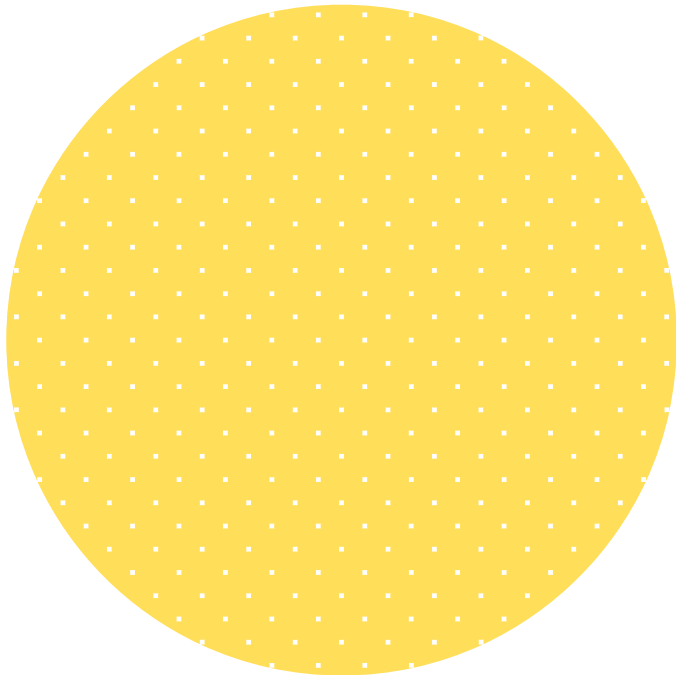
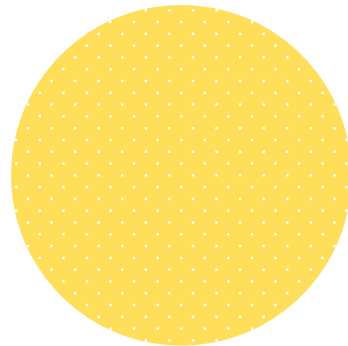




NUI Galway  
OÉ Gaillimh

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

BA in EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES & PRACTICE 2017/2018



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**Autumn 2019**

**Academic Coordinator's Foreword,**

I am very pleased to introduce this collection of Research Briefs, highlighting the exciting and informative work being undertaken by students in the BA in Early Childhood Studies & Practice here at the Centre for Adult Learning & Professional Development at the National University of Ireland Galway. Students in Year 4 of their Level 8 Honours BA undertake a significant research project as part of their academic development. The output of their research is disseminated by three means – as a minor Research Dissertation, a Presentation and a Research Brief. This document showcases a selection of the Research Briefs created by students who completed their degrees in the 2016-2017 academic year.

The Early Childhood Education and Care field is an evidence informed field and as such, it has a rich history of research and evaluation going back decades, if not centuries. We aim to base what we do on what we know, with the knowing being informed by robust research that explores areas of interest, area of importance and areas of wonder. There is an imperative for Early Childhood Educators to include 'research literacy' among the wealth of graduate attributes they take with them into practice in ECEC settings, underpinning their capacity to reflect meaningfully on research, on evidence and crucially on their practice.

Within this publication you will find projects that explore pedagogical documentation, executive functioning and cognitive development; students have explored community garden projects, connection with natural outdoor environments and approaches to mathematics, among others topics. A note of thanks goes to Caitriona Ryan, tutor with the BA, who undertook an editing of these selected briefs. Our aim in the editing process is to make required minor edits, and to work on formatting the documents, while ensuring that each student's individual voice is still heard – not to tamper with their own style, as it were. I believed we achieved this as each document stands on its own merits, sharing its own unique story in its own way, although they are presented in a collection.

It is worth highlighting that all students enrolled in the BA Early Childhood Studies & Practice are existing Early Childhood Educators or are working in an aligned role (i.e. development workers, special needs assistants, childminders). They are completing their academic studies alongside employment and are likely to have other responsibilities in their lives as well. To that end, the academic quality of their work, presented through this publication, is to be commended. This work is further testament to the dedication and commitment we know exists within the ECEC workforce, despite the external struggles related to this professional field.

I would like to thank the students who are showcased herein, for their agreement to share their work with a wider audience and I would like to thank you as well, for taking the time to read this publication. These are focused pieces of research, offering valuable insight into the work of Early Childhood Educators. These projects have the potential to inform others in their approach to practice and to inspire future research, building on the important messages emerging from these research projects.

All the Best,



Dr Sheila Garrity  
Academic Coordinator,  
BA Early Childhood Studies & Practice, MA Early Childhood Studies,  
Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development

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**Laimute Forde**

**Ready for school? Infant class teachers' views about school readiness.**



# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Ready for school?

### Infant class teachers' views about school readiness.

By Laimute Forde.

*The transition to primary school is recognised nationally and internationally as a very important time in children's lives. Positive experiences during this important transition are a strong predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes (Duncan et al, 2007). Successful transitions are closely linked to a child's readiness for school – state of a child's competencies at the time of school entry that is important for later success. It is imperative to be aware of children's skills and competencies at the time of transition to formal education, as it can help to support them during this significant time.*

### The five dimensions of 'readiness' in children

- **Physical well-being and motor development:**  
Children should be healthy, fit, independent, well-nourished, and have developmentally appropriate gross and fine motor skills.
- **Social and emotional development:**  
Children should be able to interact socially, take turns, cooperate, and express feelings.
- **Language development:**  
Children should have a well-developed vocabulary and be able to understand and use spoken language.
- **Cognition and general knowledge:**  
Children need to have basic knowledge of the people, objects, concepts, and conventions of their world.
- **Approaches to learning:**  
Children need to be enthusiastic and curious about learning, persistent at tasks, creative and confident.

(United Nations Children's Fund, 2012)



**HAPPY**  
**INDEPENDENT**  
**CONFIDENT**  
**HEALTHY**  
**CREATIVE**  
**SECURE**  
**SOCIABLE**  
**CURIOUS**  
**ENTHUSIASTIC**  
**GOOD LANGUAGE**  
**SKILLS**  
**READY TO LEARN**



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### Research Brief

This is a summary by Laimute Forde of her minor thesis conducted as part of the BA Degree in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2017 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Cairtriona Ryan and Dr. Sheila Garrity.

## School starting age



There is a clear variation in school starting age around the world. In 144 countries children start school at the age of six, in 25 countries age five, and in 35 countries age seven (World Bank, 2015).

Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the age of six. However, many children here begin school well in advance of the compulsory age – the September following their fourth birthday.

In September 2016, 52.5% of children starting school in Ireland were age four and 46.9% were age five (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

As most of the children around the world start school at an older age, this raises the question. “Are four-year-old children in Ireland developmentally ready for school?” More importantly, “Are schools ready for four-year-old children?”

### Primary school entrance age

Age	Countries
5 years	25
6 years	144
7 years	35

*World Bank data 2015*



### The Research Approach

The research aimed to understand the concept of school readiness from the point of view of people working directly with children in primary schools. Seven Infant class teachers from the West of Ireland participated in the research. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather detailed information on teachers' views, experiences, and beliefs about school readiness and smooth transitions to school. The analysis of the data collected provided valuable insights into children's readiness for school in Ireland. The research determined Infant class teachers' perceptions of the following: school readiness, the skills, and competencies important to school readiness, the challenges associated with the lack of school readiness, the practices used to promote smooth transitions, and the external influences on school readiness.

## Teachers' perceptions of school readiness

All teachers described school readiness in terms of a child's ability to meet the demands of primary education; being socially, emotionally and physically ready to start school. It was strongly emphasised that being ready for school has a crucial impact on children's whole educational experience, especially on their confidence and self-esteem. In regards to children starting school at the age of four, the majority of teachers felt that children should not start primary education until they are at least five years of age.

