Research Programme
Friday 15th April 2016
Programme At a Glance

13.00 Registration and Posters
13.30 Welcome and Keynote (Dr Orla Doyle)
14.15 Research Seminars – Parallel Session 1
15.15 Poster Presentations
15.30 Coffee
16.00 Research Seminars – Parallel Session 2
17.00 Close (Update from the Early Childhood Research Group)
I am delighted to welcome you to our second Research and Practice Seminar, which opens the Early Childhood Ireland Annual Conference and AGM 2016.

Building on the success of last year’s Research and Practice Seminar, which introduced a new dimension to the programme of our Conference, we are proud to once again offer a platform for educators, researchers, students and our members to share their work and learning. Last year’s Seminar showed the real appetite in the Sector for home-grown Irish research on matters relating to the Sector. With this Seminar, Early Childhood Ireland wants to offer a hub for sharing current and up-to-date knowledge, learning and evidence amongst educators.

Today’s programme reflects the diversity of knowledge and skills held within the Early Childhood Education Sector and the variety of research and innovative, quality practice happening across the country. 60 different research papers will be presented on an extensive range of subjects, all of which are dominant discussions in the Early Childhood Sector in Ireland today. They range from professionalisation through leadership, communities of practice and research circles, to children with additional needs, to the political developments within the sector. We have a number of papers on physical activity and many about play in all its guises. Other themes include teaching through music and creativity, the Reggio Approach and programme evaluations in the field of young children, among many others.

Another addition this year and a real treat during the Research and Practice Seminar are eight self-organised symposiums, which show the desire to form circles of research and the desire for professional sharing and discussion.

Finally, we are delighted that Dr. Orla Doyle from the Geary Institute in UCD who will discuss the importance of research in the world of early childhood care and education.

I want to congratulate everyone presenting today. Submitting oneself and one’s work to the scrutiny of other colleagues is brave and to be commended. It is a necessary part of building the profession of early childhood education and all the more valuable for that. I look forward to hearing the breadth of knowledge and skills that is being presented today.

Teresa Heeney
CEO, Early Childhood Ireland
### Research Seminars: Parallel Session A (14.15 - 15.15)

**Strand - Professionalisation**

#### Session A1: Leading Good Practice

- **Room:** 679
- **Chair:** Debbie Mullen

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie Mullen and Julie McNamara</th>
<th>Avril Stanley</th>
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<td>How Community of Practice can be applied to the Early Years Profession in County Kildare</td>
<td>Creating, Adopting, Building: Developing Strong and Effective Leadership within the Early Years Sector.</td>
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- **Grainne Mulligan**
  - The Role of the Childcare Manager in Developing and Sustaining a Community Early Years Service

**Strand - Teaching and Learning / Well Being**

#### Session A2: Maths, Literacy and Language

- **Room:** 680
- **Chair:** Elaine Hynes

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<tr>
<th>Cathy Steenson</th>
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- **Sarah Hourigan**
  - Influence of the Home Learning Environment on Expressive Language Ability Age 3: Evidence from Growing Up in Ireland
Session A3: Music and Creativity
Room: 681
Chair: Catherine Quinn

Dr. Elizabeth Scott Hall
The Role of Music in Increasing Well-Being and Providing Strategies for Learning in Preschool

Ellen Yates & Emma Twigg
Developing Creativity in Early Childhood Studies Students

Irene Teeling
Teaching Musical Skills

Session A4: Transitions
Room: 682
Chair: Emma Reilly

Marie Gibbons, Caroline Duignan & Bridie Thornton
Support Transitions: A CYPSC Initiative

Bernie Mynes
Transitions to Primary School

Criona Blackburne
How Can Children Be Supported for and During the Transition from Preschool to Primary School – Parents’ Perceptions
### Strand - Play and Well-being

#### Session A5: Play

**Room:** 683  
**Chair:** Lorraine O'Connor

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<td>Laura McQuade</td>
<td>Play Patterns and Health: Emerging Themes</td>
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<td>Tony Cassidy</td>
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<td>Marian McLaughlin</td>
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<td>Melanie Giles</td>
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<td>Frances Clerkin</td>
<td>Crossing Boundaries? Exploring</td>
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<td>Pathways Between Indoor and Outdoor Play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carmen Kealy</td>
<td>The Importance of Play and Early Years</td>
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#### Session A6: Research Circle on Outdoor Play

(Self-organised Symposium)

**Room:** 684  
**Chair:** Carol Duffy

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<td>Carol Duffy</td>
<td>Forming a Research Circle</td>
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<td>Mag Coogan</td>
<td>The Value of Loose Parts</td>
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<td>Triona O’Connor</td>
<td>Room to Grow: A Story of Outdoor Exploration</td>
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Session A7: Play for Children with Disabilities: A European COST Action to support the FUNdamental right to play of children with disabilities. LUDI

Room: 685
Chair: Carmel Brennan

Vaska Stancheva Popkostadinova, Rianne Jansens, Angharad Beckett and Egle Celiesiene

Theoretical Aspects of Play in Relation to the Types of Impairment
Methods and Frameworks for the Development of the Play of Children with Disabilities

Technology

Contexts

Strand - Framework


Room: 686
Chair: Fiona Kelleher

Siobhan Cregan
Language for Life: Strategies for Supporting Language Development in a Community Early Education Setting

Lisa Mc Mahon
Small Changes, Big Impact: Using Aistear to Assess the Learning Environment

Sandra O’Neill
Strengthening Foundations of Learning: Continuing Professional Development in a cluster of Community Early Education Settings
Session A9: Policy Implications and Political Developments

Room: 687
Chair: Donall Geoghegan

Thomas Walsh
A Crowded Space – The Policy Development Landscape in Early Childhood Education.

Dr. Laura Costelloe
What’s it all about? A discourse analysis of 2016 general election manifestos on early years care and education.

Hazel O’Byrne
Research Seminars:  
Parallel Session B  (16.00-17.00)

**Strand** - Professionalisation

**Session B1: Professionalisation**  
Room: 679  
Chair: Marion Brennan

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dr. Laura Costelloe &amp; Dr. Arlene Egan</th>
<th>Sharon Skehill</th>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Learning Skills and Dispositions among Early Years Educators</td>
<td>Participation in the Department of Education Pilot Inspection Process: A Practitioner’s Perspective.</td>
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**Marlene McCormack**  
Partners in Placement: Professionalising the Sector

**Session B2: Peer Sharing in Early Childhood Research Circles**  
(Self-organised Symposium)  
Room: 680  
Chair: Maire Corbett

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<tr>
<th>Mary Hayes</th>
<th>Maire Corbett</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experience and Potentials of Peer Sharing for Professional Development.</td>
<td>Collaborative Research Circles: Their Role and Relevance in the Early Childhood Sector in Ireland</td>
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**Triona O’Connor**  
Practitioner Research: Pedagogy and Research.
**Strand - Teaching and Learning**

**Session B3: Promoting Confidence and Positive Behaviour**

Room: 681  
Chair: Lorraine O’Connor

- **Angela Walsh**  
  Promoting Positive Behaviour: The Role of the Preschool Practitioner.

- **Amy Dowd**  
  How Can I Support Staff to Promote Positive Social and Emotional Well-Being?

- **Lorraine O’Connor**  
  Children as Leaders.

**Session B4: After the Transition: Children’s Learning and Well-being in ‘Big School’**

Room: 682  
Chair: Elaine Hynes

- **Margaret O’Donoghue**  
  Exploring the Practice of Primary School Teachers Delivering an ECEC Curriculum through Aistear

- **Sarah Rochford**  
  The influence of peer relationships on school engagement for children with specific learning disabilities - findings from growing up in Ireland

- **Ciara Blennerhassett & Frances Murphy**  
  Enhancing Physical Activity in Early Years Using a Cross-Curricular Approach
### Session B5: New Approaches to Meaningful Learning

**Room:** 683  
**Chair:** Rita Melia

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<th>Speaker</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Minahan</td>
<td>Open Space Learning / Emotional Intelligence of the Early Years Professional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rita Melia</td>
<td>In Search of Meaning in Reggio Inspired Early Childhood Settings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiona Ferris</td>
<td>How can I help children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tolerate unspecified events through the introduction of a choice section on a visual schedule?</td>
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### Strand - Play

### Session B6: Outdoor Play

**Room:** 684  
**Chair:** Carol Duffy

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<tr>
<td>Orla Gallagher</td>
<td>Unstructured Outdoor Play Habits among Irish Children.</td>
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<td>Carol Duffy</td>
<td>Outdoor Play and Learning for Under-3s.</td>
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<td>Shaunieen McCusker</td>
<td>Case Study: Piloting the Positive PlayGrounds Quality Awards</td>
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Session B7: Early Intervention for Children with an Autism Diagnosis: An Integrative and Play Based Approach
(self-organised symposium)
Room: 685
Chair: Lillian Joyce

Catherine Dwyer, Catherine Noone-Usher, Linda O’Dwyer, Aisling Treacy and Kerie Enright-Young,
Little Moo-Moos Pre-school

Strand - Families

Session B8: Programmes and Evaluations
Room: 686
Chair: Kathleen Tuite

Claire Gleeson
Social and Emotional Development in the Early Years: Providing an Incredible Beginning for Every Child

Marion Byrne, Mairead Conroy and Grainne Kent
Engaging Families Through Play

John Sharry & Adrienne Doyle
Delivering the Parents Plus Early Years Programme in Preschool and Childcare Settingse Pre-School Environment
**Session B9: Early Educational Alignment**  
(self-organised symposium)  
Room: 687  
Chair: Carmel Brennan

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<th><strong>Carol-Ann ó’Síoráin</strong></th>
<th><strong>Carmel Brennan</strong></th>
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<td>Terminology and Policy</td>
<td>Practice and Learning Environments</td>
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**Arlene Forster**  
Transitions and Alignment Across Pre- and Primary School Sectors
Poster Presentations

Posters will be displayed in the main room (Hogan Suite II) throughout the afternoon and Saturday. Presenters will be available to give a short presentation and answer questions about their poster at 15.15, immediately after the first parallel session.

