

EXPLORING EARLY YEAR  
EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES  
OF  
OUTDOORS PLAY.

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## Declaration

I hereby certify that the material, which I now submit for assessment on the programmes of study leading to the award of Master of Science in Advancing Health and Social Care, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others except to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work. No portion of the work contained in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification to this or any other institution. I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that I have adhered to Letterkenny Institute of Technology rules and regulations.

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*I would say "okay guys, let's line up to go outside" it is  
like "YES!", like they cannot wait to go out and  
like when you are "sorry guys, it's two minutes  
left" its "OHHHHH NO!"*

(Focus Group Participant, p. 28)

# Abstract

Acknowledgement of outdoor play affordances, positively supports children's health, wellbeing, learning and development. There has been a visible diminishing of opportunities for children's outdoor play in recent years. In recognition of the significance of outdoor play in the lives of children, the study intention endeavours to "Explore Early Year Educators (n=8) perspectives of outdoor play" in the County of Donegal, Ireland. In an Irish context, educators' perspective of outdoor play is under-researched.

Significant findings identified educators' perceptions of allowing affordances of outdoor play in early year settings. In particular, educators' thoughts on planning for outdoor play and acknowledgement of lack of continuous professional development courses in planning outdoor play available to them. Policy context, to an extent, positively promoted outdoor play. However, litigation and safety trepidations were overarching concerns identified as were lack of space, clothing and parental perceptions. There was clear evidence educators understood and promoted benefits of outdoor play – allowing affordances of enriched outdoor play opportunities. Educators' positive attitudes to outdoor play were apparent.

Data collection utilised focus groups. Focus groups allowed for rich dialogue on group thinking on outdoor play and data identified enablers and constraints to outdoor play. Educators' were mindful of safety at all times, again acknowledging litigation and child safety as factors which limited affordances of outdoor play. Educators' beliefs for the most were similar to literature review evidence. However, further research is necessary for this area, and it envisaged study findings uncovered, would be disseminated in publications and conferences, contributing to a debate on outdoor play in an Irish context.

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# Abbreviation Table

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CCC	County Childcare Committees
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPHA	Canadian Public Health Association
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care, Llywodraeth Cymru Welsh Government, Department of Health Northern Ireland and the Scottish Government
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
DCCC	Donegal County Childcare Committee
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECCHE	Early Childhood Care, Health and Education
Educator	Early Year Educators
EYFGDQ	Early Years Focus Group Demographics Questionnaire
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
FMS	Fundamental Movement Skills
LR	Literature Review
LyIT	Letterkenny Institute of Technology

NAECTE	National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OP	Outdoor play
Private	Private for profit
RP	Risky Play
Setting	Early Year Settings
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

# Chapter One: Introduction



## 1.0 Introduction

There is growing international consensus supported by validated research that outdoor play (OP) is fundamental for child development (Bento and Dias, 2017; Pellegrini *et al.* 2007; Ulset *et al.* 2017). Researcher delivers eight modules of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) National Framework Qualification (NFQ) Level 6 and from a teaching and learning experience acknowledged NFQ level 5/6 students suggest and recognise limited knowledge on how to plan OP successfully. Moreover, early year educators' (educator) in the field propose difficulty in successfully implementing such programs in ECCE settings in line with Aistear and Síolta guidelines (Centre for Early Childcare Development and Education (CECDE) 2007; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009). Hence, this study will examine the experiences of stakeholders of OP from research, policy and practice settings. As perspective of educators' perceptions of OP has been under-examined, this study hopes to engage with educators' in an Irish context and explore experiences of OP (Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga, 2007; Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008). Significant time spent in early year settings (settings) position educators to intervene to provide children access OP (Philips and Lowenstein, 2011; Tremblay *et al.* 2015). Friendly and Browne (2002) identified educators can instil positive health outcomes in children, families and broader communities. Exposure to OP has undergone substantial erosion in the last century (Brussoni *et al.* 2012; Caroli *et al.* 2011; Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) 2013; Herrington and Nicholls, 2007). This study will disseminate what educators' thoughts are on planning for OP and whether enablers or constraints are evident. How educators embrace outdoors as a learning opportunity, explore and understand their view of the benefits.

Additionally, this study will investigate if educators have sufficient access to outdoor environments. It will be essential to ascertain how research, policy and practice in Ireland dictate educators' professional approach and affordances of OP. A detailed literature review (LR) will explore current provision and practice; the study will then seek to establish views of relevant stakeholders concerning ECCE and OP. Evidence shall dictate the development of appropriate requirements, technique and training to accommodate educators plan and access OP.

## **1.1 Benefits of outdoor play**

Educators are perfectly positioned to introduce children to the outdoors (CECDE 2007; NAECTE 2009; NCCA 2009). A fusion of diverse OP opportunities is possible where healthy habits are nurtured. Routines are established, which positively impact children's holistic development well into the future (Frost 2010; Waller *et al.* 2017). Kernan and Devine (2010) and Jacobi-Vessels (2013) reiterated the importance of ensuring children were afforded access enriched outdoor environments. It confidently impacted their health and wellbeing. Whether children's learning styles are auditory, sensory, experiential, kinaesthetic or visual, enhanced learning opportunities are realisable whilst exploring outdoors (Gardner 1993). The holistic developmental growth in areas of physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social are endless; however, clearly calculable (Flood 2013; Gesell 2017; NCCA 2009). This study will establish what educators view as benefits of OP and whether they value their role as facilitator of such play (Canadian Public Health Association 2019). Psychological benefits of access to nature and the outdoors account for the release of endorphins which lower stress levels and vigorous physical movement contribute to positive emotional regulation (Crawford 2018; Mi-Hwa Park and Riley, 2015). Notably, there are "abundance of opportunities to create happy childhood memories" while outdoors (Louv 2010, p. 34). Children's sleeping and eating habits improve significantly with quality access to outdoor environments as do concentration, moods and behaviours. Current literature clearly outlines the benefits of children in settings accessing OP from physical, emotional, social, and motor health perspectives.

## **1.2 Constraints to outdoor play**

Diminishing of OP opportunity has been significantly identifiable over the past generation (Giles *et al.* 2018; Kemple *et al.* 2016). Critically, parental safety concerns, overreliance on technology, fear of risky play (RP) and organised extracurricular activities cited for lack of outdoor exposure (Bento and Diaz, 2017; Caroli *et al.* 2011; GUI 2013). Harper (2017) addressed fear of litigation in western society which influences educators' allowance of enabling children explore and engage fully in OP. In an Irish context, sectoral insurance company Ironshore Europe withdrew from markets in 2019. Oireachtas committees, ministers and the Taoiseach attempted to intervene, however to no avail. Such resulted in premiums tripling, which arguably impacted educators' encouragement of OP/RP. Sandseter

(2014) and Sandseter *et al.* (2012) questions educators' perception of risk/risk mastery and whether risk aversion is eroding children's opportunity to engage in developmentally challenging activities. Sandseter (2010, p. 22) suggests "risky play involves thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involves uncertainty and risk of physical injury". Sandseter (2014) proposes educators' experience/perspectives were gender-related; male educators score higher in RP allowance while female educators were cautious in their allowances. However, Sando *et al.* (2017) analysis of 2105 settings in Norway established injuries were uncommon and minor, with moderate to severe injuries presenting as extremely rare. It is noteworthy that Norway's societal value fosters OP and prevalence of male educators in practice is 10% with government initiative of reaching 20% as gender equality is enshrined in law (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2008; Pirard *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, Norway does not have the litigation culture, which is evident in Irish society.

Such considerations could impact on educators' thoughts on planning, and this study will seek to answer such hypothesis. Davies (1997) and Davies and Hamilton (2016) identified challenges to outdoor planning, citing lack of suitably available training opportunities for educators. Findings critically highlighted lack of experienced staff, high child ratios, appropriate resources and weather conditions impeded engagement in OP. Notwithstanding, Wilson (2012) identified play in nature as a fundamental alignment of pedagogy in ECCE. Opportunity for OP being a cornerstone of excellence in settings. Irish regulation and legislation adopted evidence-based best practices from worldwide counterparts have ensured professional approach in ECCE is of a high standard (Childcare Act 1991; Childcare Regulation 2016; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989). Emulation of evidence-based best approach from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Italy, Scandinavia and UK was utilised in developing NCCA (Hayes 2007). This study shall explore to what extent regulation and legislation impact educators' experience of planning for or access to OP (McClintic and Petty, 2015).

### **1.3 Planning**

NCCA (2009) Aistear curriculum was introduced to guide and support educators on planning with an emphasis on both indoor and OP opportunities. CECDE (2007) influences educators' in embracing OP specifically regarding standard two, environment and standard nine, health and welfare. It shall be necessary to appreciate educators' perspective of implementing OP within constraints of the above. Notwithstanding, findings of GUI (2013) study, highlighted increased obesity levels and lack of OP affordances, shall be contemplated with respect to the impact of lack of access to OP. Internationally, National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAEYC) (2009) values the importance of OP. Citing:

Early childhood programs in preschools allow periods during the instructional day, in which children may have free and active OP with peers.

(NAEYC 2009, p 5)

It will be advantageous to explore if educators experiences and perspectives of OP mirror NAEYC ethos. Exploration of the extent adherence to legislation/regulation impacts OP will be investigated.

### **1.4 Historical background**

The single most considerable influence of positive change in ECCE in modern Ireland occurred as a result of the signing (1990) and ratification (1992) of the UNCRC (1989). However, thirty years later, Children's Rights Alliance (2019) report card awarded a score of C in respect of ECCE quality, questioning the level of quality afforded to children in its care. Notwithstanding, this has influenced legislative changes within government - in particular the Childcare Act (1991), Childcare Regulation (2006) and subsequent (2016). Quality regulations contribute so much to the health, wellbeing and education of children in settings throughout Ireland. Positive amendments to Childcare Regulation (2016, p. 19, p. 69) detailed all registered settings operational from 30th of June 2016 provide access to OP. Settings are legally obliged to ensure "adequate and suitable facilities for a pre-school child to play indoors and outdoors during the day are provided". Through this study, the researcher will explore whether educators ascertain if they do indeed have sufficient access to outdoors. However, it is worth highlighting settings registered before the date are under no legal obligation to adhere to the new quality standard. As such, a two-tier bias scenario is identifiable of preschool children's access to OP determined by registration date of attended

setting. Arguably, having access to outdoors does not ensure participation within it. Copeland *et al.* (2016) undertook a fourteen-month study of 388 pre-schoolers from 30 randomly selected settings with access to outdoors. Children had movement detection devices fitted. Findings emphasised although 90% of settings had scheduled two or more outdoor daily activities, only 40% gained outdoor access for the planned two activities, while 32% had no access to OP. This recent study can inform and justify the need to explore what are enablers and constraints for educators providing OP access. Conclusions in research alluded to scheduled OP occurred less frequently, with this in mind Childcare Regulation (2016, p. 19) amendment failed to sufficiently detail how much time constitutes “adequate” time outdoors. This study will allow educators’ opportunity to discuss access/time spent outdoors and whether challenges are identifiable.

## **1.5 Curriculum and framework**

The ECCE free preschool scheme launched in 2010. Each qualifying child was entitled to one free preschool year. Contract signing with Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), was a funding prerequisite as was engagement with both Aistear and Síolta (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009). Four themes of Aistear combined with sixteen standards of Síolta seen as the first step in providing quality early learning experiences for preschool children in the state (Flood and Hardy, 2013). In 2016 Minister Zappone introduced the second free preschool year, recorded a 98% uptake of eligible children. In conjunction with ECCE scheme, the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), part of the First Five Strategy (2019) plan was delivered. It provides statutory entitlement to parents in respect of financial support towards childcare costs. An income-related subsidy which ensures equality, allowing parents to apply directly online to access subsidies. By reducing childcare costs, essentially making work pay, it aims to decrease child poverty, estimated at 12% (Central Statistics Office 2016). It aspires to provide children learning opportunities in quality registered settings where highly trained staff are compliant with qualities of Aistear, Síolta (\*) and Childcare Regulation (2016). Educators’ experiences shall be explored and consider whether level of attainment can impact OP experiences.

(\*) Montessori curriculum, High Scope, Reggio Emilia, Froebel, Naíonraí

Early Years Profile 2017/2018 findings detailed 94% of settings in Ireland identified as having access to an outdoor area (DCYA 2018). On average, staff in private services have higher qualifications, 69% NFQ Level 6 qualification or above, compared to 57% of staff in community services. Such may be as a result of community services' higher levels of staff who are on employment schemes/government-funded programs (appendix 1). A lower level of degree graduates can ultimately impact the quality of provisions provided to children (Moloney 2010). This study shall explore whether educators with varying educational attainment feel confident in planning for and engaging with OP. The study will have educators from both "private for-profit" (private) and community-based settings. Findings shall be a representation of the population, thus limiting bias.

OP in 0-6 age range has been under-researched in an Irish context. This study shall aspire to explore and investigate perspectives of educators concerning engaging in aspects of OP. Exploration shall build a detailed picture for educational training providers, educators and critical policymakers/stakeholders in determining what if any sectoral continuous professional development (CPD) is required to implement successful, quality, active participation in OP. It is hoped dissemination of findings in publications and conferences will contribute to debate on OP in an Irish context.

## **1.6 Research questions**

1. What are Early Year Educators' experience and perspectives of Outdoor Play? Do these perspectives correspond with professional practice, as outlined in the Aistear Curriculum or Síolta Framework?
2. What are Early Year Educators' thoughts on planning for outdoor play? Are there challenges?
3. What are Early Year Educators' views on the benefits of outdoor play?
4. Do Early Year Educators' have sufficient access to the outdoors? What support structures may be required in order to facilitate access to outdoor play?

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

## **2.0 Introduction**

Empirical literature provides the reader actively correlated data through planned research into a particular field of relevance (Grove and Gray, 2019). To acquire data to explore educators' perspectives of OP, the researcher conducted a literature review of empirical literature.

