eTwinning Feasibility Study

Feasibility Study into the Integration of eTwinning in the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Ireland

léargas

eTwinning

Co-funded by
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ATU	Atlantic Technological University
CCC	City/County Childcare Committee
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRNI	Children's Research Network Ireland
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoHC	Department of Health and Children
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EU	European Union
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
KA	Key Action
JELR	Justice Equality and Law Reform
LLP	Lifelong Learning Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organization for Economic Growth and Development
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
SAC	School Age Childcare
TUSLA	The Child and Family Agency

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ABSTRACT

This feasibility study was undertaken by a subgroup of the Children's Research Network Ireland (CRNI), the 'Early Childhood Research' subgroup, on behalf of Léargas; the National Agency for Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Youth and Sport. The aim of this scoping exercise was to explore the interest levels of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland in terms of participating in eTwinning projects specifically tailored for the ECEC sector. The subgroup that conducted the study was led by CRNI members Karen Higgins and Marcia Lacey from Progressive College (part of the City Education Group), Dr Rita Melia, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway/Mayo Campus and Dr Carol-Ann O Sioráin, Hibernia College. A review of the history and current context of ECEC in Ireland was presented that included a brief outline of engagement by the Irish ECEC sector in European projects supported by Léargas. A survey was developed and circulated to the sector through the county childcare committee networks and other social media platforms accessed by the ECEC sector in Ireland.

In total, 57 participants completed the survey, 70% (n=40) of whom were owners or managers of an ECEC setting. Team leaders and educators accounted for 19% of participants (n=11) and 11% (n=6) participants identified as other. The 'other' participants identified as ECEC lecturers/tutors, a school-age childcare provider and a provider who operates an outdoor full daycare setting. The findings provided positive confirmation that participants were in favour of an eTwinning platform specifically for the ECEC sector, but also to meet the needs of the growing school-age childcare sector, which was regulated in Ireland in 2018. The benefits of having a specific platform for the ECEC sector were identified as enhancing ECEC quality experiences for young children, professional development for ECEC educators, and recognition of the important role of ECEC educators nationally and at a European level. Challenges identified included the time commitment to participate in eTwinning projects, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and consent concerns. Recommendations based on the findings of the study were identified under three headings: practice, policy and research.

INTRODUCTION

History and Purpose of this Report

Teacher professional learning across the primary and post-primary sectors in Ireland is under constant scrutiny as these professions are regulated through registration with a professional standards body and valued politically. Initial teacher education, induction and professional learning for these sectors is supported by government funding and hence the need to justify the quality and level of engagement with evidenced growth in professionalism and quality learning outcomes for pupils, students and their communities. With the 2010 introduction in Ireland of a universal free preschool year for all children for one year before attending primary school, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has become recognised for its important impact on children's holistic development and learning. Léargas – the National Agency for Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training and Youth and Sport – is a long-established, registered charity working under the aegisof the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Léargas's mission is to enable international collaboration and exchange, promote and fund intercultural, collaborative projects between Ireland and

other countries, and advance national and European policy. One aspect of the knowledge exchange process that Léargas supports is eTwinning.

eTwinning is a free online platform offering engagement and partnership opportunities in collaborative projects and knowledge exchange to primary and post-primary schools, it also offers Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for teachers during school holidays. eTwinning projects are funded via the European Union (EU) and administered via the National Support Organisation, which in Ireland is Léargas. Currently across Europe there are specific eTwinning platforms for primary and post-primary education institutions and staff to engage and participate in eTwinning projects. However, as ECEC is a relatively newcomer to be recognised in the educational arena there is no eTwinning programme specific to the ECEC sector.

Léargas approached the Children's Research Network Ireland (CRNI's) Special Interest Group

'Early Childhood Research' subgroup to undertake a scoping study to explore the levels of interest in the ECEC sector in Ireland in terms of participating in eTwinning projects specifically tailored for the ECEC sector. The CRNI is a collaborative network of the research community in Ireland and Northern Ireland with an interest in better understanding the lived experiences of children and young people.

It is a not-for-profit group with five active special interest groups. Following discussion, a small subcommittee was formed by members of the network. The subgroup members represented three educational institutions led by the Progressive College (part of the City Education Group), Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway/Mayo campus and Hibernia College. The process and conditions of contract were established to conduct the feasibility study.

Rationale for Professional Learning via eTwinning

Kennedy (2014) provides evidence that engagement in formal (award-bearing) professional learning does not always lead to transformational practice. In fact, Kennedy (2014) argues there is robust research evidence to suggest that less-formal professional learning that creates collaborative models of inquiry yield growth in professional identity, values, skills and practices and enhance professional knowledge and understanding. The Evaluation of eTwinning Report in Ireland (D'Arcy, 2020) provides strong evidence for the success of this platform of professional learning across primary and post-primary education. A suggested opportunity within this evaluation report is to broaden the scope of eTwinning to all sectors of education, especially underrepresented groups. ECEC is a sector that is underrepresented in continuous professional learning. eTwinning will open gateways to collaborative opportunities and professional learning. The importance of quality initial professional learning in the early childhood sector is well established in the research. Further, the research argues for quality CPD (Lazarri et al., 2013; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). ECEC in Ireland has not had the same political value and therefore professional development is the responsibility of early childhood practitioners/educators, their colleagues, and their service owners. While there is some low- level funding via community-based services, via the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Tusla The Child and Family Agency (TUSLA), it is for award-bearing programmes. Publicly funded educational opportunities are set in place to ensure that childcare

services meet the minimum quality and standards set for inspection and regulation, as set out in legislation. Currently, early childhood practitioners in Ireland are not required to register with a professional body; nor are they required to hold an honour's degree in early childhood to be employed within an early years/early childhood service. Furthermore, there is no ongoing registration requirement to upskill or advance in education.

However, there are plans set out in First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 (DCYA, 2019) to generate a graduate-led workforce by 2028.