## Skills and competencies important to school readiness

Personal independence skills such as putting on coats or jackets, opening and closing bags and lunchboxes, tidying up and independent toileting were identified as very important skills by all teachers. Holding a crayon or pencil correctly was also recognised as a crucial skill that should be acquired before children start school. Social skills and forming friendships were recognised as being significant, as well as children's ability to sit and listen, follow instructions, answer questions and hold conversations.

## Challenges in regards to lack of school readiness

The lack of independence skills was found to cause the most problems in Infant classes. It was mentioned that spending a good deal of time helping children takes away from teaching subjects, and poor independence skills delay smooth transitions from one activity to another.

## Professional practices

The National Primary Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) was used in all Infant classes. Play was recognised as an important part of learning and various efforts were made to incorporate it into daily routines, through 30-40 minutes play activities. Only two teachers were implementing the Aistear Curriculum. Open evenings for parents and open days for children were two practices used to support smooth transitions to school.

## External influences on school readiness

Family and Preschool education were identified as key external supports that enhance school readiness. Preschool education was recognised as an important influence on the development of social and independence skills.





## Recommendations

### Policy and Practice

Establish a clear definition of school readiness in the Irish context. The definition of school readiness should include not only expectations for children, but also for schools and families. This would help to develop a shared understanding of school readiness among teachers, preschool teachers, parents, and policymakers. The appropriate supports can then be developed to enhance smooth transitions to school.

Reinforce nationally the use of Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009). These two practice guides provide valuable advice on supporting transitions in early years, including the transition to primary school.

Reinforce the implementation of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum (2009) in Infant classes in Primary schools. Aistear has the potential to better support the learning and development of children in Infant classes through play.

Encourage meaningful collaboration between preschools, schools, and parents.

### Further research

The findings of the study suggested that starting school at the age of four in Ireland is too young. As there is a limited amount

of scientific evidence available to prove or disprove this, there is a clear need for future research in this area. Further research is also needed on the challenges associated with a child's lack of school readiness.

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**Maria Gaynor**

**Supporting Executive Function in Early  
Childhood to Foster Entrepreneurial  
Skills; the Views of Early Years  
Practitioners.**



**Research Brief:  
Supporting  
Executive  
Function in  
Early  
Childhood to  
Foster  
Entrepreneurial  
Skills; the  
Views of Early  
Years  
Practitioners  
By Maria Gaynor**

This research brief aims to share knowledge gained from an undergraduate research study, which was conducted to explore the views of Irish early years practitioners on supporting executive functioning in early years settings. Healthy executive function development is considered crucial for well-being and

success, and early childhood as an optimal time to support its development. ☑

This brief sets out the background to the study and a short overview of the methods used to gather information. The findings are presented and offer a strong basis for recommendations on further research and to inform policy and practice relating to professional training and practice of those working with children.



This research brief is targeted at all professionals with responsibility for supporting the well-being, learning, and development of young children. It should also interest professionals involved in developing early years training content, those involved in its delivery and any person involved in advocacy for increased funding for the early years sector in Ireland.

## The Context for the Research

In 2007, the European Union adopted the *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, European Reference Framework*. Initiative and entrepreneurship are stated as key competences for modern requirements. Irish government policy states that entrepreneurship should form ‘an integral part of our ambition as a nation’ (D.J.E.I., 2015, p12) and emphasises the need to support its development in schools. Early years education is not mentioned and studies have shown that focusing on producing capitalists to drive economies is not a concept the sector embraces easily.

However, entrepreneurial skills are also considered to have a positive impact on an individual’s well-being and outcomes. **Resilience** is widely accepted as critical in overcoming adversity. **Initiative** and **risk-taking** link positively with self-esteem and optimism. **Communication** skills help build and maintain supportive relationships and higher-order thinking skills, including **problem-solving** are crucial for academic and social success. **Creativity** is linked to cognitive flexibility, which infers fluid and flexible



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### Research Brief

This is a summary by Maria Gaynor of her minor thesis conducted as part of the BA Degree in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2017 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Caitríona Ryan and Dr. Sheila Garrity.

thinking and allows for easy adaptation to new circumstances or ideas, and **motivation** increases the enjoyment and quality of learning experiences.

Globalisation and the rapid advances in technology have resulted in information becoming cheap and easily accessible. Driving the continuous flow of new products to sustain consumerism will see employees of the future being prized more for creativity than knowledge. Indeed, much of the literature reviewed for this study found that corporate dominance, consumerism, and inequality may even be tackled and reversed using the same skills deemed necessary to drive them; entrepreneurial skills.

### Early Years Practitioners in Ireland

The Irish State has historically relied on a regulatory system based on Government guidelines and inspection of numerous specific regulatory requirements rather than direct investment (ECI, 2016). Early years practitioners in Ireland are widely recognised as under-valued, over-worked and under-paid. With the newly announced rollout of the Affordable Childcare Scheme in 2017, these very same practitioners will be expected to expand capacity without compromising on quality experiences for children, which supports their unique development path. Practitioners seem well-placed to support children to develop entrepreneurial skills. However, given the current poor working

### Entrepreneurial Skills for Well-being and Success in an Uncertain Future

Creative, competent problem-solvers will be needed to navigate increasingly changing norms of modern times (Insulander et al, 2015). Entrepreneurial skills are varyingly categorised but generally include **initiative, creativity, communication, problem-solving, resilience, risk-taking** and **motivation**; and are increasingly reported to address modern requirements.

conditions, this study argues that rather than add entrepreneurship as another curriculum aim; exploring how to achieve it would be more beneficial. There is much-shared language in literature on supporting executive functioning and entrepreneurial skills and this study suggests that entrepreneurial skills are dependent on healthy executive function development. Importantly, research has shown that this area of development can be actively supported and small improvements in childhood can lead to significant benefits in adulthood. These benefits include improved employability, relationships, mental and physical health, and quality of life.

**Executive functions** are described as a family of control functions used to concentrate and think, particularly when resisting initial unhelpful or damaging impulses (Diamond, 2013). 3 core skills form the basis for higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, reasoning and planning. The core skills are; **Inhibition**, working memory and cognitive flexibility. **Inhibition** involves resisting an initial impulse if it is not appropriate. **Working memory** is the ability to think about and manipulate information stored in the mind and **cognitive flexibility** describes being able to think in a fluid and flexible way and adjust perspectives according to new demands or learning (CDC, 2011).

## Research Methods

Research was carried out in Co. Tipperary with early years practitioners who work with children from 6 months to 5 years of age. Questionnaires and follow-up interviews were used to gather their views on supporting entrepreneurship through fostering healthy executive functions. Some information on current practice which supports executive function development was also gathered. The approach was exploratory which allowed for perceptions, practices, and challenges to be identified and teased out as appropriate.



## Main Findings

- Participants were generally positive towards supporting entrepreneurial and executive function skills.
- Some practices were identified which participants felt, and literature suggested, as supporting executive function development. Worryingly, other practices reported involved rote-learning, which is considered particularly inappropriate to support executive functioning.
- Participants offered little detail to corroborate their views. This suggests that practitioners that reflect on practice from a strong knowledge-base and confidently discuss the benefits of their practice are not emerging from current childcare training courses.
- Financial strain and perceptions of inadequate childcare training content were reported challenges.

Participants feel over-worked and unprepared for their role despite several years of childcare training.

- Participants were eager to learn more about child development, were interested and positive about focusing on executive function skills and seemed committed to providing child-led curriculums with a strong focus on learning through play.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from this study. Practice which supports or could support the development of healthy executive functioning in early years settings certainly seems an area of research which could increase the effectiveness of the new Affordable Childcare Scheme. Reported objectives include reducing child poverty, improving development outcomes, labour market activation and sector quality improvement (DCYA, 2017). The literature reviewed for this study indicates fostering healthy





executive function skills, which can deliver on all objectives;

1. Further research is strongly recommended, to ensure practice is supporting executive function development sufficiently and to address a significant gap in research on this area in an Irish context.

