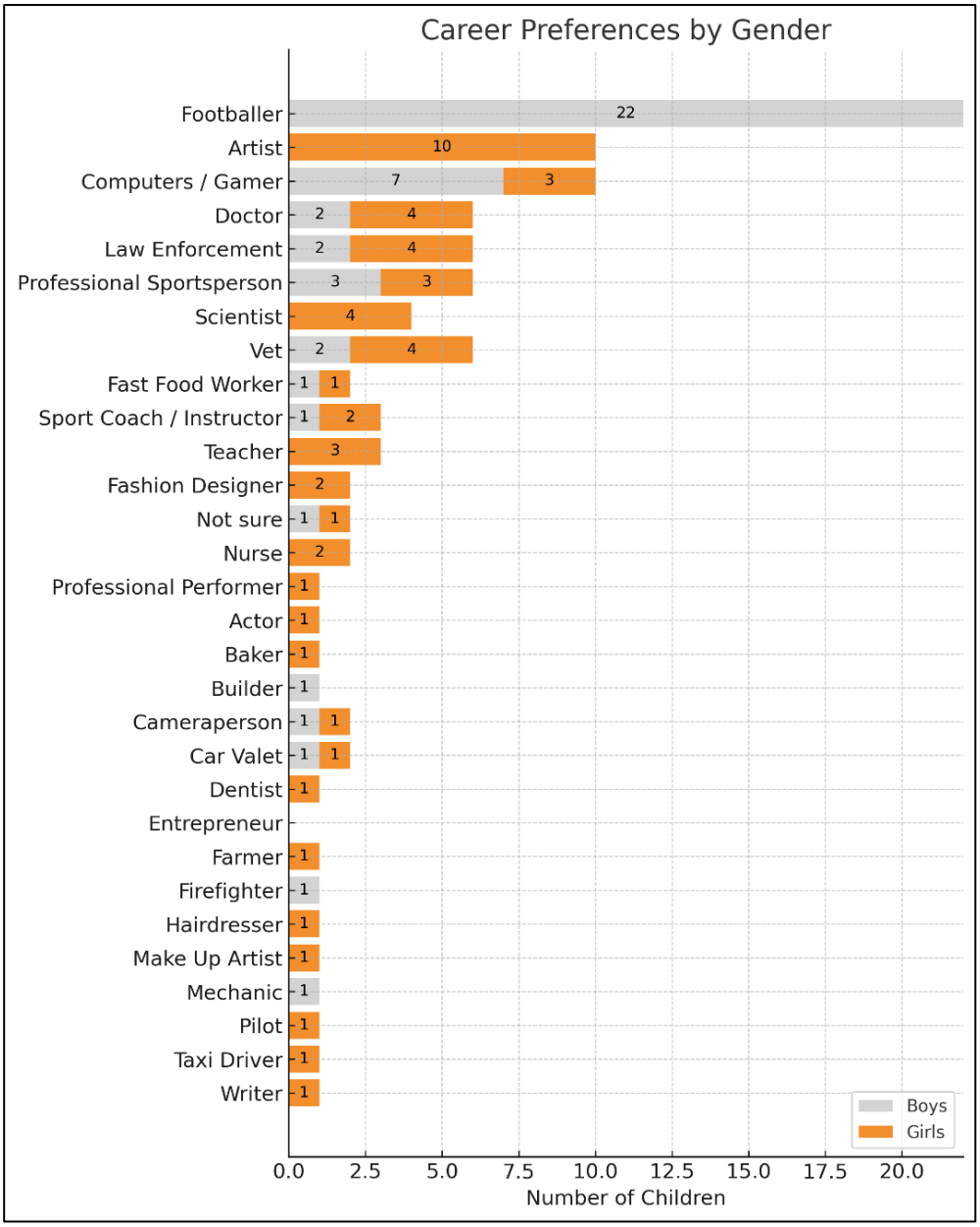


Figure 14: Gendered Distribution and Diversity of Career Aspirations

5.2.2 Classroom Discussions

Classroom discussions were employed as the second element of the Mosaic approach, to amplify the voices of the children in this participatory case study. The discussions were facilitated while children were completing their drawings. Each child was invited to speak into a small handheld microphone about careers and the world of work, guided by a series of prompting questions (see Appendix I). These conversations offered rich insights into how children conceptualise careers, while also highlighting the influences shaping their early understandings of the world of work. All 100 children were present

and included in the classroom conversations, and 399 comments or statements were captured, with girls contributing 217 (54.4%) and boys contributing 182 (45.6%) times.

Analysis of these discussions was guided by a thematic approach, underpinned by the principles of RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2022, 2023). Consistent with this approach, themes are not understood to passively emerge from the data but are actively constructed through the researcher's interpretative engagement with the dataset. The process therefore involved iterative movement between the children's narratives, the research questions and the theoretical framing of early career development, acknowledging the researcher's positionality as integral to knowledge production rather than separate from it. The themes developed through this process are presented and explored in detail below.

Where Children Learn About Jobs

> ***I talk about jobs at home because it makes me feel good and I think it's interesting. —Boy (9)***

Children identified multiple sources through which they learned about jobs. Home and family conversations were particularly prominent, with over 28 mentions across the six classroom discussions. One Second Class boy said: "I talk about jobs at home because it makes me feel good and I think it's interesting." Others referred to parents sharing their own professional experiences: "Sometimes I talk about jobs at home with my mum, because she might be showing like some of her projects that she might have done when she's a researcher." Media was also an important influence, as another Second Class boy explained: "On YouTube sometimes you can see people with different jobs." The younger children additionally referenced play, with a Senior Infant girl stating: "We can learn about jobs by playing them."

Children's Aspirations

> ***I want to be an actor because I'm very dramatic. —Girl (8)***

When prompted to discuss the jobs they had drawn and why they had drawn them, the children articulated a wide range of aspirations and reasons for their choices. Many were drawn to high-profile or visible occupations, such as becoming "a professional football player" or "a gamer", often linking these jobs with fame and affluence. One Senior Infant boy proudly exclaimed: "I'm six years old and I want to be a footballer

when I'm older for Man Utd., my favourite team, and my favourite player is Zidane." An older, Second Class boy proclaimed: "I want to be a professional football player. Because you can get lots of trophies and you can sell them and get a lot of money."

Others expressed ambitions rooted in creativity or inspiration from both role models and real-life experiences. One Second Class girl voiced the reasons for her choice as: "I want to be a teacher because all the teachers that have taught me have inspired me to teach people." A Senior Infant girl gave her reasoning when she told of hurting her hand and being treated by a doctor in hospital: "I'm seven and I would like to be a doctor because I want to help children." Other children spoke of role models they had identified through general exposure to books, television, social media and the internet. One girl spoke of loving books that become movies: "I am eight years old and I want to be an actor because I'm very dramatic."

When considering the jobs they perceived to be the "best ones", children prioritised careers they associated with high rewards. One six-year-old boy said: "Money is very important so you can buy a house and survive your life and don't starve to death." Fame and enjoyment were also highly rated, with football and social media being particularly lauded. One seven-year-old boy described football as "the best job because you get paid millions to go to different teams and you also have fun playing". Conversely, the notion of the "worst jobs" was often associated with the absence of work or with roles perceived as lacking social connection and trust. This perspective was captured poignantly by a nine-year-old boy who explained, "I think one of the worst jobs is where nobody really trusts you and you can't do anything creative because people just get angry at you."

Gender and Careers

> ***Girls and boys can do whatever boys or girls do. They shouldn't let anybody say what they can or cannot do. —Girl (7)***

Discussions around gender and work revealed children's awareness of fairness and equality in their world and in the world of work. Initially, many strongly rejected restrictive gender norms, stating, for example: "Girls and boys can do whatever jobs they want" and "Life wouldn't be fair if girls and boys could only do different jobs." At the same time, in five out of six classes, children recognised institutional limitations, in particular that of the Roman Catholic Church, which was the patron of all three schools.

The children made statements such as “Boys can only be priests and girls can only be nuns”, and “Boys can only be priests, though”, giving the impression that they viewed this as unfair.

Gender featured very prominently, with over 200 mentions across the six classroom discussions. Most references occurred in the classroom transcripts, where children actively discussed which jobs were “for boys” or “for girls”. Across the six classroom transcripts, 44 children explicitly articulated egalitarian beliefs about gender and work. While children’s views on gender often appear as egalitarian, they are also negotiating the realities of structural and cultural boundaries. On the one hand, many articulated a strong belief in equality of opportunity, rejecting the idea that jobs should be restricted to one gender and emphasising fairness, autonomy and personal choice. On the other hand, there were 27 distinct references to gender-specific or stereotypically gendered roles and activities, especially relating to religion and sports or the arts (e.g., boys as priests; gymnastics or dancing being “for girls”).

Why Do People Work?

> ***I think people have jobs because they can talk with their friends and they can also get money and afford to live a good life. —Girl (9)***

During the classroom discussions the children also reflected on why people work, with 24 children commenting. Even the youngest children had a grasp on the role that work plays in life, and their responses linked jobs not only to economic survival but also to social and emotional benefits. One six-year-old boy stated: “Having no job, you can’t make any money, so it’s the worst.” A Second Class boy (aged 8) said, “I think people have jobs because they can talk with their friends and they can also get money and afford to live a good life”, illustrating a keen understanding of a need for financial security and social connection.

These findings, the importance of early career-related conversations and the role of families, education and community in supporting children’s developing understandings of the world of work are considered in more detail in the following chapters.

5.3 Parent/Guardian and Teacher Voice

5.3.1 Electronic Surveys

In keeping with the participatory case study design, the electronic surveys were employed not merely as instruments of data collection but as opportunities for reflective engagement and co-construction of meaning with the adult participants. In the naturalistic inquiry framework guiding this research, parents and teachers were regarded as active meaning-makers, whose insights provide contextually situated understandings of children's ECRL. This interpretive approach acknowledges multiple, equally valid perspectives, consistent with the study's relativist ontological stance.

The decision to use online surveys was further informed by the recommendations of the parent and educator research advisory group (PERAG) and supported by research affirming the credibility of qualitative data collected through questionnaires. Wellington and Szczerbiński (2007) contend that such data can be as valuable as information obtained through interviews, while Sue and Ritter (2012) highlight their advantages in terms of speed, cost-effectiveness, accessibility and ease of administration and completion.

Parent/Guardian Surveys

A Google Forms questionnaire was shared with parents/guardians of all children in the schools included in this participatory case study. The respondents were asked to provide their consent to participate in the survey, and once this was provided, they were directed to the survey. The parent and guardian questionnaire explored perceptions of ECRL and sought to triangulate the findings from child participants with parental and guardian insights. It included a series of awareness and attitudinal questions, followed by open and closed items designed to examine how parents and guardians understand and support their children's career-related learning.

The survey opened with a short introduction to the study, where some of the key data gathered from the classroom studies was shared (see Appendix J). Following this there were twelve questions related to children and careers, with the final question asking if the parent/guardian would be willing to participate further in the study, via an online focus group. Fifty respondents completed the survey. The sample comprised forty-three women, six men and one participant who chose not to disclose their gender.

Parents were first invited to reflect on whether the classroom findings shared with them (see Appendix J) were surprising or noteworthy. Twenty-four (48%) of the 50 respondents replied “No”, 22 (44%) replied “Yes” and four (8%) replied “Maybe”. Question 2 then asked those who had replied “Yes” to Question 1 to qualify their answers with what stood out particularly for them. Of the 16 parents who responded to this question, 15 remarked on the gendered nature of the children’s career choices. Their comments highlighted perceptions such as:

> *We still live in a gender-based career world.*
>
> *Fascinating that majority of boys want to be footballers and girls artists.*
>
> *That gender-based roles are still a thing.*

The only response that did not mention gender was that “children are inspired by the hobbies they have. If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.” The salience of gender was further reinforced in the parent/guardian focus group discussions, the findings of which are explored in a later section of this chapter.

Parents overwhelmingly (92%, n=46) reported that their children had already begun discussing jobs and careers at home. Of the 46 responses, the majority (52.2%, n=24), indicated that these conversations typically began between the ages of four and six years. A smaller group demonstrated interest under four years old (21.7%, n=10), while others showed interest between six and eight years old (17.4%, n=8) or later from eight years to 12 years old (8.7%, n=4). This finding suggests that early childhood, particularly between the ages of four and six years, is a key period for the emergence of career-related curiosity, as visually represented in Figure 15.

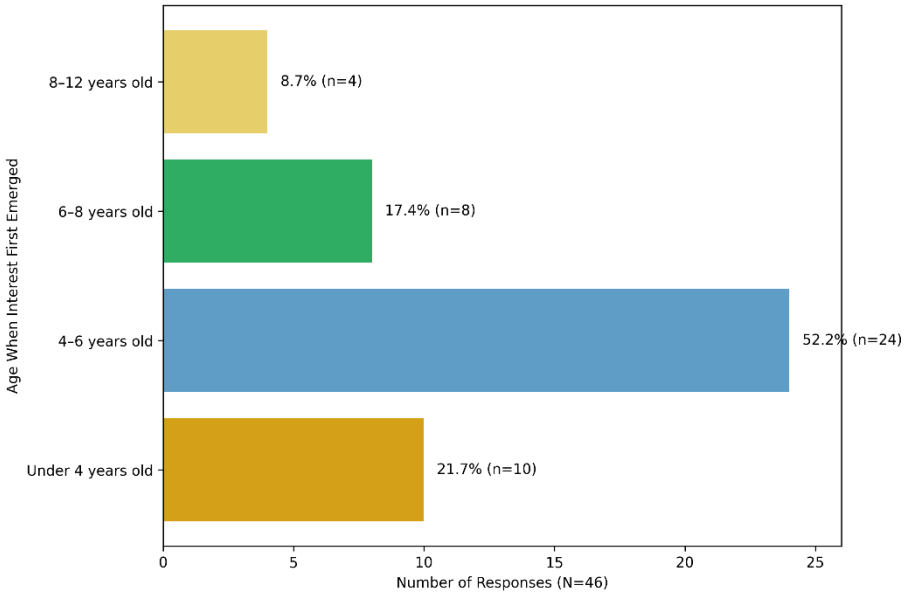


Figure 15: Parent/Guardian Reported Age of Children's Initial Career Interest

Participants were asked to identify the sources they believe influence children's awareness of jobs and careers, including family, friends, school, TV/movies, social media/internet, and books. Parents and guardians reported that the primary influence is family (48%, n = 24), followed by TV/movies (38%, n = 19) and school (33%, n = 17). Fewer respondents identified friends (25%, n = 13), books (25%, n = 13), or social media/internet (18%, n = 9) as key influences. These findings, as displayed in Figure 16, highlight the strong influence of family and media, while formal education and peer or online sources play a smaller but still notable role.

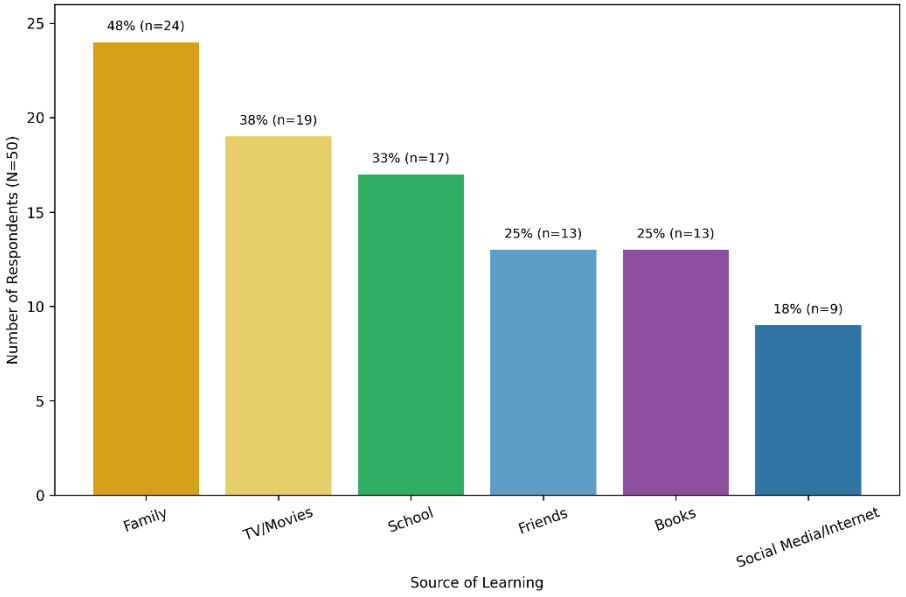


Figure 16: Where Parents/Guardians Think Children Learn about the World of Work

Strong parental support also emerged for the inclusion of ECRL within primary education. The majority of respondents believed that children should learn about jobs and the world of work during their time in primary school, although opinions varied regarding the most appropriate starting point (see Figure 17). The largest proportion suggested it should start in Junior or Senior Infants (38%, n = 19), while other common choices were Third or Fourth Class (28%, n = 14) and Fifth or Sixth Class (20%, n = 10). A smaller group felt it should begin in First or Second Class (14%, n = 7). These findings indicate a strong preference among many parents for introducing career learning early in primary education, though opinions differ on the most appropriate stage.

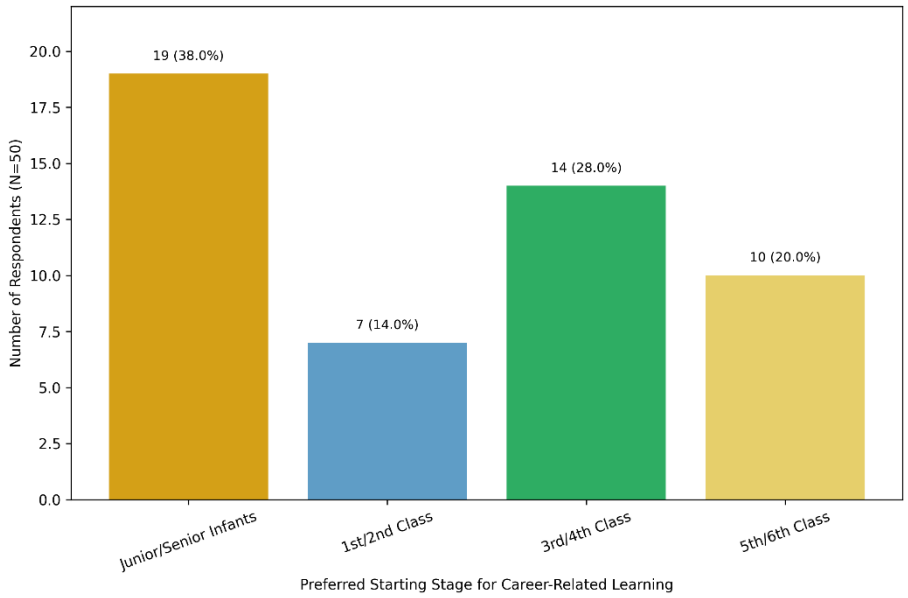


Figure 17: Parental/Guardian Preferred Starting Stage for Career-Related Learning

When asked to rate how confident they felt about helping their child learn about different jobs, most parents and guardians reported feeling confident (see Figure 18). Over half of respondents rated themselves at 5, the highest level of confidence (52%, n = 26), while a further 34% (n = 17) selected level 4. Only a small number reported lower levels of confidence, with 6% (n = 3) choosing level 3 and 4% (n = 2) each selecting levels 1 and 2. This data suggest that the majority of parents and guardians feel well prepared to support their children in exploring the world of work.

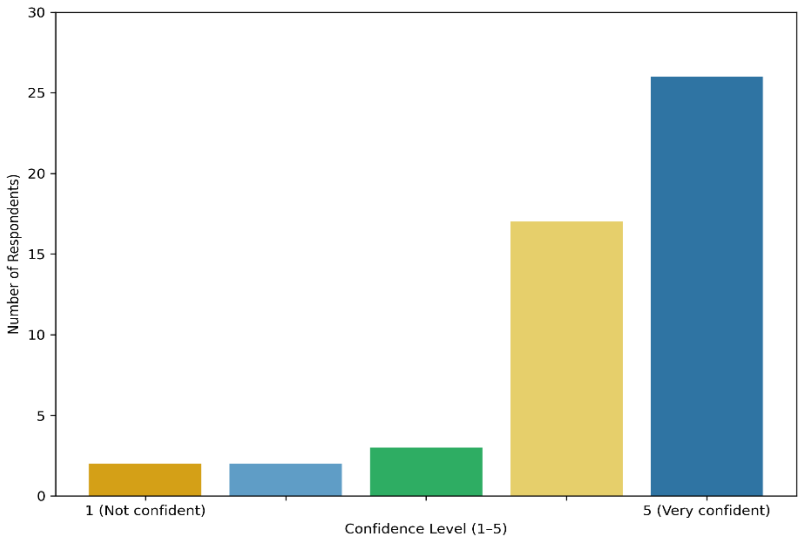


Figure 18: Parental/Guardian Confidence in Supporting ECRL

While parents / guardians generally expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to support their children's exploration of careers, several practical support needs emerged, when they were asked what might further enhance this confidence. As illustrated in Figure 19, 36 of 50 (72%) parents and guardians provided a free text response, indicating a strong level of engagement with this open-ended question. RTA of these responses revealed several recurring themes, supported by frequency counts to illustrate their relative prominence in the dataset. The most common theme, mentioned by 18 respondents (50%), was the need for structured, accessible resources to guide conversations about work and learning at home. Parents expressed a desire for "simple, age-appropriate materials", including books, worksheets and conversation prompts, that would make it easier to discuss different jobs and pathways without requiring specialist knowledge. One participant suggested, "A bank of short videos or printable activities linked to the school curriculum would make it much easier to start these conversations."

A further 10 respondents (28%) highlighted the importance of school–home collaboration, calling for regular communication from teachers about how career-related learning is addressed in class. These participants viewed ECRL as most effective when reinforced by consistent messages across both settings. Suggestions included parent information evenings, classroom newsletters outlining weekly themes, and guest talks where parents could share their own experiences of work. Seven respondents (19%) identified teacher- or expert-led guidance as a key support need. They wanted practical information about developmentally appropriate ways to talk about jobs,

suggesting resources such as short online tutorials or guidance notes for parents. As one noted: “A short guide or webinar on how to talk about jobs without putting pressure would be helpful.”

A smaller group of parents (four respondents, 11%) mentioned time constraints or limited personal knowledge as barriers to confidence. One parent commented, “I don’t know enough about jobs myself to explain them properly”, while another described struggling to find “time to explore this in a meaningful way after work”. Although fewer, these reflections reveal a clear pattern: parents are willing and motivated participants in their children’s ECRL, but their confidence depends on having access to practical tools, contextual information and shared frameworks with schools.

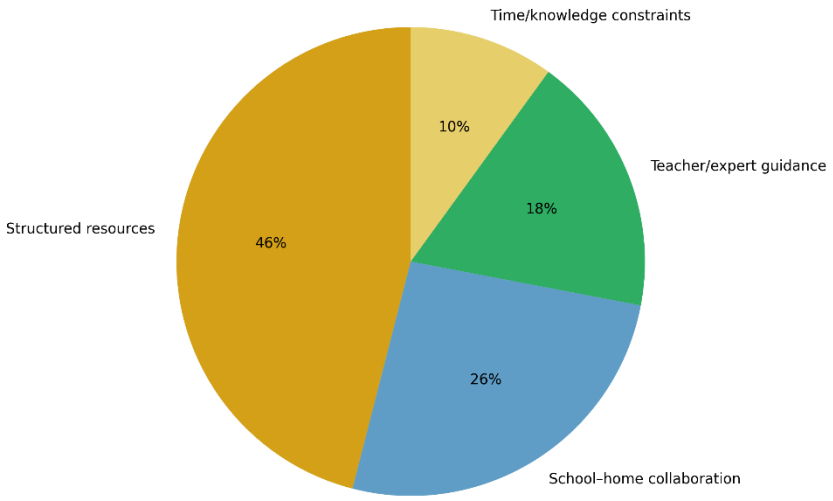


Figure 19: Parental/Guardian Perspectives on Considerations/Supports Needed for ECRL

Collectively these findings, as represented in Figures 18 and 19, suggest that supporting parents effectively requires a multi-pronged approach, to include: practical resources that are simple and developmentally aligned; good communication between schools and home; and some light-touch support or training to build parental self-efficacy. Such measures would not only enhance parental confidence but also strengthen the coherence and equity of ECRL across home and school environments.

Teacher Surveys

Similarly to the parent and guardian survey, a Google Forms questionnaire was distributed to all teachers in each of the three participating schools. Teachers were

presented with the same data collected from the children and invited to respond to 10 questions related to the world of work and ECRL. A total of 23 teachers completed the survey.

When reflecting on the classroom findings shared with them, just over half of the respondents indicated that particular aspects of the data stood out. Similar to the responses from parents and guardians, teachers most frequently commented on the gendered nature of children's career aspirations. All 13 teachers who provided further detail observed a clear gender divide in children's career aspirations, noting that boys tended to gravitate towards sports and gaming, whereas girls predominantly expressed interest in the arts. Their comments included:

> ***The clear divide between boys and girls.***
>
> ***There was still gender patterns appeared [sic] in today's society.***
>
> ***Boys aspiring to be football players and girls expressing interest in creativity.***

Teachers also strongly identified family as the most influential source of children's early career awareness, with large proportions also citing social media and the internet, school and television/movies as significant sources. Friends and books were mentioned less frequently but still by over half of respondents, indicating teachers' beliefs children's early career awareness is shaped by a diverse mix of home, media and educational influence.

