

Annual OMEP Conference

Abstracts E-Book

2023

OMEP



IRELAND

Play, Grow, Sustain: Integrating the Four Pillars of Sustainability in Early Childhood

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Foreword

Dear Attendee,

The OMEP Ireland Committee welcomes you to this year's conference, *Play, Grow, Sustain: Integrating the Four Pillars of Sustainability in Early Childhood*. OMEP, the World Organisation for Early Childhood, is an NGO founded in 1948 and operates in more than 60 countries to defend the human rights of children from birth until they are eight years of age. OMEP advocates for early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a right and as a tool to attaining other rights including citizenship, wellbeing, and dignity for all children in the world. OMEP Ireland is part of this world-wide organisation and celebrates its 75th birthday today with an early childhood conference that focuses on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The integral position of ECEC in promoting education for sustainable development (ESD) is well-documented (UNESCO, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010). Research indicates that children possess substantial knowledge about environmental issues, along with an understanding of individual responsibilities for sustainability in a world devastated by severe biodiversity loss, pervasive pollution, extreme weather conditions, resulting in insurmountable human suffering especially for children and for future generations (UNCRC, 2023 UNICEF, 2021: UNGA, 2018). This is why recent reports emphasise the importance of recognising babies, toddlers and young children as rights holders in their education spaces as set out under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989).

This conference positions babies, toddlers and young children as rights holders and contributing global citizens and places significant emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) in realising this potential. OMEP Ireland celebrates the endeavours of early childhood educators, academics and researchers in promoting ESD with children, families, early childhood students and the wider community. Today's conference offers a first-hand look at the valuable work taking place both in practice and at research level to support babies, toddlers and young children to enjoy their rights to a healthy environment as well as to social and economic security in a sustainable world (UNCRC, 1989; UN, 2015).

OMEP Ireland Committee 2023



Keynotes

Professor Francis Douglas – ‘Celebrating OMEP in Ireland: A Brief Historical Overview’

Francis Douglas is an Emeritus Professor. He was the Director of the BA degree in Early Childhood Studies in University College Cork from its inception in 1995 until his retirement in 2009. He has published widely in journals, books, reports and periodicals. He has been involved in curriculum development, evaluations and consultancies in relation to Early Childhood Education and Care both at home and abroad. He was responsible for organising numerous conferences and since 1992 he has given 163 public lectures on Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, the United Kingdom and in different areas of Europe. Francis, together with Professor Nóirín Hayes and Dr. Mary Horgan are the three patrons of O.M.E.P. Ireland.



Dr. Sharon Skehill & Dr. Mary Daly - ‘Embedding Sustainability in an Updated Aistear’.

Dr. Sharon Skehill works as an Education Officer with the NCCA on the Early Childhood and Primary team and is working on updating Aistear: the early childhood curriculum framework. Sharon has worked for several years as a Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies and has also worked directly with babies, toddlers and young children for many years in practice. Sharon has extensive experience developing curriculum content for ECEC programmes at university level and has published work relating to early childhood education; leadership; inclusion; outdoor learning and nature-pedagogy.



Dr. Mary Daly has a BA in Early Childhood Studies from University College Cork. In 2002, she completed her Ph.D. which focused on the emotional, social, moral and spiritual development of the young child; and in 2004, published a book based on her findings. Mary has worked in the area of early childhood education and care in Ireland for over 20 years. She has been employed as an Education Officer with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for a number of years. In this role, Mary has contributed to the development of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009); the Aistear Toolkit and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (online resources to support good curriculum practice); and the Mo Scéal Reporting templates which help support children’s transition from preschool to primary school. In her current work, Mary is part of the team focused on the updating of Aistear involving research and consultation with key stakeholders, including children.

Valerie Gaynor – ‘First 5 Garden of Wonder: A Garden Designed for Children by Children’.



Valerie Gaynor is the manager of Creative Kids Preschool and School-aged Service in Dublin City, which is a multi-award-winning service, and has more than 20 years’ experience working in ECEC. Valerie’s work has children’s rights at the core and is focused on how educators can improve outcomes for children by listening to children and meeting them in this moment of the development stage they are currently in. Valerie advocates for children's participatory rights as active citizens and believes that young children must have their voices present in all that affects them. Valerie is a member of the training panel for early years with Barnardos and is currently an external examiner for SETU. Valerie sits on the Updating Aistear Development group as well as being a preschool representative on the school’s forum for redeveloped Primary School Curriculum.