Included was rational of selecting articles for consideration, relationship between the research questions and authors who specialised in OP (appendix 11). Researcher obtained up to date literature predominantly published in electronic-journals as identified book sources quickly become obsolete (Parahoo 2014). Incorporation of papers published from 2010 onwards and key seminal works of authors outside this timeframe contemplated. Initial literature search resulted in the production of 409 results.

Further filtration using words such as - Child, OP, Teachers, Educator, Early Year Practitioners, Wellbeing, Health, Quality Interactions, Risky Play, Planning and Benefits provided a wealth of papers for review. Databases from the following social science background utilised EBSCO, CINAHL and Emerald. Peer-reviewed articles were noted as criteria for inclusion, thus ensuring superior criteria of categorised articles. Appraisal of a variety of qualitative and quantitative studies conducted. Significant government publications, seminal research, books, websites and regulations were included, which specifically focus on 0-6 age group category. Key emerging themes were explored. For clarity, Outdoor Play, Early Year Educator and Perspectives shall be defined below; however, discussed in-depth in appendix 10.

### **2.0.1 Definition of outdoor play**

Research culminated in a definition of outdoor play as having “access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks— is essential for healthy child development”. With recommendation of increasing opportunities for self-directed play outdoors (Tremblay *et al.* 2015). This definition is mirrored by Lipnowski and LeBlanc (2012) who defined toddlers and pre-schoolers having 180 minutes per day of activities in OP, including dancing, tumbling, running, supervised water play, throwing and catching. Bilton (2017) highlighted outdoors allows play opportunities due to space, fresh air, freedom and affords children opportunity to enhance and work on their current area of interest. In particular, details:



The outdoor area is a complete learning environment, which caters for all children's needs – cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and physical.

(Bilton 2017, p. 2)

RP is identified within the confines of OP. Hansen Sandseter (2007) characterised RP into six categories, namely 1) play with great heights 2) play with high speed 3) play with dangerous tools 4) play near dangerous elements 5) rough-and-tumble play 6) play where the children can "disappear"/get lost. This study shall explore whether educators consider or allow for RP when planning OP.

### **2.0.2 Definition of early year educator**

Educator, an individual working directly with children in settings. They are required to hold a qualification of at least Level 5 on the NFQ framework with team leaders required to have Level 6 qualification (Childcare Regulation 2016).

### **2.0.3 Definition of perspectives**

Perspectives can be best described as one's particular attitude toward something or a way of thinking about something (Fowler *et al.* 2000). Perspectives in this instance will involve understanding educators' views of outdoors.

## **2.1 Outdoor play opportunities and constraints**

Current trends highlight a decline in OP for children in early years (Nash 2018; Nutbrown 2012; Singer *et al.* 2009). Nash (2018, p. 29) detailed "studies find children in recent decades experience a lack of the outdoors" compared to previous generations. Louv (2010, p. 34) similarly outlined "children today play outside less often". Contributing factors have been intensively studied. Barriers noted as parental safety, overreliance on technology, risk of litigation and organised extracurricular activities (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Elkind 2006; Harper 2017; Larson *et al.* 2011; Vandewater *et al.* 2007). Copeland *et al.* (2009) findings acknowledged children's OP was impacted upon due to inappropriate clothing and parental clothing choices for children. Such resulted in a significant source of disagreement between parents and educators. The qualitative study of 9 FG, with (n=49) educators, verified by three independent analysers, noted if insufficient extra coats were not available, this

precluded the whole class access OP affordances. Although demographic characteristics of (n=49) FG participants were of an inner-city background, it shall be interesting to see if this study similarly identifies clothing a challenge to OP. Correspondingly, Hesketh *et al.* (2017) review of 43 papers in the quest to establish the need for increased activity in children identified a “push-pull” relationship between parents and educators, citing failure to bring in appropriate outdoor wear as an OP constraint. Early Years Careers (2016) outlined resources necessary to ensure full participation in OP, detailed weatherproofs, suns cream and educators utilising canopies and areas of shelter to counteract negatively perceived weather. Evoking “dress for messy” motto should be adopted.

## **2.2 Benefits of outdoor play**

Moore and Lynch (2017) Irish qualitative ethnographic study investigated young children’s perceptions of positive wellbeing. Remarkably, children identified OP allowed for play opportunities which evoked happiness. Furthermore, children described going to the park, the equipment, materials and resources available to them as pleasurable and conceptualised their wellbeing related to play. Remarkably, their wellbeing was not linked to social interactions with peers thus supporting ‘a lone scientist approach’ (Piaget 2013). Nicaise *et al.* (2011) cross-sectional analysis surmised active OP is conducive to wellbeing.

Observation of (n=51) highlighted outdoor exposure promotes moderate to vigorous movement in children. However notably, outdoor space and equipment significantly fostered movement. In locations where access to space was at a premium, educators’ intervention further increased children’s activity. Critically, this study conducted in California, arguable where bias could be debated, as climate positively encourages children outdoors. However, Kalpogianni (2019) research in Greece does not attest to this but rather a physical environment, educators’ attitudes and policy context to guide children’s wellbeing as a result of OP was established.

Tonge *et al.* (2018) level of quality engagement by educators within OP can influence and significantly, improve child’s wellbeing and health standards. Crawford (2018) detailed the importance of establishing competencies in development of fundamental movement skills (FMS) in children at preschool age. Citing Bellow *et al.* (2017) Crawford (2018, p. 45) proposed the benefits of “intervention programs” to develop refinement of FMS as without,

delays and lack of participation were likely to continue into teenage and adulthood, therefore impacted upon wellbeing. It was established the higher the competencies in FMS, the greater involvement in physical activities well into adolescents (Henrique *et al.* 2016; Okely *et al.* 2001). Consideration of educators gaining sufficient access to outdoors will be explored in this study as will their understanding of the importance of planning suitable activities during OP to support development of FMS.

With 203,633 children enrolled in childcare in Ireland, 71% (2860) in private and 29% (1068) in community, an increase of 9% on the previous year, educators are perfectly positioned to promote OP, wellbeing and FMS (DCYA 2018). Therefore, exploration of Irish educators' perceptions and experiences appear to be justified. Moreover, educators should constructively ensure a planned pleasing outdoor environment, regardless of limitation of space, where opportunities for child-led inspired OP is facilitated (Kalpogianni 2019). The prospect of physically demanding activities/FMS allows for capitalising on developmental potential in all areas of normative development (Gesell 2017). The experienced educators can expertly plan for accomplishing reaching milestones in the purposively designed outdoor environment (Flood 2013; Ihmeideh and Al-Qaryouti, 2015; Piaget 2013; Montessori 2002). Policies and practices can be considered/adopted from Scandinavia, with its long tradition and rich culture in nurturing OP (Eid Kaarby and Tandberg, 2017). This study shall gain to understand if in an Irish context educators face such challenges in practice and how they overcome them.

### **2.3 Outdoor play and risk**

Central to the study was understanding of how educators perceived OP. Undoubtedly the opportunity for access to OP is accompanied by potential of RP. Hansen Sandseter (2007) qualitative study on characteristics of RP observed 38 children aged 3–5 (19 female/19 male). Eight children were interviewed for their opinion on RP as were seven educators (4 female/3 male). Six categories were defined, namely 1) play with great heights 2) play with high speed 3) play with dangerous tools 4) play near dangerous elements 5) rough-and-tumble play 6) play where the children can "disappear"/get lost. Categories can serve as a guide to educators in practice, and this study shall explore educators' knowledge of same when engaging/planning for OP. However, this study is arguably not comparable to an Irish

context as 43% of educators in the study are male, compared with only 2% in the Irish sector. While Peeters *et al.* (2015) acknowledges efforts made lessened the gender gap, deeply held societal attitudes and perceptions require overcoming. Little *et al.* (2012) study of teachers' perspective of risk in OP failed to acknowledge or mention gender differences. However, Sandseter *et al.* (2014) study of 116 Norwegian educators, of which 20% were male, confirmed males scored high on excitement seeking scales in comparison to more cautious female counterparts. This cautiousness could debatably impact upon the child's ability to freely engage, as would be dependent on whether male or female educators taught/guided their allowances for discovery. Darrin Wood (2012) analysis of elementary school teachers in America, identified females as nurturing and sensitive, whereas males were more dominant and commanding. Pre-existing research of Wiest (2004, p. 63) findings deemed females "better suited to serve as role models and teachers of moral behaviour". These findings are not consistent with Mullola *et al.* (2011), who stipulated gender did not affect student outcomes. Generalisability of much-published research on this issue is problematic as Driessen (2007) too highlighted no statistically significant difference between males and females. Inconsistency in finding may be due to lack of longitudinal research. Peeters *et al.* (2015) acknowledged female educators positively supported male educators employed alongside them within the sector. This study shall ascertain whether educators' perspectives correspond to research findings in allowing affordances of RP while engaging in OP. Insufficient research has been conducted in respect of the unique perspectives, experiences, and concerns of educators of OP or RP in an Irish context, hence justification for this study.

Children, by nature, have a curiosity for engaging in OP taking risks, by challenging their skills ability refinement (Hansen Sandseter, 2007; 2010; Sandseter 2009). Outdoors provides the perfect backdrop for such engagement, risk-taking in play is a normal developmental process which children move through (Little 2010; 2013; Little *et al.* 2012). Children by nature are motivated to investigate within their environment and risk is a normal adaptive fear which protects until reaching maturation. RP is a fear reducing behaviour and not allowing adequate environmental stimulation can negatively impact and develop into anxiety disorders (Allen and Rapee, 2005; Graham and Reynolds, 2013; Sandseter and Kennair, 2011). This study will explore if educators are fully aware of the positives of engaging in outdoor RP as a vehicle to improve children's health outcome, FMS, emotional self-regulation and cognitive coping skills. Growth of resilience targets children's wellbeing, and it shall be necessary to

ascertain whether educators view such as an OP benefit (Gesell 2017). Equally, whether risk mastery is positively encouraged and modelled by the educator (Bandura 2017; Hansen Sandseter 2010).

Brussoni *et al.* (2015) systematic review of 21 papers focused on effect of risk in OP. Findings highlighted positively on a variety of health indicators and behaviours. Most notably physical activity/FMS, social health, behaviours, aggression and injuries. The review acknowledged children's need to access OP/RP as declining opportunity in recent generations has negatively impacted upon child development. Confident educators must, therefore, optimise OP opportunities. Outdoors can be an evolutionary and sustainable part of a setting that provides strategic developmental, learning and educational outcomes, promoting wellbeing (Syomwene 2017). Moser and Martinsen (2010) longitudinal study characterised responses from 278 educators, identified children in Norway spent 70% of their time outdoors in summer and 31% in winter regardless of harsh conditions. It shall be essential to explore if Irish educators avail of outdoors to such a degree, whether climate is an enabler or constrictor? Whether sufficient outdoor wear is available and whether planning for outdoors considers such factors.

#### **2.4 Early year educators' perspectives**

Niehues *et al.* (2013) investigated the effects of experienced teachers altering outdoor free play environments and introducing loose parts as a mode of increasing physical activity and movement. Researchers identified children's intrinsic enthusiasm to engage in OP in the enriched environment was calculable, as accelerometer counts were used to gauge movement. However, it firstly required re-education of RP benefits to teachers. Researchers retested two years later, with successfully maintained gains. Tremblay *et al.* (2015) research on developing a Position Statement on Outdoor Play, noted regardless of risk of injury, benefits of OP engagement far outweighed risk. Guldberg (2009) acknowledged Norway's societal approach of encouraging children outdoors:

Norwegians have a special love for outdoor pursuits and are reluctant to restrict children's freedom to roam outdoors – without adults watching them – to the same extent that other nations do.

(Guldberg 2009, p. 60)

Notwithstanding, Dietze and Kashin (2019) research concluded educators' attitudes, perceptions, values, experiences, and knowledge most certainly influence OP experiences. Further suggested the importance of educators gaining access CPD not only to enrich confidence but change attitudes to outdoor learning/engagement. It shall be motivating to understand to what degree educators engage CPD on OP.

## **2.5 Safety perspectives**

Adams (2001) surmised educators' supervision of OP is predominantly cautious, interestingly alluding colleagues' evaluation a factor combined with litigation fears. Consistency of findings within literature demonstrates settings have less and primarily minor injuries compared with injuries resulted from time spent in the home place (Briss *et al.* 1994; Leland *et al.* 1993; Schwebel *et al.* 2005). New *et al.* (2005) proposes fear of litigation impacts educators OP planning of enriched opportunities and supports the suggestion that Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and to some degree Italian educators have greater freedom to engage and encourage OP exploration. As aforementioned, insurance company - Ironshore Europe withdrew from Irish markets at the end of 2019, resulted in insurance premiums tripling. This study shall explore how this impacts educators' engagement in OP and whether caution is adopted to sustain premiums. Hayes (2005) likened the role of educators to Yeats "filling of the pail", how would this stand up against a backdrop of fear of litigation? The assumption that keeping children safe indoors is putting children at risk. Regardless of outdoor area limitations, Bilton (2007, p. 3) promoted the notion to "compensate for constraints and exploit opportunities" as a guide to educators in fostering OP. Similarly, Scandinavian countries adopt a more liberal approach but do not have litigation concerns which Ireland presents with (Adams 2001). It is, therefore, necessary to actively collaborate/engage with parents and families on adopting positive approaches to OP (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009).

## **2.6 Parental collaboration**

CECDE (2007) Standard three, outlined educators have opportunities to share information with parents in respect of benefits of OP. This study shall allow educators discuss opinions expressed by parents of OP. Loprinzi and Trost (2010) established parental perception of importance of physical activity was positively accompanied by physical performance in

preschool. Notwithstanding, children at this age require constant supervision and Little (2010) and Little *et al.* (2012) findings indicated role modelling and promotion of risk mastery serve as positive guidance for safety (Bandura 2017). Neihues *et al.* (2013) intervention in supporting educators reframe perceptions of risk in OP and share such knowledge with parents to achieve the common goal of ensuring children developed healthy, happy and resilient. Failure in addressing over supervision of OP can equally serve as a barrier to risk-taking. Therefore a healthy balance must be maintained through meaningful educator/parental collaboration (Little 2013). Although mothers acknowledged fears of their child engaging in outdoor RP, weight of access may overwhelmingly be placed on shoulders of educators while in settings to compensate for decreased opportunities in the home place. As indicated earlier, educators are perfectly positioned to provide quality opportunities in OP through government-funded initiatives, namely NCS and ECCE (Tandon *et al.* 2019).