Teaching and Learning

- Connie Hannon: Positive effect of music on behaviour
- Marian Baker: Evaluation/Research: HighScope in Mayo
- Ciara Gunning: Evaluating a Preschool Teaching Programme to Teach Preschool Life Skills (Presenter not attending)
- Tasha O’Donnell: Using a Social Choice Book © to Facilitate Critical Thinking and Enhance Social Interaction in Early Years Education

Play

- Trisha MacLaughlin: The Glen Outdoor School
- Ciara Sheehy: Play in a mixed age group
- Christina Duff: Kids Active - A physical activity intervention for preschool settings

Professionalisation

- Ayooluwa Oke: An Investigation into the Components Which Determine Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: A Comparison of Stakeholders’ Views

Well-being

- Claire Gleeson: Social and Emotional Development in the Early Years: Providing an Incredible Beginning for Every Child

Families

- Melissa Bonotto: Meaningful Interactions with Pre-School Children Receiving Integrated Family Services
Research Abstracts

Research Seminars – Parallel Session A

**Strand - Professionalisation**

**Session A1: Leading Good Practice**

*How Community of Practice Can Be Applied to the Early Years Profession in County Kildare*

Debbie Mullen, Early Childhood Ireland and Julie McNamara, Kildare County Childcare Committee

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a profession. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences within a group that the members learn from each other and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991). Early Childhood Ireland and Kildare County Childcare Committee have explored how a CoP can be applied to the Early Years Sector in County Kildare with the aim of sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to advance Early Years professional practice and to facilitate interaction on an ongoing basis between Early Years Professionals. This research will look at how to apply the model of community of practice to the Early Years Sector in Kildare. This paper draws from a community of practice design guide developed by Darren Cambridge, Soren Kaplan, and Vicki Suter (2005) which uses a step by step framework to create communities of practice. Permission has been given by participants who engaged in this research. The research was carried out through group discussions which is a generic type of qualitative research in which a small group of people provide information by discussing a topic. One of the most significant findings of this programme is the relationship building among early years practitioners from local services. By professionals utilising each other’s skills and resources their effectiveness in their practice will increase therefore providing a better quality of care to the children in their setting.

*Creating, Adopting, Building: Developing Strong and Effective Leadership within the Early Years Sector*

Avril Stanley, NUI Galway

This presentation will report on findings from a qualitative study based in the West of Ireland that explored Early Years practitioners’ understanding of leadership. Effective leadership is vital in improving the quality of ECEC provision which in turn leads to better outcomes for children (Rodd 2013; McDowell Clarke 2013). Yet the intricacies and diversity of ‘Leadership’ within the ECEC context is unclear. This has led to reluctance amongst Early Years practitioners to assume leadership roles and to understand what the role entails (Rodd 2013; Jones & Pound 2008). Models of leadership, derived from leadership theories are best suited to the ECEC sector (Rodd 2013; Lindon & Lindon 2011). The aim of the research was to examine Early Years practitioners’ per-
ception of leadership within ECEC settings. An ethical code of practice, as established by NUI Galway, was followed throughout this research study. The core findings from this research study revealed three contextual elements in practitioners’ understanding of leadership: adopting a child-centred approach to children’s learning and development; building leadership capacity within the team; and creating a shared vision for the future of the ECEC setting. This presentation will set out a proposed model of leadership which resonates with the contemporary Irish ECEC sector. The proposed model has the potential to be developed as part of leadership programmes for Early Years practitioners and to be adapted as a training tool to build leadership capacity within the team and the broader ECEC sector.

The Role of the Childcare Manager in Developing and Sustaining a Community Early Years Service

Grainne Mulligan, NUI Galway

Management in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector is not without its challenges. Research finds that the overall quality in ECEC settings is directly linked to the presence of trained and skilled leaders or managers, capable of reflection and effective communication (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008, in Ang, 2011). This presentation will share the findings of a recent study that focused on the particular challenges facing childcare managers in community based ECEC settings in Ireland. A qualitative research design was developed under the ethical research guidelines of NUI Galway, ensuring confidentiality for all participants and protecting their rights at all times. The aim of the study was to gain an insight into the role of the childcare manager in various community based childcare settings, and to establish the manager’s views on their roles and responsibilities within these settings. The main findings to be shared in this presentation include: the diversity between the management structures in smaller and larger services, managers spending less time working directly with children, though they are often the highest qualified staff, and the dependency on Community Employment (CE) staff in some services and the implications of this on quality of provision. The research highlighted the increasing amount of time childcare managers are spending on non-childcare duties and the concerning vulnerability of some smaller services in terms of long term sustainability.

Strand - Teaching and Learning / Well Being

Session A2: Maths, Literacy and Language

How Can I Support Children’s Mathematical Learning?

Cathy Steenson, Little Treasures Community Creche

This project explores ‘How can I support children’s mathematical learning?’ by bringing the mathematical learning which takes place in the setting out into the local community while involving parents. This study draws on two theoretical perspectives. Firstly, numeracy is understood as a social phenomenon which only makes sense in
a social context (Hersh, 1997). Secondly, the best outcomes for children are achieved when parents are actively involved in their children’s learning (DES, 2011). This action research draws on McNiff’s model (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) as it allows me to use a new approach in my practice and the mosaic approach to listening to children (Clark & Moss, 2011). I sought permission from all participants and made sure they had a clear understanding of what was involved. Participants could withdraw at any stage and confidentiality was adhered to at all times. The parents of the children in my setting did not have a positive view towards mathematics and did not understand its position within the early years. Involving parents in a fun community-based activity developed positive dispositions towards mathematics and linked the learning which takes place in the home, setting and community. There needs to be the correct balance of adult and child-led activities, mathematical learning should not be left to chance. Hearing mathematical language helps children to think mathematically. The educator’s attitude to mathematics has an impact on children’s learning.

**The Big Book Project: Learning about Early Literacy Skills**

Dr. Tara Concannon-Gibney & Dr. Evelyn O’Connor, Marion Institute of Education & Adelphi University, New York etter Start (formerly Dublin Institute of Technology)

Shared reading of a large format text (big book) can develop key literacy skills including concepts of print, phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and listening comprehension, within a meaningful context. It is a methodology that is commonly used as part of a ‘balanced literacy’ framework (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Pressley, 2002). As part of our emergent literacy class at Adelphi University in New York, students were required to work in pairs to create their own big books that could effectively teach a range of early literacy skills to young children. The students presented their work to the class and wrote a report detailing the possible ways that their book could be used in an early years setting. An examination of the reports revealed that the students really enjoyed the experience, stating that it allowed them to develop their creative and collaborative skills. They also felt that it enhanced their critical appreciation for children’s literature and developed their understanding of the complexity of literacy development. They also agreed that it was an engaging and interesting method for teaching emergent literacy skills to young children. This paper will discuss how the students were introduced to the ‘big book’ project, their experience of creating the big book and an examination of their reflections on the course assignment. The presentation might aid any educator seeking to develop a similar literacy project with early years’ students.

**Influence of the Home Learning Environment on Expressive Language Ability Age 3: Evidence from Growing Up in Ireland**

Sarah Hourigan, Trinity College Dublin. Tutor and practitioner, St Nicholas Montessori College

Language ability is protective in child development and plays a significant role in
determining a range of academic (Anders et al., 2012), socio-emotional (Harrison & McLeod, 2010) and behavioural outcomes (Schmiedeler et al., 2014). The home learning environment (HLE) is recognised as being deeply influential for language development (Son & Morrison, 2010). This nationally representative sample of Irish infants from the Growing Up in Ireland study explores whether the specific practices and resources that constitute the HLE predict language ability at three years. Associations between the HLE, infant and maternal characteristics and practices and expressive language ability outcomes at 3 years, as measured by the BAS II early years naming vocabulary tests, were explored using hierarchical multiple regression models. Infant gender, gestational age and maternal age were significantly associated with increased language ability scores at 3 years. The HLE variable of talking to the infant while busy predicted positive language outcomes. Infants experiencing a higher frequency of home learning practices weekly with access to a greater number of books in the home were significantly more likely to present with increased language abilities at 3 years. The overall HLE was found to explain 9.2% of the variance in expressive language ability in 3 year olds. This study adds significantly to the infant language development literature as it has been able to suggest a model that contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms between the HLE and infants’ language ability in Ireland. The findings highlight the importance of the HLE for early language development.

Session A3: Music and Creativity

*The Role of Music in Increasing Well-Being and Providing Strategies for Learning in Preschool*

Dr. Elizabeth Scott Hall, University of Winchester

A small-scale research project was undertaken at a UK inner city preschool, in an area of social and financial deprivation and a high proportion of people whose home language is other than English. Staff and parents accompanied children to weekly music sessions at the start of the school day for three terms. The theoretical framework for this study is situated within a transformative paradigm, set within an emancipatory framework of inclusion and empowerment. Using a grounded theory methodology, data from semi-structured interviews, reports and short questionnaires was analysed to explore the impact of the project. While the primary aim of the project was to encourage parents to become more involved with both the preschool and their children's education through fun-based musical activity, music was found to have addressed a wider range of issues across the preschool day. The fun-based music activities were found to be mutually rewarding for parents and children, and to have increased the sense of well-being, self-confidence and inclusion for all participants. Children demonstrated increased listening skills, increased confidence and improved language skills. Parents, who were valued as their children's first and most important educators, forged closer links with the preschool and began to gain in understanding of how children learn. Staff learned musical strategies for engaging the children and gained sufficient knowledge and confidence to use music as a tool for learning across the preschool day. These outcomes indicate a greater role for the use of fun-based musical strategies in the preschool classroom.
Developing Creativity in Early Childhood Studies Students
Ellen Yates & Emma Twigg, University of Derby

The study aimed to identify Early Childhood Studies students’ perceptions of, and confidence in, their own creativity in an East Midlands university in England; and the influence of practical, creative activities on their practice with children. The study was qualitative in nature, framed within the interpretative paradigm and based on a first year Play and Creativity module which includes practical creative activity and the development of skills to enhance confidence. The key role of the practitioner in supporting children’s creativity has been highlighted (Craft 2002, Wright 2010) alongside the need for skills and confidence in practitioners (Aubrey and Dahl 2013, Chien and Hui 2010). A study group of 25 was opportunity sampled from the full cohort of 90. Students completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of the module, alongside self-reflection sheets after five practical activities. Results were coded and analysed thematically. The study complied with the institution’s ethical procedures and participation was voluntary. Students were free to withdraw at any point. The results indicated improvement in students’ confidence in their own creativity and their ability to apply the skills developed within their practice. Students developed a wider understanding of the nature of creativity, including the importance of the environment, resources and opportunities for children to explore. The module supported students’ professional skills, including, team working, listening skills, collaboration and the importance of reflection on practice.