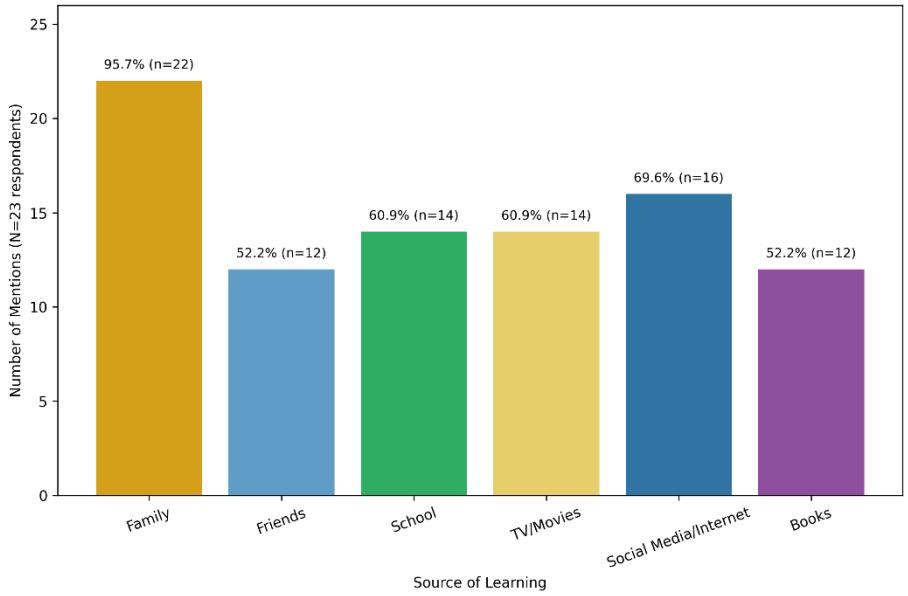


Figure 20: Where Teachers Think Children Learn About the World of Work

When asked whether children should learn about jobs and the world of work in primary school, the majority of teachers responded yes (77%, n = 17), while a smaller group said maybe (23%, n = 5). Only one teacher answered no. Again, similarly to the parent/guardian survey, this question was followed by asking the teachers when this type of learning should begin. Of the 21 responses, most teachers (43%, n = 9) chose Junior/Senior Infants as their preferred starting stage for ECRL. Almost in contradiction, the next highest response was for a later introduction, with five teachers selecting Fifth or Sixth Class, followed by four suggesting First or Second Class (19.0%, n = 4). Only three recommended Third or Fourth Class. Overall, the findings indicate that while teachers recognise value in career-related learning across different stages, many see the early years of primary school as a key point for its introduction.

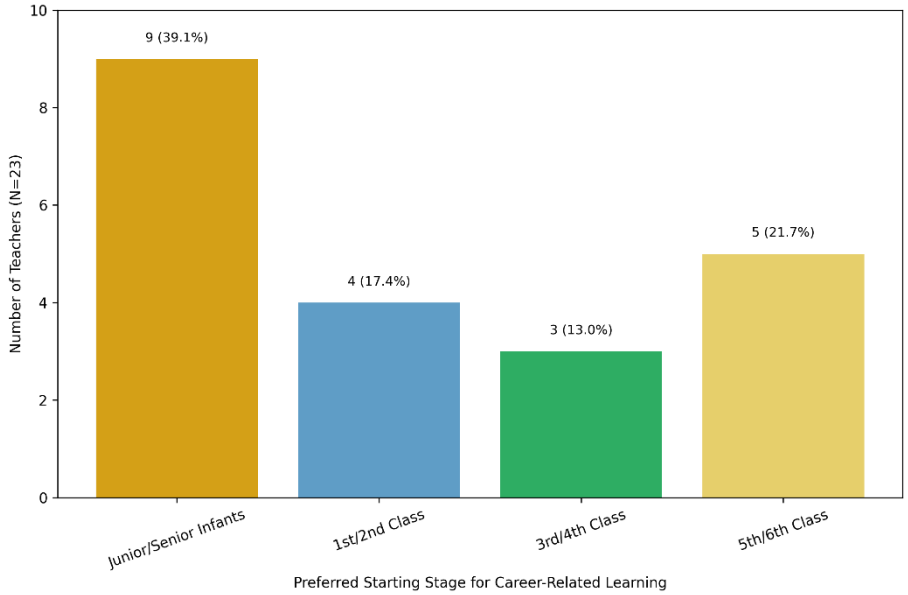


Figure 21: Teachers' Preferred Starting Stage for Career-Related Learning

Teachers also reported generally high levels of confidence in their ability to incorporate discussions about careers and the world of work within their teaching. Nearly half of respondents (47.9%, n = 11) selected level 5 ("very confident"), and a further 34.8% (n = 8) chose level 4. Together, these findings indicate that more than four in five teachers (82.7%) feel well equipped to include elements of ECRL in their classroom practice. A smaller group of respondents (13.0%, n = 3) reported moderate confidence (level 3), while only one teacher (4.3%) selected level 2 and none chose level 1. This distribution suggests that while ECRL is not yet formally embedded in Irish primary education, many teachers already perceive it as within their professional capability.

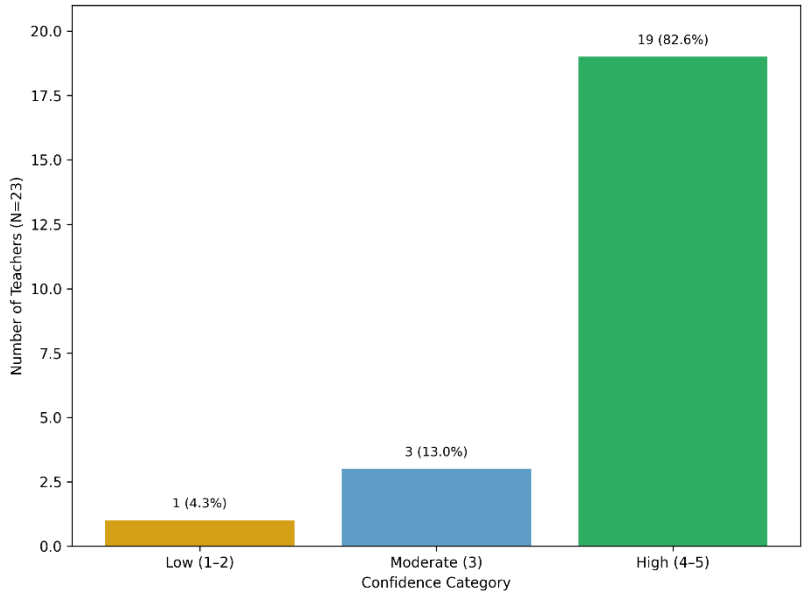


Figure 22: Teacher Confidence in Supporting ECRL

Despite this confidence, teachers identified several structural and practical challenges associated with introducing career-related learning more formally within primary education. The most significant barrier reported was lack of time within an already crowded curriculum. reported by 18 teachers (78%). A smaller yet notable proportion (26%, n = 6) pointed to a "lack of resources or materials" as another obstacle. These teachers emphasised the need for practical supports such as visual materials, play-based activities and ready-to-use lesson ideas that make career learning more accessible and engaging. Three respondents (13%) identified "uncertainty about how to teach career topics", suggesting that while teachers see the value in ECRL, some lack clarity on developmentally appropriate methods, or they fear overcomplicating content for younger learners. Only one teacher mentioned negative parental feedback, and another chose the "Other" option and expressed philosophical concerns about introducing career discussions too early.

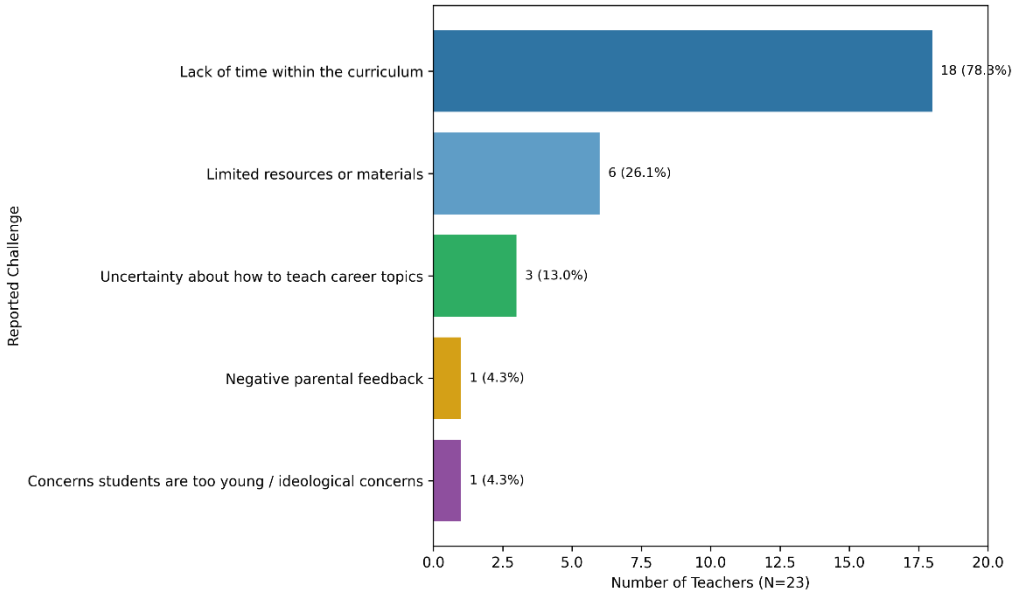


Figure 23: Teachers' Perceived Challenges in Delivering ECRL

When invited to elaborate on the types of supports that would help them incorporate ECRL more effectively, 20 teachers proposed a range of practical and collaborative solutions, demonstrating strong engagement with the topic. Thematic analysis revealed four key areas of support. The most frequent suggestion, raised by seven teachers (35%), was the importance of stakeholder and community involvement. Participants highlighted the value of guest visits from professionals, workplace visits, career weeks and talks by parents or community members. Teachers saw such activities as powerful ways to help children "visualise different roles and workplaces" and to challenge stereotypes by showcasing both male and female professionals across diverse sectors.

The second most common theme, mentioned by five teachers (25%), was the need for curriculum integration and structured progression. Respondents suggested embedding ECRL within Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) or other existing curricular areas, using thematic play in the early years and structured objectives at each class level. One participant proposed "specific careers to be covered at each class level so throughout their time in primary school they get exposure to a wide range of careers", while another recommended "cross-curricular, play-based resources which allow career exploration". A further four teachers (20%) emphasised the need for professional learning and teacher confidence-building, particularly through CPD. Suggestions included training sessions, strengths-based pedagogical approaches and guidance on supporting children's self-concept as learners. As one respondent put it, "A more

strengths-based approach to learning and development of self-concept would help us connect ECRL to existing wellbeing practices."

Finally, three respondents (15%) mentioned resource development and practical supports, such as "a bank of pictures or video clips showing various careers" or "wider variety of books in classroom libraries". Two respondents (10%) highlighted time constraints, with one specifically calling for "less paperwork" to create space for this type of learning.

Taken together, these findings indicate that teachers are both willing and motivated to include ECRL in their practice but require multi-level supports to do so effectively.

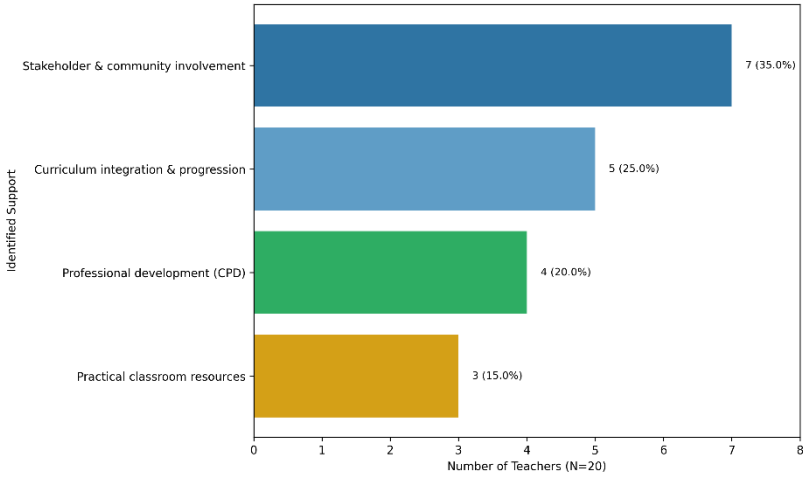


Figure 24: Teachers' Perspectives on Supports Required for ECRL

5.3.2 Focus Groups

The focus groups represent a key phase in the participatory design of this case study, embodying the principles of naturalistic inquiry, in which participants and the researcher collaboratively interpret emerging findings. Knowledge within this phase was constructed through social interaction and reflexive dialogue, consistent with the study's interpretivist–constructivist epistemological stance and its relativist ontological orientation, which recognises multiple, contextually grounded realities.

At the conclusion of each online survey, parents, guardians and teachers were invited to provide their email addresses if they wished to participate in an online focus group. These focus groups were designed to extend the participatory dimension of the study by enabling a deeper, co-constructed exploration of the themes that had developed from the children's classroom studies and the adult stakeholder survey responses.

Parent and Guardian Focus Group

Those parents/guardians who indicated they would like to take part in a focus group were sent an email invitation to participate in a Zoom focus group (see Appendix M). The group was attended by two parents/guardians from each of the three participating schools: five female and one male participant. The group included parents/guardians of children from Junior Infants to older primary years, with varied educational and professional backgrounds. The discussion, supported by prompt questions (see Appendix O), centred on when and how to begin ECRL, equity of access, perceived influences on children's views of the working world and practical ways to embed ECRL in everyday school and home life.

Parent/Guardian Ambitions for Their Children's Futures

> ***I don't want to narrow my child's vision; I want to expose him widely so he can choose.***

To begin the focus group, the researcher reintroduced the parent/guardian participants to the preliminary data gained from the classroom study and the surveys completed by parents/guardians and teachers. The group engaged positively from the outset, expressing clear support for the early introduction of ECRL. They did not, however, accept the findings from the earlier research phases at face value. Instead, they demonstrated a critical and reflective approach, questioning and debating the most effective methods for implementing this form of learning, if at all, in practice.

One participant immediately expressed wariness over equating interests with jobs and when considering the visual survey, asking: "When you ask a child what they like, they think hobbies. My daughter loves art, my son loves football, but their job ideas aren't the same" (Parent/Guardian A, female). This led the conversation to the value of interests and the idea of where interests originate and how they develop. The group continually expressed their wishes for their children to be exposed to as many opportunities as possible, emphasising breadth over specialisation, particularly too early on. One participant asked, "Will this learning push kids too early, or is it about broad exposure so they can find their path?" (Parent/Guardian B, male). His question encapsulated the group's preference for age-appropriate exploration of interests and strengths, alongside their desire to support their children to develop language for

reflection and confidence-building, rather than discussing or asking children about specific jobs.

I just want my kids to find something they're passionate about.

Parents and guardians also put forward their individual ambitions for their children, with one reflecting, "I was told early on, 'You can be anything you want', and I tell my kids the same. I'm a product of that" (Parent/Guardian E, female). Another participant, whose child has additional needs, wondered "if we are the only ones that are ambitious for him" (Parent/Guardian D, female), while a further contributor spoke of how her child's identification as a gifted learner led her to feel she "had to be a scientist", only to discover through participation in camps and other learning initiatives that she did not enjoy it. She described how they have worked with their daughter so "she is now more relaxed, owning her literacy 'superpower'" (Parent/Guardian C, female).

Guarding against adult bias continued as a recurrent theme throughout the focus group. One participant worried, "I'm an engineer; I might push engineering without meaning to. How do we avoid that?" (Parent/Guardian F, female). This discussion of bias led the conversation to specific skills, for example, technology and access to it. Questions arose particularly around when and how to introduce technology. One respondent reflected: "When should I introduce technology? I'm torn as an engineer and as a parent" (Parent/Guardian B, male). Age-appropriate ideas suggested by the group included Lego and robotics to build 'engineering thinking' before the use of screens or coding intensify.

There was also conversation around unplugged computational-thinking tasks in the early years, with potential progression to block-based coding later. This brought the group to make connections between ECRL and durable skills for the non-linear careers they all seem to have experienced, with the participants speaking about non-linear or "squiggly" careers, as one member of the focus group described her career path. Several attributed their own career mobility to learning different skills at different stages. One contributor spoke of learning programming in their spare time and how "it opened jobs for me across countries" (Parent/Guardian B, male). Others emphasised keeping an open mind: "I hated business in school yet worked in banking for years."

How to Achieve Equitable ECRL in Irish Classrooms

Bring the outside world into the classroom.

Equity of exposure and access arose as a shared concern, with one group member noting: "Exposure varies hugely by school and leadership....A structured framework would help" (Parent/Guardian E, female). Another commented that privilege "also plays a role", with some children accessing far more opportunities than others (Parent/Guardian F, female). Another added: "Teachers follow the curriculum; a clear structure would empower them" (Parent/Guardian B, male).

Collectively, these perspectives support the view that a curriculum-based framework could help ensure all pupils encounter a broad range of roles and routes, irrespective of their school. The idea that this could be a multi-stakeholder effort was floated by one participant as the group discussed practical considerations and barriers, with garda vetting and logistics listed as inhibitors to guest visits to schools. The positive mindset was maintained, however, with workable alternatives suggested, including age-appropriate videos, short stories, remote speakers and contributions from the local community. Parents/guardians favoured integrated approaches, mentioning archaeologists or similar roles being included in history lessons and journalists in English, as well as "off-the-shelf" resources that teachers can use directly.

Teacher Focus Group

Following the online survey, teachers who indicated an interest in participating in a focus group were contacted (see Appendix P). Although eight teachers initially expressed interest, scheduling and time constraints proved difficult to accommodate. Consequently, three teachers ultimately participated in the focus group. All participants were female, and two also identified as parents. Each of the study's participating schools was represented, ensuring a breadth of perspective, though none of the teachers taught the specific classes involved in the earlier phases of the research.

The focus group was conducted online after school hours and generated rich qualitative insights into both the opportunities and challenges associated with embedding ECRL in the primary curriculum. As with the parent and guardian focus group, the session began with a presentation of the children's data. The subsequent discussion was guided both by this material and by a series of prompt questions identified in advance by the researcher (see Appendix R).

Overall, the participating teachers expressed strong support for introducing ECRL at an early stage of education, a position perhaps unsurprising given their voluntary engagement in the study. While mirroring the discussions in the parent and guardian focus group, the teachers, however, approached the topic critically and reflectively; they considered not only whether ECRL should be introduced but also how it could be most effectively and sustainably integrated into everyday classroom practice.

Teachers' Ambitions and Concerns for Their Students

> ***One of my students actually wants to be an astrophysicist and maybe an astronaut.***

Several key themes developed through the discussion, with the teachers' ambitions for their students being a common thread. Each of the three teachers spoke at different times about how they enjoyed watching their students as they progressed through their primary education, and even watching some past pupils return to update them on their lives. They spoke of their surprise at some of the findings from the classroom study and how it had raised their awareness of the implications that themes like gender still have, making them more conscious when speaking with their own class groups or even their own children.

> ***Traditional roles are still there...that's how they are seeing things.***

Gender was at the forefront of the conversation as the teachers reacted to "how entrenched gender norms continue to shape children's understanding of work" (Teacher A). The predominance of female staff in caring roles (e.g., special/additional needs assistants [SNAs/ANAs] in all three schools are exclusively female) was noted as a case of not "walking the talk" (Teacher C) but rather traditional associations between gender and profession that the children witness on a daily basis. One teacher reflected on how their male principal realised that he had allocated only male teaching staff to senior classes for that academic year and felt that he needed to remedy that in case it led parents to believe "that he was giving those roles to males because the females couldn't handle senior classes". She said that her suggestion to move one of those male staff members to Junior Infants "had simply not crossed his mind".

Another teacher observed how teaching has shifted from being male-dominated, and therefore highly respected, to an increasingly feminised and comparatively undervalued profession: "As women moved into it, it became less respected...salaries became less"

(Teacher B). The influence of gender on schools and education was further discussed, as the group also pointed to outdated library materials and the challenge of finding classroom resources that do not perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes.

I was blown away...like, you know...they have the full vocabulary.

The conversation then moved to time constraints and the curriculum. The participants recalled from the survey data that time arose as the most significant perceived barrier to introducing new learning (20 of the 23 teachers surveyed cited time as the primary challenge). In response to this, one participant spoke about the new primary school curriculum, describing how "now everything is through play" and how this can lend itself to weaving other subject areas into lessons. She spoke about using the property market as an example of this during a Maths lesson. She described "somebody who sells houses" to the class and was surprised when they immediately responded with "the estate agent".

The other teachers concurred about how easy it can be to underestimate how much children know that they may not have been explicitly taught in the classroom or directly via the curriculum. The busyness of the classroom was again noted, as all three teachers said their colleagues had raised concerns about the challenge of finding time to accommodate all curriculum changes that have come, and continue to come, down the line. However, they also spoke positively about staff-generated strategies to address them. As one participant concluded: "You just have to be creative."

How to Achieve Equitable ECRL in Irish Classrooms

It's really teaching them about what type of learner they are...then, they realise their strengths and their weaknesses.

The participating teachers consistently discussed the value of durable skills such as self-awareness, resilience and adaptability, which they appeared to perceive as more important for children's futures than rote subject knowledge. As one participant remarked: "It's not about knowing all the rivers in Ireland...but do I know who I am, what my strengths are and what I have to offer the world?" (Teacher B). Another recurrent concern was what the teachers perceived as a lack of alignment between primary and secondary education. The focus group participants described how self-awareness and exploratory learning fostered in primary school often "lapsed" at transition: "We always work towards our strengths and then that's not matched or

mirrored in secondary school" (Teacher A). The group sensed that this disconnect was particularly evident during subject choice before the transition to secondary school, when it was felt that parents' and guardians' anxieties or lack of understanding could often compound pressures on students.

This led to the group highlighting the strong role they believe parents and guardians play in shaping children's perceptions of education and careers. The teachers viewed the parents/guardians as very outcome-focused: "Parents think if the workbook is finished, the curriculum is done" (Teacher B), with perhaps little recognition or understanding of the value of process-oriented learning. They suggested that tools to support joint initiatives, between home and school, could help bridge this gap and simultaneously encourage topics such as ECRL to carry through to home.

The group also recognised the importance of children encountering real people in varied professions. Experiences such as guest speakers, site visits and media representations were identified as potential ideas, but with the caveat of being time- and resource-poor, leading this group to raise similar concerns to the parent/guardian group about geographic inequities, vetting processes and limited access to diverse role models. When it came to the everyday practicalities and how ECRL could potentially be supported, the participant teachers expressed a clear appetite for structured, accessible resources, comparable to existing platforms such as Twinkl.[5] They emphasised that confidence and competence in teaching career-related content could be enhanced through clear progression frameworks, modular guides and CPD. As one noted: "Teachers...give us a week-by-week guide and we'll follow it" (Teacher C).

5.4 Developing Themes

The themes presented in this chapter are contextually grounded interpretations, developed through an inductive and reflexive process characteristic of naturalistic inquiry. Rather than claiming definitive or absolute truths, these findings are understood as socially constructed meanings, co-created through engagement between participants and the researcher. They reflect the multiple perspectives and situated experiences that

[5] https://www.twinkl.ie/: Resources for educators created by educators.

exist within a relativist view of reality, consistent with the study's interpretivist and constructivist approach.

The analysis that follows advances a series of interpretive themes actively constructed through RTA, foregrounding the researcher's role in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2022, 2023). ECRL is first conceptualised as a phenomenon embedded in the everyday life of the school, rather than as a discrete or isolated curricular initiative. Attention then turns to how children's interests and aspirations operate as early expressions of future-oriented thinking. The analysis further interrogates the persistence and negotiation of gender and the ways in which it shapes engagement with ECRL. Consideration is also given to the positioning of durable skills as foundational to children's longer-term development. The discussion subsequently explores the layered environmental influences shaping children's career understandings and future thinking, before examining the tensions and possibilities associated with integrating ECRL within the formal curriculum.

5.4.1 ECRL as a Phenomenon

This study identified ECRL as a multifaceted process through which children actively construct understandings of work, identity and future possibilities. Across classroom, survey and focus group data, ECRL appeared as a phenomenon which develops both intentionally and unintentionally through everyday activities, from classroom conversations to familial interactions and media influences. The findings show that even at a young age, most children could articulate clear career aspirations, often grounded in visible or familiar occupations, aligning with international research (*inter alia* Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2015; McMahon & Watson, 2008; Percy et al., 2025) – indicating that career awareness emerges well before adolescence.

Importantly, children's early expressions of "what I like", "what I am good at", and "me when I am older at work" reveal that career-related learning is already embedded in daily experiences. Teachers and parents tended to view such learning as a by-product of broader educational processes rather than a discrete area of focus. Nonetheless, the data suggests that children actively construct understandings about work, roles and personal capability, highlighting ECRL as an embedded, organic phenomenon in early education contexts.

5.4.2 Interests, Aspirations and Future Thinking

Across the three participating schools, children demonstrated active and often enthusiastic engagement when asked to think about or discuss their futures. Almost all participants (98%, n = 98) articulated specific career aspirations, showing that ideas about work begin to form at a remarkably early stage. These aspirations were strongly linked to children's present interests and perceived strengths, with many drawings making direct connections between "things I like to do", "things I am good at", and "what I want to be when I grow up". This close alignment between interest, ability and aspiration highlights the developmental significance of curiosity, play and self-expression in shaping ECRL.

Children's career thinking was characterised by both imaginative and pragmatic elements. While some aspirations were influenced by visible and high-profile roles, such as famous footballers, YouTubers, or actors, others reflected empathetic and altruistic motivations, such as becoming teachers, doctors, or veterinarians. Many children spoke about "helping others", "making people better", or "teaching people new things", suggesting that notions of care, contribution and creativity already underpin their future-oriented thinking.

Teachers noted that these conversations often emerge organically in their classroom contexts, providing valuable opportunities to support reflection, language and durable skill development. Parental and teacher perspectives corroborated these findings, with both groups observing that children begin to express curiosity about work from as early as four to six years old. Parents and guardians attributed these emerging interests to exposure within the home and through family occupations, everyday conversations and media influences, while teachers viewed classroom dialogue, peer interactions and play as complementary sources. Both adult groups agreed that the early years of primary education represent a crucial window for nurturing exploratory and strengths-based thinking about the future, rather than steering children towards particular occupations.

The data also suggests that children's career-related aspirations are influenced by their understanding of success and fulfilment. References to money, enjoyment and social connection were common across the classroom discussions, with one boy remarking, "People have jobs because they can talk with their friends and they can also get money and afford to live a good life." These comments reveal an emerging, multidimensional

concept of work that includes economic, social and emotional components. Such insights reinforce that ECRL learning extends beyond awareness of jobs; but rather can support the development of a sense of self-concept, agency and even motivation in a broader social world.

Overall, this theme highlights that children's interests and aspirations are dynamic, fluid and contextually informed. They reflect a blend of imagination, observation and lived experience, offering parents/guardians, educators and other stakeholder adults a valuable entry point for fostering reflective discussions about learning, possibility and self-concept. In this sense, ECRL operates as a foundation for future thinking, helping children not only to imagine who they might become, but also to understand the connections between their present experiences and future selves.

