

CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF SERVICE

QUALITY IN THE

IRISH CHILDCARE PROVIDERS:

A CASE STUDY OF FIFE CHILDCARE

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MBA Business Management

**CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY
IN THE IRISH CHILDCARE PROVIDERS:**

A CASE STUDY OF FIFE CHILDCARE

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Abstract

The research investigates the customers' (parents') perception of service quality in the Irish childcare context, where new research could contribute theoretical value. The conducted research explored key quality perception triggers for the parents, described the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction, described the relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty to providers, identified how parents' satisfaction impacts positively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers, and identified the quality improvements desired by parents within the Irish context.

Both primary and secondary data collection tools were employed to gather information. The primary data collection involved keeping a researcher's diary and conducting semi-structured interviews on a purposive sample of eight customers of Fife childcare service, and then analysing collected data via thematic analysis. The research findings revealed that curriculum & activities, physical facility and staff were the main triggers of the parents' perception of childcare service quality. It found that there is a strong relationship between the childcare service quality perception, parents' satisfaction and loyalty. It further revealed, that the higher the level of parents' satisfaction, the higher their level of loyalty, regardless of the recent "Breach of Trust" documentary.

However, it found that though the participants were satisfied with the current provision, they desired and recommended some quality improvements. The research (though small scale) has implication for Irish childcare service providers, by equipping them with the information to aid/improve their provisions of care and education services – hence a new conceptual framework is proposed.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents an introduction to the background of this dissertation; it outlays the contextual situations of the problems that have raised the importance of customer perception of childcare service quality and the researcher's personal interest in the subject of study. It clarifies the research questions and the intended contributions of this research, and further outlines the scope as well as the limitations of this research.

1.2 Background

The decade 1997 to 2007 was distinctive for Ireland, famously known as the "Celtic tiger". It was a period of powerful economic growth with low unemployment to an extent that the 2007 European Union (EU) Lisbon employment target for the Ireland was met (Barry and Sherlock, 2008, p. 2). This economic growth was driven by the increase in the proportion of women in paid employment and a large population of immigrant workers.

This significantly impacted on and transformed the economic position of women from traditional low labour force participation to an EU average level and rising. As a result of the increase in women's participation in paid employment, an array of changes were reflected in women's expectations, their rising educational attainment levels, increased employment opportunities, smaller families and economic pressures in a high-growth-high-cost economy. High property prices in particular, became the compelling reason for two incomes in a vast majority of households of both low and middle income levels. Family life, especially the education and care of young children were affected by this change, as households with young children had to be reliant on paid/unpaid relatives, paid carers, crèches/Montessori facilities (workplace, private or community) to provide childcare (Barry and Sherlock, 2008, p. 4).

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The distinctive change in economic circumstances has provided an unexpected context for a significant policy shift in early childhood care and education (ECCE) which, if properly harnessed, could have fundamental effects on young children and their families (Hayes, 2010, p. 67). Also, the recent revelation of the RTE Prime Time Investigation documentary broadcast is necessitating urgent audit and reform of the policies and regulations relating to the care of young children, particularly those in centre-based/pre-school services (RTE Prime Time, 2013)

Early childhood care and education settings' role in improving children's development has begun to be viewed with increasing importance. High-quality centre-based childcare is associated with a host of positive developmental outcomes for children, such as increased cognitive abilities, language development, emotional and social development especially for disadvantaged children (Doherty et al., 2006, Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001, p. 1552) as confirmed by Vandell et al, (1988, p. 1291) that children who attend poorer-quality childcare show more problematic development which persist into later childhood.

Harnessing the above, Omar et al (2010, p. 4440) believe that childcare is generally fulfilling at least two different functions: first, to free-up parents, particularly mothers, to get back in paid employment. Second, is to foster the physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children, as also stated by Sylva et al's (2011, p. 40) statement "...children who experience early non-maternal care are not necessarily at a disadvantage, as good quality child-care and the experience of early nursery care appear to facilitate children's development"

In contrast, studies have also shown that parents are the biggest influence on the development of their children in all areas particularly the emotional, moral, and social development of their children (Sylva et al 2011, Papalia et al., 2002). This is because concerns have been raised by

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some studies that care givers in non-maternal care settings may spend less time in a one-to-one interactions than the young children will have in their own homes. Sylva et al (2011, p. 19) argue that that this is a very important concern as researches have shown that child development, requires complex social interaction with warm, sensitive adults, particularly in the early years. But the conclusion drew from this particular study (Sylva et al, 2011p. 40), as stated earlier above, insights that good quality early nursery care also facilitates children's development. However, they reiterated that even when controlling measures for the effects of the quality of non-maternal care have been put in place; it had been proven that more hours of care are usually associated with socio-emotional adjustment challenges in young children (particularly ages 2 – 3, 4 & a half and beyond . “While high quality care is likely to be beneficial, especially in the short to medium term, its effects are unlikely to override other important predictors of developmental outcomes, such as cumulative hours in child-care” (Sylva et al (2011, p. 21).

This school of thought has been particularly strengthened by the recent RTE Prime Time Investigation program tagged “Breach of Trust”, a documentary broadcast on the 28th of May, 2013, revealing video footages of under-cover RTE reporters of some sub-standard care given to young children (RTE Prime Time, 2013). This has sparked up a debate across the Irish community.

Some, as highlighted above, believe that care for young children (particularly 0 – 4 years) offered by childcare services is beneficial in the psychosocial development of the children, while some debates support the fact that parents are the best care-givers for their children. David Coleman, a Clinical Psychologist (Irish Independent, 2013), is of the opinion that parents in Ireland are lacking in this role particularly for the children within the birth to three years age block, he believes it is parental involvement in the life of their child that is the

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single biggest predictor of school success, irrespective of their attendance at crèche or preschool. He opined that tax policies in Ireland are anti-family and the children are paying the price, since both parents are coaxed into working, while having their children cared for by childcare services. This belief is also supported by two Irish Newspaper columnists: Breda O'Brien (Irish Times) and Martina Devlin (Irish Independent), who both believe that the Irish state's pushing the productivity of women as members of the society has taken precedence over the quality care of children (Irish Times, 2013; Irish Independent, 2013).

The researcher for the purpose of this study will be taking the stance that childcare services fulfil two different functions in line with the researches of Omar et al (2010) and Sylva et al (2011): to free-up parents especially mothers to return to paid employment and contribution to the development of children particularly the birth to six age block.

The characterization of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland has not been inclusive of all settings for children in the birth to six age group, with a division existing between school and non-school settings. Such a division is not acceptable for advancing towards a cohesive, coordinated ECCE sector in Ireland, especially the separation between the concepts of care and education. Over the past years, major policy papers have recognized that care and education are indivisible elements in a child's life (Fallon, 2005, p. 289).

This has led to the development of The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – NQF (Soilta), the first national set of best practice standards for early childhood care and education in Ireland. It was designed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education - CECDE (closed in November 2008 due to government rationalization move - O'Hara, 2010, p. 373) and launched in May 2006 by the Irish Minister for Children (Doyle et al, 2011, pp. 164-165). This manual encourages providers and potential providers to obtain professional qualifications with development plan, demonstrate

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skill levels and knowledge regarding roles and responsibilities, develop key principles and vision in their childcare settings, share information with other professionals, demonstrate sensitivity and regard for children and their families including catering for special needs. Also, the Pre-school regulation 2006 was amended from the previous (abolished 1996 and 1997) ones by the department of Health and Children to uphold standard of care and ensure high quality is maintained by providers of pre-school services (RTE Primetime Documentary, 2013).

However, Walsh (2007, p. 6) in describing the various initiatives on quality in the Irish childcare context stresses that the theme of quality within ECCE services is comprised of research that is generic in nature rather than specific to any of the 16 national Standards of Siolta. Barnes and Adamczyk, 1993; Rivera, 2001 (cited in Omar et al, 2010, p. 4441) are of the view that despite growing demand for childcare services and their critical role in children's development, childcare service providers unlike other services have been slow to applying marketing principles to their businesses. Hence, the delivery and quality of this important consumer service has implications not only for direct customers of this service such as parents but also for users of the service (children) as well as the society as a whole (Omar et al, 2010, 4441).

Against this backdrop, this research topic is geared towards identifying the service quality perception of childcare providers' customers (parents) following the revelation of the RTE Prime Time documentary (RTE, 2013) and the roll-out of the NQF framework which began in January 2010 (Doyle et al, 2011, pp. 164-165), and their actual experiences with a view to equipping the childcare providers/others with the information to aid/improve their provisions of care and education services in this new dispensation as dictated by the current economic climate.

1.2.1 Personal Interest in the topic

The researcher choose the topic because she is already familiar with the Irish childcare business model through a professional childcare training course she took a while back and also about 2 years work experience within the sector. Since then, she has developed a particular interest in this business sector which has been illuminated by this MBA Business Management course.

1.3 Statement of research question and contribution

My main aim for undertaking this paper is to answer the following main research question:

“How do parents (customers) perceive service quality in Irish childcare providers?”

Answering this question will be done by posing the following sub-research questions:

1. What is the relationship between childcare service quality and parents’ satisfaction?
2. What is the relationship between parents’ satisfaction and loyalty?
3. How does parents’ satisfaction impact positively/negatively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers?
4. What quality improvements (if any) are desired by the Irish childcare customers (parents)?

Answering the stated research questions will be achieved by examining **these objectives**, starting with:

1. To explore the key factors affecting parents’ perception of service quality in Irish childcare providers.

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2. To describe the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction.

The rationale for these will be to find out what quality factors affect the satisfaction of childcare customers (parents). This will be beneficial for new and existing childcare providers to explore what factors trigger their customers' choice of a service over others and satisfaction. This will allow the forming of a framework or key concepts since Omar et al (2010) suggest that the choice is in the hands of the customers (parents).

This leads to the third and fourth objectives:

3. To describe the relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty to Irish childcare providers.
4. To identify how parents' satisfaction impacts positively or negatively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers.

The rationale for these objectives will be to find out if the quality triggers discovered indeed lead to favourable or unfavourable customer behaviours – loyalty / disloyalty, as suggested by Omar et al (2010).

This leads to the fifth objective:

5. To identify the quality improvements desired by the Irish childcare customers.

The researcher's overall intention and contribution to Irish childcare service customers' (parent's) perception of quality is to find out what quality factors trigger parental satisfaction, enabling childcare services to find out what appeals to parents as customers, so that they can exploit these marketing practices in the correct way. This will make a positive impact and a beneficial contribution by allowing Irish childcare providers to focus on high standard service

delivery and parents' satisfaction to build a long-term relationship between parents and firms, tying-in with Omar et al's (2010) discovery.

1.4 Approach to dissertation

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, a literature review will be conducted to examine the theories and concepts of customer quality perception that are currently found in literature and then complement this secondary research with an exploration of their application in the primary research. In addition to the extensive secondary research, involving academic journals, books and current newspapers of the childcare service area, the researcher will be undertaking a primary research on the Irish childcare providers' customers using semi-structured interviews to understand what influences customers' favourable behaviours as stated in the objectives above.

1.5 Organisation of the dissertation

To build on the initial part of this paper: the introduction of the researcher's intended research (*chapter 1*), *chapter 2* will present the literature review of the childcare service customer quality perception theories and concepts that intend to justify the research topic, this chapter will be divided into several sub-sections to explain several angles of the topic. *Chapter 3* introduces the proposed research methodology for the primary and secondary research. The chapter will reflect on the used techniques for the research including strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methodology, and the activities carried out, while providing a brief discussion on the validity and reliability of the chosen methodology. *Chapter 4* will present the data findings and an analysis/discussion of how the findings relate to the literature review as well as the researcher's interpretation of them. *Chapter 5* will present the conclusions and recommendations, which aims to conclude what the findings mean for the chosen research

area, how it connects to the research question and how it relates to today's business environment. It will also present recommendations based on the analyses and conclusions drawn from research findings, as well as recommendations for further research which will add on to this or other current researches. *Chapter 6* presents the self-reflection account of the researcher throughout the masters studies. The bibliography follows after this, presenting the list of materials consulted by the researcher. Finally, the appendices and list of tables follow with the interview guide and other supporting documents.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

The initial step in determining scope of the study is to choose the area/field of study – customer service quality perception within the context of Irish childcare. The current debate sparked by the recent RTE Prime Time documentary “The Breach of Trust” brought another angle that could not be ignored.

The amount of current and available literature specifically for the Irish childcare service customer perception of quality is limited; this effectively impacted the literature review, consequently giving it a general overview for several industries and countries without a specific target. On the contrary, it opened up the opportunity to explore this (Irish childcare service customer quality perception) in the primary research. The primary data collection was also limited by the fact that childcare service providers were unwilling to give access for its collection. Several Childcare providers (community, chains and owner-managed) were contacted and approached with a view to gaining access for data collection, but only about four childcare providers granted initial access. Eventually, only one childcare service granted access while all others denied the researcher access explaining that they cannot accommodate this study giving all manner of excuses, but it is apparent, that in the face of the recent development, they do not want to further expose their operations to public scrutiny.

1.7 Conclusion

The section has introduced the contextual background, setting the scene that has necessitated this study. This has been triggered by the recent “Breach of Trust” documentary. It outlined the research question, its approach and organisation of the research while defining the scope and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents the current theories and concepts of customer service quality perception that are currently found in literature, it presents the various sub-sections like the customer service quality perception, satisfaction and Loyalty etc. The chapter presents the Irish childcare context alongside some of its regulatory bodies and ends with a brief summary.

2.2 Customer Service Quality Perception, Satisfaction and Loyalty

Many studies have focused on exploring the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioural outcomes (Lee, 2011, p. 1). A general belief is that high quality service leads to customer satisfaction and other desirable customer behaviours such as loyalty, greater willingness to make a recommendation to someone else, reduction in complaints and an improved customer retention rate (Zeithaml et al, 1996; Bitner, 1990).

2.3 Customer Service Quality Perception

Service quality from a customer perspective is a widely researched area. Parasuraman et al (1988, p. 24) defined service quality from the customers' perspectives as the "difference between customer expectations of service and the perceptions of the actual service received". Service quality has been described as a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction (Parasuraman et al, 1988; Bolton & Drew, (1991). Lee (2013, p. 2) describes service quality as a complex concept having multi-faceted dimensions. Several researches have been reported in the last number of years to verify service quality dimensions.

Gronroos' (1984) two-dimensional model describes service quality as a) technical quality: what customer receives and b) functional quality: how a service is provided or delivered. SERVQUAL model is the most widely used instrument of measuring service quality (Lee,

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2011, p. 2). The model's five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are developed into an expectation-perception gap score scaled into a multiple 22- item study instrument (Parasuraman et al, 1988, 24).

Researchers have varying views about the best way to conceptualize the SERVQUAL instrument. Cronin & Taylor (1992) and Teas (1994) argued that performance measures of perceived quality are better than the "perceptions minus expectations measures". While Cronin & Taylor (1992) are of the view that "perceptions" explains more variances in the structural model, Parasuraman et al (1993) argues that this is dependent on the objective of the study; gap scores are useful for the purpose of diagnosing service shortfalls, whereas perception ratings alone are useful when explaining the variance in some dependent variables.

Many past researches have revealed that service quality perception can be viewed as a form of attitude that is related to but not equal to satisfaction, which results from comparing expectations with performance (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Lee, 2010a). Some conceptual and empirical studies have also inferred that service quality is made of service product, service environment and service delivery (Rust and Oliver, 1994) or interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality as suggested by Brady and Cronin (2001) and Lee (2011)

Hence, since the researcher's objectives of the study is to explore the interrelationship of the three constructs (service quality perception, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty) in the structural model, the researcher will be adopting the perception score of service quality (Cronin & Taylor, 1992) rather than the gap score (difference between expectation and perceptions of service performance).

