

INSTITIÚID OIDEACHAIS 

MARINO  

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

*An Associated College of
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*



17th April 2026

Marino Institute of Education

Research Papers

Session 1a Outdoor Pedagogy

Paper 1: Slow relational pedagogy in the outdoors

Presenter: Orla Doyle (Carraig Briste and Killeghney Early Years)

This presentation shares the story of how a slow relational pedagogy has gradually developed within the outdoor environments of Carraig Briste & Killeghney Early Years. Inspired by the principles of the Reggio Emilia and a deep love of the outdoors, our journey began with a simple question: what might happen if we slowed down our practice and allowed more time for relationships, curiosity, and connection to unfold naturally. Through our years of ongoing reflection and collaboration, as educators we began to pay closer attention to the everyday moments of children's play and exploration outdoors. Pedagogical documentation, including observations, photographs, and learning stories, became an important tool in helping us notice what mattered to children and how they interacted with the natural environment. These reflections, alongside professional dialogue among educators, supported a growing awareness of how time, space, and relationships influence children's learning. Over time, we began to see how slowing down transformed our practice. Children spent longer periods exploring, questioning, and collaborating with one another. Curiosity deepened, attention was sustained, and the outdoor environment began to act as a co-teacher, inviting creativity, inquiry, and problem-solving. Relationships between children, educators, and the natural world became stronger and more meaningful. Our story highlights how intentionally slowing the pace of early years practice can support children's wellbeing, belonging, and engagement. At Carraig Briste & Killeghney Early Years, the blending of Reggio Emilia inspiration with a strong connection to nature continues to shape a pedagogy where learning grows through relationships, reflection, and the richness of everyday experiences outdoors.

Paper 2: Slow and sustainable: an early childhood outdoor pedagogy

Presenter: Clair James (Winchester University)

This paper proceeds from the assumption that early childhood is a period of intrinsic value rather than merely a preparatory stage for schooling. Drawing upon the 'slow' movement of the 1980s—particularly David Elkind's *The Hurried Child* (Elkind, 2006)—alongside the work of contemporary advocate Alison Clark (Froebel Trust, 2022), it highlights the significance of temporal openness in outdoor learning. Focusing on outdoor education within an English context, it is suggested that when slow, contemplative time and space are afforded outdoors—free from the pressures of predetermined learning objectives and early

learning goals—opportunities emerge to include all children. Returning in part to the past pedagogy of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) and underpinned by Graham Harvey’s research, when viewed through a new-animist lens it becomes evident that a slow, outdoor pedagogy, offers the possibility of unified inclusion: the inclusion of all persons in the widest sense of the word. Such a profound interconnectedness of humans, other beings, and place conveys a divergent paradigm, in which learning emerges in subtle, relational ways that often resist measurement, rendering it misaligned with dominant accountability-driven frameworks. Finally, it is argued that children’s diverse and non-linear developmental trajectories align well with a ‘slow’ and sustainable pace when outdoors, thus enabling a radical, authentic, unified inclusion.

Paper 3: ECE educators’ perspectives on the value and impact of prepared outdoor environments

Presenters: Ethan Cosgrove, Jason Flaherty and Sharon Skehill (The Willow Outdoor Early years setting / Newtown Kids Club Ltd., Galway).

This action research study, conducted in part of a MA study, examines early childhood educators’ perspectives on the value and impact of prepared outdoor environments in early childhood education and care. For the purpose of this presentation, the research is supported by insights from practice, as well as discussion of the setting’s role in informing Tusla’s Guidance ‘When the Roof is the Sky’ (2023). Situated within the context of Ireland’s Aistear curriculum framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) and informed by updated guidance on outdoor play and nature pedagogy, the presentation will explore how intentionally designed outdoor spaces support holistic learning and development.

Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach, semi-structured interviews were carried out with participating educators working in the outdoor early years setting as part of an action research project. Findings indicate that thoughtfully prepared outdoor environments foster well-being, autonomy, and engagement of babies, toddlers and young children, with educators playing a crucial role in shaping creative, responsive spaces that enhance learning and development.

The study demonstrates that prepared outdoor environments function as significant pedagogical tools rather than purely recreational spaces. Participants linked prepared outdoor environments to curriculum outcomes aligned with Aistear’s Themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking, as well as supporting professional practice. The presentation aims to illustrate links between research and practice by discussing how we prepare the outdoor spaces, set out and set up provocations, and plan a curriculum to nurture learning and development to achieve the Learning Goals of Aistear in the outdoors.

The study contributes to a growing evidence base that positions the prepared outdoor environment as an integral component of early years education and provides ideas from practice in bringing Aistear to life in nature.

Session 1b Professional Identity

Paper 1: Educators' perspectives on professional identity in Irish ECEC

Presenter: Diaga Marini (Marino Institute of Education)

The professional identity of early childhood educators is a foundational element of developing one's career success. Developing a sense of one's professional self is something we all do to give our roles purpose, but our roles purpose is not always understood or appreciated by others in society or governing bodies. This is the case for the sector of early childhood education and care as it is a career that does not have a strongly established professional identity, or a unifying title denoting their role, that educators can self-identify by. While professional identity, or lack of it within the context of early childhood education and care sector, is associated with a multiplicity of factors, this research explored through reviewing past literature pertaining to this area, and sixteen qualitative questionnaires, the influences of professionalism, historical contexts, policy and frameworks, and systemic challenges, such as gender, societal perceptions of the sector, job satisfaction, remuneration, and commitment to remaining in the sector, on early childhood educators professional identities. The findings produced conclusions that display educators feel every factor named above had an impact on their professional identity and how others perceive and value their professional role within society. Educators from this study also believed that for their job to be worked with passion and long-term commitment, they must be recognised, respected, valued, and remunerated accordingly in return, by the government and by wider society.

Paper 2: Untold Stories: Exploring the professional identity of female ECE pioneers in Ireland.

Presenters: Tasha O'Donnell, Maja Haals Brosnan and Eileen Keane Niland

Those familiar with the ECE sector in Ireland know that professional identity remains elusive. While ECE is lauded for its long-term benefits, those working in the sector remain undervalued. The ongoing turmoil of increased accountability (Levitt, Janta and Wegrich, 2008) and ambitious policy plans (Urban, 2019) has not been assuaged by the introduction of a new funding model and the sector finds itself in a long-term recruitment crisis. With widespread closures and several organisations voicing the opinion that it is time for the state to take responsibility for the sector, it seems we are at a critical juncture (Urban, 2025).

Utilising feminist story-telling and creative methodologies across three phases, Untold Stories seeks to give voice to the pioneering women of ECE in Ireland; those who committed to opening settings, fulfilling their desire to work and to facilitate the return of other women to the workplace. These women, and their passion for ECE, paved the path for the sector and there is much we can learn from them. Phase 1 employs a qualitative survey, offering setting owners and educators an opportunity to share their stories and thoughts on the evolution of the ECE sector. Phase 2 comprises three in-person sessions with setting owners, providing deeper exploration of their stories. Session 1 explores their origin story through zine-making, session 2 delves into their hopes and aspirations for ECE through photo-voice, and session 3 unpacks their professional identity, how it was forged and what continues to influence and reshape it, through object folding. Phase 3 facilitates participant reflections.