The present report contains a detailed presentation of the historical context of ECEC and sets the context for this scoping research exercise. It also describes how the research approach and methodology were selected, given the brief presented to

the research team. Following on from the methodology are the findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

ECEC in Ireland: The Historical Context

The first five years last a lifetime and have a lasting impact on the type of person we become. A happy and healthy start in life, one that provides children with positive and nurturing influences, is vitally important. Our children deserve the best start and opportunities in life to fulfil their potential (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.7).

Centre-based ECEC is relatively new to the Irish social context. In order to gain a better understanding of the development of the ECEC sector in Ireland it is important to look back at the relevant demographic, economic and socio-cultural context, which has changed – and is continually changing – in Ireland. These changes are underpinned by social and political transformation and increased policy commitment to ECEC. Other influences include an increased understanding of children and childhood, an image of the child as capable and competent (NCCA, 2007), and a policy commitment to supporting children's rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

Historically in Ireland young children's care and education were treated as separate entities, where 'care' was provided in the home primarily by a parent or family member and 'education' was provided outside the home by professional teachers or educators. The context for early childhood care and education (ECCE) can be traced to The Children's Act (1908), which was a landmark document for the care of children in Ireland. This document, which was enacted under British rule, was an attempt to regulate the lives of children and focused on their treatment as opposed to their punishment. The Act introduced compulsory education and bestowed upon children a separate legal status (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004).
For the greater part of the 20th-century research identifies that the majority of children in Ireland were cared for within their own homes primarily by their mothers.

A ban on women working as civil servants or teachers introduced in 1932 ensured that women's place was in the home (Arensberg and Kimbell, 1940). Curtin and Varley (1984) paint a picture of care for children within the home being undertaken primarily by mothers and assisted by the extended family. Hannan and Katsiaouni (1977) and Fahey and McLaughlin (1999) identify a dearth of documented research for much of the 20th century outlining the position of children within the family and society. Policy change directly affects social change, and Ireland's decision to join the European Economic Community in 1973, together with the lifting of the 'marriage bar' in 1974, had significant implications for women accessing the workforce and or further education and training, and consequently the place of children and families in society. During the period 1951 to 1991 the number of married women in paid employment increased sevenfold. According to Tovey and Share (2003), this was due to better education, declining fertility rates and the capacity to earn high wages. However, the lack of child care to support female participation in the work force was recognised as a barrier to employment opportunities for women. A survey of the Childcare situation in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s, conducted by the Central Statistics Office in 2003, highlighted that childcare provision was most frequently being provided by family or neighbours (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [] 2004). The provision of centre-based, or formal childcare was very limited, with some opportunities for socialisation and preschool education being offered on a small scale primarily in a home-based setting.

Historical Policy Context

In October 1996, various social partners were invited to participate in discussions to develop a national agreement. Partnership 2000, for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness, according to the then policymakers, represented a strategic approach to lead the Irish economy and society into the 21st century (Department of The Taoiseach, 2000). In 1997 an Expert Working Group on Childcare in the context of the Partnership 2000 national agreement was established. The role of the Expert Working Group was to develop a National Childcare Strategy that would focus on the development of a comprehensive childcare service to meet the needs of parents who were in employment, education and/or training (DJELR, 2004).

Equally at an international level, Irish policymakers were committed to the Lisbon Agenda (2000), which required member states to increase the participation of women in the labour force and the Barcelona Summit, which established a number of targets regarding child care and early childhood education by 2010 (Office of the Minister of Children, 2007). The first significant step, at a policy and investment level, towards the provision of the developing childcare services in Ireland was in 1998, when a total of 11million Irish pounds of EU and Exchequer matched funding was allocated to incentivise and develop childcare services in Ireland to support parents in entering or participating in the work force, or in returning to education and or training (JELR, 2004). This was the first Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (1) 1998-1999. EOCP (11) followed from 2000-2006. The main objectives of the EOCP I and II were to maintain and increase the number of childcare facilities and places; and to introduce a coordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services in Ireland. The EOCP programmes provided capital expenditure for the development of early years settings, funding to support staffing of voluntary-managed early years settings, quality enhancement, and administrative supports.

The Expert Working Group on Childcare recommended the establishment of a county structure for childcare (Department of Health and Children, 2006). This resulted in 33 City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) (now known as County Childcare Committees) being established across the 26 counties and cities. The role of the CCCs was to develop a coordinated strategy for childcare provision in their city or county.

A number of National Voluntary Childcare Committees also received some funding to support quality early years provision, as well as the training and upskilling of the sector. It must be noted that The ECOP was a funding programme to support parents in entering or remaining in the workforce, or in gaining access training or education, as such this policy commitment was a labour force commitment. The aim of the subsequent funding programme – the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 – was to proactively respond to the local development of quality childcare supports and services based on the needs of children and families (Department of Health and Children, 2006).

The National Children's Strategy (2000)

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realize their potential (DoHC, 2000, p. 4).

The vision of the National Children's Strategy (2000) above outlined Ireland's vision for children and young people over a 10-year period from 2000-2010. The adoption of the 10- year strategy published in 2000 was by far the most significant policy development for children and for ECCE. The strategy identifies six principles to guide all actions when working with children, namely, that all work with children must be (1) child centred, (2) family orientated, (3) equitable, (4) inclusive, (5) integrated and (6) action orientated. The development of the National Children's Strategy was initiated by Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC in 1992 which, according to Hayes (2013, p. 4), offers 'a blueprint for how we, as adults, can respect and support children and young people'.

The White Paper; Ready to Learn

The National Forum on Early Childhood Education was established in 1998. The forum brought together organisations and individuals with an interest in early childhood education. The White Paper Ready to Learn (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 1999) which bases its proposals mainly on the 1998 Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, sets out an agenda to overhaul and greatly develop the early years sector in Ireland (O'Donnell, 2018). The key theme of Ready to Learn was the need to standardise quality ECEC provision in Ireland. This first policy document, which specifically addressed the education and care of children under 6 years, recognised that while there was evidence of quality provision in the ECEC sector, there was also a need to standardise provision.

National Practice Frameworks

In 2002 the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched. The role of the CECDE was to complete a comprehensive Programme of Work (Duignan, 2005) in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper Ready to Learn (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) was published in 2006 following four years of consultation with a variety of stakeholders. From an international perspective, in 2004, the OECD conducted a Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (OECD, 2004). This review found that education provided in infant classes in primary schools in Ireland was too directive and formal (OECD, 2004).