2.4 Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Oliver (1981) defined **customer satisfaction** as the “summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding confirmed or disconfirmed expectation is coupled with the consumer’s prior feelings about the consumption experience”. He suggested that an individual’s expectations are (a) confirmed when a product performs as expected, (b) negatively disconfirmed when the product performs more poorly than expected, and (c) positively disconfirmed when the product performs better than expected. This paradigm, known as *confirmation/disconfirmation*, leads to an emotional reaction called *satisfaction* or *dissatisfaction*. But, Churchill and Surprenant (1982) infer that satisfaction can be viewed as an attitude, due to be assessed as the sum of satisfactions with various attributes of a product or a service. And Caruana et al. (2000) suggested that satisfaction can be considered as a post-decision experience concept, whereas an attitude can be viewed as a pre-decision construct. Rust et al (1994) discovered that customer satisfaction and delight are both highly influenced by customer expectations (what is likely to happen on average).

Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) defined customer satisfaction as a consumer’s fulfilment response. In this regards, satisfaction can be considered as a judgment that “a product or service feature, or product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment”. Lee (2013) explains that customer satisfaction can be explained as the degree of a customer’s positive feeling towards a service provider, hence very important for service organisations to gain an understanding of the customer perception degree in their service. Deng et al, (2009) suggest that a high level customer satisfaction may have a positive effect on customer loyalty, while Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Zeithaml et al (1996) are of the view that favourable behavioural intentions influence the service providers’ ability to retain their customers’ loyalty to them as well as recommending their service to other customers. The researcher will be adopting the above views in the course of this study.

Customer loyalty is defined as “the feeling of attachment to or affection for a company’s people, products or services” (Jones & Sasser, 1995, p. 94). Although marketing researchers favour the use of behavioural scales to assess customer loyalty, the exclusive use of behavioural scale as a loyalty measure has been criticised because behavioural loyalty can be influenced by a variety of circumstantial constraints such as accessibility of services or products (Dick & Basu, 1994). Dick & Basu (1994) argue that in this situation, behavioural scale may fail to distinguish between spurious loyalty from true loyalty. Hence, Baloglu (2002) proposed an attitudinal measure scale to reflect trust and emotional attachment. Customer loyalty is not only the ultimate object for customer satisfaction measurement, but also a key determinant of a firm’s long term viability (Deng et al, 2009). As suggested by Fornell (1992), the higher the level of satisfaction, the greater the customer loyalty level.

Going by the suggestion of Dick & Basu (1994), that a behavioural - attitudinal measure is necessary to fully appreciate the picture of customer loyalty, the researcher will be adopting the customer loyalty concept that bears both behavioural and attitudinal aspects.

2.5 Relationship among Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty

Lee (2013, p. 3) like many other studies (like Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al, 1996) posit service quality to be an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Several studies have also found a direct positive link between service quality perceptions and customer behavioural intentions inferring that the two constructs have a strong causal relationship (Zeithaml et al, 1996; Cronin et al, 1997; Cronin et al, 2000).

However, many service literatures have reported that early research efforts focused on preventing confusion between customer satisfaction and service quality by determining

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whether there is any distinction between the two (Bitner, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1993). Customer satisfaction as suggested by Oliver (1980) results from comparing the experience of service quality (which is encountered) with what was expected.

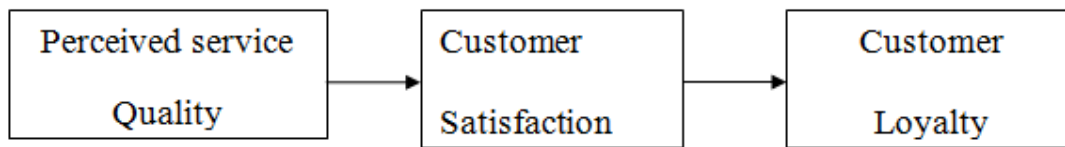
There are also contradictory views on whether or not customer satisfaction or service quality directly affects customer loyalty. Kim (2011, p. 623) suggests that the conceptual conflict has resulted from Parasurman et al's (1988) definition of service quality; "a form of attitude, which is related but not equivalent to customer satisfaction, and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance". Bitner (1990) supported this definition and asserted that satisfaction derived from individual transactions lead to service quality (or attitude), which in turn leads to customer loyalty. Cronin and Taylor (1992) on the other hand, propose that service quality mediates customer satisfaction and future buying intentions: customer satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality.

Kim (2011, P. 624) assert that, though Cronin and Taylor (1992) demonstrated that customer satisfaction has a more significant effect on customer loyalty than service quality; it seems feasible that both factors could influence customer loyalty significantly.

Nielsen (2000) suggested that "companies look increasing to quality, satisfaction and loyalty as keys to achieving market leadership. Understanding what drives these critical elements, how they are linked, and how they contribute to your company's overall equity is fundamental to success". The researcher in the light of the above statement will be utilising Kim's (2011, p. 632) assertion that customer's perception of quality has an indirect influence on customer loyalty via customer satisfaction, as seen in the framework below. This also confirms that customers' decisions to remain loyal depend directly on their satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

2.5.1 Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Perceived Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty.



Source: Adapted from Kim, 2011, p. 632.

2.5.2 Perceived Value as Moderator in Service Quality and Satisfaction

Perceived value as asserted by Zeithaml (1988) is defined as the trade-off between the benefits and sacrifices. Lee (2010a) infers that perceived value can be seen as the outcomes or the benefits gained by customers relative to the total cost they paid. Whereas Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived value as “the consumer’s overall assessment of utility of product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given”. Perceived value plays a moderating role in the relation of service quality and satisfaction with researchers (Caruana et al 2000 and Ryu and Han 2010) agreeing that there is a combined effect of perceived value and quality on satisfaction.

2.5.3 Perceived Price as Moderator in Service Quality and Satisfaction

Lee (2013) asserts that the distinction between objective price (the actual price of a product) and perceived price (the price as encoded by customers) indicates that the objective monetary price is frequently not the price encoded by the consumer. Perceived price focuses on customers’ concerns as to whether they are being charged more than or about the same as charged by competitors. However, Zeithaml (1988) infers that consumer perception of value is highly related to the perception of price, and that the measurement of perceived value includes price perception. Ryu and Han (2010) found that the perceived price has a significant effect on the relationship between quality and customer satisfaction. That is,

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customers' perception of a reasonable price enhances the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction.

2.5.4 Perceived Switching Cost as Moderator on Satisfaction and Loyalty

Switching cost is defined as the cost of changing services in terms of time, monetary value, and psychological factor (Dick and Basu, 1994). Lee (2013, p. 4) advised that switching cost does not only create barriers to customer churn, but also weakens the effect of satisfaction on customer loyalty. Lee et al. (2001) discovered that the link between customer satisfaction and loyalty is weak when switching cost increases. Their results show that when customers perceive that they must spend a greater amount of time and effort to search for service providers with a higher level of customer satisfaction, they are more willing to keep their current service providers no matter how high or low the satisfaction is.

These three preceding sub-sections have implication for the researcher as she will be adopting this notion in the course of the study, to see whether or not perceived value, perceived price and perceived switching cost have effect on the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the context of the study. Lee (2013, p. 7) suggested that practitioners should determine exactly what roles perceived value, perceived price, and perceived switching cost plays in their customers' satisfaction and loyalty. The author suggested that marketing practitioners should incorporate the cost into their customer loyalty relations if perceived switching cost plays a crucial role in the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and they may be better able to improve customer satisfaction if perceived value and price plays a significant role in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

2.6 Childcare in Ireland

Ireland as stated earlier, has witnessed significant social and economic changes in the last decade due to the economic boom (O'Hara, 2010, p. 360). The focus on childcare has grown as labour force participation (in particular among women) has increased, creating a greater demand for non-parental childcare (Central Statistics Office, 2009). However, Barry and Sherlock (2008, p. 2) asserted that:

“Public provision of care services is at an extremely low level in Ireland. Childcare is largely available only on the private marketplace or within informal extended family and community contexts, with the exception of a small amount of publicly funded childcare in geographical areas designated as disadvantaged. Ireland has no comprehensive provision for pre-school childcare or education”.

This was also highlighted by the European Union 2007 Spring Council recommendation (country-specific) to Ireland and some other member states requesting them to put plans in place to increase their childcare provisions or to improve the work-family life balance (Barry and Sherlock, 2008, p. 27). O'Hara (2010, p. 360) suggests that because of the transient nature of childhood, it is imperative to make the best possible use of it, by investing early in their education, care and development that will ensure a well-balanced future for children and society.

O'Hara (2010, p. 360) suggests that ‘‘childcare’’ refers to day-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children. This includes naionrai, day-care services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups. ‘‘Full day-care service’’ allows providers to operate a service for up to five/more hours per day. Pre-schools offer a structured day-care service for pre-school children, which may include a Sessional Pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day-care service. Typically each premise is broken down into various rooms; for example, baby room, wobbler room,

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toddler room, and pre-school room. A child is assigned a room depending on age, stage and ability (Department of Health and Children, 2006).

All childcare facility proprietors must register with the Health Service Executive (who is responsible for the inspection of the pre-school services) and must adhere to standards in compliance with the Pre-school Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006) and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education NFQ (Soilta). In providing good quality childcare, staff must be trained; in Ireland the minimum standard is FETAC Level 5, which replaced Level 2 for childcare workers, and FETAC Level 6 for Managers. Some staffs are also trained in Montessori (O'Hara 2010, p. 363).

2.6.1 Pre-School Regulations - Appendix 1

2.6.2 Soilta: National Quality Framework (NQF) - Appendix 2

2.6.3 Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework – Appendix 3

2.7 The case of Fife Childcare Service

For the purpose of this study, Fife childcare provider has been chosen as a case study. According to the service manager (via a brief interview) Fife Childcare service is a provider of good quality childcare and early years education for babies, wobblers, toddlers, pre-School and after School children. This not-for-profit business entity is a community service that has been providing full-time, part-time and sessional services in its purpose-designed crèche in the Dublin area since its inception in 1984. It currently has about 39 and 30 children who use the service on a full-time and a part-time basis respectively. There are currently six full-time, six part-time and sixteen community employment (CE) staffs who all have qualifications in childcare and are Gardai (The Irish Police) vetted which is the legal requirement for those

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working with children and vulnerable adults. The CE staffs are paid directly by the Irish Government through FAS (The Irish Training and Employment Agency). Fife childcare service has about fifty parents currently, some of whom have more than one child using in the service.

The manager advised that the service provides good quality and is a well reputed service within the local community where it is situated. The service operates within the specifications of the Pre-school Regulations, Soilta: the National Quality Framework and Aistear: the Early Childhood Quality Framework mentioned earlier. Majority of the children that use the service from baby continue on in the service until pre-school and after-school years with some even beginning to use the service for their own children or to gain work-experience for their studies/training. It is a good place to work with little or no staff-churn as some staff members have been working there since the last 14 to 15 years.

The service like any other childcare provider services the various government childcare schemes (see appendices) like Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), and Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) which are administered by the Local City or County Childcare Committee and Pobal on behalf of the Irish government. It is also entitled to access the various Irish government/European Union (EU) funding (administered by Pobal and other agencies) available to both for-profit and non-profit childcare services provided they fulfil the eligibility criteria for the various funding schemes.

2.7.1 Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme - Appendix 4

2.7.2 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme - Appendix 5

2.7.3 Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme - Appendix 6

2.7.4 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) - Appendix 7

2.7.5 Pobal - Appendix 8

2.7.6 Community Employment - Appendix 9

2.7.7 Community Crèches /Non-Profit Organisations - Appendix 10

2.8 Parents as customers

Fenech (2011, p.102) suggest that it is important for parents' knowledge of quality to align completely with expert understandings. According to Fenech (2011, p. 102) there is an urgent need for parents who are informed consumers to drive quality improvements in childcare centres, suggesting that there is potential for parents to become a powerful consumer advocacy force.

It is in the light of this, that this research will be exploring the service quality perception of the parents who have their children in the formal childcare service as “customers”, with a view to equipping the childcare services providers/others with the information to aid/improve their provisions of care and education services, especially in this climate of recession.

2.9 Childcare providers customers' service quality perception

As stated earlier, the growing demand for childcare, an important consumer service has made its quality delivery significant, not only for direct customers of this service such as parents but also for users of the service (the children) as well as the society as a whole (Omar et al, 2010, p. 4441). Quality here is defined (Blau and Mocan, 2002, p. 484) “as the developmental appropriateness of the care provided and is assumed to be observable by consumers” (parents). Katz (1993; cited in Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002, p. 88) is of the view that quality in early childhood care and education is a relative concept that is subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests of the stakeholders.

Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002, p. 88) are of the view that the definition of quality will vary, depending on the needs and values of the stakeholders in question: children, parents, families, employers, providers and society. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) also asserts that quality in childcare is difficult to define, and should be seen as an evolving process, a continuum rather than an end result for individuals and collectives, including a diversity of perspectives (Duignan et al, 2005. P. 25). Research proven necessity for a set of quality standards emphasises that best practice in relation to childcare environment should incorporate:

“...a child-centred focus, clear adult/child ratios, staff support and team building, qualification of practitioners, an infrastructure supporting parents involvement, curriculum, clear assessment protocols, observation tools for staff/child interactions, a respect for diversity, infrastructure development which builds upon existing networks; consistency in assessments which account for all stakeholders; adequate governmental policy and financial support” (Duignan et al, 2005. P. 25).

Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002, p. 88) argue that quality from the parents' perspective is usually defined in relation to the needs of the family and child. Parental perceptions have

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been proven to reinforce and extend current formulations of childcare service quality (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Da Silva & Wise, 2006).

Although O'Hara et al, (2010, p. 362) suggests that in the Irish context, numerous research studies on quality and advancing early childhood care and education (ECCE) have been conducted by the centre for early childhood and development (Duignan and Walsh, 2005, Duignam et al, 2007 etc.), the researcher found the **following gaps** (with reference to the literatures discovered by her) that these researches have been done only from many researchers and professional/policy-makers' view points. This confirms Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002, p. 88) suggestion that out of the four perspectives on the quality of childcare, the researcher/professional perspective is considered more often than the other three (Childcare staff, parents and children perspectives) to inform childcare policy.

Also, the researcher found that though O'Hara et al's study (conducted in the Irish context) drew data from parents' perspectives, its approach was quantitative (deductive).

Hence, the researcher will be conducting a qualitative primary research to draw primary data from the parents' perspectives, using the childcare satisfaction model (which reflects how a parent feels about his or her child's childcare arrangement) suggested by Poms et al (2009) in exploring the overall research question of finding out how parents perceive service quality in the context of childcare providers. The model will be incorporated with the suggestion of Emlen's (1999) scale of measuring parents' perception of their childcare arrangements.

2.10 *Quality Improvement in Irish Childcare Providers*

The Irish government through the Department of health and children and the Health Services Executives (HSE) is constantly looking for ways of improving the care and education of

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children in Ireland. This has implication for childcare service providers in Ireland, heightened by the recent RTE Prime Time “Breach of Trust” documentary.

To this end, Munton and Mooney (1999) suggest the use of *Self-evaluation tool*, a key element of several successful school improvement initiatives, which has been used for some early years’ service providers to drive quality improvements in childcare services. But they argue that developing self-assessment as an effective tool for raising standards in early years (childcare) settings might require greater understanding of organizational processes typical of service providers in this sector. This tool will help childcare providers describe processes by which they establish priorities for change, develop action plans, and subsequently implement change to ensure high care/service standards are continually maintained, while allaying potential risks that may occur.