Here, we will present an overview of the research, for context, and findings from phase 2, session 1, which utilised zine-making to explore the stories of ECE setting owners. The findings show how a focus on relational pedagogy and child-led practices, with emphasis on quality and community, emerged naturally for these pioneers prior to the existence of policies and frameworks. One key discussion is the government initiative to offer two free preschool years, and the challenge which is posed by such political discourse, which focuses on affordability and parental productivity within the workforce, yet fails to recognise educators tasked with providing ECE, or to successfully address recruitment and retention. As conversations shift towards a public model of ECE, Untold Stories documents the experience of those who paved the way and are now struggling to survive in a system that offers little recognition of their contributions.

Paper 3: Untold Stories: The voices of female ECE pioneers in Ireland.

Presenters: Maire Uí Mhurchu (Marino Institute of Education / Gaeloideachas), Martina Osborne (independent) and Samantha Hallows (Narrative 4 / TOY Together Old and Young / Child Development Initiative)

While Untold Stories seeks to amplify the voices of our ECEC female pioneers, this embedded session offers a unique opportunity to hear directly from these incredible women. They will share their lived experiences of ECEC, beginning prior to regulation of the sector, at a time predating policy, frameworks and formal qualifications. Their journeys were born from a deep passion and grá, which sustained them as the sector developed around them.

During this presentation, they will speak to the research data, share their insights and expertise. They will share stories from their own humble beginnings, predating policy and frameworks, to their role of service to the community, building true partnerships with families. They will further reflect on their professional identity, much contested in ECEC

in Ireland, and share their thoughts on navigating the development of sector policies as female leaders

While they share a journey, each story is unique and offers an opportunity to learn from these women who paved the path for ECEC in Ireland and continue to give back to the sector, advocating for a strong and sustainable future and supporting the next generation of educators.

Session 1c Children's voices and experiences

Paper 1: Child Agency in Practice: exploring the voice and influence of children in the ECCE preschool programme.

Presenter: Michelle Lehane (Mary Immaculate College)

In the context of Aistear's view of the child as being agentic (GoI 2024), this mixed methods and case study research, examines how child agency is facilitated and embedded in preschools that participate in the ECCE programme. Child agency is defined as children having 'the ability to take action or to choose what action to take' (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). Personal well-being is linked to agency and the belief that we have some control over our self and the world (Hayes and Filipović 2018; Fane et al. 2020). Phase 1 is a mixed methods online survey of early childhood professionals about child agency in the ECCE programme. Phase 2 is an in-depth case study of two ECCE preschools with children aged 2-6, and their educators. Preliminary findings from Phase 1, indicate that respondents linked child agency with listening to the voice of the child, following the children's interests, child-led activities or during free play. Benefits of child agency included wellbeing, empowerment and self-confidence. While all (n=38) respondents believe that children are competent in making decisions about their learning, this did not necessarily equate to children having agency over their time or the adult led routine and structure of the ECCE session. As a result, children may experience different levels of agency. Three levels of agency are presented based on the preliminary findings: Child-led child agency: Adult-led child agency and Constraints on agency. Direct quotes from participants around the topics of children's interests, choices, play, agency over time, snack time and structure provide insights into child agency in practice during the ECCE preschool programme. These insights offer scope for reflection on how child-led child agency can be promoted in line with Aistear's vision of the 'agentic' child.

Paper 2: Teaching children's rights in ECE

Presenters: Kate Lyons and Jessica McDonnell (Marino Institute of Education)

This research explores the role of rights-based resources in enhancing educators' knowledge and supporting young children's enjoyment and understanding of their rights within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Ireland. Grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and informed by national frameworks such as *Aistear* and *Siolta*, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach. Two interconnected research projects were conducted. The first examined how a suite of rights-based video resources informed children's awareness and enjoyment of their rights, while the second investigated educators' perspectives on children's rights and the usefulness of these resources in practice. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six ECEC educators and focus group discussions with children under three years of age. Findings indicate that while educators often implement rights-based practices intuitively through relational pedagogy, they lacked confidence and explicit knowledge of children's rights. The resources enhanced educators' capacity to teach rights explicitly and meaningfully. For children, engagement with the videos supported participation, voice, and influence, as illustrated through the Lundy Model. Overall, the study highlights the value of accessible, developmentally appropriate resources in embedding children's rights within everyday ECEC practice.

Paper 3: Exploring gender identity in early childhood: Young children's understandings of gender in ECCE

Presenter: Chloe Hurley (Munster Technological University)

Purpose: This study explores young children's gender-related understandings and experiences within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings, alongside educator's perspectives and practices relating to gender. The purpose of this research is to examine how children perceive, reproduce, and potentially challenge gender stereotypes, and analyse how educator beliefs and the ECCE environment shape children's gender identities. Using a qualitative, child-centred methodology, data was gathered through whole-setting observations, semi-structured educator interviews, and participatory focus groups with children across four ECCE settings. **Methodology:** Two innovative, rights-based methods were employed with children: art-based focus groups, where children created representations of a 'boy' and a 'girl', and photo-elicitation focus groups, where children captured and discussed images of their favourite spaces. These participatory approaches supported children to express their perspectives using both visual and verbal modes, positioning them as active contributors to the research process (Martin, 2019). **Key findings:** Preliminary findings indicate that young children's gender understandings and expressions are largely stereotypical, with male and female children conforming to traditional gender norms through play, interactions, and self-expression. Notably, half of the male children refused to create a 'girl' during the art focus groups,

reflecting the internalisation and reproduction of gender norms in early childhood (Butler, 1988), particularly, children’s internalisation of gendered power hierarchies. Educator interviews revealed limited knowledge of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) practices relating to gender. Implications for Practice and Policy: These findings highlight a need for targeted DEI professional learning in ECCE. Of 37,060 ECEC professionals in Ireland in 2023, only 763 undertook the DEI training offered through Count Childcare Committees (Oireachtas, 2024; Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Evidence from CPD programmes such as the LINC programme suggests that sustained, structured professional learning can positively influence educators’ knowledge, attitudes, and practices (Pölzl-Stefanec, Barta and Walter-Laager, 2024). Gender-responsive CPD delivered over a short, structured timeframe may therefore support greater uptake and meaningful change in practice.

Session 1d Inclusive and trauma informed education

Paper 1: Does the philosophy of integration translate into practice?

Presenter: Holly Lewis (Marino Institute of Education).