5.4.3 Gendered Career Thinking

Gender developed as one of the most consistent and pervasive influences shaping children's early career-related thinking and learning. The visual surveys revealed distinct gendered patterns: boys overwhelmingly identified with sport and technology, while girls gravitated towards artistic and caring professions. The classroom conversations also reflected both awareness and ambivalence towards gender norms: while many children voiced egalitarian views ("Girls and boys can do whatever jobs they want"), they simultaneously acknowledged institutional limitations such as religious roles restricted by gender. Focus group data further illuminated how these patterns mirror the environments in which children live and learn, with teachers recognising that gendered assumptions persist in their own profession. One commented that as teaching became more feminised, it became less socially valued, and in all participating schools, SNAs were exclusively female, reinforcing gendered perceptions of roles.

Collectively, these findings suggest that although children articulate notions of fairness and equality, their career aspirations remain profoundly influenced by pervasive gender norms. This underscores the importance of intentional, early interventions to disrupt and broaden these stereotypes. While some children demonstrated awareness of gender stereotypes, others reproduced traditional occupational divisions, suggesting that gendered messages remain embedded across family, media and school contexts. These

findings highlight the continued need for early, deliberate interventions that challenge restrictive norms and promote equitable career imagination.

5.4.4 Durable Skills

Across all stakeholder groups, the importance of developing durable skills, such as self-awareness, resilience, creativity and adaptability, was repeatedly emphasised. These skills were consistently valued over the acquisition of rote knowledge or curriculum content, reflecting a shared understanding among adult participants that being able to learn, adapt and collaborate is more critical for long-term success than learning information by rote without application. Teachers in particular identified the development of such competencies as central to effective career-related learning, describing them as "skills for life" rather than "skills for school". As one participant observed, "It's not about knowing all the rivers in Ireland...but do I know who I am, what my strengths are and what I have to offer the world?".

This sentiment reflects the understanding that career-related learning is not primarily about making occupational decisions but about fostering self-awareness, reflection and a sense of agency that enable children to navigate learning and life with confidence. In this context, the development of durable skills can be seen as a central outcome of ECRL, positioning it as a key component of holistic child development rather than a peripheral or supplementary activity.

Parents similarly prioritised breadth of exposure, confidence-building and self-expression over early or prescriptive career direction. Many described valuing opportunities that helped children "find what they enjoy", "believe in themselves", or "see that they can try things". Such perspectives align closely with social learning and developmental theories (Bandura et al., 2001; Super, 1990), which posit that confidence, curiosity and perceived self-efficacy are foundational to lifelong learning and adaptability. Parents' recognition of these qualities suggests an intuitive understanding of durable skills as essential life competencies that extend beyond formal schooling or future employment.

Although the child participants were not directly asked to define or discuss durable skills, their responses revealed implicit awareness of them. When describing careers they admired, children often referred to qualities such as creativity ("I want to be a

clothes designer because I like art and clothes"), empathy ("I want to be a scientist because I want to help people") and collaboration ("I think people have jobs because they can talk with their friends"). These examples demonstrate how children's conceptions of work already incorporate relational, imaginative and affective dimensions.

5.4.5 Environmental Influences

Although this study did not extend to an in-depth examination of the specific environments in which participating children lived, careful consideration was given to the broader contextual diversity in the sample. The greater Dublin region encompasses urban, suburban and rural areas, and one school from each setting was purposefully selected. This strategy was designed to capture a range of perspectives and experiences and to enhance the representativeness of the data, thereby enriching the exploration of ECRL among young children. Grounded in a naturalistic inquiry framework, the study sought to understand participants' experiences in their authentic, real-world settings, with the researcher immersed in each school environment to interpret the meanings that children and adults ascribed to these experiences.

Findings across the datasets identified family and home as the most influential environments in shaping children's early career learning and aspirations. This influence was complemented by exposure to media, school experiences and community interactions, all of which contributed to children's developing sense of what work is and who does it. Parents and guardians frequently articulated their intention to "expose [children] widely so they can choose", demonstrating an awareness of how differential access to opportunities, resources and networks can influence the scope of children's future possibilities. Teachers similarly emphasised the importance of environmental representation, observing that authentic, "real-world exposure" through initiatives such as guest speakers, community visits and local partnerships enables children to connect abstract classroom learning with lived career journeys.

Nonetheless, both teachers and parents recognised significant structural and logistical constraints that limit such opportunities. Practical barriers, including geographic distance, vetting requirements for visitors and time pressures within the curriculum, were cited as challenges to ensuring equitable access to experiential ECRL. These

constraints highlight how opportunity structures are unevenly distributed and can either enable or restrict engagement with career-related learning.

5.4.6 Curriculum Integration

Curriculum design and implementation developed as central themes across the teacher and parent datasets, reflecting a shared recognition that the primary curriculum provides both opportunities and constraints for embedding ECRL. While ECRL is not explicitly represented in the current Irish Primary School Curriculum, teachers reported that elements of it already surface informally through thematic, cross-curricular and play-based learning, with one teacher commenting, “We talk a lot about life skills through other subjects.” Participants referenced subjects such as Aistear (Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to six years), Maths, and SPHE as natural contexts in which discussions about interests, strengths and the world of work often arise. The teacher focus group participants discussed how children’s questions and comments during these lessons often led organically to conversations about occupations, responsibilities and skills, integrating career-related learning opportunistically through storytelling, thematic projects, class visitors, and so on. These approaches reflect creativity and professional agency within existing curricular parameters, with one teacher commenting on discussions around the students’ “likes and dislikes and subjects they enjoy, and we’ll kind of make connections that way”.

Most of the adult participant stakeholders, however, did not perceive ECRL as a formal learning objective, highlighting a clear gap between implicit practice and explicit policy intent. A recurring finding across teacher surveys and focus groups was that time represents the most significant structural barrier to embedding ECRL, with 87% (n = 20) of teacher respondents identifying it as their primary challenge. Despite this, both teachers and parents recognised the potential for integration within the reformed Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a), which emphasises flexibility, child agency and holistic development through interconnected learning experiences. The framework’s focus on wellbeing, creativity and lifelong learning provides a natural platform for incorporating early exploration of work, skills and future possibilities. Participants viewed this as an opportunity to move ECRL from being an incidental occurrence to a structured, developmentally appropriate component of learning.

Teachers highlighted the need for clear frameworks, accessible resources and professional learning opportunities to support confidence and competence in facilitating discussions about work, skills and aspirations. Parents and guardians similarly emphasised the importance of curriculum-based consistency, expressing a desire for coherent approaches across schools that ensure equitable and consistent access to ECRL, regardless of context. The suggestion of a "Twinkl for ECRL", an online repository of adaptable resources, demonstrates a shared need for practical, evidence-informed tools that can be used flexibly by educators, parents and other key stakeholders alike.

This chapter has presented the findings of this participatory case study, which sought to explore ECRL among young children in Irish primary schools. Grounded in a naturalistic inquiry framework, and informed by interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies, the findings reflect the co-constructed understandings that were generated from the voices of children, teachers and parents/guardians across three primary school settings. The findings illustrate that ECRL is a complex, dynamic and already-present dimension of children's early educational experiences. While ECRL is not a formal part of the curriculum, it emerges organically through everyday classroom interactions, play, storytelling and informal discussions. The children in this study demonstrated clear and often confident awareness of work and occupational roles, articulating future aspirations that were imaginative, relational and frequently grounded in familiar experiences. Their reflections revealed how curiosity, observation and social engagement underpin the early construction of career-related knowledge and self-concept.

Across the datasets, several interrelated themes became apparent. First, ECRL as a phenomenon was shown to be deeply embedded in daily learning experiences and shaped by multiple contextual influences. Second, children's interests and aspirations are fluid and exploratory, often rooted in their current passions and developing perceptions of competence. Their statements, ranging from "I like helping animals, so I might be a vet" to "I want to be a teacher like mine", illustrate the connection between play, identity and future thinking. Third, gendered career thinking is a strong and recurring influence. Despite many children expressing egalitarian views ("girls and boys can do whatever jobs they want"), their drawings and discussions revealed

persistent gendered patterns, reflecting the implicit messages that children absorb from their social, cultural and educational environments.

The study also revealed a strong and consistent emphasis on the importance of durable skills, such as self-awareness, creativity and adaptability. Both teachers and parents prioritised the development of these competencies over the acquisition of "rote knowledge", recognising them as central to children's long-term learning, wellbeing and employability. For many teachers, these skills were seen as integral to ECRL, serving as "skills for life" rather than "skills for school".

The environment developed as both a contextual and active influence on children's ECRL. Family and home environments were cited as the most influential sources of early career awareness, followed by media, school experiences and the children's communities. The adult participant stakeholders recognised that these opportunities are not equally available to all children, with both groups mentioning disparities in access and resources, such as opportunities for guest speakers or experiential learning.

The curriculum represented both a challenge and an opportunity. While ECRL is not currently explicit in the Irish Primary Curriculum, teachers demonstrated that it already occurs implicitly across learning areas such as SPHE and Aistear. The majority of participating teachers cited lack of time as a major barrier to embedding ECRL more formally, yet both teachers and parents expressed strong support for curriculum-embedded and collaborative approaches. The introduction of the revised Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a) and the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030) (DES, 2023b) was viewed positively by the adult participant stakeholders as perhaps a timely opportunity to integrate ECRL more intentionally within curriculum.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter illuminate the multifaceted nature of ECRL in Irish primary education, revealing both the richness of children's early career thinking and the systemic factors that shape its expression as children begin to make sense of work, identity and possibility. The interplay between children's developing interests, gendered perceptions, environmental contexts and curriculum structures demonstrates that ECRL is not a discrete or peripheral topic, but rather a core component of early

learning and identity formation. The following chapter situates these findings within the broader body of national and international research, drawing on theoretical frameworks introduced in earlier chapters to examine how children's early encounters with ECRL align with existing models of career development. Chapter 6 will also explore and discuss the implications of these findings for policy, curriculum design, teacher education and family engagement, with a view to identifying pathways towards a more coherent and inclusive approach to supporting ECRL in Irish primary schools.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a critical interpretation of the study's contribution to understanding ECRL among primary-aged children in Ireland. Consistent with the naturalistic inquiry framing and a participatory case study design, the analysis is grounded in an interpretivist–constructivist epistemology and a relativist ontology, where children, their parents/guardians and teachers are co-researchers and therefore co-constructors of meaning.

The focus of this analysis is on gaining an understanding of whether ECRL exists across home, school and community and, if so, how these contexts shape emerging understandings of work, identity and aspiration. The discussion will also consider existing policy and practice in Ireland in relation to teaching, learning and guidance. In line with the findings presented in Chapter 5, the discussion positions ECRL not as a discrete intervention but as a socially situated phenomenon embedded in everyday life experiences, structured around four salient themes: (i) interests, aspirations and future thinking, (ii) gendered career thinking, (iii) durable skills, and (iv) environmental influences. Finally, the chapter turns to examining any implications for curriculum, policy and practice in the Irish context.

6.2 Interpreting ECRL as a Phenomenon

The extant body of career development literature increasingly positions childhood not as a preparatory stage for future career decision-making, but as a critical developmental period in its own right (Gottfredson, 1981; Mann et al., 2018; McMahon & Watson, 2005; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Super, 1980). This evolving perspective challenges traditional, decision-focused models of career development and instead encourages the design and application of inclusive, developmentally informed frameworks that view children as active and competent agents in shaping their own learning and future trajectories (*inter alia* Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018; Ellott et al., 2025; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). In this context, ECRL reflects a paradigmatic shift towards early, age-appropriate exploration of work, identity and possibility. It encompasses a broad set of learning

experiences designed to promote self-awareness, challenge stereotypes and build durable skills such as adaptability and creativity (Cahill & Furey, 2017b, 2017a; Godden et al., 2024; Howard & Ferrari, 2022; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019).

Underpinned by a naturalistic inquiry framework and employing a participatory case study design, this research was guided by an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology and a relativist ontology. This methodological stance assumes that multiple, contextually situated realities coexist and that meaning emerges through social interaction and co-construction. The approach therefore invited children, in the first instance, and their parents or guardians and teachers, in the second instance, to be co-researchers, ensuring that their lived experiences, reflections and interpretations remained central to how ECRL was conceptualised and understood. Findings from this study align with international evidence, positioning ECRL as a naturally occurring and multifaceted process through which children actively construct understandings of work, identity and future possibility. Across the classroom, survey and focus group data, ECRL developed as a phenomenon that develops both intentionally and unintentionally through everyday experiences, whether through classroom discussion and peer interaction or outside of school through family conversations or media influences.

This study contributes original empirical evidence from Ireland to a growing body of international research recognising that children's career awareness begins much earlier than policy frameworks traditionally assume. Through its participatory and multi-phased design, the study makes visible both intentional and incidental moments of learning, positioning ECRL as something that children are already experiencing and actively constructing. In doing so, it extends international scholarship (Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2015; McMahon & Watson, 2008; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021) by situating these insights within the Irish primary education context and grounding them in children's own voices.

Across the classroom data, almost every participating child (98%, n = 98) could articulate a career aspiration, frequently linking it to their interests, perceived strengths and imagined adult identities. From a naturalistic inquiry perspective, these findings illuminate how ECRL is not an unconnected process but rather a socially mediated phenomenon unfolding across children's lived experiences. Children actively construct their understandings of work, identity and possibility through the social and cultural

cues available to them, while parents, guardians and teachers act as mediators and meaning-makers in this process.

A distinctive contribution of this doctoral study is the development of a child-centred conceptual framework of ECRL (see Figure 25), derived inductively through reflexive thematic analysis. The framework positions the child at the centre of a layered ecology of influence, encompassing parents/guardians and teachers; thematic constructs such as interests, durable skills and gendered thinking; and the broader contexts of curriculum integration and policy. In synthesising these interrelated dimensions, the model moves beyond linear or intervention-based interpretations of career education and instead conceptualises ECRL as a dynamic, systemic, relational and contextually embedded process.

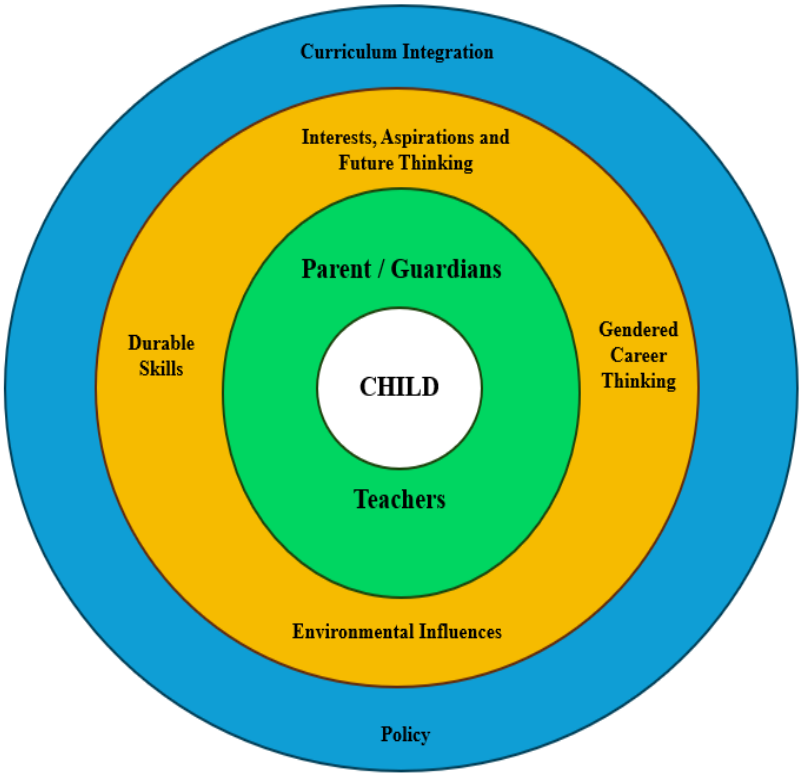


Figure 25: A Child-Centred Conceptual Framework of ECRL

Through articulating this integrative framework, the study offers both theoretical and practical advancement. It provides a conceptual tool through which educators and policymakers can better understand how ECRL is already operating in primary school contexts, and how it might be more intentionally supported. Rather than introducing ECRL as a new curricular add-on, the findings suggest that policy and curriculum

reform should recognise, scaffold and extend the forms of meaning-making already taking place in children's everyday lives.

Consequently, this research reinforces the view that ECRL is not an externally imposed educational initiative but an existing developmental phenomenon, exemplified in this study through an interpretive, participatory lens. By approaching ECRL as a lived and co-constructed phenomenon, this research invites a re-examination of how early education in Ireland can best support children's developing sense of self, agency and future orientation. The following sections discuss the interpretive themes developed through RTA and their influence on ECRL.

6.3 Developing Themes

Through reflexive thematic analysis of data gathered from classroom observations, surveys and focus groups, a series of interconnected themes were developed, offering insight into how ECRL is shaped and experienced in the lived contexts of young children in Irish primary schools. In keeping with the naturalistic inquiry framework and participatory case study design, these themes were not predetermined but developed inductively through iterative engagement with participants' reflections, dialogue and meaning-making. Interpreted through a constructivist and interpretivist lens, each theme represents a co-constructed understanding shaped by the voices of the children participants, their parents/guardians and teachers. Together, the constructed themes show ECRL as a naturally occurring and socially situated phenomenon, influenced by a complex interplay of personal, social and environmental factors.

The discussion begins by examining children's interests, aspirations and future thinking, exploring how these early expressions of preference and possibility shape emerging understandings of work and identity. It then considers patterns of gendered career thinking, interrogating how social norms and expectations continue to influence children's imagined futures. Attention subsequently turns to the development of durable skills, positioning these as foundational competencies that underpin longer-term career adaptability and personal growth. The analysis then explores environmental influences, highlighting the relational, cultural and contextual factors that shape children's developing career awareness. Building on these themes, the discussion considers the role of curriculum, first situating ECRL within the Irish Primary Curriculum

Framework before examining issues of curriculum integration and teacher agency. The chapter then broadens its lens to consider international comparisons, drawing lessons for the Irish context. It concludes by synthesising the key insights and outlining their implications for theory, policy and practice.

6.3.1 Interests, Aspirations and Future Thinking

Children's early expressions of interest and aspiration offer an insight into how they begin to construct ideas about themselves, others and the world of work. In this study, children were active agents capable of reflecting upon their experiences and imagining their futures. From a constructivist–interpretivist standpoint, their voices, represented through their drawings and classroom conversations, reveal how meaning is co-created through their lived experience and everyday interactions with family, teachers, peers and the wider environment. Through this lens, interests, aspirations and future thinking emerge as interrelated processes that form the foundations of career development.

Across all three participating schools, children demonstrated an active and often joyful engagement when reflecting on what they enjoyed, what they felt they were good at and what they hoped to work at as grown-ups. Almost every child (98%, n = 98) articulated a specific aspiration for the future, indicating that career-related thinking is already deeply embedded in their early sense-making processes. Their aspirations closely aligned with their stated interests and perceived strengths, with many children drawing direct connections between "things I like", "things I am good at", and "what I want to be when I grow up".

This clear pattern echoes established research on the developmental role of interest and intrinsic motivation, which identifies interest as a central driver of attention, engagement and learning and as a dynamic construct shaped by children's interactions with their environments (*inter alia* Dweck, 2002; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Lapan, 2004; Quinlan & Renninger, 2022; Renninger & Hidi, 2016; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). As Quinlan and Renninger (2022) remark, interest begins forming early in childhood and exerts a significant influence on future-oriented thinking, an effect strongly reflected in the children's meaning-making in this study.

The children's future thinking captured in this research revealed a balance of imaginative exploration and pragmatic awareness. While many were drawn to visible or high-status roles, such as footballers or social media influencers, others articulated aspirations grounded in empathy, creativity and caring, such as teachers, doctors or veterinarians. These choices often mirrored the children's lived experiences and everyday observations, underscoring the powerful influence of role models and the social visibility of professions on emerging career possibilities consistent with international research (Chambers et al., 2018; Ginevra & Nota, 2018; Howard et al., 2015; OECD, 2021, 2025; Percy et al., 2025; Yavuz, 2022). Their reflections also revealed a multidimensional understanding of the practical elements of employment such as "needing money to live a good life", as well as moral and social considerations, with frequent references to "helping people", "making others happy", and "doing something fun", suggesting that children have an encompassing view of employment.

This aligns with Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise, which argues that that even young children form ideas about work that include economic necessity, social value and lifestyle implications. It also aligns with more recent findings in contemporary career development, which emphasise that children see work as involving personal fulfilment, helping others, being happy and doing something meaningful, not only earning money (Archer & DeWitt, 2016; Ellott et al., 2025; Howard & Walsh, 2011; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a). Participating parents/guardians and teachers corroborated these patterns, identifying the home and classroom as the most influential contexts for early career-related curiosity. Many of the participating adult participant stakeholders placed a value on the early years of primary education as a key period for cultivating interests, self-awareness and reflective thinking, rather than directing children towards fixed occupational goals. This finding echoes that put forward by Porfeli (2009) and Howard and colleagues (2015) as well as Ellott et al., (2025), who note parents and teachers as key influencers.

Viewed through the naturalistic inquiry framework, these insights illustrate how ECRL is a lived, evolving process of meaning-making, where children's interests and aspirations are fluid, contextual and co-constructed through dialogue and experience. They reveal a developing awareness of the possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in which children experiment with future identities through imagination, play and discourse (Cross & Markus, 1991; Gottfredson, 1981; Super, 1980). Their ability to

connect current interests with future roles demonstrates the seeds of self-efficacy and self-concept development that are central to lifelong career learning (Bandura et al., 2001; Howard et al., 2015). These findings reaffirm that even at a young age, children's thinking about work is both aspirational and grounded in lived experience.

In summary, this emergent theme positions interests, aspirations and future thinking as foundational elements of children's early learning about work, identity and possibility. Research consistently shows that children's interests and competence beliefs are central drivers of engagement, self-concept development and future-oriented thinking (Hidi & Renninger, 2006b; Renninger & Hidi, 2016; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Recognising these processes as naturally occurring features of children's everyday meaning-making invites educators and policymakers to reconceptualise ECRL not as an additional curricular burden, but as an opportunity to nurture and extend children's intrinsic curiosity, confidence and self-efficacy through existing pedagogical practices (Bandura et al., 2001; Quinlan & Renninger, 2022).

This aligns with the notion of a future-focused mindset, in which educators intentionally connect classroom learning to the wider world, highlight transferable skills and cultivate durable dispositions that enable children to see themselves as future professionals (Woolf Cohen, 2025). Moreover, when educators engage thoughtfully with children's emerging ideas about who they are and who they might become, they support the development of "possible selves" (Cross & Markus, 1991; Godden et al., 2024; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 1995; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). In this way, ECRL can more intentionally cultivate the foundational dispositions that support children's emerging ideas about who they are and who they might become.

6.3.2 Gendered Career Thinking

Gender was one of the most pervasive and formative themes shaping children's ECRL in this study. Consistent with a large body of international research, the findings demonstrate that children begin to internalise gendered expectations about work and identity from an early age, often well before formal career education is introduced (Bian et al., 2017; Chambers et al., 2018; Davenport & Padwick, 2025; Education and Employers, 2016; Gottfredson, 1981; OECD, 2021; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). The data from this participatory case study reveals that while children frequently articulate beliefs in fairness and equality, with statements such as "girls and boys can do whatever

jobs they want", their career aspirations and perceptions of work remain subtly but powerfully shaped by an often unconscious gendered discourse surrounding them.

This unconscious bias was evident in the children's immediate environments. In all participating schools, the SNAs/ANAs were female, while the school patronage representatives were male priests – patterns that quietly reinforce gendered associations between care and femininity, and between leadership or authority and masculinity. These local realities, alongside broader cultural influences such as media representations, collectively shape the gendered messages that children absorb about who does what kind of work and why. Research consistently shows that media exposure such as through children's television, literature and online content amplifies and reinforces traditional gender hierarchies, portraying men in leadership, scientific or physical roles and women in caring or domestic ones (Education and Employers, 2016; Fernandez & Menon, 2022; Nesbitt et al., 2022).

From an interpretivist–constructivist perspective, these patterns illustrate how children's understandings of gender and work are socially produced and negotiated through interaction. The participatory design of this research positioned the children and their parents, guardians and teachers as co-researchers and made visible how gendered assumptions are both reinforced and challenged in everyday life. In classroom discussions, survey responses and focus group data, distinct gendered trends developed. Boys overwhelmingly associated their future selves with sport, gaming, or technology-related careers, with 44% (n = 22) identifying "footballer" as their preferred occupation. Girls, by contrast, were more likely to express interest in caring or creative professions such as teaching, nursing or the arts. Notably, however, almost a third of the girls in the study (n = 16) expressed aspirations in STEM fields, suggesting both continuity and contestation of traditional gender norms. The data presented in Table 14 also reveals an important difference in the range and diversity of career aspirations expressed by boys and girls, in particular the contrast between the breadth of girls' aspirations and the relative narrowness of boys' career thinking at this age. While boys' responses were heavily concentrated in a small number of traditionally masculine occupations, particularly football and professional sport, girls' aspirations were notably more diverse across creative, caring, academic and STEM-related fields. Although girls continued to identify with some traditionally feminised occupations such as teaching, nursing and the arts, they also demonstrated openness towards careers in science, veterinary work, law

enforcement and technology. By comparison, many boys appeared more restricted within culturally dominant constructions of masculinity, with sport-related careers occupying a disproportionately large share of their responses. This suggests that gender stereotyping may also constrain boys' career imaginaries albeit differently from girls'. These findings reinforce research suggesting that traditional masculine norms can limit boys' perceptions of acceptable futures, particularly where care-oriented, creative or expressive occupations are concerned (Cinamon & Yeshayahu, 2020; Davenport & Padwick, 2025). From a constructivist perspective, this finding highlights how children actively negotiate occupational identities within socially sanctioned gender boundaries, often reproducing dominant cultural expectations even while expressing beliefs in equality and fairness. Consequently, effective ECRL interventions must not only encourage girls into non-traditional pathways such as STEM, but also broaden boys' exposure to diverse careers beyond sport, technology and narrowly defined masculine roles.