Session 1 – Pillars 1 & 2 – Political and Social & Cultural

Presenter	Abstract
<p>Maureen Dwyer</p>	<p>Sowing the Seeds of Sustainability: Putting theory into practice in an early childhood classroom and museum context</p> <p>We know that children learn best through hands-on, child-directed learning experiences. The Project Approach enables learners to engage in in-depth investigations of real-world topics worthy of their attention and effort (Katz, Chard, & Kogan, 2014). In this post-pandemic landscape, the importance of centering learning in a global context is now more important than ever. The author will share current research and best practices for intentionally integrating learning about sustainability, empathy and altruism with children, in order to cultivate communities of kindness where they can then learn how to act with empathy and compassion toward themselves, their communities, and the world around them (Haslip et al., 2022, Sustainability from the Start. Edchild.com. https://www.edchild.com/course). Examples of realized projects demonstrating how the UN pillars of Environmental/Economic and Social/Cultural sustainability can be put into practice with preschool children at a Project Approach school will underscore children’s capacity to engage with and critically examine relevant, complex issues. Furthermore, because children’s worlds are not confined to the classroom, integrated approaches for scaling and incorporating learning about sustainability, empathy and altruism into a US children’s museum, and other informal and formal learning environments, are being explored with educators and administrators. A matrix for scaffolding children, their families, and the adults who care for them, around the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) will be presented as a framework for supporting children’s healthy and holistic development.</p>
<p>Dr. Sheila Garrity & Sarah Collins</p>	<p>Early Childhood Educators engagement with Education for Sustainable Development through Aistear: a systems analysis</p> <p>Education for sustainable development (ESD) prepares learners for global citizenship. It is considered the great hope through which Anthropogenic destruction of our world can be halted and a sustainable and more equitable future created. In Ireland, relevant State departments suggest Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, supports ESD practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). However, there is an absence of research concerning how or if educators are facilitating ESD in Irish ECEC. Drawing on a forthcoming publication and offering a systems-perspective framed within the Irish policy context, this presentation will report on a quantitative study offering first insight into educators’ views, practices and engagement with ESD in ECEC. Findings reveal educators feel inadequately prepared to facilitate ESD; they are either unsure or do not believe Aistear contains ESD content or facilitates their practice in this area. When viewed through a ‘systems’ lens, missed opportunities to realise the goals of ESD in Irish ECEC are evident. The presentation will interrogate Irish policy/reports/strategies, with questions of rhetoric in policy-speak related to ESD emerging. Due to the gaps in policy implementation, it is highly probable large discrepancies exist in ESD implementation with children in ECEC settings. This presentation will join other voices in calling for the current updating of Aistear to ensure the presence of ESD. To successfully implement ESD in ECEC, the revised framework must include robust and dedicated ESD training, as, at present, many educators lack the foundation on which to base their ESD practice.</p>
<p>Monika Haid, Dr. Sheila Garrity & Dr. Aidan Harte</p>	<p>Spaces and Traces: Young children’s meaning making through digital methodologies in a time of global pandemic</p> <p>‘Spaces and Traces’ involved young children, early childhood educators, and students in a project that embodied a pedagogy of citizenship and presence, viewing a university campus from young children’s perspectives. Reflecting the University of Galway’s ‘value-based strategy’, promoting</p>

	<p>an open, inclusive, and respectful community space, the project further connected with the Social and Cultural Pillar (UN-SDGs), in creating inclusive and equitable environments, fostering positive relationships, and nurturing social skills and empathy. Based on the Mosaic Approach¹, aligning with Aistear, reflecting a sociological and rights-based construction of the child, our methodology engaged with children as co-researchers and interpreters of their worlds. Notions of belonging and identity are central to Aistear,² situating the child as a rights holder, a citizen with agency and autonomy. Developing a sense of citizenship begins early, as children participate in their communities, experiencing their voices being heard, their opinions shaping outcomes. Plans for on-site, in-person exploratory campus visits were reimaged to that of online connections, due to the global pandemic. We argue the spirit of the Mosaic Approach as a democratic, participatory, non-hierarchical methodology was respected, and extended, through digital methodologies. Relationship formation, a sense of belonging and meaningful connections to a 'place', by young children, can be facilitated through online connections, when underpinned by intentional foundational work, and collaborative partnerships.</p>
<p>Siobhan Fitzpatrick</p>	<p>Recognizing the global importance and challenges of Peace Education in Early Childhood (EC)</p> <p>This presentation will display a cohesive, international perspective of the topic, developed and applied by the International Network of Peace Building with Young Children (INPB). The presentation will focus on the relevance of SDG 4 and 16 and the transformative power of Early Childhood Development to promote high quality early education and sustainable peace and social cohesion. INPB's theoretical foundation is a Children's Rights Socio-Ecological Model, which draws on the conceptual ecological framework informed by Bronfenbrenner. In addition to the life circles in Bronfenbrenner's model, the network's circles include the stage of conflict that children are exposed to. Relatedly, the network applies a children's rights and social justice approach, acknowledging the interdependence between adults' and children's rights, as well as the richness of diversity. The presentation will link with the political sustainability pillar. In accordance with its mission and theoretical framework, INPB focuses on three key areas: advocacy, programmatic development and implementation, and research. We will describe local, as well as international advocacy campaigns, aimed at raising awareness of- and supporting collaborations peace building efforts in EC in different regions and contexts. We will then present guiding principles and examples of evidence-based peace building programs, e.g., capacity building and mentoring for adults who support young children, developing curriculum and related resources, contributing to the development of appropriate accredited graduate and postgraduate programmes. Finally, we will describe INPB's research approach and provide examples of studies carried out by the network's members and colleagues, which can support countries, communities, and families in advancing peace education and additionally, enrich further research. We will describe a growing body of international evidence on the use of persona characters in supporting young children strengthen their own identity while understanding and respecting others. We will also explore new research emerging from Northern Ireland on work with toddlers and the importance of supporting a culture of reflective practice for staff and children. Importantly, we will discuss barriers and challenges in promoting peace education in EC and call for further collaborations in addressing growing divisions and conflicts that harm children. We will conclude by sharing lessons and insights, that will hopefully assist in reinforcing international EC peace building efforts. We will use the OMEP Conference to promote a new publication "Foundations of a Peaceful World" which was formally launched at the UNGA 78th Session in New York in September 2023.</p>
<p>Dr. Mary Moloney & Dr. Jennifer Pope</p>	<p>Who CARES? Nurturing Citizenship, Agency, Responsibility, Empathy and Sustainability in Early Childhood Education</p> <p>Education for sustainability is one of the most important goals within the field of early childhood education (Wang, Zhou and Cui, 2020). From a very young age, children 'learn the values of friendship, the avoidance of conflict, environmental sustainability, the power of technology and</p>