2.11 Conclusion

Summarily, in relations to my main research question “*How do parents perceive service quality in Irish childcare providers*”, the literature review has provided many interesting insights. The review shows that though several researches have been done by the Department of Health and children and the Health Services Executive (HSE) to advance the quality standards of the childcare service provisions in the Irish context, a significantly few number have been done from the parents’ perspective, hence, the need for this study.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

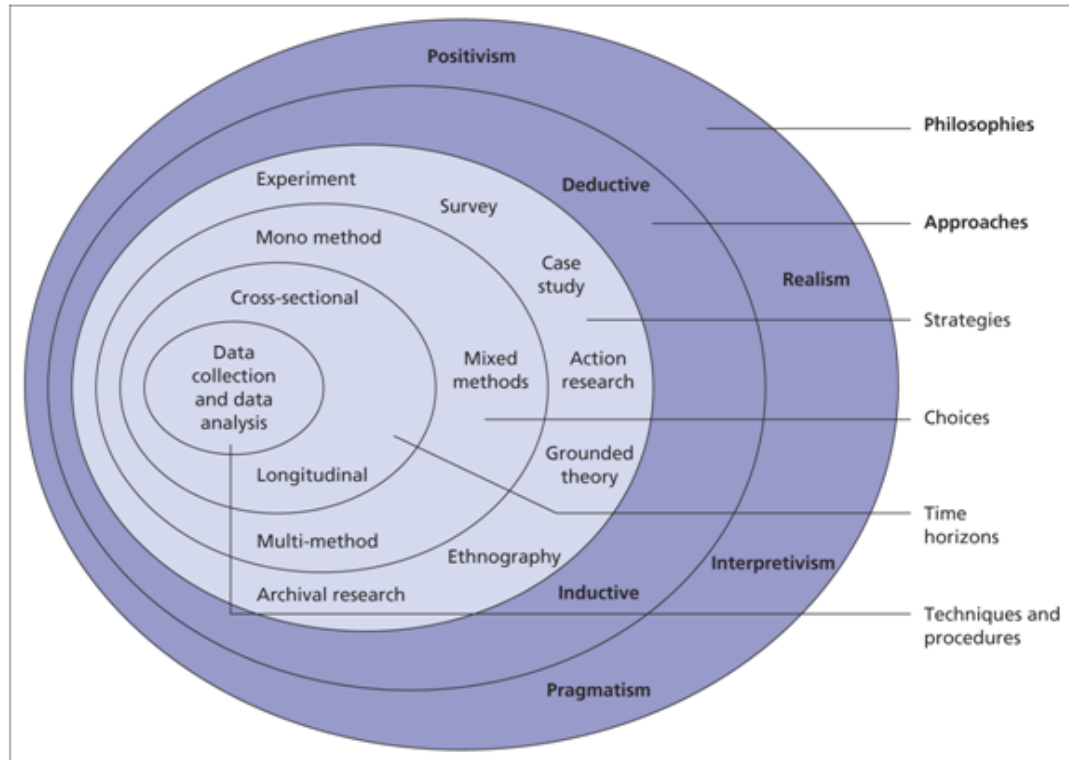
The following chapter presents the underlying methodology and techniques used in the primary and secondary data collection and the analysis for this study. It further addresses the justification for the qualitative research methodology, and then addresses the reliability, validity and the limitations of this qualitative research.

3.2 Methodology

Saunders et al (2009, p. 5) defines research as the systematic collection and interpretation of information to find out things. Methodology refers to the process and procedures of the research. Research method usually takes off from one's position on ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132). It refers to the tools of data collection and analysis. Methodology deals with the approach or paradigm that underpins the research. The objective of the methodology is to outline the particular rationale to conducting primary research. To this end the research "onions" was employed:

3.2.1 *Figure 2 Research Onions*

Figure 2 Research Onions.



Source: Saunders et al, 2009, p. 108.

3.3 *Research Philosophy*

Holden and Lynch (2004, p. 407) state that the review of philosophy is an important part of the research process because it opens the researcher up to possibilities allowing for their research skills enrichment and confidence enhancement that they are using the appropriate methodology. According to Saunders *et al* (2009, p.106), the philosophical perspectives of business research are positivism, realism, pragmatism and interpretivism. There are two major ways of thinking about research philosophy, each of which has different influence on our thought of the research process, they are: ontology and epistemology. “Ontology defines

epistemology, which in turn defines methodology, which then determines applied methods” (Slevitch, 2011, p. 75).

3.3.1 *Ontology*

Ontology is concerned about the nature of reality and being (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132). The central point is to determine if social entities can and should be regarded as objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or if they can and should be referred to as social constructions built up from social actors’ perceptions and actions. (Bryman, 2008, p. 18).

Ontological positions establish our process of knowing. There are two aspects of ontology: objectivism and constructionism/constructivism/subjectivism. Bryman (2008, p. 19) states that “Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors”. The researcher adopted the *constructionism/constructivism* ontological position which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It is a view that social phenomena (which are continually revising) are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors (Saunders *et al*, 2009, p.111). That is a reality is influenced by the context of the situations which are the individual’s experience and perceptions, the social environment, and the interaction between the individual and the researcher.

3.3.2 *Epistemology*

Epistemology is a theory of knowledge concerned with the nature and the scope of knowledge (Slevitch, 2011, p. 74). It is interested in the connection between the “knower”

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(research participant) and the “would-be knower” (the researcher). According to Bryman (2008, p. 13) the central issue here is to determine whether or not the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences.

There are three possible stances that could be taken on the epistemological perspective: they are realism, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism affirms the imitation of the natural sciences. The role of research here is to test theories and provide material for the development of laws. Realism shares two features with positivism. It believes that natural and social sciences can and should use the same data collection and explanation and also that there is a reality that is separate from our interpretation of it (Bryman, 2008, p. 14). The researcher took the *interpretivism* perspective which as stated by Bryman, (2008, p. 16) is an alternative to positivist orthodoxy that has been influential for decades. It is built on the notion that a strategy that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences is required to enable the social scientist to gain the subjective meaning of social action. It is a transactional and subjectivist position allowing for the dynamic interaction between researcher and participants which is vital to the capturing and describing the participants’ lived experiences, since reality is socially constructed (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

This confirms Ponterotto’s (2005, p. 130) suggestion that a “constructivist–interpretivist researcher may interview only a handful of clients for longer periods of time and when analyzing the transcript data will not seek other researchers’ consensus on identified themes”. This will allow for the multiple expressions of meaning of an event or issue and interpretation of data (multiple realities).

3.4 Research Approach

According to Saunders et al (2009, p. 124), there are two approaches that can be taken: deduction and induction. This research had an *inductive* approach (a collection of qualitative data) in which research questions are developed to gain an understanding of the meaning humans attach to events, (childcare providers' customers). The inductive approach is more related to a transactional and subjectivist position allowing for the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant. This allowed for the multiple expressions of meaning of an event or issue (in this case: customers'/parents' quality perception) and interpretation of data (multiple realities).

3.5 Research strategy

Amidst the several research strategies: experiment, survey, case-study, action research, grounded research, ethnography and archival research, the researcher adopted the **single case** study strategy for this research. It represents a unique case, allowed the understanding of what causes a phenomenon while linking causes with outcomes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 314) as well as generated a discernment of the context of the research (Irish childcare providers).

There were 5 embedded cases of the various sections (baby, wobblers, toddlers, pre-school, and after-school) of the childcare service. The researcher interviewed eight parents across these various rooms. One major advantage of case study strategy is that it allows the use of *triangulation*. This is the use of different data collection techniques within one study in order to ensure that the accuracy of data collected (Saunders et al 2009, p. 146). Konecki (2008, p. 15) describes it as a tool to verify the validity of connections between the indicator and the term by means of other indicators which subsequently serves a final verification of the

validity of the analysis and the validity of the conclusion on the basis of collected data. However, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 314) the case study strategy has the following weaknesses:

3.5.1 Weaknesses of Case Study Strategy

1. Selection bias may overstate or understate relationship: The process of selecting a case for research may be biased in defining the researcher's relationship with the phenomenon/organisation under study. This may be vaguely defined.
2. Weak understanding of occurrence in population of phenomenon under study: The researcher may not be knowledgeable enough on the occurrence of the subject of study in that particular population.
3. Statistical significance often unknown or unclear: This relates to the validity of the findings of the study as a case study may not be representative of the population, hence the generalisation of study findings may be difficult.

These have implication for the researcher's sample size of a single case which is just the particular chosen childcare provider.

3.6 Research Choice

A *multi-method qualitative* selection was chosen for this study. It is the collection (using more than one data collection technique) and analysis of the qualitative data using non-numerical (qualitative) procedures, but it is restricted within either the quantitative or qualitative (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 155). Hence the researcher chose to collect qualitative data using semi-structured interviews and researchers' diary. This allowed for facilitation of research and as stated earlier the triangulation of multiple sources of data (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 155).

3.7 Time Horizons

There are two different approaches in terms of time horizon stipulated by Saunders et al. (2009, p. 155). The longitudinal referred to as a “diary” perspective time horizon, which requires accumulating data over a long period of time and the cross-sectional also known as “snap shot” time horizon. The *cross-sectional studies* time horizon, which can be described as the study of an exact phenomenon at a particular point in time (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 155) was employed for this research. The researcher interviewed a cross-section of the population to analyse their perceptions of the service quality of the childcare providers. This type of design is appropriate for studies (academic studies like this, that are usually time constrained) focused on finding out the occurrence of a phenomenon, situation, problem or issue at a certain moment in time by taking a sample of the population.

3.8 Data Collection Tools

As this is an exploratory study, the data collection technique was an inductive approach employing both primary and secondary data collection techniques. Different collection techniques will be used to triangulate multiple sources of primary data.

3.8.1 Qualitative primary data collection tools

- ***Semi-structured interviews:*** Interviews are primary data collection tool described by Kahn and Cannell, 1957 (cited in Saunders et al., 2009, p. 318) as “a purposeful discussion between two or more people” that aids the collection of valid and reliable data relevant to research questions and objectives. The researcher collected primary data using semi-structured interviews, a particular type of interview structure that allows a list of themes and questions to be covered, while allowing for additional

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questions (probing questions) to explore the research questions and objectives (see appendix 13).

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with *eight* respondents - Fife childcare's parents/customers across the various rooms (see Appendix 12) lasting between 20 – 40mins in Fife childcare between the 9th and the 26th of July (See Appendix 11). The participants were given an information briefing about the study so as to make informed decisions and were told that confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured. The data was recorded with an audio-recorder (voice recorder application on an android mobile phone) which was fully transcribed after the interview sessions by the researcher as it went along. Marschan-Perkkari and Welch (2005, pp. 186-188) suggest that the main advantage of interviews is the ability to uncover more complete answers that might be answered at a more superficial level through written questionnaires/survey research. This may be necessary to gain honest and accurate responses and add insights that lay the groundwork for larger follow-up studies. The researcher also conducted a brief interview with the childcare service manager to gather some background information and hence aided the data analysis.

However, it is imperative to mention that primary data collection was extremely difficult. Some of the providers that had agreed to participate in the study before the RTE Primetime programme documentary titled the "Breach of trust" was aired on television changed their minds after the programme. Out of the childcare services approached for access, only about four service providers granted initial access. One of them that had been informed four months before the research commenced denied permission with less than 7 weeks to the dissertation due date. Eventually, only one

(Fife Childcare) granted permission for the research study to be carried out within her organisational context. Interview sessions spanned over two weeks with difficulty experienced in scheduling interview sessions with the parents (Initial intention was to have at least twelve interviews with parents of different nationalities). This had implication for the timing of the research as it delayed the research process.

- **Researcher diary:** The researcher also employed a diary which is designed to capture the “little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention” (Wheeler & Reis 1991, p. 340; cited in Bolger et al, 2003, p. 580). Its purpose is not primarily about the presentation of the research to others, but lubricates the research process through recording observations, thoughts and questions as they happen, used later by the researcher to stimulate reflective thinking about the research (see Appendix 18).

3.8.2 *Qualitative Secondary data collection tool*

Qualitative secondary data is a kind of qualitative analysis which aids in the construction of primary research. This was collected from academic journals, books, government publications, newspapers articles, company administrative documents and industry reports and statistics that relates to these areas. During the research, the researcher to a large extent used the Dublin Business School’s EBSCOHost database and Business Source Complete and used various keywords to search literature in different media that address the chosen topic. The same method was adopted to find theories and concepts relating to research methodology in order to understand the key aspects of the areas involved to aid the understanding of the processes, methods used and to illustrate the researcher’s thought process when conducting the study.

3.9 Sampling Method

Owing to the restriction of time, money, and access, the researcher adopted the ***non-probability sampling*** technique which allowed the researcher to use her judgement to select a sample that best answered the research questions. Therefore all members that would be representative of the study did not have the same chance of being selected. The researcher chose the ***purposive (judgemental) sampling*** which is a non-probability sampling that is particularly useful when working with small samples, such as a case study researches and allowed the researcher to use her judgement to select cases that will best answer the research questions and meet the objectives (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 237). This was because it was not feasible to get all the names of the parents in the childcare services. Consequently, this allowed the researcher an easier access to potential participants while using a low cost method. Although, non-probability samples can often generate interesting and useful findings, it is pertinent to reflect on how it differs from an ideal; hence generalisation should be done with caution. An ideal sample would show a balance of the different demographic groups represented (gender, age, occupation, nationality etc) to obtain an even spread over the demographic groups represented. The result of the obtained sample is presented in *Chapter 4 – Findings and Analysis*.

3.10 Population and Sample

The population for this research were the parents (customers) of the Childcare providers in Ireland altogether (it was not feasible to get the list of parents in these various services) including the parents in this childcare service: Fife childcare. The sample size for the semi-structured interview sessions was eight parents (customers) of Fife Childcare service.

3.11 Data Analysis Tools

Bryman (2006, P. 539) advise that qualitative data analysis defer from quantitative analysis in that with the latter, analysis occurs after data have been collected, whereas qualitative data analysis starts from when some data have been collected, and the findings of that initial analysis shape the following steps in the data collection process. He suggested there are several strategies of qualitative data analysis: narrative analysis, thematic analysis, grounded analysis and grounded analysis and analytic induction analysis.

The researcher ensured that data analysis began after the first interview session was over, which actually had implications for her next steps in the data collection process (making it an iterative process: a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data), in that it helped her to modify some of the words (changed: disciplinary style to instilling life lessons) and questions (added: what is quality childcare service to you) in the interview guide to aid better understanding of the questions and the data collection. The researcher adopted the qualitative data analysis and employed the following qualitative data analysis tools to analyze the data collected:

3.11.1 Transcription

The audio-taped primary data collected was transcribed by the researcher after each interview session. The transcription though a time-consuming, frustrating and sometimes boring activity was done by the researcher to get familiar with the data collected which aided the analysis, because the close-reading and interpretative skills needed to analyze the data was facilitated by the close attention dedicated to transcribing the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp.17-18). Another reason was to avoid wrong interpretation of the audio data. The transcribed data was then analyzed using the thematic analysis.

3.11.2 Coding

Coding is the starting point for most qualitative data analysis forms where by data (transcripts and/or field notes) is reviewed and broken down into component parts which are given names shaped by the researcher's interpretation of the data, unlike quantitative research that requires fitting of data into pre-conceived standardized codes (Bryman, 2008, p. 542). The researcher began coding manually after the collection of the initial data so as to manage the data and as an important first step. She used her own labels to generate initial codes from the data, while adopting some In vivo codes (words taken from that section of data as labels) as well.

3.11.3 Thematic Analysis (*Theoretical approach*)

The researcher chose the thematic analysis which involves identification of recurring themes across the transcribed talk (guided by the research questions set by the researcher during the research design phase). "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6). Thematic analysis can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to interpret the surface of reality, but the theoretical perspective of the thematic analysis should be clearly defined. The theoretical framework is the assumptions about the data its representation in the real world. Thematic analysis involves a step-by-step guide which offers flexibility, but a repetitive process.

Thematic analysis requires that a number of clearly defined choices be made before data collections (sometimes), analysis and on an ongoing reflective dialogue by the researcher or researchers throughout the analytic period. The researcher's diary was helpful to the researcher in this regard. These decisions are: (see Appendix 17).