Longitudinal research consistently shows that such early expressions of interest do not always persist into adolescence or adulthood; however, role discrimination and gendered occupational expectations often continue to endure, as socialisation pressures and structural barriers progressively narrow children's perceived possibilities over time (Brussino & McBrien, 2022; Gottfredson, 1981; OECD, 2021, 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). This underscores the importance of sustained, developmentally appropriate interventions that reinforce all children's engagement with both STEM and the arts, through the primary years and beyond, ensuring that early curiosity evolves into enduring confidence and opportunity. Parents/guardians described noticing gendered patterns in their children's interests from an early age, once again highlighting that these gendered perceptions are not formed in isolation but are continually reinforced through the intersecting influences of family, school, media and broader societal structures (Brussino & McBrien, 2022; OECD, 2012, 2021, 2025).

The pervasiveness of these gendered assumptions was vividly illustrated in *Redraw the Balance* (Education and Employers, 2016), in which 61 of 66 children drew men when asked to depict a firefighter, surgeon or fighter pilot. This finding was later echoed in the Drawing The Future study (Chambers et al., 2018), which surveyed 20,000 children aged seven to eleven years, across 20 countries. The study found that children's career aspirations at age seven closely resembled those of seventeen-year-olds, suggesting that

occupational stereotypes become deeply entrenched early in life. Family, school and media developed as key influences, and a significant mismatch was observed between children's aspirations and labour market demands.

These findings support those of other international studies, with Auger et al. finding that the majority of the 123 children in their study (aged 6–11 years) "provided specific careers or occupations to the question 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'" (Auger et al., 2005, p. 324). Similarly, in the UK's Drawing The Future project, over 90 per cent (n = 11,786) of children aged seven to eleven years identified their dream job (Chambers et al., 2018). The same research project was carried out in Northern Ireland in 2025, with 1,476 children participating and 1,463 (99.1%) identifying a dream career, with only 13 (0.9%) not knowing or not providing an answer.

When considered alongside international research, the findings from the present study, though based on a small sample, suggest that while children often articulate ideals of fairness and equality, their developing career identities remain profoundly influenced by pervasive gender roles and stereotypes. Through the lens of an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, these findings underscore that gendered understandings are not fixed or universal but are contextually produced and mediated through lived experience. This highlights a need for intentional, early and sustained interventions within ECRL that not only broaden exposure to a diverse range of careers but also critically challenge the underlying assumptions that cause children to exclude certain careers as inappropriate or unattainable. Meaningful ECRL must therefore extend beyond simply introducing new occupational possibilities; it must actively engage with and dismantle the subtle, often invisible boundaries that continue to shape children's aspirations through traditional gender norms and societal expectations.

6.3.3 Durable Skills

A significant contribution of this study, aligned with existing scholarship, is the identification of durable skills as foundational in shaping children's engagement with ECRL. As discussed in Chapter 3, the concept of durable skills has evolved from earlier framings of soft, non-cognitive or twenty-first-century skills (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Farrington et al., 2012; Kautz et al., 2014) towards the broader and more encompassing term *durable skills*. Increasingly adopted in education and career development research (Cole et al., 2021; Hutson et al., 2022; Robinson, 2023), durable

skills represent a broad set of enduring personal attributes and competencies such as creativity, adaptability and self-awareness. These skills extend beyond any specific academic subject or career pathway and support individuals to navigate complexity and change across their lifespan.

From a theoretical standpoint, this emphasis on durable skills resonates strongly with the foundations of career development theory. Parsons' (1909) model mooted the importance of understanding oneself as essential to vocational decision-making, while later theorists such as Super (1957, 1975), Bandura et al. (2001) and Savickas (1997) framed career as a developmental, adaptive process of identity construction. These theories converge on the premise that cognitive knowledge alone is insufficient for career success or satisfaction; rather, durable skills underpin individuals' capacity to adapt, persist and engage meaningfully with their educational and vocational trajectories (Farrington et al., 2012; Han et al., 2022; Kautz et al., 2014; OECD, 2025).

Findings from this study reveal a clear alignment with these perspectives. Across focus groups and surveys, all adult participants consistently placed value on the development of durable skills. Teachers, in particular, viewed ECRL as a pedagogical entry point for developing these lifelong competencies. One explained, "It's not about knowing all the rivers in Ireland...but do I know who I am, what my strengths are and what I have to offer the world?". This sentiment captures the understanding, evident across adult participants, that ECRL contributes not merely to career knowledge but to the broader cultivation of the reflective, social and emotional capacities that support children's holistic development. Parents echoed this emphasis, prioritising curiosity, exposure and confidence over premature career direction. Their reflections emphasise that ECRL's purpose lies not in guiding children towards specific occupations but towards broad developmental competencies.

Although the data gathered from children did not explicitly assess their understanding of durable skills, their statements often reflected these capacities indirectly. Many described future careers in ways that emphasised creativity ("I want to be a clothes designer because I like art and clothes"), empathy ("I want to be a scientist because I want to help people") or collaboration ("I think people have jobs because they can talk with their friends"). These expressions suggest that children already conceptualise work in socio-emotional and interpersonal terms, core aspects of durable skill development.

The methodological approach adopted by this study guided both the analysis and interpretation of the data. It enabled the voices of children, parents, guardians and teachers to be seen not simply as pieces of data, but as meaningful insights that reflect how durable skills are lived, demonstrated and supported in the children's environments. The prominence of durable skills in teachers' discussions supports calls for greater curricular alignment and intentionality. Hutson et al. (2022) advocate for the explicit identification of where and how such competencies are taught and learned, a process they term "skillifying the syllabus". While their work focuses on higher education, the principle is equally relevant at primary education level. Mapping existing activities that foster durable skills and explicitly articulating them in teaching and assessment practices could help embed ECRL more coherently across the curriculum.

At the same time, the findings invite critical reflection. Sultana (2024) cautions that concepts such as resilience and adaptability, when framed narrowly as individual traits, risk reproducing neoliberal narratives that place responsibility for systemic inequities on learners themselves. From the interpretivist and constructivist perspective adopted in this study, such competencies are best understood as socially mediated and contextually shaped rather than as inherent attributes. In the context of ECRL, it is therefore vital that the promotion of durable skills be situated within inclusive, socially aware pedagogies that recognise structural influences on opportunity and access. Educators should aim not to cultivate resilience to endure inequity, but to foster critical agency that empowers children to question and transform their social realities.

Ultimately, this study positions durable skills as both intrinsic to ECRL and continually reinforced through it. Viewed through an interpretivist lens, durable skills can be understood as the social, emotional and cognitive threads that connect children's present experiences to their imagined futures, shaping how they interpret possibilities and construct meaning over time. Recognising this allows ECRL to be conceptualised not only as an early form of career learning but also as a broader social and personal learning process that contributes directly to the curricular aims of wellbeing, inclusion, agency and lifelong learning embedded in the reformed Irish Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a, 2024). Such engagement fosters reflective, inclusive and developmentally attuned understandings of the future and supports the development of durable skills identified as critical to lifelong career development (Hartung et al., 2008; Hutson et al., 2022; Maree, 2018; Savickas, 1997). In this way, ECRL provides a

meaningful context for cultivating the psychological and interpersonal capacities that underpin children's evolving sense of identity and their preparedness to navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

6.3.4 Environmental Influences

The findings of this study reinforce longstanding theoretical and empirical evidence that children's career-related learning is deeply embedded in their social and environmental contexts. Classic career development theorists such as Roe (1957) and Super (1957, 1975, 1980) emphasised the family as the child's first and most enduring career reference group, recognising that parental values, interests and expectations profoundly shape how children begin to understand work and self. Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise extended this understanding, proposing that by middle childhood, children begin to narrow their perceived career possibilities in accordance with familial, cultural and societal norms.

Many scholars, including Holland (1959), Hoyt (1984), Howard et al. (2009), Cinamon and Dan (2010) and Hughes et al. (2022), have likewise identified parental attitudes, interests and aspirations as central to how children construct early understandings of work and career, an observation that has remained consistent across decades of research. Building on this foundation, more recent studies continue to affirm that ECRL is a socially situated and relational process, co-constructed through everyday interactions at home, in school and across the wider community (Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018, p. 202; Cinamon & Yeshayahu, 2020; Ellott et al., 2025; Howard et al., 2015).

Consistent with these perspectives, this participatory case study sought to explore how children's understandings of work and career are shaped by their lived environments. Guided by an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, the research positioned children, parents and teachers not merely as data sources but as co-researchers whose insights helped illuminate the relational and contextual nature of ECRL. Their shared reflections highlighted how the intersecting contexts of home, school and community influence what children perceive as possible and who they imagine they might become.

The findings confirmed that family remains the most powerful and consistent influence on children's ECRL. Almost half of parents (48%, n = 24) and over 90% of teachers

(n = 21) identified family as the principal factor shaping children's awareness of work. Parents described their role as providing "exposure" and "opportunity", while simultaneously acknowledging the inequities inherent in such opportunities across social and geographical contexts. Teachers echoed these concerns, noting that children's experiences were often constrained by structural barriers such as geography and access to diverse role models.

These findings closely reflect Vondracek et al.'s (2019) argument that parents' own work contexts, resources and social networks shape the way in which children learn about work, influencing both the opportunities available to them and the reproduction of occupational stereotypes and early career compromises. They also align with broader evidence demonstrating that while parental support and social capital can expand opportunity, disparities in access to resources and networks frequently perpetuate inequality and constrain children's imagined futures (Flouri et al., 2015; Kintrea et al., 2011; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

The role of schools and communities also developed as central to ensuring equitable access to ECRL. Teachers, in particular, advocated for integrated and experiential approaches, emphasising the value of "real-world exposure" through guest speakers, workplace visits and partnerships with community stakeholders and local organisations. These perspectives align with current calls in policy and research to move career-related learning beyond the confines of the classroom, linking it to authentic experiences that help children connect learning with lived realities (Chambers et al., 2018; Mann et al., 2018; OECD, 2025). However, participants also noted that realising such opportunities requires substantial structural support. Persistent barriers, including time pressures, limited resources and logistical challenges, continue to restrict feasibility, particularly for smaller or rural schools, where access to diverse industries and role models is limited. This tension underscores an ongoing challenge in ECRL: while experiential, community-connected learning is widely endorsed, its implementation remains uneven and disproportionately affected by contextual disadvantage.

Media influence was also developed as a theme reflecting a powerful environmental factor shaping children's early understandings of work. Parents tended to cite television and books as key sources of their children's career ideas, whereas teachers pointed to the growing prominence of social media and online platforms. This generational

difference highlights the rapid evolution of the communicative environments in which children make sense of work and the increasingly complex media ecologies they navigate. As revealed by existing research, media serves to both an enable and constrain ECRL. It can broaden children's imaginative possibilities by exposing them to a wide range of occupations, but it also has a propensity to reproduce narrow, gendered and stereotypical portrayals of work that can limit perceived possibilities (Chambers et al., 2018; Fernandez & Menon, 2022; Howard et al., 2015; Nesbitt et al., 2022; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). The findings from this study reinforce these dual dynamics, underscoring the need for critical, mediated engagement within ECRL to support children in interpreting and questioning the occupational messages they encounter through social media and online engagement.

Viewed collectively, these findings align with career development theories, which conceptualise ECRL as occurring in an intersectional network of influences (Herr et al., 2004; Howard et al., 2015; Patton & McMahon, 2014; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Super, 1975). Family, school, community and media function as overlapping systems that together influence how children begin to define career identity and possibility. From an interpretivist perspective, these influences are not static or universal but evolve dynamically through everyday interactions and reinforce the view that ECRL is both pedagogical and social. It emerges not as a formal intervention but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by opportunity structures and mediated by the adults and contexts in children's lives.

Recognising this interconnected ecosystem highlights the need for systemic, collaborative approaches that engage schools, families and communities as co-partners in supporting children's developing awareness of work and identity. In this sense, ECRL serves not only as a space for learning but also as a means of promoting fairness, helping to broaden children's horizons and reduce the social and occupational inequalities that can limit career imaginings or possibilities.

6.4 The Role of Curriculum in Early Career-Related Learning

While families, schools and communities form the environments in which ECRL takes place, the curriculum provides the structure through which these experiences can be made intentional, inclusive and sustained. The findings of this study highlight the

curriculum's pivotal role in shaping the scope, delivery and reach of ECRL. The adult co-researchers, teachers, parents and guardians consistently recognised that embedding ECRL in the formal curriculum is essential to ensure consistency and progression across schools. This aligns with long-standing international research which emphasises that structured, system-level approaches are necessary to integrate career learning effectively into education (Cahill & Furey, 2017a; Godden et al., 2024; Hughes et al., 2016; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a; OECD, 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Grounded in a naturalistic inquiry framework, and guided by interpretivist and constructivist assumptions, this study approached the curriculum not as a fixed policy document but as a lived, evolving practice co-constructed through interaction. Through the participatory design of this research, teachers, parents, guardians and children collectively highlighted how everyday classroom experiences, informal conversations and day-to-day encounters contribute to children's developing understandings of work and the wider world. These findings reinforce that the curriculum acts both as a guide for learning and as a reflection of educational practice, shaped by the meanings that teachers and learners construct together. The discussion that follows considers how the Irish Primary Curriculum Framework can support this integration, positioning ECRL not as a discrete add-on but as a central feature of holistic, child-centred education.

6.4.1 ECRL and the Irish Primary Curriculum Framework

The ongoing reform of Ireland's primary school curriculum, led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2023a, 2024), presents an important opportunity to integrate ECRL with broader educational goals. The new Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a) replaces the 1999 curriculum with a more integrated, flexible and child-centred approach that prioritises holistic development and future readiness. It promotes six broad learning areas: (i) Language, (ii) Mathematics, (iii) Science and Technology, (iv) Wellbeing, (v) Social and Environmental Education, and (vi) Arts Education, and it encourages play-based, inquiry-led pedagogies that position teachers as creative facilitators of learning. Within this framework, there is clear conceptual alignment with the principles underpinning ECRL, which promote self-awareness, exploration and transferable skills such as curiosity, collaboration and adaptability (Cahill & Furey, 2017a; Godden et al., 2024; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018a, 2019; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Findings from this study indicate that teachers may already be integrating career-related themes incidentally within existing subjects, particularly through thematic and inquiry-based approaches. For instance, one teacher described using a property market scenario during a mathematics lesson, where pupils immediately identified the role of an estate agent. Such moments illustrate how ECRL can occur organically through existing subjects, demonstrating that career-related learning complements rather than competes with the curriculum's broader pedagogical vision.

6.4.2 Curriculum Integration and Teacher Agency

The teachers, parents and guardians who participated in this study endorsed embedding ECRL within existing curriculum areas rather than treating it as an additional subject. Teachers identified strong potential for integration through Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Wellbeing, areas that are already focused on identity, community and inclusion. This approach aligns with the NCCA's focus on inclusion, community and learner agency, as these curricular spaces lend themselves to activities that promote self-awareness, empathy and reflection on roles in society. Parents also endorsed this integrated approach, noting that a structured framework would promote consistency and equity across schools. As one parent remarked, "Teachers follow the curriculum; a clear structure would empower them."

However, the findings also identified systemic challenges. Time constraints were the most frequently cited barrier, identified by 20 of the 23 teachers who participated, followed by the need for practical resources and professional development. These findings reflect international evidence that curriculum overload, competing priorities and limited teacher preparation can hinder the sustainable integration of career-related learning (Kashefpakdel et al., 2019; OECD, 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). Yet teachers also demonstrated notable creativity and agency in adapting to new initiatives. As one participant reflected, "You just have to be creative." This adaptability suggests that when appropriate supports are in place, teachers are both willing to embed ECRL meaningfully in their classrooms and capable of doing so.

From an interpretivist standpoint, teachers' responses reveal that curriculum integration is not only a structural task but also a relational and professional one. Teachers act as mediators between policy and practice, shaping how ECRL is experienced by children. Their commitment to fostering self-awareness, curiosity and agency mirrors the

participatory ethos of the new curriculum and should be supported by clear guidance, accessible resources and professional learning opportunities that enable teachers to connect ECRL with existing curricular goals. Doing so would position ECRL not as an isolated initiative, but as a key part of delivering the curriculum's overarching aim "to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society" (NCCA, 2025).

6.5 International Comparisons and Lessons for Ireland

Insights from international practice offer valuable perspectives for understanding how ECRL can be meaningfully embedded in education systems. There are many examples where programmes of learning have evolved from isolated initiatives into coordinated, curriculum-aligned approaches that connect schools, families and communities in supporting children's understanding of work, identity and possibility.

In the UK, large-scale initiatives such as Drawing The Future (Chambers et al., 2018) and Primary Futures have shown how career-related learning can be integrated across subjects through authentic, experience-based activities. These projects have been particularly successful in linking classroom learning to real-world contexts, helping children challenge stereotypes and broaden their horizons (Mann et al., 2018). In Australia, the BECOME and Little Ripples programmes promote inquiry-based exploration of community roles and personal interests, both in school and at home (BECOME in Primary Schools, 2025; Career Industry Council of Australia, 2021). Canada's Exploring Possibilities initiative further extends this model by embedding career learning in identity, belonging and wellbeing frameworks, encouraging children to connect who they are with what they might become (Godden et al., 2024).

While these international programmes provide valuable insights, there is no standout example of a fully integrated national curriculum that embeds ECRL across all areas of primary education on a nationwide scale. Most initiatives remain project-based or locally driven, often dependent on external partnerships and short-term funding. This absence of systemic integration underscores the challenge faced internationally: how to move from innovation at the margins to a sustainable, embedded practice that reaches every child.

Several principles shared across contexts underpin the most effective approaches. First, ECRL begins early, recognising that career awareness and self-concept develop long before adolescence. Second, it is embedded in the curriculum rather than treated as an add-on, ensuring that learning is inclusive and sustained. Third, teacher professional learning is prioritised, equipping educators with the confidence, pedagogical tools and community links to enact ECRL in ways that are both authentic and achievable.

The findings of this Irish study align closely with these international lessons. This study's participating teachers, parents and guardians recognised the children's appetite for this kind of learning and called for early, structured and integrated approaches to ECRL. Like their international counterparts, Irish teachers described ECRL emerging naturally through play, inquiry and cross-curricular learning (Cahill & Furey, 2017a; Ellott et al., 2025; Godden et al., 2024; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). However, they also emphasised the need for practical supports, accessible resources and collaboration with families and local communities to ensure consistency and equity across schools.

International evidence alongside findings from this study emphasise that ECRL works best when it is both supported by policy and responsive to context. Ireland is well positioned to learn from international experience while tailoring approaches to our own cultural and educational landscape. The new Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2023a) already reflects many of the values underpinning ECRL in practice around the world, and offers opportunity to build on these international insights by focusing on integration, teacher agency and sustainability. This study contributes to that process by offering grounded evidence of how ECRL already takes shape in Irish children's everyday experiences.

6.6 Conclusion

Over a century ago, Parsons (1909) proposed that effective career development rests on three principles: understanding oneself, gaining knowledge of work, and reasoning about the relationship between the two. These principles remain relevant in contemporary career-development approaches, especially in efforts to nurture children's building sense of identity, agency and possibility. When viewed through this lens, ECRL is not a fixed but an evolving process through which children learn about

themselves and the world and begin to see their place within it and their possible future selves.

This discussion has explored how ECRL operates as a naturally occurring and socially embedded phenomenon. It unfolds through the daily experiences of children and is shaped by the interactions, expectations and opportunities that surround them. Interpreted through a naturalistic inquiry framework and an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, ECRL emerges as a co-constructed and relational process rather than a predetermined curriculum outcome. Three key insights have been particularly evident. First, children begin to form ideas about work and identity far earlier than policy or curriculum frameworks currently recognise. Second, their developing understandings are deeply influenced by gender, family and environment, which together shape how they interpret what is possible or appropriate. Third, the reformed Irish Primary Curriculum Framework offers a powerful opportunity to embed ECRL intentionally and equitably in everyday teaching and learning.

The persistence of gendered career thinking within the findings was both revealing and troubling. Despite the adults in children's lives advocating equality, children's aspirations often reflected deeply and often unconsciously embedded gender roles. This demonstrates how societal messages continue to shape young minds. Similarly, environmental influences, such as family, geographical location and exposure to role models, can be significant influences on determining the range of possibilities that children imagine for themselves. These findings highlight the need for structured, inclusive frameworks that ensure every child's experience of ECRL is guided by opportunity rather than circumstance. Durable skills also developed as central to how children and adults conceptualise ECRL. Teachers and parents viewed curiosity, adaptability and self-awareness as foundational to meaningful learning about work and life. When developed in supportive and inclusive contexts, these skills can help children navigate uncertainty and engage critically with the world around them. Embedding ECRL in the curriculum through inquiry, creativity and reflection can therefore strengthen not only career understanding but also broader educational goals of wellbeing, inclusion and lifelong learning.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter draws together the key insights, conclusions and implications of this naturalistic inquiry and participatory case study. Building on the preceding discussion, it reaffirms the central argument that ECRL is a naturally occurring, socially situated and relational process that develops through children's everyday interactions across home, school and community. The chapter begins by revisiting the study's aims and methodological foundations, before synthesising the major findings in relation to the research questions. It then considers the study's contributions to theory, policy and practice, identifying opportunities to embed ECRL more intentionally in Irish primary education. Finally, the chapter presents recommendations for educators, policymakers and researchers, while reflecting on the broader significance of supporting children's early understandings of work, identity and possibility in an evolving educational landscape.

7.1.1 Overview of the Study

This study set out to explore ECRL among young children in Irish primary schools. It investigated how children engage with ECRL and articulate their perspectives, experiences and aspirations related to work and the future. In parallel, the study examined how this learning is perceived and potentially supported by key adults in the child's life, namely teachers and parents or guardians. Grounded in a naturalistic inquiry framework and a participatory case study design, the research was informed by a constructivist and interpretivist epistemology and a relativist ontology. These philosophical assumptions shaped the methodological approach, positioning children and adults as co-researchers whose experiences and perspectives were essential to understanding how ECRL unfolds in everyday contexts. The following sections will explore the integrative insights which developed through this research.

7.1.2 Limitations

While this study was designed to be methodologically rigorous and ethically robust, all research is necessarily shaped by the boundaries of its chosen focus and, in particular, by the constraints of its design. These limitations must therefore be acknowledged.

Firstly, as with all qualitative case study research, the findings are context-specific and therefore not intended to be statistically generalisable. The focus on a bounded case, situated within a small sample of schools in one geographical area, means that the insights generated may not fully reflect the experiences of children, parents or educators in other settings or locations. However, the study does offer rich, transferable insights that may inform similar contexts or a future larger-scale study, particularly in relation to ECRL and child participation in educational research.

Secondly, although the study adopted a participatory and child-centred approach, involving children meaningfully throughout the research process, there will always be an inherent power imbalance between adult researchers and child participants. While efforts were made to mitigate this, such as using a child research advisory group, using child-friendly research tools and applying Lundy's (2007) model of participation, they can never be completely diminished.

Thirdly, the reliance on self-reported data from children, parents and teachers may have introduced bias or social desirability effects. Participants may have shaped their responses based on what they perceived the researcher wanted to hear, or due to the presence of their peers during some activities. Triangulation of data sources and participant validation were employed to reduce this risk, but it cannot be fully eliminated.

Finally, time and resource constraints limited the breadth and depth of the scope of the study. While valuable insights were gathered across two phases, a longer-term investigation might have captured more nuanced developments in children's understanding of careers and their educational experiences over time.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully to the limited body of research on ECRL in the Irish primary context, and it demonstrates the value of embedding child voice and agency in educational research design.

7.2 Early Career-Related Learning as a Phenomenon

This study found that ECRL is already occurring naturally across children's everyday experiences, where they demonstrate awareness of work, identity and personal strengths well before adolescence. The findings illustrate that ECRL is not an externally imposed

construct but a natural developmental phenomenon, emerging both intentionally and incidentally through interactions in the home, school and wider community. The evidence suggests that these everyday, often incidental moments act as powerful formative experiences, shaping children's early conceptions of work, contribution and identity. ECRL is therefore understood as a socially co-constructed process, consistent with developmental and social cognitive career theories (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013; McMahon & Watson, 2022a; Watson & McMahon, 2022b).

In advancing both theoretical and practical understandings of ECRL, this study invites a reconceptualisation of early career development and career-related learning as dynamic processes that begin in early childhood. Four interrelated themes were generated through the analysis: (i) *inspirations, aspirations and future thinking*; (ii) *gendered career thinking*; (iii) *durable skills*; and (iv) *environmental influences*, each representing a distinct yet interconnected dimension of how children construct meaning around their self-concept as well as their possible future work and selves.

7.2.1 Inspirations, Aspirations and Future Thinking

Almost every child in the study (98%) was able to articulate a specific career aspiration. This provides empirical evidence that children's career aspirations and future-oriented thinking emerge much earlier than is traditionally acknowledged in career development theory and policy. Across classroom discussions, focus groups and surveys, the children actively made sense of the world of work through conversations, play, observation and media engagement. Their reflections revealed early signs of self-concept formation, linking their personal interests and abilities with imagined future selves. Children made statements such as "I want to be a gamer or a researcher, because I want to discover new things or be famous" (Boy, 9) and "I would like to be a doctor, because I want to help children" (Girl, 7), demonstrating a definite, if evolving, understanding of how personal strengths and interests can translate into future possible selves.

By documenting how children construct and express these early aspirations, this study offers new insight into how curiosity, agency and identity formation underpin ECRL. It challenges the assumption that career exploration is a later developmental task, instead positioning future thinking as a foundational component of early learning and personal development. This finding aligns with, but also extends, the work of theorists such as Super (1990), Cross and Markus (1991) and Auger et al. (2005), offering contemporary

and Irish-based evidence that self-concept and career imagination begin to take shape far earlier than previously assumed.

7.2.2 Gendered Career Thinking

This study makes an important contribution to knowledge by illuminating the enduring role of gender as a formative and pervasive influence in ECRL. Across visual, conversational and focus group data, gender consistently arose as one of the most significant factors shaping how children imagine work, identity and future possibilities. The research extends existing international evidence (Chambers et al., 2018; OECD, 2025; Percy et al., 2025; Percy & Ameagh, 2021) by demonstrating how gendered assumptions are reproduced and negotiated in the Irish primary school context, revealing both continuity and complexity in how young children internalise and contest gender norms.