	<p>the value of commerce’ (Twigg et al, 2015, p. 82). Global citizenship then, must be nurtured in the early childhood period when the foundations for development and lifelong learning are laid. Drawing on international literature, this presentation establishes early childhood and infant classrooms as appropriate sites for young children to express and act upon their thoughts, feelings and experiences with regards to the world around them, their place in it, and their hopes for the future. It further highlights the many ways in which teachers can nurture and empower young children as citizens who are caring, agentic, responsible, and empathetic and who embrace the concept of sustainability (CARES). Adopting a thoughtful, value-driven, intentional approach to young children’s education, that includes first-hand experience, opportunities for children to revisit in-depth the same environment, and paying close attention to their feelings and senses (Clarke, 2021) is vital. Fostering children’s agency and participation in the early childhood setting or classroom is essential. As this presentation will highlight, it involves engaging in deep self-reflection to consider pedagogical practice, relationships with children, and the experiences that children have throughout the early childhood and primary school day.</p>
<p>Caroline Guard</p>	<p>Sustaining moments of unhurried social encounters with babies through Adagio interactions</p> <p>This session will share findings from a recently completed doctoral study, funded by The Froebel Trust, London, England that examined the context of social interactions between babies and early childhood educators in formal day-care. This session connects to the Social and Cultural Sustainability in the way it reflects on the institutional culture arising in formal day care and its impact on emerging relationships between professionals and young children. An ethnographic study framed by a theoretical lens comprising Froebelian philosophy, Bakhtin’s Dialogism and Cultural Historical Theory (Shevtsova, 1992), the study exposed how moments of close interaction were often ruptured by a culture of fast paced practice that conflicted the needs of babies and increased pressure on educators. Babies appeared to thrive in moments of close, sustained encounters with familiar adults. Similarly, educators felt their practice enriched when they created space for moments of unhurried closeness with babies. Yet, the social interactions documented were seemingly shaped by educators’ ability to be responsive but were ultimately anchored in institutional traditions and structural organisation, which was regulated by wider educational policy. Significantly this study revealed the influence wider political agendas have on the everydayness of interactions with babies. Such influence on institutional culture bred an environment where time with babies was overshadowed by a culture of conflict that challenged the ethical and moral position of educators. IN addition to sharing project findings, this session will consider the ethical challenges of completing research in settings with very young children and introduces delegates to the concept of ‘Adagio Interactions’ which promotes moments of being <i>at ease</i> during reciprocal connection with children in formal day care. Slowing everyday encounters <i>to a walking pace</i> has the potential to create a sustainable social culture where children and educators are positioned as equal dialogic partners during unhurried moments of connection. Such moments form the grounding for positive, sustainable relationships in formal day-care to thrive.</p>
<p>Muireann Ranta</p>	<p>‘Chicken soup’ or transformative approach in ESD policy for early childhood under the UNCRC</p> <p>This paper stems from a PhD thesis that was grounded in a child rights-based methodological paradigm (Ranta, 2023) to explore how young children (2-5 years old) define their own education and participatory rights to education for sustainable development (ESD) under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Ethical approval was given by the Research Ethics Committee, Southeast Technological University. The paper responds to the latest recommendations from the Committee of the CRC to assess national policy from a child rights impact perspective and aligns with the political dimension of sustainability. (UNCRC; 2023, UNESCO, 2010). The ‘chicken soup’ analogy was coined by leading scholars in the field of children’s rights (Sloth-Nielsen, 1996 in Lundy and Martínez Sainz, 2018) to illustrate how rights can be misrepresented through a rosy, uncontentious lens when, in fact, rights claims do indeed bring conflict and contestation.</p>