Findings clearly demonstrate a mismatch between participants' time dedicated to study and levels of confidence and/or ability to relate practice to theory. This is despite a reported enthusiasm for child development knowledge and a clear commitment to providing quality experiences for children. Thus;

2. Further research is recommended on the content and delivery of Irish childcare training at QQI Level 5 and 6.

Perceptions of accelerated societal change and the potential impact on children's current and future well-being and success seem critical.

3. Further research is recommended on how Irish children, are currently and, are expected in the future to cope effectively with this rapid pace of change.

The research recommended may instigate policy formation which reflects practitioners' current strengths and acknowledges challenges to practice. This may also lend itself to advocacy for increased sector funding. The study suggests that expansion of child development content, with a particular emphasis on executive functioning, in childcare training would be a particularly welcome outcome. It seems clear, however, that children, who are effectively supported to develop entrepreneurial capacities through the development of strong executive function skills, would be the ultimate benefactors from increased interest in this area of research

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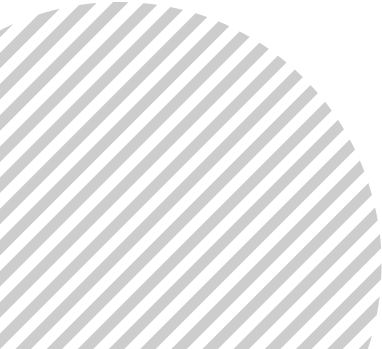

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**Cora Gillic**

**Laying the Foundations': Irish Early Years Practitioners' Perspectives on the Importance of Mathematics in Early Childhood.**



## **‘Laying the Foundations’: Irish Early Years Practitioners’ Perspectives on the Importance of Mathematics in Early Childhood By Cora Gillic**



### **Research Brief:**

In 2011 the Department of Education and Skills introduced the *National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy Among Young People*. This policy document aims to address concerns about falling standards in mathematics and literacy across the Irish educational system. The policy notes that early years practitioners are ‘a powerful resource’ (p.8) in ensuring a child’s mathematical development.

Other research papers comment on the necessity for early years practitioners to provide a broad range of mathematical experiences for young children (NCCA 2014; Ginsburg & Amit, 2008), and to view children as competent learners, who are capable of learning complex mathematical concepts (Clements & Sarama, 2009).

In an era of increasing global and national pressure for children of all ages to be educated to a high standard, and where the STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects are a major policy focus, this research asks: “Is the subject of mathematics a feature of preschool practice in Ireland?”

This research brief summarises the key findings from a small study investigating the beliefs and practices of eight Irish early years practitioners in the area of early childhood mathematics.

Findings revealed that for the most part, participants demonstrated positive dispositions towards the inclusion of mathematics in their pre-school rooms. However, the range of mathematical activities largely related to number and shape recognition.

This research by Córa Gillic proposes several recommendations to increase the range and type of mathematical activity to be provided in pre-school learning rooms.



### **Research Brief**

This is a summary by Cora Gillic of her minor thesis conducted as part of the BA Degree in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2017 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Caitríona Ryan and Dr. Sheila Garrity.





## Context

In 2011 the Irish Department of Education launched the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Young People 2011-2020*. This document recognised the importance of providing a broad mathematics education for all children, including those in their pre-school years. It also recognised Early Years Practitioners as playing a key role in the mathematical education of young children.

Aistear - The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, (NCCA, 2009) asks practitioners to provide a broad range of mathematical experiences for young children including sorting, classifying, sequencing, matching patterns and investigating shape, weight, and capacity.

International research demonstrates that a rich quality mathematical education for young children depends on two major factors: the pedagogical (how to teach) knowledge, *and* the mathematical subject knowledge of the practitioner.

Quality mathematical play needs practitioners who are mathematically knowledgeable and who actively interact with the child as they play, using appropriate vocabulary and playful teaching techniques.

Current best practice relating to the teaching of mathematics to young children is heavily influenced by the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky and Bruner. Here, children are *scaffolded* by more competent persons, developing a community of learners, through positive verbal interactions. The 2002 REPEY Project noted that a mix of direct adult-led and child-led practice provides the best outcomes for children (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002).

***Play is a key vehicle for children's learning.***

Play provides a safe arena for children to test current knowledge and to try new ideas. It is an active method of learning. Play helps to develop problem-solving skills and to foster creative and divergent thinking.

Practitioner interactions are crucial to high-quality mathematical play, as they encourage the child to think about their learning through the use of 'math talk', simply using mathematical vocabulary.

Children are now recognised as very capable learners who can investigate and understand quite complex mathematical ideas and concepts.

"Children have their own preschool arithmetic which only myopic psychologists could ignore"

Lev Vygotsky 1935/1978



## Methodology

Eight participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique. Participants chosen were working in funded ECCE scheme preschool classrooms and held QQI Level 6-8 qualification in Montessori or Early Childhood Education and Care.

Participants were asked about the types of mathematical activities they provided, and if they thought mathematics was appropriate, relevant or necessary in the development of the young child. They were also questioned about their opinions on the devising of a semi-structured pre-school mathematics curriculum.



## Main Findings

### **Mathematics is a fundamental skill for life and for understanding the world.**

Participants stated that they believed that mathematics is a fundamental life-skill, crucial to enabling young children to understand the world around them.

Participants believed that mastering the number system was the most important mathematical skill young children should learn.

### **The Child as a Learner**

All of the participants viewed young children as being very capable and competent learners.

Participants with BA Degrees in Early Childhood were very adept at describing mathematical play, as observed in their settings.

It was stated that mathematics needs to be fun to foster positive dispositions towards the subject. Play is a key learning strategy!

"I think we underestimate children drastically...they are capable of anything and learning anything" Participant 5

### **Fear of Doing too Much**

The majority of participants expressed that although they wished to follow the child's lead in terms of learning, they were fearful of doing too much mathematically. There was an uncertainty of the type of mathematics required at pre-school level. There was obvious fear of crossing the divide between pre-school and primary school. Participants feared that a child would know too much mathematically, and therefore, be bored or disruptive at primary school.

### **Role of the Practitioner**

Some of the participants identified their role as one of 'Laying the Foundations'. Early childhood was seen as a time for introducing mathematical concepts and fostering positive dispositions through a social interactionist approach.

Participants noted that they were the facilitator of an environment, that was mathematically rich, and that afforded children time and opportunities to investigate mathematical concepts in their own time.

The range of mathematical activities provided by participants was varied, but there was a strong emphasis on numbers, counting, and shape.

## A Broad Welcome for a Pre-school Mathematics Curriculum

Play-based practitioners were in favour of a more structured approach to pre-school mathematics. One participant noted how they found it difficult to assess mathematical development through play and stated that such a curriculum may help them to gauge a child's mathematical ability and knowledge more accurately.

Participants also stated that such a development may help to clarify what mathematics should be covered in the pre-school phase.

## Recommendations

- ◆ To facilitate a broader pre-school mathematics experience for young children, as recommended by International and Irish Policy, this research recommends that **all** pre-service courses in early childhood education contain a mathematics module. In-service training should also be provided to current pre-school personnel.
- ◆ This report proposes that Irish educational policy needs to work towards the development of a more cohesive system within the early childhood age group. This would ensure that practitioners within the 3-8 age group are familiar with the learning outcomes that are expected for children throughout the age range.
- ◆ Further to the above, this report suggests that a practice guide for early childhood mathematics be devised to clarify mathematical concepts required to be taught and assessed at pre-school level.
- ◆ A lowering of the adult: child ratio (currently 1:11) within Irish pre-school rooms would enable practitioners to spend more time interacting with, and observing individual children and small groups to better facilitate the planning and assessment of each child's mathematical development, knowledge, and achievements.

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## Key Points from the Literature

Mathematics is a key life skill.

Children learn mathematics through interacting with their environment, and with the people in that environment. Play is a key learning strategy.

The REPEY Project (2002) recommends that a mix of adult-led and child-led learning is the most effective way for children to learn new concepts.