Teaching Musical Skills
Irene Teeling, Natural Start, Donabate

The aim of my research was to see how I could improve the musical skills of the children in my setting. At first I examined the process of musical acquisition. A child’s sensitivity to nuances in sound are significant to ensure its survival (Custodero 2005). This can be seen in the rhythm of their mother’s heartbeat and through motherese. Musical acquisition skills are also considered to be linked to language acquisition and pattern recognition (Dissanayake 2012). I explored the musical concepts and skills to be fostered in the early years. I focused on improving the children’s sense of pulse and tempo. Teaching strategies employed to implement the plan included facilitating, modelling, demonstrating and singing. Action Research was the chosen method of research for this study (Koshy, 2010). I conducted one cycle of research which spanned four weeks. My sample consisted of 17 children between the ages of three years, five months and four years, ten months. Modelling proved to be the most effective teaching strategy. Children were highly engaged when singing was improvised and made meaningful through personal connections and playfulness. Incorporating music into the curriculum does not require expert musical skills or theoretical knowledge. Implications for practice include the daily facilitation and modelling of spontaneous singing on meaningful topics to the children. Encouraging musical skills of staff members will also go towards fostering appreciation for musical activity in a setting. Music education in the early years has many short and long
term potential benefits to society including increased well-being, self-expression, communication and self-esteem (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald. 2012). Implications for policy include supporting the building of a musical community by encouraging the involvement of parents and local musicians in early years’ settings.

**Strand - Transitions**

Session A4: Current learning from the sector

*Support Transitions: A CYPSC Initiative*

**Marie Gibbons, Caroline Duignan & Bridie Thornton**, TUSLA and Galway and Roscommon Children and Young People’s Services Committees

Supporting transitions from preschool to primary school was identified as a priority for the Galway and Roscommon CYPSCs in 2015. A subgroup was set up to explore existing practice in the area and to develop an appropriate method for EYPs and schools to share information on transitioning children. The result is a collaboration between the CYPSCs, EYPs, preschool children, schools and Child Care Committees in Galway. Prof Noirin Hayes provided advice to the project in its early days. A booklet entitled ‘this is me’ was developed during the consultation process and was piloted in 5 preschools. An evaluation was conducted involving 18 schools, EYPs, parents and children. The methodology for the evaluation involved questionnaires to parents and teachers and face to face interviews with early years’ practitioners and children. The final document is aligned to the themes of Aistear and is written from the perspective of the child and the expression uses everyday language that children can relate to. It is strengths based and does not focus on educational attainments, rather it presents a holistic image of the individual child at a point in time and across several key domains. The booklet strengthens partnership with parents as practitioners share the information, and parents can also add in their own thoughts and observations. The feedback from the evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive and the booklet will be formally launched in 2016, with information being shared at CCCC network meetings. The CYPSC is fully funding the printing of the booklets.

*How Can Children Be Supported for and During the Transition from Preschool to Primary School – Parents’ Perspective*

**Criona Blackburne**, University of Sheffield & First Steps Montesorri

The aim of this small-scale research project was to gain an insight into parents’ perspective on issues that affect their children during the period of transition from preschool to primary school in the Irish context. This research focused on enlightening understanding of why transitions may be problematic, what causes difficulties and how schools can change to alleviate the challenges surrounding transition. The research method employed was qualitative in the interpretative paradigm. This study used questionnaires to gauge parent’s views on what strategies they consider
relevant for supporting children’s transition. The ethics and research in this study was underpinned by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in particular Article 3.1, which states ‘the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’. The research was undertaken in good faith with the aim of improving transitions for children. Participants was voluntary, anonymous and completing and returning the form was considered to be consent. In response to the research question, ’How can teachers support children’s transition from preschool to primary?’ Continuity, communication and collaboration between all stakeholders emerged as essential in improving children’s transitions. Aistear and Siolta provide frameworks that can create continuity across settings and provide an educational approach that is age appropriate, fosters interactions and is respectful to each child. The success of implementing these frameworks to support children’s transitions is dependent on developing mutual respect between the sectors and national policies to support collaboration and communication between settings during transitions.

Transitions from Pre- to Primary School: Educator Collaboration

Bernie Mynes, Scoil an Linbh Iosa, Co. Kildare

My research investigated how teachers and pre-school educators in the area could collaborate to create a positive transition for a child. Through communication and collaboration, the participants and I created a unique transition programme. Transitioning from preschool to school is recognised as an important milestone in a young child’s life. Most children experience the transition positively, but some children are anxious about starting school as they do not know what to expect. Collaboration and communication between the settings are highly recommended by the literature in order for children to experience a positive transition. The data derives from qualitative research methods. I conducted semi-structured interviews to obtain infant teachers and preschool educators views on transitioning. I then presented the findings from the interviews to a focus group which consisted of the interviewees. Strict ethical considerations were taken. Participants signed a consent form before taking part in the research. Anonymity for all participants and settings was used throughout the research. Findings suggest collaboration, sharing information and multiple visits are important in creating a positive transition for children. Children who visited the classroom, and met their teacher multiple times prior to September helped them with the transition. Children became familiar to their new classroom and teacher through informal meetings. The transition process is not as daunting as before. Through this multifaceted programme, support is provided to young children in their transition to school. By using the information provided and meeting the children themselves, the schools can adjust to the needs of every child.
Strand - Play

Session A5: Play

Are Children Getting the Opportunities to Realise Their Right to Play?

Laura McQuade, Playboard, Northern Ireland

In recent years the importance of the child’s right to play has become increasingly recognised as being integral to the acquisition and development of skills as well as promoting enhanced health, well-being and resourcefulness (O’Loughlin, 2014). However, being able to play is dependent on children having time, space and licence to play, which in turn is dependent on a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors (Lester and Russell, 2010). Given the lack of data on how children experience their right to play, PlayBoard NI working in partnership with the Centre for Children’s Rights, QUB, sought to design a play measure and ascertain the extent to which children felt they had opportunities to play in school and outside of school. Questions for the measure were developed and designed by two children’s research advisory groups, consisting of children and young people aged 10-14 years. Secondly, 2,420 P7 school children in Northern Ireland took part in the online questionnaire which explored their perceptions of their play opportunities, through the Kids Life and Times Survey. The survey suggests that the majority of children who responded to KLT felt positive that they have opportunities to play in their schools and communities or homes. However, in terms of play opportunities within school, almost a quarter of children felt they did not have a good choice of things to play with in their school playground, whilst over a fifth felt they did not have enough time to play during the school day. Results from this study offer an insight into children's understanding of ‘play’ at school and communities. Given that Article 31 rights are so critical, this measure provides a useful mechanism to evaluate and monitor children's rights in the future.

Play patterns and health: Emerging themes

Laura McQuade, Lesley Anne Henry, Dr Tony Cassidy, Dr Marian McLaughlin & Professor Melanie Giles, School of Psychology, Ulster University

The health and social behaviour of adolescents is a major concern in the UK. Obesity levels in childhood are on the increase with 25% of children aged 2-15 in Northern Ireland being either overweight (18%) or obese (7%) in 2013/14 (DHSSPSNI, 2014). Although children are more active than adults, many children have turned to more passive play-time behaviours afforded by television, video games and computers. Their leisure time activities are becoming more sedentary due to inactive lifestyles and habits at home (Andersen et al, 1998). Play is essential for child development yet the impact of the generational change in children’s play opportunities and patterns has not been investigated. The current study provides an initial exploration of adult’s perceptions of their play as a child and the patterns of play that emerge to inform the development of a play patterns measure.
Adult participants were invited to take part in qualitative focus group discussions around their recollections of play and exploring patterns of their play as a child. The transcripts of eight focus groups involving 35 participants (12 males and 27 females) were analysed using thematic analysis. Participant selection was based upon convenience and opportunity sampling. Seven main themes were identified: creative/imaginative play, outside/free play, active/passive play, social/lone play, technology and play, play opportunities/barriers to play and avoidance of exercise. Play was also linked to exercise, obesity, and health. Time, permission, accessible spaces and the provision of risk and challenge were identified as important factors in providing play opportunities. Results from this study provide a classification of play types to inform the development of a measure. They also provide some evidence for a link with developing health in children and young adults.

**Crossing Boundaries? Exploring Pathways Between Indoor and Outdoor Play in a Pre-School Community of Practice**

Frances Clerkin, Cork Institute of Technology

Societal concerns for children’s physical and mental well-being within the relationships, spaces and places of their early years experiences have raised the status of outdoor play alongside concerns about risk, safety and shrinking opportunities for children to enjoy unstructured or free play (Kernan 2010, Sandseter 2011, Waters 2016). This paper addresses concerns about balancing children’s right to protection with children’s right to play in what may be an increasingly risk averse society. The socio-cultural perspective of this paper draws on my doctoral thesis where pre-school is conceptualised within a community of practice model (Wenger 2008) which values and explores the evolving participatory identities of all concerned (Rogoff 2008). The participant observer research role adopted sought implications for the practitioner role in balancing opportunities for positive risk (emotional and physical) and creating pathways between indoor and outdoor play opportunities. Challenges to participatory affordances indoors and outdoors reflected views of the child as vulnerable and primarily in need of protection juxtaposed against understandings of children as competent and confident. Conflicting adult perceptions on the use, value, availability of technology in children’s play also evidenced. Children’s perspectives became visible through collaborative documentation and discussion of their indoor and outdoor play experiences. Ethical considerations such as consent/assent for all participants were observed and adhered to throughout. The findings indicate that practitioners require training and professional development programmes that actively seek to cross boundaries between indoor and outdoor play opportunities. A key inference is that following children’s dispositional interests helps create participatory pathways within and across the communities of practice that children inhabit.