	<p>Having comprehensively engaged with these debates, this paper applies their thinking to analyse the latest national ESD strategy ESD to 2030 for Ireland (GOI; 2022). This second ESD strategy puts forward five priority action areas: i) advancing policy, ii) transforming learning environments, iii) building capacities of educators, iv) empowering and mobilising young people, and v) accelerating local-level actions. The paper examines whether a misrepresentation of child rights can be identified for the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. In addition, it pinpoints where alignment with the CRC needs to be explicitly intersected and how the role of duty-bearer for ECEC practitioners can be supported. It concludes with contributions from young children and their perspectives on developing a transformative child rights based ESD approach.</p>
<p>Melissa Bonotto</p>	<p>Have we moved on from a tokenism approach in cultural diversity?</p> <p>This study set out to identify what was a meaningful interaction for preschool children with additional needs in the Irish context of early intervention and family support. It is connected to the Social and Cultural pillar of sustainability, which emphasises inclusive and equitable environments, recognising and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of children, promoting cultural awareness and celebrating diversity. It is embedded in the Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and is primarily qualitative research characterised as a flexible design (Robson, 2007). The methodology included the following research methods: semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups for preschool teachers and parents, the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005) to capture children's views and one quantitative scale, the My Family Star Scale (Outcomes Star, 2017), only used with parents. It was approved by the University of Galway Ethics Committee, and careful consideration for children's assent and ways young children withdraw were taken. Inclusion emerged as a theme of how meaningful interactions are supported by Family Support preschools with children with additional needs. This paper will touch on findings showing the greatest relevance of inclusion for this cohort of children and its role in creating inclusive environments, fostering positive relationships and nurturing social skills. It will also present a great deal of reflectivity regarding current guidelines for inclusion, diversity and equality in the early learning and care sector and its implementation. Reflections regarding an antibias approach and a tokenism approach will be pointed out embedded in these research findings.</p>



<p>Dr. Leah O’Toole & Deirdre Forde</p>	<p>Fostering social, cultural and political sustainability by listening to the voices of babies, toddlers and young children: The updating of Aistear</p> <p>Since the publication of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), there have been growing moves internationally towards greater consultation with children for research, policy, curriculum development and practice. However, participation with the youngest children tends to be less well developed (Blaisdell et al., 2019). Babies, toddlers and young children communicate in subtle ways through behaviours, play choices, emotional expressions, as articulated through the ‘Hundred Languages of Children’ (Malaguzzi, 1996). Deep, reciprocal relationships are required to ensure accurate interpretation of those languages by adults, and in the absence of such relationships in early childhood education practice and research, children are disempowered by missed opportunities to access their ‘voices’. This presentation will share our work on ‘<i>A Consultation with Babies, Toddlers and Young Children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum</i>’, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and conducted by researchers from Maynooth University, Stranmillis University College Belfast, and Early Childhood Ireland (O’Toole, Forde, Matson, Stafford, Stokes, Mooney, Walsh, Doherty, McCartney, Kerrins and Kelleher, 2023). This presentation will consider how our youngest citizens can share insights into their lives to help us work towards inclusive and equitable environments that respect and celebrate diversity. We will foreground the importance of creating relational systems and contexts for ECEC that foster positive relationships and nurture social skills and empathy. As well as considering the implications for practising educators, this presentation will have relevance for governance, policies, and institutions. The consultation used a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) and was underpinned by Lundy’s (2007) model of child participation which conceptualises the child’s right to participation using the concepts of ‘space’, ‘voice’, ‘audience’ and ‘influence’. The project employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O’Toole, 2020) with early childhood educators as ‘coresearchers’. Ethical approval was gained from the Maynooth University ethics committee as lead institution.</p>
<p>Dr. Margaret O’ Donoghue</p>	<p>Creating opportunities to empower students of early years education to be agentic in supporting social and cultural sustainability</p> <p>Strong partnerships between, civil society, the private sector and artists are essential for the design, implementation, and exchange of good practices to culture and creativity and are part of the solution for a sustainable future (UNESCO 2023). Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEFS) presents an opportunity for early years educators and children to explore sustainability. This presentation will address SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being. The presentation will share how a collaborative project between Year 4 students at TUDublin, a local primary school, author, Katie O Donoghue (no relation) and her children’s book entitled ‘The Little Squirrel Who Worried’ created a space for the students to engage in activities that addressed human, and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes (Jacoby,1996c). The project created opportunities to empower the students to be agentic in supporting social and cultural sustainability; appraise ways in which best practice in the creative arts may be used to support the emotional needs of young children; facilitate students to evaluate their own creativity and reflect upon their own personal development through engagement with the creative arts.</p> <p>Collaboration empowers students to think about their role as early years educators in community engagement. They are not just delivering their newly acquired knowledge; they are as Laredo (2007) and Stephenson (2011) put forward being offered an opportunity for social leadership. A space to support social and cultural sustainability.</p>