Thematic analysis offers these advantages:

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- I. Flexibility: The researcher found that thematic analysis is flexible, easy and relatively quick method to use, even though she employed the manual style of this analysis.
- II. Data summary: It helped the researcher in summarizing vital elements of the data set but it could also give a thick description of the data set.
- III. Highlights similarities and differences: Thematic analysis as discovered by the researcher helps the comparison and contrast of the data. The various respondents compared and contrasted against one another across the various themes and sub-themes that emerged.
- IV. Social and Psychological data interpretation: It allows for social as well as psychological interpretation of data. The researcher was able to interpret the interviewees' responses in terms of the social and emotional context of the phenomenon under study: childcare service customers' quality perception.
- V. Informing Policy development: Thematic analysis is useful for producing qualitative investigations suited for informing policy development. The researcher discovered that it informed the addition/improvement to the customer quality perception, satisfaction and loyalty conceptual framework.

However, the disadvantages which are a function of a poorly conducted analyses or inappropriate research question, than of the method itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 27-28) are:

- I. Limited Interpretative power: Thematic analysis has limited interpretative strength, without an existing theoretical framework that substantiates the analytic claims made.
- II. Misconception: Thematic analysis often appears or miss-construed as done by someone lacking the appropriate skills to perform a supposedly more branded analysis like the discourse analysis or the grounded analysis.

- III. Difficult higher-phase analysis: flexibility though an advantage can become a disadvantage because it makes higher-phase analysis difficult (developing core-themes and sub-themes), this is usually frustrating for researchers in deciding what focus on data to adopt.

3.12 Ethical Consideration

Ethics are the “norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationships with others” (Cooper and Schindler, 2008. P. 34). It refers to the appropriateness of the researchers’ behaviours in relations to the rights of those who become subjects of their work, or are affected by it. The researcher has tried to evaluate values from the research process as values reflect personal beliefs or the feelings of the researcher.

According to Saunders et al, (2009, p. 184), the deontology and teleology are the two dominant philosophical standpoints. The deontological view promotes the fact that deception should never be used to collect research data while the teleological view argues that the benefits of the research findings be weighed against the cost of acting unethically, hence considering whether the research benefits are morally just. The researcher has taken the stance of *universalism* which according to Bryman (2008, p. 116) takes the view that the researcher should never break ethical precepts as this is an informed study. Breaking ethical is morally wrong and are damaging to research.

Ethics permeates through the processes and stages of research. The following are four major areas of consideration which informed the researcher’s decisions:

- ***Informed Consent:*** according to Bryman (2004, p. 510) is the most widely debated within social research ethics. It is principled upon the fact that prospective research

participants should be given the needed information to make an informed decision of whether or not they wish to participate in the study. The researcher ensured that all participants were informed of the nature and requirement of the research via a research information sheet so that they can make an informed decision, which was taken both verbally and in written forms (see Appendix 15). Also, they were informed that they were not under pressure to answer any question during the interview sessions, they could withdraw their participation at any time and that confidentiality will be maintained at every time during the process of this study.

- ***Deception:*** may be related to deceit over the real purpose of the research or some undeclared sponsorship, or an association with another organization that will use data gained for commercial advantage. The researcher ensured that the participants were informed of the purpose of the research (academic requirement) and that it is used for nothing else other than this purpose. This was also done both verbally and through the information sheet.
- ***Privacy and confidentiality:*** The researcher tried to ensure that the promises of confidentiality requested and promised during the stage of gaining access to the organization, has been maintained to ensure the confidentiality of personal data like names, addresses, etc. The researcher tried to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the recording of information and that the maintenance of records was maintained in upholding the data protection requirements. Anonymity was insured by using pseudonyms for the identification of the organisation and the interview participants. The researcher informed the participants of the potential publication on E-source (DBS online academic publication intranet), as a reference for future students. A confidentiality form was signed with the organisation (see Appendix 16).

- **Accuracy:** This concerns the researcher's objectivity during the data collection stage, ensuring that the researcher collected data accurately and fully avoided subjectivity in data recording as this impairs on the validity and reliability of the study. The researcher adhered to this during the interviews sessions by ensuring that the interviewees' responses were not influenced by the tone of her voice or asking leading questions to illicit desired responses. This was also adhered to during the analysis of the data collected, this was achieved by not allowing pre-conceptions as a parent influence the interpretations of the participants' responses during the analysis.

3.13 Research Reliability, Validity and Limitation

The credibility of research findings depend on reducing the possibility of getting the answer wrong, hence the research design is very crucial. The possibility of getting an answer wrong was reduced by paying attention to two particular emphases on research design: reliability and validity (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 156). These (reliability and validity) data quality issues particularly relates to the use of semi-structured interviews.

3.13.1 Reliability

Reliability relates with whether the techniques of a study are consistent (Bryman, 2004, p. 28). It relates to the consistency and reproducibility of one's research. This can be threatened by participant error, participant bias, observer error and observer bias during the research process for reasons such as use of wrong research population, data collection method, research population, data interpretation, conclusion development. The researcher conducted eight face-to-face semi-structured interviews to give a bit of rigour to the research process. She also kept a researcher's dairy, thus allowing for **internal reliability** of the research, but not **external reliability**, because of the limitation of the non-probability selection of the

sample that is unrepresentative of the population. Hence the sample is not representative enough of the research population.

3.13.2 Validity

Validity refers to whether the research measured what it intended to measure. It relates to the integrity of the research conclusions generated. The researcher ensured this study has **internal validity** by employing a multi-method research choice, across the various sections of the childcare service (though a single case), but, not an **external validity** (generalisability) as the study was limited by the primary data collection strategy: a single case. However, it has a reasonable transferability, because the researcher was able to relate this study to existing research.

3.14 Conclusion

This chapter explained the research process that was chosen as there are different methods of carrying out research. The researcher believes that the chosen method, approach, strategy and philosophy were appropriate and useful to analyse the objectives and draw general conclusions.

Chapter 4 – Data Findings/Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain the thematic analysis done and the findings on the data obtained from both primary and secondary research. This will be an integration of the findings made in the primary research, the correlation with literature (discussion) of the findings from the study and the researcher's interpretation of them. The product will be the foundation for the subsequent chapters. Therefore it will be relatively critical and analytical in order to integrate theories and concepts with the presented data (themes).

4.2 Data Findings

The following section of this research project presents the data collected from the eight semi-structured interviews that were conducted. A thematic analysis was done on the interview transcripts and is discussed in the following section.

The objectives of the study were to explore the key factors affecting parents' perception of service quality in Irish childcare providers, describe the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction, describe the relationship between childcare parents' satisfaction and loyalty to these providers, identify how parents' satisfaction impacts positively or negatively on loyalty to these providers and to identify the quality improvements desired by the Irish childcare parents.

The thematic analysis done on the study participants' responses have revealed that there are four core-themes established throughout the interviews sessions, but each core-theme also had sub-themes which also emerged from the analysis. These will be analysed in detail and quotations from interviews will be used to substantiate these findings, and then a brief discussion will be given to showcase the researcher's interpretation of these in reference to the existing literature.

4.2.1 Objective One:

To explore the key factors affecting parents' perception of service quality in Irish childcare providers

The study in exploring the key factors affecting parents' perception of service quality in the Irish childcare providers fulfilled its first objective with the following discoveries:

Service Quality

The first core theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview responses is service quality. There were varying expressions of words (perceptions) as to what quality in a childcare service is from the eight interview participants, but there seem to a general consensus on what quality is within a childcare setting. Below are some of the responses:

Breda one of the interviewees feels that quality childcare service is a 100% in terms of the quality of service that children (parents) receives from childcare services as she found in this service. She also connotes quality to be the relationship developed by staffs of the service with both children and parents.

"Quality has to be 100% when it comes to children. Quality here is a 100%. Gabriel was here for 3 years (she is 11 years now) and then the baby is here since she was 5 months (she is 3years now). The quality of care is good and the girls [staffs] are so nice and so caring to my children, they know the children on a name basis, everybody knows what each has done , good, lovely, you cannot complain, they look after my children"(Breda).

Maria on the other hand sees quality in a childcare service to be the treatments shown to the children by the staffs, in terms of how kind, patient and understanding they are towards the children by saying:

"In a quality child care, I will be looking for kindness first of all towards the children and patience and understanding, and there is a lot of that in here and of course the quality"(Maria).

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The dedication to the work and responsibility of caring for young children is expressed by Tina as being a key in childcare service quality:

“Quality childcare is a hundred percentage dedication for the children, to be looked after properly as if it were your own child. Make sure that the responsibility you have for that child is a hundred percent” (Tina).

Shelly captures her thoughts below by saying that quality in childcare is the nature of the staff’s relationship with customers (children and parents), the building (the facility) and the curriculum in terms of the way it is delivered and the content of what is being learnt by the children:

“Quality childcare is the friendliness of the staff, the hygiene of the building [facility] itself, how it is kept. How they play educational games with them. They are playing with them, they are teaching them ABC, how to count, how to sing. All things that they should be doing, but, they are doing with them, but in a manner that they do not actually realize they are learning. It is the way it should be” (Shelly).

However, this theme had some sub-themes which emerged from the analysis:

Staff

This sub-theme emerged from the thematic analysis as part of the quality theme. There were varying expressions of this; Most of the participants expressed the importance of the qualification & training of the staff not minding to have a fully qualified and trained staffs as the room leaders and then having a trainee staff assisting/supporting the room leaders as stated by Shelly and Maria:

“I know there are qualified staffs and trainees with them, which I think are sufficient. Because the trained qualified care workers they have are extremely good, they are extremely confident and competent as well. They know how things should be and run. But as well they know everybody has a different way of moulding to that and so meet their needs, their own needs and the needs of the children as well” (Shelly).

“I think it is actually very good with the FAS training (CE) as well and then you have the childcare leader in the rooms, so that is okay. Because everyone has to start off somewhere

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and everyone has to learn so it does not bother me the slightest, the child is being looked after, you know” (Maria)

While others stressed the (staffs’) relationship and interaction with children evident through the amount of direct attention/supervision giving to the children as expressed by Eva’s and Shelly’s statements:

“As far I know and coming from how fond he is of all of them, you can see that he gets the attention, but I mean I don’t know how it will be during the day, if they will be constantly around him, but when they are out playing , they are up and down to whoever and they give equal amount of attention to all the kids, I reckon, I don’t see during the day, but from what he says, the shouting [across to them on the road], from his responses to them and they cope, obviously they do pay attention, obviously if he is not familiar with them he will not be calling out to them across the road. So I feel he is getting a lot of direct attention” (Eva).

“They are very good, they give my children attention, and just not my children, I am being but specific all the other children” (Shelly).

A good number of the respondents think that the staffs’ interaction with children revealed by the Adult: child ratio was also important as expressed by Sandra’s and Stella’s statements:

“Their ratios are fine and I think they get a lot of attention” (Sandra).

“When they are working at the table, I think they work in two or three children: an adult, so it is fine” (Stella).

Majority of the participants also feel that that the staffs’ relationship with parents as seen in the way they treat them, respond to their needs and suggestions is also important, this was shown in Stella’s and Sandra’s statements:

“I think my relationship is very good, some of the girls I know from outside. My baby was very small when I brought her in the first day as she was a pre-mature baby. I was worried leaving her, but obviously I had to go back to work. They were so supportive, telling me everything she ate, drank and everything else. They have always helped me; I have to say I have a great relationship with them” (Stella).

“Oh they definitely take it [my suggestions] on board and straight away respond. One example is that I find that the youngest fellow [her youngest son] when the air-condition is on, I find he gets runny nose and the eyes, it is the only time it happens, and the girls [staffs]

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thought he might be sick, I said no, it is the air-condition because he never liked that outside, so they fixed that problem” (Sandra).

A good number of the participants using different words to stress the importance of the personality of the childcare staffs. Shelly and Maria put it simply as:

“It is just a very good service and the staffs are wonderful and lovely, and that is what makes it. That starts from the higher hierarchy; the manager to the supervisors, to the room leaders, and then to the workers” (Shelly).

“They are very honest and they are very approachable. The minute you walk in, you are welcome straight away. I don’t feel I am afraid, so they are very approachable” (Maria).

Physical Facility

The second sub-theme for Service quality that emerged was physical facility as majority of participants expressed that it impacts on service quality and is very important in terms of the cleanliness, size, safety of the rooms and outdoor area as well the age-appropriateness of the toys as physical equipments. Almost the respondents feel that the facility is always clean as seen in Breda’s and Andrea’s and statement:

“It is always clean, you always see cleaners cleaning first thing in the morning. I only live down the road and every time you come in, you see them cleaning” (Breda).

“It [physical facility] is clean, quite clean” (Andrea).

Most of the participants feel that the facility is big and adequate as seen in Eva’s and Breda’s responses:

“Oooh!, It is huge, the fact they have a separate sleeping room for the kids and they are sleeping in the same room where they are playing and they can close the door and they have a monitor. You can see the monitor constantly on and every time you go in, it is buzzing so you can hear it” (Eva).

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“Oh yeah, you do not want something too big. It is kind of more homely this way, I think the rooms are a bit small, I think they are only allowed take certain number of children, so the size is perfect” (Breda).

Eva’s statement above, also expresses the importance of the safety measures provided for the physical sleeping facility to be important. Tina talks about the safety of the facility and in administering medicines to the children which she finds to be good:

“Well, I like to think again everything is a hundred percent. Health and safety bolts, in a crèche with young children, people are responsible for your child. Also for medicines, if my son needs medicines or Calpol or anything they will always ring me to ask me. I have often given them anti-biotic they make sure I put down the right amount, things like that is what I find very good” (Tina).

The respondents feel that the toys are age-appropriate as can be seen. Andrea believes that the toys are age appropriate, saying:

“The toys are appropriate for their age group [0-1yr]” (Andrea).

Breda and Tina strengthen this point in saying:

“Yeah, actually the toys are educational, I have seen that ...” (Breda).

“I think they really have a lot of toys and do a lot of different activities all the time ...” (Tina)

Curriculum and Activities

The third sub-theme that emerged from the analysis is curriculum & Activities. These impacts on the service quality and relates to the age-appropriate content of what is being taught and how it is taught as expressed by the respondents. All of the respondents believe as shown by some of the comments, that the curriculum and activities are age-appropriate as evident in the effects on their children saying:

“Curriculum is age appropriate. In my son’s age group, as an observation, I’ve seen age appropriate activities being done with that group. And he has really come on, and I’ve seen the effect” (Andrea).

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“Well he has come on “lips and bounds” his speech and words, and his numbers and everything else, counting, so I mean he is way above where I expected it be at this stage. Oh yeah, there are age-appropriate activities” (Eva).

“It is age-appropriate and everything. They had an assessment with her here last year (at 2 years) to test her intelligence, and they found she was capable of doing what a 3 year old will do” (Breda).

Maria strengthens this further, by saying that it is not taught with force but actually through play, which is the method for the curriculum delivery at this level:

“Yeah I have seen that, and I think it is age appropriate because nothing is being forced on him, because that is not suitable for him, but the play, the songs, it is appropriate for his age. And that is what I do at home, though the books as you are not forcing him” (Maria).

Perceived Value

Perceived value is the fourth sub-theme that emerged under service quality. All of the respondents feel they are getting good value for money in comparison with other services as perceived by them. Stella and Eva say this in their statements below:

“I am quite happy with what I am getting. She has another cousin who goes to another crèche, but from what her mum says when we are talking, I know that she is getting as good value as her other cousin who goes to the other facility, which is much more expensive” (Stella).

“... but you know what I mean when you look at other types of crèches and the cost, and the community crèches, it’s more than half the price slashed” (Eva).

And Maria though struggling at moment because she was recently made redundant also agrees saying:

“Emm, compared to other crèches, it is really good, but because as I said I have recently been made redundant, I am struggling” (Maria).