While there were no guidelines on curriculum in early years settings in 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and assessment (NCCA) published Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), which is a play-based curriculum that supports children's learning and development in early years services and in the first two years of primary school education.

Free Preschool Year Programme

In 2010, a one-year universally available preschool year was introduced and extended to two years in 2018. The universal two-year programme is available to all children between 2 years and 8 months, and between 5 years and 6 months before they attend primary school. ECEC services participating in the programme must provide an appropriate education and care programme that adheres to the principles of the national practice frameworks: Siolta, the National Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the National Early Years Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The programme is provided in both community, not- for-profit crèches and private crèches.

The Quality Agenda

Following concerns raised in a media report 'A Breach of Trust' (RTE, 28 May 2013), the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald TD, outlined her commitment and agenda for improving quality in preschool services. Commitments included the implementation of the two national practice frameworks – Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009); a review of the inspection of early years services, to include an early education inspection system; and a review of the professional training system for early education practitioners. The most significant announcement was a commitment to further increased investment to support the introduction of the free preschool year (DCEDIY, 2022).

Regulation of Early Years Services

The Children's Act (1908) was a landmark piece of legislation for the care of children in Ireland, introducing compulsory education and giving children a separate legal status (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004).

This was the primary childcare legislation until it was replaced almost a century later by the Children Act 2001 (Hayes, 2002). Part VII of the Child Care Act 1991 gave effect to the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 (Government of Ireland, 1996). The 1996 and amended 1997 Regulations – the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997) – provided for the first system of notification and inspection of ECEC services in Ireland. These initial Regulations were replaced in 2006 and the new Regulations – The Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No. 2)

(Amendment) Regulations 2006 (Government of Ireland 2006) – placed a greater emphasis on the holistic development

of the child as outlined in the National Children's Strategy (2000), and in keeping with the recommendations of the OECD Thematic Review (OECD, 2004). The current regulations with which early years services in Ireland must legally comply are the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016).

The types of ECEC services currently available in Ireland, as outlined the 2016 regulations, include, sessional services, which provide ECEC services for a set period of time during the day, full-time services, which provide ECEC services throughout the day, and part-time services, which provide ECEC services between 3.5 hours and 5 hours a day. Part time sessions may include a sessional preschool service for preschool children not attending the part-time day care service (Government of Ireland, 2016).

Childcare regulations that are inspected by TUSLA measure both structural and process quality under four key areas, as outlined in the Quality and Regulatory Framework (TUSLA, 2018). Early years providers must meet regulatory requirements in areas such as governance, the health, welfare and development of the child, safety and premises, and facilities. A significant change for early years providers with the introduction of the 2016 regulations was the requirement to register their early years service with TUSLA, as opposed to the previous notification system. In relation to services provision, the 2016 regulations introduced a requirement for all children to have access to the outdoors on a daily basis. A significant quality requirement was for all individuals working directly with children to have a minimum Level 5 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications NFQ)

Early Years Education Focused Inspections

Following the introduction of the ECEC scheme in 2011, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) requested the Department of Education and Skills (DES) early years inspectorate to carry out education-focused inspections of early years services participating in the programme. These inspections focused on four areas: Area 1 – quality of the context to support children's learning and development; Area 2 – quality of the processes to support children's learning and development; Area 3 – Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements;

Area 4 – Quality of management and leadership for learning. A Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) (DES, 2018) is available on the DES website (DES 2022).

First 5: A Whole-of- Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028

First 5 (DCYA, 2018) aims to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a 10-year plan to ensure that all children have positive early experiences and get a good start in life. As the first early years strategy, it seeks to ensure that 'babies and young children have a strong and equal start' (DCYA, 2018, p.3). The strategy outlines a vision for early childhood that is valued and critical, and which involves supportive communities and integrated services. Five big steps are identified to enhance young children's lives and include (1) providing broad and flexible options for parents to balance work and child care. The strategy outlines (2) a new model of parenting support and (3) new developments to support children's health. Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, which is a new term identified in the strategy for the ECEC sector, has been identified to improve affordability, accessibility and quality. The Strategy includes a commitment to (4) reform the early learning and care system to include a graduate-led workforce, a new funding model, the regulation of childminders and school-age childcare. The strategy also includes (5) measures in relation to addressing early childhood poverty, including free and/or subsidised ELC and the introduction of a free-meals programme in some ELC settings. An implementation plan and annual progress reports are available on the First 5 Government of Ireland website (Government of Ireland, 2022)

Workforce Development

First 5 (DCYA, 2019) commits to a graduate-led workforce by 2028 and the provision of CPD opportunities for the ELC sector. Nurturing Skills: The workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2021) identifies that:

A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children's rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.2)

The aim of Nurturing Skills (2021) is to outline a strategy for the ELC sector to support the ongoing professionalisation of the sector and to give individuals working in the sector opportunities for career development and professional recognition (Government of Ireland, 2021). Currently in Ireland the ELC sector is undervalued and underpaid. There have been a number of significant reforms in the sector, including the introduction of the free preschool year in 2011, and a second free preschool year in 2016; the requirement for ELC professionals to have a basic minimum qualification, as outlined in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016); the introduction of Early Years Education Focused Inspections by DES in 2018, and the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016 to name but a few. However, the terms and conditions of the ELC sector in Ireland remains poor. The actions set out in the Workforce Plan 2022-2028 are organised under five pillars: (1) establishing a career framework for the sector; (2) raising qualification levels in the sector; (3) developing a national CPD system for the sector; (4) supporting the recruitment, retention and diversity of the sector; and (5) moving towards regulation of the profession. While the vision of the workforce development plan is ambitious, it will not be effective without equivalent funding to support its implementation.

Current Context of ECES in Ireland

The Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019-2020 (Pobal, 2021) identifies that during the 2019/2020 programme year (19 August 2019-14 August 2020) 180,149 children were enrolled on at least one Government subsidy programme, while 105,975 children benefited from the ECCE scheme.