This study examines whether the philosophy of integration within early childhood and primary education settings translates into meaningful practice. While integration is widely endorsed in policy, there remains ambiguity in its definition and implementation, often resulting in practices that fall short of genuine inclusion. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators who had experience in both integrated and mainstream educational settings. Data were analysed thematically to explore educators’ understandings of integration, the influence of national and international policies, and the practical realities they encounter. Findings indicate that although integration is supported in theory, significant barriers hinder its effective enactment, including insufficient training, funding constraints, staffing and ratio challenges, and a lack of clarity surrounding definitions of integration. The dominance of medical-model thinking continues to shape practice, despite policy support for the social model of disability. Participants highlighted the importance of play, collaboration, and flexible environments in supporting children’s participation, yet noted that current structures often limit these possibilities. The study concludes that while the philosophy of integration is theoretically sound, it is not yet fully achievable in practice. Targeted investment, clearer definitions, enhanced professional development, and systemic reform are required to bridge the gap between policy ideals and lived educational experiences.

Paper 2: It's because we care: Mattering, care and trauma sensitive practice in ECEC

Presenters: Annie Cummins and Judith Butler (Munster Technological University)

This presentation discusses the findings from a World Café research project that co develops a trauma sensitive framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), using Brown and Isaacs' (2005) principles to facilitate structured, collaborative dialogue among educators, students, managers, policymakers, and parents. The findings identify care as a central, cross-cutting theme embedded across all three components of Butler's (2022) Shamrock Model: Neuro-informed, Environment, and Relationships. However, while care was widely recognised as foundational to trauma sensitive practice, participants expressed tensions and a lack of consensus regarding the role of love in professional relationships. Discussions revealed care as a complex psychological, political, and relational process, shaped by power, commodification, judgement, and professional norms within ECEC contexts. Importantly, care is positioned as the primary mechanism through which psychological safety, belonging, and emotional regulation are fostered, enabling children, families, and educators to experience being seen, valued, and able to contribute meaningfully, resulting in a sense of mattering. This presentation argues that trauma sensitive practice must attend not only to environments and relationships but also to the psychological experience of mattering, situating care as central to wellbeing, identity, and participation in ECEC. The findings emphasise the need to value care as a core component of early childhood educators' professional practice and to recognise its socio-political dimensions, positioning trauma sensitive practice as embedded within broader cultural and structural conditions rather than located solely in individual practice.

Paper 3: Processes of belonging for children with a migratory background in Italian ECEC

Presenter: Paolo Bertuletti (Università degli Studi di Bergamo)

The presentation will illustrate the results of an empirical study aimed at exploring processes of belonging in an Italian nursery, focusing on a 31-month-old girl with a migratory background. The research, conducted in 2025, was guided by the following questions: How is children's belonging constructed in this context? Which values are at stake process? Drawing on Yuval-Davis's theory of the politics of belonging and the analytical framework developed by Sumsion and Wong for investigating belonging in early childhood education and care, the study examines how belonging is negotiated and enacted in everyday nursery practices. Using a qualitative case study design, the researchers conducted systematic observations and video recordings centred on a single child, allowing for an in-depth analysis of belonging from the child's perspective. This methodological approach also

enables a refinement of the adopted theoretical framework in line with Yin’s concept of “analytical generalisation”. The findings suggest that educational practices rooted in well-established pedagogical traditions may lead ECEC practitioners to overlook subtle social dynamics that shape processes of belonging among very young children, potentially hindering their full inclusion within the nursery community. Educators involved in this research received inputs in developing strategies to foster belonging among children from multicultural contexts. The findings may also guide other practitioners and policymakers in shaping more inclusive ECEC services.

Session 1e Changing practice

Paper 1: Continuing the journey: How the National Siolta Aistear Initiative supports engagement with the updated Aistear

Presenters: Sandra O’Neill and Lorraine Farrell (Better Start)

This paper discusses the national Aistear dissemination plan and the actions undertaken to support understanding of and engagement with the updated Framework (GoI, 2024). The update reflects societal changes, shifts in EC policy and research, changes to our understanding of babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident rights holders and acknowledges an increasingly professionalised EC workforce. The roll out and communication of Aistear (2009) received some criticism due to inconsistent messaging and limited professional learning opportunities. In response to that critique, multiple supports have been provided in a variety of structures and contexts for those working within the early childhood sector. As part of the Aistear dissemination plan, local, regional and national events communicated the key messages to several stakeholder groups including early years educators, City and County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service, Gaeloideachas and Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta. In partnership with the NCCA events for the Department of Education and Youth and Tusla Inspectorates, higher education institutions and further education and training organisations were also held. Other supports included workshops for early years educators, conferences and seminars, CoPPs for educators and support services, national webinars, blogs, research papers, and presentations. Early feedback from focus groups and questionnaires shows the update is well received. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, a key online support for educators, has been updated to align with the updated Framework. More resources written with early years educators for early years educators, will be published across 2026. A key message from the Aistear dissemination plan is to ‘take it slow’. As such, supports extend into 2027 and beyond to ensure ongoing professional learning opportunities and guidance for the early childhood sector.

Paper 2: ‘Why don’t we just ask them?’ Consulting with the early childhood sector to update the Aistear and Play programme

Presenter: Sandra O’Neill (Better Start)

This paper tracks the redevelopment of Aistear and Play, a professional learning and mentoring programme for early childhood settings. Developed by the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI), over 600 educators have participated in the programme since 2019. Delivered by Better Start Quality Development Service, the programme now requires review to align with the updated Aistear curriculum framework (GOI, 2024). As such a stakeholder consultation was undertaken to explore 1) the impact of the programme 2) whether the programme is still fit for purpose and 3) potential barriers to participation. An interpretivist research paradigm was adopted using online questionnaires and focus groups. Former participants of Aistear and Play; mentors who delivered the programme; and early childhood educators and managers who had never participated with Aistear and Play were consulted. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis Framework (2006). Findings suggest that Aistear and Play is a beneficial programme. Educators strongly felt that the whole setting approach, inclusion of mentoring and in person training was crucial and should be maintained. Over 90% of educators reported extensive learning regarding Aistear, skills development and an improvement to quality due to their participation. Similarly, mentors stated that Aistear and Play is one of the strongest tools they have to support practice in settings. In contrast however, educators who had not taken part in the programme identified multiple barriers to their possible participation, negatively impacting their likelihood to ever engage. This has implications for policy and practice. While Aistear and Play is highly regarded by those who have participated, most managers and educators consulted stated they would never participate with the programme in its current structure without substantial incentives. Research findings will influence the content and structure of the redeveloped Aistear and Play programme, expected to be available in 2027.

Paper 3: Inclusive and Sustainable Post-Covid Pedagogy (InSCoPe)

Presenters: Rhona Stallard, Natasha O’Donnell and Maja Haals Brosnan (Marino Institute of Education)

We present learning from a recent Erasmus+ project, Inclusive and Sustainable Post-Covid Pedagogy (InSCoPe) that established a Community of Practice (CoP), which aimed to explore experiences of how pedagogies that enhance inclusion and equality were balanced with Covid-19 restrictions and how these can be sustained into the future.