Shelly captions this by saying; that the service is reasonable priced, but not at the expense of the quality of what is offered to the children:

“As I said I do not know if other parents have looked into other crèches but it is the most reasonably priced crèche in the whole of the area. I do not say the most reasonable-priced because I bring my kids here and they are fed rubbish, they get a decent breakfast, a decent lunch, a snack, fruits, a yoghurt. If they are hungry through the day, they have more fruits and bread and crackers. It is the best priced crèche around, I can guarantee you, but it is not at the cost or expense of the children” (Shelly).

4.2.1.1 Correlation with Literature

Rust and Oliver, (1994) suggested that service quality is made of service product, service environment and service delivery while Brady and Cronin (2001) and Lee (2011) inferred that it is interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality. Service quality has been described as a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction (Parasuraman et al, 1988; Bolton & Drew, (1991). Lee (2013, p. 2) describes service quality as a complex concept having multi-faceted dimensions.

Quality here is defined (Blau and Mocan, 2002, p. 484) “as the developmental appropriateness of the care provided and is assumed to be observable by consumers” (parents). The specification of the childcare service quality in Ireland is stipulated by the Pre-school Regulations 2006 (executed and enforced by the Health Services Executives – HSE), Soilta: the National Quality Framework, Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in collaboration with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) before its closure in 2008 (see Appendices).

The first core-theme: **Service Quality** and its four sub-themes aligns with existing literature as it confirmed that service quality as suggested by Rust and Oliver, (1994) is made up of service product, service environment and service delivery. And that it is a complex multi-faceted concept (Lee, 2013, p. 2) as revealed by the emergent sub-themes. This correlates with Ceglowski and Bacigalupa’s (2002, p. 88) view that the definition of quality will vary,

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depending on the needs and values of the stakeholders in question: children, parents, families, employers, providers and society. In this phenomenon, the *service product* represents the Curriculum & Activities, the *service environment* is the Physical Facility and the service delivery signifies the *Staff*. **Curriculum & Activities** impacts on service quality and relates to the age-appropriate content of the various activities and how it is delivered to the children. The **Physical Facility** also impacts on quality and relates to its cleanliness, size, safety of the rooms and outdoor area as well the age-appropriateness of the toys as physical equipments. The **Staff** as the vehicle of service delivery obviously impacts on quality and it relates to their qualification & training, relationship and interaction with children, relationship with parents and personality. The fourth sub-theme - **Perceived Value** according to Lee (2010a) is the benefits gained by customers relative to the total cost they paid and its measurements includes perceived price as inferred by Zeithaml (1988). It mediates between the service quality and parents' (customers') satisfaction as suggested by Caruana et al 2000 and Ryu and Han 2010. Perceived value and quality has a combined effect on satisfaction. The first theme and its first three sub-themes also conformed to most of the requirements (for both for-profit and non-profit organisations) stipulated by the Irish Childcare regulating bodies mentioned above. As stated by Duignan et al (2005, p. 25) and mentioned earlier in this study, best practices in early childhood care services should incorporate:

“...a child-centred focus, clear adult/child ratios, staff support and team building, qualification of practitioners, an infrastructure supporting parents involvement, curriculum, clear assessment protocols, observation tools for staff/child interactions, a respect for diversity, infrastructure development which builds upon existing networks; consistency in assessments which account for all stakeholders; adequate governmental policy and financial support”.

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This has particular implication for non-profit childcare services as they are usually under more scrutiny from the local authorities like the City and County Childcare Committees (who executes some of the government funding) and other regulatory bodies because they have to meet standard requirements to be eligible for such funding. The study found that the childcare service under review conforms to the above.

4.2.2 Objective Two:

To describe the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction

The second objective of describing the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction was met with these findings:

Overall Satisfaction

Overall Satisfaction emerged as the second core-theme from the interviews analysis. Satisfaction is a post decision experience concept. Respondents refer to satisfaction as what they feel after experiencing the childcare service, a major indicator of this appeared to be the happiness of their children. All of the respondents expressed their satisfaction using various words:

Stella and Eva affirmed this by saying that once their children are happy that gives them satisfaction:

“She (Jade) is quite happy, she has never had any issues with the staff and she is quite happy with the overall thing and once she is happy, I am happy. I am overall quite happy” (Stella).

“I am beyond satisfied, holding to the fact that he is happy, once I know he is happy, that is all I care about” (Eva).

But, Shelly puts it all together in her statement below:

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“So overall, I am overly satisfied, the pricing, the way they educate the kids, the way they discipline them, feed them, the way they teach them. There is no number on your card that you [interviewer] have there, that I could tick that could describe this, because it [rating] will be the top. Watch the way they interact with the kids, they are just brilliant, I just love it, kids do not fret coming in the morning. They are not such that kids will come from crèche or school and are like “thank God, it is over”, they are happy” (Shelly).

Even the RTE Primetime documentary titled “Breach of Trust” that caused a lot of heart-ache for the parents/customers; it did not affect their satisfaction with the service as most argue that this service is different and all services should not be painted the same way. Tina said this:

“It [documentary] does not affect my satisfaction because I do not think everybody should be painted the same way and it is a decent crèche and decent people” (Tina).

However, some said even though they are satisfied overall with the service, the documentary was shocking, heart-breaking, made them fearful, disappointed, angry, cautious and more alert, as Sandra puts it this way :

“Oh do not get me wrong, I was very disappointed after watching that [documentary], I did not actually watch it, I think I only watched about five minutes of it and had to turn it off. But it did not make me think of any different of here, affect me, I was actually very surprised they gave out letters reconfirming how everything is being done, but I did not actually think they needed to do that. I never questioned anything, it did not affect me” (Sandra).

However, some sub-themes emerged from the analysis of this theme, which are:

Service Quality

This emerged from the analysis as having a key relationship with the core-theme of overall satisfaction. Participants referred to the faultless service quality while describing their overall satisfaction. Andrea affirms this:

“I think this one [the service] is very good; it’s practical and its run very well. I really like it, I feel my son is safe here and he is well looked after” (Andrea)

Developmental Milestone

This is the second sub-theme of overall satisfaction that emerged. Most of the participants referred to the developmental milestones (physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social skills - PILES) that their children had attained/achieved as giving them satisfaction as seen in the below statements from Stella, Shelly and Eva (whose expectations for their children's developmental level were exceeded):

"I find it [childcare service] to be very good. Because of what she (Jade) has learnt, she has learnt awful lot of things, I probably could not teach her at home. It is very consistent. ... Jade has been here since she was five months and she is very happy" (Stella).

"It is one of those things you cannot describe, because it is the benefits I have seen in my children. ... So overall, I am overly satisfied ..." (Shelly).

"Well he has come on "lips and bounds" his speech and words, and his numbers and everything else, counting, so I mean he is way above where I expected it be at this stage" (Eva).

Good Reputation/Community Service

This is the third sub-theme that emerged from the core-theme: overall satisfaction. Participants in describing their satisfaction related good reputation/community service to the core-theme of satisfaction. Tina, Shelly and Eva affirm this saying:

"My son Keane has been here since he was a little over a year and half, I have not had many problems; I think it is good that it is community based. If I have any problems, I just ask one of the girls, and they are very helpful and understanding. So it is good for a community based and everybody interacts so well, and everybody gets along" (Tina).

"This centre itself has huge potential, and especially for the service that they provide, you know. It is a community based care crèche, the service is reasonably priced. ..." (Shelly).

"...but you know what I mean when you look at other types of crèches and the cost, and the community crèches, it's more than half the price slashed" (Eva).

Parental Involvement

This is the fourth sub-theme from the overall satisfaction core-theme, it relates to the involvement of parents in the care and education of their children by the childcare service on a daily basis via the daily information sheet and verbal information. Majority of the participants expressed the essence of this in their views as seen below. A couple of the respondents talk about the information and permission in relation to caring for sick children (one of the service policies) as seen in Tina's view below:

"They will always ring my job (her work place) to ask is it okay to give your son some Calpol or Nerofen, they do not do anything without getting permission, and they always inform you" (Tina).

Stella and Shelly strengthen this by saying they get advised as whether or not the child needs to go home to the doctor's:

"They have a policy that they will always ring you to get permission to give either Calpol or Nerofen, and inform you if the child needs to go home to the doctor's or not" (Stella).

"... but if I need to be called to take her to the doctor, I have no doubt that they will make that call, to tell me that child needs to be taken to the doctor, and I am extremely happy with that" (Shelly).

Shelly's statements below also show the parents value being informed of any incidents/accidents that may have arisen by the service:

"... I come in, it is just not handing me the sheets of what they did that day, she can tell me what they did for the day word for word. If there was an accident, the first thing they will tell me is oh this happened, but she is okay, we gave her this, we did that, and that is across the board" (Shelly).

Flexibility

This is the fifth sub-theme that was seen through the analysis of overall satisfaction. It can be seen that flexibility of the childcare service impacts on their satisfaction. Flexibility relates to

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the hours (full-time or part-time) offered by the service, allowance for the various government childcare programmes like the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), allowance for late pick-ups (not a routine) and delayed payment. The participants expressed these in various ways.

Some talk about being given allowance for a late pick-up (not a routine); as seen in Breda statement below, who also expressed their flexibility in terms of the fact that they will be helping to collect her daughter from the local primary school where she will be starting the Early Intervention classes:

“They are very flexible, as there was a particular Christmas I had forgotten that they close early on the Christmas Eve, 4.30pm I think it is, but they gave me that extra time about 10 minutes, rang me to know where I was and were even very kind with it. Even with that I am sending Anna to the big school [primary school] to do just 2 hours there every day. I sent the other two children there, so I want her to try it too, they will be dropping her and collecting her back to the crèche for me, so they have given me that flexibility” (Breda).

Maria talks about the flexibility of hours in the service:

“He used to be full-time, but now he is only part time, because they do not want him to feel left out on his crèche, because I have just been made redundant, either way, I am struggling but he is still here” (Maria).

Eva describes the flexibility the service allows for delayed payment:

“It is absolutely great, I had not realized I had missed a payment last year, you can pay up all in one lump, or you can pay a Euro at a time. They are quite flexible, they do not hound you, they will say listen you are missing a payment here, but whenever you are ready, you can pay” (Eva).

Allowance for the various government childcare programmes showed to give some of the participants satisfaction, Andrea who is on a FAS training had this to say:

“I’m on a scheme (CETS), they pay €50 and I give €25 weekly, I’m happy enough with the fees” (Andrea).

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Breda a lone-parent, working full-time had this to say:

“... I am a lone parent ... so I am on grade A [on the CCS programme] and I pay €85 weekly for her ... But no, the amount of care they give her is amazing” (Breda).

4.2.2.1 Correlation with Literature

Customer satisfaction is defined by Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) as “a consumer’s fulfilment response”. In this regards, satisfaction can be considered as a judgment that “a product or service feature, or product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment”. Lee (2013) explains that customer satisfaction can be explained as the degree of a customer’s positive feeling towards a service provider. The research conforms to the above literature as revealed by this theme and its sub-themes. The Overall Satisfaction theme relates to what the parents felt after experiencing the childcare service, this was indicated by the “happiness of their children”. It points to the fact that they had expectations which were fulfilled by the service experience as suggested by Rust et al (1994) that customer satisfaction and delight are both highly influenced by customer expectations. Even the shocking and heart-breaking documentary “Breach of Trust” did not seem to diminish this.

Overall Satisfaction emerged as the second core-theme having five sub-themes. The **Service Quality** sub-theme is a “service feature” as suggested by Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) and in this regard was regarded by most of the interviewees as “faultless”. This signifies that there is a relationship between the childcare service quality and the customers’ (parents’) satisfaction as suggested by Lee (2013), Taylor, (1992); Zeithaml et al, (1996) that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. **Developmental Milestone** sub-theme was also emerged through the interviews as an indicator of parents’ satisfaction. This relates to their judgement of their children’s achievements in terms of the Physical, intellectual, language, emotional

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and social skills (PILES). **Good Reputation/Community Service sub-theme** also emerged as an indicator of the parents' satisfaction as per their judgment. They seem to connect quality with the community nature of the service and this ties in with Ilhan's (2013, pp. 97-98) statement that Non-profit organisations in the social context have a crucial role in the development of a civil society. They are innovative, provide services and develop policies, support minority and local interests. These organisations perform public tasks (that have not been provided by both the public and private sectors) that have been delegated to them by the state and also influence policy directions in the state, for-profit sector and non-profit organisations. Aaker et al (2010, p. 235) suggestion also fit in, that the perception of non-profit organisations can be created to be highly warm and competent through the tool of credibility to arouse a feelings of admiration which in turn leads to increased willingness to buy, with these effects persisting and actually playing out in actual behaviours.

Parental Involvement sub-theme is another indicator of parental satisfaction. This relates to the involvement of parents in the daily care and education of their children, via taking permission to administer medicines, advice to visit doctor, accidents/incidents information, responding to parents' suggestions and needs which ties in to Duignan et al's (2005) statement mentioned earlier and one of the principles of Soita-the National Quality Framework for Irish childcare which states that:

Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows (CECDE, 2013).

Flexibility sub-theme also emerged as another service feature which the parents judged as contribution to their feeling of satisfaction. This relates to the hours (full-time or part-time)

offered by the service, allowance for the various government childcare programmes like the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), allowance for late pick-ups (not a routine) and delayed payment. This again ties in with Duignan et al's (2005) statement above in terms of governmental policy and adequate financial support as a best practice in early childcare services. These enable children who would otherwise not have had access to this childcare service because of their parents' financial situation to have one.

4.2.3 Objectives Three and Four:

To describe the relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty to Irish childcare providers; To identify how parents' satisfaction impacts positively or negatively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers.

The study's third and fourth objectives of describing the relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty to Irish childcare providers; identifying how parents' satisfaction impacts positively or negatively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers made the following findings:

Loyalty

Loyalty is the third core-theme that emerged throughout the analysis of the interview transcripts. This is the feelings of attachment the parents showed towards the childcare service and its staff, measured by the attitudes and behaviours they displayed. The respondents expressed this with various words, particularly Breda and Shelly as revealed by their expressions below:

"They are very good, honest people. Overall crèche has been a life saver to me ... the crèche has done so much for Anna, being a premature baby coming in for the first time in here, and the bottle-feeding was long-winded, but look at her now, she is three years, she is way ahead

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of her mind. I mean people have come and gone in the crèche, but the communication is still there, it has not changed ... I always give presents and cards at Christmas saying in the cards "thank you for all you have done for Anna, for you are doing a great job. Sali the manager is great too ... "(Breda)

"Love them, my kids come in, they are happy, met by staff that smile, have a good morning, sing songs, play with them. If they are hurt, if they are sick, they comfort them. I cannot explain it, it is like an extended family in here. Like she is not the most sociable kid, but she loves here" (Shelly).

All the eight respondents indicated that they will continue using the service again and even for other siblings of their child (ren) in the service currently (continued patronage) which is another show of affection and attachment for the service as shown by some of their statements below:

"Well he'll be in this place hopefully as long as he's still alive; he'll still be here before he starts school. I am so familiar with everybody now, I could not take him. I will use the service for another child" (Eva).

"Yeah, she will continue to use the service, if I had any issues, she would not have come here in the first place" (Stella).

"I do not want to have any more children, as I have three here. But if I were to have another one and still working, it will definitely here" (Shelly).

Overall Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction emerged during the analysis as a sub-theme of the loyalty core-theme. As stated earlier, satisfaction is the degree of a customer's positive feeling towards a service provider, the sum total of their attitudes towards a service provider. This emerged related to the loyalty of the study participants as they described their feelings and indicated their intention for continued patronage. The study revealed that because all the participants were satisfied overall with the service, the "Breach of Trust" documentary did not change their

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decisions to repurchase or continue to use the service as expressed by some of their responses below:

“No, the documentary does not affect my satisfaction, when I saw what was happening in those crèches, I felt terrible, sick to my stomach, I felt that was an abuse of those children, I felt how could anybody do that. ... So, It did not affect me in a way, I did not think twice that oh my God, I need to check the background of the crèche, I need to check that in the crèche, I did not think that all. ...” (Shelly).