## **2.7 Ingredients for a quality environment**

Participation of NCS (2019) section 4.1 and 4.2 entails providers comply fully with both legal and regulatory obligations in respect of Childcare Act (1991), Child and Family Agency Act (2013), Children First (2017), Equal Status Acts (2020) and Data Protection Act (2018), being prerequisites to approval. Appendix 1,11 of the NCS contract, highlight providers must adhere to principles of CECDE (2007) and NCCA (2009). DCYA (2018) detailed 84% of settings engage in Aistear and 74% in Síolta with other curricular amounting for remainder (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009). DES (2009, p. 2) comprehended educators need to deliver enriched ECCE experiences while engaging “in interdisciplinary professional work practices designed to support delivery of consistent quality in ECCE experiences of young children”. Childcare Regulation (2016) does not necessarily consider child developmental or play needs, as it fails to expressly stipulate amount of time required in OP. Arguably, amendments could be perceived as tokenistic as the timescale for OP not detailed. Barber *et al.* (2013) observed British children OP at 90 minutes, comparable to Vale *et al.* (2010) specified Portuguese OP at 402 minutes. Improving upon findings of Barber *et al.* (2013), the UK government introduced the UK Chief Medical Officers' (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) 2019) Physical Activity Guidelines. Clearly outlining:

Pre-schoolers should spend at least 180 minutes per day in a variety of physical activities spread throughout the day, including active OP.

(DHSC 2019, p. 22)

It shall be advantageous to understand educators' perspectives, in particular to OP and whether their perspectives are impacted as a result of legislation. Having discussed legislation that defines practice, contemplation of sectoral historical overview is represented in appendix 12.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Acknowledgement that early childhood is a critical time in respect of the promotion of healthy development, yet research established decline in opportunity for OP. Exploration of international and national research studies found, international evidence-based best practice informed Irish practice. This chapter has allowed the critique of research which impacts upon educators' perspectives of enabling/promoting OP. With children spending extended periods in settings, literature has ascertained educators can intervene and actively encourage engagement in OP, which is a central element of quality provision. Research recognised regulation and litigation could undoubtedly influence opportunity for such play to a certain extent. The conflicted educators need to collaborate with families, understand their concerns and positively influence a cultural change in OP perspective. Research dubiously argued scheduled access is not always utilised and weather can/cannot impact affordances of OP. Understanding of educators' perspectives, experiences, challenges, enablers or constrainers to OP in the Irish context is under-researched and unknown. The researcher hopes engagement and exploration with educators, will frame their perspectives, identify gaps and limitations they experience in OP affordances.

For this study, it will be necessary to adopt an exploratory qualitative approach. Focus group (FG) interviews allow for obtaining rich explorative qualitative data on the subject matter. One rural and one urban focus group interviews shall be carried out. Chapter three will detail study design, methods of data collection and subsequent analysis and interpretation of findings. It is hoped dissemination of findings in publications and conferences will contribute to debate on OP in an Irish context.



# Chapter Three: Methodology

### **3.0 Introduction**

An in-depth literature review identified international perceptions of early year educators' perspectives of outdoor play; however, little had been investigated in the Irish context (Looney 2019). This study endeavoured to determine the following specific objectives:-

#### **Objective of the study**

1. To provide an understanding of early year educators' experience and perspectives of outdoor play and ascertain whether such perspectives correspond with professional practice as outlined in the Aistear curriculum or Síolta framework (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009)
2. To equip researcher with sufficient information to appreciate and recognise early year educators' thoughts on planning for outdoor play and whether they identified challenges to this
3. To highlight early year educators' views of benefits of outdoor play
4. To understand whether they were afforded sufficient access to outdoors

Researcher hoped dissemination of study findings in publications and conferences would contribute to debate on outdoor play in an Irish context. This qualitative study utilised focus groups as the mode of data collection. Due to Covid-19 Pandemic, and adhering to government social distancing legislation, employed the Zoom platform (Department of Health and Department of the Taoiseach 2020). Approval to utilise Zoom from Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LyIT) Ethics Committee was granted, as face to face focus group approval was initially given. The researcher acknowledged strengths of Zoom as communication was streamlined, high-quality video, use of recording feature and crisp audio. However, weakness identified the need to have technology 'know-how', internet access and quality broadband. Such impeded (n=3) participants' connection, contribution and engagement. To ensure rigour, researcher invited participants to log into Zoom before live FG, however, identified poor broadband, resulted in unsuccessful access. Researcher acknowledged access to Zoom a study limitation.

By definition, a focus group is:

A gathering of a limited number of individuals, who through conversation with each other, provide information about a specific topic, issue or subject

(Savin-Baden and Major, 2013 p. 375).

It was established two focus group interviews with educators from the county of Donegal, would be employed. Utilising one rural and one urban sample design. Step by step procedures in respect of collation of data and analysis reflected upon (Gibbs 1988). The design, sampling, methodology and data collection discussed in-depth in this chapter. Finally, considerations in respect of ethical affordances were equally presented and measures taken to uphold ethical standards deliberated (Aronson 2001; DJELR 2018; Feeney 2010; Ndebele 2013; WMADH 2013).

### **3.1 Design**

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach. As aforementioned, educators' perspectives of OP have been under-researched in an Irish context. Both FG interviews obtained rich explorative qualitative data on the subject matter (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).

#### **3.1.1 Research paradigm**

The research paradigm or theoretical perspective utilised an interpretive/naturalistic FG approach (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The exploration of educators' perspective of OP required a methodology where rich dialogue fostered, allowed for discussion on the proposed questions (Fern 2001). Depth and breadth of responses one gathers in a FG compared with bare numerical information one might acquire in quantitative research, lent itself well to this particular topic. It allowed participants to justify and expand on points made leading to increased clarity, thus maximising data validity interpreted by researcher (Krueger 2015). Rather than adopt a quantitative positivist approach, where predefined probabilistic modes of data collection could be employed, qualitative option utilised afforded understanding of educators' explicit views and opinions. Comparison to research governed by subjectivity, in pursuit of the humanistic insight of educators' approaches to OP, assumption of a FG was deemed most suitable (Crotty 2003; Kuzmin 2018). Fern (1983, p.

121) defined FG as “a qualitative collection tool in which several respondents simultaneously discuss a given topic under guidance of a moderator”. It allowed for patterns and trends identification and informed researcher of experiences and perspectives educators perceived to OP. LR highlighted an apparent decline in OP. It equally questioned educators’ affordances of OP, RP and fear of litigation. Moreover, educators’ duties to comply with legislation in the backdrop of an ever-evolving sector, identified as being overwhelmed by regulation (Childcare Regulation 2016).

### **3.1.2 Focus group methodology**

FG has a long history in qualitative research and originated in 1920’s USA (Krueger 2015). FG help to determine weakness, ways of improving situations, feelings, opinions, perceptions and insights into topics of discussion. FG offer a context for interactions, exchanges and comments (Morgan 2009). With an ever-expanding legislative and regulative backdrop, it was beneficial to ascertain how educators ensured opportunity for OP within such identified restrictions. FG differs from other categories of group interactions as they do not require experts to agree consensus or solve an identified problem. They simply aim to investigate and appreciate participants’ perceptions, thought processes and responses to the setting’s environment in which they work (Krueger 2015). FG also enabled understanding of educators’ consideration of Lewin’s (1947) theory of Action Research. It was pivotal to ascertain whether educators took an autocratic lead ensuring affordances of OP were provided for children regardless of confines of OP/RP, fear of litigation, legislation and regulation thus guaranteeing holistic development of children in their care (CECDE 2007; Gesell 2017; Maslow 1999; NCCA 2009).

#### **Advantages of focus groups**

1. Allowed for a rich narrative of lived experiences of educators, who actively planned for best possible outcomes for children in their care (First Five 2019)
2. Gave participants opportunity to justify, expand on and provide clarity concerning points made, thus giving researcher more detailed data of heightened validity
3. Wealth of issues identified within a short time frame
4. Allowed for exploration of ideology across demographics and a variety of settings

5. The value of transferability of chosen framework could undoubtedly extend to a broader scale investigation of educators' perspectives of OP in an Irish context should equivalent conditions, situation and procedure be employed (Guba and Lincoln, 2003)

### **Disadvantages of focus groups**

1. Experienced facilitator required to utilise Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach to data analysis
2. Lack of confidentiality as dependent upon participants ease to discuss/disclose potentially sensitive personal information with strangers (Data Protection Act 2018)
3. Social amiability and desirably - profess what one thinks is the right answer in a social context
4. Social agreeability – agree with who one perceived as 'all-knowing'

### **3.1.3 Pilot study**

Practice FG run-through to test questions, recording and analysis was utilised. Such allowed researcher hone skills and identify if any questions or areas from the principal planned FG could be omitted (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Pilot FG participants had opportunity to give researcher feedback on the process. Researcher used this information to shape the way forward in the main study. Employing a small group of educators/teacher identified by their ability to comment on the topic and give honest feedback on processes to researcher was engaged (n=4). Their educational background ranged from NFQ level 6, 7 - 8, with a combined experience of 51 years, averaged at 12.75 years. Pilot study data collected was not included in the research study.

### **3.1.4 Justification of method adopted**

Disregarding of quantitative methods, as such restricts voice of participant/s as information is generally obtained in the form of closed-ended questions and Likert rating scales. This study required "exploring" of educators' perspectives of OP and Uijtdehaage and O'Neal (2015) critically acknowledged participants evaluate quantitative questionnaires mindlessly.

Koufakou *et al.* (2016) carried out a preliminary study of abstracting participant's insight and

sentiment on topics noted several free-text questions generated more qualitative data than a large number of quantitative questions. Brandl *et al.* (2017) five-year collation of data from 885 college students positively acknowledged benefits of adopting FG interviews as allowed one to one feedback and problem-solving abilities after each course. Research equally acknowledged the historically recognised FG could be an invaluable supplement to quantitative research (Fern 2001). Opportunity for face to face communication, where clarity to proposed questions could be deciphered through rich dialogue in a comfortable, relaxed setting was the ideal choice to answer study questions. Such equally allowed for expansion of topic for discussion, with introduction of considerations which researcher had not initially anticipated (Hsieh *et al.* 2014). FG allowed opportunity for debate on practical solutions that experienced educators positively engaged in to ensure opportunity of OP is afforded to children in their care. The researcher acknowledged FG limitations as it could be argued no scientific analysis, as reliability fails to be determined, in comparison to quantitative methods (Morgan 2009).

Similarly, researcher's lack of in-depth background knowledge on topic could be problematic. However, researchers' understanding of ECCE sector counteracts those mentioned above. FG allows for development of broad sectoral insight, and this methodology will be useful in uncovering essential information from educators on affordances, constraints or enablers of OP (Kitzinger 1994). The day to day planning for OP, challenges which educators face - in particular, lack of space, resources and time constraints were explored to ensure acknowledgement of a humanistic approach/response. Use of FG to gather data versus the use of quantitative surveys to generate broader and detailed reactions across a range of demographics, including rural and urban settings, community-based and private settings established.

The gathering of different ideologies, perspectives and experiences encouraged participants to reflect, not only on their contributions but also on contributions of other participants (Schon 1983). Such allowed participants explore issues from different perspectives as well as their own. The FG approach also afforded researcher opportunity to probe closed comments/replies or generalisations and seek clarity and depth in responses. Use of 'open-ended comments' often lack specificity and contextual factors, for example, participants

asked for their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions when compared to specific focus closed-ended questions. Researcher acknowledged this limitation (Tucker 2013; 2015). However, time was afforded to all participants to voice their experience of working and planning for OP effectively.

### **3.1.5 Rigour and validity**

The qualitative researcher must attend to and ensure study rigour (Cypress 2017). Researcher acknowledged this could be a challenge in qualitative research due to encounters of interpretation in comparison to adopting a quantitative approach. Rigour, by definition, ensures careful, accurate, thorough attention is lavished on the study, and the researcher endeavoured to ensure such (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). Strength of study design, and appropriateness of adopting a historically recognised FG to answer research questions, limited potential of prejudice which could be inherent in qualitative research (Fechner 2014). Addressing validity - researcher attested to accurateness and truthfulness of answers given by participants as FG were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Educators' perceptions were validated by questioning and investigating throughout FG interviews to appreciate educators' knowledge of characteristics and attributes of engaging in OP. As a validation instrument, clarification sought to ensure accurate, truthful and factual responses interpreted by the researcher (Leininger 1987). Justification of framework chosen and potential for reproducibility guaranteed rigour as could be generalised to other contexts (Krueger and Casey, 2009).

## **3.2 Sampling**

Purposeful identification and contacting of settings for participation was employed. Ensuring a mix of community-based and private settings located within the county of Donegal. Letter of invitation forwarded to a gatekeeper (management of a setting) (appendix 3/15) outlined all relevant information concerning intention, purpose and methodology style of proposed research (n=18). Follow up call was made to the manager to determine if setting wished to participate. Once consent was given for staff access, a letter of invitation sent to educators for FG participation (appendix 4). No selection bias was adopted; both community-based and private settings afforded equal opportunity to partake. As was FG from rural/urban locations,

thus adopting a purposeful sampling approach. Bondas and Hall (2007) recommended in-depth studies with purposefully selected participants rather than impersonal superficial large-scale studies where viability could be questionable. “Purposeful sampling requires access to key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich content” (Suri 2011, p. 4). Therefore, employment within ECCE (0-6) sector, working directly with children, stipulated as criteria for inclusion. It was envisaged (n=6-8) would attend FG. Krueger and Casey (2009, p. 67) recommended at least 4-8 in a FG. They outlined “focus groups determine perceptions, feeling and thinking of people about issues, products, services and opportunities“ was paramount in determining answers of study questions. Exclusion of researchers’ current pupils from participation, due to potential for an unequal relationship which could impact on validity of data/findings generated. Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, adhering to government social distancing regulation, Zoom was adopted as mode to conduct the FG. In FG 1, (n=4) attended from private based settings. No community-based settings participated due to difficulty in accessing Zoom volume. Researcher characterised the FG participants in chapter 4, table 1. In FG 2, (n=4) attended, three from community and one from private setting.