Framed within a social constructivist paradigm, InSCoPe used video with practitioner-researcher dialogues to facilitate self-reflection and discussions on ECEC practices (Tobin & Hsueh, 2007). InSCoPe identified key pedagogical practices for inclusion to be sustained into the future:

- Understandings of inclusion embedded through understandings of pedagogy more broadly.
- Small group sizes/ratios, allocation of designated educators to groups, parent-partnerships, peer and sibling relationships, and routines are central to inclusion.
- Covid-19 measures led to slower, relational, and agentic practice.
- Professional loneliness and fragmentation of experience negatively impacts inclusive pedagogy.

The CoP strengthened educators' professional confidence in inclusive practice, thus highlighting the need for continuous team reflection and shared narratives.

Session 2a Literacy and preschool-primary school connections

Paper 1: Professional learning at the preschool-primary boundary to support continuity and progression in vocabulary learning across the transition to primary school

Presenter: Alison Nulty (Dublin City University)

This paper presents the conceptual framework for a PhD study that explores how a cross-sector professional learning community (PLC) may support shared understandings between pre-primary and primary educators in relation to vocabulary development across the transition from pre-primary to primary education. In Ireland, most children attend preschool prior to transitioning into primary school (Walsh et al., 2024). In line with this, continuity and progression across the early childhood education (ECE) continuum have become an increased focus of recent Irish policy, particularly in areas such as early literacy (GoI, 2024; NCCA, 2023; NCCA, 2024). Research indicates that strong relationships between pre-primary and primary educators, developed through sustained cross-sector professional learning, are central to supporting continuity and progression (Boyle et al., 2018; Dockett & Perry, 2020). However, while this emphasis on cross-sector professional learning is evident in Irish policy (DCEDIY, 2018, 2023), there is limited evidence of structured cross-sector professional learning at system level.

In the study, a PLC is adopted as a model of collaborative inquiry through which preschool and primary educators reflect on practice and develop shared understandings to support

vocabulary learning. The PLC is conceptualised as a boundary space where preschool and primary professions meet. However, this boundary space can also create tension, as educators may bring different understandings of their role in supporting transitions, different priorities for children's development and different pedagogical approaches (Rantavuori, 2018). The conceptual framework brings together Hord's (1997) dimensions of effective PLCs and boundary-crossing theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to examine how professional learning in this boundary space may support collaboration between preschool and primary educators. This conceptual framework will guide the empirical study and has potential significance for transition policy in Ireland.

Paper 2: An exploration of top-down perceptions garnered from government-produced documents on literacy in the Republic of Ireland

Presenter: Maureen Colleran (Marino Institute of Education)

This paper examines the Government of Ireland's top-down approach to enhancing literacy skills development by analysing government-funded documents and highlighting its efforts to ensure continuity in learner outcomes and experiences across sectors, situating early childhood education as the foundation blocks for lifelong learning.

The document analysis presented in this paper is part of a qualitative study using Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2016) that explores government-produced documents. Theoretical sampling, guided by purposeful selection, was used to select document sources for analysis from various government websites. Next, purposive sampling involved identifying and strategically selecting information-rich cases related explicitly to literacy using keywords.

The document analysis, at the focus of this paper, notes that, across departments, the government is emphasising similar aspects of literacy across age groups, thereby providing a continuum of literacy learning from early childhood to adulthood. This paper focuses on three factors:

1. Digital literacy: Several policy documents highlight the need for greater awareness of disinformation and stronger digital and critical literacy skills. Even though its importance is emphasised, digital literacy is given little clarity in the early years.
2. Changing times and society's role in language learning skills: Many documents cited a changing society as the rationale for policy changes or for creating documents.
3. The learner: The government seeks to create lifelong learners from early childhood and, as such, is the focus of many documents.

An understanding that government policy is designed to establish a continuum of literacy learning from early childhood to adulthood is important, as it will directly affect how policy and strategies are communicated to service providers and users. Although there is some guidance on enacting strategies through an Implementation Plan, it is left open to interpretation.

Paper 3: Children’s participation in community: Strengthening the links between ECEC settings and local libraries

Presenters: Kathryn O’Riordan (Department for Children, Disability and Equality) and Frances Campbell (independent researcher)

The purpose of the research was to assess the delivery and impact of the Little Library Initiative in the Republic of Ireland. The objective of the initiative was to link Early Childhood Education and Care to local libraries and connect children transitioning from pre-school to school with an opportunity to join their library, offering children book bags with story books and resources for parents to support the child’s transition to primary school.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using both thematic and narrative approaches. Data was collected through 31 small group discussions, an online survey and phone interviews with parents. Survey data, researchers’ observations and thematic data from interviews were cross referenced to identify emergent themes and issues and to explore the relationships between issues. Participant sampling and data collection continued until no new conceptual insights were generated and the research team felt they had gathered repeated evidence for the thematic analysis, thus reaching theoretical saturation.

Results of Little Library and Book Bag Initiative 2021, 2022 indicated stakeholders found it conceptually and strategically relevant. However, the implementation of the initiative faced operational and logistical challenges. Limitations of the research were identified. There was a clear consensus that the Little Library project provided a wide range of positive benefits, and the initiative should continue. The research was undertaken in accordance with ethical guidelines, prioritizing participant consent, confidentiality, and integrity of the data. This study builds on a wide body of research that shows the value of connecting ECEC to their community and that these connections can support children's transitions.

Paper 4: Similarities in Mother' and Fathers' Toddler Interactions and Links with School Readiness.

Presenters: Caoimhe Dempsey (University College Cork), Sarah Foley (University of Edinburgh) and Claire Hughes (University of Cambridge).

Purpose: Despite fathers' growing involvement in childcare, studies of parental influences on children's school readiness rarely adopt a dual focus on both mothers and fathers. We respond to this gap via two studies.

Methodology: In a sample of 185 two-parent families, Study One examined similarities, differences and longitudinal links between displays of positive affect and reciprocity in home-based play observations of mother-toddler and father-toddler dyadic interactions at two timepoints (14- and 24-months). Study Two involved an age 48-months follow-up of 77 children, for whom teachers rated school-readiness, including subscales of language and cognition, daily living skills, behavioural regulation, and family support.

Key findings: At 14-months, mothers displayed higher average levels of positive affect than fathers, but there were no mean differences by parent gender in dyadic reciprocity. Within-family associations strengthened over time, and by 24 months, average levels of positive affect and dyadic reciprocity were similar for mothers and fathers. Mother-toddler reciprocity and maternal positive affect at 14-months each predicted father-toddler reciprocity at 24-months, controlling for fathers' behaviour at 14 months. Significant contrasts were found in associations between mother- and father-toddler interactions and domains of school readiness. Father-toddler reciprocity at 24-months predicted children's language and cognition skills, while mothers' positive affect at 24-months predicted children's daily living skills. Neither dimension of parent-toddler interactions predicted children's behavioural regulation.