“... So it [documentary] did not affect me in the slightest way, I did not even think for one minute anything was happening to my child ... It did affect me” (Maria).

Recommendation

Recommendation is the second sub-theme that emerged for loyalty. This is the act of telling others positive things about a service (positive word-of-mouth) which often results in them making a purchase decision. Respondents indicated this positive consumer behaviour as a measure of their loyalty to the childcare service. All of the participants said they will not only be using the service again (as shown above) but will be recommending the service to friends and families, some of whom were already recommending. Below are some of their statements in relation to this:

“Yeah, I have no problem recommending to friends and family. Jade’s cousins use the service, one is finished now” (Stella).

“I recommended the service to my sisters, and their two children are in Kina’s room, so his cousins are in the same room with him” (Maria).

“The outdoor play is appropriate, probably a bit small in terms of the size, but I know they have Astroturf floor, but I’m happy enough” (Andrea).

4.2.3.1 Correlation with Literature

Jones & Sasser (1995, p. 94) suggests that “Loyalty is the feeling of attachment to or affection for a company’s people, products or services”. The third core-theme: Loyalty

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emerged from the findings having overall satisfaction and recommendation as sub-themes. The parents indicated their loyalty by their feelings and attitudes towards the crèche tying in with the above definition. All the study participants used several words to show these and indicated their continued use (continued patronage) of the services which also correlates with Deng et al's (2009) suggestion that "customer loyalty is not only the ultimate object for customer satisfaction measurement, but also a key determinant of a firm's long term viability" and Deng et al's (2009) and Fornell's (1992) assertion that a high level customer satisfaction may have a positive effect on customer loyalty. Their high satisfaction had a positive effect on their loyalty to the childcare service that even the "Breach of Trust" documentary could not change.

The above concepts explain why **Overall Satisfaction** emerged as a sub-theme of the Loyalty through the findings, since it revealed their feeling of attachment/affection to the childcare service. **Recommendation** (positive word-of mouth) emerged as a sub-theme indicating their behavioural measurement of their loyalty. Both the show of affection and behaviour indications give a better measurement of their loyalty as suggested by Dick & Basu (1994), that a behavioural - attitudinal measure is necessary to fully appreciate the picture of customer loyalty. Hence, it is evident that there is a relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty – third objective and that parents' satisfaction impacts positively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers – fourth objective.

From the fore-going core-themes and sub-themes, it is evident that customer quality perception is **an antecedent** of customer satisfaction which **mediates** between customers' service quality perception and customer loyalty and that correlates with Kim's (2011, p. 632) conceptual framework that "customer's perception of quality has an indirect influence on customer loyalty via customer satisfaction".

4.2.4 Objective Five:

To identify the quality improvements desired by the Irish childcare parents

The research's fifth objective of identifying the quality improvements desired by the childcare customers (parents) made these discoveries:

Quality Improvement

Quality improvement emerged throughout the interviews transcripts as the fourth core-theme. Quality Improvement is an approach to the analysis of performance and systematic efforts to improve it. It emerged that though the participants were satisfied with the childcare service and were loyal indicated by their expressions of feelings of attachment and intention to re-purchase (stay with this childcare provider), all of the participants either desired or/and recommended quality improvements in various parts of the childcare service delivery. One of which (handing out daily record sheet to parents of pre-school children) had been sorted out in the course of this study interview sessions. As emerged from the analysis, a good number of the participants desired quality improvements in the physical facility, indicated as follows:

“Probably space, more space in the baby room, so the children have more room and they are cluttered” (Andrea).

“Just more colours outside in the courtyard, it is lovely to be honest as there are loads of colours in the rooms and on the corridors, just outside on the floor, I know it is not essential, it feels good when you go outside and you see the colours” (Eva).

“It is adequate size: but I do find the after school room is very small ...” (Sandra).

Some want the daily records to be handed to them on a daily basis, to inform them of their children's daily routine in the crèche:

“I suppose, the only thing is I noticed they used to hand out the sheets to us (parents) going from the other rooms; they do not do that in the pre-school room. I know they might probably

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be keeping the records somewhere, but it not an automatic thing they do. That is the only draw-back, that when you go back, you are like oh what will I give her, the daily records really help” (Stella).

Some want all the childcare staffs to be lovers of children, qualified and trained:

“The only thing I’d hope to see is that every childcare worker has a qualification and they have experience. I do not have any problem if they are in training and they really love children” (Andrea).

However, some of the study participants recommended some quality improvement measures which are as follows: Andrea recommends that the staff recruitment process should incorporate a trial period of six weeks so as to put rigour into the recruitment process in order to ensure that childcare providers employ only those who love children:

“That is my advice as well; you know that when they are employing or training, they’d recognize those who love children and those who are doing it for a job, there is a big difference. This can be achieved by giving all new employees a trial period like six weeks and they are monitored” (Andrea).

Some suggest being exempted from paying fees if a child is genuinely sick with contagious diseases:

“But I think if they were genuinely sick because of measles, conjunctivitis etc, that are contagious and they are sent home, then I think there should be a little of a lee-way. If it is a genuine illness that will affect other children in the crèche, I think you should not be charged” (Maria).

Some recommends that this interviewing (study) is good and should be conducted more often to get the feedback of parents:

“Just that I think this questions you are asking me and this questionnaire, I think this is very good for parents and it should be done more often than it is been done” (Tina).

Some recommend more government recognition and running more of the community childcare services like Fife childcare service:

“The government should recognize and run more of places like this, because looking after other people children is mentally and physically draining ...” (Shelly).

4.2.4.1 Correlation with Literature

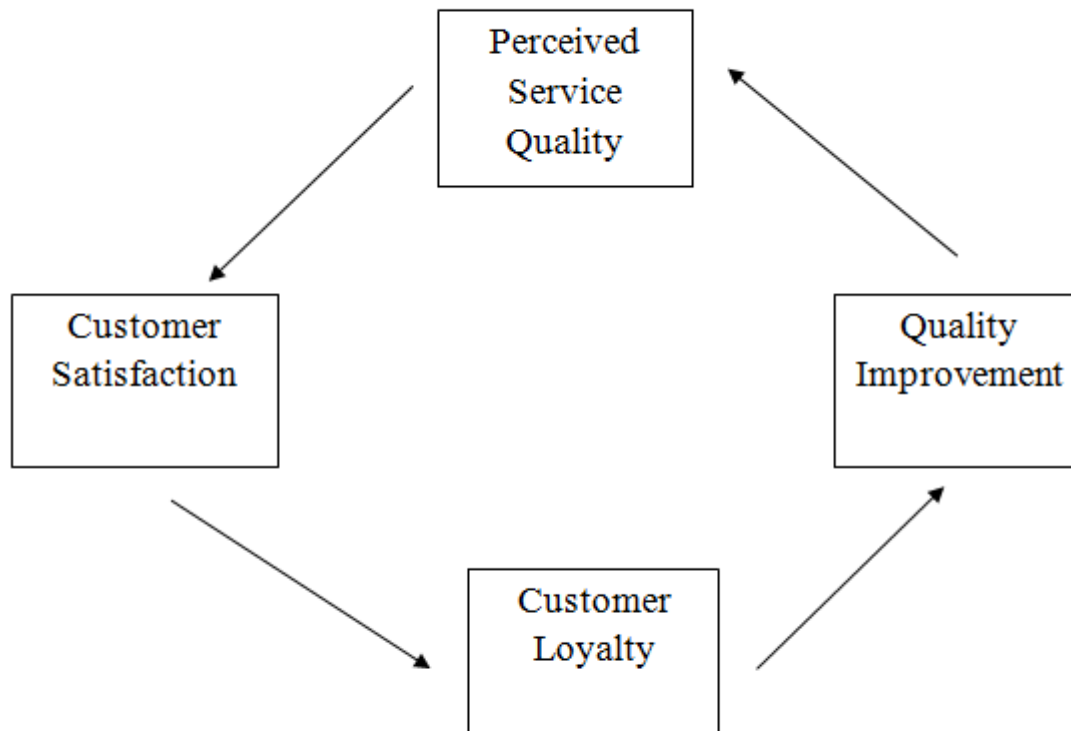
Quality Improvement which came up as the forth core-theme is the review of performance with a view to improving it. This according to literature has implication for the childcare services, particularly in the light of the recent “Breach of Trust” documentary so as to ensure high care/service standards are continually maintained, while mitigating potential risks occurrences (Munton and Mooney, 1999). The parents indicated various desires and recommendations for quality improvements as indicated in the findings.

Munton and Mooney (1999) recommends *Self-evaluation tool* (used with some early years’ service providers) a key element of several successful school improvement initiatives, to be used to drive continuous childcare service quality improvement initiatives, while allaying potential risks that may occur. However, they advised that greater understanding of organizational processes synonymous with childcare service provision might be needful in developing self-assessment as an effective tool for raising standards in childcare settings. There was no evidence from this study emerging themes that the childcare service provider is engaged in self-evaluation as recommended above.

From the foregoing, the researcher proposes that quality improvement be added to Kim’s (2011) conceptual framework, so that the quality improvement feeds into service quality perception an antecedent of customer satisfaction which mediates between quality and customer loyalty (see figure 3 below).

4.2.4.1.1 Figure 3 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 3 Proposed Conceptual Framework.



Source: Oluwafemi, 2013

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has answered all the research objectives by outlining the core-themes and sub-themes emergent from the thematic analysis done on the semi-structured interview transcripts. It further gave the researcher's interpretation while aligning these findings with existing literature as stated in the literature review done earlier.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion/Recommendation

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents the researcher's conclusion in relation to the research question, present the answer to this based on the primary research findings, and further determine how it relates to today's business environment. It also presents recommendations for the industry and further research where the researcher's current research has fallen short and where further research can add on to this work.

5.2 Concluding Remarks

This study though a small scale research focused on answering the main research question (and in effect answered the sub-research questions) which is the purpose of the study.

The main research question: (**How do parents (customers) perceive service quality in Irish childcare providers?**) was answered as the research found that curriculum & activities, physical facility and staff are the key triggers affecting the parents' perceptions of childcare service quality. It was discovered that there is a strong relationship between the service quality (an antecedent of customer satisfaction) and parents' satisfaction with perceived value mediating between childcare service quality and parents' (customers') satisfaction. This in effect answered the second sub-research question: What is the relationship between childcare service quality and parents' satisfaction?

The findings of the research revealed that the satisfying feeling of experiencing the service led to parents' loyalty expressed either through their words and/or show of affection and attachment (continued patronage), this answered the third sub-research question: What is the relationship between parents' satisfaction and loyalty? The research also found that the parents' satisfaction impacted positively on their loyalty to the childcare services, that even in the face of the heart-breaking "Breach of Trust" documentary, all the study participants were

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still loyal to the childcare providers expressed in both words and action of continued patronage. Hence, answering the fourth sub-research question: How does parents' satisfaction impact positively/negatively on loyalty to Irish childcare providers?

This study discovered that though the parents were satisfied leading to their loyalty to the childcare service, they desired and recommended some quality improvements mentioned earlier, effectively answering the fifth research question: What quality improvements (if any) are desired by the Irish childcare providers' parents?

This research has implication for the today's business world, particularly in the Irish economic climate, as it (though small scale) will go a long way in equipping the childcare providers/others with the information to improving their provisions, delivery of care and education services, and parents' satisfaction to build a long-term relationship between parents, firms and other stakeholders.

This aligns with Omar et al (2010, 4441) assertion that the delivery and quality of this important consumer service has implications not only for direct customers of this service such as parents but also for users of the service (children) as well as the society as a whole. This correlates with O'Hara's (2010, p. 360) suggestion that because of the transient nature of childhood, it is imperative to make the best possible use of it, by investing early in their education, care and development that will ensure a well-balanced future for children and society. Also as stated earlier, Fenech (2011, p. 102) suggests there is an urgent need for parents who are informed consumers to drive quality improvements in childcare centres, stressing the importance for their knowledge of quality to align completely with expert understandings, as there is potential for parents to become a powerful consumer advocacy force. To this end, the providers should devise strategies to get more of the parents' involvement in their daily operations of care and education of their children.

5.3 Limitations

Although the research answered the research questions posed, it cannot be generalised across the entire study population, but it does have some reasonable transferability (since it is linked to existing research) because of the following limitations:

- It was conducted in Dublin on a single non-profit childcare service (as the researcher had great difficulty gaining access to the childcare chains – for-profit services) which is not representative of the Irish Childcare service providers population.
- The sample sizes was a small number of eight respondents and were only Irish women (mothers), again not representative of the Irish parent population (as Ireland has emancipated into a multicultural society with different nationalities).

5.4 Recommendations for the Industry and Further Research

The conducted research has recognised that customers' (parents') service quality perception in the Irish Childcare providers is an antecedent of customer satisfaction which mediates between service quality perception and customer (parent) loyalty as stated in literature. This also discovered that higher customer satisfaction led to higher level of loyalty.

However, because of the limitations stated earlier, further research could be done on a larger scale with a bigger sample size involving fathers and non-nationals across all regions of Ireland so as to be representative of the parent population. Also, further research could include a comparison between a number of the for-profit and non-profit/community childcare services. Lastly, the conceptual framework suggested by the researcher is only at the conceptualisation stage and will need to be proven empirically to be applicable to the current business age.

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This framework could help childcare service industry to maintain a high quality standard by constantly improving the quality of their service offering through the cycle suggested. This could be done by getting parents' opinions as part of the self-assessment tool (mentioned earlier) which helps childcare providers describe processes by which they establish priorities for change, develop action plans, and subsequently implement change to ensure high care/service standards are continually maintained, so that potential risks that may occur could be mitigated (Munton and Mooney, 1999).

5.5 Conclusion

The foregoing has drawn conclusion from the research findings by answering the main research question: how do customers perceive childcare service quality in the Irish childcare providers? and sub-research questions. It also presented recommendations for the Irish childcare industry and further research which are all geared towards making the industry a better one for the various stakeholders.

Chapter 6 - Reflection on Own Learning and Performance

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the researcher's reflections on how the completion of the MBA programme has contributed to own personal development. This section also provides an assessment of the knowledge and experiences acquired and how such learning has helped her to develop and improve certain skills that will benefit performance in personal life and future employments.

6.2 Reflection on Process

The process of arriving at a dissertation topic was such that the researcher initially had several ideas for the dissertation proposal. The ideas were related to different business plans and models. After careful consideration of the data requirement and research timeframe, the researcher picked the topic on customer quality perception within the childcare context as she already has an understanding of the business model and was attracted to finding more about it in terms of the quality drivers from parents' perspective within this industry. The researcher's interests in this industry spurred her to adapting the research topic into the childcare sector.

The researcher started reading books, academic and business articles as well as searching some relevant websites in order to gain a deeper understanding of the childcare business within the Irish context. The searching of these articles required a painstaking and focused strategy using the DBS database search tool called EBSCO Host. This search tool was chosen because it was available for use and allows the searches to be conducted across various current and up-to-date databases. This demanded rigorous and concerted efforts at defining and searching the keywords, categories and disciplines in order to find the relevant information. This information helped the researcher to develop theories, concepts and then to

come up with research problem, objectives and questions investigated in the course of the research.

6.3 Reflection on Sources

The researcher chose both primary and secondary formats for the collection of information. The primary format was achieved through an interview strategy while the secondary format of information was achieved through a deep exploration of the various databases around the research topic. The researcher even had to search other disciplines in an attempt to widely explore the topic areas. She carefully read, evaluated and selected materials for and cited the various materials used, using the Harvard referencing style in the dissertation.