### **3.3 Procedure**

Initial pilot FG was planned and delivered with educators who were room leaders/teacher within settings based in County Donegal (n=4). Educators experience, background and knowledge, allowed for honest feedback on OP topic and similarly commented on development of researcher’s FG facilitation skills. To optimise the two subsequent FG, researcher asked educators’ opinions concerning terminology utilised/questions proposed (Krueger 2015). Kitzinger (1994) findings highlighted the importance of enriched interactions between participants in FG. Research of 351 participants engaged in 52 FG indicated the importance of engaging with pre-existing groups to analyse what participants thought and why they thought so. Such FG allows for challenging what participants profess to believe versus how they actually behave. Thus, limiting opportunity for response bias. Likewise, Khan and Manderson (1992) explicitly encouraged such social grouping as it allows for idea formation understanding in a social context. Some participants in both pilot and two main FG were professionally aware of each other. Due to study’s geographical location, educators acknowledged previously attended CPD training courses with



participants. Such did not appear to inhibit participants' engagement. Interpretation is similarly supported by Khan and Manderson (1992) findings, thus allowing for a rich fluid conversation on topic under investigation.

Initial FG Zoom meeting was arranged for an appropriate time to accommodate educators' agenda/schedule. As a welcome gesture, general pleasantries exchanged with an appreciation for participation during Covid-19 Pandemic and for accessing Zoom (Denscombe 2017). Participants were encouraged to get comfortable and ensure they could see and hear participants and equally, would not be disturbed during meeting. An informal approach was adopted to guarantee participants' ease. Time was afforded to participants to interact between themselves before commencement of FG. FG objective was to obtain information and take account of educators' opinions, in a relaxed environment where they felt comfortable expressing their perspectives on OP through reciprocal fluid communication. Before FG commencement, participants were encouraged to complete a Participant Consent Form (appendix 5) and Early Years Focus Group Demographics Questionnaire (appendix 6). This information subsequently outlined the participants' characteristics (chapter 4). To aid FG flow, researcher adhered to guidelines (appendix 8).

### **3.3.1 Focus group engagement**

Concerning Zoom, facilitator informed participants one person should speak at a time, and audio recording would commence immediately. Recordings transcribed verbatim, and participants anonymity guaranteed as no names were used (participants 1 /2 /3 /4 utilised) (Data Protection Act 2018). Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any stage up to transcription. Researcher ensured no one participant dominated discussion and all had equal opportunity to contribute actively (Cohen *et al.* 2013). Participants were informed researcher as a mandated person, would comply with Children First (2015) guidelines. (Mandated persons are people who have contact with children and/or families who, by qualification virtue/training/experience, are in a pivotal position to help protect children from harm). Guiding of FG discussion utilised open-ended questions on OP (appendix 7). Participants were encouraged to explore their perspectives of OP with their thoughts on planning for OP – what enablers/restrictors they identify. What they viewed the benefits of

OP and how legislation and regulation promoted/impacted their planning for OP. Supervisor reviewed questions, and to ensure clear comprehension; some questions were simplified.

Equally, no direct question was posed with respect to participant's content knowledge of Síolta framework/Aistear curriculum. Thus, safeguarded validity of responses and put participants at ease. Creswell and Creswell (2018) outlined limited time yielded best information collation, FG 1 - 59 minutes and FG two - 82 minutes. It was pivotal throughout FG, that researcher continuously clarified responses of participants, thus ensuring/maintaining rigour. Patton (1991, pp. 287-289) outlined the importance of researcher maximising "quality of interactions" with available resources and skills. Correspondingly, acknowledged researcher could potentially be "bound by time"; however, time was generously allotted for each participant to engage and contribute to the rich discussion on OP. Complementary respectful interactions allowed participants to communicate as each provided an audience for one another. Kitzinger (1994) acknowledged possibility of FG criticisms; however, surmised this need not be negative nor invalidate findings but instead allows for theorising why such opinions are/were perceived. Such argumentative interactions allow for shifting of group consensus and consideration of how educators practice differs depending on an array of themes. Generation of such themes allowed for exploration of opinions perceived by participants on OP.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Focus group data**

Researcher adopted an open mind when exploring qualitative data utilising thematic analysis. To systematically consider research question and recognise if a patterned response was becoming apparent. To identify significant emerging themes from number of instances themes occurred (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Applying sound judgement to establish significance of themes within data set. Furthermore, to determine and analyse what themes have potential for importance. Utilising thematic analysis ensured rigorous process of clearly identifying and classifying such themes/emerging patterns (Clark and Braun, 2013). Researcher did not solely assume research questions as themes, but preferably analysed transcript. Advantage of adopting this flexible method allowed for diverse data examined, be

identified. Researcher acknowledged various approaches that could be adopted, however, for study purpose adherence to Braun and Clarke (2006) influential ‘Six-Step’ framework (appendix 9). Correspondingly, identified if any compounding LR content was identified and characterised within FG rich conversation content. Hence importance of utilising a pilot study and two FG interviews, which ensured questions were relevant for area explored and researchers’ terminology/language used, understood by participants. Such attention to detail allowed exploration of rigour within the framework. Elements contributed as a result of utilising ‘loose end questions’ near FG end, added to the wealth of data available for analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, pp. 212-213). To not disturb the organic FG conversation flow, open-ended questions allowed clarification of content or questions which researcher initially omitted, again ensured study rigour.

### **3.4.2 Interpretation of themes**

Due to volume of data collected, researcher recognised data management as a crucial stage of research (Moule *et al.* 2017). Moreover, such ensured trustworthiness and rigour within findings. Researcher utilised an approach of colour coding data to identify associations, patterns and themes within transcripts. To interpret meaning, this structured format of thematic analysis proved useful as researcher acknowledged limitation as a ‘novice’ concerning data analysis (Smith and Firth, 2011) (appendix 13).

### **3.4.3 Early Years Focus Group Demographics Questionnaire data**

It was essential to provide within the study detailed descriptive statistics in respect of summarised findings of the questionnaire (appendix 6). Such involved getting an exact representation of participants in respect of educators’ qualification, location (rural/urban), years of employment. Equally, type of setting and time spent outdoors which may or may not impact perspectives (CECDE 2007; Childcare Regulation 2016; DCYA 2018; First Five 2019; NCCA 2009) (chapter 4). Due to settings employing predominantly female staff, researcher identified this as a limitation (DCYA 2018). Ideally, FG would have continued until saturation was evident. Researcher acknowledged in succeeding chapters the methodological and personal limitations of the study, thus allowing for an educated conclusion in respect of validity/reliability of findings (Kitzinger 1994).

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

Research permission was sought and successfully obtained (7/2/20) from LyIT Ethics Board in collaboration with assigned supervisor (British Educational Research Association 2018) (appendix 16). Due to Covid-19, it was necessary to gain ethics board permission to utilise Zoom as a mode to conduct FG as previously granted face to face FG would have breached social distancing restrictions (Department of Health 2020, Department of the Taoiseach 2020). Researcher endeavoured to:

Ensure research processes and findings were transparent, honest and trustworthy, and that inferences and generalisations drawn from research evidence were valid, reliable and credible.

(Bertram *et al.* 2015, p. 10)

as cited by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association. Dignity and participants' rights were ensured in line with Nuremberg Code of Medical Ethics (Czech *et al.* 2018). Wellbeing and comfort safeguarded throughout the study. Participants' were given accurate, detailed, honest information concerning study nature and purpose (Smith 2009) (appendix 4). Resnik (2018, p. 113) specified informed consent was "important for promoting trust between subjects and investigators" as assured participant/s researcher would treat them respectfully. There was no possibility to coerce participation as interested parties freely came forward and logged onto Zoom. Participants' attendance on Zoom established voluntary FG participation. Researcher discussed research rational by presenting letter of invitation to interested participants and answered all questions (appendix 4). Participant Consent Form was presented for completion, thus ensuring permission in line with ethical guideline (World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki 2013) (appendix 5).

Participants' name/setting names were not disclosed during process, referred to as participant (n=1/2/3/4). Participants' were invited to complete a questionnaire (appendix 6) to determine group characteristics, again no names/work locations disclosed during documenting of data for publication (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018; Data Protection 2018).

Ethically, considerations concerning storing participants' data were acknowledged.

Participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity assured by only storing data securely in a locked filing cabinet, electronically secured on a password protected encrypted computer, again in a locked office. Transcribed data stored in the same manner as was physical recorded data storage hard drive. Researcher acknowledged findings of Greenwood *et al.*

(2017) analysis of both transcribed data and direct audio recording analysis. With the comparison of results, two techniques were equivalent in identifying themes. Although direct analysis is more cost-effective, researcher acknowledged from results an ‘experienced researcher’ should only utilise this mode. On reflection, in particular with consideration to ‘reflection in action’ and regardless of cost or time, to ensure rigour, data was transcribed verbatim (Gibbs 1988; Schon 1983).

Participants were advised on importance of safeguarding confidentiality and privacy of all by not discussing with non-participants observations made or opinions expressed during FG meetings (Shamoo and Schwartz, 2008). Adams and Miles (2013) analysis of the Belmont Report indicated ethical knowledge and adherence as a critical component in epistemology. Researcher made it clear to participants as a mandated person and in keeping with Children First (2015), should a disclosure concerning welfare and/or protection of children be highlighted, it would be referred to Tusla. Researcher made every effort to ensure research was conducted in an objective, honest and unbiased manner. Researcher acknowledged participants might perceive a risk of giving truthful responses during discussions, due to possibility of being prejudged by fellow participants (Adams 2001). It was made clear to participants this study is part of a Master’s dissertation and may not influence or impact policy/practice within ECCE sector. Researcher ensured a nonbiased approach concerning the subject investigation to ensure impartial results. Respect and consideration regarding participants and data received from them assumed (Alderson 1995; 2008; Data Protection Act 2018; GDPR 2018;). Results were undoubtedly presented factually in publication. Most notably, researcher exercised “*Primum Non-Nocere*” – First do no harm – in relation to study participants.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined study objectives, design implemented, sampling recruited, procedure of data analysed and ethical considerations respected throughout the utilised FG. Rationale of adopting FG was deliberated upon as was considerations respected, with regards to ensuring study rigour and validity. As there is little research on this topic in an Irish context, researcher hopes the subject of “Exploring Early Year Educators’ perceptions of Outdoor Play” would be replicated to validate study findings and improve outcomes/offer supports to educators in the form of CPD.

# Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

#### **4.0 Introduction**

The principle study's purpose was to explore educators' perspective of OP. Employment within settings/ECCE (0-6) sector, and working directly with children, stipulated as criteria for inclusion. This study specifically intended to investigate and give voice to perceptions and experiences of educators regarding the following research questions:

1. What are educators' experiences and perspectives of OP? Do these perspectives correspond with professional practice, as outlined in the Aistear Curriculum or Síolta Framework?
2. What are educators' thoughts on planning for OP? Are there challenges?
3. What are educators' views on the benefits of OP?
4. Do educators have sufficient access to outdoors? What support structures may be required in order to facilitate access OP?

Results and discussion of the focus group data are presented.

\* Transcribed focus group data is presented in booklet form, hence identifying page numbers from pp. 1-53 as exert locations within text.



#### 4.1 Results - focus group response data

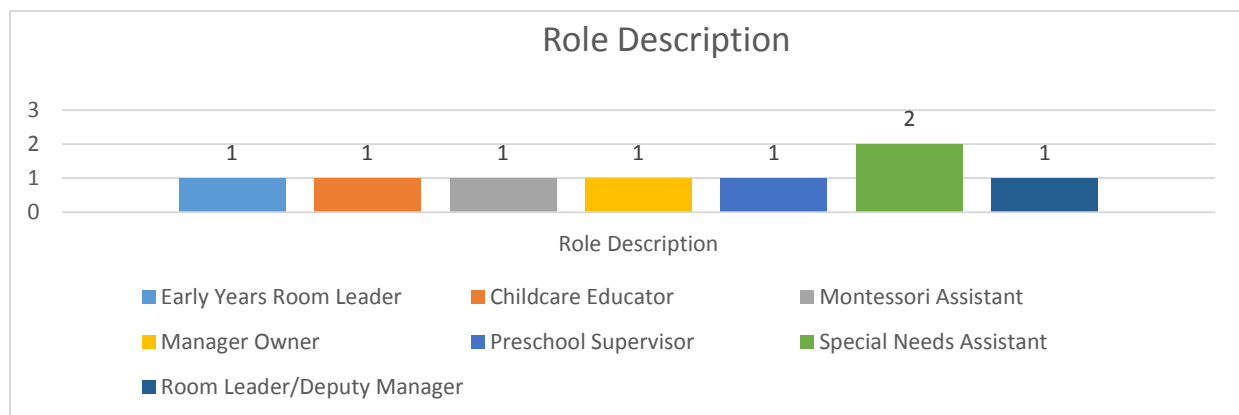
(N=8) educators participated in two focus groups; rural (n=4) and urban (n=4). All participants identified as having some form of OP access. Groups' characteristics outlined in table 1. Mean length of experience in current role was 5.5 years. Participants characterised their roles in table 2.