Practitioner knowledge of play as a method of learning coupled with mathematical subject knowledge is important to ensure quality mathematical experiences for young children.

Practitioners' positive 'fun' attitude towards mathematics is essential in fostering positive dispositions towards mathematics in children.

A broad range of mathematical activities and experiences, including number, shape and space, operations, measures, and pattern, should be offered to preschool children (Ginsburg & Amit, 2008).



**Vanessa Kelly**

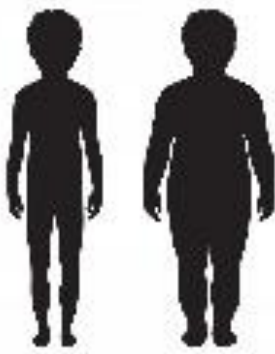
**Eating habits and food behaviours are easier to change in early childhood rather than adulthood: The impact a community garden can play in children and their families' healthy eating habits**



## Eating habits and food behaviours are easier to change in early childhood rather than adulthood: The impact a community garden can play in children and their families' healthy eating habits. *By Vanessa Kelly*

One in four three-year-old children in Ireland is either overweight or obese. Childhood obesity not only affects early childhood years but also negatively impacts children into adulthood. Obesity has been rated as the fifth highest risk factor for mortality (Growing Up in Ireland, GUI, DCYA, 2013). Over the last decade, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that 43 million children under five years of age were overweight. The main concern is that children are generally eating more calorific foods with fewer nutrients (WHO, 2009). Safefood reported in 2016 that the Irish population had a high intake of poor nutrient-dense foods.

*'parental involvement in activities at their children's school site has been linked to students' higher academic achievement and lower dropout...' (Ozer, 2007, p.858).*



Ireland has seen many recent changes over the last century. In the past, the Irish population was highly malnourished, had high birth and fertility rates, and numerous infectious diseases. Nowadays, the fertility rates are lower and there is a reduction in chronic infectious diseases.

Ireland joined the European Economy Community (EEC) in 1973, now known as the European Union (EU). The Celtic Tiger brought about many changes; when the Irish economy grew so did the population's finances. More people tended to eat out more often and this led to an overconsumption of less nutritious foods with higher calories (NUI Galway, 2016). The EU developed many health and nutrition policies to target

O'Hara, and Murrin reported in 2008, from their research in Ireland, that the quality of children's diets relied on their socio-economic background.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009) is an organisation dedicated to enhancing the quality of education children receive in Ireland. Aistear aims to improve interactions with early educators and children, through children's emerging interests being implemented into their educational curriculum. NCCA (2009) points out that children are supported by adults in their lives both in physical and psychological well-being, and are encouraged to make healthy choices with concerns to nutritious foods. With obesity on the rise, it is important to observe children's eating habits and research into the impact and influence a community garden with preschool children, their parents and their local community members may have on their food behaviours and habits.



### Research Brief

This is a summary by Vanessa Kelly of her minor thesis conducted as part of the BA Degree in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2017 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Caitríona Ryan and Dr. Sheila Garrity.





**Reports and studies:** Ozer (2007) researched into garden programmes with children. From her results she questioned who benefits from the community garden; the children, the parents or the community? Johnson (2013) disagreed with Ozer, believing that all involved learn together and that is the benefit. Passy (2014) noted in her research that children benefitted from the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables in the home. Kos and Jerman (2012) highlighted in their 2012 research that through involvement in farming the children developed a greater knowledge of foods.



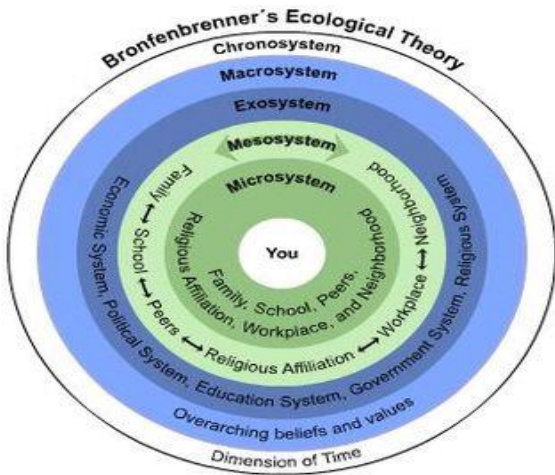
Both Ozer (2007) and Passy (2014) agree that community gardens provide opportunities for children to develop socialisation skills.

Safefood (2016) found in their Irish study that the Irish population had a high intake of poor nutrient-dense foods with 24% of children's sugar intake and 21% of fat intake coming from added sugar. Foods such as biscuits and sweets, naturally occurring sugar such as those found in fresh fruit, vegetables and milk was not a concern. The participants, who were interviewed during the Safefood research, believed their eating habits derived from their early childhood and stated how it is easier to change food behaviours and habits when you are a child rather than in adulthood.

**Methodology:** Qualitative design was the method chosen for this research study to help gather and understand parents' perspectives on their children's eating habits while being involved in a community garden. The strengths of qualitative design methods in research are that they allow a written report based on parents' experiences to be compiled.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with consented parents. These questions were designed based on the following objectives: to analyse parents' perspectives of their children's eating habits prior to and during involvement in the community garden; to examine if children's involvement in a rural community garden had any impact on the family's eating habits, and finally; to explore the impact of children's social interactions and participation in a rural community garden.

**Community involvement:** The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009) suggests that children's well-being is influenced by their relationships and interactions with their family and the wider community. Children are immensely influenced by their parents' and families' eating behaviours (Scaglioni, Salvioni & Galimberti, 2008). The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2010) noted children's relationships are essential for their development.



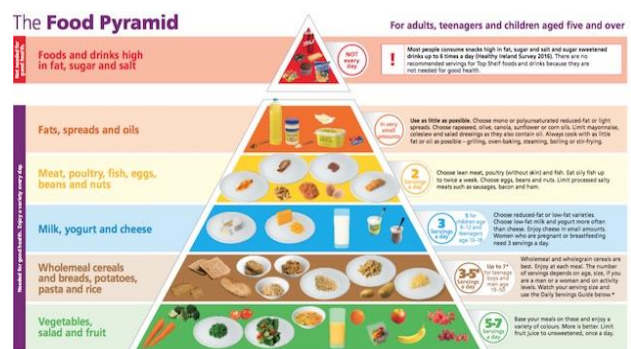
Bronfenbrenner devised an Ecological System Theory, in which the child is at the centre of the system surrounded by circles. These outer circles are called the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem involves the child's immediate environment: their family, community, and where they attend school. The mesosystem relates to the relationships between the microsystems. The exosystems are areas of the child's life that influence their development indirectly, such as their parents' work. The macrosystem refers to the values and beliefs of the society and culture in which the child lives. The chronosystem relates to how, over time, the child's environment grows and develops. Their systems are ever-evolving. All these systems influence children's development directly and indirectly (NUI Galway, 2013).

**Children's social learning theory:** Albert Bandura (Association for Psychological Science, 2013) devised a theory based on how children learn, known as social learning theory. He stated that children learn by observing others. These people are called models. Models are people such as parents, peers, and others that children encounter.

**Findings of this study:** The findings of this research study can report the positive effects the gardening

group has had on these preschool children and their families.

Firstly, this research reported that most parents mentioned how they have made changes to their children's and family's eating habits by increasing their fruit and vegetable consumption. The children had a huge impact on family eating habits, by influencing their family's choices in foods, and by bringing more awareness of a healthy balanced diet. Secondly, this research can report the children's improved knowledge of food growth cycles and the need for the body to use food as a fuel for energy. Another finding of this research was the sharing of sugar-free recipes, which encouraged some parents to bake vegetables into healthy sugar-free treats for their families.



The study also showed that having parental involvement is essential, as parents are the main carers and educators of their children (NCCA, 2009). Parents emphasized how their children grew with confidence and beamed with pride when informing others of their gardening knowledge.