**The Importance of Play and Early Years**

Carmen Kealy, NUI Galway / UNESCO CFRC

Ireland recorded the highest level of 0-14 year olds among the EU 25 Member
States in 2004 (Dunne et al., 2007), which may account for the increasing interest in children’s well-being. Current debates and research suggest that pressure to perform at a young age has damaging long-term effects. Parents and teachers argue young children to be too ‘fragile’ for subject based learning and emphasise the importance of building social skills, language and confidence, best achieved through structured play (Cambridge Primary Review 2013). While 90% of countries in the world prioritise social and emotional learning with a start of formal schooling at age six or seven (Whitebread, 2012), children in Ireland are exposed to priorities such as literacy and numeracy from a very young age. A Wellbeing research programme at the London School of Economics proposed that a child’s emotional health is far more important to their satisfaction levels in adulthood than other factors, which include academic success when young. Drawing on research in neuroscience, but also scholarly work on child development and learning, this literature review argues against early school start due to the importance of play in early childhood. An examination of reading ability in 32 countries found no difference in capacity by the age of nine. Further, evaluations on programmes such as the ‘Incredible Years’ found a focus on play particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children to regulate behavioural issues.

Session A6: Outdoor Play (self-organised Symposium)

Research Circle on Outdoor Play

Carol Duffy, Early Childhood Ireland, Triona O’Connor, Bessborough Community Crèche, Cork, and Mag Coogan, ABC Club, Meath

“When you make what you value and notice more visible to yourself and others, it becomes a resource for change” (Curtis & Carter, 2013). The resources afforded to us from this Early Childhood led Research Circle are offered as a contribution towards change. This research circle comprised of practise educators are undertaking action research on aspects of outdoor play and learning which will inform their own provision and that of the wider ECCE sector. Utilising an action research methodology (Mc Niff 2013) this symposium presents both completed and ongoing research that addresses the following: Adult Interactions Outdoors (Brain, Mukherji, 2005), Affordances of Outdoor and Community Environments (White 2014, Rogoff 2003), The Value of Loose Parts in Children’s Play (Nicholson, 1972) Developing Funds of Knowledge Hedge 2011, Gonzales 2005 With research from and in practice each of the researchers add to the narrative of the benefits, challenges and forward momentum of outdoor provision within our early years sector in Ireland. This symposium highlights rich and varied paradigms of provision. The findings have implications for the outdoor environments provided for young children the experiences offered and the role of the adults outdoors. This symposium presents the research using scenarios and stories from the observed data. The ethical implications (Gorman 2007) and considerations of undertaking this research have been discussed and agreed with the children and families involved.
Session A7: Play for Children with Disabilities

*Play for Children with Disabilities: A European COST Action to support the FUNdamental right to play of children with disabilities. LUDI*

Vaska Stancheva Popkostadinova, Rianne Jansens, Angharad Beckett and Egle Celiesiene

The Symposium will present the interdisciplinary Action “LUDI – Play for children with disabilities” (2014-2018) funded by the EU COST program, which intends to create a new independent field of research and practice (Besio Carnesecchi 2014) and to establish an exhaustive framework for further studies. The network gathers almost 100 members from 31 countries. Play is fundamental (Ryall et al 2013; Eberle 2014; Henricks 2014) and it is a right (Clements Fiorentino 2004) for children with disabilities as for any child: in fact they may be deprived from playing due to their impairments or they cannot participate to play activities due to environmental, cultural and social barriers (Besio, 2008): e.g., accessibility of environments and objects, lack of inclusive social contexts and of knowledgeable educators and professionals. Often their daily life is oriented towards functional rehabilitation, while time for leisure, fun and childish experiences is disregarded. LUDI claims for play as a universal right, thus shifting the prevailing attention from disease and recovery towards health, well-being and social participation. The status of the art of the Action activities will be presented through the results of its four Working Groups: a) theoretical constructs on play and play types in relation to the kinds of impairment; b) a database of experiences of use of technologies and toys in case of disabilities; c) contextual barriers to the play of children with disabilities; d) development of a survey to collect and analyze the users’ needs in the field of play.

**Strand - Frameworks**

Session A8: Strengthening Foundations of Learning

*How Aistear support high quality interactions and the development of the learning environment*

Siobhán Cregan, Lisa McMahon & Sandra O’Neill, Early Years Programme Team, Preparing for Life

Strengthening Foundations of Learning (SFL) is a continuing professional development programme for Early Years practitioners in eight community, centre-based settings. It aims to improve outcomes for children by using a combination of practitioner training and mentoring, to promote and enhance quality early educational practice. The programme focuses on the following areas: Curriculum, Oral Language, Leadership, and Transition to primary school. Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework provides the basis for these interventions, allowing participants to connect children’s learning to the principles, themes and guidelines of Aistear and embed effective pedagogical strategies into everyday activities and planning. SFL’s team comprises an Early Years Quality Mentor, a Speech and Language Therapist and Programme Manager, who work with practitioners and managers through a combination of
training sessions and on-site mentoring, using coaching strategies and video feedback. Participants also attend cluster groups, which provide valuable opportunities for peer interaction, for learning to be shared among different settings. The project is now in its third year and interim findings have been positive. Qualitative feedback suggests that the programme is having a positive and lasting impact on settings in the areas of play (type, variety and quality), the learning environment, planning and assessment (making children's learning visible), communication and interactions. Positive effects are also evident, on Early Childhood Educators’ ability and confidence to discuss their curriculum, goals and ethos.

**Strand - Policy**

Session A9: Policy Implications and Political Developments

*A Crowded Space – The Policy Development Landscape in Early Childhood Education*

Dr. Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University

Following decades of State apathy and a policy vacuum in the sphere of early childhood education (ECE), the last two decades have witnessed a myriad of policy and practice developments in the field of ECE (Hayes et al., 2013). These developments emanate from a range of government departments and agencies, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills and the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). The competing interests and the various motivations for supporting ECE has resulted in a crowded policy development space for the sector, most particularly in very recent years. This presentation will examine recent key policy developments and the departments/ agencies responsible for their design and implementation. The aim of the research is to delineate and critically analyse the contributions of key departments and agencies to ECE policy and its impact, both positive and negative, on the sector. The research was undertaken using critical document analysis, by interrogating recent policy publications and pronouncements and examining the websites of key departments and agencies. As Bowen (2009:27) states document analysis “requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.” These developments are mapped visually by department/ agency and the presentation culminates with a visual overview of the current policy landscape. The analysis has revealed a plethora of recent policy developments that, collectively, are overwhelming for the sector to understand or implement and a lack of coherence or cohesion in the policy development arena. One of the key conclusions is that a clearer vision is needed for the sector to ensure that policies are coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for their enactment.

*What’s It All About? A Discourse Analysis of 2016 General Election Manifestos on Early Years Care and Education*

Dr. Laura Costelloe National College of Ireland
Mindful of the significance of election manifestos as important indicators of party policy, this paper seeks to analyse patterns of language present in the manifestos of the main political players in General Election 2016. At the time of writing, the make-up of the new Government was still unclear, however election manifestos offer an interesting insight into how early years care and education is viewed by our political leaders and the issues that they deem as priority for Ireland’s future. Proceeding from the theoretical departure point that language is best interpreted in the context of the political, economic and social environments in which it is used (Fairclough, 1995), this study identifies typical patterns of discourse present across a range of election manifestos available for voters. It identifies the linguistic and discursive means by which early years practitioners are described and critically considers the prioritisation – or not – of the child in the commitments put forward by the various political parties. It considers the emphasis on early years education vis-à-vis early years care and recognises the dominance of lexical patterns focusing on affordability and fiscal concerns. Concerns regarding quality are de-emphasised and it emerges that economics is most often prioritised over excellence. Therefore, this study seeks to highlight the role that political discourse plays in societal understandings of the early years sector in Ireland and consequently to contribute to ongoing debates in relation to the future of the early years landscape in Ireland.


Hazel O’Byrne, youngballymun

youngballymun is a Collective Impact Implementation Initiative with 30 active partners in the health, education, early years and community sectors. The strategy integrates effective, evidence-based ways of working into mainstream services for families and children in infancy, toddlerhood and throughout childhood. The strategy works to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for children by building capacity in parents and practitioners and reconfiguring how children’s services are delivered. youngballymun is unique in the scale and depth of implementation across the community. Throughout 2015, youngballymun compiled data and evidence of its programme of work in an innovative and exciting evaluation approach. Extensive research data of five years of implementation in the local community was gathered and documented along with personal testimonials from families, health workers, preschool staff, teachers and others to provide a comprehensive account of the strategy. A Performance Story Report (youngballymun, 2015), using the contribution analysis methodology, was developed and submitted to a jury of independent experts. The jury, with expertise in implementation, evaluation and community work, interrogated the evidence in a public forum over the course of two days, questioning of witnesses, including practitioners and managers involved in the initiative and researchers, to discuss their perspectives on the experience of strategy and the wider context. This paper will describe the youngballymun practice model and detail the pioneering research and evaluation approach as well as presenting findings in relation to changes for practitioners and agencies, changes for organisations, and changes for children, their families and their implication for policy and practice more widely.
Research Seminars – Parallel Session B

Strand - Professionalisation

Session B1: Professionalisation

*Developing Learning Skills and Dispositions among Early Years Educators*

Dr. Laura Costelloe & Dr. Arlene Egan, National College of Ireland

Apps (1981) has highlighted three primary challenges associated with adults returning to learning: lack of confidence, negative experiences of school and other commitments. These difficulties are often experienced by early years educators embarking on a programme of study. For many educators commencing degrees at Higher Education there is often a gulf between the learning skills and dispositions required for third level learning and existing skill levels. At the National College of Ireland, we have developed a suite of personal and professional development modules, designed to serve as a pedagogical bridge aiding students’ transition from second-level/further education or from the world of work to third-level. The focus of this study is on the design, delivery and evaluation of a module entitled Managing Your Learning, which was designed to develop the abilities of students to engage with and participate in learning for higher education. The sample comprised 20 students from 1st and 2nd year BA in Early Childhood Education. Throughout the module qualitative feedback was gathered by the students on the key areas of design which included; peer learning, goal setting, the development of a growth mindset and embracing opportunities for reflective practice in order to maximize learning potential. The students reported a high level of satisfaction with the module and the long term learning benefits were reported. Narrative analysis highlighted students’ positive changes in mindset and understanding of learning in different areas. This module uses a learner-centred approach which acknowledges the variety of learning preferences and learning needs in the classroom. Based on student feedback and data recommendations on key aspects of module design are made. This paper will highlight some of strategies embedded within the module in order maximise transferable learning skills for early years educators and question how best we can support transitions to higher education learning.