Implications: Together, these findings highlight the need to consider interactions across family subsystems and the importance of fathers in parenting support and school readiness interventions.

Session 2b STEM and sustainability

Paper 1: You're in the lava! You're gonna die!' – Science and maths learning during sociodramatic co-play in early childhood setting

Presenter: Nicola O'Reilly (Institute of Education, DCU)

Research suggests that the use of sociodramatic co-play, in which educators play alongside young children to support their play and learning, can be an effective approach to support early STEM learning. Sociodramatic play is particularly motivating for young children and

is crucial to the development of executive functions, abstract thinking and imagination, all key to STEM learning. Sociodramatic co-play allows educators to pursue children's inquiries with them, whilst taking opportunities to support the STEM learning that emerges during play. Co-play must be conducted sensitively by educators, who identify and take advantage of learning opportunities that arise, whilst allowing children to maintain ownership and control of their play. This type of play has been shown to allow for more inclusive participation in STEM learning for all children but particularly for girls, who historically have been underrepresented in this area.

This presentation will report on a Professional Learning intervention for educators within a Community-based Early Childhood setting. The intervention sought to support the educators to learn about sociodramatic play and co-play, early Science and early Maths in order to be able to use sociodramatic co-play to support children's learning in these areas. The intervention involved workshops, mentoring and video analysis of practice and data collection involved both audio- and video-recordings of educators and children.

Initial findings suggest that participation in the Professional Learning intervention allowed educators to learn how to use sociodramatic co-play to support young children's Science and Maths learning, but that barriers to this approach also existed.

Paper 2: 'STEAM from the Start': Proposing a conceptual framework for the development and implementation of a STEAM training intervention for early childhood educators

Presenter: Paula Walsh (Dundalk Institute of Technology)

Innovative and inclusive pedagogical practices are essential to preparing young children for active participation in an increasingly complex, technological, and interconnected world. This study presents STEAM from the Start, a novel conceptual framework developed through constructivist grounded theory to reconceptualise how early childhood educators meaningfully integrate STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) into their pedagogical practice. Responding to persistent national and international challenges including limited educator confidence, unclear definitions of STEAM, misconceptions about technology, and inadequate training, the research identifies six themes that shape educators' implementation of STEAM. These themes map onto two overarching determinants of pedagogical change: educators' willingness (beliefs, values, and dispositions) and ability (skills, knowledge, and structural supports).

Drawing on data from survey responses ($n=245$) and focus group participants ($n=6$) and following a process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), the *STEAM from the Start*

framework was developed and subsequently engaged in the design of a STEAM training intervention. The training was delivered to 153 ECEC educators across Ireland and combined theory, hands-on engagement, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Findings indicate significant increases in educator confidence, clearer conceptualisations of STEAM, reduced perceived barriers, changes in planning and attitudes to technology and more intentional curriculum-aligned integration of STEAM in ECEC pedagogical practice.

This research contributes a theoretically grounded, educator-informed model that positions STEAM not as an add-on, but as an inclusive, playful, and transdisciplinary pedagogical approach. By addressing both willingness and ability, *STEAM from the Start* offers a scalable pathway for transforming curriculum design, strengthening educator agency, and fostering equitable STEAM experiences in ECEC. Recommendations include exploring scalability, leveraging non-screen based unplugged technologies, and adapting the framework to emerging pedagogies such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality.

Paper 3: Supporting early numeracy development through collaborative partnerships with homes, early years services and schools

Presenters: Weiyi Lui, Cathy Steeson and Lana Cummins (National College of Ireland)

This presentation shares insights from a Research Ireland funded participatory action research (PAR) that examined early childhood educator's knowledge and practice of embedding Education for Sustainability (EfS) within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Ireland. Education is widely recognised as key to changing values and behaviours for a sustainable future, and Ireland's national strategies on Education for Sustainable Development (DES, 2014; GOI, 2022) highlight the importance of developing sustainability as a lifelong learning skill, beginning in the early years. However, training and resources for early year educators remain limited (Ranta, 2023; 2025). Findings from this study revealed a broad range of understandings of EfS, often shaped by an anthropocentric lens that emphasises individual responsibility. At the same time, some participants began to reframe EfS as a shared, transformative process grounded in collaboration and collective action, aligning with Armstrong's (2015) Ecocene perspective. Participants highlighted key barriers to implementation, including lack of time, limited professional training, insufficient resources and managerial support, and uncertainty about how to translate sustainability concepts into daily practice. The study concludes that creating meaningful, lasting change requires both grassroots innovation and top-down policy backing.

Paper 4: Building sustainable futures: Embedding Education for Sustainability (EfS) in early childhood education and care

Presenters: Annie Cummins (Munster Technological University) and Muireann Ranta (Southeast Technological University)

This presentation shares insights from a Research Ireland funded participatory action research (PAR) that examined early childhood educator's knowledge and practice of embedding Education for Sustainability (EfS) within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Ireland. Education is widely recognised as key to changing values and behaviours for a sustainable future, and Ireland's national strategies on Education for Sustainable Development (DES, 2014; GOI, 2022) highlight the importance of developing sustainability as a lifelong learning skill, beginning in the early years. However, training and resources for early year educators remain limited (Ranta, 2023; 2025). Findings from this study revealed a broad range of understandings of EfS, often shaped by an anthropocentric lens that emphasises individual responsibility. At the same time, some participants began to reframe EfS as a shared, transformative process grounded in collaboration and collective action, aligning with Armstrong's (2015) Ecocene perspective. Participants highlighted key barriers to implementation, including lack of time, limited professional training, insufficient resources and managerial support, and uncertainty about how to translate sustainability concepts into daily practice. The study concludes that creating meaningful, lasting change requires both grassroots innovation and top-down policy backing.

Practice Meet

Presentation 1: The power of the ordinary moment: Rethinking outdoor spaces as sites of inquiry

Facilitator: Kerrie Ann Boyce (Marino Institute of Education)

Outdoor time in early childhood settings is often positioned as a break from 'real' learning, with curriculum largely planned and delivered indoors. When intentionality remains indoors, children's inquiry may be unintentionally limited. This brief reflection challenges that divide. Drawing on observations from a recent visit to The Outdoor Primary School, where a child-led investigation into bird nests evolved into a cross-curricular learning journey, this presentation highlights 'The Power of the Ordinary Moment'. It invites educators to reconsider how attitudes, planning practices and pedagogical awareness shape the learning potential of outdoor spaces.

Presentation 2: Inside this door

Facilitator: Amanda Beck (Marino Institute of Education/Bluebells at Ayle).