These numbers were a reduction on previous years, due to the impact of Covid 19 (Pobal, 2020). A total of 4,690 services operating during the year were contracted to provide at least one of the four DCEDIY funding programmes. The average weekly fee was €186.12 (an increase of €1.76 or <1%) for part-time services and €73.90 (a €0.60 increase or <1%) for sessional services (Pobal 2021, p.11). The report confirms that there are approximately 30,883 staff working in the ELC and school-age hildcare sector, of whom 26,294 (85%) work directly with children (Pobal 2021, p.12). The report also confirms that 94% of staff who work directly with children have qualifications at NFQ Level 5 or higher and that 69% of staff have qualifications at NFQ Level 6 or higher. The proportion of staff who work directly with children with a NFQ Level 7 qualification has increased since 2015/2016 and at the time of the report, 27% of staff working directly with children now hold a qualification at NFQ Level 7 or higher. The majority of ELC and SAC services are operated by private (for-profit) organisations. In 2019/2020 private services accounted for 74% (3,476) of all services contracted to provide at least one of the funding programmes, with community programmes accounting for the remaining 26% (1,214) (Pobal 2021, p. 41).

The literature reviewed for this study identifies the rapid changes that have influenced the ECEC sector over the last two decades in Ireland. Currently, Ireland operates a split system, as care and education are viewed from a legislative perspective as being separate. However, as Start Strong (2010) suggests, care and education are inextricably linked.

ECEC and European Projects

The Erasmus+ School Education: The Impact of Mobility Projects on the Professional Development of Staff (D'Arcy, 2022) confirms that Erasmus+ (the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport), which is underpinned by EU policy (2014-2020), brought together all previous projects previously operated under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), such as Comenius, which was the programme that facilitated the mobility of individuals in the school education system. The current programme – Erasmus+ programme 2021 to 2027 – is the programme in which organisations that develop a European development plan can apply annually as part of the Key Action (KA) 1 mobility strand for short-term projects lasting from 6-18 months. Also, under KA1 educators may have an opportunity to take part in training courses or undertake job shadowing activities. In Ireland, the Erasmus+ school education programme is managed by the national agency, Léargas.

Hughes (2021) traced the personal and professional paths of Irish vocational educational training graduates funded under the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 and the Leonarda da Vinci 2007- 2013 mobility programmes. In the ECEC sector, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) is a membership organisation that supports over 3,800 members working with more than 120,000 children and families, who access preschools, afterschool and full day-care services (ECI, 2022). A report recently presented at an Erasmus+ exchange June 2022, hosted by Léargas and EC Ireland, confirmed that since 2012 ECI has engaged in 12 KA1 projects, with five-day study visits to countries including Italy Germany, Norway, Scotland, Germany and Sweden. ECI has also successfully engaged with six KA2 projects with 27 European partner countries. A range of outputs pertinent to the ECEC sector were developed and are available to access online. These outputs include CPD modules on positive transitions to primary schools, three CPD modules on child-centred competencies, a framework for early childhood and higher education institutions, training for childminders, and a toolbox for the validation of such training.

As with all other activities, educational and training mobility across Europe was completely transformed and mobility projects were brought to a standstill in March 2020. However, this did not prevent projects from progressing online, such as the Clare Education Centre –Early Years transitions project (D'Arcy, 2022), in which parents were given guided tours and introduced to teachers online to support their children's transition from preschool to primary school. In this collaborative project, 32 teachers from 13 local schools in Clare undertook structured training courses in Greece and Croatia, where they shared and discussed Aistear with international colleagues. This resulted in 'Staff awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries increased, offering staff the opportunity to build networks of international contacts' (D'Arcy, 2022, p.13). With the lifting of restrictions in the summer 2021 came a renewed interested in international collaborations through mobility and online projects. The opportunities for such collaborations and opportunities for funded educational and training mobility in Europe are extremely important as we face economic uncertainty, post-COVID and post-Brexit.

Methodology

This was a small-scale study that set out to assess whether eTwinning would be of interest and/or of benefit to those within the early years sector. eTwinning offers a platform for staff (teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc.) working in a school in one of the European countries involved, to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share and, in short, feel and be part of the most exciting learning community in Europe. A mixed methods approach was taken, utilisingboth qualitative methods and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are generally used to interpret and understand experiences, beliefs, opinions, and lived experiences, which are then coded and themed (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Quantitative methods include numerical data, such as gradient scales and surveys, which is collected and analysed (Bloomfield and Fisher, 2019). The present study used a survey that collated both numerical and non-numerical data. The survey was submitted to the Progressive College Ethics Committee for approval in February 2022 and was granted approval, as there no ethical issues were evidenced. The survey itself was offered as an opt-in survey, where participants could decide to opt in and complete the questionnaire. After exploring the literature pertaining to ECEC in Ireland from a historical and current context, the authors structured survey questions to explore the feasibility of using the eTwinning concept in the early years sector. eTwinning is in use in primary and post-primary schools across Europe, with 233,744 schools currently participating (Léargas 2023) The survey questions were designed to ascertain the current service provision, the size of service, the role of the respondent completing the survey, loca-

tion (urban, suburban, or rural), and from a qualitative perspective, the perceived benefits and challenges involved in taking part in eTwinning. Microsoft Teams (Forms) and Survey Monkey® were used to generate the survey. The survey was widely circulated among relevant stakeholder groups across social media platforms (Facebook, Early Years Representative Communities of Practice, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), County Childcare Committees, early years services, early years educators, and students of early years care & education training programmes. In total, 57 surveys were returned – 53 on Microsoft Forms and 4 on Survey Monkey®. The survey was initially circulated in March 2022, but as only a small number of participants returned it, a decision was made to keep it open for a longer period of time, to see if the participant rate would increase. The survey closed at the end of June 2022 (see the Appendix for a list of survey questions asked).