*Participation in the Department of Education Pilot Inspection Process: A Practitioner’s Perspective*

Sharon Skehill, Newtown Kids’ Club Ltd.

To provide an overview of our settings’ experience of the Department of Education inspection process and discuss the process in light of perceptions of professional identity within the early years’ sector.

A phenomenological study on the training experiences of early years practitioners was undertaken in 2014, and this acts as the basis for discussion on progression and developments in the sector. The Inspection will be discussed from personal experience of the process and discussed in light of findings from the original research.
project. Our experience is a personal one, unique to our setting and so it needs to be acknowledged that the same experience may have different responses and reactions from other practitioners within the sector. The findings from the phenomenological study highlighted the issue of professional identity within the sector, and how practitioners found their role to be undermined and misunderstood in society, and suggestions were made regarding how this might be rectified. From personal experience participating in the Department of Education pilot programme, it was felt that this process might address some of the issues highlighted in the original research through the approach, knowledge and experience of the inspectorate team. Sharing experience of the new inspectorate process will provide information to practitioners and also address issues as highlighted in the original research regarding professional identity and the our role in a developing and changing sector.

*Partners in Placement – Professionalising the Sector*

**Marlene McCormack, DCU, Saint Patrick’s College**

This scoping study explores the perspectives of early childhood settings on supporting 3rd level students during placement practice. It examines the setting’s expectations of both the 3rd level institutions and the students with whom they engage as part of the placement process. The rationale for this study emerges from the paucity of research on student placement in the Irish context and is underpinned by Balduzzi and Lazzari (2015, p.125) who contend that the ‘role played by ECEC institutions in workplace-based professional preparations programmes remains largely under-researched’. The study is underpinned by concepts of educational partnership (Cardini, 2006), collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and is viewed through a lens which understands that all learning happens in a social and cultural context (Rogoff, 1990). The study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on semi structured interviews, using a schedule of three questions with a purposive sample of 37 managers of early childhood settings. Early Childhood Settings have agreed to participate in this piece of research and they have been advised through a Plain Language Statement, that they may withdraw their interview data at any stage. All interview commentary has been anonymised and shared back with the settings involved.

Consistent themes emerged from the interviews. Preparation, structure and communication were highlighted as central to the partnerships between 3rd level institutions and early childhood settings. Student’s engagement, initiative and commitment were valued as attitudes, attributes and behaviours that staff expected of students on placement. Implications abound for the preparation of students as well as the allocation of resources to placement.
Session B2: Peer Sharing

*Peer Sharing in Early Childhood Research Circles (Self-organised Symposium)*

Maire Corbett, Early Childhood Ireland, Mary Hayes, Lullabies and Laughter, Lisvernane, Co Tipperary and Triona O’Connor, Bessborough Community Crèche

Practitioner research is key to the emergent curriculum proposed by Aistear (NCCA 2009). Like action research, it ‘enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work, and to create their own theories of practice.’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2005). In working with an emergent curriculum, the educator is constantly researching children’s interests and ways of deepening and extending understanding. The approach shifts the focus from an understanding of education and quality as universal to embracing with diversity and multiple perspectives at local level (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999). A very successful feature of recent Early Childhood Ireland work with early childhood educators on Aistear and Siolta is peer sharing of practice. Early Childhood Ireland has now formed a Research Circle in Cork to identify and support practitioner research interests and develop exemplars to enhance practice and generate discussion and peer sharing. The process is intended to support practitioners at local level to lead change and engage with challenge in early years education. Participants in the research circle operate ethically, seeking permission for including examples, photos etc. from parents, children and staff. Within the research circle, respect for other participants is key so that participants feel free to express opinions, share concerns and engage in argumentation.

**Strand - Teaching and Learning**

Session B3: Promoting Positive Behaviour

*Promoting Positive Behaviour: The Role of the Preschool Practitioner*

Angela Walsh, NUI Galway

The aim of the ensuing research is to explore theory and practice variables when implementing pedagogical practices that promote positive behaviour of preschool children. Irish preschool regulations require pedagogical practices underpinned by international best practice acquired from research and literature. Comparing such theory with findings of qualitative interviews exploring practitioners’ perceptions of their practices was conducted. Twelve Offaly based preschool practitioners took part. This identified aspects of practice that did not match up with pedagogical theory, such as working to agreed policy, and reflective practice. These anomalies impact on practitioner’s ability to promote, and the child’s ability to develop, positive behaviour patterns. A move away from a focus on children’s behaviour towards a focus on learning dispositions is evident within the research. This extraction of behaviour from exclusively the onus of the child, to how learning dispositions are supported engenders a greater onus on the practitioner to implement effective pedagogical strategies. This requires a nurturing pedagogical style that can capture the nuance
of the dynamic nature of preschool practice. The primacy of the ordinary, everyday, reciprocal interactions within a ‘whole child perspective’, where the practitioner translates the ‘nouns’ of positive learning dispositions into the ‘verbs’ of a nurturing pedagogy can guide the acquisition of positive behaviour. This research recommends investment at State level to facilitate practitioners’ continuous professional development, future research, and national policy development to align theory and practice variables embedded in the role of the preschool practitioner in promoting positive behaviour of preschool children.

**How Can I Support Staff to Promote Positive Social and Emotional Well-Being?**

*Amy Dowd, Cuan Bhride Childcare Centre*

Aistear defines children’s well-being as ‘being confident, happy, and healthy’ (NCCA, 2009, 16.) This action research study focuses on how I can improve my support of the Early Years Educators (EYEs) working with a group of toddlers. The definition and importance of social and emotional well-being will be examined. Research conducted by Bowlby and Ainsworth regarding the attachment theory is discussed. Galinsky’s work on executive functions for young children is reviewed to reveal the importance of the learning of vital processes such as self-regulation and how it can affect self-esteem. Using O’Leary’s Cycles of Action Research (O’Leary, 2004), data is gathered through an online survey, a focus group of EYEs working in the toddler room, and a reflective diary to reflect on my own actions. Ethical considerations are taken to preserve the dignity of the children, their families, and the EYEs involved in the study. I propose to discuss the two cycles that were undertaken and the conclusions that were reached from this action research study. They are as follows:

- Positive behaviour strategy training developed and implemented
- Resources purchased based on children’s interests
- Difficultly for staff to plan consistently

I propose to discuss the findings of the dissertation, including the important of personal self-reflection, how communication with EYE is vital to practice, and organizing my work schedule so that I may deal with issues as they arise. I will also discuss practice one year on, including the use of the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide and assistance of Better Start.

**Children as Leaders**

*Lorraine O’Connor, Early Childhood Ireland*

The aim of this paper is to examine current thinking and practice towards children as leaders. It will explore attitudes and beliefs of early years practitioners and managers towards children as being ‘leaderful’. Each day, children are on a journey in exploring their environment and leading their own learning. Waniganayake and Semann (2011) believe leadership in childhood is a ‘transition’ whereby children are ‘being and becoming leaders’. New Zealand adopts a pedagogical model of leadership
suggesting it as a ‘framework for responsibility’ (Grazier and Meade; 2008): the child will ‘be’ responsible and in turn ‘take’ responsibility or in essence be leaderful. Therefore, implying, if we view children as leaders, they will become ‘leaderful’. Through a questionnaire, this research explored attitudes and beliefs towards children within ECEC regarding leadership with practitioners and managers (N=10). Ethically, this research respected the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant. This research is based on attitudes and beliefs, and it does not suggest poor practice where leadership is not evident. The findings revealed multiple understandings of what ‘leaderfulness’ is in ECEC. It emerged ‘leaderful’ qualities in children may be viewed with a positive and negative lens. In addition, attitudes towards leadership in children differed between practitioners and managers. The findings suggest a correlation between the attitudes of the ECEC setting, and the opportunities which are afforded to children in becoming leaderful. The implications of this research for practice are if children are afforded with various levels of opportunities, will each child become a leader. A key recommendation from the findings is to provide training to create awareness of ‘leaderfulness’ and children within the early years sector.

Session B4: After the Transition: Children’s Learning and Well-being in ‘Big School’

*Exploring the Practice of Primary School Teachers Delivering an ECEC Curriculum through Aistear*

**Margaret O’Donoghue, The Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown**

Crucial to providing continuity for children in their learning experiences, as they transition from preschool to primary school is an exploration of how primary school teachers understand the framework which supports the curriculum. The forthcoming revised primary school curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants will seek to ensure ‘greater consistency’ with Aistear (NCCA 2012, p14). This pilot study looked at how primary school teachers understand Aistear (2009), and is guided by two research questions. The first key research question is: How do primary school teachers understand Aistear (NCCA 2009), Ireland’s early childhood curriculum framework? A related sub-question is: How does their understanding of Aistear (NCCA 2009) influence their teaching practice? From an ontological point of view, the research adopts a constructivist approach. A focus group discussion was chosen as the method of data collection. Analysis of the data highlights that despite the espoused views about the importance of play in the early years, the language used by the participants suggested a mainly didactic approach, and left little choice to the children in directing their own learning through play. The findings also highlight that there is a need to understand the realities teachers face in delivering an early childhood curriculum through Aistear (NCCA 2009). This pilot study was undertaken as part of a proposed main study and in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a D.Ed. degree. Ethical principles and procedures were followed including the participants being adequately informed about the purposes of the research, its outcomes and dissemination and confidentiality.
The influence of peer relationships on school engagement for children with specific learning disabilities - findings from growing up in Ireland

Sarah Rochford, Trinity College Dublin and Centre for Effective Services

This study explored the relationship between peer relationships during primary school (age 9 years) and school engagement after the transition to post-primary school (age 13 years) among children with Specific Learning Impairments (SpLD) in comparison to their non-SpLD peers. The inclusion criteria for SpLD in this study was a diagnosis of dyslexia, dyscalculia or dysgraphia. This was a secondary analysis of data from the first and second waves of the child cohort of the Growing up in Ireland study. Participants included children with a SpLD and a matched random sample of children without a SpLD and their primary caregivers. Results indicated significant differences between the two groups, with SpLD children reporting significantly poorer peer relationships at age nine, including fewer close friends, lower levels of popularity among peers and more peer problems. At age 13, SpLD children also had poorer school engagement, including higher absenteeism, lower levels of school liking, more disengaged, troublesome school behaviours, less positive reinforcement from teachers and a poorer academic self-concept. Regression analyses indicated that having a SpLD, being male and peer relationship indicators at age 9 were among the most consistent significant predictors of school engagement outcomes at age 13. Further analysis revealed that popularity and level of peer problems were the most important early peer relationship indicators mediating the relationship between SpLD status and post-primary school engagement. Emergent policy and practice implications will also be discussed.