This nano presentation shares a practitioner's "vision of the child," expressed through a reflective narrative developed from lived early childhood practice. Titled *Inside This Door*, the piece illustrates how an educator's image of the child influences environment, relationships, and pedagogical decisions. Through a short reading and reflection, the presentation explores how positioning children as capable, confident, and active participants transforms everyday practice. It concludes by inviting educators to reflect on how their own implicit image of the child shapes children's experience of play, belonging, and learning.

Presentation 3: Have you P.L.A.Y.E.D. today?

Facilitator: Ashling Sheehan Boyle (Technological University of the Shannon)

This framework was developed as part of a research project that was a partial component of MA Academic Practice. This submission explores the benefits of integrating practical play experiences which moved beyond experiential learning into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in broader concept of exploring childhood. The research focuses on considering students lived experience of play and incorporating opportunities within delivery of practical play modules. Particularly in challenging students thinking and encouraging them to develop new perspectives which overall will impact the quality of daily practice with children.

Grounded in Einstein's view of play as the "highest form of research," The research examines how a student's academic experience with play influences the quality of care and education. Findings highlight that students must challenge their own preconceptions by experimenting with various resources and experiences. Consequently, the study developed a social constructionist framework titled '**Have You P.L.A.Y.E.D today.**' This tool assists lecturers in fostering student engagement through play-based learning. The research concludes that for children to receive high-quality learning experiences, their educators must first undergo valuable, play-based reflective learning themselves.

The research considers adult learning theories and more specifically the work of Nicola Whitten on the role of play-based pedagogies in higher education and the work of RE: PLAY is a three-year ESRC-funded project that is looking a Play in UK universities. Some of the research was also inspired by Professor Alison James on the role of Lego serious play.

Presentation 4: A sustainability mindset, where does it all start?

Facilitator: Colette Saunders (Trócaire)

The focus of this practice meet relates to a personal insight which has developed for me based on my work as a development education officer for Trócaire. Drawing on my own background in the early years, and my current practice as a development education practitioner, this nano presentation will highlight how the slow relational pedagogical approach (French, 2021) when adapted for the pre-school child, may be used by early childhood practitioners to foster and nurture positive dispositions related to sustainability in the early years (NCCA, 2024; O’Sullivan 2025). The key takeaway is for early years professionals to recognise their agency in supporting the development of a sustainability mindset in pre-school children.

Presentation 5: Pat-a-Cake to Page: How nursery rhymes build early literacy

Facilitator: Clara Maria Fiorentini (Marino Institute of Education)

Before children can read words on a page, they must first hear, play with, and understand the sounds of language. This nano presentation makes a clear and compelling case for nursery rhymes as essential tools in early literacy development. Through rhythm, repetition, and playful interaction, familiar rhymes support phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and memory - key building blocks for reading. This session highlights how nursery rhymes also strengthen relationships, support belonging, and enrich everyday practice. This nano presentation will challenge the idea of rhymes as “extras” and instead position them as powerful, practical tools, supporting children on their journey from playful oral language to confident early readers.

Research Posters

Title: Exploring the links between children's outdoor play and well-being in Early Childhood Education

Presenter: Chloe Butler (Marino Institute of Education)

The purpose of this research project is to examine how educators can use outdoor play to promote children’s well-being in early childhood education (ECE). Outdoor play is essential for children’s well-being. This research examines how educators promote children's well-being in ECE and the challenges faced. This research was conducted using a qualitative questionnaire that included closed and open-ended questions. Participants comprised eighteen early childhood educators. The majority of participants agreed on the availability of sufficient time, space and resources for outdoor play. They

further agreed that the emphasis on risk management was appropriate. Challenges indicated by participants included bad weather, small spaces, lack of outdoor shelters and inappropriate clothing.

Title: Co- Developing the Shamrock Model: Advancing a Trauma- Sensitive Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

Presenter: Emma Hume (Munster Technological University)

This MA research project co-develops the Shamrock Framework, a trauma-sensitive guide for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. The Shamrock Framework conceptualises the essential elements of trauma-sensitive practice within Early Childhood Education and Care, offering guidance for educators in supporting all children, with particular relevance for those affected by trauma and adversity. This research builds on the original Shamrock Model (originally developed by Butler, 2022), which identified three core components of trauma-sensitive practice: neuro-informed approaches, strong relational foundations, and the environment as intervention. The model was subsequently expanded into a broader conceptual framework to guide practice across diverse early education and care contexts. The present study seeks to further deepen and refine the Shamrock Framework through engagement with children and families, foregrounding lived experiences of safety, belonging, and mattering within ECEC settings. This presentation will detail the multiphase qualitative methodology used throughout this research. Phase 1 involved a World Café event with educators and key stakeholders to explore current understandings and enactments of trauma-sensitive practice. Phase 2 engages young children using participatory methods to examine their perspectives on safety, belonging, and mattering in everyday educational contexts. Phase 3 involves semi-structured interviews with families to provide complementary insights and contextual depth. Phase 4 draws on findings from the earlier phases to co-develop and pilot the refined Shamrock Framework in selected ECEC settings, followed by an evaluation using observation and reflective journalling to examine its influence on children’s wellbeing, relationships, and participation. By integrating educator, child, and family perspectives, this research advances a co-constructed, empirically grounded trauma-sensitive framework for ECEC. The study contributes to contemporary debates on relational, rights-based, and trauma-informed practice by positioning children’s lived experiences at the centre of systemic development.

Title: How primary school teachers respond to child grief in the classroom

Presenter: Amy Martin (Marino Institute of Education)

Grief and bereavement are natural parts of life, but children understand and respond to loss differently depending on their age, family background, and personal experiences. In Irish

primary schools, teachers often play an important role in supporting children who are grieving. However, many teachers feel unprepared because they do not receive formal training or clear guidance on how to support bereaved pupils. Research shows that around one in ten children in Ireland experience the death of a family member during their school years. Despite this, grief education is not a required part of initial teacher education. This can leave teachers feeling anxious and unsure of how to respond. This study explores how Irish primary school teachers support children experiencing grief. It looks at their experiences, confidence levels, challenges, and the supports available to them. The research also considers how school culture and family beliefs influence teachers' responses. The findings aim to inform improvements in teacher education, school policy, and supports for grieving children.

Title: Educators' use of a transition observation tool to support children's experiences of entering an early years setting

Presenter: Alexandra Sukenikova (Technological University of Dublin)

Transitions from home into early childhood education and care (ECEC) are increasingly recognised as emotionally complex processes that unfold over time (NCCA, 2024, pp. 18, 35) and require sensitive and relationship-based support (Byrne-MacNamee, 2020, pp. 55-56). While Aistear positions transitions as a core principle and emphasises partnership with families (NCCA, 2024, p. 18-19), it provides limited practical guidance on how educators should systematically observe and document children's experiences during separation. A recent systematic scoping review highlights the need and value of further practice-based research examining tools that support transitions for children, families, and educators (van Trijp et al., 2025, p. 17). This research study, underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory adopted action research (O'Leary, 2017) to explore educators' use of a structured transition observation tool to support reflective practice during the settling-in period. The study was situated within one Irish ECEC setting. Data collection included narrative and time-sampling observations, reflective field notes and semi-structured interviews with two early childhood educators and one volunteer practitioner. The data was analysed thematically (Bryman, 2016).