The parents enjoyed the bonding time they shared with their children in the gardening group. Parents also recognised how their children's social interactions and skills had developed through the gardening group.

**Recommendations:** From the findings of this research study it leads to suggest that all early years' settings

should develop a community garden, where involvement is encouraged, supported and made accessible to all.

Another recommendation from this study would be to expand the area in which it has been carried out. In Co. Louth, there are 10, 411 (CSO, 2011) children. If this study expanded to include these children, their parents, and their local community members it may highlight a need for a greater healthy food policy within all educational areas.

The major point to be learned from this research study is how the children benefitted. The parents reported how their children's socialisation skills had improved and how the gardening group provided an opportunity for the parents to bond with their children. The weekly gardening group engaged children in a fun and inclusive manner, by offering opportunities for the children to take the leading role through active hands-on experience in all areas of the garden. It was noted

that the children grew with confidence and beamed with pride as they shared their gardening experience and knowledge with their family members. It also provided opportunities for the children involved to be active agents in their healthy food choices, not only for themselves but also for their family members by bringing awareness about healthier food options.

Further research is also necessary to investigate the long-term benefits of an extended gardening group, where all unite together throughout the whole year to develop their garden and share their skills and knowledge, not only on gardening but also on preparing food and sharing healthy recipes. This research should be developed from an early age and continued until they are young adults. By expanding and extending this study it may highlight a need for government funding into community garden developments, where children of all ages are involved and actively participate with their parents and their community.

Kelleher, C.C., Lohan, J., O'Hara, M.C. & Murray, C. (2008) *of the*

*The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family, and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences....'* (NCCA,

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**Aoife O'Mahony**

**An investigation of families with young children, currently living in rural and urban Ireland, and their experiences and connection with the natural outdoor environment**



# An investigation of families with young children, currently living in rural and urban Ireland, and their experiences and connection with the natural outdoor environment by Aoife O'Mahony



## INTRODUCTION

Nature Deficit Disorder is a term presented by Richard Louv (2005) where he believes that children today are becoming more disconnected from nature and the natural environment. Recent studies have shown that children are spending more time indoors than ever before with 10% of children never visiting a wooded area (Ryan, 2016), and 75% of British children spending less time outdoors than the daily recommended time for prisoners (Wayman, 2016).

For the previous generations, play mainly consisted of time spent outdoors in surroundings including the freedom of



fields and parks, with many opportunities to observe and engage with the natural environment. (Hickey, 2016).

Time spent in the outdoors allows a child to develop their imagination, problem-solving skills, physical development,

**In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace'**  
(Louv, 2005)

self-confidence as well as improving their mental health and well-being.

Time spent outdoors allows a child to develop their imagination, problem-solving skills, physical development, self-confidence as well as improving their mental health and well-being.

The increase in digital media and technology today has been a contribution to children deciding to remain indoors and experience play and nature through a screen rather than first hand. Studies have highlighted that children are spending a staggering 8 hours a day in front of a screen. (Hanscom, 2016). Children are also spending more time in a car traveling from school to structured activities to home, impacting on the time left for playing freely in natural environments.

A recent publication in Ireland on children aged 7-12 years indicated that they would like to 'increase the free time available to play' (Coyne et al, 2012. P4). However, children identified that one of the worst things about growing up in Ireland was the weather, as it prohibited them from engaging in the outdoors (Coyne et al, 2012. P6). With these studies in mind, the research aims to see if children are spending more time indoors than outdoors and what are the natural environments that children and families are spending their time within in Ireland today?



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## Research Brief

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## RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample were parents of children aged 0-12 years currently living in rural and urban areas across Ireland.



## Research Approach

The approach taken for this study was Quantitative Research, which was chosen to reach a large number of families living around Ireland, as the aim was to investigate the environments families, from different locations, engage in with their children.

**‘Quantitative methods are ideal for studying large numbers of people’ (NUI Galway, 2014)**

The research aimed to identify if children and families were spending more time indoors or outdoors in Ireland. This was due to current literature and research highlighting that children today were staying indoors more than ever before, ‘almost half of children (48%) spend more time in front of a screen than outdoors’ (Ryan, 2016). The research also aimed

to investigate the types of environments families are spending their time together.

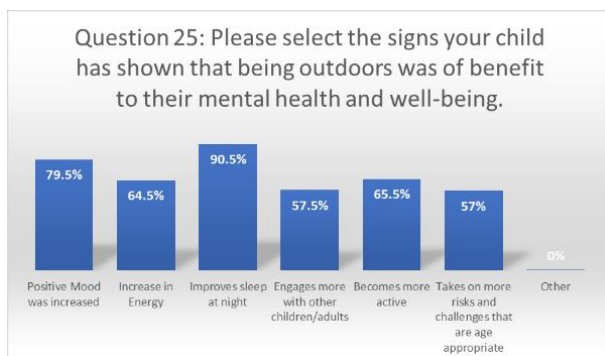
**‘Outdoor Play is an outlet for the child’s everyday stress’ (Clements, 2004)**

An online questionnaire was chosen as the data collection tool. Through using this method, it could be sent to participants living across Ireland. It is believed that everyone has access to the internet or a smartphone today and so participants could take part in their own time.



## Main Findings

All the parents said that they felt the outdoors was beneficial to their own and their children’s mental health and well-being.



### Screen Time and Outdoor Time

The findings from the research show that children are spending a similar amount of time on average a week engaged outdoors as they are engaged on screen time. Participants stated that almost half of their children spend 5-10 hours a week engaged in both activities. However, 28%

of children in this study are receiving less time outdoors than prisoners with less than 1 hour a day.

### Parents’ experiences outdoors and their children’s experiences outdoors

97% of parents said that they played outdoors as a child with all parents today encouraging their children to play outdoors. 74% of parents encourage their children to play outdoors daily, while less than half of parents find the time as an adult to be in the outdoors every day.

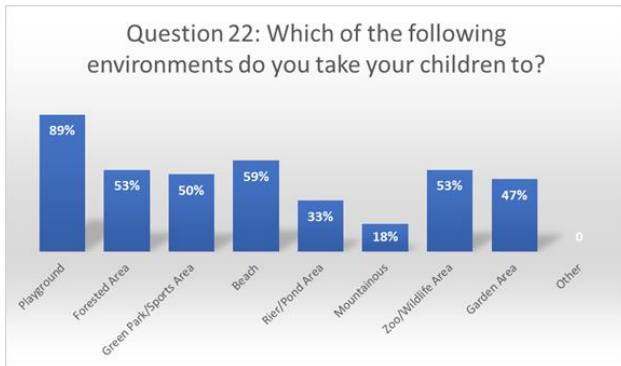




The findings show that parents are encouraging their children to play outdoors today, regardless of their location.

The research also shows that children are spending similar times in their own gardens as their parents did when they were younger. However, there is a decrease in children spending time in a neighbour's garden, nearby green area as well as a nearby tarmacadam area.

The findings highlighted that there has been an increase in children today being taken to different environments compared with their parents. The playground received the largest increase, while other natural areas are largely more visited than the previous generation. This shows an increase in families frequenting more natural environments today.



There was no clear link between parents who were taken to areas as children and to where they now take their own children. The research showed that children today experience more varied areas in comparison to their parents, regardless of their location or their parents' own childhood experiences.

### Environments children engage in unsupervised is limited today



The findings highlighted that children are restricted by the affordances for unsupervised play. As environments stretched further from homes, parents stated they would not allow their child to play in those areas unsupervised. This indicates that children today are getting limited unsupervised play in natural areas other than their own homes and gardens.

However, 55% of the participants had children under 6 years, so this may indicate why they did not allow their children to play much further than their own home or neighbour's garden.

### Indoor activities engaged in today

The findings show that parents are engaging in varied indoor activities with their children with, interestingly, reading being the activity most frequented together. However, it could be viewed that screen time in the family home could be rated higher than reading when both watching television and playing on a computer/tablet are combined to 76%.