Findings

In total, (n=57) questionnaires were completed: (n=54) were completed on Microsoft Forms and (n=4) were completed on Survey Monkey®. The online questionnaire (see Appendix) consisted of (n=8) questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to consider if the ECEC sector in Ireland was interested in accessing a specific eTwinning platform. This ECEC eTwinning platform would provide opportunities for ECEC settings in Ireland to twin with their European ECEC counterparts. Similar to the eTwinning facilities which are available to Irish primary and secondary schools to e Twin with their European counterparts. The findings from Question 1 confirm that of the (n=57) individuals who completed the online survey 35% (n=20) individuals identified as owners of ECEC settings. A further 35% (n=20) identified as managers, 5.2% (n=3) identified as team leaders, 14% (n=8) identified as ECEC educators and 10.5% (n=6) identified as 'other' (see Figure 1 below). Question 4 invited participants to outline what 'other' may refer to. Two (n=2) of these 'other' respondents identified as ECEC lecturers, (n=1) individual identified as a provider of a full daycare outdoor service, and further individuals offered a service type that also included a School Age Childcare (SAC) service.
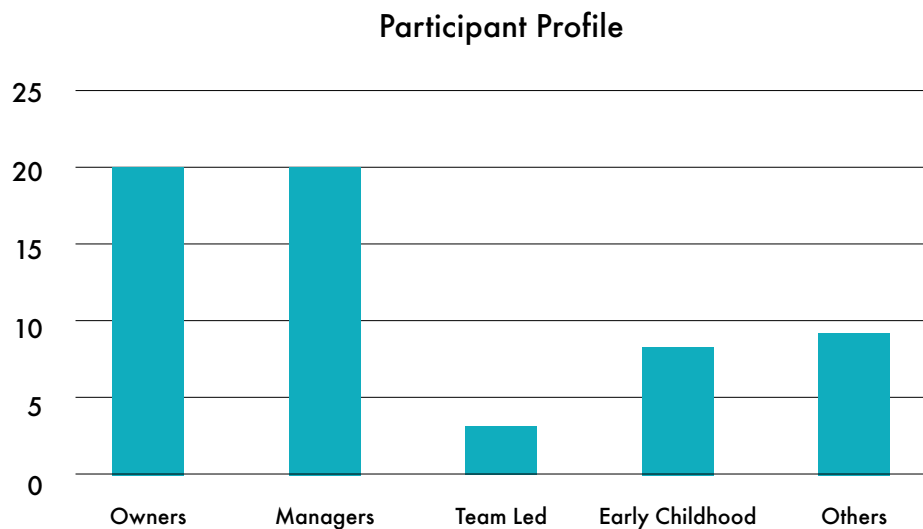

FIGURE 1: PARTICIPANT PROFILE

When participants were asked in Question 2 how interested they would be in taking part in an eTwinning project (see Figure 2 below), the owners (n=20) confirmed that 35% (n=7) they were extremely interested and 45% (n=9) were somewhat interested. In total, 10% (n=2) owners confirmed that they were neutral and a further 10% (n=2) were definitely not interested.

The (n=20) managers who answered this question confirmed that 20% (n=4) were extremely interested with 55% (n=11) managers being somewhat interested. In total, 15% (n=3) managers identified that they were neutral, and 10% (n=2) managers confirmed that they were definitely not interested. The three team leaders made three different choices: 33.3% (n=1) confirmed that they were somewhat not interested, 33.3% (n=1) were somewhat interested and 33.3% (n=1) were

extremely interested. Two 25% (n=2) of the early childhood educators were extremely interested, with 50% (n=4) educators being somewhat interested. The remaining 25% (n=2) of early childhood educators confirmed that they were definitely not interested in participating in an eTwinning project. The (n=9) 'others', consisting of ECEC lecturers, SAC providers and a service provider who offered an outdoor full daycare service, confirmed that they were extremely interested in participating in an eTwinning project.
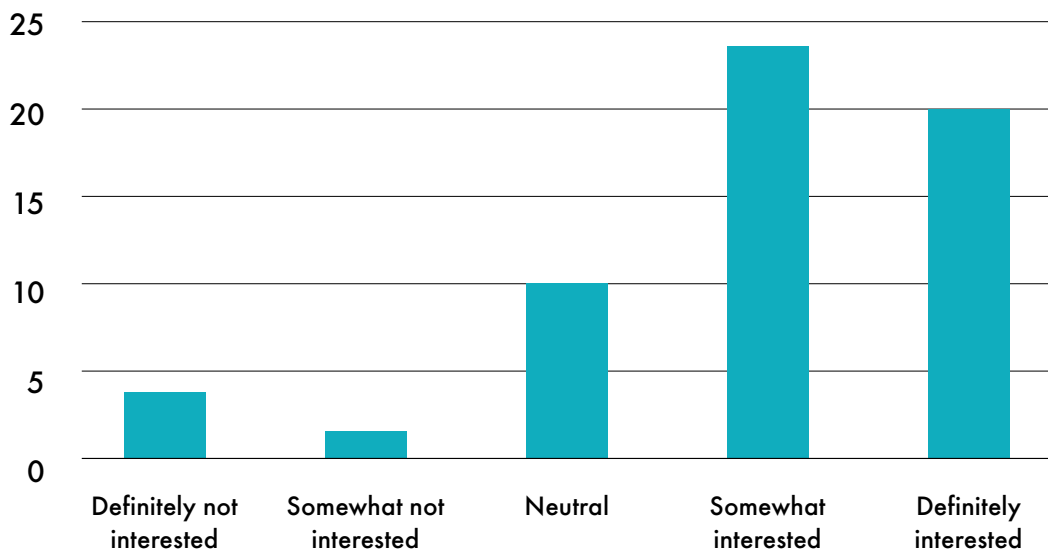

FIGURE 2: PARTICIPANT INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN ETWINNING

Question 3 provided more information on the service types of those participating in the survey. In total, (n=20) participants confirmed that they work in a full daycare service that offers a programme of care and education for more than 5 hours per day (Government of Ireland, 2016).