Workshops – Global Citizenship

Facilitator	Abstract
<p>Leesa Flannagan</p>	<p>Mindfulness for Educators</p> <p>With Irish children spending more time in early years’ settings, there is a body of evidence that suggests that children’s outcomes are influenced by the quality of interactions, relationships, and experiences they have in early years’ settings (OECD, 2021). With relationships playing a crucial part of each individual’s sense of wellbeing and happiness (Seligman & Martin, 2012), the educator has a unique opportunity to nurture positive relationships with young children and cultivate social skills that are required for the trajectory of life. Research to date exploring mindfulness practice with young children has indicated benefits, including improvement in prosocial behaviour (Berti & Cigala, 2020), enhanced self-regulation and executive function (Thierry et al., 2018). Further studies have indicated that practicing mindfulness in the early years, increases cooperation and empathy in young children (Kim, 2022) and enhances coping skills and resiliency (Coss, 2021). Such skills also align with the theoretical underpinning of education for sustainable development (ESD), which shares a number of overlapping pedagogical synergies with early childhood education (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010; Pramling-Samuelsson, 2011; Davies & Elliot, 2014). This practical workshop will provide educators with ideas and activities to introduce mindfulness to young children in their settings. The variety of mindfulness activities that will be shared in this workshop will support educators in the development of social skills, emotional literacy, empathy, and compassion in young children. This practical demonstration will provide educators with a toolbox of resources including breathing exercises, music and movement activities, and creative activities that will allow the educator a multitude of ways to share mindfulness with young children. It is envisaged this workshop will offer the opportunity to educators to consider integrating mindfulness within their pedagogical practice with young children.</p>
<p>Dr. Sharon Skehill & Anne Price</p>	<p>The Beginnings of Belonging: Using documentation to support children’s transitions through the SDGs in the emergent curriculum</p> <p>This proposal for a workshop session aims to share understanding of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the early years curriculum in our outdoor setting, with particular reference to Goal 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The aims of this project from practice were to support children to transition into the setting in the aftermath of Covid-19 and to create a sense of belonging in this space through the development of a sensory garden. It also seeks to illustrate meaningful documentation of children’s learning through shared reflection on experiences, linking to Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and inspired by Malaguzzi’s philosophy of the 100 languages of children. The project is founded on a rights-based perspective with an understanding of child voice underpinned by Lundy’s model of participation (2007). The Mosaic approach (Clarke, 2017) guides the participatory research with the group of children aged between 2.5 and 3.5 years of age. Observations, child-conversations as well as reflective conversations with educators, parents and members of the community inform and illustrate the cyclical process of the emergent curriculum in practice.</p> <p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of the shared project in supporting a sense of belonging and meaningful participation • Importance of facilitating children’s sense of agency and responsibility through nature-inspired activities • Recognising the benefits of shared documentation between educators to reflect on and support children’s sense of wellbeing • Holistic nature of the SDGs within the early years curriculum in supporting children’s rights as well as empowering them to take responsibility for their environment and place.



Dr. Marie Gibbons

The Sky is the Roof – Tusla’s updated guidance on outdoor play

This workshop session aims to share information on the recently published Tusla Early Years Inspectorate’s guidance document for services operating outdoors. The guidance document ‘When the Roof is the Key’ provides guidance and information to those services operating fully or mostly outdoors on meeting the requirements as currently set out in the Early Years’ Service Regulations (2016) and/or Registration of School Age Services Regulations (2018). The workshop will share key messages from research into outdoor service provision and will set out how the research has influenced and informed the development of the guidance document. We will share findings of a mapping exercise and a survey conducted by the Inspectorate with outdoor service providers and outline how the feedback from the sector was reflected in the development process. The workshop will also bring participants through the guidance, reflecting on key thematic issues that impact practice including managing risk in the outdoors, inclusive practice, supporting risky and adventurous play and engaging with parents. The guidance document sets out all the information that current and prospective providers of outdoor services will need for registration with Tusla, for compliance with the regulations and for the safe and effective management and operation of an outdoor service.