The findings show that while many children articulate ideals of fairness and equality, their aspirations are shaped by persistent social patterns in family, school and media contexts. Teachers themselves acknowledged the persistence of gendered divisions in the education profession, noting, for example, that as teaching became more feminised, it was perceived as less socially valued and that all special needs assistants in participating schools were female.

By evidencing how gendered occupational associations are already established and reinforced in early childhood, this study advances theoretical understanding of circumscription and compromise (Gottfredson, 1981) in contemporary educational settings. It highlights the need for early, intentional interventions that move beyond awareness-raising to actively challenge and broaden children's gendered career representations. In doing so, it contributes to both the theoretical discourse and practical design of ECRL by framing gender equity as a developmental, rather than remedial, objective and most importantly one that must be embedded from the earliest stages of education to ensure more inclusive and equitable career trajectories.

7.2.3 Durable Skills

Consistent with international evidence, the findings of this participatory case study confirm that children's career development is not linear or sequential, but rather fluid and dynamic – and most effective when embedded within broader learning processes

(Auger et al., 2005; Chambers et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2015; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). ECRL, therefore, is not about making occupational choices, but about cultivating the durable skills that underpin lifelong learning and wellbeing (Ellott et al., 2025; Hartung et al., 2008, p. 202; Santilli et al., 2017).

The importance of nurturing these durable skills was repeatedly emphasised across all stakeholder groups. Teachers, parents and children alike valued self-awareness, confidence and problem-solving over the acquisition of rote knowledge or narrow curriculum outcomes. Parents and guardians also prioritised breadth of exposure, confidence-building and an understanding of self. The focus group participants spoke of helping children "find what they enjoy", "believe in themselves" and "see that they can try things". These perspectives align with career development theories, which position confidence, curiosity and perceived self-efficacy as foundational to adaptability and lifelong growth (Bandura et al., 2001; Dweck et al., 2014; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Although children were not explicitly asked to discuss "durable skills", their language and reasoning demonstrated implicit awareness of them. When describing admired careers, they emphasised qualities such as creativity, empathy and collaboration. This interpretation aligns with the Department of Education and Skills' (DES, 2023) conceptualisation of guidance as a lifelong process that enables individuals to manage educational, personal and social transitions in order to reach their potential and contribute meaningfully to society. By synthesising these perspectives, this study offers new empirical evidence that ECRL can contribute to overall learning outcomes and curricular aims while supporting child development.

7.2.4 Environmental Influences

Findings across the datasets highlighted family and the home environment as the most significant influences in shaping children's early career learning and aspirations. This initial influence is further enriched by children's exposure to media, school experiences and community interactions, all of which contributed to their evolving understanding of what work is, who performs it and how it connects to everyday life. Parents and guardians frequently expressed a desire to "expose [children] widely so they can choose", reflecting an awareness that unequal access to opportunities, resources and social networks can shape the range of futures that children imagine for themselves. Teachers also recognised the powerful role of environment and representation, noting

that authentic, real-world encounters can all help children bridge the gap between abstract classroom learning and the lived realities of career pathways.

7.3 Concluding Summary

The findings of this study present a compelling case for recognising ECRL as an intrinsic, naturally occurring and socially situated element of childhood development. The participatory, naturalistic approach adopted in this study is both a strength and a limitation. Its strength lies in its depth of engagement and the authenticity of the voices represented. The constructivist and interpretivist stance enabled knowledge to be co-constructed through dialogue, allowing for nuanced insight into the social and relational nature of ECRL. However, as a small-scale case study, the findings are contextually specific and therefore not generalisable. Instead, they offer rich, situated insights that may resonate with other educational contexts where similar dynamics exist. This reflective, relational methodology highlights the value of positioning children and the adults around them as active contributors to knowledge about learning, identity and future thinking. The research demonstrates that children are not passive observers of the world of work but active meaning-makers who construct, question and refine their understandings of self, work and possibility through everyday experiences.

By framing ECRL as a lived and co-constructed phenomenon, this study challenges the notion that career learning must begin in adolescence or be driven solely by curriculum design. Instead, it suggests that career learning begins in childhood, often before formal recognition by policy or practice. This study therefore positions ECRL as a continuum of meaning-making through which children connect their everyday experiences to emerging understandings of self and possible future selves. By acknowledging that career learning is already taking place in early childhood, educators and policymakers have an opportunity to cultivate children's curiosity, agency and confidence, ensuring that these early encounters are inclusive and developmentally appropriate and therefore provide a strong foundation for equitable and lifelong career development. The study extends existing career development theory by evidencing that key constructs such as self-concept, adaptability and agency are already present and evolving well before adolescence. It also challenges education systems to move beyond viewing career learning as a discrete or later-stage intervention, instead embedding it within holistic,

child-centred approaches that nurture curiosity, confidence and inclusivity from the earliest years of education.

Importantly, this research highlights the central role of families, teachers and wider communities in shaping children's early career understandings and aspirations. It underscores the need for intentional, developmentally appropriate opportunities that make the world of work visible, equitable and relevant to all learners, while also addressing the subtle but persistent influences of gender, representation and access. Building on these insights, the following section sets out a series of recommendations for policy, practice and future research. These recommendations aim to translate the study's findings into actionable strategies for embedding ECRL in Irish primary education and beyond, ensuring that every child is supported to develop the awareness, adaptability and durable skills needed to navigate their lifelong learning journey with confidence and purpose.

7.4 Implications and Recommendations

7.4.1 Strengthening Alignment between Policy and Practice

Since UNESCO's founding in the 1940s, global education agendas have increasingly emphasised that academic learning alone is insufficient and that education systems must support the holistic development of every child. An international review by the Brookings Institution, which examined seven education systems, including Ireland's, found that it is possible to redesign academically focused systems to attend to children's social, emotional, moral and civic development. Across these systems, common strategies include engaging diverse stakeholders, building coherence between policy and practice, strengthening social and instructional infrastructures and supporting educators through sustained professional learning. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that transforming education systems to support holistic student development is achievable, but requires ongoing collaboration, distributed leadership and continuous monitoring to embed new practices meaningfully in everyday schooling (Datnow et al., 2022).

This emphasis on enabling conditions in the wider educational ecology aligns closely with ECRL, which similarly represents a shift towards holistic student development. By helping children build self-knowledge, curiosity, aspirations and an understanding of

the broader world, ECRL aligns with systemic reform efforts that move beyond narrow academic goals towards more humanistic aims. The call to leverage theory, research and principles from systemic education reform to advance holistic outcomes is therefore highly relevant: ECRL offers a practical and developmentally appropriate way to operationalise these reforms in primary settings. It provides concrete mechanisms through which broader policy ambitions can be practised in the classroom. In this sense, ECRL is not peripheral to system reform but an achievable step in moving from policy to practice.

Despite increasing international recognition of the importance of ECRL, it remains marginalised in both policy and practice (Howard & Ferrari, 2022; McMahon & Watson, 2022b; OECD, 2021, 2025; Percy et al., 2025). This persistent gap between research and implementation means that opportunities to embed ECRL in education systems are often overlooked. International evidence and policymakers have consistently recognised this disconnect; however, translation into practice has been limited, partly because ECRL is still widely perceived as an optional or peripheral activity rather than an integral part of children's learning and development. Reframing ECRL as central to educational quality and inclusion is therefore essential. Positioned within this broader vision, ECRL becomes a core component of inclusive, high-quality education that empowers every child to imagine and realise their future possibilities. This aligns with the Department of Education and Youth's *Reflections on Inclusion in the Irish Education System*, which describes an inclusive system as one in which "all children and young people can access supportive, engaging and appropriately challenging learning experiences that enable them to have daily life-enhancing encounters and fulfil their potential" (DEY, 2024).

The inclusion of primary-level guidance in the *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance* (2024–2030) represents a significant policy shift and aligns closely with the findings of this study. The strategy's emphasis on a whole-school, developmental and preventative approach reflects this research's argument that career-related learning begins long before adolescence and is embedded in children's everyday experiences. By positioning early guidance as an opportunity to foster self-awareness, curiosity and adaptability, the framework moves beyond the traditional, later-stage models of guidance towards a continuum of lifelong learning and support. This policy direction validates one of this study's central conclusions, namely that early, inclusive

and intentional engagement with career learning enhances children's confidence, sense of agency and readiness for ongoing learning. It is therefore recommended that national policy frameworks explicitly recognise and support ECRL as a foundational element of primary education.

Integrating ECRL in the Primary Curriculum Framework would ensure that all children, regardless of background or context, have equitable access to diverse, age-appropriate opportunities to explore self, work and community. The current redevelopment of the primary curriculum offers a timely and significant opportunity to embed ECRL systematically, providing a coherent structure through which early guidance can be positioned as a normal, expected and developmentally appropriate part of children's learning. Embedding ECRL at this stage of reform would allow policymakers to address long-standing inconsistencies in provision and to ensure that early career learning becomes a foundational, rather than peripheral, element of primary education. Policy should further promote school–home–community partnerships and encourage the integration of career learning outcomes within both guidance and wellbeing initiatives, ensuring coherence across the wider educational ecosystem.

Bridging this research–practice divide requires systemic support and collaboration among all stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, families and, crucially, children themselves. Embedding ECRL through integrated, developmentally appropriate pedagogies can ensure that children encounter diverse career narratives early and continuously throughout their educational journey. In addition, teacher education and professional learning should emphasise the importance of nurturing adaptability, curiosity and critical awareness within guidance practice, thereby equipping educators to support children's evolving aspirations in meaningful and inclusive ways.

The Brookings international review (Datnow et al., 2022) identifies ten key lessons that education systems draw on when working to embed holistic student development. These systems emphasise the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders and leveraging partnerships, constructing coherence through opportunities for dialogue about cultural norms and cognitive and policy frameworks, and managing the perceived tensions between equity and academic rigour. In parallel, they focus on building or rebuilding educational infrastructures by strengthening social infrastructure to support

dialogue around holistic development and creating educator supports and resources that recognise the classroom as a cooperative space. The integration of these infrastructures into policy and then into everyday practice requires careful contextual considerations and distributed leadership to cultivate educator and student agency.

These system-building lessons from seven international case studies have clear relevance for embedding ECRL within primary education. ECRL relies on the same commitment to engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including families, community partners and employers, and it depends on constructing coherence between curriculum, wellbeing and guidance policies. Managing potential tensions between academic priorities and broader developmental goals is essential, particularly as ECRL enhances rather than detracts from core learning. The emphasis on developing robust social and educational infrastructures aligns closely with the need to establish pedagogies that position career learning as a co-produced, culturally responsive practice rooted in children's experiences. Equally, balancing policy expectations with local adaptability allows schools to adapt ECRL to their specific contexts, while distributed leadership fosters teacher and student agency in shaping future-oriented learning. Continuous professional development and purposeful creation of resources, for school and home, are central to ensuring that these ECRL practices become embedded and sustainable and a meaningful element of primary education.

7.4.2 Implications and Recommendations for Teacher Education and Continuous Teacher Professional Development

The ongoing redevelopment of the Primary Curriculum Framework represents a significant shift in how learning is conceptualised and enacted in Irish primary education. Since its inception in 2023, the framework has marked a movement away from prescriptive objectives toward an outcomes-based approach that is already evident in the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and Primary Mathematics Curriculum (NCCA, 2023b). Central to the reform is a strong emphasis on continuity and progression, ensuring alignment with children's earlier learning in early childhood education, while supporting a smoother transition to learning at second level (Walsh, 2020).

A key feature of the new framework is its explicit focus on teacher and child agency. The framework also foregrounds teacher and child agency through revised guidance on

time allocation that introduces both minimum curriculum time and flexible time. This increased flexibility is intended to enable teachers to respond to pupils' emerging needs, facilitate integrative learning and create immersive, contextually meaningful learning experiences (Department of Education, 2023, as cited by Walsh et al., 2023). These changes reflect a broader curricular vision that values flexibility, contextual relevance and the collective agency of teachers and children in shaping meaningful learning. This positions the reformed curriculum as a platform for innovation, integration and the development of learning experiences that are responsive to children's diverse interests, backgrounds and future pathways.

Ireland uses a "Whole School Guidance" model at second level, where guidance is integrated into all areas of school life and supported by a coordinated whole-school effort. A dedicated planning team leads this work. This approach enables all teachers to play an active role in supporting students' holistic development and reinforces that guidance is a shared responsibility. It also ensures that the specialist skills of the guidance counsellor are used in the most effective way for students. With a whole-school approach, guidance goals are more realistic and more likely to be achieved. The broader literature on implementing ECRL also highlights the importance of a whole-school, collaborative approach. Studies consistently indicate that ECRL is most successful when it is embedded in the curriculum and supported by school leadership, classroom teachers and other key stakeholders (*inter alia* Briddick et al., 2018; Cahill & Furey, 2017; Doe, 2017; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Kashefpakdel et al., 2019; Magnuson & Starr, 2000; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Evidence from seventeen case studies conducted by Kashefpakdel et al. (2019) shows that although teachers' roles in career-related learning vary considerably in the UK, coordinated school-wide structures are essential for ensuring meaningful, coherent and developmentally appropriate provision. Primary teachers play a particularly influential role in shaping children's early career awareness, with strong evidence that early experiences can meaningfully support vocational identity development and later career readiness (Cahill & Furey, 2017; Howard et al., 2017; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

However, despite curriculum redevelopment, Burke and Lehane (2023) highlight that accountability pressures, curriculum demands and limited access to professional learning can restrict teachers' capacity to act agentically. It is therefore imperative that

as curriculum changes are introduced, they are understood collectively across the school and supported with sufficient time and resources, so that teachers are better positioned to exercise professional judgement and enact integrated approaches effectively. This has clear relevance for ECRL, which relies on teachers being able to make informed, context-sensitive decisions about how to weave early career learning through everyday teaching and learning. The successful integration of ECRL into the primary curriculum depends on a robust and coherent continuum of teacher education and professional learning. This includes preparing student teachers for future-focused, integrated pedagogies; providing ongoing CPD that is sustained, collaborative and contextually relevant; and ensuring school-wide structures that support teacher agency and collective responsibility. Without these conditions, the ambitions of curriculum reform risk remaining aspirational rather than actionable.

7.4.3 Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this research point to significant implications for early childhood and primary-school-based career education, particularly in terms of how career-related learning can be embedded in everyday educational practice. Evidence from the literature demonstrates that career development begins early and that young children are capable of forming and refining occupational concepts long before they reach post-primary (*inter alia* Ginevra et al., 2024; Gottfredson, 1981; Howard & Walsh, 2010; Porfeli et al., 2008; Super, 1980; Watson & McMahon, 2005). This reinforces the view that schools play a critical role in shaping children's long-term aspirations, interests and understandings of the world of work. Consequently, educators, school leaders, policymakers and all key adult participant stakeholders have a role to play to ensure that children experience rich, varied and developmentally appropriate opportunities to explore work and life possibilities from the earliest stages of their education.

Curriculum Integration

A central implication emerging from this research is the need to integrate ECRL within everyday classroom pedagogy rather than confining it to isolated, stand-alone events. The literature consistently shows that when career learning is woven into ordinary instruction, students develop stronger connections between their academic learning and future life pathways (Auger et al., 2005; Ferrari et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018b; Percy & Ameagh, 2021). Approaches that embed career

concepts into routine classroom activities also reduce the additional workload that can accompany new initiatives, as teachers draw on existing lesson structures and curricular content. Thematic and cross-curricular approaches, such as those built around school-wide events or inquiry-based learning, have been shown to be particularly effective in supporting this type of integration while maintaining coherence and contextual relevance for learners (Corry, 2025).

The capacity of educators to meaningfully embed early childhood career learning relies on the provision of adequate time, practical resources and sustained professional development. Findings from this study and the broader literature highlight the value of supports such as exemplar lesson plans, learning progression frameworks and reflective tools that help teachers integrate career-related learning through play, project work and cross-disciplinary experiences. These resources are especially important given growing evidence that structured early childhood career education programmes can be designed and implemented successfully, resulting in measurable improvements in young children's occupational knowledge and career awareness (Ellott et al., 2025; Ferrari et al., 2018; Ginevra et al., 2024; Howard et al., 2017). Ensuring that educators have ongoing access to resources, training and collaborative planning opportunities will be essential if schools are to strengthen the consistency and quality of their early career learning practices.

Whole School Framework Approach

One effective strategy for sustaining high-quality ECRL is the development of whole school professional learning plans that embed career-related pedagogy in existing staff-development structures. The findings of this study provide empirical support for the value of adopting such an approach. The child-centred conceptual framework developed through RTA demonstrates that ECRL does not operate as an isolated classroom activity but as a continuously negotiated and socially constructed developmental process shaped by interactions between children, the adults in their lives and wider environmental influences, including curriculum structures and broader policy contexts. The multi-layered influences identified in the empirical data indicate that isolated or ad hoc initiatives are unlikely to produce sustained or meaningful impact. Rather, the ecological and contextual nature of ECRL evidenced in this research highlights the value of a coherent, systemic, whole-school approach.

When professional development is incorporated into a school's annual learning plan rather than delivered as a single, isolated initiative, teachers are more likely to engage meaningfully with the material, revisit concepts over time and apply new knowledge consistently in their practice. This is particularly pertinent given the study's findings that teachers expressed both willingness to engage with ECRL and uncertainty about its implementation. These tensions highlight the importance of structured, sustained professional support. Embedding ECRL in existing whole-school learning structures therefore responds directly to the challenges identified in the data.

A whole school approach also aligns with broader national policy developments in Ireland, particularly the *Whole School Guidance Framework* for second-level schools, launched by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) in 2007. Notably, Action 2.5 of the most recent national policy explicitly calls for the introduction of a "whole-school approach" to guidance at primary school level (DES, 2023b, p. 4). While originally developed for post-primary contexts, its central principle, that guidance is a shared responsibility embedded across the school community, offers a transferable structural model. The empirical findings of this study extend this principle into the primary context, demonstrating that children are already engaging in meaning-making around work, identity and future possibilities long before adolescence. The study therefore contributes a developmentally grounded rationale for adapting whole-school guidance principles to earlier stages of education.

The Whole School Framework continues to form a central component of contemporary guidance policy (DES, 2023b) and provides structured guidelines for schools in how to design and implement a comprehensive whole school guidance programme that can meet the varied and evolving needs of all learners. The approach's emphasis on shared responsibility and the integration of guidance within the broader educational and pastoral experience of students resonates strongly with the findings of this doctoral study. In shaping their provision, schools are encouraged to position guidance-related learning as a core pillar of their wellbeing structures. This aligns closely with the findings of this research, which reveal the interdependence between wellbeing, identity formation, self-awareness and future-oriented thinking. When children engage in meaningful exploration of their interests, strengths and aspirations, they develop a stronger sense of self and a clearer understanding of possible pathways, both of which are central to wellbeing.

This emphasis is equally relevant to the redeveloped primary curriculum (NCCA, 2023a), which foregrounds holistic learning, personal agency and the development of broad competencies from early childhood onward. The new curriculum's commitment to fostering children's sense of identity, belonging and connectedness aligns closely with the principles underpinning guidance-related learning. By encouraging exploration, curiosity and incremental self-discovery, the primary curriculum provides a developmental foundation upon which guidance frameworks in post-primary education can build. Integrating ECRL within this revised curriculum reinforces the continuity of guidance across the educational continuum and ensures that the foundations for wellbeing, identity development and future-oriented thinking are established from the earliest stages of formal schooling.

Future-Focused Mindset Approach

The findings of this study suggest that children's interests, aspirations and emerging possible selves are not abstract or distant constructs but living elements of their everyday classroom experience. When children articulated clear connections between "what I like to do", "what I am good at" and "me when I am older at work", they demonstrated early forms of identity construction and future-oriented thinking consistent with possible-selves theory (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Packard & Nguyen, 2003). By situating all teachers within a whole-school approach to guidance, and encouraging them to explicitly connect classroom learning to life beyond school while cultivating durable skills transferable across education and careers, this mindset provides a practical framework for extending children's naturally occurring future-oriented thinking. Practices such as assigning classroom jobs, using walls and displays to highlight career connections, explicitly teaching durable skills and providing structured opportunities for leadership and collaboration reinforce responsibility, motivation and self-efficacy. These are precisely the dispositions observed emerging in children's narratives in this study.

Extant research also indicates that such environments strengthen both academic engagement and long-term career management skills, while fostering confidence, competence and a sense of agency (Bandura et al., 1996; J. Eccles, 2009; Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Hutson et al., 2023; Kaplan & Flum, 2009). Viewed through this lens, ECRL is not an additional curricular demand but a purposeful extension of children's

ongoing meaning-making, enabling them to clarify, strengthen and broaden their emerging possible selves within developmentally responsive classroom experiences, family contexts and their wider lived environments.

Micro-Level Support

Since the findings from this study demonstrate children's career thinking as a socially co-constructed and context-dependent process, sustained support for ECRL must extend beyond individual classrooms to coordinated whole-school and community-level practices. International research demonstrates that schools can enhance the quality and sustainability of ECRL through establishing communities of practice and curriculum teams dedicated to this area. Such professional learning communities provide structured opportunities for educators to engage in ongoing dialogue and interrogate evidence-informed challenges. These forms of collaborative inquiry are associated with improved teacher learning, stronger instructional coherence and enhanced student outcomes (Chambers et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2022b; Percy & Ameagh, 2021).

Ensuring that collaborative planning time is formally protected in teachers' timetables is critical, as it increases the likelihood that these communities become embedded and sustainable features of school culture rather than additional responsibilities placed on already overextended staff (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2025). This would also directly address teachers' concerns about time and curriculum restraints, which was a finding from this study's empirical research. In this way, structural supports in schools can be strengthened further through strategic partnerships, as partnerships with external organisations provide an additional and complementary strategy for sustaining professional learning in ECRL.

International evidence highlights the value of collaboration with local employers, community groups, higher education institutions and career development professionals in supporting teachers' access to current labour market information and contemporary work practices. These partnerships can also contribute practical resources, co-facilitated professional development and authentic learning experiences that enrich classroom practice while reducing the resource and preparation demands placed on individual teachers' expertise (Chambers et al., 2018; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018b; Mann et al., 2018; Percy & Ameagh, 2021; Rice et al., 2022). School–community partnerships of this kind are widely recognised as key mechanisms for strengthening relevance,

broadening student horizons and enhancing the overall quality and coherence of career-related learning across educational systems (Chavaudra et al., 2014; Horgan et al., 2015; Watts & Law, 1977).

This research also highlights the importance of recognising and engaging the broader ecosystem that influences children's emerging career development. Teachers, parents, caregivers and community members all contribute to shaping children's beliefs about work, aspirations and future opportunities (Howard & Walsh, 2011; Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). Schools therefore have a responsibility to build meaningful partnerships with families and local organisations in order to widen children's exposure to varied work environments, role models and cultural contexts. Creating inclusive, authentic career-related experiences not only broadens children's occupational horizons but also helps them develop a stronger sense of self, personal values and future goals. These collaborative approaches reinforce the notion that career learning is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the classroom.

Macro-Level Support

At national level, education bodies such as the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, along with Oide (the national professional learning support service for teachers and school leaders) and the network of Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), play a central role in shaping and enhancing professional learning across the sector. These organisations collectively provide high-quality professional and personal development opportunities for educators at local, regional and national levels. Their capacity to develop coherent guidance, curate accessible and evidence-informed resource banks, and design targeted professional development modules positions them as key enablers in supporting schools to embed early career learning in their existing practices. Through coordinated national supports, schools can access consistent messaging, high-quality materials and sustained professional learning pathways that strengthen the integration, effectiveness and longevity of early career learning across the primary and post-primary systems.

Digital platforms that curate high-quality resources and facilitate peer sharing can also help sustain professional learning communities and reduce duplication of effort. The findings from this research were recently disseminated as part of a funding proposal to support the development of a digital resource designed to enhance ECRL in primary

schools in Ireland. The empirical evidence generated through the study provided a robust rationale for the creation of an accessible, curriculum-aligned tool that would assist educators in embedding career learning in everyday practice. The proposal was successful and funding was awarded to advance this work. As a result, the digital resource is now in active development, with ongoing design and testing processes informed by the insights and recommendations emerging from the research. In this way, the study not only identifies systemic needs at macro level but also contributes directly to the development of national infrastructure intended to embed and support ECRL in everyday experiences, both at home and at school.

7.4.4 Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study point to several important directions for future research in ECRL. Given the developmental nature of children's emerging understandings of work, identity and future possibilities, longitudinal research is particularly needed. A sustained programme of inquiry that follows children over multiple years would offer valuable insight into how career-related thinking evolves across time and in response to curricular change, pedagogical interventions or shifts in policy. Longitudinal designs would also allow researchers to examine the longer-term influence of early career learning experiences on children's aspirations, self-concept and educational decision-making.

Comparative research across diverse socio-economic, linguistic and cultural contexts is similarly needed to build a more comprehensive understanding of how children interpret work and career possibilities. The current study was necessarily bounded within a specific geographical and demographic context; therefore, future studies should examine how contextual factors, including school ethos, community resources, socio-economic status and cultural norms, shape opportunities for and engagement with ECRL. Such work would support a deeper understanding of equity issues in ECRL and help identify practices that are culturally responsive and contextually appropriate.

Participatory and co-design methodologies also warrant further development in this field. While this study employed a participatory, child-centred approach, including the use of a child research advisory group and child-friendly tools informed by the Lundy (2007) model of participation, future research could explore even more immersive and child-led approaches. There is potential to involve children, families and educators

collaboratively in the development, implementation and evaluation of classroom-based interventions that explicitly challenge pervasive stereotypes and promote more equitable visions of future possibilities. Such interventions could be tested through design-based research, randomised controlled trials, or mixed-methods approaches to generate robust evidence of impact.

Another area highlighted for future investigation concerns the role of digital tools and technologies in supporting ECRL. As digital literacy becomes an increasingly central component of children's learning, and as digital platforms play a more prominent role in their everyday lives, there is significant potential for research to examine how technology can enhance, scaffold or complicate early career learning experiences. As discussed in an earlier section, this study has already contributed to this emerging area: following the dissemination of its initial findings, funding was successfully secured to develop a dedicated digital platform to support ECRL in the primary context. The design and development of this platform are now underway, providing a timely and practical opportunity for iterative research, user testing and evaluation. Future studies could therefore examine how children, teachers and parents interact with this digital resource, its impact on learning and engagement and the ways in which digital tools might broaden, challenge, or reshape children's early understandings of work and future possibilities.