Individuals working in a sessional service up to 3.5 hours per day accounted for (n=23), with (n=5) working in a part-time service that provides ECEC services for between 3.5 hours and 5 hours a day (Government of Ireland, 2016). The other nine included ECEC lecturers and SAC providers (see Figure 3 below). Question 5 was included to ascertain the geographical location of participants of the survey. Findings confirmed that (n=27) were located in rural areas, (n= 20) were located in urban areas, and (n=10) were located in suburban areas.
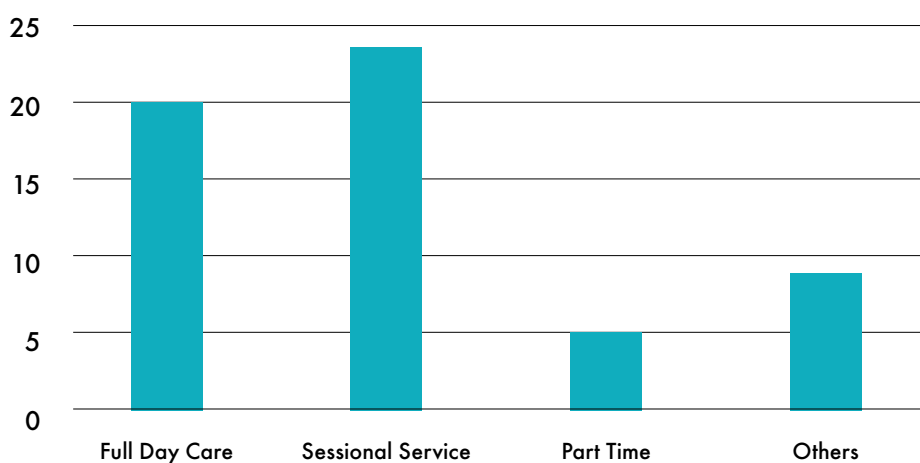

Early Childhood Service Provider Type

FIGURE 3

Of the (n=48) ECEC service providers who participated in the survey, (n=8) providers offer ECEC facilities for more than 100 children, and (n=16) providers offer a service for 50-99 children. In total, (n=19) providers offer ECEC provision for 23-49 children, while 8 (n=8) ECEC service providers facilitate 12-22 children. Three (n=3) service providers offer ECEC provision to (n=11) children and one service offers an ECEC service to fewer than (n=10) children.

The qualitative findings from this survey were collated from Questions 7 and 8, which explored, respectively, the perceived benefits and challenges of potentially participating in an eTwinning project. A thematic approach was taken to analysing the findings from Question 7 of the online questionnaire. Three distinct themes were identified: (a) 'Children's early years experiences'; (2) 'Early childhood educators' professional development'; and (3) 'Learning and ECEC policy issues'.

Qualitative Theme Question 7a: 'Children's Early Years Experiences'

Under the theme of 'Children's early years experiences', participants identified the benefits for young children in early years settings to engage and share their experiences with peers from across Europe. A common thread was the importance of understanding diverse cultural contexts.

One participant working in a centre for asylum seekers and refugees suggested 'it would be good to be able to link with children from another country in a similar setting and exchange information and ideas' (Participant 22), while (Participant 26) confirmed that a benefit of participating in an eTwinning project would be 'exposing the children to other cultures, hands-on direct interaction between teachers, and the wealth of learning that would allow between countries'. The theme of intercultural relationship-building was also expressed by (Participant 34), who suggested that participation in an eTwinning programme would 'help the children learn about other cultures, build relationships, help to reduce xenophobia in our communities'. Participation in eTwinning projects was also linked to quality provision and learning from European peers how to support ongoing, quality ECEC and care provision.

Qualitative Theme Question 7b: 'Early Childhood Educators' Professional Development'

The theme of professional development ran through all the data for this question. Participants identified how participation in an eTwinning programme could support collaboration and sharing of knowledge. The importance of communicating with European colleagues was identified as offering an opportunity for reciprocal learning and opportunities for new learning, knowledge and practice enhancement. The possibilities of showcasing best Irish practice to an international audience and gaining a greater understanding of European early childhood educators' experiences were identified as being particularly beneficial. Learning more about European pedagogy and curriculum frameworks and using this learning to support ongoing CPD and evaluation of current practice as a community of practice was a theme identified throughout the responses to this question. This 'access to other perspectives' (Participant 53) was seen as an opportunity and potential to gain shared understandings and co-construct knowledge through potential shared projects in ECEC settings in Ireland and across Europe.

Qualitative Theme Question 7c: 'ECEC Policy Issues'

While policy was not mentioned in the data, the importance of being part of a European community that which would support quality practice and professionalisation of the ECEC sector in Ireland was evident in the responses.

Having opportunities to 'collaborate with the early childhood sector outside of Ireland' (Participant 19) or 'being part of the most exciting learning community in Europe' (Participant 20). eTwinning gives according to another participant the potential for participants of eTwinning projects, opportunities to be 'introduced to projects and ideas [that they] wouldn't have consid-

ered' (Participant 27). While European networking was a significant theme throughout, Participant (43) confirmed that 'An international knowledge would be beneficial for all employees from here and abroad as sometimes different frameworks and curriculums are confusing'.

The qualitative findings recorded from Question 8, which considered the perceived challenges of Irish ECEC educators and individuals, were collated under three themes: (a) 'Time'; (b) 'Language barriers'; and (c) 'Governance/management issues'.

Qualitative Theme Question 8a: 'Time'

In total, 33.33% of participants (n=19) identified time as a major challenge for them to participant in an eTwinning project. The issue related to having time to schedule meetings, time to prepare for meetings, and having time to engage meaningfully in the learning experiences. Equally, participants spoke of the need to take time to engage and develop mutual understandings within the constraints of a working day. Time was also identified as a factor in relation to different time zones and how that might impact on engagement and participation.

Qualitative Theme Question 8b: 'Language Barriers'

The theme of the challenge of language barriers was identified by 15% of participants (n= 8). This theme was linked with concern about sharing resources across the eTwinning platform.

Qualitative Theme Question 8c: 'Governance and Management'

The final theme under the perceived challenges identified by participants was management and governance issues. Participants expressed concern in relation to the potential costs. Technical expertise and internet connectivity were also identified as concerns in areas such as Donegal. GDPR was also identified as a potential challenge and possible concern.