**Table 1 Characteristics of Focus Groups Sample**

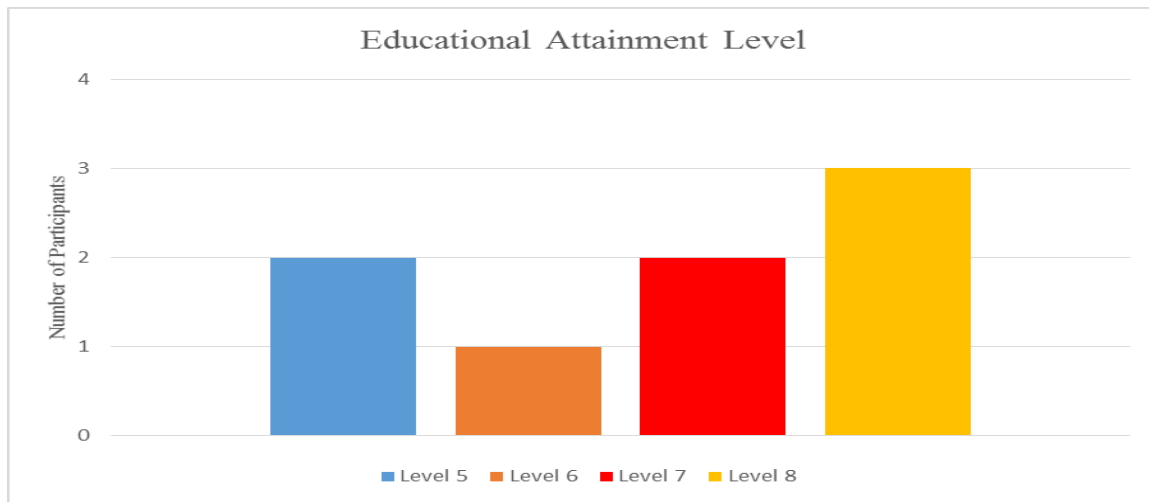
Professional Experience								
Participant	Access to Outdoors	Status of setting		Role title(s)			Duration / Length of service in current role	Total Length of service in ECCE
		Private for profit	Community	Owner	*Other	Leader /supervisor		
1-R	✓	✓				✓	3 years	2-5 years
2-R	✓	✓			✓		10 years	10 years
3-R	✓	✓			✓		10 years	10 years
4-R	✓	✓		✓			10 years	10 years
5-U	✓		✓			✓	1 year	1 year
6-U	✓		✓		✓		1 year	2-5 years
7-U	✓		✓		✓		5 years	10 years
8-U	✓	✓			✓		4 years	4 years
Mean length in current role								5.5 years

\*Other = Special Needs Assistant/Childcare Educator/Outdoor Teacher/Deputy Manager/Montessori Assistant (all female)

**Table 2 Role Description**



**Table 3 Focus Groups - qualifications in Early Childhood Care and Education**



Participants’ educational attainments outlined in table 3. As per regulation guidelines, all participants held minimum required qualifications - NFQ framework (Childcare Regulation 2016). (N=5) held degree awards, while (n=1) attained level six award. Of the (n=2) with level five, (n=1) was in the process of completing level six. (N=6) detailed partaking in short CPD courses. Short courses were characterised as courses of day/s/week/s duration in areas such as Aistear, Síolta, Hanen, Lámh which are CPD courses funded by DCYA to ECCE sector. Participants were encouraged to list those completed, which were not included, identifying FAR First Aid, Healthy Ireland Smart, Sensory Processing, and Montessori Pedagogy as courses attended, see table 4.

**Table 4 Short Courses**

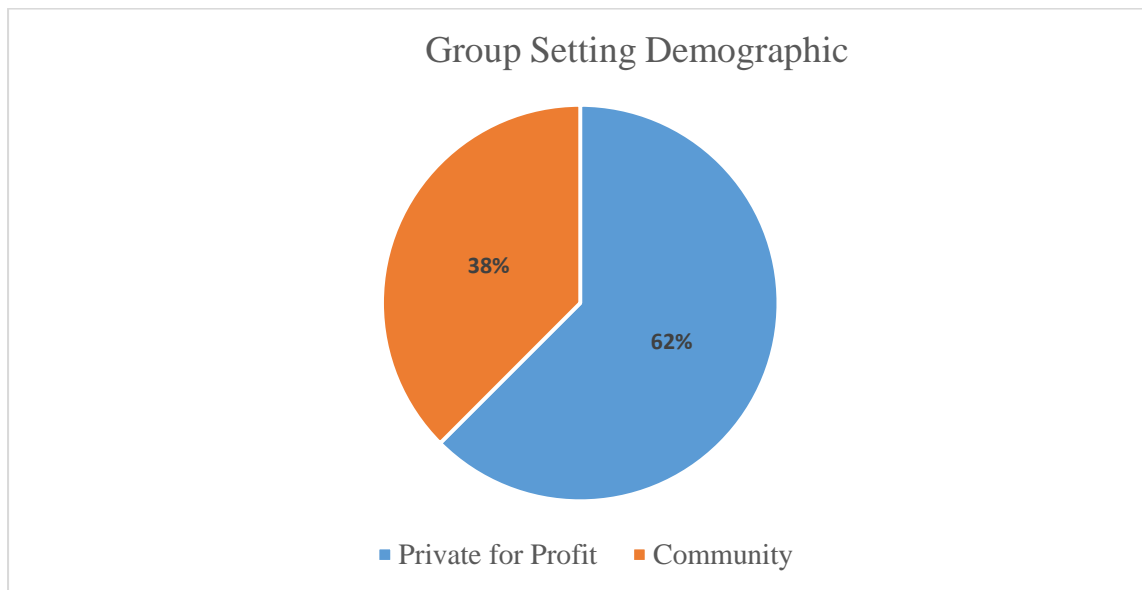
Participant	NFQ 5	NFQ 6	NFQ 7	NFQ 8	Montessori Teaching	Short Courses
1-R				✓		0
2-R		✓				3
3-R	✓					0
4-R			✓			2
5-U				✓		5
6-U			✓			5
7-U				✓	✓	2
8-U	✓					1

NFQ –National Framework of Qualifications. U – Urban, R – Rural

**Table 5      Group setting/participants demographic**

Group setting demographic, 5.1 - contained (n=3) participants from community settings and (n=5) private settings. 5.2 - FG 1 (n=4) rural private. FG 2 (n=3) urban community, (n=1) urban private.

5.1



5.2

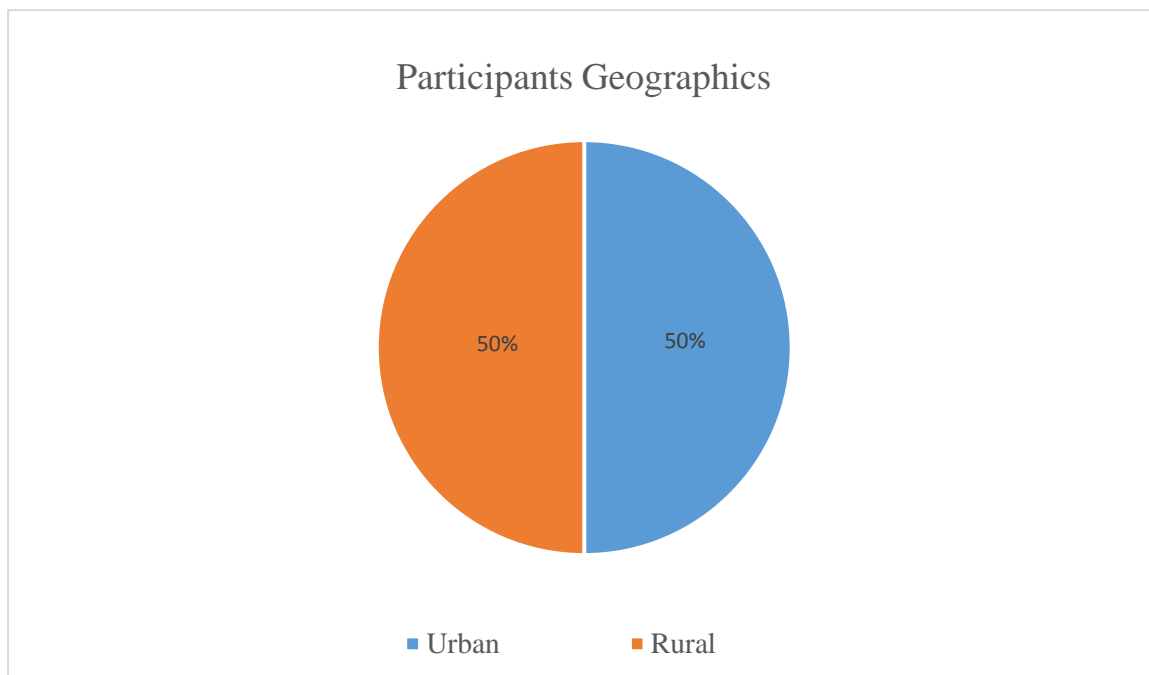
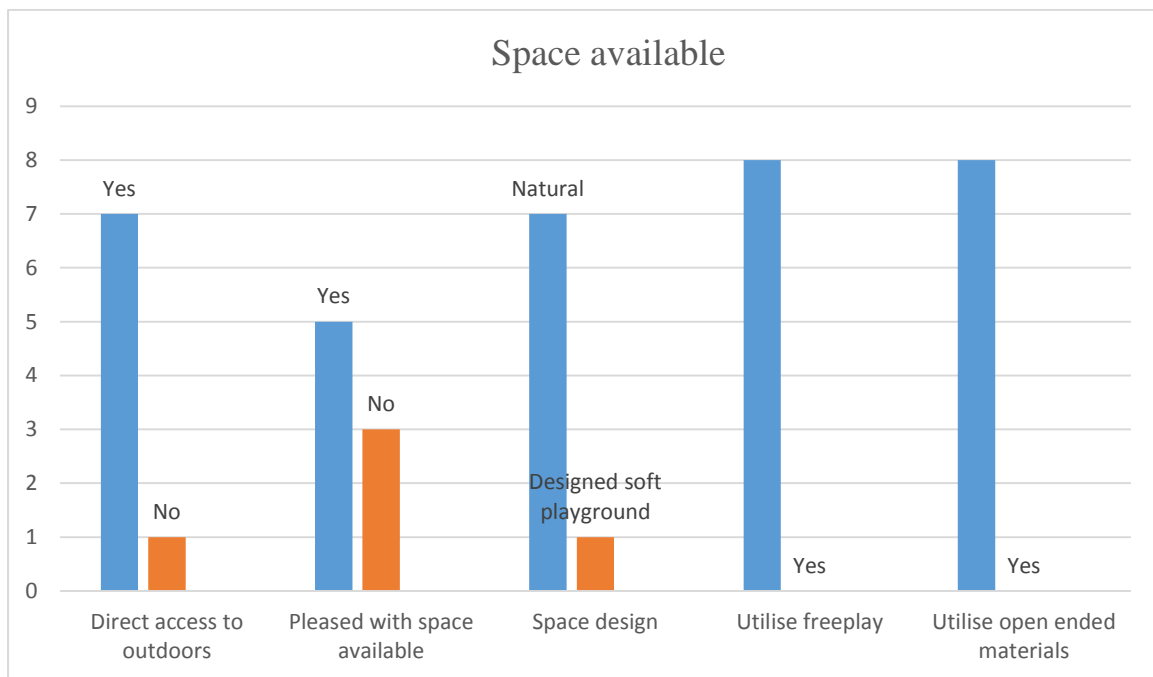


Table 7 outlined participants' outdoor environment. Table 6, (n=7) reported having direct access to OP. (N=1) required a two-minute walk across a car park to gain entry to outdoors. (N=5) stated they were not happy with settings outdoor provision. Reasons given included inflexible scheduling regarding access, small play spaces and lack of direct access to outdoors. (N=7) expanded upon their outdoor space being natural, while (n=1) detailed space was a designed soft flooring playground. (N=8) utilised and understood benefits of employing and affording children opportunity to engage in free-play and used open-ended materials.

**Table 6 Breakdown of environment**



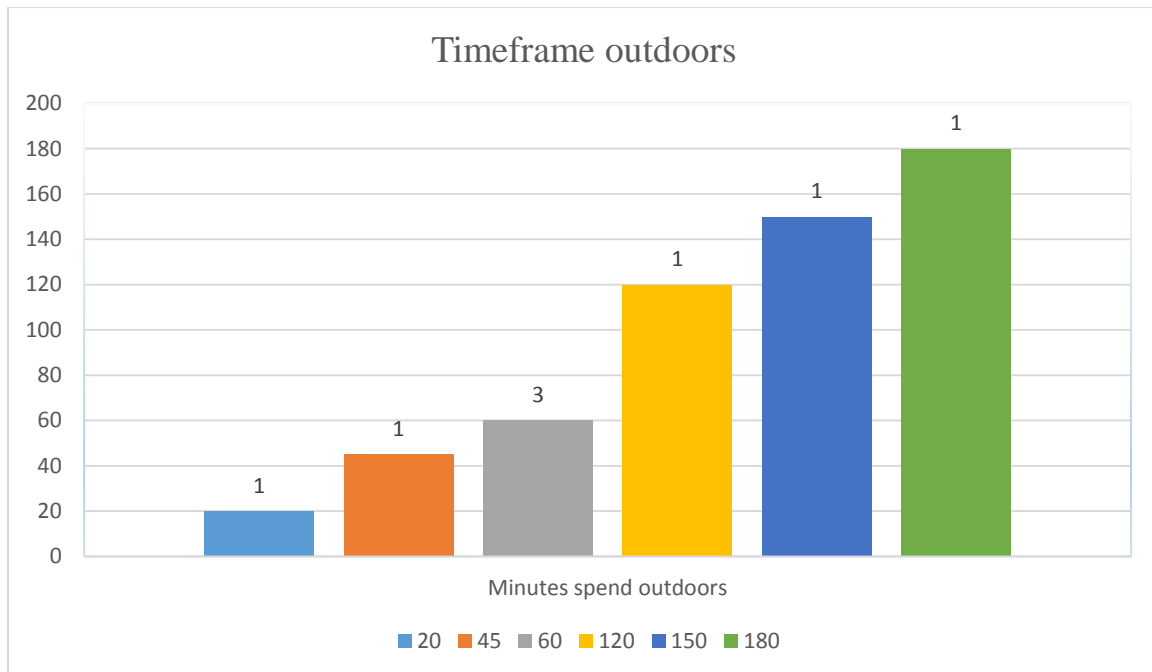
**Table 7 Focus Group Outdoor Environment**

Outdoor Environment									
Participant	Access to Outdoors	Status of setting		Environment			Direct Access to outdoors	Duration / Length time spend outdoors daily	Happy with available space
		Private for profit	Community	Open ended materials	Natural	Designed playground			
1-R	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	1 hour/sessional	yes
2-R	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	1 hour/sessional	no
3-R	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	20 mins/sessional	no
4-R	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	1 hour/sessional	no
5-U	✓		✓	✓		✓	X	30-60 mins all day	no
6-U	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	120 mins all day	no
7-U	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	150 mins all day	yes
8-U	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	180 mins/sessional	yes

\*Sessional = up to 3.5 hours per day

\*All day = up to 8 hours per day

**Table 8 Timeframe outdoors**



Other than one sessional outdoor setting who participated in 180 minutes of OP, sessional settings identified 20/60/60/60 minutes outdoors, while ‘all day’ settings detailed 30-60/120/150 minutes OP engagement. ‘All day’ settings acknowledged inflexible scheduling, restrictions. Sessional services did not stipulate such. Majority of participants identified weather impacted OP opportunities; however, worked within its confines, (n=1) stipulating “lashing rain” being only curtailer (p. 9). However, another positively acknowledged “we have a wee bit of a covered area so we try and get them out, if it is just .... to do a sitting game” (p. 19). Thus, highlighting participant refusal to allow weather impact/dictate OP opportunity, instead embraced facilities available.