In conclusion, the research identified that both parents and children are spending similar times indoors engaging with screen time as they are spending in outdoor environments. The findings indicated that children are taken to the playground most frequently by their parents, while there is also an increase in children being taken to more natural areas, compared with their parents' childhood experiences. The research also highlighted that children are allowed very limited unsupervised playtime outside of their own gardens. Finally, the findings identified that reading was the most frequented activity engaged indoors by families.

## Recommendations

The findings give an insight into family life today and the environments they spend their time in. As the playground is the most frequented environment by children and families, it is recommended that community playgrounds be developed further to incorporate more natural elements. By integrating natural elements into these environments, it will enable children to develop a connection with nature, but will also allow for more creative play and physical development.

While the research identified that children are being taken to more natural areas than their parents before them, the type of activity engaged in within these environments was not highlighted. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be carried out in order to investigate the activities that families may be engaging in within these areas. Knowledge of the quality and types of activities would allow for a better insight into children's relationships with the natural outdoor environment.

The findings also identified that children are allowed very limited unsupervised play in areas outside of their gardens and so it is recommended that Early Years Services evaluate their outdoor play space to facilitate the use of more natural elements that enable children to play and hide among them. This would allow the child to believe they were out of view of the adult, yet remaining in a safe space with their peers, as well as building a positive relationship with natural elements.

**'Natural outdoor settings offer the most open-ended, sensory calming environments for children, inspiring hours of pretend play and creativity that aid in the proper development of their senses.'**

**(Hanscom, 2016).**

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**Amy O'Rourke**

**How Can Documentation Facilitate  
Learning and Development During Early  
Years Education?**



# How Can Documentation Facilitate Learning and Development During Early Years Education? *By Amy O'Rourke*

## PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION

“The practice of observing, recording, interpreting and sharing through a variety of media the processes and products of learning in order to deepen and extend it.”

(Krechevsky, et al 2013, p74)



## What is documentation?

Documentation is a process that involves collecting samples of children's actions using various media such as observations, photos, and anecdotal notes. These pieces of documentation are then analysed by practitioners and used to inform planning in order to extend the learning experiences of children, based on their current interests and learning styles. This process is then shared with the wider community to allow children's learning and development to become visible.

Presenting documentation is key in allowing children to reflect and expand on their own learning. Documentation is most commonly associated with the Reggio Emilia approach to education. Children in Reggio Emilia inspired settings are encouraged to express their thoughts and ideas through their multiple symbolic languages. They enquire into concepts deeply and form new understandings by engaging in conversations and experiences with others.

Documentation is a vital part of early childhood care and education. However, it can be an area of confusion and frustration for early childhood practitioners. Wien, (2011) describes documentation as a complex process with many layers. Due to this difficulty, contrasting techniques of assessment are often put into place, such as assessment tasks that are based on 'school ready' skills (Dubiel, 2014). This traditional style of assessment which is better suited to older children can have negative impacts on children's development and can limit their potential (Lang, 2014). Carr, (2001) encourages early childhood practitioners to highlight and foster children's innate learning dispositions such as perseverance and communicating with others which can be applied to many learning situations.

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*Documentation is a vital part of early childhood care and education.*

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### Research Brief

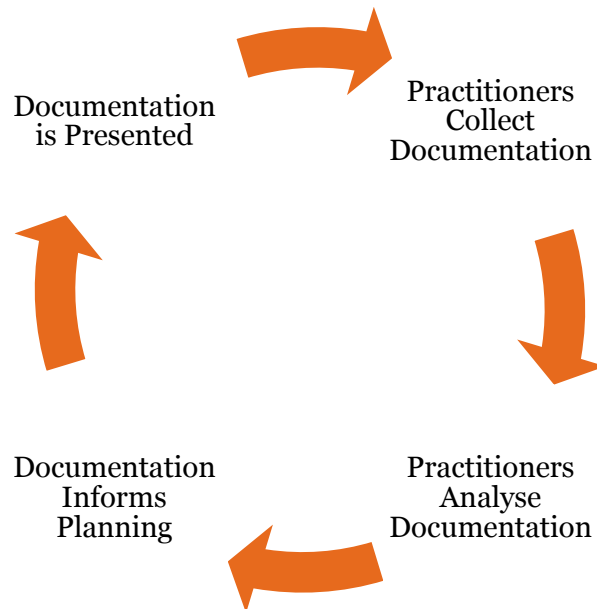
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## The Process of Documentation

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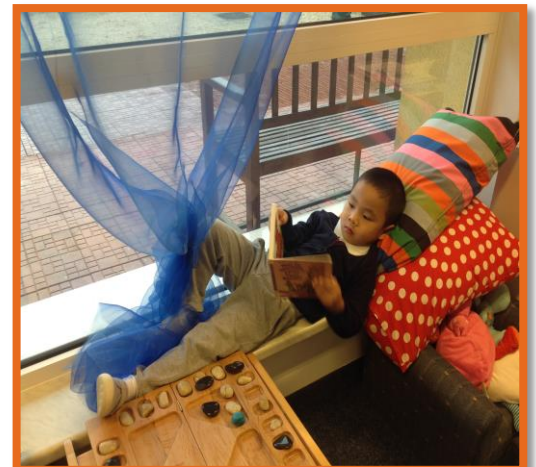
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### THE RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was necessary in order to gather and present a clear understanding of documentation from those within the sector. It will aim to provide clarity for practitioners who are finding the process of documentation challenging. The purpose of this research was to uncover how documentation can facilitate learning and development during early years education.

The main objectives were to highlight the benefits of documentation, to uncover the role of the practitioner, and to discover what methods of documentation are used. Data was collected during semi-structured interviews with ten early childhood practitioners at the American International School of Bucharest. This method of data collection was chosen to allow practitioners to share their personal practice, opinions and philosophies surrounding documentation.

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## THE FINDINGS

### A whole child perspective

The study found that through documentation children's individual interests and dispositions were highlighted. Practitioners used this information to move children towards the next stage in their development.

### Visible learning

All participants noted the power of documentation in allowing children's learning process of development to become visible for parents, other practitioners and to the children themselves. This process allows children to see the value of what they do.

### Reggio Emilia influence

All practitioners discussed the Reggio Emilia approach having had an impact on how and why they collect and present documentation. Seeing the child as a competent individual was a key understanding shared. Adapting this approach to suit individual practice is important.

### Layers of documentation

Documentation was found to be a complex process involving multiple layers. These layers include: deciding what to document, how to collect the documentation, interpreting the documentation, presenting it effectively, deciding whom to present it to, and finally, ensuring practitioners use the documentation to extend learning.

### The Benefits of Documentation

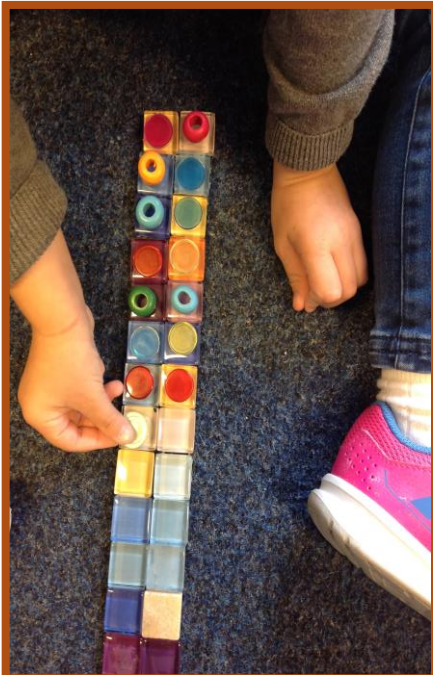
The findings demonstrated multiple benefits of documentation, including: visible learning, the value that documentation places on children's actions, and viewing the child holistically.