Enhancing Physical Activity in Early Years Using a Cross-Curricular Approach

Ciara Blennerhassett & Frances Murphy, Saint Patrick’s College

The Health Behaviours in School-aged Children Survey (2006) found that more than half of Irish primary school aged children did not meet the recommended daily level of physical activity (PA). This study investigated if a cross-curricular approach can be used to promote the PA levels of children in an Irish primary school. Objectives included (a) designing a unit of work to promote the PA levels of children as they learn, and b) evaluating it from the perspective of the teacher who designed and implemented it. The unit of work was underpinned by a broad focus on development of fundamental movement skills through structured play activities. The ‘teacher researcher’ was a main focus of this study (Koshy, 2010). I examined and analysed my own teaching and the effect it had on the PA levels of children in my class using an action research methodology. Key sources of data included a reflective journal, observations of children’s PA levels and a record of PA levels measured using pedometers. Data were analysed by coding using the ‘constant comparative method’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) where the process of comparing data with previously collected data culminated in the formation of theory and the generation of conclusions and recommendations. The study illustrated how a cross-curricular approach can be used to promote the PA levels of the children as PA levels increased overall, they enjoyed the lessons and engaged better in their learning when they were
physically active. The use of a cross-curricular approach should be explored as schools examine how PA levels can be increased throughout the school day.

Session B5: New Approaches to Meaningful Learning

Open Space Learning / Emotional Intelligence of the Early Years Professional

Mary Minahan, Carlow Institute of Technology / Cherish Childcare

Can the model of Open Space Learning enhance the development of emotional intelligence of early childhood professional (EYP)? Open space learning is an emerging paradigm of teaching and learning which offers opportunities for learners and lecturers to interact in an alternative learning environment outside the traditional classroom. This piece of research will explore the benefits of this method. The evolving role of the Practitioner in the ECEC sector has changed dramatically over the last number of years adding to the demands of the EYP. Using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies the open space learning approach will be explored with a focus on the impact on emotional intelligence. This study will demonstrate that further research into causal links and how individual composite deficits of interpersonal skills could be enhanced by using the open space learning model. The application of enhancing the emotional intelligence of EYP only serves to promote and encourage exciting innovative thinking in the next generations. The research will extract knowledge from many sources of secondary research including readings from relevant theories, academic journals, on-line articles, textbooks, statements from experts, previous studies on the chosen concepts. Primary research will be obtained by using the use of the Emotional Quotient Inventory 360, which will demonstrated the current emotional intelligence levels of the EYP and interviews with subject matter experts. Ethical considerations will be at the forefront of this research. The aim of the research will be to highlight how using the OSL method will enhance the emotional intelligence of the EYP.

In Search of Meaning in Reggio Inspired Early Childhood Settings

Rita Melia, Early Childhood Ireland

The aim of this research is to support early childhood educators to search for meaning in the early childhood setting. This ethnographic action research project is located in a cluster of Reggio inspired early childhood education settings. The action researchers (early childhood educators) have hopes that they can create change in their settings by using the Reggio approach to pedagogical documentation as a tool to construct the meaning of the ECCE setting as a place that plays an active role in children’s search for meaning. In this research these meanings and exploratory theories reveal how children think, question and interpret their relationships with the early childhood educator and through pedagogical documentation the children and adults develop an interpretive ‘theory’ a narrative that gives meaning to the daily activities, interactions and relationships. Underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 ecological theory, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory and Bruner’s Folk pedagogy, this research presents a case study
of a learning journey. Children and adults are consenting participants on the journey, which gives visibility to the competencies of both children and the early childhood educators (the action researchers). Using the action research cycle, learning from this research will be shared with the early childhood sector through the national organisation Early Childhood Ireland. The implications for policy and practice are as suggested by Rinaldi; sharing documentation makes visible the culture of childhood both inside and outside the school and is a true act of participation, exchange and democracy (Rinaldi, 1998).

How can I help children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tolerate unspecified events through the introduction of a choice section on a visual schedule?

Fiona Ferris, Maynooth University

This action research investigates how to help children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tolerate unspecified events through the introduction of a choice section on a visual schedule. The rationale stems from concerns that I may not have been providing the children in my setting with realistic expectations of social scenarios, or equipping them with necessary skills to tolerate the unexpected nature of daily life due to the structured schedule of classes and the predictability of routine. The use of visual scheduling was discussed, highlighting the various reasons why one would use visual schedules for a child with ASD, the reasons why they are effective and the benefits and advantages of their use (Banda et al., 2009). The presence of anxiety in children with ASD is also investigated. As choice boards are the key component being introduced as part of this action research dissertation, literature surrounding their use (Zysk and Notbohm, 2004) and the benefits associated with their use was considered (Vicker, 2007), linking their use to the alleviation of anxiety in children with ASD (Vicker, 2005). I conducted research through observation and a mixed method approach of documenting the variation in anxiety as a response to the introduction of a “?” visual on the schedule. Upon arrival at this section of the class, the children were redirected to a choice board displaying a choice between two different activities. In Cycle 2, two more choices were added to the board. Upon completion of Cycle One, it was observed that counter to the negative reaction expected, children adapted well to the new section of the schedule. It is thus recommended to continue the process of preparing the children for unscheduled events as a means to improve associated levels of anxiety in every day life as a result of changes in schedule and routine.

Strand - Play

Session B6: Outdoor Play

Case Study: Piloting the Positive PlayGounds Quality Awards

Shauneen McCusker, Playboard, Northern Ireland

The benefits of school playtime are widely acknowledged, yet many schools have
reduced the time and opportunities available for playtime (Blatchford and Baines, 2006). Playtimes offer children an important opportunity to increase their daily physical activity through unstructured free play (WHO, 2007) and reduce stress (Creswell et al, 2005). Over the past 12 months, PlayBoard have been piloting the development of a quality award programme for Primary Schools in Northern Ireland. The programme supports schools to promote positive play in the school playground whilst embedding a play ethos through effective policy and practice. Upon completion, schools have an enhanced play space and a culture that supports healthy growth, development and learning. The presentation will provide an overview of the case study and learning to date. As a pilot, PlayBoard worked with Ballymacash Primary School who had identified a number of concerns regarding pupil engagement in play. Through the programme staff, pupils and parents became engaged in a remodelling of the play environment and underlying play culture. The enhancement of the outdoor play spaces was completed in conjunction with the children and involved the physical redesign/upgrading of the playground area based on the needs identified by the children. School staff were supported through a programme of training and mentoring which has enabled them to deliver enriched play experiences within the school environment whilst fostering a participative approach, ensuring that children have a key role in the decisions that impact upon their play experience. At the end of the experience the school will have obtained a Play Quality Award. The learning from this case study will be disseminated to wider schools and communities.

Unstructured Outdoor Play Habits among Irish Children

Orla Gallagher, Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown

This research aimed to investigate the existing practices among Irish children, aged between 3-6 years in relation to their access to and engagement with unstructured play in outdoor environments. Recent research has highlighted the value of unstructured play spaces for children’s development, and linked engagement in unstructured play to positive child outcomes (Herrington and Brussoni 2015, Barker et al 2014, Starling 2011, Hanscom 2014). Through use of a quantitative methodology, 120 parents of children aged 3-6 years old completed an online survey around their child’s access to, and engagement with the outdoor environment. The sample was self-selected and accessed via a number of online parent peer-support groups and parenting forums, enabling access to a wide cohort of parents. Ethical clearance for this piece of research was sought and granted in line with the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown’s procedures on ethics clearance for research. The main findings included that children aged 3-6 years engage with the outdoor environment in three main settings – in the home, the local community and within a range of educational settings. The types of outdoor environments which are accessed may be categorised as formal environments, natural environments and wild environments. The research shows that children spend longer engaged in unstructured play in wild outdoor areas, compared with formal or natural areas. Another key finding was that children’s outdoor play within educational settings may be restricted by practitioners and/or parents’ attitudes and values towards play, weather and seasonal conditions. These findings should be of interest to policy makers, parents and those that work with
Early Childhood Ireland are committed to the development of quality outdoor provision within the ECCE sector. Outdoor provision particularly for the Under 3’s needs serious consideration and attention. This longitudinal case study of an infant outdoors, aims to raise awareness of the significance of outdoor experiences and play in the life of infants. This study was undertaken with due regard and deference to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA). The child’s rights, needs and comfort at all times took precedence over any data collection. The collated data provides insight into how the outdoors supports developing competencies and intelligences (Gardner, 2008), embodiment of experiences (Shumway-Cook & Woolacott, 2007), and growing funds of knowledge (Hedge 2011). Further analysis determined how simple yet meaning-filled rituals (Pelo 2013) played a role in connecting children to people and place (Moore, 2014, Chawla, 1999, White 2014). Chawla (1999) found that places that stood out in memory were those frequently experienced “always part of the regular rhythm of life”. Finch (2014) states “Frequency requires proximity” My research correlates with these findings, highlighting many implications for infant outdoor provision. The findings have implications for the provision of outdoor time, space, and materials for the under 3’s. They support the consideration of new paradigms of practice that enable our youngest children experience outdoors both inside and outside the setting gates.