Title: Babies, toddlers, and young children’s transitions in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at a residential therapeutic centre for mothers in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction

Presenter: Alison Welch, Judith Butler and Annie Cummins (Munster Technological University Cork)

Initiated at the request of a residential therapeutic community for mothers and children in Ireland, this study examines how young children under the age of five experience transitions into and out of a residential therapeutic setting, as interpreted through adult perspectives. While women account for approximately 20 per cent of those entering drug treatment in Europe (EMCDDA, 2022), research exploring the experiences of their children remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding young children’s experiences of transitions within a residential therapeutic context. The research focuses on the transition supports currently available to children entering the residential service, the challenges they encountered during these transitions, and the additional supports required as children move into community based early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. It also explores the extent to which existing supports promote children’s sense of safety, continuity, and wellbeing during their stay in the therapeutic setting and following their transition out of the service. A qualitative research methodology, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, is adopted to explore in depth the transition processes experienced by young children entering and exiting the residential therapeutic setting. This approach enables an examination of children’s subjective experiences as interpreted by adults, situated within shared meanings and socio-cultural contexts (Acharya, 2025). Data are generated through semi structured interviews conducted across two phases with three participant cohorts: mothers in recovery, residential therapeutic staff, and community ECEC educators. The data are analysed using thematic analysis to identify both anticipated and emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Ethical approval for this study has been granted by Munster Technological University and the study adheres to established ethical guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations. Guided by a clear conceptual framework and well-defined research objectives, this study aims to generate evidence informed insights to strengthen trauma informed practice in early childhood education and care. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, sociology, and education, the research seeks to enhance understanding of trauma informed transitions, relational based care, and systemic supports for young children exposed to early adversity. The findings will inform early childhood policy and contribute to the development of trauma informed ECEC practices within Ireland.

Workshops

Workshop 1: Play therapy as pedagogical practice: experiencing therapeutic play through partnership

Facilitator: Sinead Leigh (Play Therapy Ireland)

This 40-minute interactive workshop introduces participants to play therapy, what it is and how it can be used as a pedagogical practice that supports emotional wellbeing through relational, child-led approaches. Presented on behalf of PTIrl, the workshop is designed for early childhood educators and professionals interested in integrating therapeutic-informed play practices within educational settings. Pedagogical practice means how we intentionally support learning and development, not just what we do, but why and how we do it. It includes: The choices you make, The relationships you build, The way you respond in the moment, The theories and values guiding your actions. The workshop will begin with a brief introduction to play therapy and its alignment with contemporary early childhood pedagogy, including concepts of attunement, emotional safety, and child-led learning. Participants will then rotate through four facilitated experiential play stations, spending approximately ten minutes at each. The stations include: LEGO for symbolic and relational play; messy play using materials such as oobleck or slime to support sensory regulation; creative art prompts using drawing and clay (e.g. House-Tree-Person); and sand play with figures to explore narrative and emotional expression. Participants will engage directly in each modality, with facilitators consciously holding therapeutic space and modelling reflective, non-directive approaches. A looping visual presentation will highlight the pedagogical and therapeutic benefits of each play modality, supporting reflection and discussion.

Workshop 2: Sustainability in Action: Realising Aistear 2024 through creative everyday practice

Facilitator: Rachel Redmond (Marino Institute of Education / National College of Ireland)

To advance the vision of children as agentic global citizens, the updated Aistear (NCCA, 2024) positions babies, toddlers, and young children as relational beings with deep connections to people, place, and the natural world, underpinned by values of justice, equity, and human rights. Developing dispositions associated with agentic citizenship requires meaningful engagement with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Collins & Garrity, 2025). Recent research conducted in Ireland (2025) indicates that many early childhood educators feel inadequately prepared to facilitate ESD in practice, highlighting a significant gap between policy aspirations and pedagogical confidence (Collins & Garrity, 2025). Ireland's Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development

(2022) outlines Ireland’s goal to have educational settings such as Early Learning and Care settings, as genuine places and educational spaces for sustainability by 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2022). Objective: Grounded in the updated Aistear (2024), and aligning with Ireland’s ESD to 2030 Strategy and the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this interactive workshop supports educators to move from awareness to agency by empowering them to translate sustainability principles into transformative everyday practice. Format: Through a reflective discussion supported by images and real-life examples, participants will explore how simple changes to materials, space, and pedagogical practice can promote creativity, sustainability, and active learning, consistent with Aistear (2024)’s child-centred and inquiry-based approach. Then, a hands-on art exploration of natural and recycled material will demonstrate how sustainability can be embedded through process-led, creative experiences that nurture children’s agency, responsibility, and connection to the natural world. The power of provocations in the environment will be a highlight to encourage reflection on how children often experience “themes/topics” through product-focused art experiences. Educators will gain an understanding of how time and space can be afforded through a demonstration of process-focused art opportunities that support slow relational pedagogy.

Workshop 3: Normal All Along: Story based discussion

Facilitator: Fintan McCutcheon (independent)

Dr Fintan McCutcheon gives a dramatic-reading of his short-story Normal All Along from his recently published collection Burning Inwards. The 20year old unnamed narrator questions both why and to what purpose he has lived his life, to date, in the shadow of his unspecified label. In the style of a slightly identifying conference research paper, the narrator sheds his heartfelt insight and a controversial take on the discourse of Children’s Rights. 30minutes of story followed by audience discussion.

Workshop 4: Intergenerational storytelling

Facilitator: Samantha Hallows (Narrative 4 / TOY Together Old and Young / Child Development Initiative)

At this workshop Samantha will share her experiences and research on Intergenerational learning to support crafting connections across generations. Samantha offers an innovative approach to intergenerational learning by merging the power of storytelling to build empathy through story exchange, digital innovations and sustainable art. The workshop aims to dismantle ageist biases and attitudes.

Participants will engage in story exchange prompted by the tactile examples and hands on experience of repurposing everyday materials. Using tin cans, smooth stones, glass jars, and crepe paper participants will transform recycled materials into symbolic artefacts to serve as anchors for sharing life lessons and building empathy. These activities utilize the "Power of Early Intervention," helping younger participants reshape social attitudes while providing older adults with a renewed sense of purpose and cognitive stimulation.

Through the lens of Narrative 4 story exchange Samantha will demonstrate how a simple crepe paper flower or a decorated tin-can pencil holder becomes a bridge for mutual respect. By the end of the session, participants will have motivation and first hand experience of how recycled art acts as a catalyst for resilience, literacy, and community cohesion, proving that both materials and people carry enduring value at every stage of life.