Further research might also seek to address some of the methodological challenges identified in this research. For instance, while qualitative case studies offer rich, contextual insights, complementary quantitative or mixed-methods research would support broader generalisability. Similarly, more systematic approaches to triangulation, including observational methods or artefact analysis, could reduce reliance on self-reported data and mitigate social desirability bias. Researchers might also examine strategies for further minimising power imbalances between adult researchers and child participants, such as child-led data collection, peer interviewing, or the use of digital storytelling tools.

Despite the limitations acknowledged in this study, particularly those relating to its bounded context, sample size, reliance on self-reported data and limited longitudinal scope, the findings contribute important, original insights to a largely underexplored area in the Irish primary education context. Building on this foundation, future research

has the potential to deepen understanding, strengthen practice and inform policy development in ways that meaningfully enhance children's early encounters with career-related learning and ensure their voices continue to shape this emerging field.

The ongoing dissemination of this research has been central to its impact, ensuring that the findings contribute to professional practice, policy dialogue and ongoing innovation in early childhood career-related learning. Throughout the study, emerging insights were shared with participating schools, professional networks and relevant stakeholders to promote reflection, capacity-building and informed discussion about the role of ECRL in Irish primary education. Interim findings were presented at national and international conferences, enabling dialogue with scholars, practitioners and policymakers and placing the research within broader conversations on career development, childhood studies and curriculum reform.

In addition to scholarly dissemination, the research has informed several practical outputs. As outlined earlier, the findings were used to support a successful funding proposal for the development of a digital platform designed to enhance ECRL in the primary context. This platform is now in active development, creating a tangible mechanism through which the research continues to influence practice. The development process has opened further opportunities for iterative evaluation and user engagement, ensuring that the digital resource aligns closely with the needs of teachers, children and schools.

Future dissemination activities will aim to broaden the reach and impact of the research. Engagement with teacher professional networks has been identified as a key dissemination pathway. Findings from this study will be shared through professional development workshops, invited presentations and contributions to communities of practice across Ireland. It is hoped that these activities will further support teachers, school leaders and policymakers in deepening their understanding of the importance of early career learning, recognising the centrality of child voice in educational design and applying the study's insights to both classroom practice and whole-school planning.

Other planned outputs include peer-reviewed journal articles addressing the methodological contributions of the study, the insights generated through child-centred participatory approaches and the implications of ECRL for policy and curriculum development. Additional conference presentations, both nationally and internationally,

will further position the research within scholarly and practitioner debates. The digital platform currently under development will also serve as an evolving site for dissemination, with future phases involving pilot studies, user-training sessions and open-access resources that translate the research findings into actionable tools for classrooms. There is also potential to collaborate with national bodies such as Oide, the NCCA and Education Support Centres Ireland to embed the research in professional learning programmes and national discussions on guidance, wellbeing and curriculum implementation.

7.5 Conclusion

This study adds a unique contribution to the growing body of international research that recognises career-related learning as a developmental phenomenon that begins in early childhood. Empirically, it provides much-needed Irish evidence in an underexplored area, giving voice to children, teachers and parents and illuminating how ECRL unfolds organically in the everyday life of primary classrooms. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of participatory, naturalistic approaches in capturing children's learning as lived, relational experience, highlighting the importance of child voice and agency in educational research. Conceptually, it extends understanding of ECRL as a dynamic, socially mediated process intertwined with identity formation, wellbeing and social equity.

Taken together, the findings present a pragmatic and optimistic vision for the future of ECRL in Ireland. Where forms of career-related learning already occur informally, the challenge for educators and policymakers is to make these processes intentional, inclusive and developmentally appropriate. By embedding ECRL coherently within the redeveloped primary curriculum, supporting teachers as reflective and creative professionals and fostering meaningful collaboration among families, schools and communities, Ireland can ensure that every child is supported to imagine and pursue a broad, equitable and fulfilling set of future possibilities. The study also reflects the potential for research to catalyse innovation. The successful awarding of funding to develop a digital platform informed directly by this research signals the practical value and wider relevance of the study's findings. This emerging resource offers a promising avenue for ongoing dissemination, iterative evaluation and sustained impact on classroom practice.

In closing, this research acknowledges that ECRL is not a peripheral or optional element of children's education, but a vital component of their holistic development and lifelong learning. The insights generated here affirm that when we listen to children and act with intention, we can build an education system that expands their imagined futures, whilst simultaneously providing a strong foundation upon which future studies, policy initiatives and professional practices can continue to build.

References

Adler, R. H. (2022). Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, *38*(4), 598–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344221116620

Akosah-Twumasi, P., Emeto, T. I., Lindsay, D., Tsey, K., & Malau-Aduli, B. S. (2018). A Systematic Review of Factors That Influence Youths Career Choices—The Role of Culture. *Frontiers in Education*, *3*. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2018.00058

Archer, L., & DeWitt, J. (2016). *Understanding young people's science aspirations: How students form ideas about 'becoming a scientist'*. Routledge.

Archer, L., DeWitt, J., & Wong, B. (2014). Spheres of influence: What shapes young people's aspirations at age 12/13 and what are the implications for education policy? *Journal of Education Policy*, *29*(1), 58–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.790079

Arthur, M. B., & Hall, D. T. (Eds.). (1989). *Handbook of career theory* (first). Cambridge Univ. Press.

Arthur, M. B., Inkson, K., & Pringle, J. K. (1999). *The new careers: Individual action and economic change*. Sage Publications.

Arthur, N., Neault, R., & McMahon, M. (2019). *Career theories and models at work: Ideas for practice*. http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6361417

Auger, R. W., Blackhurst, A. E., & Wahl, K. H. (2005). The Development of Elementary-Aged Children's Career Aspirations and Expectations. *Professional School Counseling*, *8*(4), 322–329.

Australian Blueprint for Career Development. (2022). National Career Institute.

Aziz, A., & Khan, N. (2021). *THE POTENTIAL USES OF PILOT STUDY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH*. *3*, 750–767.

Bailey, B. A., & Nihlen, A. S. (1989). Elementary school children's perceptions of the world of work. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, *24*(2), 135–145.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1995). *Self-efficacy in changing societies / edited by Albert Bandura.* Cambridge University Press.

Bandura, A. (2001). *SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: An Agentic Perspective*.

Bandura, A. (2012). On the Functional Properties of Perceived Self-Efficacy Revisited. *Journal of Management*, *38*(1), 9–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311410606

Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (1996). Multifaceted Impact of Self-Efficacy Beliefs on Academic Functioning. *Child Development*, *67*(3), 1206–1222. https://doi.org/10.2307/1131888

Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001). Self-Efficacy Beliefs as Shapers of Children's Aspirations and Career Trajectories. *Child Development*, *72*(1), 187–206. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00273

Bandura, A., Pastorelli, C., Barbaranelli, C., & Caprara, G. V. (1999). Self-efficacy pathways to childhood depression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(2), 258–269. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.2.258

Barbour, R. (2014). *Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526485045

Barnes, A., Bassot, B., & Chant, A. (2011). *An introduction to career learning and development, 11-19* (1st ed). Routledge.

Beale, A. V. (2000). Elementary School Career Awareness: A Visit to a Hospital. *Journal of Career Development*, *27*(1), 65–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484530002700105

Beane, J. A. (1997). *Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education*. Teachers College Press.

Betz, N. E., & Hackett, G. (1986). Applications of Self-Efficacy Theory to Understanding Career Choice Behavior. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *4*(3), 279–289. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1986.4.3.279

Biesta, G. (2010a). Pragmatism and the Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research. In *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Biesta, G. (2010b). Pragmatism and the Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research1. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie, *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (pp. 95–118). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335193.n4

Bimrose, J., & Hearne, L. (2012). Resilience and career adaptability: Qualitative studies of adult career counseling. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *81*(3), 338–344. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2012.08.002

Blustein, D. L. (2004). Moving from the Inside Out: Further Explorations of the Family of Origin/Career Development Linkage. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *32*(4), 603–611. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000004265962

Blustein, D. L. (2006). *The psychology of working: A new perspective for career development, counseling, and public policy*. Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.

Blustein, D. L., Schultheiss, D. E. P., & Flum, H. (2004). Toward a relational perspective of the psychology of careers and working: A social constructionist analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *64*(3), 423–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2003.12.008

Bordin, E. S., Nachmann, B., & Segal, S. J. (1964). An articulated framework for vocational development. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *10*(2), 107. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046072

Borow, H. (1964). *Man in a world at work.* (pp. xvii, 606). Houghton Mifflin.

Bourke, R. (2020). *ETHICAL AND INCLUSIVE RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN.* ROUTLEDGE.

Bourke, R., & Loveridge, J. (Eds.). (2018a). *Radical Collegiality through Student Voice: Educational Experience, Policy and Practice* (1st ed. 2018). Springer Singapore : Imprint: Springer.

Bourke, R., & Loveridge, J. (2018b). Using Student Voice to Challenge Understandings of Educational Research, Policy and Practice. In R. Bourke & J. Loveridge (Eds.), *Radical Collegiality through Student Voice: Educational Experience, Policy and Practice* (pp. 1–16). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1858-0_1

Bradbury-Jones, C., Isham, L., & Taylor, J. (2018). The complexities and contradictions in participatory research with vulnerable children and young people: A qualitative systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, *215*, 80–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.08.038

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* (First published). SAGE.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *24*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Breen, R., & García-Peñalosa, C. (2002). Bayesian Learning and Gender Segregation. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *20*(4), 899–922. https://doi.org/10.1086/342895

Bregman, G., & Killen, M. (1999). Adolescents' and Young Adults' Reasoning About Career Choice and the Role of Parental Influence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *9*(3), 253–275. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327795jra0903_2

Brewer, J. M. (1942). *History of Vocational Guidance* (First).

Brown, D. (2016). *Career information, career counseling, and career development* (Eleventh edition). Pearson.

Brown, M. T., Lum, J. L., & Voyle, K. (1997). Roe Revisited: A Call for the Reappraisal of the Theory of Personality Development and Career Choice. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *51*(2), 283–294. https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1997.1583

Brussino, O., & McBrien, J. (2022). *Gender stereotypes in education: Policies and practices to address gender stereotyping across OECD education systems* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 271). https://doi.org/10.1787/a46ae056-en

Cabrera, N. L. (2011). Using a sequential exploratory mixed-method design to examine racial hyperprivilege in higher education. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, *2011*(151), 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.400

Cahill, M., & Furey, E. (2017a). *The Early Year—Career Development for Young Children—A Guide for Educators*. CERIC.

Cahill, M., & Furey, E. (2017b). *The Early Year—Career Development for Young Children—A Guide for Parents*.

Cameron, R. (2010). Is Mixed Methods Research Used in Australian Career Development Research? *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *19*(3), 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/103841621001900308

Career preparation: A longitudinal, process-oriented examination | Elsevier Enhanced Reader. (2011). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.12.012

Career Readiness in the Pandemic: Insights from new international research for secondary schools (OECD Education Policy Perspectives No. 44; OECD Education Policy Perspectives, Vol. 44). (2021). https://doi.org/10.1787/8b1215dc-en

Carless, D., & Lam, R. (2014). The examined life: Perspectives of lower primary school students in Hong Kong. *Education 3-13*, *42*(3), 313–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2012.689988

Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Percy, C. (2018). *Drawing The Future*. Education and Employers.

Charlesworth, T. E. S., & Banaji, M. R. (2022). Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Stereotypes III: *Long-Term Change in Gender Stereotypes*. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *13*(1), 14–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620988425

Charmaz, K. (2014). Grounded Theory in Global Perspective: Reviews by International Researchers. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(9), 1074–1084. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414545235

Chen, C. P. (2003). Integrating Perspectives in Career Development Theory and Practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *51*(3), 203–216. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2003.tb00602.x

Chope, R. C. (2001). Influence of the Family in Career Decision-Making. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, *17*(2), 54–64.

Chope, R. C. (2002). *Family Matters: Influences of the Family in Career Decision Making*. ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED470005.pdf

Christensen, P. M., & James, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (3rd edition). Routledge.

CICA. (2021, November 23). *Turning little ripples into positive choices for our children's future—Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA)*. https://cica.org.au/turning-little-ripples-into-positive-choices-for-our-childrens-future/

Cinamon, R. G., & Dan, O. (2010). Parental Attitudes Toward Preschoolers' Career Education: A Mixed-Method Study. *Journal of Career Development*, *37*(2), 519–540. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845309357050

Cinamon, R. G., & Yeshayahu, M. (2020). *Children's occupational knowledge: A conceptual framework and measure*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-020-09425-4

Clacherty, G. (2024). Drawings in a "Container": A Visual Narrative Approach to Research With Refugee Children. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, 8629. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8629

Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2008). *Spaces to play: More listening to young children using the mosaic approach* (Repr). National Children's Bureau.

Clarke, S. (2020). Using Technology to Seek the Vulnerable and Marginalized Child's Voice in Hospital: Co-working with a *'Child Research Advisory Group'* (CRAG). *Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Nursing*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694193.2020.1832626

Cochran, L. (1997). *Career Counseling: A Narrative Approach*. SAGE Publications.

Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The Psychology of Change: Self-Affirmation and Social Psychological Intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *65*(1), 333–371. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115137

Cohen, L. (2014). *Imagining women's careers* (First edition). Oxford University Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (eighth edition). Routledge.

Coleman, H. L. K. (Ed.). (2008). *Handbook of school counseling*. Routledge.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (Sixth edition, international student edition). Sage.

Cross, S., & Markus, H. (1991). Possible selves across the life span. *Human Development*, *34*(4), 230–255. https://doi.org/10.1159/000277058

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage Publications.

Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *11*(1), 100. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Schneider, B. L. (2000). *Becoming adult: How teenagers prepare for the world of work* (1st ed). Basic Books.

Cunanan, E. S., & Maddy-Bernstein, C. (1994). *The Role of the School Counselor*. National Center for Research in Vocational Education.

Curry, J. R., & Milsom, A. (n.d.). P–12 Career and College Readiness: Ecosystemic, Developmental Considerations. In *Career and College Readiness Counseling in P–12 Schools* (pp. 1–32). Springer Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826136152.0001

Curry, J. R., & Milsom, A. (2017). P–12 Career and College Readiness: Ecosystemic, Developmental Considerations. In *Career and College Readiness Counseling in P–12 Schools* (pp. 1–32). Springer Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826136152.0001

Cytrynbaum, S., & Crites, J. O. (1989). The utility of adult development theory in understanding career adjustment process. In *Handbook of Career Theory* (Fourth, pp. 66–89). Cambridge University Press.

Danson, M., & Arshad, N. (2014). The Literature Review. In *Research methods for business & management: A guide to writing your dissertation* (pp. 37–40). Goodfellow Publ.

Davenport, C., & Padwick, A. (2025). Making their minds up: Flux and stability in young children's career aspirations in North East England. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1038. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05364-z

DCU REC. (2025). *DCU Research Support—Research Ethics*.

DES. (2023a). *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030)* (p. 38). Government of Ireland.

DES. (2023b). *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan (2024-2030)* (p. 10). Government of Ireland.

DeWitt, J., & Archer, L. (2015). Who Aspires to a Science Career? A comparison of survey responses from primary and secondary school students. *International Journal of Science Education*, *37*(13), 2170–2192. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2015.1071899

DeWitt, J., & Archer, L. (2017). Participation in informal science learning experiences: The rich get richer? *International Journal of Science Education, Part B*, *7*(4), 356–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/21548455.2017.1360531

Downes, P., & Maunsell, C. (2007). *Count us in: Tackling early school leaving in south west inner city Dublin: an integrated response.* [Report]. South Inner City Community Development Association and South Inner City Local Drugs Task Force. https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/20007/

Dweck, C. (2002). The Development of Ability Conceptions. In *Development of Achievement Motivation*. Academic Press.

Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A Social-Cognitive Approach to Motivation and Personality. *Psychological Review*, *95*(2), 256–273.

Dweck, C., Walton, G. L. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2014). *Academic Tenacity: Mindsets and Skills that Promote Long-Term Learning* (p. 43). Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/manual/dweck-walton-cohen-2014.pdf

Early Childhood and Primary Developments Consulting with children: Child voice in curriculum developments. (2022). National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Eccles, J. S. (2009). Who Am I and What Am I Going to Do With My Life? Personal and Collective Identities as Motivators of Action. *Educational Psychologist*, *44*(2), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520902832368

Education and Employers. (2016). *Redraw the Balance – challenging gender stereotypes*. Education and Employers. https://www.educationandemployers.org/17497-2/

EDUCATION (WELFARE) ACT, 2000, Pub. L. No. Number 22 of (2000). https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/22/enacted/en/html

Eldén, S. (2013). Inviting the messy: Drawing methods and 'children's voices'. *Childhood*, *20*(1), 66–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212447243

Elliot, A. J., & Dweck, C. S. (Eds.). (2005). *Handbook of competence and motivation*. Guilford Press.

Ellott, J., McConnell, A. E., Spotton, D., & Reisman, S. (2025). Introducing Elementary Students to the World of Work. *Journal of Education*, *205*(1), 72–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574241297991

Eva, N., Newman, A., Jiang, Z., & Brouwer, M. (2020). Career optimism: A systematic review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *116*, 103287. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.02.011

Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Seneca Keyes, T., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance –A Critical Literature Review. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research* (p. 103). Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Fernandez, M., & Menon, M. (2022). Media Influences on Gender Stereotypes. *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review*, *10*(2), 121–125.

Ferrari, L., Nota, L., Schultheiss, D. E., Stead, G. B., & Davis, B. L. (2018). Validation of the Childhood Career Development Scale Among Italian Middle School Students. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *26*(4), 732–748. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072717727483

Fitzsimons, S., & Smith, D. S. (2025). 'I'm not burning out, I'm rusting out': Investigating the causes of rustout in teacher educators in Ireland and the United Kingdom. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *12*(1), 1211. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05543-y

Flouri, E., & Panourgia, C. (2012). *Do primary school children's career aspirations matter? The relationship between family poverty, career aspirations, and emotional and behavioural problems*. 23.

Fouad, N. A. (2007). Work and Vocational Psychology: Theory, Research, and Applications. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *58*(1), 543–564. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085713

Fouad, N. A., Kim, S., Ghosh, A., Chang, W., & Figueiredo, C. (2016). Family Influence on Career Decision Making: Validation in India and the United States. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *24*(1), 197–212. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072714565782

Ginzberg, E., Ginsburg, S. W., Axelrad, S., & Herma, J. L. (1951). *Occupational choice: An approach to a general theory.* (pp. viii, 271). Columbia University Press.

Gomez, K., & Beachum, F. D. (2019). The "Voice" of Children of Poverty: Candid Insights to Their Career Aspirations and Perceptions of Self-Efficacy. *The Urban Review*, *51*(5), 724–747. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00503-8

Gorard, S., & Taylor, C. (2004). *Combining methods in educational and social research*. Open University Press.

Gothard, B., & Mignot, P. (1999). Career counselling for the 21st Century—Integrating theory and practice. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, *21*, 153–167.

Gottfredson, L. (1981). Circumscription and Compromise: A Developmental Theory of Occupational Aspirations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology Monograph*, *28*(36).

Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies: A typology of reviews, *Maria J. Grant & Andrew Booth*. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, *26*(2), 91–108. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x

Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2020). *Researching Children's Experience*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209823

Guest, G., Namey, E., Taylor, J., Eley, N., & McKenna, K. (2017). Comparing focus groups and individual interviews: Findings from a randomized study. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(6), 693–708. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1281601

Guichard, J. (2001). A Century of Career Education: Review and Perspectives. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *1*(3), 155–176. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012207018303

Gutman, L. M., & Akerman, R. (2008). *Determinants of aspirations*. Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

Gutman, L. M., Schoon, I., & Sabates, R. (2012). Uncertain aspirations for continuing in education: Antecedents and associated outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, *48*(6), 1707–1718. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026547

Gysbers, N. C. (1996). Meeting the Career Needs of Children and Adolescents. *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, *21*(4), 87–98.

Hackett, G. (1995). Self-efficacy in career choice and development. In A. Bandura (Ed.), *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies* (1st ed., pp. 232–258). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527692.010

Han, C., Farruggia, S. P., & Solomon, B. J. (2022). Effects of high school students' noncognitive factors on their success at college. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(3), 572–586. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1770715

Hanna, A., Morris, M. L., Hoff, K. A., Nye, C. D., Jones, K. S., & Rounds, J. (2025). Can everyone get interesting jobs? Estimating interest fit across gender, ethnicity, and education. *Applied Psychology*, *74*(1), e12567. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12567

Harcourt, D., Perry, B., & Waller, T. (Eds.). (2011). *Researching young children's perspectives: Debating the ethics and dilemmas of educational research with children* (1st ed). Routledge.

Harrington, T., & Long, J. (2013). The History of Interest Inventories and Career Assessments in Career Counseling. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *61*(1), 83–92. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2013.00039.x

Hartung, P. J., Porfeli, E. J., & Vondracek, F. W. (2005). Child vocational development: A review and reconsideration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *66*, 385–419. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2004.05.006

Hartung, P. J., Porfeli, E. J., & Vondracek, F. W. (2008). Career Adaptability in Childhood. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *57*(1), 63–74. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2008.tb00166.x

Hearne, D. L. (n.d.). Ethical Research in Guidance Counselling. *NCGE School Guidance Handbook*.

Heckman, J., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the Mechanisms Through Which an Influential Early Childhood Program Boosted Adult Outcomes. *American Economic Review*, *103*(6), 2052–2086. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.103.6.2052

Helwig, A. A. (2008). From Childhood to Adulthood: A 15-Year Longitudinal Career Development Study. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *57*(1), 38–50. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2008.tb00164.x

Herr, E. L. (2001). Career Development and Its Practice: A Historical Perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *49*(3), 196–211. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2001.tb00562.x

Herr, E. L. (2013). Trends in the History of Vocational Guidance. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *61*(3), 277–282. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2013.00056.x

Herr, E. L., Cramer, S. H., & Niles, S. G. (2004). *Career guidance and counseling through the lifespan: Systematic approaches* (6th ed). Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Hidi, S., & Renninger, K. A. (2006). The Four-Phase Model of Interest Development. *Educational Psychologist*, *41*(2), 111–127. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep4102_4

Holland, J. (1959). A Theory of Vocational Choice. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *6*(1).

Holland, J. L. (1973). *SOME PRACTICAL REMEDIES FOR PROVIDING: VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE-FOR EVERYONE*. 35.

Holland, J. L. (1985). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments.* (1st ed.). Prentice-Hall.

Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments.* (3rd ed.). Prentice-Hall.

Horgan, D. (2017). Child participatory research methods: Attempts to go 'deeper'. *Childhood*, *24*(2), 245–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568216647787

Horgan, D., Forde, C., Parkes, A., & Martin, S. (2015). *Children and young people's experiences of participation in decision-making at home, in schools and in their communities*. Department of Children and Youth Affairs. https://hdl.handle.net/10468/6826

How COVID-19 caused a global learning crisis | McKinsey. (2022, April). https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-covid-19-caused-a-global-learning-crisis

Howard, K. A. S., & Ferrari, L. (2022). Social-emotional learning and career development in elementary settings. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *50*(3), 371–385. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1959898

Howard, K. A. S., Flanagan, S., Castine, E., & Walsh, M. E. (2015). Perceived influences on the career choices of children and youth: An exploratory study. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *15*(2), 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-015-9298-2

Howard, K. A. S., & Walsh, M. E. (2010). Conceptions of career choice and attainment: Developmental levels in how children think about careers. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *76*(2), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.10.010

Howard, K. A. S., & Walsh, M. E. (2011). Children's Conceptions of Career Choice and Attainment: Model Development. *Journal of Career Development*, *38*(3), 256–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845310365851

Hoyt, K. B. (1979). *PARENTS AND CAREER EDUCATION: DESgRIPTIONS OF CURRENT PRACTICES* (p. 25). ffice of Career Education (DHEW/OE).

Hoyt, K. B. (1984a). Career Education and Career Guidance. *Journal of Career Education*, *10*(3), 148–157. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484538401000303

Hoyt, K. B. (1984b). Helping Parents Understand Career Education. *Journal of Career Education*, *10*(4), 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484538401000402

Hughes, D., & Kashefpakdel, E. (2019). Innovation in Career-Related Learning: Starting Early in Primary Schools. In J. G. Maree (Ed.), *Handbook of Innovative Career Counselling* (pp. 213–230). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22799-9_13

Hughes, D., Mann, A., Barnes, S. A., Baldauf, B., & McKeown, R. (2016). *Careers education: International literature review* (p. 102) [Literature Review]. Education Endowment Fund.

Hughes, D., Murray Fleming, A., & Croll, L. (2022). *Parental Engagement and Career-Related Learning (CRL) in primary schools* (p. 15) [Briefing Report]. North East Ambitions. https://www.northeastambition.co.uk/resources/view/parental-engagement-report

Hutchings, M. (1996). What Will You Do When You Grow Up?: The Social Construction of Children's Occupational Preferences. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, *1*(1), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.2304/csee.1996.1.1.15

Hutchinson, J. (2012). Career-related learning and science education: The changing landscape. *School Science Review*, (346), 91–97.

Iellatchitch, A., Mayrhofer, W., & Meyer, M. (2003). Career fields: A small step towards a grand career theory? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *14*(5), 728–750. https://doi.org/10.1080/0958519032000080776

Kaplan, A., & Flum, H. (2009). Motivation and Identity: The Relations of Action and Development in Educational Contexts—An Introduction to the Special Issue. *Educational Psychologist*, *44*(2), 73–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520902832418

Kashefpakdel, E., Rehill, J., & Hughes, D. (2018). *Career-related learning in primary schools* (p. 45). Education and Employers.

Kaushik, V., & Walsh, C. A. (2019). Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and Its Implications for Social Work Research. *Social Sciences*, *8*(9), 1–17.

Kautz, T., Heckman, J. J., Diris, R., ter Weel, B., & Borghans, L. (2014). *Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 110; OECD Education Working Papers, Vol. 110). https://doi.org/10.1787/5jxsr7vr78f7-en

Kiely, J., Haals Brosnan, M., Ui Chianan, A., Colum, M., & Dunne, Claire. (2022). *Report on the Consultation with Children on Draft Primary Curriculum* (p. 184). Marino Institute of Education.