## **4.2 Focus group results**

Methodology chapter outlined how FG data evaluation led to development of themes. The dominant themes identified were:-

### **4.3 Perceived benefits of outdoor play**

All participants recognised benefits of OP to children in their care. They outlined their lived experiences on benefits of varying activities. “If it was up to me, I would love to stay outdoors all day” proclaimed (n=1) (p. 2). “There was a lot more space – a lot more freedom” expressed, specifically detailing “it is important for them as part of the curriculum” (p. 17). (N=1) agreed, citing “for development, growth, for their physical development” (p. 17). Further surmising an awareness of getting outdoors in the fresh air was beneficial to all children, in particular “for kids that maybe need extra breaks” promoting sensory break allocations (p. 17)

#### **4.3.1 Physical development**

“Bringing out the Mini-Me Yoga ..... game of Duck Duck Goose... just getting them involved in games... running around... jumping on tyres” all pointed towards refining and improving gross motor skill/FMS development (p. 8). Use of balance beams, Buntus bag to create obstacle courses were examples of planned activities highlighted. Acknowledging it allowed children to “play more so as a whole group ... than when indoors (p. 8). Equally, “1000 children have learnt how to ride a bike within the setting” was participants’ experience over 17 years in practice (p. 25). Additionally, (n=2) cited children were “always ready to roll the hill or climb the tree” as was “kicking and catching a ball” to further refine physical development (p. 25). “Picking up worms, picking up simple small things” attributed to refining fine motor skills with affordances outdoors far outweighing indoor opportunity (p. 27). “So, I kinda think physical development is my most important thing when we are outside” as space affords robust opportunity to physically engage and continue progression of physical development.

### **4.3.2 Social/emotional development**

“You know a child that plays on their own in the book corner or reads alone might initiate a game of ‘runaway’ or ‘capture’“. Equally, “quiet child in the classroom can become a different child outdoors” (p. 24). Concurring, (n=1) “ones that are shy inside seem to come out of themselves outside” suggesting friendship formation occurred more naturally outdoors (p. 26). Further estimating confidence “was unreal as they get outside - there is no roof or a door” hence has freedom to socialise “come and see this, come and see that, catch me!!” allowing for expansion of friendship circles (p. 24). Such echoed further when participant considered “I think it brings them out of their shell .... when they are outside, they would be far more chatty” (p. 7). Indicating enhanced provision of OP affords opportunity to extend “and get different wee friendship circles going” (p. 26). “Amongst themselves....being outside, sharing toys, negotiating ‘*oh can I have a turn next*’ ” improve social etiquette, turn-taking, collaboration and negotiating skills (p. 26). Going a step further, “It is good to get the school pals to mix before they go to school” thus, easing transition to primary (p. 27). (N=2) concurred, friendship formation in more extensive settings with children from other rooms before the move being essential. Participants considered how indoors girls may engage in table-top activities, whereas when afforded OP “they are all running around, more active” socially engaging with boys (p. 27). “You know emotionally; they are learning to manage their emotions ... regulation” which can be teased through games such as Tag, especially when child is caught (p. 26). “They just need to get out, they just need to run about, they need to self-regulate and run off a bit of steam”, was the realisation - children and staff alike benefit from OP (p. 2). Outdoors affords extra space for exploration, (n=2) comprehended “less tell tailing” and disputes, surmising this was due to the child’s need for more independence, adopting a “this is our world, and we are embracing it” attitude. In contrast, OP diminishes evidence of such traits (p. 28).

### **4.3.3 Intellectual/language development**

“You notice that they are more intent to explore outside ...looking for something new....whether it is the spider on the wall...they are kinda learning more about the natural world” while adding to their expanding vocabulary in a social context (p. 24). Majority of participants continued to detail whether “it is planting, digging in the mud”, looking for worms, they are “kinda looking for adventure outside rather than compared to inside”,



acknowledging the engaged educators can actively nurture intellectual development (p. 24). “I would find that 95% of the time the kids would be far calmer coming in after play .... definitely have more concentration .... willing to sit .... organised activity”, visibly improving upon concentration (p. 34). “Their behaviour is better too cause they have more freedom”, noted altered behaviours (p. 7). As was creativity and imagination “they use their imagination more .... you can hear the little conversation .... you wonder where do they get these ideas?” (p. 7). Mood is notably enhanced “get outside for a bit of fresh air .... release their free spirits”, were all attributed to experiencing OP by majority of participants.

#### **4.4 Ingredients for a quality outdoor environment**

##### **4.4.1 The need to get outdoors**

“I try to get outside every single day, I think it is so good for the children to get out kinda let off steam”, daily engagement in OP was a majority driving factor of both FG (p. 17).

“Getting them outdoors is an essential part of everyday – you know for all our children, for learning” (p. 17). Notably striking, participant detailed “I find myself looking at the weather app in the morning just to see when it is our outdoor time ...’YES!!’ we can get outdoor or ‘no’ we won’t get out today!” (p. 18). Participant stipulated “to be honest unless the weather was atrocious outside like lashing down rain” (p. 9) with a second concurring “so we wouldn’t go out if it was lashing the rain you know in our setting” (p. 14). “At our open day, our manager will tell parents ... OP is a big part of what we do from day one” identified by (n=2), stipulated OP engagement was embedded in policy (p. 20). “For myself and my staff, there comes a certain time in the day when we need to say ‘*we need to get outside*’” expanded upon sentiments of (n=3) (p. 2).

#### **4.4.2 Clothing**

“I would be a believer that there is no such thing as bad weather, it is just bad clothing” with appropriate clothing available to all children deemed vital by the majority (p. 19). “Even though we have requested .... bring in like wet suits .... most children don’t”, impacting negatively on OP affordances (p. 19). To counteract, one setting had spares however recognised “we wouldn’t have enough to kit out 20 children” (p. 19). Notably, participant informed parents, OP engagement was policy “and if they are not happy with their kids outside perhaps keep them at home”. Such resonated with another setting who outlined a family insisted their child was not to be out in the rain, firmly stating “we don’t want them out in the rain ....we don’t mind if they are out in the cold but .... we don’t want them out in the rain!”. Participant informed said family to bring “wet gear and their wellies” acknowledging only torrential rain impeded OP (p. 3). “They come suited and booted and would be 100% on board outdoors four days a week” voiced by a predominantly outdoor setting. Further detailed “we have an outdoor classroom and shelter, so it doesn’t matter about the weather” (p. 30).

#### **4.5 Professional Practice**

“Outside it is difficult .... curriculum planning is kind of tricky” as depends upon allotted time frame, voiced as OP constraint (p. 20). “You know the fish boxes, and put in loose parts .... all different stuff”, use of boxes of interest proposed as OP planning solution (p. 21). “We would have a lot of open-ended materials”, cited to encourage child-led activities with free play (p. 4). (N=2) settings engaged in Sólta accreditation programme, positively impacted quality of practice. “Anything that you can teach inside .... we put on our hat .... library area, construction, dramatic play” were all constructed outdoors. “Loads and loads of ideas on how to make the most of your environment .... it kinda inspired us to bring inside out” voiced by (n=2) (p. 21). “To be honest, it is mostly free play .... it is up to the children”, proposed as approach adopted on free play (p. 4). Extending upon the child-led approach, (n=1) outlined “we would give them free play first, and I would get ideas from the kids a lot of the time” (p. 20). Contemplating OP education, “we did touch on it, but I think there is room for more” stipulated (n=3) with degrees. Citing OP education only covered upon reaching degree level (p. 22). “The last one I did was the Buntus one and that was the closest to the outdoors” indicated by (n=1) (p. 11). “That was years ago”, concurred another (p. 11). Majority of

participants acknowledge CPD needs in the form of OP courses. “When you go to courses you find out new and exciting things .... try them out in school” recognised as the benefit of attending training (p. 12). “If you were able to go to other settings outdoors and their areas, you would probably get more ideas” voiced as sector collaboration advantage (p. 12). “There is not a lot of courses .... but one thing I will say is Glenn Outdoor offer open evenings for staff .... look at their outdoor area and how they implement the curriculum”, recognised as an opportunity to improve knowledge base on planning and facilitating OP (p. 22). “I would find that some staff don’t have a clue about outside, so if they do learn in their training it comes easier” clearly depicted need for CPD (p. 35).

#### **4.6 Risky play and litigation**

“We are all very cautious, we do try, like going up and down the slide .... we are very cautious how many people we allow even in the wee play area”, whilst recognising the benefits of RP (n=3) acknowledged safety and litigation fears (p. 6). “You would love to let them but you are nervous about doing it .... certain parents .... would not understand why you would be doing something like that” expressed (n=1) (p. 7). “There is less risk probably when you are indoors” which in reality impacts OP affordance (p. 10). “Early years sector don’t really promote it enough, and staff are weary of letting children engage in risky play” expressed by participant. Further extended “it has a lot to do with inspectors coming in.... they are telling us let children out .... they are not really supporting you in things that you are doing” highlighting educators need “more support in RP and more courses on it would be really beneficial” (pp. 14-15). Another felt OP allows “more boisterous .... a lot more room for rough and tumble play”, however instinctively participant remembered, “he fell and hit himself” before and became anxious “to a degree .... there is kinda a wee limit .... it is kinda a fine line” indicated (pp. 24; 32). Comprehending litigation impacted practice “it would be in your brain because of the culture that we live in” equally, acknowledging reporting process, worrying “oh my god what are they going to come back with”, however CCTV availability eased participants’ worry (p. 32). Another participant held the view more caution was afforded to other people’s children than own children, citing “oh my goodness if they fall .... what is going to happen”. Regardless, promoting risk mastery by allowing exploration - prompting “if you go much higher, do you think something could happen? ...planting a seed in their head”. Rather than remove risk completely, expressed “I do believe that kids .... this is how they learn .... this is

how they learn life – they have taken risks” acknowledging “sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn’t” encouraging risk mastery (p. 33).

“More space for risk-taking – risky play, their spatial awareness .... more opportunities for them to develop all those wee important skills” presented by liberal participant whose experience was shaped by outdoor forest school work experience (p. 28). “No, no, we can’t be doing that” response of overcautious co-workers (p. 33). Regardless, expressed if given opportunity to expanding outdoor area, “I would be all for risk-taking yea”. This ethos mirrored participant promoting risk mastery and allows children to climb trees, acknowledging colleague’s response of “look at them down there, is this, okay, maybe they are going to fall?” The inspirational response was “that okay; they are going to *learn* to fall!” (p. 32).

#### **4.7 Parental collaboration**

“It is difficult to get the parents around to it, but we have two years to work on with the kids” embraced as an approach to influence OP culture with parents. “When they are leaving, they ... take off their gear - whether it is mucky, wet and get into their car”, citing advantage of individual boxes for outdoor wear, thus ensuring parents visualise ease of OP transition (p. 20). “Why, you were outside, you know, it was too cold .... you should have them inside” relayed as negative parental perception of OP (p. 23). “Can you *not* bring them out when it is raining?” again expressed by parent to participants’ dismay (p. 3). However, positively, (n=1) detailed level of “supportive parents” within the setting, optimistically noted “would have no problem if they did come to me and explaining benefits of OP cause some parents just aren’t educated on benefits .... we studied it and .... it is important to pass that onto them so they know for themselves” which encouragingly highlights level of collaboration achievable through joint partnership (p. 14).

With results outlined above, chapter five will move forward and allow interpretation of findings referring back to literature and establish if data from the FG does answer the research question.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

## **5.0 Introduction**

The study purpose was to report on early year educators' perspective of outdoor play, to ascertain educators' thoughts on planning for outdoor play, views of benefits and whether they determine sufficient outdoors access. Key findings appear to indicate educators were competent in understanding benefits of providing quality outdoor play for children.

Participants expressed views that were consistent with high-quality professional practice (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009). Nevertheless, the majority of educators identified the need for CPD in planning outdoor play. Educators participated from both community (n=3) and private (n=5) setting from County Donegal and worked in all day/sessional settings with 0-6 age group. This purposeful sampling strategy ensured population representation.

### **5.1 Benefits of outdoor play**

The need for daily engagement in OP was embedded in settings policies and was a driving factor of both FG, with such acknowledged by (n=8). Conceding, educators' perspective, beliefs and culture determined OP access, which strongly supported Moser and Martinsen (2010) conclusions of settings spending 70% of time outdoors in summer and 31% in winter. Such mirrors (n=1) experience of utilising an outdoor chart, acknowledging 80-100% OP access in spring/summer, with fewer in autumn/winter. (N=8) identified a necessity to get outdoors daily, however, differs Copeland *et al.* (2016) findings, with 90% of settings having scheduled two or more outdoor daily activities. However, only 40% gained access to activities scheduled, while 32% had no OP access. This large-scale study of 30 settings employed movement detection devices with factual data leaving no room for error, whereas the possibility of social agreeability within FG with potential of criticisms from participants is acknowledged (Kitzinger 1994). Researcher accepts gaps exists as small sample size and opportunity for reaching FG saturation not identified.