Discussion

Findings from the questionnaire confirm that 40 of the 57 individuals who completed the questionnaire were either owners or managers of an ECEC setting. In total, 11 individuals identified as team leaders or educators and 6 individuals identified as 'other'. The 'others' included individuals who work in SAC settings and lecturers/tutors of ECEC initial and continuous training programmes. The fact that the majority (70%) of those who completed the questionnaire were owners or managers is significant and is reflective of the findings. In total, 80% of the owners and managers confirmed that they were extremely or somewhat interested in participating in an eTwinning project. The team leaders and early childhood educators who completed the questionnaire confirmed that 2 of the 3 team leaders were extremely or somewhat interested in eTwinning, while 6 of the 8 early childhood educators were extremely or somewhat interested in eTwinning. The findings from the 'other' category confirm that they were all extremely interested in eTwinning. Therefore, overwhelmingly, participants who completed the questionnaire were extremely or somewhat interested in participating in eTwinning as part of the Irish ECEC sector. Equally, it is important to acknowledge that 10% of owners and 10% of managers, together with 33.3% of team leaders and 25% of early childhood educators, were definitely not interested in eTwinning.

Given that the majority of participants who completed the questionnaire were owners or managers of ECEC settings, the findings suggest that owners and managers recognise that eTwinning may offer positive benefits from a strategic, policy and practice perspective. In comparison, the 33.3% of team leaders and 25% of early childhood educators who confirmed that they were not interested in eTwinning may suggest that there is a disconnect between owner/manager aspirations for the ECEC setting and the motivation of staff to engage with eTwinning in practice in the setting. Based on the context of the

ECEC sector provided earlier, this sector in Ireland has undergone significant change with increased expectations from early childhood educators with little or no renumeration. This has resulted in a sense of apathy, which was also evident in the low numbers of the sector who completed the questionnaire. The findings from this small-scale study clearly identify that there must be personal or professional benefits for early childhood educators and team leaders to support their participation if they wish to do so.

Participants of the study work primarily (n=23) in sessional ECEC settings. These are settings that offer a programme of education and care for up to 3.5 hours a day. Many of these settings offer the free preschool scheme. However, there were similar interest (n=20) participants who work in full daycare settings. Interestingly, a number of 'other' providers identified that they provide stand-alone SAC provision or offer a wraparound service that includes breakfast clubs and SAC; and one participant confirmed that she offers a full daycare outdoor setting. These findings are interesting, particularly in relation to the SAC, as these children should have access to eTwinning in primary schools, but eTwinning is seen as being of interest to SAC providers. It is equally important to note the number of full daycare providers who are interested in eTwinning, as this could open wonderful opportunities for discussing ECEC provision for babies and toddlers - children under 3 years are often forgotten about when education is being discussed. Research confirms that the first 1,000 days of a child's life have been identified as a unique period of opportunity, when the foundations of optimum health, growth and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established (Cusick and Georgieff, 2016). During these firsts three years the building blocks for lifelong learning are put in place (Marmot et al., 2010).

The geographical location of the participating ECEC settings is also interesting, as is the size of the settings of those who expressed an interest in eTwinning. The greatest interest in eTwinning came from medium-sized settings that facilitate 23-49 children. In total, 10 of the participants confirmed that they work in an early year setting in an urban community, with 37 participants working in a rural or suburban setting. These findings are significant when we consider the identified challenges, which include poor broadband coverage, rural isolation and geographical isolation, as Ireland is an island.
The benefits of eTwinning were collated under three themes: (1) 'Children's ECEC experiences'; (2) 'ECEC educators' professional development'; and (3) 'ECEC policy issues'.

When considering children's quality ECEC experiences, participants suggested that eTwinning could support a greater understanding of cultural and social similarities and differences. In addition, they suggested that eTwinning could provide opportunities for young children to share their experiences and learnmfrom their European peers. eTwinning was identified as enhancing children's ECEC experiences.

The benefits for educator professional development were clearly identified. eTwinning was recognised by participants as providing opportunities for ECEC educators to collaborate with European colleagues, to share knowledge, to showcase quality Irish practice at an international level, and to offer reciprocal learning with positive outcomes for young children. From a policy perspective, engaging in eTwinning was identified by participants as a way of supporting and promoting the professionalisation of the ECEC sector in Ireland, building on the workforce development plan: Nurturing Skills (Government of Ireland, 2021). Participants want to be recognised as professional ECEC educators, but they also want to have an opportunity to participate in learning and development with their European peers. eTwinning is a first step and having an eTwinning platform specifically for the ECEC sector is a policy decision that participants believe will enhance young children's experiences in ECEC settings in Ireland. It will also support the professional development and professionalisation of the ECEC sector in Ireland.

The challenges identified by participants of the study were collated under three headings: (1) 'Time'; (2) 'Language barriers'; and (3) 'Governance and management. The issue of having time to participate and actively engage in eTwinning projects was highlighted by participants as being potentially problematic. Having time to engage in projects that are not a regulatory requirement needs to be given some serious consideration in the current context of ECEC in Ireland. While time has been identified as a challenge, it is also a symptom of a bigger systemic issue in the context of ECEC in Ireland. It is clear from the data that ECEC educators in Ireland are intrinsically motivated to enhance children's ECEC experiences. However, with a history of underinvestment, little regard or support for professional development and learning, and little or no support for non-contact time, ECEC educators have identified that having time to engage in projects that enhance quality early years

provision and professionalisation of the sector outside the regulatory and statutory requirements is a cause for concern. The theme of language as a barrier to engagement in eTwinning projects was identified by 15% of participants. A further theme of governance and management identified a number of areas that could be potentially challenging. These included issues with poor broadband or connectivity, which in some parts of Ireland could be difficult for early years settings.

The hidden costs of participating in eTwinning projects, particularly in relation to maintaining adult/child ratios and providing time for staff and children to engage fully with an eTwinning project, were highlighted by participants, the majority of whom (70%) were owners or managers of ECEC settings. Further challenges identified included GDPR issues and parental consent and child assent to participate in eTwinning projects.