Kim, H., Carney, J. V., Guo, X., & Prescod, D. J. (2022). The role of developmental assets in childhood career development. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *70*(2), 98–109. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12286

Krumboltz, J. D., Mitchell, A. M., & Jones, G. B. (1976). A Social Learning Theory of Career Selection. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *6*(1), 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007600600117

Lanford, M., & Tierney, W. G. (n.d.). *From Vocational Education to Linked Learning:*

Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2002). Social cognitive career theory and adult career development. In *Adult career development: Concepts, issues and practices, 3rd ed.* (pp. 76–97). National Career Development Association.

Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2013). Social cognitive model of career self-management: Toward a unifying view of adaptive career behavior across the life span. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *60*(4), 557. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033446

Livingstone, S. M., & Blum-Ross, A. (2020). *Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about how technology shape children's lives*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190874698.001.0001

London, M., & Smither, J. (1999). Career-related continuous learning: Defining the construct and mapping the process. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, *17*, 81–121.

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2009). Developing outcomes for educational services: A children's rights-based approach. *Effective Education*, *1*(1), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415530903044050

Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2012). Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views. *Childhood*, *19*(1), 129–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211409078

Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011a). Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education & Development*, *22*(5), 714–736. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463

Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011b). Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education and Development*, *22*(5), 714–736. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463

MacArthur, N., Neault, R. A., & McMahon, M. (2019). *Career theories and models at work: Ideas for practice.* CERIC.

Magnuson, C. S., & Starr, M. F. (2000). How Early Is Too Early to Begin Life Career Planning? The Importance of the Elementary School Years. *Journal of Career Development*, *27*(2), 89–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484530002700203

Mann, A., Diaz, J., & Zapata Posada, S. (2025). *Career readiness in Madrid, Spain: Insights from a survey of young adults (19-26)* (331st ed., OECD Education Working Papers) [OECD Education Working Papers]. https://doi.org/10.1787/73cdc17d-en

Maree, J. G. (2013). *Counselling for Career Construction*. SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-272-3

Maxwell, J. A. (2010). Using Numbers in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(6), 475–482. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364740

McCowan, C., McKenzie, M., & Shah, M. (2017). *Introducing career education and development: A guide for personnel in educational institutions in both developed and developing countries*.

McMahon, M., & Watson, M. (2005). Occupational Information: What Children Want to Know. *Journal of Career Development*, *31*(4), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484530503100402

McMahon, M., & Watson, M. (2022). Career development learning in childhood: A critical analysis. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *50*(3), 345–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2062701

Meadow, L. (1955). Toward a theory of vocational choice. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *2*(2), 108. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045961

Mercieca, D., & Jones, P. (2018). Use of a reference group in researching children's views of psychotherapy in Malta. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, *44*(2), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/0075417X.2018.1481130

Mishna, F., Muskat, B., & Cook, C. (2012). Anticipating Challenges: School-based Social Work Intervention Research. *Children & Schools*, *34*(3), 135–144. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cds002

Moore, N., Godden, L., Merchant, L., & Nesbitt, H. (2022). *Supporting Career Development in Children: Literature Review* (Project Report No. 1; Pan-Canadian Research Project into Career Development Practices in Canadian Elementary Schools, p. 84). CERIC.

Morgan, D. L. (2014). Pragmatism as a Paradigm for Social Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(8), 1045–1053. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413513733

Morgan, D. L. (2017). *Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods: A pragmatic approach*. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544304533

Mosseri, S., Cooper, R., & Foley, M. (2020). *The future of work and gender* (p. 12) [Research Paper,]. Work Gender Equality Agency.

Motivation and Identity: The Relations of Action and Development in Educational Contexts—An Introduction to the Special Issue. (n.d.). https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520902832418

Motivation and social cognitive theory | Elsevier Enhanced Reader. (n.d.). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.101832

Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*(1), 33. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.33

Murray Fleming, A. (Director). (2024). *What is the Research all about?* [Video recording]. https://www.canva.com/design/DAFzfGnxCv8/WIh49kw0ifGRVsDXYelmgQ/watch?utm_content=DAFzfGnxCv8&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=uniquelinks&utlId=h6f6e58169b

Nauta, M. M. (2010). The development, evolution, and status of Holland's theory of vocational personalities: Reflections and future directions for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *57*(1), 11–22. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018213

NCGE. (2017). *NCGE: A Whole School Guidance Framework* (p. 27). National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE).

Nieuwenhuys, O. (1997). Spaces for the children of the urban poor: Experiences with participatory action research (PAR). *Environment and Urbanization*, *9*(1), 233–250. https://doi.org/10.1177/095624789700900118

Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. (2017). *Career development interventions* (Fifth edition). Pearson.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1609406917733847. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

ODiCY. (2023). *BECOME Education: Career exploration* (Career Exploration Case Study). OECD. https://www.oecd.org/en/toolkits/odicy.html?orderBy=mostRelevant&page=0

OECD. (2004). *Career Guidance and Public Policy.* Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4962174

OECD. (2012). *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*. OECD. https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2012-en

OECD. (2020). *Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States* [Text]. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/early-learning-and-child-well-being_3990407f-en

OECD. (2024). *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*. OECD. https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en

O'Leary, M., Lysaght, Z., Nic Craith, D., & Scully, D. (2019). *O'Leary, M., Lysaght, Z., Nic Craith, D., and Scully, D. Standardised Testing in English Reading and Mathematics in the Irish Primary School: A Survey of Irish Primary Teachers.* : Dublin City University, Centre for Assessment Research Policy and Practice in Education and Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Oliveira, Í. M., & Araújo, A. M. (2022). Career exploration as a foundation for career developmental learning and academic success in childhood. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *50*(3), 351–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1887814

Oliver, M., Witten, K., Kearns, R. A., Mavoa, S., Badland, H. M., Carroll, P., Drumheller, C., Tavae, N., Asiasiga, L., Jelley, S., Kaiwai, H., Opit, S., Lin, E.-Y. J., Sweetsur, P., Barnes, H. M., Mason, N., & Ergler, C. (2011). Kids in the city study: Research design and methodology. *BMC Public Health*, *11*(1), 587. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-587

Osipow, S. (1990). Convergence in Theories of Career Choice and Development: Review and Prospect. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *36*(2), 122–131.

Oyserman, D., Gant, L., & Ager, J. (1995). A socially contextualized model of African American identity: Possible selves and school persistence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(6), 1216. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.6.1216

Packard, B., & Nguyen, D. (2003). Science Career-Related Possible Selves of Adolescent Girls: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Career Development*, *29*, 251–263. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022939512735

Packard, B. W.-L., & Nguyen, D. (2003). Science Career-Related Possible Selves of Adolescent Girls: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Career Development*, *29*(4), 251–263.

Palladino Schultheiss, D. E. (2008). Current status and future agenda for the theory, research, and practice of childhood career development. *Career Development Quarterly*, *57*(1), 7–24. Gale Academic OneFile.

Palladino Schultheiss, D. E., & Stead, G. B. (2004). Childhood Career Development Scale: Scale Construction and Psychometric Properties. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *12*(2), 113–134. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072703257751

Parsons, F. (with University of Michigan). (1909). *Choosing a Vocation*. Houghton Mifflin company. http://archive.org/details/choosingavocati00parsgoog

Patton, W., & Collin, A. (2009). The Need for Dialogue between the Vocational Psychological and Organisational Perspectives on Career. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *18*(3), 52–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620901800307

Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2001). *Career development programs: Preparation for lifelong career decision making*. Australian Council for Educational Research.

Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2014). *Career development and systems theory: Connecting theory and practice*. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10873688

Peila-Shuster, J. J. (2015). Career Development for Children. In K. Maree & A. D. Fabio (Eds.), *Exploring New Horizons in Career Counselling* (pp. 205–218). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-154-0_12

Peila-Shuster, J. J. (2018). Fostering hope and career adaptability in children's career development. *Early Child Development and Care*, *188*(4), 452–462. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1385610

Peila-Shuster, J. J., Carlson, L. A., & Huff, A. E. (2019). Children's Career Development: The Building Blocks for Career Adaptability. In J. G. Maree (Ed.), *Handbook of Innovative Career Counselling* (pp. 231–249). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22799-9_14

Percy, C., & Ameagh, A. (2021). *Starting Early: Building the foundations for success*.

Percy, C., Hughes, D., & Chambers, N. (2025). *Drawing The Future: Exploring the career aspirations of children in Northern Ireland* (p. 74).

Peters, M. D. J., Godfrey, C. M., Khalil, H., McInerney, P., Parker, D., & Soares, C. B. (2015). Guidance for conducting systematic scoping reviews. *International Journal of Evidence-Based Healthcare*, *13*(3), 141–146. https://doi.org/10.1097/XEB.0000000000000050

Porfeli, E. J., Hartung, P. J., & Vondracek, F. W. (2008). Children's Vocational Development: A Research Rationale. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *57*(1), 25–37. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2008.tb00163.x

Quinlan, K. M., & Renninger, K. A. (2022). Rethinking employability: How students build on interest in a subject to plan a career. *Higher Education*, *84*(4), 863–883. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00804-6

Rammstedt, B., Lechner, C., & Danner, D. (2024). *Beyond literacy: The incremental value of non-cognitive skills* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 311). https://doi.org/10.1787/7d4fe121-en

Renninger, K. A., & Hidi, S. (2011). Revisiting the Conceptualization, Measurement, and Generation of Interest. *Educational Psychologist*, *46*(3), 168–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.587723

Renninger, K. A., & Hidi, S. (2016). *The power of interest for motivation and engagement*. Routledge.

Renninger, K. A., & Hidi, S. E. (2022a). Interest: A unique affective and cognitive motivational variable that develops. In *Advances in Motivation Science* (Vol. 9, pp. 179–239). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2021.12.004

Renninger, K. A., & Hidi, S. E. (2022b). Interest development, self-related information processing, and practice. *Theory Into Practice*, *61*(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2021.1932159

Rice, M., Bunker, K. D., Kang, D.-H., Howell, C. C., & Weaver, M. (2007). Accessing and Recruiting Children for Research in Schools. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *29*(4), 501–514. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945906296549

Robertson, P. J. (2020). Evidence-Based Practice for Career Development. In P. J. Robertson, T. Hooley, & P. McCash (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development* (1st ed., pp. 353–370). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190069704.013.26

Roe, A. (1957). Early Determinants of Vocational Choice. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, *4*(3), 212–217.

Rogers, C. R. (1951). Perceptual reorganization in client-centered therapy. In *Perception: An approach to personality* (pp. 307–327). Ronald Press Company. https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2007-10350-011.pdf

Rogers, C. R., & Carmichael, L. (2014). *Counseling and psychotherapy: Newer concepts in practice*. Riverside Press.

Rojewski, J. W., & Hill, R. B. (2017). A Framework for 21st-Century Career-Technical and Workforce Education Curricula. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *92*(2), 180–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1302211

Rosen, J. A., & Rosen, J. A. (with RTI International). (2010). *Noncognitive skills in the classroom: New perspectives on educational research*. RTI Press.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods*, *15*(1), 85–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569

S. Virtudazo, A. (2024). The Influence of Gender Stereotype on the Career Aspirations in Technology and Livelihood. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology (IJISRT)*, 2247–2289. https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/IJISRT24MAY1792

Salmon Richards, L. (1881). *Vocophy: The New Profession. A System Enabling A Person To Name The Calling Or Vocation One Is Best Suited To Follow*.

Savickas, M. L. (1994). Measuring Career Development: Current Status and Future Directions. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *43*(1), 54–62. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1994.tb00846.x

Savickas, M. L. (1997). Career Adaptability: An Integrative Construct for Life-Span, Life-Space Theory. *THECAREER DEVELOPMENTQUARTERLY*, *45*, 247–259.

Savickas, M. L. (2003). Advancing the Career Counseling Profession: Objectives and Strategies for the Next Decade. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *52*(1), 87–96. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2003.tb00631.x

Savickas, M. L., & Lent, R. W. (Eds.). (1994). *Convergence in career development theories: Implications for science and practice* (1. ed). CPP Books.

Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J.-P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R., & van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *75*(3), 239–250. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004

Schultheiss, D. E. P., Palma, T. V., & Manzi, A. J. (2005). Career Development in Middle Childhood: A Qualitative Inquiry. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *53*(3), 246–262. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00994.x

Schunk, D. H., & DiBenedetto, M. K. (2020). Motivation and social cognitive theory. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *60*, 101832. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.101832

Sefotho, M. M. (2015). A Researcher's Dilemma: Philosophy in Crafting Dissertations and Theses. *Journal of Social Sciences*, *42*(1–2), 23–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2015.11893390

Skorikov, V. B., & Patton, W. (2007). *Career development in childhood and adolescence*. Sense Publishers.

Snyder, C. R., Hoza, B., Pelham, W. E., Rapoff, M., Ware, L., Danovsky, M., Highberger, L., Ribinstein, H., & Stahl, K. J. (1997). The Development and Validation of the Children's Hope Scale. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, *22*(3), 399–421. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/22.3.399

Snyder, C. R., Lopez, S. J., Shorey, H. S., Rand, K. L., & Feldman, D. B. (2003). Hope theory, measurements, and applications to school psychology. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *18*(2), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1521/scpq.18.2.122.21854

Solberg, V. S. H., & Ali, S. R. (Eds.). (2017a). *The handbook of career and workforce development research, practice, and policy* (1 Edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Solberg, V. S. H., & Ali, S. R. (Eds.). (2017b). *The handbook of career and workforce development: Research, practice, and policy* (1 edition). Routledge.

Sowa, S., Xia, J., Smith, J., & Manches, A. (2023). Supporting children's career aspirations under changing career conditions: A systematic review of intervention approaches. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-023-09596-w

Stead, G. B., Perry, J. C., Munka, L. M., Bonnett, H. R., Shiban, A. P., & Care, E. (2012). Qualitative research in career development: Content analysis from 1990 to 2009. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *12*(2), 105–122. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-011-9196-1

Stringer, K., Kerpelman, J., & Skorikov, V. (2011). Career preparation: A longitudinal, process-oriented examination. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *79*(1), 158–169. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.12.012

Sue, V. M., & Ritter, L. A. (2012). *Conducting online surveys* (2. edition). Sage.

Sultana, R. G. (2024). Four 'dirty words' in career guidance: From common sense to good sense. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *24*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-022-09550-2

Supeno, E., Dorceus, S., Rivard, G., Corff, Y. L., & Bourdon, S. (2022). Career Information Practices of Guidance Practitioners. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, *21*(1), 56–76. https://doi.org/10.53379/cjcd.2022.336

Super, D. E. (1954). A theory of vocational development. *American Psychologist*, *8*(5), 185. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0056046

Super, D. E. (1957). *The psychology of careers: An introduction to vocational development.* ([1st ed.). Harper.

Super, D. E. (1975). Career Education and Career Guidance for the Life Span and for Life Roles. *Journal of Career Education*, *2*(2), 27–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484537500200204

Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *16*(3), 282–298. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1

Super, D. E. (1983). Assessment in Career Guidance: Toward Truly Developmental Counseling. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, *61*(9), 555–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2164-4918.1983.tb00099.x

Super, D. E. (1990). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. In *Career choice and development: Applying contemporary theories to practice* (pp. 197–261). Jossey-Bass.

Sweet, R., & Watts, A. G. (with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2004). *Career guidance and public policy: Bridging the gap*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2003). Issues and dilemmas in teaching research methods courses in social and behavioural sciences: US perspective. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *6*(1), 61–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570305055

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (2nd ed). SAGE Publications.

Testa, A. C. (2005). Accessing research participants in schools: A case study of a UK adolescent sexual health survey. *Health Education Research*, *21*(4), 518–526. https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyh078

Tinsley, H. E. A. (1992). Career decision making and career indecision. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *41*(3), 209–211.

Trice, A. D. (1991). Stability of Children's Career Aspirations. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, *152*(1), 137–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.1991.9914684

Trice, A. D., & Greer, H. W. (2017). Theories of career development in childhood and early adolescence. In *Career Exploration and Development in Childhood* (First, pp. 11–23). Routledge.

Trice, A. D., Hughes, M. A., Odom, C., Woods, K., & McClellan, N. C. (1995). The Origins of Children's Career Aspirations: IV. Testing Hypotheses from Four Theories. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *43*(4), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1995.tb00436.x

Trice, A. D., & Tillapaugh, P. (1991). Children's Estimates of Their Parents' Job Satisfaction. *Psychological Reports*, *69*(1), 63–66. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1991.69.1.63

Tummons, J., & Duckworth, V. (2013). *Doing Your Research Project In The Lifelong Learning Sector.* McGraw-Hill Open University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/shu/detail.action?docID=1069457

UNCRC. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (p. 15). United Nations.

Vondracek, F. W. (2001). The Developmental Perspective in Vocational Psychology. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *59*(2), 252–261. https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2001.1831

Vuorinen, R., Watts, A. G., & European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network. (2012). *Lifelong guidance policy development: A European resource kit*. European Lifelong Policy Network.

Waechter, N., Kalmus, V., Mascheroni, G., & Opermann, S. (2023). Large-Scale Comparative School-Based Survey Research: Challenges and Solutions for Sampling, Fieldwork and Informed Consent. *Methods*, *data*, 22 Pages. https://doi.org/10.12758/MDA.2023.03

Watson, M., & McMahon, M. (2004). Children's Career Development: A Metatheoretical Perspective. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *13*(3), 7–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620401300303

Watson, M., & McMahon, M. (2005). Children's career development: A research review from a learning perspective. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *67*(2), 119–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2004.08.011

Watson, M., & McMahon, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Career development: Global issues and challenges*. Nova Science Publishers.

Watson, M., & McMahon, M. (2018). *Career exploration and development in childhood: Perspectives from theory, practice and research*.

Watson, M., Nota, L., & McMahon, M. (2015). Child career development: Present and future trends. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *15*(2), 95–97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-015-9308-4

WEF. (2025). *Future of Jobs Report 2025* (p. 290) [Insight Report]. World Economics Forum. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

Whiston, S. C., & Keller, B. K. (2004). The Influences of the Family of Origin on Career Development: A Review and Analysis. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *32*(4), 493–568. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000004265660

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (Eds.). (2002). *Development of achievement motivation*. Academic Press.

Wigfield, A., & Wagner, A. L. (2005). Competence, Motivation, and Identity Development during Adolescence. In *Handbook of competence and motivation.* (pp. 222–239). Guilford Publications.

Willis, G. (2007). *World Views, Paradigms, and the Practice of Social Science Research—SAGE Research Methods*. http://methods.sagepub.com/book/foundations-of-qualitative-research/n1.xml

Wilson, F. (2013, January 6). *The Creation of the National Vocational Guidance Association*. Https://Www.Ncda.Org/. https://www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/page_template/show_detail/74076?model_name=news_article

Worrell, F. C., & Hale, R. L. (2002). The relationship of hope in the future and perceived school climate to school completion. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *16*(4), 370. https://doi.org/10.1521/scpq.16.4.370.19896

Xing, X., & Rojewski, J. W. (2018). Family Influences on Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy of Chinese Secondary Vocational Students. *New Waves Educational Research & Development*, *21*(1), 48–67.

Xu, C. L. (2021). Time, class and privilege in career imagination: Exploring study-to-work transition of Chinese international students in UK universities through a Bourdieusian lens. *Time & Society*, *30*(1), 5–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X20951333

Yavuz, O. (2022). The Career Development Needs of Elementary School Students. *International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications*, *13*(2), 47–57.

Zhang, Y., & Wang, X. (2023). Effects of gratitude on intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in career decision-making. *Motivation and Emotion*, *47*(5), 669–678. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-023-10020-7

Appendix A: School Principal Information Sheet / PLS

Dear Principal

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** I am writing to request your permission to carry out research with one senior infant class and one second class group in <Insert School Name>

The following paragraphs explain the research and what is involved for your school:

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that may help your child progress in education and later in work.

My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for my school?

With your consent, I would like to visit the school twice in the coming weeks.

In my first visit, I will introduce myself and my project to both classes in age-appropriate and easy to understand terms. The following week I will revisit the class and we will do a drawing exercise when the children will be encouraged to draw themselves doing something they enjoy, something they are good at and lastly themselves at work in the future. We will then discuss the drawings. The class group will stay together during the exercise and the classroom teacher will be present for the entirety of both sessions. All activities will be carried out so that each child feels comfortable and so the session will be a fun experience for them. I will record what the children say during the class discussion. This is only for the purpose of writing down what the child says after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research. All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed.

The following sets out some frequently asked questions and answers:

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that through participation in these research activities, you and your children might begin / continue conversations that could positively contribute to their future aspirations and possible career paths.

Risks

We do not anticipate that any risks other than that experienced in everyday life will emerge for participants in this research children in the study. I will seek consent from the Board of Management, classroom teachers and each child's parent and guardians as well as assent from the children before they take part in the activities. All participants will be free to withdraw from the activities at any time. No children's names or school names will be used in the published research so your child will not be identifiable.

Voluntary Participation: Does our school have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix B: Board of Management Information Sheet / PLS

Dear Chairperson

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** I am writing to request your permission to carry out research with one senior infant class and one second class group in <Insert School Name>

The following paragraphs explain the research and what is involved for your school:

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.
My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for my school?

With your and the Board of Management's consent, I would like to visit the school twice in the coming weeks.

In my first visit, I will introduce myself and my project to both classes in age-appropriate and easy to understand terms. The following week I will revisit the class and we will do a drawing exercise when the children will be encouraged to draw themselves doing something they enjoy, something they are good at and lastly themselves at work in the future. We will then discuss the drawings.

The class group will stay together during the exercise and the classroom teacher will be present for the entirety of both sessions. All activities will be carried out so that each child feels comfortable and so the session will be a fun experience for them.

I will record what the children say during the class discussion. This is only for the purpose of writing down what the child says after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research.

All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed. Below are some frequently asked questions and answers:

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that through participation in these research activities, you and your children might begin / continue conversations that may positively contribute to their future aspirations and possible career paths.

Risks

We do not anticipate any risks to children in the study. I will seek consent from classroom teachers and each child's parent and guardians as well as assent from the children before they take part in the activities. All participants will be free to withdraw from the activities at any time. No children's names or school names will be used in the published research so your child will not be identifiable.

Voluntary Participation: Does our school have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix C: Teacher Information Sheet / PLS

Dear Teacher

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** This letter is to explain what my study is about.

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.
My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for my class?

With your consent, I would like to visit your class twice in the coming weeks.

In my first visit, I will introduce myself and my project to the class in age-appropriate and easy to understand terms. The following week I will revisit the class and we will do a drawing exercise when the children will be encouraged to draw themselves doing something they enjoy, something they are good at and lastly themselves at work in the future. We will then discuss the drawings.

The class group will stay together during the exercise and you will be present for the entirety of both sessions. All activities will be carried out so that each child feels comfortable and so the session will be a fun experience for them.

I will record what the children say during the class discussion. This is only for the purpose of writing down what the child says after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research.

All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed. Below are some frequently asked questions and answers:

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that through participation in these research activities, you and your children might begin / continue conversations that may positively contribute to their future aspirations and possible career paths.

Risks

We do not anticipate any risks to children in the study. I will seek consent from each child's parent and guardians and assent from the children before they take part in the activities and they will be free to withdraw from the activities at any time. No children's names or school names will be used in the published research so your child will not be identifiable.

Voluntary Participation: Does my class have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix D: Parent & Guardian Information Sheet / PLS

Dear Parents and Guardians

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** This letter is to explain what my study is about.

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.
My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for my child?

I will visit your child's class this May and introduce myself and my project to the class in age-appropriate and easy to understand terms. The following week I will revisit the class and we will do a drawing exercise when the children will be encouraged to draw themselves doing something they enjoy, something they are good at and lastly themselves at work in the future. We will then discuss the drawings.

The class group will stay together during the exercise and their class teacher will be present. All activities will be carried out so that each child feels comfortable and so the session will be a fun experience for them.

I will record what the children say during the class discussion. This is only for the purpose of writing down what the child says after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research.

All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed.

On the next page, I have answered some common questions, but I would also be happy to speak with you to answer any further questions you may have.

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that through participation in these research activities, you and your children might begin / continue conversations that may positively contribute to their future aspirations and possible career paths.

Risks

We do not anticipate any risks to children in the study. Your child will be in their classroom and their classroom teacher will be present. They will be asked if they wish to take part in the activities and they will be free to withdraw from the activities at any time. No children's names or school names will be used in the published research so your child will not be identifiable.

Voluntary Participation: Does my child have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix E: Informed Consent for Parents and Guardians

CHILD PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	
I the parent/guardian consent to the following:	*Tick = Yes*
I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and this completed consent form for my records.	
I have been given sufficient information about the research to decide whether or not my child can participate in the research.	
I know who to contact to ask questions about the research.	
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary, and that I / he / she / they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, and without penalty.	
Are you happy for your child to take part in the research?	
Are you aware that the classroom session will be audio recorded?	
Will you allow the research team to use anonymized quotes in presentations and publications?	

Are you aware that the results of the research will also be used as part of a PhD study?	

I AGREE to allow my child to participate in this research project:

Child's Name: _____

Child's Class: _____

Child's School: _____

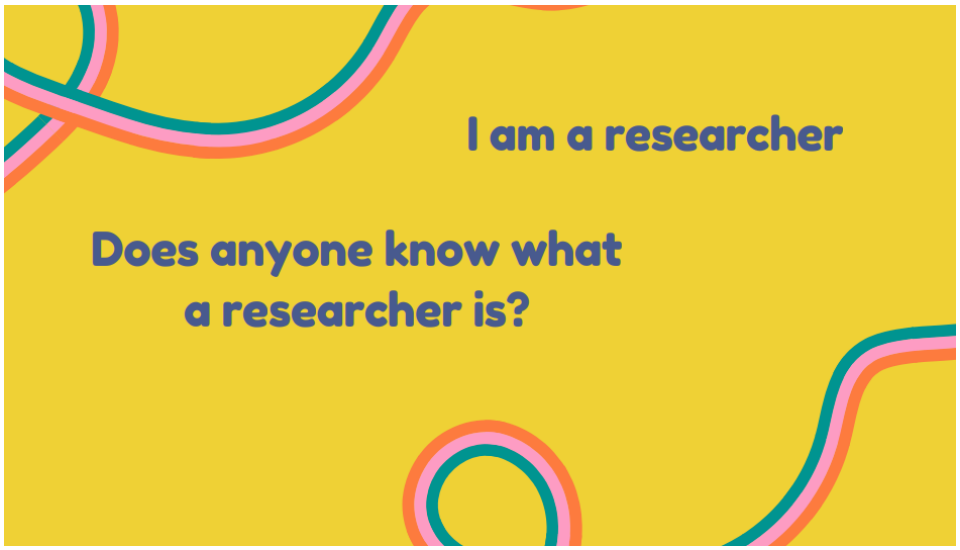
Child's Teacher: _____

Parent / Guardian Name_____

SIGNATURE _____

Appendix F: Children Information Presentation / PLS








We all have lots of questions


When I come to see you I want to learn all about YOU and what you think about jobs


Can you draw some pictures for me?
Do you like to draw?