Session 2 - Pillars 2 & 3 – Ecological & Economical

Presenter	Abstract
<p>Marlene McCormack</p>	<p>Towards Sustainable, Healthy and Inclusive Communities: Play on the Edge and Voices from the Margins</p> <p>This study funded by the Froebel Trust, is a joint research project between DCU, Maynooth University along with educators, children and families in two early childhood settings in Dublin’s north inner city. It is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of play and play provision in some of Dublin’s most marginalised communities through the voices of young children and families living there. Play, which supports children’s well-being and the development of community, is fundamentally a social, economic and political issue. Dublin City Council (DCC) has been proactive in consulting widely to inform the development of the most recent Play Strategy, but the voices of very young children and their families living in marginalised areas are not always materialised in policy. In tune with the theme of this conference, this project showcases a model for engaging in meaningful dialogue, towards the sustainability of healthy and inclusive communities (SDG 11) where all children and families can thrive (SDG 3). Drawing on a Participatory Action Research [PAR] (Egmore et al., 2020) approach, this study uses a Future’s Workshop (Jungk & Müllert, 1987) method to enable the voices and opinions of those on the edge to emerge and to potentially influence future play provision within the city. The study highlighted, that in creating authentic opportunities for active participation, the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of children and families are transformed into concrete visions for play in their community, which potentially become powerful tools of advocacy and calls to action. These visions encapsulate the essence of sustainability and sustainable development as they endeavour to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (UN, 1987, p.8).</p>
<p>Dr. Alison Moore</p>	<p>Nurture through nature: fostering early childhood students’ understanding of outdoor learning spaces</p> <p>This presentation relates to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education. This two-phased research project funded by the Froebel Trust investigates Early Years and Childhood Studies students’ developing understanding of outdoor learning spaces. The Educator’s understanding of outdoor spaces positively impacts on the quality of outdoor spaces and children’s learning therein (Murphy, 2018). Froebelian principles are the lens through which we are examining the data. This</p>



	<p>research can be linked to the ecological environment pillar, supporting the need for ‘adults who are deeply attuned to nature...[with] a desire to connect children to the beauty and wonder around them’ (Tovey, 2020). In phase1 of the study (February to April 2022), students reflected on their experiences in the UCC School of Education outdoor learning space. They constructed reflective portfolios and participated in focus group discussions. Our findings indicated that students were starting to consider how the outdoor environment could contribute to their developing understanding of children and the evolving process of linking theory to practice was apparent. During Phase 2 of the study (January to May 2023), the initial findings were further enhanced when students undertook their first professional practice placement, documenting their reflections on the outdoor spaces they encountered in practice. Focus groups with the students were organised for discussion of their reflections and observations of outdoor learning spaces. Combining college gained knowledge with placement acquired knowledge (Holman and Richardson, 2021) will be explored when delineating the findings.</p>
<p>Rebecca Tinney</p>	<p>Exploring the Attitudes of Early Years Educators and Parents of Pre- School Children towards Outdoor and Risky Play in Ireland</p> <p>This study links to the Environmental/Ecological Sustainability Pillar. Formative outdoor and nature experiences in early childhood have long been upheld as the antidote to environmental issues (Spiteri 2020). However, outdoor play (OP) experiences for children in the early years are declining in Ireland and discourses like fear, sanitation technology and school readiness are usurping children’s lives (Blant 2023). The implications of this for the environment and sustainability remains a nebulous concept.</p> <p>Pre-school children’s access to play experiences is controlled and managed by the adults in their lives. Therefore, this study explores the attitudes of early years educators and parents of pre-school children towards OP and risky play (RP). A mixed methods approach using both quantitative questionnaires and qualitative focus groups was employed. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection ensures a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon being studied. The strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods in research are exploited and any weaknesses of both methods may be minimized (Scott and Morrison 2005). This approach also facilitates triangulation of data collection and analysis. This allows for greater internal validity of the findings and may increase confidence that conclusions drawn are valid (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).</p> <p>The fundamental ethical principles for research are ensuring respect for the rights and dignity of participants, upholding the safety and well-being of all involved, and those potentially affected by research, as well as the professional integrity of the researcher and the research community (Connolly 2003). Ethical approval to conduct the study was sought and granted from the Institute Research Ethics Committee in the Atlantic Technological University. All participants were over the age of 18. The researcher made sure the dignity and rights of each participant were respected. Each participant was given detailed, honest, and accurate information about the study. The researcher continues to make every effort to ensure that ethical principles are upheld and that this research is conducted in an honest, unbiased, and objective manner.</p> <p>Preliminary findings would indicate that educators and parents are aware of the importance of OP and RP opportunities for preschool children. However, factors such as the views and attitudes of management, safety concerns, and lack of appropriate space and facilities for OP and RP for young children were found to impact upon the OP and RP opportunities preschool children in Ireland are receiving. Children have a right to a high-quality education that supports the development of respect for the natural environment (Barnardos 2023).</p>
<p>Claire Butterly</p>	<p>The recruitment and profile of the Early Years Educator funded through the Access and Inclusion Model from the perspective of those working in the ECEC sector</p> <p>Access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary educations is outlined as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015). While considering Education for Sustainable Development, social and cultural sustainability are of particular importance, as all children are entitled to receive affordable and high quality in early childhood education and care</p>