CONCLUSION

This feasibility study was undertaken by a subgroup of the CRNI, the 'Early Childhood Research' subgroup on behalf of Léargas. The aim of this scoping exercise was to explore the interest levels of the ECEC sector in Ireland in terms of participating in eTwinning projects specifically tailored for the ECEC sector. The subgroup that conducted the study was led by CRNI members from the College of Progressive Education, ATU Galway/Mayo campus and Hibernia College. A review of the history and current context of ECEC in Ireland was presented, which included an outline of engagement by the Irish ECEC sector in European projects supported by Léargas. A survey was developed and circulated to the sector through the county childcare committee networks and other social media platforms accessed by the ECEC sector in Ireland.

In total, 57 participants completed the survey, 70% (n=40) of whom were owners or managers of an ECEC setting. Team leaders and educators accounted for 19% of participants (n=11) and 11% (n=6) participants identified as 'other'. The 'other' participants identified as ECEC lecturers/tutors, a SAC provider and a provider operating an outdoor full daycare setting. The findings provide positive confirmation that participants are in favour of an eTwinning platform specifically for the ECEC sector, but also to meet the needs of the growing SAC sector that was regulated in Ireland in 2018. The benefits of having a specific platform for the ECEC sector were identified as enhancing ECEC quality experiences for young children. This enhancement was highlighted specifically in relation to the areas of social and cultural understandings and reciprocal learning. The value of an eTwinning platform for the ECEC sector to support the professional learning and development of ECEC educators was highlighted as a very positive benefit, which could progress in tandem with the recently published workforce development plan for the ECEC sector: Nurturing Skills (Government of Ireland, 2021). The governance and management benefits of having an eTwinning platform specifically for the ECEC sector, will – based on the findings of this study – further enhance the professionalisation of the Irish ECEC sector in Ireland and support the Irish ECEC sector in having visibility and a positive European presence.

The challenges identified by participants of the study were primarily based on the current status of ECEC in Ireland. Having time to commit to and actively participate in an eTwinning project was identified as the most significant challenge. While the 70% of owners/managers recognised time as a challenge to participation, 25 (n=2) of the educators and 33.3% (n=1) confirmed that they were in no way interested in participating in eTwinning projects. The disconnect between owner/manager aspirations for the ECEC setting provision and staff motivation may be linked to the current state of flux and rapid change in the ECEC sector in Ireland. This context was also identified as a challenge to conducting the study, due to the apathy of the ECEC sector at the time of data collection. Other challenges identified included that of language being a barrier to communication. Governance and management challenges included issues with poor broadband connections and possible GDPR considerations, together with potential challenges in relation to parental consent and child assent to participating in eTwinning projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations based on the findings of this study are addressed under the following areas: practice, policy and research.

Practice:

- Develop an eTwinning platform specific to the ECES and SAC sectors as a priority similar to and on a par with those available to the primary and post-primary education sectors in Ireland.
- Establish cross-departmental funding strategy to support non-contact hours to enable and support ECEC educators and team leaders in actively participating in eTwinning projects specifically for the ECEC sector. o Recognise participation in eTwinning projects as informal CPD and learning.

Policy:

- Align with the workforce development plan for the ECEC sector: Nurturing Skills.
- Recognition within the two practice frameworks: Aistear (NCCA 2009) and Síolta (CECDE 2006)

Research

- Establish resources to be put in place to support action research projects in ECEC settings based on participation and collaborations between ECEC settings in Ireland and Europe.

The provision of an eTwinning platform specifically for the ECEC sector will provide increased opportunities for educators to share and learn from European colleagues. This opportunity is available to primary and post-primary educators and it is

important that such opportunities are provided for ECEC educators, in order to support and enhance the learning experiences of Ireland's youngest citizens.

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APPENDIX

Appendix : Copy of questionnaire

eTwinning in the Early Years - A Feasibility Study
The 'Early Childhood Research' Special Interest Group, a special interest group of the Children's Research Network, have been invited to conduct a feasibility study on behalf of Léargas, the National Management Agency for European projects, to assess whether eTwinning would be of interest and benefit to those within the Early Years Sector.

eTwinning offers a platform for staff (teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc.), working in a school in one of the European countries involved, to communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share and, in short, feel and be part of the most exciting learning community in Europe. eTwinning is co-funded by the Erasmus+, the European Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport. Currently, eTwinning is only facilitated in both the Primary & Secondary school systems with great success. eTwinning programmes focus on cooperation between communities and between countries, and aim to bring an international dimension to the work of education, training, and youth and community organisations. One of the most important elements of eTwinning is collaboration among teachers, students, schools, parents and local authorities. In eTwinning teachers work together and organise activities for their students. They have an active role, interact, investigate, make decisions, respect each other, and learn 21st-century skills. eTwinning projects involve the contribution of each member of the team.

There are three main functions, which will be adapted to suit the Early Years sector:

1. A dedicated website where teachers can create a profile, search for partners, develop and deliver their own projects.
2. Access to 'Twinspace': a private and secure online workspace where you and your partner(s) administer the project; students can be invited to participate in the Twinspace as members.
3. Facilitation of online and face-to-face learning opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills, competencies and pedagogical approaches.

eTwinning projects can be as large or as small as you wish them to be!

1. Please confirm which of the following represents your role in the ECEC Workforce

☐ Owner of an early years service

☐ Manager of an early years service

☐ Team leader

☐ ECEC educator

☐ Special needs assistant

☐ Other

2. How interested would you be in taking part in eTwinning?

☐ Extremely interested

☐ Somewhat interested

☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat not interested

☐ Extremely not interested

3. Which of the following early years service types most represents your current provision?

☐ Full daycare

☐ Sessional preschool service (3/3.5 hours)

☐ Part-time daycare (more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours)

☐ Other

4. If you chose 'other' in question 3, please specify here

_____

5. What is your geographical location?

☐ Urban

☐ Rural

☐ Suburban

6. How many children are attending your early years service?

☐ 100

☐ 50 – 99

☐ 23 – 49

☐ 12 – 22

☐ 11

☐ > 10

7. What would you consider the benefits to taking part in eTwinning?

_____

_____

_____

8. What would you consider challenges to taking part in eTwinning?

_____

_____

_____