### The Practitioner's Role

It was found that the practitioner's role is vitally important, and is also a complex process. While Reggio Emilia had a large impact on the participants' theoretical philosophies, they felt that they were continuing to develop the technique in practice. No practitioner believed that they had mastered the art of documentation. Many participants mentioned that their most valuable professional development came from learning from other colleagues.

### The Methods of Documentation Used

Multiple methods of documentation were discussed during the interview process and some participants had preferred methods such as 'Floorbooks' or photos; however, it was a common view that the most accurate documentation derived from using a mixed methods approach. The data also suggested that a key aspect of successful documentation is how you *use* the documentation that you collect, not how you collect it.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the benefits to children's learning and development highlighted in this research, pedagogical documentation should become a feature of all early childhood care and education settings.

Holistic methods of documentation should replace any assessment tasks during which children are expected to 'perform'.

Practitioners should be supported through this complex process with time, professional development opportunities such as Reggio Emilia training, and through systems that encourage practitioners to learn from their peers.

*"I believe it is the key to the child's development really. I think that it is documentation that shows us where the child is going, where they've come from, how to move them forward. So, it is really important, and it is the key to facilitating the child's growth. So very important."*

*(Research participant)*

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**Belinda Walsh**

**Steiner Waldorf in Ireland**



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# Steiner Waldorf in Ireland

Research Brief

By Belinda Walsh

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## Steiner-Waldorf, a less popular approach

Steiner-Waldorf is less popular than approaches such as Montessori and Play-based early years services in Ireland, but what are the reasons behind this? This brief shares with you the outcomes of research about this topic from the perspectives of parents and early years practitioners in County Cork.

### Statistics: Early Years Services in Ireland

Montessori popularity 46%

Play-based popularity 43%

Steiner-Waldorf popularity 1%

(Pobal, 2016)

In Ireland, there are 14 Steiner-Waldorf services. County Cork has just 1 Steiner-Waldorf pre-school. (ISKA, 2016)

## Regulation and Policy

Regulation and policy support quality practice in early years services. The Government of Ireland (2016) Early Years Services Regulations highlight that the practitioner must facilitate the health, safety, welfare, and development of children in the service. These regulations alongside Síolta (CECDE, 2006), the quality framework and Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the curriculum framework, highlight the importance of positive relationships between families, staff and children; an appropriate environment that is safe and practical; and a curriculum that supports children's well-being. Steiner-Waldorf education links well with this.

### The Steiner-Waldorf philosophy



The first educational cycle of this philosophy is from 0-7 years. At this stage children are not introduced to formal learning; therefore, they do not learn to read or write during this period. Children learn through play, creative, artistic and practical experiences such as cooking, gardening, or using logs and branches to build dens. Children are never pressured to participate in an activity or to learn. This is to allow children to develop a love for learning and do so when they are ready. The pressure to learn academically at too young an age can damage a child's natural love of learning (Pound, 2006). Rhythm and repetition are important within Steiner-Waldorf education. The children may have a gardening day, cooking day, craft day, painting day, adventure day, etc. Children of this age are discouraged from using information communications technology. This is because technology can be negative to the development of imagination and creativity. There is also a great emphasis on outdoor play and the natural learning environment (NIIG 2014a)



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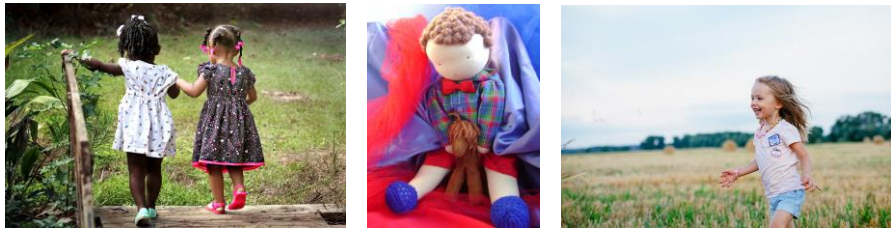
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## Is there a positive or negative connection between the views of parents and EYPs and the popularity of Steiner-Waldorf education in Ireland?

The purpose of the study was to understand parents and early years practitioners' knowledge and opinions about the Steiner-Waldorf philosophy; to discern why it seems to be a less popular approach to early childhood education and care in Ireland and to compare the views of practitioners who have experience working in Steiner-Waldorf education with those who do not.

To undertake the study, twelve participants were chosen; six parents and six early years practitioners were interviewed. Three practitioners had experience working in Steiner-Waldorf and three did not. The flexible interviews provided an insight into the views of parents and practitioners on Steiner-Waldorf education.



### *Main Findings*

#### *Knowledge*

One theme that occurred from the research was that most parents and practitioners without experience of Steiner-Waldorf were not knowledgeable about the approach. One practitioner did not identify the philosophy that her service uses and similarly, many parents could not identify the philosophy of the services that their children were attending.

#### *Natural Learning Environment*

The findings suggest that the participants linked the natural learning environment to the use of imagination and creativity. Interestingly, both the Steiner-Waldorf and non-Steiner-Waldorf practitioners held similar views about the natural learning environment to aid development.

#### *Weather*

In Steiner-Waldorf education outdoor play in a natural environment is important for children. The data showed that both sets of practitioners and parents agreed with this concept. The parents believed that children should not play outside in poor weather, in case they become ill. However, both sets of practitioners agreed that once appropriate clothing is available, outdoor play in all weather is beneficial.



### *Relationships*

Children in Steiner-Waldorf education can have the same teacher for up to 8 years. Most participants liked, that through this relationship, the class becomes like a family; teachers are respectful and aware of themselves as positive role models; children are not pressured; and that through this relationship the teacher gets to know each child individually, including their likes, dislikes and what challenges them and felt that this is important for learning. However, the question arose, “What if the child doesn’t get along with the teacher?” One parent suggested that everybody has personality clashes, while, another suggested that children need to learn how to deal with disputes effectively and having a positive role model as a teacher is a good way to learn this.

### *ABCs and 123s*

In Steiner-Waldorf education the children are not introduced to the printed word before the age of 7. Most parents supported this and there was agreement between both sets of practitioners that children would catch up with reading and writing at a later stage. Parents mentioned how they liked that children are not pressured to learn academically. In contradiction to this, both sets of early years practitioners suggested that parents want their children learning letters and numbers before they begin school.

### *Information Communications Technology (ICT)*

In Steiner-Waldorf education children are discouraged from using technology and the media. There was a contrast in opinion about this. All practitioners and most parents agreed that there is no place for technology in the pre-school and that children learn better through play. Some parents suggested that if children are surrounded by technology, why avoid it? Furthermore, another parent who teaches ICT in the early years as a module in a Montessori college explained that technology, when used in certain ways, can have learning benefits, such as improving literacy development.

### *EYPs of similar opinion*

Steiner-Waldorf practitioners were better informed about the approach than the other practitioners and provided more detailed opinions. However, both groups of practitioners held similar views about Steiner-Waldorf education and its learning benefits.



## Why is Steiner-Waldorf less popular?

Although there were varying opinions about different aspects of the Steiner-Waldorf philosophy all parents agreed that they would consider sending their children to a Steiner-Waldorf pre-school and all practitioners liked the approach. When each participant was asked why they thought Steiner-Waldorf was less popular, people often answered that they did not know or understand the philosophy. More individual opinions included, that it can be seen as wacky or hippy and the spiritual aspect can be foreign to people. There was agreement between practitioners that most parents want their children learning ABCs and 123s before they begin school and Steiner-Waldorf does not teach this.

The data gained from the study showed that within this sample group there was a lack of knowledge about Steiner-Waldorf education in county Cork and contrast in opinion about technology, reading and writing in early childhood and other aspects.

## Recommendations

In light of the above findings further research could include an investigation into what parents and early years practitioners know about different childcare philosophies, and to understand if parents want their children learning ABCs and 123s before they begin school.

It is recommended that early years practitioners critically reflect on their relationship with children and how their attitude and actions influence children; and that early years practitioners discuss the benefits of outdoor play with parents.