	<p>which should take place in inclusive environments. The adults preparing these environments play a critical role in ensuring the access, inclusion and participation of all children and adults who occupy these spaces. To support inclusion within preschools environments, ECEC settings can apply for funding under the Access and Inclusion Model to employ an additional staff member to reduce child: staff ratios within their environments. This presentation aims to explore the recruitment and profile of these early years' educators funded through the Access and Inclusion Model, which is currently a role that has not yet been sufficiently theorised. This project seeks to fill that knowledge gap and explore how settings recruit EYEs funded under AIM, and what qualifications, skills and attributes these EYEs are bringing to their early childhood teams and practice. The study, which occurs in two phases, utilizes a sequential mixed methods approach and is informed by a social constructivist approach. The methodology consisted of online surveys in the first phase and following the analysis of this data, online semi-structured interviews will take place in phase two. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Phase one, which was recently completed and will be discussed in this presentation, involved distributing an anonymous online survey to setting Owners/Managers, Early Years Educators and EYEs funded through AIM, who self-selected themselves to engage in the research. Phase two will involve semi-structured interviews with a selection Owners/Managers and EYE funded through AIM, who will be selected through using the snowballing sampling technique. In this phase, it is hoped to collect more in-depth data which will highlight the strengths and challenges being experienced by stakeholders in the ECEC sector who engage with AIM Level 7, as €21 million was invested in the Access and Inclusion Model in 2020 (Government of Ireland 2021).</p>
<p>Paula Walshe</p>	<p>Lacking the STEAM to Power Sustainability Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care?</p> <p>Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Maths [STEAM] is closely aligned with children’s sense of identity due to concepts from the across the STEAM domains being inherently connected to their 21stcentury lives (Hachey, 2020). The edifying benefits of engaging in STEAM is acknowledged in current educational policy in Ireland (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2023), and the recently reformed primary curriculum (Department of Education [DE], 2023). Significantly, a recent report from the Department of Education Inspectorate [DEI] (2020) describes a need for increased training and supports for ECEC educators to facilitate STEAM through initial training and continuing professional development. It is vital this skills gap is addressed to enable educators to facilitate children’s engagement in playful STEAM opportunities regarding nature, conservation and sustainability. The Tashkent Declaration (UNESCO, 2022, p.7), includes a commitment “to transform curricula and pedagogy” within ECEC, to support “progress on sustainable development”. Furthermore, Target 4.2 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) aims to increase access to quality ECEC to ensure children are “ready for primary education” (2015, p.21). Due to increased focus on STEAM within educational policy (GoI, 2023), the primary curriculum (DE, 2023) and Literature Review to Support the Updating of Aistear (French et al., 2022), in addition to the acknowledged ECEC skills gap in this area (DEI, 2020), it is vital educators are provided with opportunities for STEAM training if they are to support our youngest learners to develop knowledge and awareness of sustainability to support the pillar of environmental responsibility. STEAM affords children the opportunity to develop skills and dispositions relevant to the social cultural and political sustainability pillars, such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration which are vital to their active participation in society and sense of global citizenship (WiseLindeman & McKendry Anderson, 2015). This paper will present findings from ongoing doctoral research which engaged ECEC educators in surveys and focus groups to explore barriers and facilitating factors to their engagement in STEAM practices and will develop a STEAM training intervention in the next phase of the research. This research utilises a constructivist interpretivist paradigmatic approach based upon constructivist grounded theory (Chamaz, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained from DKIT.</p>



<p>Laura Firth</p>	<p>Appraising the Expectations of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for Scrutinising Transitions from Early Years to Primary Education in Irish Early Childhood Education</p> <p>This research explores the ‘transition’ between preschool and primary school in relation to the effectiveness of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). Within Irish society, early years educators deliver an inclusive culture by providing an inclusive pedagogy scaffolded by the child-centred AIM. Children with special education needs require particular support at the time of transition to primary school. This transition should be treated as a process rather than a once-off event with parents, early years educators and primary school teachers working together (O’Kane, M. 2016). “For a child, who has no previous building blocks of knowledge of experiencing new things, new encounters can be difficult. This is especially the case if they are handled poorly by adults taking care of them, and in some instances, this may lead to long-term behaviour and health issues” (Graham, 2012). It is essential for early years educators, parents, the primary school and other professionals working with the child should collaborate to support the child’s transition to primary school. The theoretical framework of this study draws upon existing inclusive practice (Ring, E. et al. 2021) as well as early years educators partnering with parents and primary schools to support a child’s transition to primary school (Hayes, N. et al. 2017) and learning within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). “Communities of practice” can be used as a valuable analytical and theoretical tool to explore the AIM model in professional early years practice (Wenger,1998). Currently, there is limited research exploring communities of practice in terms of inclusive practice. This research will explore the possible development of a community of practice framework to guide inclusive practice for the early years profession in Ireland. A mixed method approach was adopted using a quantitative online survey and semi-structured qualitative as a research tool to gain insight into the experiences of early years educators and managers of AIM and transitions from preschool to primary school. Educators and managers who have experience working with children in preschool were identified as a representative subgroup of the research population. Key findings suggest that there are clear benefits to engaging with AIM, but there are also a lot of challenges. The biggest challenge is the recruitment of staff under AIM level 7 support. The study found that participants would like more involvement from AIM in the transition process to primary school. Educators welcome the development of a community of practice in relation to inclusive practice.</p>
<p>Dr. Jennifer Pope</p>	<p>Giving the Greenlight to Greenspaces: what the research is telling us about the importance of greenspaces for young children’s healthy development & wellbeing</p> <p>Based on a comprehensive review of the literature on the role of greenspaces for young children, this paper provides an overview of benefits across a range of indicators of child development, health and wellbeing. The evidence would strongly suggest that engaging with more natural environments has the potential to provide a myriad of benefits to young children. These benefits include physical benefits through increased physical activity, blood pressure impacts and less weight gain and wider health benefits such as reduced myopia and fewer hospital admissions. In terms of mental wellbeing, there are positive impacts on stress levels, reduced risk of ADHD and improved memory and cognition. From a socioemotional perspective, prosocial behaviour also appears to be increased. The diversity of play and learning experiences can also be developed further through interaction with the natural environment. However, while the research is highlighting the importance of early experiences outdoors and the potential wider health and developmental benefits, paradoxically, evidence would also seem to suggest a decrease in opportunities for young children to play and spend time outside in greenspaces and inequities to access greenspaces. This presentation will consider these findings from a children’s right’s perspective and the wider implications for policy and practice.</p>