The researcher at the inception of the dissertation had some assumptions: One was the fact that she thought the collection of the primary data will not be difficult since it was collecting the views/perceptions of childcare providers' customers (parents) and not the staff/management teams, only to find out shockingly that the aftermath events of the recent RTE Primetime documentary had changed the tides making service providers to exercise extreme caution to such things like work experience, research studies etc. that would have been the case before now. As a direct consequence of this, the researcher was denied access by several childcare providers including a service that had granted an initial access about four months before the publication of the documentary by RTE Primetime. Even after being granted access within the service, it was difficult to get access to respondents/parents. This resulted in the delay of primary data collection by the researcher.

The second assumption was that the researcher thought that there will be so much information about customer perception of service quality in the Irish childcare sector, only to discover after a period of search and exploration that not so much is available from the customers' (parent) perspective within the Irish context, but the context of countries like the

United kingdom, United States of America and Australia. Majority of the research available within the Irish context in this field had been done from the policy-makers perspective.

The researcher could not use un-reviewed or non-academic articles, information and websites like Wikipedia, blogs, opinions etc, this is because the information contained in them is un-substantiated by research evidences. The researcher learnt a great deal from exploring and finding information on her topic as this exposed her to a great deal of information: articles, concepts and theories. The researcher then had to synthesise the information and extract the relevant pieces of information from the whole lot, making sure the information is logical and arranged in coherent manner, while adopting the allowed academic style for the masters' level of writing. The researcher also found out that she had to delve into other disciplines like psychology, child development etc. to find sufficient sources as the business disciplines alone were not sufficient sources for the information required for the topic area.

The researcher found that the whole process of sourcing information for her topic improved her academic and logical thinking a great deal, developing her into a logical and critical thinker. She found the writing of the dissertation very exciting, in that she learnt a lot of information and the same time very challenging because the writing required a lot of clear focus, good time management skills, and confidence in sourcing and gathering information.

6.4 Reflection on Dissertation formation

The various sources that the researcher employed during the course of writing the dissertation provided substantial support and backing, providing a basis on which the findings of the research stemmed on. This provided a balance for the findings of the dissertation.

The findings of the dissertation gave the fresh insight into the perception of service quality from the consumers' perspectives (parents) within the Irish childcare service sector. Most of the findings were not surprising, since they were not different from literature; the only

surprising discovery was that satisfied customers remained loyal (though with some level of caution) even in the face of external factors uncontrollable by a company. This was the finding of this dissertation in that the customers (parents) interviewed were not influenced to becoming dissatisfied/disloyal in the light of the recent RTE Primetime programme.

6.5 Reflection on researcher's learning

The most important consideration in the design of educational programmes is the learning styles of students (Allison and Hayes, 1988, p. 269). Also, managers within formal learning environments have abilities to learn differently from particular types of experiences and activities. Hence, a development, educational and training environment may suit one person at different time from the other in a different environment (Swailes and Senior, 1999, p. 1).

6.5.1 Learning styles and strategies

Learning cycle is important in that it helps people to recognise personal inner strengths and improve their skills. Some scholars like Kolb (1984) explain the variations in preferences through the concept of experiential learning which suggests that the learning process involves four different kinds of abilities. They argued that effective learners need all four abilities, while recognising the difficulty of utilising these abilities simultaneously. He portrays these four abilities in two bi-polar orthogonal dimensions namely: Concrete Experience (CE) – Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE) – Reflective Observation (RO) with these four learning stages forming a continuous cycle (Kolb, 1984). He also identified four learning styles: convergent style, divergent style, assimilation style, and accommodative style (Kolb, 1984).

Honey and Mumford (1992) developed their learning styles system as a variation of Kolb's (1984) model. Their descriptions of the stages in the learning cycle are activist, reflector,

theorist, and pragmatist. There is a strong similarity between the Honey and Mumford's (1992) stages and the corresponding Kolb's (1984) learning styles.

- **Activist (Accommodator):** such people act first and consider the consequences later. They are focused on the present and are very attracted to new challenges.
- **Reflector (Diverger):** such people watch and listen before offering an opinion. Seeks data and considers thoroughly before taking a decision. Postpones conclusions until the end.
- **Theorist (Assimilator):** such people seek perfection in their approach to problems using the vertical step by step approach. They dislike fickleness.
- **Pragmatist (Converger):** such people act quickly and confidently to implement ideas. They see problems as opportunities and display good practical problem-solving and decision making skills.

Honey and Mumford's (1992) concept form the basis of a new measure: the Learning styles Questionnaire (LSQ) which they claim to be more meaningful to managers and management activities. Although not explicitly adopting Kolb's (1984) bi-polar structure the LSQ embodies the same bi-polar structure corresponding to Kolb's learning cycle thus: Activist = Concrete Experience (CE); Reflector = Reflective Observation (RO); Theorist = Abstract Conceptualization (AC); Pragmatist = Active Experimentation (AE).

6.5.2 Researcher's learning style

On completing the Learning Style Questionnaire to determine her learning style, the result shows that the researcher has strong preferences for both Reflector and Theorist styles of learning (both rating the same), which she does agree with, but will argue that she lends more to the Reflector style of learning which is characterised by the fact that as suggested by

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Honey and Mumford (1992), Reflectors are able to look at things from different perspectives, but do not deliver their conclusions until the data has been collected and reviewed.

Using these learning styles, the researcher noticed that she learns by observing, thinking about what is happening, while viewing situations from different perspectives (this was one of the reasons she kept a researcher's diary during this study process). She finds it more difficult to learn when she is worried by time pressures or need to move quickly from one activity to another. The researcher found that her best research process was to investigate carefully, have a plan in mind, think about what she was learning and then make detailed analysis. When the researcher wanted to rush on any task or make quick conclusions due to other commitments, she could not force the process as the results were below her expected standard. She had to pause to adopt a more cautious and in-depth approach.

6.5.3 Benefits of the MBA programme

Without any question, enrolling on the MBA in Business Management programme is one of the biggest challenges the researcher has ever faced. The course demanded a lot from the researcher, and it has been very difficult to combine with other commitments outside studies, especially in the most consuming final stage - the completion of the dissertation. It has been a work of great personal commitment, but ultimately the researcher sees all the effort rewarded. Now that the researcher is finishing her the programme, she can say that it has been a wonderful experience, in terms of both knowledge and personal development, even the experiences shared with her colleagues in the school.

The MBA programme has empowered the researcher with new skills and knowledge that otherwise would have been very difficult to obtain, and which she will utilize and apply in her future career, both academic and occupationally. It has provided her with an even stronger base and grounding in Business Management, wherein lies her future career path.

6.5.4 Skills development

Having started the MBA course, there were four major skill areas, which posed the greatest challenge for the researcher, but have greatly developed and improved in the course of the MBA course, these were:

- **Research skills:** This was a completely new skill for the researcher as her graduate course did not require such extensive research work. She noticed significant improvement in her research skills since starting the MBA programme. The different modules' assessments required some level of reviews of academic literatures. While initially she found analysis techniques difficult and intimidating, now she feels confident using information, applying solutions to the research objectives and effectively interpreting results, the researcher's diary went a long way in helping to achieve this for this study. She learned patience and how to identify quickly the key information within a document and also how to conduct information searches and locate published papers within information databases and the internet, hence developing her cognitive, critical, problem-solving, research and investigative skills.
- **Written & Oral Communication Skills:** The researcher has achieved significant improvements in this area since commencing the MBA programme. Completion of the various written assignments has taught the researcher effective writing skills in both her module assignments and emails to colleagues and lecturers. This has also provided immense benefits to her work (when she returns to work) as she has to deal with clients and other dependents by both phone and email. She has greatly improved her interpersonal and oral communication skills within the group settings via the various presentations that had to be completed as part of the different modules.
- **Time management Skills:** The researcher has demonstrated improvements in her time management skills as she had to learn how to combine the programme with other

commitments to meet the deadlines (the compulsory set times for the submission of modules assessments). In the initial stages of the dissertation she devoted too much time to reading and reviewing documents due to the vast amount of literature on the subject. Due to the size and level of time involved, the researcher created a project plan which was useful in tracking her objective completion and to move the dissertation forward.

- Team working skills: From the assessments during the programme, the researcher has learnt how to operate within a team and also how to develop and maintain good relationships with colleagues. She is now able to better identify individual characteristics, understand others' views, to recognize the strengths of other team members and work effectively to achieve mutual goals. Her inner strengths: self confidence and self-esteem also increased during this period as she had the opportunity to learn from feedbacks given by lecturers and her classmates. She was able to take and give constructive criticisms and learn from it.

6.6 Conclusion

During this one year of full-time study, the researcher has developed key skills and gained business knowledge. This has been applied to her personal life and will be carried into work when she returns to full-time work. She is now able to better manage personal life, knowing how to deal with urgent issues/tasks, not forgetting the less urgent ones, but sticking to strict deadlines. She has become an improved communicator and confident at working with her colleagues in a group as well as alone. The researcher attributes these developments and improvements to the MBA Business Management course, which has helped her to be more responsive to decisions in personal life, and will definitely transmit to her work life. It has also opened up a strong career path and increased her confidence in her future plans.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Pre-School Regulations

The Pre-school services (Amendment) Regulations 2006 came into operation in 2007. It is executed and enforced by the Health Services Executive (HSE) who is responsible for the registration and inspection of the pre-school services.

The regulation is divided into six parts covering all aspects of a pre-school service. Part 1 gives an introduction of the regulation, part 2 gives the specification in terms health, welfare and development of the child, first aid, medical assistance, management and staffing and behaviour management. Part 3 takes care of the requirement in terms of notification of the service to Health Services Executive, notification of the change in circumstances, number of pre-school who are catered for and part 4 defines the regulation relating to pre-school children register, records, information for parents, fire safety measures, copy of Childcare Act and Regulations. Part 5 gives the specifications relating to premises and facilities, heating, ventilation, lighting, sanitary accommodation, drainage & sewage disposal, waste storage & disposal, equipment & materials, food & drink, safety measures, facilities for rest & play. The last part – 6 gives the requirements in terms of furnishing the Health Services Executive (HSE) with information (as may be required), insurance, annual fees, inspection and enforcement & inspection (DCYA, 2013).

Appendix 2 - Soilta: National Quality Framework (NQF).

Soilta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education has been developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in consultation with the wider Early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland and is applicable to all settings in which children 0 – 6 years are catered for and therefore transcends the traditional divide between care and education and between the formal school sector and the informal ECCE sector. The Framework is divided into twelve Principles each of which are presented

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individually with explanatory notes given to give better interpretation. The twelve Principles are: The value of early childhood, Children first, Parents as partners, Relationships, Equality, Diversity, Enriching environments, Safety, welfare & well-being, Role of the adult, Teamwork, Pedagogy, Play. One of the Principles relating to parents as partners states that: “Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development” (CECDE, 2013). The explanatory note accompanying this principle is:

“Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grow” (CECDE, 2013).

The Principles translate into sixteen national standards making the visions come into reality of practice in settings catering for children 0 – 6 years. The seventy-five Component of Quality further unpacking the detail within have a direct relationship with the Standards (each having varying number of components). Each Component of Quality is accompanied by a variety of Signposts for Reflection. These are open-ended questions that act as a tool for self-reflection for practitioners to review and consider their current practice within the broad area of the sixteen Standards. Many of these Signposts for Reflection are further supported by a list of ‘Think Abouts’ that helps the reflective practitioner to consider various aspects of his/her practice (CECDE, 2013).

Appendix 3 - Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was collaboratively developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The framework helps adults (practitioners

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and parents) provide appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children from birth to six years regardless of where the learning takes place. It is divided into twelve principles of early learning and development and has four themes namely: Well-being, Identity & Belonging, Communication, and Exploring & Thinking (NCCA, 2013).

Appendix 4 - Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme

The CCS Programme supports disadvantaged parents and provides support for parents in low paid employment and training or education by enabling qualifying parents to avail of reduced childcare costs at participating community childcare services. The participation in the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme is restricted to community/not-for-profit childcare services and is administered by the local City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) (DCYA, 2013).

Appendix 5 - Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme

The free pre-school year was introduced with effect from 2010 and seeks to provide early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children in the year before they commence primary school. To achieve this, services participating in the pre-school year are required to provide age-appropriate activities and programmes to children within a particular age group. For this reason, a minimum and maximum limits to the age range within which children will qualify to participate in the programme has been set and it is currently required that children are aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months at 1st September in the relevant pre-school year .

The programme is administered by the Childcare Directorate of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and local operation of the programme is managed by the City and County

Childcare Committees (CCCs). Both community and commercial service providers can apply to participate in the ECCE programme (DYCA, 2013).

Appendix 6 - Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme

The Childcare Education and Training Support programme (CETS) is administered by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs on behalf of FÁS and the VEC. The objective of the programme is to support parents on certain eligible FÁS and VEC courses by providing subsidised childcare places. FÁS and the VECs decide who is eligible to avail of the programme, and the main terms and conditions of the programme. There are about 2,800 places in total available at any one time under the programme which are divided between FÁS and VEC places, which could be full-time, part-time and afterschool places.

The Department, via the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) manage the allocation of places under the scheme. The information is then passed on to Pobal, who make the payments to providers on the Department's instructions.

There are about 2,800 places in total available at any one time under the programme. These are divided between FÁS and VEC places, with full-time, part-time and afterschool places available (DYCA, 2013).

Appendix 7 - City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs)

Thirty-three City and County Childcare Committees were established in 2001 to encourage the local development of childcare. They are the first point of contact for the public applying for grant assistance under the National Childcare Investment Programme. They offer services locally including: advice on setting up a childcare business; childcare information sessions; training courses for those considering a career in childcare; and advice and support on

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applying for a National Childcare Investment Programme grant. They also offer services to parents like providing information on local childcare facilities and parent networks (DYCA, 2013).

Appendix 8 - Pobal

Pobal established in 1992 is a not-for-profit organisation with charitable status that manages funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the European Union (EU). Pobal encourages the pilot of new initiatives and are committed to supporting communities and local agencies towards achieving social inclusion, reconciliation and equality. (Pobal, 2013)

The organisation supports partnership approaches to decision-making in communities' engagements during development processes at local level, and encourages communities', State agencies' and other stakeholders' co-ordination. Pobal are committed to policy development contribution through the lessons learnt from the programmes managed on behalf of the Government. It was established as Area Development Management, but changed its name to Pobal in 2005.

Appendix 9 - Community Employment

The Community Employment Scheme is designed to help long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged groups get back into work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities, namely voluntary organisations and public bodies involved in not-for-profit activities. The criteria for participating in the Scheme are based on a minimum age of 25 years and length of time in receipt of various social welfare payments (Patterson and Dowd, 2010, p. 123).

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Placement is for at least one year and up to three to five years depending on age and circumstance of participants, with specific criteria for Travellers, ex-offenders, refugees, people with disabilities and those referred by a Drugs Task Force. The Scheme is financed and delivered through FÁS: Ireland's training and employment authority. FÁS gives financial support in the form of allowances and funding to assist with the CE Scheme, like participant wages, Supervisor salary, materials grants and specific skills training grants.

According to the above authors, CE Supervisors provide individual support to participants through an 'Individual Learner Plan' process which focuses on meeting the learning needs of participants. The Individual Learner Plan provides for the planning, organising and recording of the work experience, training and development that each participant receives while working on CE, assisting them to enhance both technical and personal skills. The training provided through Community Employment is delivered within a Quality Assurance framework.

Appendix 10 - Community Crèches /Non-Profit Organisations

A community childcare (not-for-profit) facility is a service that provides affordable childcare which is intended to provide childcare for families on lower incomes, and also to support parents to return to work or education. The importance of quality in non-profit organisations is now receiving recognition by researchers. This recognition is due to the fact, in line with profit-making organisations, non-profit organisation should be aware of not just the implication of transparency and accountability, but that of quality service provision to its customers as well (Ghani et al, 2012, p. 76).