It is recommended that the government fund a study into the use of technology in the early years. Research needs to investigate which technology is beneficial to healthy development and which technology is not.

With a lack of knowledge and literature around Steiner-Waldorf in Ireland, a longitudinal study that compares Steiner-Waldorf to mainstream education should be carried out. This could develop a better insight into aspects of the approach.



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**Adell Woods**

**Exploring the Implementation of Aistear,  
the Early Childhood Curriculum  
Framework, with Early Years Educators  
and Primary School Teachers with  
children aged 3-6 years of age within the  
Northeast of Ireland.**





*Exploring the Implementation of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, with Early Years Educators and Primary School Teachers with children aged 3-6 years of age within the Northeast of Ireland. Research Study conducted by Adell Woods*

## Research Brief

In November 2016 research was carried out with Early Years Educators and Infant Class Primary School Teachers in the Northeast of Ireland to examine and explore the Implementation of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. The study examined how the settings adapted their existing Curriculum and daily routine and explored the benefits and challenges of implementing the Curriculum Framework with children aged three to six years. The benefits for children's social interactions, language, and cognitive development through play in a child-led environment were discussed with participants. However, training and resources were a concern and a requirement for Early Years Educators and Primary School Teachers.

## Introduction

Aistear is the National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged birth to six years (NCCA, 2009a). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009a, p.9) states that Aistear is the Irish word for 'Journey' and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is where children aged birth to six years are embarking on a lifelong journey of learning. Aistear is implemented in crèches, pre-schools, childminders and infant classes in primary schools across Ireland.

## What is Aistear?

The NCCA produced Aistear in 2009. The curriculum framework is built up of four main elements: Principles and Themes (NCCA, 2009a), Guidelines for Good Practice (NCCA, 2009b), a user guide and key messages from the four research papers that supported and guided the development of Aistear (NCCA, 2009a). All are available online at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie).

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development (NCCA, 2009a, p.7).

The first principle is 'children and their lives in early childhood' (NCCA, 2009a, p.7). This principle focuses on the rights of the child. It promotes the view of children as citizens who

are unique, with their own ability, skills, and interests. Each child has a right to be recognised, accepted and valued and for their voice to be heard.



The second principle is the children's 'connections with others' (NCCA, 2009a, p.7). It reflects children's relationships with adults, peers, parents, families and the wider community. It focuses on the adult's role in supporting and guiding children's learning and



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### Research Brief

This is a summary by Adell Woods of her minor thesis conducted as part of the BA Degree in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2017 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Caitríona Ryan and Dr. Sheila Garrity.

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development.



The third and last principle is 'how children learn and develop' (NCCA, 2009a, p.7). This highlights how children learn in many ways. Children can learn numerous things at the one time; this is known as holistic development. Children learn and develop in the indoor and outdoor environment where they can explore emotions, build relationships, develop social skills, and language development.



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 31 addresses children's rights to rest, leisure, recreational activities and play (UNCRC, 1989).

The Aistear Curriculum Framework breaks down children's learning and development into four themes:



The themes, aims, and goals outline dispositions, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge and understanding' (NCCA, 2009a, p.13) that children will develop with the support and guidance of Early Years Educators and Infant Class Primary School Teachers.



### Context: Progress development in ECCE for children aged 3-6 years.

It is important to note, that in Ireland, the compulsory age for formal education is six old (Department of Education and Science, 2002), but in reality, children in Ireland generally start primary school at the age of four.

In 1999 the new Primary School Curriculum (PSC) was introduced. The curriculum discussed children's holistic development and children's individual learning, concerning emotional growth, and physical and social development through imagination and creativity. The curriculum also mentions infant



classes, the environment and developing through play.

In 2010 the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education, 'Universal Preschool Year' (Citizens' Information, 2017) was provided to children for the year before they attended primary school. The Early Years Strategy Report 'Right From the Start' (DCYA, 2013) recommended that universal preschool be extended from the age of three years.

A direct outcome of this report was the introduction in 2016 of a second 'Universal Pre-School Year' that provides universal pre-school for children after their third birthday (Citizens Information, 2017). By participating in this programme, all pre-schools agree, under contract from the DCYA, to adhere to

### Methodology

- This study engaged with qualitative data analysis.
- 11 semi-structured interview questions addressed aspects of implementing Aistear with children aged three to six years.
- Six Early Years Educators and Seven Infant Class Primary School Teachers participated in the case study.
- Five themes emerged from the data; Emergent Curriculum, Social Development, Communication, Holistic Development and Implementation of Aistear.



### Findings

'Aistear Time' is a term expressed by Primary School Teachers as 1 hour allocated to Aistear daily. 4/5 work stations, depending on the number of children in the classroom, in their allocated table group, either got 15 minutes at each station, in classes where numbers were lower or worked at the one work station for 45

### **Social Development**

Infant Teachers use Aistear to engage in conversation and to look for interests. They all spoke about choosing a certain work station to sit at daily, and how Aistear develops social skills. Tina Bruce (2001) discusses how children make props and make up rules during role-play and imaginary play. This gives children the opportunity to resolve conflicts, to develop friendships. Early Years Educators highlighted children engaging in conversation during 'circle

implementing the Aistear Curriculum Framework (DCYA, 2016, p.11).

minutes and then moved onto the next work station the following day. Consequently, by the end of the week, all 5 work stations were visited by each child.

Early Years Educators discussed taking photos and linking them to Aistear themes, aims and goals, and sharing these with parents. Be it a child zipping up his coat for the first time, or sharing news about a baby being born. They incorporated these interests into the daily activities and learning for the children, throughout the pre-school session.

### **Emergent Curriculum**

Early Years Educators discussed a 'child-led' environment where children's interests and ideas are brought to life in the form of photos, and art, and during free-play. They highlight how children learn at their own pace. Primary School Teachers mentioned that activities/stations are organised by the teacher and a rota is devised. Conversations are listened to and ideas come to life in future planning.

### **Communication**

Many participants spoke in regard to listening to children's ideas and engaging in conversation. UNCRC (1989) Article !2, a child's opinion, identifies that children have a right to

talk and to be listened to. Early Years Educators and Primary School Teachers expressed that by engaging in conversation, listening to

## Conclusion

The research concluded that Aistear, the Curriculum Framework, is evidently being implemented by Early Years Practitioners and Primary School Teachers in pre-schools and primary schools for children aged three to six years, within the Northeast of Ireland. The benefit of learning through play in a child-led environment is apparent. Aistear is well and truly on its adventurous journey in being implemented in the Northeast of Ireland.

opinions and implementing children's interests into the setting, ensures that children's voices are heard.

## **Holistic Development**

The majority of Early Years Educators discussed inviting children's parents, family and members of the community into the pre-school setting to further develop children's knowledge, curiosity, and interests. Aistear (NCCA, 2009b) gives guidelines on the benefits of including parents in the setting, and children gain a sense of identity and belonging.

## **Implementation of Aistear**

All participants stated how they endeavour to implement Aistear in the daily routine with their curriculum. However, Primary School Teachers expressed time constraints and ratios as a barrier to implementing Aistear adequately in the classroom with the Primary School Curriculum.

All participants expressed the need for training in the form of workshops, resources and in-service training and mentoring.

## Future Recommendations

The research study carried out by Walsh, McMillian & Doherty (2013) in Ballyfermot highlights how Early Years Educators and Infant Class Primary School Teachers participated in Aistear training together. Ideas were shared among both settings and a greater understanding of how each setting implements Aistear was gained. In-service mentoring and workshops were available and benefited both settings and educators. The transition from pre-school to primary school was also made easier for children, due to the newfound relationships between the preschool and primary school. Initiatives like the 'Aistear in Action' in Ballyfermot would be recommended nationally, to benefit all children's play, learning, and development.

A gap in the literature was evident within the study, and therefore a future research path within Irish literature on a large-scale analysis would be suggested to create a fuller picture of the implementation of Aistear in pre-schools and primary schools.

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