<p>Georga Dowling, Dr. Leah O’Toole & Tracy McElheron.</p>	<p>Towards building a visibility framework for ECEC.</p> <p>We began this conversation by writing a chapter titled ‘A new publicness for early childhood education and care in Ireland.’ We feel continuing this discussion would further develop our thinking around deconstructing what we actually mean by ‘public’ and what vision we should have for the early childhood sector.</p> <p>We would like to engage with the discourses emerging in policy around moving towards a public model and asking is that really what we are doing or is it rhetoric? Is a public system what we want? What would this model really look like? Does this involve moving away from the concept of consumerism within ECEC? These are some of the questions we feel are important to unpack.</p> <p>We argue that consideration of children in ECEC ‘in the interests of the public’ involves conceptualising babies, toddlers, and young children as full citizens. This means creating a space that embodies their visibility, essentially the ‘publicness’ of children.</p> <p>Consideration of educators and educational settings in ECEC ‘in the interests of the public involves a ‘new publicness’ which respects early childhood educators as citizens with insights, expertise, and agency and ensures they are visible and valued.</p> <p>Consideration of parents/families in ECEC ‘in the interests of the public’ acknowledges the genuine pressures experienced by families and seeks to empower them to be more than simply consumers of ECEC.</p> <p>Lastly, consideration of the community in ECEC ‘in the interests of the public’ incorporates the community experiencing the ECEC as a ‘public good.’ We suggest moving beyond simply ‘consulting’ with children, parents, educators, and communities to rather ‘considering’ them deeply.</p> <p>When we unpack the concept of ‘considering’ children, families, educators, and the communities we delve into some of these social challenges facing the ECEC sector.</p> <p>Rather than an empirical body of work, this is a conceptual piece resulting from a collaborative writing project carried out within a community of practice comprising of individuals with a diversity of backgrounds, knowledge and experience. This writing collective critiques the current model of consultation as a means to inform policy for the ‘public good’ and argues instead, for a reconceptualization of what it means to be truly visible in terms of policy decisions and outcomes.</p>
<p>Karolyn McDonnell</p>	<p>Sustainable Partnerships to Enhance STEM Provision for Early Childhood Education and Care</p> <p>CALMAST is the South East Technological University’s Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) Engagement Centre based the Waterford Campus in Ireland. Our work focuses on collaboration and partnerships with schools, communities and industry to promote engagement for all ages and abilities with STEM. STEM supports children’s capacity to understand and engage fully with the world around them (Dunphy <i>et al.</i>, 2014), and the benefit of positive and consistent early educational experiences with STEM are well documented (Dunphy <i>et al.</i>, 2014, McClure <i>et al.</i>, 2017; Parker <i>et al.</i>, 2022). Research has found that children who are introduced to STEM learning experiences in early childhood fare better in literacy and numeracy tests later in their education (Dunphy <i>et al.</i>, 2014). In addition, the Irish Government’s <i>STEM Education policy</i> (DES, 2017) acknowledges that maths underpins all STEM learning experiences. STEM activities have always formed part of early childhood education, however deficits in confident pedagogical practices have been identified. These can include a lack of sufficient professional training in teaching methods (Leung, 2023) or a lack of access to appropriate resources (Ejiwale, 2013; Dong, <i>et al.</i>, 2020). Calmast are responsible for coordinating the very successful all-island of Ireland Maths Week, held annually every October, as well as a number of Science Festivals, the South East Engineering Festival, and the Bealtaine Living Earth Festival among others. This presentation will share some of CALMAST’s activities supporting Early Childhood Education. In addressing Social and Cultural Sustainability, we have created a network across the South East between industry, educators and local governance to develop a community of practice which we envision will strengthen practitioner’s confidence with and access to STEM resources and teaching. Our aim is to contribute to the development of effective teaching and learning strategies and resources for early years and their educators to achieve our guiding objective of ‘STEM for all’.</p>

Play, Grow, Sustain: Integrating the Four Pillars of Sustainability in Early Childhood