Session B7: Early Intervention for Children with an Autism Diagnosis

Early Intervention for Children with an Autism Diagnosis: An Integrative and Play Based Approach (self-organised symposium)

Catherine Dwyer, Catherine Noone-Usher, Linda O’Dwyer, Aisling Treacy and Kerie Enright-Young, Little Moo-Moo’s Preschool

The aim of our on-going research is to examine the efficacy of integrating children with an Autism diagnosis into a mainstream pre-school using an individualized approach and utilising the natural environment. We also seek to investigate the benefits of our programme that offers 1:1 teacher student programmes, small and large group activities and access to a multi-disciplinary team. Five children have taken part in our research to date. The children are all aged between 2.5 and 4. Data on each child’s targets and set plans are kept everyday by the child’s tutor. The VB-Mapp assessment manual was utilized for the purpose of this study which emphasises the importance of developing fundamental social skills. Each child’s tutor performed the initial assessment. Our BCBA designed each I.E.P. Our SLT and OT contributes their own programmes to each I.E.P following assessment in the natural environment. Each child is re-assessed every three months. Each child’s I.E.P was designed to incorporate a play-based, emergent and Montessori Curriculum underpinned by the Aistear and
Síolta quality programmes. Repeated assessments every three months have shown substantial increases in each child’s competency in key areas such as imitation, communication and play skills. The benefits of integration with typically developing peers are also evident from observed improvements in areas such as group instruction and social skills. Over the coming months we intend to continue this research and build upon our results. We also currently offer support to parents in the form of training and information. We collaborate with stakeholders. In addition, we intend to share our framework with other childcare practitioners.

**Strand - Families**

Session B8: Programmes and Evaluations

*Delivering the Parents Plus Early Years Programme in Preschool and Childcare Settings*

**John Sharry & Adrienne Doyle**, Parents Plus, UCD & Fingal Childcare Committee

The Parents Plus Early Years Programme (PPEY) is one of five evidence-based Parents Plus Programmes that were developed in Ireland in collaboration with families. Drawing on well-researched ideas on child development, attachment and behaviour management, the PPEY uses video feedback, small group discussion and role-play to support parents (of children aged 1 to 6 years old) to:

- Tune into and connect with their children
- Expand children’s learning, language and attention
- Teach children everyday tasks
- Manage tantrums and misbehaviour
- Help children be more cooperative and to keep rules.

The PPEY was delivered as part of the Fingal Parenting Initiative in preschool settings by trained childcare practitioners and community link workers from collaborating agencies. Overall, 1,100 parents participated in either a workshop or one of the 35 PPEY programmes delivered over eight weeks in local pre-school settings. The PPEY sessions were delivered from existing community agencies in the Fingal area. Facilitators received training and supervision from Parents Plus under the coordination of the local Children and Young Peoples’ Services Committee (a structure for bringing diverse agencies together to jointly plan and coordinate local children’s services). The evaluation of over 350 parents completing the PPEY showed significant reductions in child behaviour problems and parental stress, and the courses successfully engaged disadvantaged families with clinically significant problems who benefited most in the outcomes.

*Engaging families through play*

**Marion Byrne, Mairead Conroy and Grainne Kent**, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland
The 0-2 programme is a new universal family support intervention being delivered in the Inner City Community funded by the Area Based Childhood programme. It aims to develop parental skills with a focus on nutrition, health care and overall child development. Based on the Community Mothers programme methodology, it involves families receiving weekly home visits from a home visitor who employs a non-directive approach in supporting the family. Additionally, a community support programme in the form of a parent toddler play group is offered to parents which gives them the opportunity to play with their toddlers in a stimulating environment whilst learning about supporting their child’s development and meeting other parents. The National College of Ireland’s ethical guidelines were observed throughout the delivery of this programme. Initial evaluations of the programme completed in December 2015 showed a high level of satisfaction from parents. Our findings indicate how through working collaboratively with other interagency staff, this informal early engagement is crucial to supporting families to access services and supports. In providing evidence to this effect, the experiences of families, in addition to the referral pathways of families’ engagement with services will be explored. Ultimately it is suggested that in order to support all families, including those most vulnerable, engagement through informal practices in this early stage is crucial. In providing positive early experiences families may be more likely to continue to engage with services when needed. In doing so, the potential of reaching families in need with targeted supports increases.

Social and Emotional Development in the Early Years: Providing an Incredible Beginning for Every Child

Claire Gleeson, Genesis Louth

The aim is to present the local experience of delivering the newly developed Incredible Beginnings Programme, an evidence informed training model promoting effective classroom management strategies to staff within Early Years settings. The programme includes supports to provide structured, warm, and predictable environments which will in turn promote children’s social, emotional and academic success. The Incredible Beginnings training is based on Bandura’s modelling and self-efficacy theories which promote principles of live and video modelling, rehearsal and self-reflection. This is a whole service approach to training which is delivered over 12 x 2.5 hour sessions each of which takes place at least one week apart. Programme delivery commenced in January 2016 with two groups of 14 (total 28) participants from a community based Early Years service in Louth. As per Incredible Years protocols sessions are delivered by two trained Group Leaders using a collaborative approach between them and the participants. The programme is not being formally evaluated. However, to date the programme retention and weekly reflective checklists have shown that the staff have shared learning opportunities and reflected verbally as to how the collaborative approach has strengthened the team as well as enhancing their relationships with parents and children. There are currently no internationally recognised evaluation measures being used with this training programme. We are exploring potential tools to measure the level of interaction between the child and the
Early Years practitioner. We plan to begin to evaluate the impact on practice starting with the second cohort (Sept 2016 – Feb 2017) which will include staff from both community and private settings. Suggested instruments to use include the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS). Those taking part in any proposed evaluation will do so with informed consent, and may withdraw from the process at any time.

Strand - Policy

Session B9: Early Educational Alignment

Early Educational Alignment (self-organised Symposium)

Carmel Brennan, Early Childhood Ireland, Carol-Ann O’Sioráin, Trinity College Dublin, and Arlene Forster, NCCA Co-Ordinator, Early Childhood Ireland

The aim of this research is to create early childhood research communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) to identify key areas and alliances for further research within the sector. A review of the literature and associated discussion papers on four topics pertaining to early childhood care and education, including the terminology that frames work in the sector (Wolfe 2015), learning environments (Kernan 2015), professional identity (Moloney 2015) and transitions (O’Kane 2015) offered a complex theoretical framework. These papers were presented at a Researching Early Childhood Education and Care (RECEC) seminar entitled ‘Early Educational Alignment: Reflecting on Context, Curriculum and Pedagogy’ in October and formed the basis for professional conversations among participating researchers, practitioners and policy makers. These conversations generated the data. This symposium focuses on the findings and implications of these discussions. Nóirín Hayes (Trinity College) will addresses the topic of terminology and policy, Arlene Forster (NCCA) will discuss transitions and alignment across pre- and primary school sectors and Carmel Brennan (ECI) will explore the relationship between practice and the findings in terms of learning environments. Key questions arising across the themes are: What are the issues that must be addressed in a context where we now recognise the critical importance of the early years in terms of social justice and lifelong learning and development? What are the implications of a philosophical shift towards understanding learning as situated, embodied and embedded in culture? What are the implications for provision when responsibility is distributed across government, families and providers?
Poster Presentations

Posters will be displayed in the main room (Hogan Suite II) throughout the afternoon and Saturday. Presenters will be available to give a short presentation and answer questions about their poster at 15.15, immediately after the first parallel session.

Strand - Teaching and Learning

Positive effect of music on behaviour

Connie Hannon, Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eirinn, Foras Na Gaeilge

The aim of the research is to explore the positive impact of using music to promote positive behaviour and concentration in children in an early years setting thus improving ability to learn and improve oral speech and communication. I am a musician and use music by means of a variety of musical instruments and variety of music song and dance. I have observed closely how children engage better with exceptional interest and enthusiasm when teaching activities through music. Music is both therapeutic and improves mood and concentration which keeps children engaged longer. I have noted in particular regarding children who have poor / delayed verbal ability the amazing results how music can empower them to build on vocabulary through learning through music in a fun way. I am fortunate that I play 5 instruments have also noted a marked improvement in behaviour concerning children with additional needs when making music a part of everyday activity. Music is truly magic. We have also sparked an interest among the children to get involved in lots of musical activity and use their skills such as performance outside the setting which is a huge confidence builder.

Evaluation/Research: HighScope in Mayo

Elaine Sterritt, Early Years Organisation

This poster presentation aims to provide a comprehensive account of “HighScope in Mayo” based on the evaluation/research completed in Mayo, commission by HighScope Ireland Institute in conjunction with The Child and Family Agency Mayo Early Years Services The theoretical framework of the research examined the extent to which the HighScope model of practice is embedded in ten early years’ settings in County Mayo The HighScope model: The HighScope model is an evidence based outcomes focused model based on supporting children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development through active participatory learning where both teachers and children have major roles in shaping the children’s learning. Children are encouraged to plan, carry out, and reflect on their own activities through a plan-do review process. Adults observe, support, and extend children’s play as
appropriate. They also encourage children to make choices, problem solve, and engage in activities. A core part of the process involved accessing the voices of relevant stakeholders. These included children, parents, staff, representatives and trainers from the HighScope Irl. Institute, representatives from the Child and Family Agency and other statutory and community agencies. The methodological design for this evaluation was guided by the principles of implementation science with the aim of understanding what, why and how interventions work in real world settings. These are the methods used in the evaluation. ---Primary data collection: included interviews, focused groups, online questionnaires and documented filmed case studies. ---Secondary data analysis of existing monitoring and evaluation information. The poster presentation will outline the main findings of the research along with the recommendations proposed.

Evaluating a Preschool Teaching Programme to Teach Preschool Life Skills

Ciara Gunning, NUI Galway and Galway City and County Childcare Committee

(NB! Presenter not attending)

The current research evaluated a preventive intervention for preschool children which aims to mitigate risk factors for later difficulties through teaching thirteen ‘preschool life skills’. The preschool life skills program which was evaluated in the current research was developed by Hanley, Heal, Tiger and Ingvarsson (2007) within the science of applied behavior analysis (ABA). The 13 skills were identified as: (a) the most commonly taught replacement skills in interventions for challenging behavior from the ABA literature and (b) important skills for success in later education settings from the school readiness literature. A pre- and post-test between groups design was employed to evaluate the intervention in a preschool in Co. Galway. The program involved teacher training and classwide teaching. The current research was approved by and complied with guidelines from the Research Ethics Committee in National University of Ireland Galway. Fully informed consent was obtained from the preschool manager, staff and parents/guardians. Fully informed assent was obtained from the participating children. Within the current application, this evidence-based program was successful and feasible in improving the children’s knowledge and use of the 13 important skills. Levels of challenging behavior decreased and child, parent and staff reports of the program were very positive. Benefits were evident for staff and children. Given the preventive nature of this intervention and the complex current challenges facing early years services, these results have important implications for future behavior support policy and training development.