Further studies until saturation was evident could answer this point with substantial clarity. However, in the Irish context, Kernan and Devine (2010), concur with Copeland *et al.* (2016) findings, of increasingly marginalised OP opportunities. GUI (2013) outlined the importance of outdoor engagement and (n=8) stipulated having planned pleasing outdoor environments.

Regardless of limitation of space, accomplished opportunities for child-led inspired OP as opposed to Kalpogianni (2019) findings, suggesting a lack of suitable outdoor space hindered children play outdoors.

Lipnowski and LeBlanc (2012) defined pre-schoolers having daily access to OP activities, included dancing, tumbling, running, supervised water play, throwing and catching, which is strongly supported by study results of a varied outdoor child-led curriculum. Informative findings favoured educators' rich positive engagement in daily OP, providing for fruitful varying ranges of activities to promote children's holistic development (Gesell 2017). Study outcomes demonstrated (n=8) enhanced awareness of developmental benefits of OP, through OP activities and believed the importance of establishing FMS competencies in development of children at preschool age (Crawford 2018). Such measures positively impacted upon wellbeing, validating Syomwene (2017) findings. However, the results fail to strongly support to what degree wellbeing was improved upon as researcher conceded an additional "before and after" wellbeing question on the questionnaire could have proved informative.

Nonetheless, educator's awareness of OP positively impacting children's behaviour was a dominant study theme, allowing for hypothesising the OP environment was critical to children's wellbeing. Correspondingly Moore and Lynch (2017) investigation reported children's perceptions of positive well-being was easily achieved through OP affordances. Participants identified children's mood and concentration notably enhanced, strongly supported Brussoni *et al.* (2015) conclusions with behaviours positively improved upon through access to both OP/RP. Findings continue to answer the study question of educators' view of the benefits of OP, which were identifiable with (n=8) promoting OP as being central to wellbeing.

## 5.2 Regulation

Literature transpired regulation lacked specific emphasis on appropriate timeframes children should spend outdoors while in preschool (Childcare Regulations 2016). Regulation, did not stipulate access to outdoor space in settings registered post-June 2016. Such, somewhat differs DHSC findings (2019, p. 22) which specified the “need of children access 180 minutes per day”. (N=5) sessional participants detailed 20/60/60/60/180 minutes in daily OP. Whereas (n=3) all day settings spent 30-60/120/150 engaging in OP activities. Remarkably, only one sessional setting achieved mandatory 180 minutes as defined by DHSC (2019). In an Irish context, this requires further investigation at regulatory, legislation and policy level to eliminate identified gaps.

Lack of regulatory emphasis on OP space size appears to be a determining factor accounting for 63% being unhappy with quality OP space/size afforded to them. Interestingly, acknowledged by (n=3) rural-based participants, hypothesising - rural areas did not automatically afford more space. Such is in contrast to CECDE (2007, p. 20) standard two, stipulating “comfortable .... pleasing surroundings, safe .... and accommodates the needs of all” evidently not expressed by (n=5). With repeated issue of space raised, community-based participant longed for government acquisition of council land adjacent to setting to improve upon available outdoor space. Governments’ First Five Strategy (2019) advocated ‘quality’ outdoor areas to children availing of DCYA programmes, however, failed to prescribe what constitutes ‘quality’. Clarity of interpretation is required, and a suggestion regulatory/legislative policy maker’s review Childcare Regulation (2016) has the potential to instigate a sectoral enhanced outdoor play culture. Nicaise *et al.* (2011) signified, where space was limited, educators’ intervention was imperative to engage enriched affordances of OP. (N=3) voiced such, acknowledged limited space, however, utilised to the fullest potential. Supported by Kalpogianni (2019) who indicated an enriched environment promoted quality child-led engagement; yet further stipulated lack of suitable space being an overarching constraint in hindering OP. This overarching constraint was not evident in this study. Researcher acknowledged Kalpogianni Greek study indicated a minimal level of government regulation.



In contrast, Irish regulation deemed more robust, which one could hypothesis determined quality of experiences for children as a consequence of more substantial structuring. Researcher acknowledged study limitation as failed to have educators specify or detail date of registration of preschools. Furthermore, researcher cannot attest to participants' size of outdoor space and acknowledged a quantitative survey could have elicited more data on setting topography. Regardless space did not decrease OP opportunities in settings, but participants believed larger areas could have allowed for increased potential. Findings support the conclusions that participants were not negatively impacted upon as a result of the outdoor space available to them but rather worked within the confines of available space. As such study exploration could be deemed justified, and further investigation could serve to additionally support the need for policymakers to review and amend sectoral regulation accordingly.

### **5.3 Litigation and risky play**

Currently, findings consistently acknowledged educators indicated a focus on safety/litigation a significant factor for allowing OP/RP engagement with considerations of perceived risk being a primary focus. New *et al.* (2005), acknowledgement of litigation fear, influenced educators planning of OP and study evidence strongly supports such. Such has the potential to negatively impact child development and reflects Graham and Reynolds (2013) evidence of lack of affordance of RP, influenced development. Little (2013) too corroborated, citing failure to allow risk negatively impacted development. One might expect educators to contemplate preserving their own or setting/business good name, refusing to allow opportunity where injury of a child and potential for litigation would impact negatively upon their capacity to continue professionally. Such was evident when (n=3) reflected upon the level of cautiousness necessary when children were on the slide or even as simple as limiting numbers in the small play area. Comprehending litigation influenced practice validated Adams (2001) findings in respect of a litigation culture, clearly evident in Ireland. Coupled with some insurance premiums tripling, damagingly erodes educator's confidence in fully engaging in OP (Little *et al.* 2012). Educators' attitudes, perceptions, values and experiences most certainly influenced OP experiences and were identifiable in the level of cautiousness voiced by 75% of participants' experiences (Dietze and Kashin, 2019). Coupled with conclusions of Adams (2001) in respect to fear of being evaluated by one's colleagues were

apparent in study discussions, however (n=2) citing, not swayed by colleague's negative disapproval. Educators' evident focus on litigation, as opposed to OP opportunities, could arguably impact upon child development due to unmet needs. (N=2) identified this was their foremost thought; however, the perceived adverse action of allowing total immersion in OP counterbalanced their demand to allow for developmental opportunities which positively impact risk mastery. In answer to the study question, there is a clear identification that supports, and guidance may be needed by educators through access to CPD not only to enrich confidence to engage in OP fully but to change and sculpture attitudes and facilitation of outdoor learning.

#### **5.4 Clothing and parental collaboration**

A critical study finding indicated clothing impeded access to OP. Such equates to Copeland *et al.* (2009) results which identified two significant constraints to OP, insufficient clothing and parental conflict re apparel and/or access to OP. Notably, one setting informed parents from the onset, policy was to engage in OP. Participant from a predominantly outdoor setting detailed children arrived prepared and would be 100% on board with the OP ethos. Further comprehended unlimited access to the outdoor classroom; therefore, weather did not impact OP affordances. This philosophy fits with Early Years Careers (2016) encouraging motto of "dress for messy"! With consideration to CECDE (2007, p. 22) standard two, component 2.2 "the environment is adaptable for and accessible to, all children and adults within the setting", this was true to a certain extent as participants detailed, they had spare outdoor clothing. Nevertheless, voiced they would not have enough clothing to kit out a whole class. Apparent refusal to provide essential clothing is dismissive of educators who are attempting to provide developmentally appropriate activities for children. Hence strongly supporting Copeland *et al.* (2009) conflict analysis. Further probing could have led to an in-depth understanding of the underlying issue likely to represent educators' perceived concerns regarding parents embracing OP.

Interestingly, 75% identified a "push-pull" relationship with parents concerning OP affordances (Hesketh *et al.* 2017). As aforementioned, in particular failure to bring in suitable clothing a significant issue. Participants were aware of the importance of sharing knowledge with parents to ensure children developed healthy, happy and resilient; however,

noted this was not always the case (Neihues *et al.* 2013). Utilising role modelling to serve as positive guidance on OP for parents was proposed as an option (Bandura 2017). (N=3) participants' negative perceptions of parents questioning their choice of engagement in OP was a source of discomfort. However, positively, (n=1) detailed level of "supportive parents" within the setting and encouragingly highlighted levels of achievable collaboration through joint partnership. Estimating OP is an increasingly attractive option which requires sharing with parents (Harper 2017). However, with societal values of professional recognition of early year educators in its infancy, time, positive engagement, collaboration with parent's and society are essential to alter attitudes. Moloney and Pope (2013) strongly supported this perceived negative occurrence and likely represented (n=3) lived experience. Citing degree graduates felt undervalued and under-appreciated as a professional in Ireland, in comparison to their primary school teacher contemporaries. This identified constraint required teasing out, and researcher recognised further investigation could have uncovered educators' perceived reasoning behind this potentially negative relationship with parents and how this may have impacted upon them both personally and professionally.

## **5.5 Professional practice**

To a large extent, utilising documentary planning was not evident for OP; instead, participants adopted child-led activities with free play. Such contradicted Nutbrown (2012) findings, that skilful planning was necessary to ensure quality. Researcher attested to participants' engagement in rich interactions which appear equivalent to pillars of quality within Aistear/Síolta. Interestingly, NCS contract highlights provider must adhere to principles of Síolta and Aistear (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009). Furthermore, DCYA (2018) detailed 84% of settings engaged in Aistear with 74% in Síolta. However, statistically, FG findings did not concur, with 25% engagement identified. An interpretation that the rollout of the Aistear/Síolta framework occurred amid the 2008 recession. With the delivery of training provided by county childcare committees on a smaller scale. Such small scale provision resulted in settings not accessing training for all staff as the burden of knowledge transfer was placed on those who attended, to mentor to those who did not.

Nonetheless, educators appeared to provide quality of provision for children in their care through experiencing an enriched OP environment. However, deliberated difficulty of settings

who shared outdoor areas with inflexible scheduling (n=3). Participants comprehended it would be easier plan if unlimited OP access were available. Deliberation of boxes of interest with open-ended materials to aid OP planning was a consideration. In reality, such activities appear to equate in practice to Aistear's theme, Exploring and Thinking:

Aim 1 – children will learn about and make sense of the world around them. Learning goal 1, engage, explore and experiment with their environment.

(NCCA 2009, p. 44).

Hypostasizing, there appears to be a lack of awareness of how to utilise Aistear, as all participants seem to be achieving the specific aims and goals of the four themes. Researcher accepts this area required further research. Participants need support and scaffolding to plan and provide documentary evidence of daily/weekly/monthly OP scheduling which is a requirement of the DCYA inspection team (Vygotsky 1978).

Notwithstanding, (n=2) felt the Síolta accreditation programme which their settings engaged in, positively impacted upon quality of practice (CECDE 2007). (N=1) particularly appreciated the possibility of taking all areas of the indoors, outdoors. (N=2) with ECCE degree attainment held the view, it was only upon reaching degree level, exposure to OP planning occurred. Majority of participants acknowledge the need for CPD in the form of courses on OP. (N=1) believed it had been ten years since attending a resemblance of an outdoor course. Recognising no OP courses were available to them cited sectoral collaboration could improve knowledge base on planning and facilitating OP. While this does answer the study question of whether educators' professional practice corresponds to that of Aistear/Síolta, it does highlight the absence of an ability to engage with documentary evidence of OP curriculum planning and a lack of availability of CPD in OP.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Having contemplated the FG findings, researcher acknowledged rich fluid reciprocal conversation was evident, which allowed for a meaningful discussion on educators' perspectives of OP. Participants strongly identified lack of support/availability in accessing CPD courses on OP, regardless, rich descriptive content depicted by participants appear to outline their professional knowledge of benefits of OP to children and how they guided affordances of such. However, having analysed findings, recognised further questioning and

probing could have potentially given more in-depth clarity to topic areas. The researcher advocates the need for further investigation in this area; however, hopes study finding will add to the knowledge base on an Irish perspective of OP.

# Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

## 6.0 Introduction

The research study aim was to “Exploring Early Years Educators’ Perspectives of Outdoor Play”. The main findings acknowledged educators were professional, competent and aware of OP benefits to children in their care. In particular, stipulated various areas of development enhanced, giving lived experiences of planned activities which supported advancement and improvement in child development (Flood 2013; Gesell 2017; Gesell *et al.* 1943). The need to go outdoor was intrinsically woven into their practice and suggested their perspectives correspond with professional practice as outline by Síolta and Aistear (CECDE 2007; NCCA 2009). Síolta – Standard 11, Professional Practice:

Practising in a professional manner that requires that individual have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing professional development.

(CECDE 2007, p. 79).

Notwithstanding, majority of educators did not fully engage with curriculum and framework documentary planning. However, throughout discussions, their practice appeared to adhere to Síolta’s 16 pillars and four themes of Aistear. They were simply unaware of how to fully utilise and depict reached goals and aims within their planning documentation. It could be identified participants who held degrees were more informed concerning engaging with Aistear and Síolta. Of particular interest was the acknowledgement by participants of the apparent absence of OP courses, say for a Síolta workshop which was part of CECDE accreditation process. Such requires further investigation, to identify gaps, support educators fully engage with curriculum/framework. Exploration and development of subsequent strategies could support educators, to fulfil their potential concerning planning.

Whether urban or rural-based, all participants recognised enriched experiences afforded to children while outdoors. (N=3) urban and (n=2) from rural setting detailed limited outdoor space available, researcher assumed rural settings would have had access to larger areas; however, evidence contradicted such. However, rather than feel disadvantaged, (n=5) used the area available to the fullest of their ability. All participants fostered an environment which positively supported children access affordances of OP. They identified suitable clothing was paramount for affording access OP for both themselves and children. Parental

negativity of their child being outdoors in all weathers discussed by several. Such requires further exploration to identify why such parental attitudes are held. Equally, what support strategies could be instigated to encourage and support both educators and parents in enabling engagement and enjoyment in OP (Harper 2017). Participants identified weather was not a significant constraint to accessing OP as they refused to allow it to be. Researcher acknowledges the pre-assumption weather would have impacted OP based on Moser and Martinsen (2010) sizeable cohort study; however, study findings did not concur – highlighting gaps still exists.