Can you draw things
you like to do?

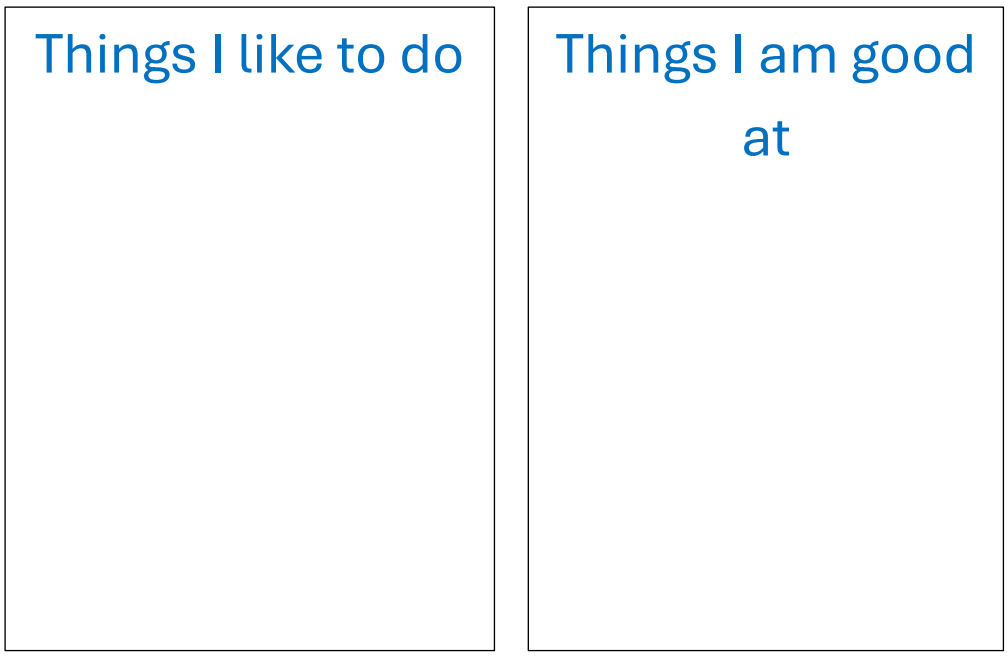

SCHOOL
Can you draw a picture of
something you are good at?

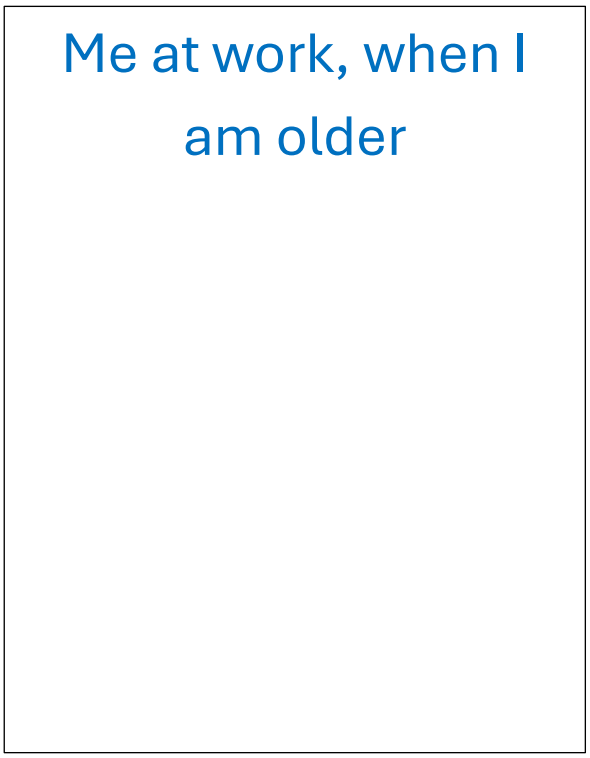

POLICE
Can you draw what you will look
like when you are at work?

Appendix G: Informed Assent for Children

Questions	😊 Yes 😟 No
I understand what this RESARCH is about 	
I understand that we will draw pictures and Aisling will collect them 	
I understand that my class will be asked to talk about jobs 	
I understand that I can stop being in the group at any stage if I want to 	
I understand that the group is being recorded 	
NAME	
Witness and Date	

Appendix H: Children's Visual Questionnaire





Appendix I: Prompts for Classroom Discussion

- What subject do you like best in school?
- What do you like about it?
- How do you feel when you are doing it?
- What do you not like in school?
- What do you not like about it?
- How does it make you feel?

- Do you know what a job is?
- Name some jobs you know….
- Are there jobs for girls and jobs for boys, or can anyone do any job?
- What job(s) would you like to do when you are older?

- Do you ever talk about jobs with an adult? With your friends?
- Does anyone in your family have a job?
- What job to they do?
- Do you think they like their work?
- Would you like a job like that?

- Who do you know who has the best job?
- Why is that a great job?
- Who do you know who has the worst job?
- What do you think is that the worst job?

Appendix J: Classroom Data Shared with Participating Adult Stakeholders

Findings from the classroom studies

A study with 100 children (50 boys and 50 girls) from Senior Infants (ages 5-7) and Second Class (ages 7-9) explored their interests and future aspirations. They were asked to draw three pictures:

1. Something they like to do
2. Something they are good at
3. What they want to be when they grow up

Key Findings

- **Activity Preferences:**
  - More boys preferred football (27 boys) and gaming (9 boys).
  - More girls preferred art (15 girls), creative play (12 girls), and gymnastics (5 girls).
  - Running and swimming were popular with both boys and girls.
- **Overlapping Interests and Skills:**
  - Many children enjoyed and excelled at football, art, gymnastics, and reading.
  - More boys identified gaming and football as strengths.
  - More girls identified dancing and music as strengths.
- **Career Aspirations:**
  - The most common aspiration among boys was to be a **professional footballer** (44%).
  - The most common aspiration among girls was to be an **artist** (10 girls).
  - Other common choices for girls included **scientist, vet, and doctor**.
- **Takeaways:**
  - Most children had a clear idea of a future career.
  - Despite class discussions about all jobs being open to both genders, traditional gender patterns appeared in their preferences.
  - Careers in **sports and gaming** were more popular among boys, while **art and caring professions** were more common among girls.
  - Some careers, like **doctor and police officer**, were chosen by both boys and girls.

Appendix K: Parent/Guardian Online Survey (incl. PLS & Informed Consent)

Parent & Guardian Survey: Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools

Dear Parent & Guardian

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools** and am seeking your contribution through the completion of a short survey

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'early career-related learning' (ECRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that helps children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.

My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for me?

I recently visited three primary schools in the greater Dublin area and carried out research with senior infants and second classes. Using drawings and a class discussion, I aimed to discover what the children know about the "world of work" and their thoughts about careers.

I would now like to invite you to participate in an online survey, to give your opinion on some of the findings and to hear more about your thoughts on children's early career related learning.

The survey is anonymous and should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. The answers to all questions will only be seen by me and will be stored securely throughout the research. All survey responses will be destroyed within 5 years of completion of the research.

Below, I have answered some common questions, but I would also be happy to speak with you to answer any further questions you may have.

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

- Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:
- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set by the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.
- It is hoped that findings of this research may help support the career related learning of primary school children.

Risks

It is not envisaged that there are any risks to participants arising from involvement in the survey. You will be free to withdraw from the session at any time but as the survey is anonymous once you submit your answers, you will no longer be able to withdraw. No names or school names will be used in the published research so you will not be identifiable in the published research.

Voluntary Participation: Do I have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once you begin you may discontinue participation in this study, without prejudice, up until you submit answers to the survey. After this time, as the survey is anonymous, it will not be possible to withdraw your answers.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or survey responses will be held be the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What will happen to the results of this study?

The results of this study will be used in the write-up of this PhD study being carried out supported by Dublin City University. It is hoped that the findings will be shared in academic publications and conference proceedings.

What if I have more questions?

If you should you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Informed Consent

Please answer the following questions to give consent before moving to the survey questions

I have read and understand the information above about this study *

- Yes
- No

I have been given sufficient information about the research to decide if I would like to participate in the research. *

- Yes
- No

I know who to contact to ask questions about the research? *

- Yes
- No

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up until I submit my survey responses, without giving a reason, and without penalty *

- Yes
- No

I am happy to take part in the online questionnaire *

- Yes
- No

I am aware that the data collected from this survey will be used as part of a PhD study funded by Dublin City University and maybe used in academic publications and / or conference proceedings *

- Yes
- No

Did any of the classroom study findings stand out to you? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

If yes, what caught your attention?

Your answer

Has your child ever talked with you about jobs or careers?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Not sure

If yes, how old were they when they first showed interest?

- ◯ Under 4 years old
- ◯ 4-6 years old
- ◯ 6-8 years old
- ◯ 8-12 years old
- ◯ Not sure

Where do you think children learn about jobs and careers? (Tick all that apply)

- [ ] Family
- [ ] Friends
- [ ] School
- [ ] TV/Movies
- [ ] Social Media/Internet
- [ ] Books
- [ ] Other: _____

Do you think children should learn about jobs and the world of work in primary school? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

If yes, what stage do you think career-related learning should begin in primary school?

- ◯ Junior/Senior Infants
- ◯ 1st/2nd Class
- ◯ 3rd/4th Class
- ◯ 5th/6th Class

How confident do you feel about helping your child learn about different jobs?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not very confident	○	○	○	○	○	Very confident

What, if anything, would help you to feel more confident in supporting your child's career related learning?

Your answer

Do you remember being asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" as a child?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

If yes, what was your answer?

Your answer

Please indicate your gender *

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Prefer Not to Say
- ○ Other: _____

If you are interested in taking part in an online focus group to discuss this topic further, please share your **email** here:

Your answer

Appendix L: Teacher Online Survey (incl. PLS and Informed Consent)

Informed Consent

Please answer the following questions to give consent before moving to the survey questions

I have read and understand the information above about this study *

- Yes
- No

I have been given sufficient information about the research to decide if I would like to participate in the research. *

- Yes
- No

I know who to contact to ask questions about the research? *

- Yes
- No

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up until I submit my survey responses, without giving a reason, and without penalty *

- Yes
- No

I am happy to take part in the online questionnaire *

- Yes
- No

Did any of the classroom study findings stand out to you?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Maybe

If yes, what caught your attention?

Short-answer text

Where do you think children learn about jobs and careers? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ School
- ☐ TV/Movies
- ☐ Social Media/Internet
- ☐ Books
- ☐ Other:

Do you think children should learn about jobs and the world of work in primary school? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Maybe

If yes, what stage do you think career-related learning should begin in primary school?

- ○ Junior/Senior Infants
- ○ 1st/2nd Class
- ○ 3rd/4th Class
- ○ 5th/6th Class

How confident do you feel about including career-related topics in your teaching?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not very confident	○	○	○	○	○	Very confident

What are the biggest challenges in introducing career-related learning in primary school? (Tick all that apply.) *

- ☐ Lack of time within the curriculum
- ☐ Limited resources or materials
- ☐ Uncertainty about how to teach career topics
- ☐ Concern that students are too young for career discussions
- ☐ Other: .....

What additional support or resources (if any) would help you include career-related learning in your classroom?

Long-answer text .....

Do you remember being asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" as a child?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

If yes, what was your answer?

Your answer

Please indicate your gender *

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Prefer Not to Say
- ◯ Other: _____

If you are interested in taking part in an online focus group to discuss this topic further, please share your **email** here:

Your answer

Appendix M: Focus Group Information Sheet & PLS for Parents/Guardians

Dear Parents and Guardians

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** This letter is to explain what my study is about.

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.
My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for me?

You may remember, I recently visited your child's school and carried out research through use of drawings and a class discussion to discover what they know about the "world of work" and their thoughts about careers.

I would now like to invite you to join in an online focus group, via Zoom to discuss some of the findings and to hear more about your thoughts on your child's early career related learning.

There will be two sessions to choose from

1. XXX June 2024 @ 11:00am

or

2. XXX June 2024 @ 7pm

Each session will last no more than one hour and will take the form of an informal conversation between participants. All participants are parents of children who have taken part in the class research and are from one of three schools. The Zoom sessions will be audio recorded, only for the purpose of writing down what has been said after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research. All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed.

On the next page, I have answered some common questions but I would also be happy to speak with you to answer any further questions you may have.

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that through participation in these research activities, you and your children might begin / continue conversations that may positively contribute to their future aspirations and possible career paths.

Risks

It is not envisaged that there are any risks to participants arising from involvement in the focus group. You will be free to withdraw from the session at any time and will never be asked to speak unless you volunteer to do so. No names or school names will be used in the published research so you will not be identifiable in the published research.

Voluntary Participation: Do I have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix N: Parent and Guardian Focus Group Informed Consent

PARENT / GUARDIAN PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	
I consent to the following:	*Tick Yes*
I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and this completed consent form for my records.	
I have been given sufficient information about the research to decide if I would like to participate in the research.	
I know who to contact to ask questions about the research.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, and without penalty.	
I am happy to take part in the online focus group.	
I am aware that the session will be audio recorded.	
Will you allow the research team to use anonymized quotes in presentations and publications?	
Are you aware that the results of the research will also be used as part of a PhD study?	

I AGREE to participate in this research project:

My Name: _____

My Child's School: _____

SIGNATURE _____

Appendix O: Prompts for Parent/Guardian Focus Group

The researcher intends to discuss with parents, the findings from Stage 1 of the research i.e. the children's drawings and the classroom discussion. It is intended that questions along the following lines will be asked.

I met children across two classes (senior infants and second class) in three schools and they drew pictures about:

- Something they like doing.
- Something they are good at
- Themselves at work when they are older.

When asked about what they like doing, X number of children drew…….

When asked about something they are good at, Y drew….

When asked to draw themselves at work, Z drew ……

- Are any of these findings surprising to you?
- Does your child ever talk about what they are good at?
- Does your child ever talk about what they enjoy doing?
- Has this changed in recent years?

- I asked the classes about the subject they like best in school. Is this something your child ever talks about?
- Does your child ever talk about what they would like to do when they grow up?
- If so, what kinds of jobs do they discuss?
- Do you believe there are jobs better suited for girls and those better suited jobs for boys?
- What job(s) would you like your child to pursue?
- Are there any jobs you would not like your child to pursue?
- Do you think it is helpful for children to learn about the world of work in primary school?
- If so, how do you think that could be best delivered (From What age? Textbook? Website? etc)

Appendix P: Teacher Information Sheet / PLS for Focus Group

Dear Teacher

My name is Aisling, I am a guidance counsellor, lecturer and researcher in Dublin City University. Currently I am doing a PhD research study on **Early Career Related Learning in Irish Primary Schools.** This letter is to explain what my study is about.

Introduction to the Research Study: What does Early Career Related Learning mean?

The term 'career-related learning' (CRL) is used to describe the activities and learning in primary schools that help children to develop knowledge about the world of work, e.g. learning about different careers. It also covers skills that are not strictly academic like social and emotional skills and behaviours that will help your child progress in education and later in work.
My study hopes to find out what (if any) career related learning is currently happening in schools and what (if anything) we can do to support that learning.

Details of Involvement in the Study: What is involved for me?

I recently visited your school and carried out research with senior infants and second class. Using drawings and a class discussion, I aimed to discover what the children know about the "world of work" and their thoughts about careers.

I would now like to invite you to join in an online focus group, via Zoom to discuss some of the findings and to hear more about your thoughts on children's early career related learning.

There will be two sessions to choose from

3. XXX June 20024 @ 2.00pm

or

4. XXX June 2024 @ 6pm

Each session will last no more than one hour and will take the form of an informal conversation between participants. All participants are primary school teachers and are from one of three schools where children participated in the research. The Zoom sessions will be audio recorded, only for the purpose of writing down what has been said after the session. The recording will only be heard by me and will be stored securely throughout the research. All recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed.

On the next page, I have answered some common questions, but I would also be happy to speak with you to answer any further questions you may have.

Are there potential benefits or risks to being involved in the study?

Benefits

Children's views on careers are very important. Research carried out in other countries has shown that:

- Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and is a global issue (as evidenced in 15 countries).
- Career aspirations are set at the age of seven and change relatively little between then and 18 years.
- There is a significant mismatch between the career aspirations of children and labour market demands.

It is hoped that findings of this research may help support the career related learning of primary school children.

Risks

It is not envisaged that there are any risks to participants arising from involvement in the focus group. You will be free to withdraw from the session at any time and will never be asked to speak unless you volunteer to do so. No names or school names will be used in the published research so you will not be identifiable in the published research.

Voluntary Participation: Do I have to take part in this study?

No, this study is voluntary and will not take place without consent from all stakeholders. Once we begin you may discontinue participation in this study at any time without prejudice.

Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality.

Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' and schools' actual names and / or specific locations will not be used and any notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (upon publication of this PhD study).

What if I have more questions?

If you should have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me by email: aisling.fleming@dcu.ie. To contact an independent person please email rec@dcu.ie

Appendix Q: Teacher Focus Group Informed Consent

TEACHER PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	
I consent to the following:	*Tick Yes*
I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and this completed consent form for my records.	
I have been given sufficient information about the research to decide if I would like to participate in the research.	
I know who to contact to ask questions about the research.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, and without penalty.	
I am happy to take part in the online questionnaire.	
I am aware that the questionnaire will be anonymous except for the name of my school.	
Will you allow the research team to use anonymized quotes in presentations and publications?	
Are you aware that the results of the research will also be used as part of a PhD study?	

I AGREE to participate in this research project:

My Name: _____

My School: _____

SIGNATURE _____

Appendix R: Prompts for Teacher Focus Group

The researcher intends to discuss with parents, the findings from Stage 1 of the research i.e. the children's drawings and the classroom discussion. It is intended that questions along the following lines will be asked.

I met children across two classes (senior infants and second class) in three schools and they drew pictures about:

- Something they like doing.
- Something they are good at
- Themselves at work when they are older.

When asked about what they like doing, X number of children drew…….

When asked about something they are good at, Y drew….

When asked to draw themselves at work, Z drew ……

- Are any of these findings surprising to you?
- Do you ever talk to your class about what they are good at?
- Do you ever talk to your class about what they enjoy doing?
- Do you ever talk to your class about what they would like to do when they grow up?
- If so, what kinds of jobs do they discuss?
- Do you believe there are jobs better suited for girls and those better suited jobs for boys?
- Do you think it is helpful for children to learn about the world of work in primary school?
- If so, how do you think that could be best delivered (From What age? Textbook? Website? etc)
- What do you think the challenges might be?
- What might mitigate these challenges?

Appendix S: Researcher's Child Protection Certification



Children First

TUSLA
An Ghníomhaireacht um Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

This is to certify that

Aisling Murray Fleming

has successfully completed

'Introduction to Children First'

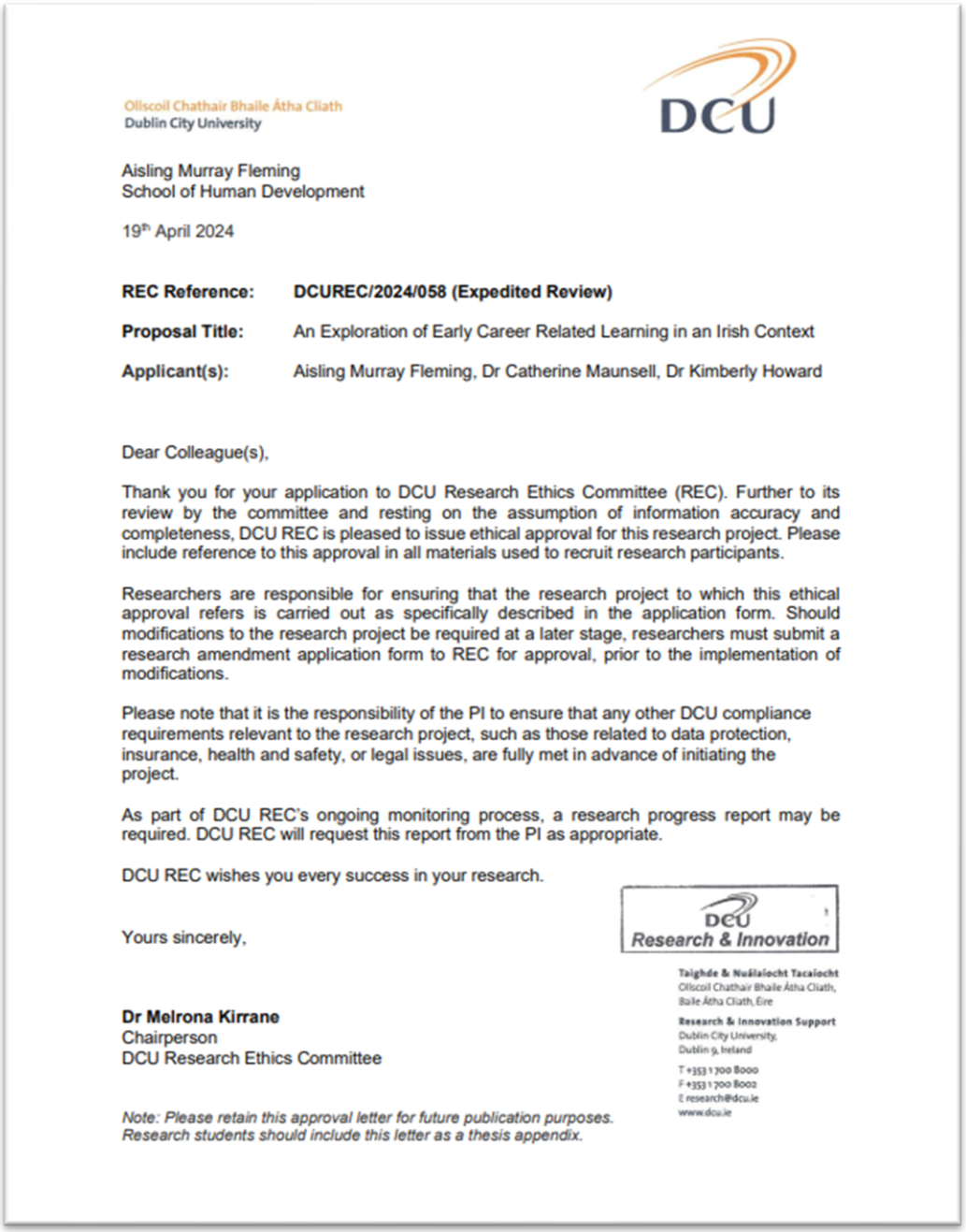
Elearning Programme

Date completed: 6 February 2024

Signed:

Bernard Gloster
Chief Executive
Tusla – Child and Family Agency

Appendix T: DCU Research Ethics Committee Approval



Oliscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Aisling Murray Fleming
School of Human Development

19th April 2024

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2024/058 (Expedited Review)**

Proposal Title: An Exploration of Early Career Related Learning in an Irish Context

Applicant(s): Aisling Murray Fleming, Dr Catherine Maunsell, Dr Kimberly Howard

Dear Colleague(s),

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to its review by the committee and resting on the assumption of information accuracy and completeness, DCU REC is pleased to issue ethical approval for this research project. Please include reference to this approval in all materials used to recruit research participants.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that the research project to which this ethical approval refers is carried out as specifically described in the application form. Should modifications to the research project be required at a later stage, researchers must submit a research amendment application form to REC for approval, prior to the implementation of modifications.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that any other DCU compliance requirements relevant to the research project, such as those related to data protection, insurance, health and safety, or legal issues, are fully met in advance of initiating the project.

As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, a research progress report may be required. DCU REC will request this report from the PI as appropriate.

DCU REC wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

DCU Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Oliscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

Research & Innovation Support
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000
F +353 1 700 8002
E research@dcu.ie
www.dcu.ie

Dr Meirona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes.
Research students should include this letter as a thesis appendix.

Appendix U: Mapping Review Sample Summary Table

This table provides a sample overview of the thematic clustering and methodological distribution of selected studies included in the mapping review. The categorisation reflects researcher-led coding conducted in alignment with the SALSA framework (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis).

Thematic Cluster	No. of Key Studies[6]	Dominant Methodologies	Representative Sources (Examples)	Key Conceptual Emphases
Early Career Related Learning	301	Literature reviews; intervention studies; mixed method studies; reports	Briddick et al., 2018; Cahill & Furey, 2017b, 2017a; Ginevra et al., 2024; Hughes & Kashefpakdel, 2019; Magnuson & Starr, 2000; Maree, 2018	Early intervention; programme design; impact of structured CRL activities; primary-level implementation
Influence of Parents / Guardians and Teachers	57	Mixed methods; qualitative interviews; survey research	Bregman & Killen, 1999; Cinamon & Dan, 2010; Fouad et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2022; Kintrea et al., 2011; Whiston & Keller, 2004	Parental attitudes; relational influences; teacher mediation; family socio-cultural context
Curriculum Integration	19	Policy analysis; conceptual models; practice-based	Briddick et al., 2018; Burke & Lehane, 2023; Corry, 2025; Hoyt, 1984a; McMahon & Watson, 2022b; Patton & McMahon, 2014; Walsh, 2020; Walsh et al., 2023	Whole-school; integration across subjects; lifelong guidance continuum
Possible Selves and Aspirations	13	Longitudinal studies; developmental research; quantitative surveys	Auger et al., 2005; Cross & Markus, 1991; Hackett, 1995; Helwig, 2008; Porfeli et al., 2008	Career adaptability; aspirations; self-efficacy; developmental progression
Gender	6	Quantitative surveys; sociological analyses; policy reports	Ben & García-Peñalosa (2002); Charlesworth & Banaji (2022); Brussino & McBrien (2022); Archer & DeWitt (2016)	Gender stereotyping; social reproduction; cultural influences; equity in aspirations

[6] The number of studies listed under each thematic cluster is illustrative and reflects dominant strands within the reviewed literature rather than an exhaustive count.