Ilhan (2013, pp. 97-98) advised that non-profit organisations are formally described by three fundamental characters, first: no individual or group is allowed to benefit from the profit - non-distribution constraint (though some provide returns to their members, for example trade

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commissions); second: they are exempt from tax on corporate income; third: some non-profits organisations may enjoy tax privileges such as subsidies, or deductibility of donations to the organisation. Non-profit organisations in the social context have a crucial role in the development of a civil society. They are innovative, provide services and develop policies, support minority and local interests, and most importantly, active citizenship. These organisations perform public tasks (that have not been provided by both the public and private sectors) that have been delegated to them by the state and also influence policy directions in the state, for-profit sector and non-profit organisations.

Aaker et al (2010, p. 235) discovered that companies are judged by people along warmth and competence: two social judgement dimensions of people, to form perceptions of firms. There has been varying definitions of warmth by several authors: *warmth judgments* typically include perceptions of generosity, kindness, honesty, sincerity, helpfulness, trustworthiness, and thoughtfulness, whereas *competence judgments* include confidence, effectiveness, intelligence, capability, skilfulness, and competitiveness (Aaker 1997; Grandey et al. 2005 and Corneille 2005).

Companies termed non-profit were seen to be generally considered high in warmth while those termed for-profit are high in competence. Competence perceptions drive willingness to buy that is customers have more eagerness to buy a product from a for-profit than a non-profit organisation. But as the above authors suggested, the perception of non-profit organisations can be created to be highly warm and competent through the tool of credibility to arouse a feelings of admiration which in turn leads to increased willingness to buy, with these effects persisting and actually playing out in actual behaviours (Aaker et al 2010, p. 235).

Appendix 11 – Schedule of Interviews

The table below gives a breakdown of the interview dates, times and the location.

Pseudonyms	Interview No.	Date	Location	Start	Finish
Andrea	1	9/17/13	Fife Childcare	3.00 pm	3.30 pm
Eva	2	9/07/13	Fife Childcare	3.40 pm	4.05 pm
Sandra	3	10/07/13	Fife Childcare	4.45 pm	5.05 pm
Stella	4	10/07/13	Fife Childcare	5.15 pm	6.43 pm
Breda	5	18/07/13	Fife Childcare	4.25 pm	5.07 pm
Maria	6	18/07/13	Fife Childcare	5.15 pm	5.37 pm
Tina	7	24/07/13	Fife Childcare	3.30 pm	3.58 pm
Shelly	8	26/07/13	Fife Childcare	5.45 pm	6.25 pm

Appendix 12 – Profile of Respondents

Pseudonyms of Respondents	Andrea	Eva	Sandra	Stella	Breda	Maria	Tina	Shelly
Nationally	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish	Irish
Age	37 yrs.	25 yrs.	38 yrs.	44yrs.	39yrs.	40yrs.	40yrs.	35yrs.
Working /Studying	Studying	Studying	Working Full-time	Working Full-time	Working full-time	Recently Redundant	Working Full-time	Working full-time
No. Of children	Two	One	Three	One	Three	Two	One	Three
Ages of Children	16 yrs. & 1yr.	2yrs.	6, 4 & 2 yrs.	4yrs.	18, 11 & 3 yrs.	18 yrs. & 22 Months	3 yrs.	17, 6. & 2 yrs
No. Of children in service	One	One	Three	One	One	One	One	Two
Type of Service use	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
Length of service use	6 weeks	1 yr.	5 yrs:7 Months	3 yrs:6 Months	3 yrs.	1yr.:6 months	2 yrs.	5 yrs.:4 months
Government Childcare Scheme	CETS	CCS	-	-	CCS	-	-	-

Source: Interview Transcripts.

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From the table above, all the respondents were women aged between 25 and 44 years. They have between one and three children currently using the service and have been patronising the service for a length of time ranging between 6 weeks and five years: 7 months. One of these women is studying full-time hence, eligible and is on the Childcare Education and Training Scheme (CETS), a government programme which enables her get reduction in the childcare cost, one of them was recently made redundant, but not getting any assistance towards the cost of her childcare service. One is working full-time and another is studying full-time but are both on the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme (qualifying for the government childcare programme as single mothers with medical cards), while the rest five women were working full-time and paying the full cost for their childcare service.

Appendix 13 – Interview Guide

Date:

Start:

Finish:

Opening: Thank you for making out time to take part in this interview session.

To reiterate, the research is for an academic purpose only, which may be published on the DBS online academic intranet: e-Source.

- 1. What is your nationality?**
- 2. What is your age?**
- 3. How many children do you have?**
- 4. What are their ages?**
- 5. How many of your children use this childcare service or any other?**
- 6. Are you working or studying at the moment?**
- 7. Please tell me what you think about your childcare service?**
- 8. Describe the relationship between you and your child's caregiver? -**

Probes:

Is that in terms of staffs treating you with dignity and respect?

Describe staffs' responsiveness to your suggestions about your child?

Tell me about the caregiver's disciplinary style?

Describe the way your caregiver deals with meals/snacks, allergies if any?

- 9. Describe the relationship between your child and the caregiver? -**

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Probes:

What is your caregiver's policy about taking care of your sick child?

Tell me about the caregiver's dependability?

What do you think about the attitude of your caregiver toward flexibility of drop-off and pick-up times?

10. Tell me how you feel about the amount of direct attention/supervision given to your child? -

Probe:

What do you feel about the number of other children cared for at the same time – adult: child ratio?

11. Tell me your opinion about the physical facilities or space in which your child stays? -

Probes:

In terms of cleanliness?

Safety?

Adequate size?

Appropriate toys?

Outdoor play area?

12. What do you think about the training and qualifications of your childcare provider(s)?

13. How do you feel about the level of education and the curriculum? –

Probe:

Are there age-appropriate activities for child's development?

14. What do you think about the fees charged? –

Probes:

Tell me what you feel about your caregiver's policy of charging for late pick-ups?

What do you feel about your caregiver's policy of charging when your child does not attend?

Describe the flexibility your caregiver allows for delayed payment?

15. How do you feel about the value you are getting for your money?

16. Describe how you feel overall about your child care? -

Probes:

In terms of your satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

In the light of the recent "*Breach of Trust*" documentary aired on the RTE Primetime program, is your overall feeling of satisfaction expressed above affected by this?

17. How do you feel about using the service again? -

Probes:

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Will you continue with the service for the child (now, the following year) or another child (if any)?

Will you be using the after-school care for the child (ren) or siblings?

18. How do you feel about recommending the service to others like family, friends etc.?

19. Tell me what you will like changed in the current service: any aspect?

20. What additional comments would you like to add concerning this subject: Your perception of the service quality?

21. What advise do you have for the service: anything at all?

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix 14 – Information Sheet for Research Participants

- What is the research topic?

Customer Perception of Service Quality in the Irish Childcare Industry

- What is the purpose of the research?

It is a purely academic research as part of the assessment for Business management programme award.

- What kind of data will be collected from the participants (parents), how and how long will it take?

Parents' opinions/views on quality of the childcare services, collected via interviews which will be audio-recorded, lasting about 45mins.

- Participation is absolutely voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at anytime during the course of the interview.

- The research will be beneficial to both the childcare providers and parents as well.

- There will confidentiality of the data collected from participants, and anonymity will be observed at every stage of the research.

- Only Examiners for the programme will be assessing the data collected/findings of the research. This might also be published on E-source - the Dublin Business School academic portal.

Appendix 15 – Consent Form

Title of research project:

Customer perception of quality of service quality in the Irish childcare chains: A case study of Giraffe Childcare.

Name and position of researcher:

Bukunola Oluwafemi, MBA Business Management student at Dublin Business College, Dublin.

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above
study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at
anytime.

I am aware that while every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality of
the information I provide, this can only be offered within the limitation of the
law.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:

Bukunola Oluwafemi (researcher)

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 16 – Confidentiality Agreement Form

Dublin Business School

Company Security Clearance and Confidentiality

Name: _____

Dissertation Title: _____

Company Security Clearance

Please initial as appropriate

1. We agree that the student(s) may undertake a dissertation of the nature indicated above and that he/she/they will be given access to appropriate information sources within our Organisation.
2. We agree that copies of the finished project will be made available for assessment by staff of Dublin Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and External examiners.
3. We request that the completed dissertation be treated as confidential and not used for any other purposes other than assessment.

Company Name: _____

Signed: _____

Position: _____

Date: _____

Note to Student:

Please ensure that the original signed copy of this form is forwarded to the Postgraduate Business Programme Coordinator and a copy of this form also is included in the Dissertation.

Appendix 17 - Thematic Analysis (Theoretical approach)

Thematic analysis requires that a number of clearly defined choices be made before data collections (sometimes), analysis and on an ongoing reflective dialogue by the researcher or researchers throughout the analytic period. These decisions are:

- a. What counts as a theme?: A theme/pattern according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”. This refers to prevalence both in terms of weight within each data item, and occurrence across the entire data set. The researcher had to determine the importance of every data piece in relation to what it captures in terms of the research question (prevalence) using the count of the number of different speakers who articulated the theme, across the entire data set. This enabled her to develop core-themes and sub-themes.
- b. A rich description of data set or a detailed account of one particular aspect: The researcher has a choice between these two: giving a rich thematic account of the entire data set which is useful for an under-researched area or giving a refined account of one particular theme or groups of themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 11). The researcher chose the latter as it enabled her to give a refined account of the group of themes within the study.
- c. Inductive versus theoretical thematic analysis: According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 12) themes and patterns can be identified by the inductive (bottom up) or the theoretical/deductive (top down) approach. The inductive approach refers to the identified themes being linked to data themselves (similar to grounded theory). The researcher adopted the theoretical/deductive approach which allowed a more detailed analysis of some parts of the data, mapping how and why she did the coding: to

answer a specific research question (how do parents perceive the service quality in childcare providers).

- d. Semantic or latent themes: This decision relates to the level at which themes can be identified: at a semantic/explicit or a latent/interpretative level. Semantic relates to the identification of themes based on the surface/explicit meaning of what the participant has said or written (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 13). The researcher chose the latent/Interpretative level which refers to an attempt being made to theorize the importance of the themes and their deeper meanings and effects in relation to existing literature.
- e. Epistemology: essentialist/realist versus constructionist thematic analysis: Thematic analysis can be done both on the realist/essentialist and the constructionist paradigms. Essentialist/Realist approach allows for theorizing motivation, experience and meaning in a straight forward manner. The researcher as stated earlier in the research philosophy adopted the constructionist approach which enabled her to theorize the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions, that fuelled the individual accounts that are provided.

Appendix 18 – Researcher’s diary

The following are some of the logs from the researcher’s diary:

Date/ Month/2013	Event Log
<p>1st Week January</p> <p>3rd Week</p> <p>4th Week</p>	<p>Customer perception of service quality will be an interesting topic, but in which context: retail, Information technology or childcare?</p> <p>Chose the childcare context as it had been the focus of a bit of attention in my personal development portfolio (PDP).</p> <p>Started researching: searching and reading up literatures on this to get some basic ideas. Oh goodness! This is such a task, how am I going to get through this.</p>
<p>February</p> <p>26th February</p>	<p>Reading these journals is such a daunting task! Getting frustrated, how can I get better at this?</p> <p>We had a lecture on reading and reviewing (doing a critique) academic journals. I now feel a bit confident reviewing the journals, but it is so time consuming and boring.</p> <p>Approached some childcare services and informed the managers of my plight of a doing an academic research on their organisations.</p> <p>All of them advised they will review with management and get back to me, but that it should be no problem.</p>
<p>March</p>	<p>Approached a couple more childcare services, still the same story.</p> <p>Anyway it should be no problem, as I will not be interviewing staffs, managers or the children.</p> <p>So I need to worry about the dissertation proposal at the minute, as it is so time consuming.</p>
<p>April</p>	<p>Dissertation is due on the 15th of April, and some other continuous assessments due too.</p> <p>Exam is also around the corner!</p> <p>I will take a stride at a time and worry less.</p>

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May	Kept asking, but still no response from any of the childcare providers.
26 th May	<p>Alarming!!! Spirit Radio news advice of the scandal of abuse in 3 childcare service chains and already notified to the Gardai.</p> <p>Oh I hope this does not affect me, in terms of getting access, one of the services is the first service I approached. I can only wait and see!</p>
5 th June	Submitted an official letter from DBS introducing myself and my plight to the very first childcare service that had granted initial access.
25 th June	<p>Got no feedback, even though I kept asking until today when the manager gave a shocker: they cannot accommodate my research at this time because they are very busy with the current situation!!!</p> <p>Oh God help me!!! Where do I go from here! Less than 7 weeks to due date!</p>
26 th June	Checked with all other services approached earlier, but got no feedback while some denied access as well.
27 th June	<p>Approached three new services (one of which is a community childcare service) who advised again they will get back to me after consultation with management.</p> <p>I ordered introduction letters from the Registrar's office for the three services.</p> <p>I kept ringing to get feedback while awaiting letters, but there was none.</p>
2 nd July	Met Supervisor and informed her of my situation with getting access for primary data. She gave some helpful advice as last resort alternatives.
3 rd July	Went to one of the three services and was advised that they will not be accommodating my research, at this time, maybe at a time later, as they are busy at this time. (My aims is to interview parents, not staff or children.
5 th July	<p>Rang the community service, and thank God, it was a positive news! They granted full access with the manager willing to assist me in any way she possibly could. But she advised she needs to speak with parents to get their consents, and then we can start scheduling interviews sessions with them.</p> <p>Rang the manager back, she advised that some parents gave their consent, so we scheduled the first two interviews for Tuesday the 9th of July.</p>
8 th July	Rang the third service to see if I can get access to do a comparison between non-profit and for-profit organisations, but it was a no access story with the same excuses.

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9 th July	<p>Conducted the first two interviews, it was okay. But the question “describe the disciplinary style of your childcare provider” seem to raise some eye-brows.</p> <p>The second interviewee had used the phrase “instilling life lessons” so I will be changing the question to “describe the style your childcare provider adopts in instilling life lessons into the children”. I tried not to raise my voice tone, so I do not prompt any response in interviews.</p> <p>It will be interesting to see how this change affects the responses. Anyway I started transcribing the audio-recorded data. It is so time-consuming and challenging.</p>
10 th July	<p>I conducted the next two interviews: these were a lot smoother with the phrase “instilling life lessons” as it seemed to resonate better with the parents.</p> <p>Actually, it appears that I am not capturing the term “quality childcare” from parents’ perspectives appropriately. So I will be introducing another probing question “what is quality childcare service to you” after the question “describe your childcare service” in the next set of interviews. At the moment, I am engrossed with this challenging task of “transcribing data” But getting familiar with the data, which is good.</p>
18 th July	<p>The next two interviews were conducted today (as it was not possible to schedule interview sessions with parents before now). It went well, and the new probing question seem to be working wonders, as it got the parents describing their expectations and their perceptions of a quality childcare service.</p> <p>I am transcribing and coding (manually) along using my own labels and In vivo codes.</p> <p>Patterns beginning to appear, but I will wait and see if there are surprises.</p>
24 th July	<p>Conducted the next interview today.</p> <p>I really wish I could get a father or a non-Irish national to interview, but it has not been possible, so far they have been all Irish women, but good enough right across the rooms: baby, wobbler, toddler etc., some studying, in training courses or working full-time.</p> <p>If I can get one more interview, that will be it as I do not have time on my side.</p>
26 th July	<p>Conducted one more interview today, it was still an Irish mother.</p> <p>Anyway thank God I am done with interviewing, thanks to Fife childcare management, staff and parents (customers) for this.</p> <p>Continued transcribing and coding. Boy! It is a hard, time-consuming and boring work.</p>

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28 th July	<p>I am lost in the mist of data! God help me! How do I analyse these now?</p> <p>I went back to read about thematic analysis and got the distinction between grounded theory and thematic analysis, which made life easier for me.</p>
29 th July	<p>My pre-conception as a parent myself should not bias my interpretation of the data, so I have to be as open as possible. I will only build on the existing theories.</p>
August	<p>Writing up the dissertation is another challenge! But slow and steady wins the race they say!</p> <p>It is daunting as well, but rewarding, as the end has justified the means! Thank God!</p>