Workshop 5: Introducing Gaeilge through movement, song and dance

Facilitator: Maire Uí Mhurchu (Marino Institute of Education / Gaeloideachas)

The updated *Aistear* early childhood curriculum framework emphasises the integration of Gaeilge in daily practice to support children's culture, identity, and language development through play.

This interactive workshop explores practical and playful ways for educators to introduce Gaeilge in early years settings. Participants explore simple everyday phrases and strategies that can be naturally embedded into routines and interactions.

Through engaging activities such as rhythm, rhyme, song, and movement, educators will experience hands-on approaches that make language learning enjoyable and meaningful for young children.

The session also highlights a range of useful resources and supports—both physical and digital—to assist educators in confidently using Gaeilge.

Participants will leave equipped with practical ideas to foster a positive and playful connection to Gaeilge in their settings

Bain úsáid as an cúpla focal atá agat.

Workshop 6: Enhancing support and engagement of immigrant parents in ECE in Ireland

Facilitator: Florence Ajala (Mary Immaculate College)

Immigrant parents bring valuable perspectives to their children's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and, like all parents, benefit greatly from being actively involved in their children's ECCE. This workshop, "Enhancing Support and Engagement of Immigrant Parents in Early Childhood Education in Ireland," is designed to create a collaborative space where early childhood educators and immigrant parents can work together to enrich young children's learning and development.

The workshop draws on findings from semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a doctoral study exploring the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrant mothers engaging with their children's ECCE in Ireland. The research was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Epstein's (2019) Framework of Six Types of Involvement.

In 2022, fifteen Nigerian mothers whose children participated in the free preschool programme between 2020 and 2022 were purposefully selected for the study. The participants identified barriers such as cultural differences and ethnic backgrounds, the impact of COVID-19, and work commitments that hinder immigrant parents' engagement in ECCE within the Irish context. These findings will serve as a foundation for dialogue and reflection throughout the workshop.

Through interactive case study and shared discussions, participants will explore these barriers and collaboratively generate practical strategies to overcome them. By the end of the session, attendees will be empowered to foster inclusive, supportive, and meaningful engagement with parents of young children with immigrant backgrounds in Ireland.

The study received ethical approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC), in consultation with my supervisors. Prior to participation, information letters outlining the research aims and procedures were sent to all participants.

Participants were purposively sampled from Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, with these settings acting as gatekeepers to intentionally select Nigerian mothers who could provide unique insights into barriers, they have faced engaging with their children's ECCE. This purposive sampling was chosen to access information that could not be obtained from other sources (Cohen et al. 2018; Taherdoost, 2016).

In total, 15 immigrant mothers of Nigerian descent living in Ireland participated in the study. All had children who availed of the universal ECCE programme between 2020 and 2022. Geographically, three participants were from Leinster (East of Ireland), four from Connaught (West of Ireland), and eight from Munster (South of Ireland).

The Universal ECCE Programme is a state-funded, two-year preschool programme available to all children in Ireland between the ages of 2 years and 8 months and 5 years and 6 months, prior to entering primary school (Hanley and Garrity 2022; Hayes et al. 2013). With participants' informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases: Phase 1 (January–February 2022) and Phase 2 (November 2022). Conducting interviews across these two phases helped to mitigate any potential impact of COVID-19 on the research. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2022) inductive reflexive thematic analysis.

Workshop 7: Bringing Aistear's image of the baby, toddler and young child to life in practice

Facilitators: Lorraine Farrell (Better Start) and Mary Daly (NCCA)

This interactive workshop focuses on the image of the child as articulated in the updated Aistear and explored through the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. Aistear presents babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident learners, with voice and influence over their own learning, relationships and social worlds. This workshop supports educators to reflect on how this image is understood and, critically, how it is brought to life through everyday curriculum decisions, interactions and routines. The session is designed as a reflective, participatory workshop. Drawing on Aistear and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, participants will be supported to examine their own view of babies, toddlers and young children and to consider how beliefs about agency, competence and confidence shape practice. Participants will work individually, in pairs and in small groups, engaging in guided reflection and discussion. The focus throughout is on everyday moments and interactions, creating space for educators to think together and learn from shared professional experience. By the end of the workshop, participants will have developed a clearer shared language around the image of the child in Aistear, increased awareness of how this image, along with their own image of babies, toddlers and young children, influences curriculum in their setting.

Workshop 8: Aistear's reflective cycle of planning and assessing

Facilitators: Sharon Skehill (Newtown Kids Club) and Donna Carolan (NCCA)

This paper describes the rationale for Aistear's Reflective Cycle of Planning and Assessing through discussion of research and literature informing the stages of Noticing, Nurturing, Responding and Reflecting. Based on the Guidance for Good Practice (Government of Ireland, 2024) and a commissioned paper (Skehill, 2026), it aims to deepen understanding of the purposes of assessment and to illustrate how meaningful documentation can guide

the curriculum. It seeks to clarify the rationale for using the cycle and how it supports the educator in planning and developing a responsive, challenging and rights-based curriculum which can be documented to reflect the unique learning journey of each baby, toddler and young child. It offers guidance on how the Reflective Cycle can be used in practice to support engagement with the Vision, Principles and Themes of the updated Aistear, emphasising the meaningful purposes, processes and practices involved in planning, assessing and the pedagogical documentation of the enacted curriculum. The workshop session will provide opportunities for participants to engage with the Reflective Cycle through hands-on experiences designed to support curriculum planning for babies, toddlers and young children. Participants will be guided through the Reflective Cycle and supported to develop a plan that supports engagement with the Vision, Principles and Themes of Aistear. Examples of pedagogical documentation will support participants to consider how to plan for and assess learning and development in ways that are meaningful and purposeful and consequently bring Aistear's image of the Agentic Educator to life.

Workshop 9: Stories as a tool to engage young children in learning about global issues

Facilitator: Colette Saunders (Trócaire)

This workshop is informed by research undertaken by Ruane et al., (2010) and Barry et al., (2023) which explored how young children in early childhood education (ECE) settings engage with global issues, what approaches and strategies work best & current practices associated with Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in ECE. The workshop is intended to engage early childhood practitioners in a creative activity related to global citizenship which they may apply to their professional practice. A children's story about climate change will be read to workshop participants as a provocation. Using a variety of creative resources which will include natural materials, workshop participants will then be invited to re-create scenes from the story and discuss these with their peers. The aim of this workshop is to actively engage participants in practical, hands-on learning experiences which generate discussions related to global issues such as climate, intercultural awareness and what it means to be a global citizen. Workshop participants will also be invited to think about and discuss where they see the links emerging between the activity, the early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2024), and theory underpinning professional practice for example, sustained shared thinking (Siraj Blatchford et al., 2002) teachable moments (Ephgrave, 2018), each child's own funds of knowledge (Fenech et al., 2025; Moll et al., 1992) and reflexivity (Argyris & Schön, 1974).