Using a Social Choice Book © to Facilitate Critical Thinking and Enhance Social Interaction In Early Years Education

Tasha O’Donnell

This study was conducted in a Montessori school in Dublin. It was designed for use in the Junior Montessori class, with children aged 3-6 years. The aim of this study was
to facilitate critical thinking and enhance social interaction with the use of a Social Choice Book ©. Leslie (1987) researched the difficulties often encountered when attempting to read social cues, but it was Gray (1994; 1998) whom created Social Stories as a way of assisting children to better understand social situations. This was researched by many others (Happe 1995; Rowe, 1999; Bledsoe, Smith and Simpson, 2003; Smith, 2003; Howley, Arnold and Gray, 2005), with positive outcomes. This research, combined with Greer’s (2002) study on designing teaching strategies, and Wall’s (2003) recommendation of tailored support, paved the way for this project. The Social Choice Book © was designed to contain a number of stories, each one describing a situation with which the children were familiar. Following the story it provided three ways in which children could respond to the situation, with each choice leading to a consequence. The choices consisted of a typically emitted response, a neutral response and an ideal response. It was created to read as a group and work together to achieve a desired response. It also provided the children with a frame of reference to manage behaviour in social situations. The study was discussed with the parents and children involved. It was agreed if the study should become harmful in any way it would be stopped immediately. The study yielded encouraging results. As hoped, the children began to refer to the stories to problem solve their own situations. It also became a reading tool and was used in association with the Stay Safe programme, to enhance understanding.

Strand - Play

The ‘Glen Outdoor School’: The Impact and Implications of Outdoor Risky Play on the Glen’s Preschool Children’s Holistic Growth

Trisha MacLaughlin, Sligo Institute of Technology

Outdoor risky play is a universal activity and a vital medium for learning and building essential life skills. Irish preschool policies have recognised this importance and a strategy for its provision has been managed through Siolta and Aistear. That said other policies and adult attitudes in their efforts to provide safety have made the delivery of outdoor risky play difficult. Research has also documented a decrease in children’s opportunities for outdoor play, be that on the street, within homes or in educational settings (O’Connor, et al, 2014). The ‘Glen Outdoor School’ has pioneered Irish early learning practice and their attendees benefit from predominantly outdoor risky play. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of preschool children from the ‘Glen’. The research aimed to identify developmental, behavioural or attitudinal variation noted by gathering the testimony of parents, childcare workers or teachers of the children as they transition to National school infant class. Additionally, the children’s activities in both settings were observed rather than constructed. Data collection was guided by ‘The Children First’ policy and Data Protection Act. The paper sought to establish perspectives on the children’s outdoor risky play experiences and gain a deeper understanding how this might impact on their lives, subsequent educational experiences and implications of this teaching method on children’s holistic growth. Key findings comprised of positive relationships: between physical development and health days off; between outdoors
and nature; and the impact of risk on creativity, imagination, communication and confidence.

**Play in a Mixed Age Group Setting**

**Ciara Sheehy**, Baltimore Community Playschool

The aim of the research is to look more closely at learning and teaching dynamic between children in a playschool setting of a mixed age group of children between 2 years and 9 months – 4 years and 8 months. The rationale for this research is to examine the varying developmental stages within this setting and how it influences children’s play. The theoretical framework this research proposal is based on is Vygotsky’s Social Learning Theory (1978). This looks at the children’s social interaction as having a fundamental role in early year’s development. Through play and social interaction children become more competent in all areas of development. The aspect of this theory which is most relevant to this research is Vygotsky’s idea that the level of cognitive development can be influenced by the presences children of varying levels of ‘skill’. This refers to the level of development which can be attained when children engage in social behaviour with children of different developmental stages. The type of methodology which is most suitable for this research is participation observation. This method it allows us to take non-verbal interactions into consideration and also provide more contexts to the situations. The ethical considerations involved in this research proposal are consent and confidentiality in regards to the participants and the potential for bias by the observer. The main findings will look at the implications of National policy, the setting’s policy, the impact on the teachers as well as the children observed.

**Kids Active: A Physical Activity Intervention for Pre-School Settings**

**Christina Duff**, DCU

Early childhood represents a critical window for Physical Activity (PA) promotion and the development of motor skills (Hardy et al. 2010). Fundamental movement skills (FMS) are basic observable patterns of behaviour, which are considered the precursor to more complex and sport-specific movements. Research consistently suggests that FMS proficiency is positively associated with PA participation during childhood (Lubans et al., 2010; Larsen et al. 2015). The ‘Kids Active’ study will measure the baseline PA participation of preschool children aged 3-5 years old (n=200), using objective accelerometry over five days. Four individual FMS (run, jump, overhand throw and catch) will be assessed using the Test for Gross Motor Development 2 (TGMD-2) (Ulrich, 2000) and questionnaires will be administered to educators, specifically measuring perceived competence in teaching PA. Twenty preschools will receive a specifically tailored ‘Kids Active intervention’, over a 6 week consecutive period. This programme will be designed with the Aistear curriculum in mind, and will be delivered by the preschool educators, who have received intervention delivery training. PA, FMS and educators’ perceived competence to teach PA will be measured again after the 6-week intervention and compared against a control group to answer the following questions:
1) Are educators more competent and confident in providing PA and active play opportunities following ‘Kids Active’ training?
2) Does the implementation of ‘Kids Active’ result in an increase in PA participation and FMS proficiency amongst young children?
Results will inform further development and improvement of the ‘Kids Active’ programme prior to national dissemination in Year 2, to ensure long-term sustainability and efficacy of the programme.

**Strand - Professionalisation**

*An Investigation into the components which determine quality Early Childhood Education and Care: A Comparison of Stakeholders’ Views*

Ayooluwa Oke, Cork Institute of Technology

This poster presentation aims to provide an overview of quality ECEC and the challenges which may hinder its provision. There is a general consensus that quality ECEC is socially constructed and subjective (Grotewell et al. 2008; Matthews 2007; Wyness 2006; NCCA 2004; Bronfenbrenner 1992). Ultimately, due to the complicated nature of quality ECEC, it is now believed that no universal definition of quality ECEC exists. (Moss et al. 2013). Therefore, to understand what quality ECEC means and how it can be implemented, parents and practitioner’s views must be sought. This study aims to contextualise quality ECEC within an Irish context. Literature on quality ECEC was analysed. 30 semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents and practitioners. Online questionnaires will be distributed to gain quantitative data on parents and practitioners perspectives on quality ECEC. Consent will be sought from all participants, any information gathered will be obtained on a voluntary basis and in a confidential manner. This study has several implications for policy concerning quality ECEC. A theory of quality ECEC will be formulated, directly from the experiences of parents and practitioners. Furthermore, based on these experiences, the challenges of quality provision will be illuminated. Understanding quality ECEC from key stakeholders (parents and practitioners) will aid in the development of specific policies to support the complex work of parents and practitioners, in educating and caring for young children. Thereby, strengthening the learning experiences afforded to early learners in Ireland.

**Strand - Families and Well-being**

*Meaningful interactions with pre-school children receiving integrated family services*

Melissa Bonotto, UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

Research has shown the relevance of positive foundations in the early years of children’s lives and the importance of intervening at an early stage to prevent problematic issues escalating. This research aims to study how meaningful interactions with pre-school children receiving integrated family services, can improve children’s outcomes. It views children from a holistic perspective based on
development as a constant journey in which a person interacts with his/her environment and his/her development is influenced not only by what happened but also by the way that it was perceived. Furthermore, the individual interacts, directly or indirectly, with his/her environment in micro, meso, exo and macro-systems. As part of the Tusla Development and Mainstreaming Programme, this piece of research is associate with the “Networks and Meitheal Work Package Evaluation Plan” conducted by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. Meitheal is the National Practice Model for all agencies working with children, young people and their families in Ireland. According to Tusla (2013). Meitheal is a multi-agency early intervention process responding to the specific needs of a child. This research is in its first year exploratory phase of a four years programme. A mixed methods approach will be applied. Finally, it aims to produce a framework for the application of meaningful interactions with pre-school children receiving integrated services based on the ecological model with an outcome focused approach.

**Social and Emotional Development in the Early Years: Providing an Incredible Beginning for Every Child**

Claire Gleeson, Genesis Louth

The aim is to present the local experience of delivering the newly developed Incredible Beginnings Programme, an evidence informed training model promoting effective classroom management strategies to staff within Early Years settings. The programme includes supports to provide structured, warm, and predictable environments which will in turn promote children’s social, emotional and academic success. The Incredible Beginnings training is based on Bandura’s modelling and self-efficacy theories which promote principles of live and video modelling, rehearsal and self-reflection. This is a whole service approach to training which is delivered over 12 x 2.5 hour sessions each of which takes place at least one week apart. Programme delivery commenced in January 2016 with two groups of 14 (total 28) participants from a community based Early Years service in Louth. As per Incredible Years protocols sessions are delivered by two trained Group Leaders using a collaborative approach between them and the participants. The programme is not being formally evaluated. However, to date the programme retention and weekly reflective checklists have shown that the staff have shared learning opportunities and reflected verbally as to how the collaborative approach has strengthened the team as well as enhancing their relationships with parents and children. There are currently no internationally recognised evaluation measures being used with this training programme. We are exploring potential tools to measure the level of interaction between the child and the Early Years practitioner. We plan to begin to evaluate the impact on practice starting with the second cohort (Sept 2016 – Feb 2017) which will include staff from both community and private settings. Suggested instruments to use include the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS). Those taking part in any proposed evaluation will do so with informed consent, and may withdraw from the process at any time.