Noting of varying changes in behaviours and mood when a child could or could not access OP. Majority of participants identified having sufficient access to OP. However, scheduled sharing of outdoor areas was identified as an OP constraint, as was lack of safe, direct access to outdoor spaces. Support structures of additional funding strands for resources and purchasing of additional grounds discussed. The availability of private settings accessing all DCYA funding strands deliberated as they account for 70% of settings. DCYA funding strands favour supports for community-based settings as they prohibit private settings access crucial funding strands. Intertwined are attitudes of inspections with regards to immersion in OP while allowing for aspects of RP in a backdrop of fear of litigation, similarly established in Kernan and Devine (2010) findings where an inspector suggests fencing off a tree to prevent children climbing. Study findings have allowed for rich investigation into educators' perspective and experience of OP. Most elements identified were supported and interlinked within the LR with minimal contradictions evident. Educators' pursuit of best possible affordances of OP for children within their care through professionalism and modelling of best practices was acknowledged (Bandura 2017). They openly and honestly discussed their thought on, and challenges encountered when providing OP opportunities. Strategies of supporting educators engage professionally with Aistear/Síolta framework, and Childcare Regulation (2016) needs to be investigated and considered by policymakers within a legislative and regulative backdrop.



## **6.1 Limitations**

### **6.1.1 Geographical**

Researcher acknowledges constraint of limiting study to only Co. Donegal, Ireland. However, every attempt was put in place to ensure replication of sample to allow for generalisability of ECCE sector. Both urban and rural FG were differentiated, and participants came from varied educational attainment levels (NQF level 5-8). Such allowed for perspectives from childcare assistants to room leaders, deputy manager to owner-manager, voice their OP experience. Similarly, participants came from both community and private settings. Transferability of chosen framework opted for, could undoubtedly be extended to a broader scale investigation of educators' perspectives of OP in an Irish context should equivalent conditions, situation and procedure be employed. Researcher recognises this in-depth study has characteristics of settings nationwide; thus, further replicated studies have the potential to validate findings successfully.

### **6.1.2 Participant numbers**

Initially, FG enrolled (n=4) for the pilot study and (n=6) participants for both FG. However, as a result of restrictions concerning Covid-19 Pandemic and introduction of social distancing, face to face FG had to be cancelled. With the need to allow context for interactions, exchanges and comments to answer the research question, substitution for the Zoom platform by LyIT ethics committee was granted (Morgan 2009). However, (n=2) had to withdraw due to poor internet availability/connectivity. Equally, (n=1) on the day could not access Zoom volume, while (n=1) messaged 15 minutes before meeting to cancel. Such resulted in a smaller than anticipated sample size of (n=4) in each FG (Krueger and Casey 2009). However, this purposeful sampling strategy ensured population representation as it contained participants with qualification attainment of NFQ level 5-8.

### **6.1.3 Gender**

Due to the childcare sector employing predominantly female staff in Ireland (98%), researcher identified this as a limitation as male educators score higher on allowance of RP and excitement seeking in OP (Sandseter 2014). Only (n=1) male partook in the study (pilot). Every effort was made to enrol both genders. Researcher had interest from male ECCHE students; however, criteria stipulated participants had to work directly with children in settings; therefore, affordance of an invitation to partake was not possible.

### **6.1.4 Time constraints**

Short time frame for collection of data accounts for limitation of only having time to carry out two FG. Ideally, FG would have continued until saturation was evident to enhance trustworthiness (Hennink *et al.* 2019; Hennink *et al.* 2016; Kitzinger 1994). The unprecedented impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic, social distancing measures eliminated some rural participants in engaging in FG and the reopening phase 2 impact of allowing small gatherings to assemble, was too late concerning study completion time frame.

### **6.1.5 Data analysis**

Acknowledgement that constraints in responses of open-ended FG questions were a limitation. Researcher interpretation in respect of categorising responses was considered. However utilising Braun and Clarks' thematic analysis served as a guide for categorisation (Braun and Clark, 2006). Researcher ensured familiarity of data, assigned preliminary codes, identified themes and colour coded accordingly. Individual participants to verify their transcripts or analysis was not sought. Such would have entailed providing other participants accounts and with consideration to Data Protection (2018), deemed not appropriate (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). However, addressing of validity, accurateness and truthfulness of findings of answers given by participants acknowledged accordingly. Researcher made available to supervisor and external examiner transcribed data.

### **6.1.6 Honest response**

Researcher recognised engaging with participants who may know each other professionally as a limitation. Challenging of what participants profess to believe versus what they actually believe was a consideration (Kitzinger 1994). However, such social grouping in FG allows for understanding of idea formation in a social context (Khan and Manderson, 1992). It was hoped through rich dialogue, clarity and accurateness of answers would be evident.

### **6.2 Findings of questionnaires**

Prior to FG commencement, completion of demographic questionnaires by (n=8) and (n=4) pilot/FG occurred. Such served to get an in-depth understanding of backgrounds of participants' setting, work experience and educational attainment. Researcher conceded inclusion of questions concerning analysing children's wellbeing before and after OP, as could details of setting registration date and setting outdoor topography. Further research could potentially provide further transparency on the topics mentioned.

### **6.3 Future research**

The research study acknowledged and highlighted questions which merit additional investigation or clarity:-

1. An evaluation into providing opportunities in CPD to the ECCE workforce in respect of OP. Stipulating at least one educator from every setting accessing training, therein mentoring co-workers on best practices and pedagogical approach to OP.
2. An investigation to ascertain what supports could be afforded to educators in particular to utilising both Aistear and Síolta in planning and documenting OP.
3. Exploration of how to influence parental attitudes towards benefits of OP.

4. An evaluation of the degree to which sectoral inspectors could positively support educators engage in meaningful OP opportunities.
5. Assessment of the litigation culture perceived by the ECCE workforce, both at a sectoral and legislative level.
6. A review of the Childcare Regulation (2016) - consider clarity of outdoor time children should have in various settings. Guidance on minimum outdoor space which children should have access to and finally a clear outline of what constitutes “quality”.

This study has highlighted the need for educators access CPD concerning both planning in Aistear/Síolta and courses to support OP. LR has highlighted sector progression since the signing and ratification of the UNCRC (1989). Although as a sector, much progress has been achieved, societal values need to alter to foster OP as a priority. Such requires to be enshrined in legislation. Where educators feel safe to allow for opportunities of OP, informed to actively collaborate with parents in presenting to them the benefits of OP and professionally be in a position to show inspectors the rich outdoor environment which affords all types of play opportunities to the growing child.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

This research study “Explored the Early Year Educators’ Perspectives of Outdoor Play”, utilised FG to determine the experiences, perspectives, planning for and view of the benefits of OP. This method allowed for rich result categorisation, identify the professionalism of participants, the belief they had to ensure best possible outcomes for children while engaging with OP. Educators were reflective in respect to their role and acknowledged regulation and litigation could impact upon affordances of active OP. There was evidently a high level of awareness of benefits of OP, and they gave rich data on activities they encouraged to support children’s physical, intellectual, social and emotional progression. Regardless of study limitations, an undertaking of further research to identify educators’ perspectives on OP at a national level is a requirement. This study may serve as a template in that the identified findings may be responsible for underpinning policy and procedure aimed at encouraging

change within the sector in respect to CPD through provisions of education offered to educators in OP affordances.

Furthermore, to reconsider the Childcare Regulation (2016) wording and to stipulate minimum time spent outdoors, minimum outdoor area required and definition of “quality” in OP environments. In an attempt to eradicate the two-tier bias system of settings registered before June 2016, all settings should have to ensure affordances of OP for all, in line with UNCRC (1989). It is acknowledged we are in the grasp of a recession concerning the Covid-19 Pandemic, however, additional sector investment from 0.2% of GDP to a potential European standard (1.9% Sweden), would further professionalise the workforce (Byrne 2020). Never has there been a better time to promote the outdoors. It positively impacts wellbeing - so vital during this pandemic. Aspirationally, it is hoped this study will be disseminated in publications and conferences which could contribute to debate on OP in an Irish context.

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# Appendices

**Appendix 1 - Statistic of settings in Ireland (DCYA 2018)**

Statistic of settings in Ireland (DCYA 2018).

Staff working in settings	29,555
Working directly with children	22,132
Work part time	47%
Female staff	98%
Male staff	2%
Staff under the age of 45 years	70%
Settings contracted to provide the ECCE programme	4,242
Private settings	76% (3,211)
Community settings	24% (1,031)
June 2018 - number of children benefited from ECCE scheme	118,673
Donegal - children registered in settings	3900
Donegal - community settings	41%
Donegal - private settings	59%
Access to outdoor area	94%
NFQ level 5 employed	6,310
NFQ level 6 employed	9,533
NFQ level 7 employed	1,408
NFQ level 8 employed	3,151
NFQ level 9 employed	296



**Appendix 2 - Outdoor module content ECCHE Degree Programmes in Ireland**

Individual outdoor module content ECCHE Degree Programmes in Ireland

	<b>Level 7 degree</b>	<b>Level 8 degree</b>
<b>Letterkenny Institute of Technology</b>	1 module	1 module
<b>Dundalk Institute of Technology</b>	0 modules	1 module
<b>Sligo Institute of Technology</b>	0 modules	1 module
<b>GMIT</b>	1 module	1 module
<b>Tralee Institute of Technology</b>	0 modules	0 modules
<b>University of Limerick</b>	0 modules	0 modules

### **Appendix 3: Letter to Gatekeeper**

Magheroarty  
Gortahork  
Letterkenny  
Co Donegal

20<sup>th</sup> April 2020

### **Position of Gatekeeper in Research Study**

Dear Sir or Madam

I am completing my MA in Advancing Health and Social Care, under the supervision of Majella McBride of Letterkenny Institute of Technology. In order to access detailed perspectives of early year educators' experience of the outdoors I am conducting research in the form of a focus group. As you are a manager of an early year setting in Donegal I should be pleased if you could facilitate and act as gatekeeper for this research. I should be thankful if you would grant permission to approach your staff and display the letter of invitation in your setting.

It is envisaged that this study will give an in-depth understanding of early year educators' perspective of engaging in outdoor play. This exploration shall build a detailed picture for educational training providers, early year educators' and key policy makers in determining what if any continuous professional development is required by the sector in order to implement successful, quality, active participation in the outdoors. This study has received approval from the research ethics committee of LYIT, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.

Should you agree to partake in the research study acting as gatekeeper, I should be pleased if you would contact me on 086 1735180 or [mccraith@hotmail.com](mailto:mccraith@hotmail.com) when I shall arrange to discuss any questions you or your staff may have. A time and date shall be arranged to suit the participants. Confidentiality shall be guaranteed throughout this study.

The focus group shall involve an informal discussion with other early year educators' and myself on Zoom. The topic of conversation shall be **audio** recorded. The recordings shall be transcribed verbatim and participants anonymity is guaranteed as no names shall be requested or used (participants no. 1, no. 2 etc. shall be utilised).

Privacy and confidentiality shall be protected throughout the research study. Participants name, work setting or address shall not be required or revealed to anyone outside the study. Information collected shall be kept in a secure location and participants can withdraw from the study at any stage prior to transcription/analysis/dissemination. It is expected that when

the focus group meets that it shall take approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. In respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and for the purpose of social distancing, Zoom shall be utilised.

The findings generated from this study and focus group shall be used in my dissertation in Masters of Science in Advancing Health and Social Care. Similarly, it may be used in journal articles, academic papers or future research studies. Your participation shall be greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

*Mary Doohan McCraith*

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**Mary Doohan McCraith**

**Enc.**

**Appendix 4: Letter to Early Year Educator**

Magheroarty  
Gortahork  
Letterkenny  
Co Donegal

20<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear Early Year Educator

I am completing my Masters in Advancing Health and Social Care, under the supervision of Majella McBride of Letterkenny Institute of Technology. In order to access detailed perspectives of early year educators' experience of the outdoors I am conducting research in the form of a focus group. As you are an early year educator in Donegal I should be pleased if you could partake in this research.

I hope to hear about your thoughts and feelings on outdoor play (0-6 age group). This exploration shall build a detailed picture for educational training providers, early year educators and key policy makers in determining what if any continuous professional development is required by the sector in order to implement successful, quality, active participation in the outdoors. This study has received approval from the research ethics committee of LYIT, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.

Should you agree to partake in the research study, I should be pleased if you would sign both a Consent Form and Early Year Focus Group Demographic Form and email to me prior to the focus group meeting. Ideally, it would be envisaged that 8 – 10 early year educators' would take part. In respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and for the purpose of social distancing, Zoom shall be utilised. Your planned meeting will take place on Wednesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April at 3pm using the Zoom application.

It is expected that when the focus group meets that it shall take approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. The focus group shall involve an exploration of your experiences and views on outdoor play provision as stated above. The topic of conversation shall be **audio** recorded. The recordings shall be transcribed verbatim and participants anonymity is guaranteed as no names will be requested or used (participants no. 1, no. 2 etc. shall be utilised).

You are not obliged to take part in this study and you can opt out at any time (prior to transcription/analysis/dissemination). It is understood that you do not have to give a reason for opting out. Participants shall be advised on the importance of safeguarding the

confidentiality and privacy of all participants by not discussing with non-participants the observations made or opinions expressed during the course of the focus group meeting/s.

Privacy and confidentiality shall be protected throughout the research study. All participants name, work settings or addresses shall not be revealed to anyone outside the study. Information collected shall be kept in a secure location. Data collected will only be used for the purpose intended. Data will be correlated and stored on a hard drive of a desktop computer in a locked office. This information will only be accessed by the researcher, research supervisor and examiner. The computer will be password protected and encrypted for safety and security. Hard copies of data generated will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All information will remain confidential until it has been deleted/shredded 5 years after completion of the research.

I should be please if you would agree to partake in this focus group and I should be thankful if you could confirm by email [mccraith@hotmail.com](mailto:mccraith@hotmail.com) or telephone on 086 1735180 where I shall happily discuss further your involvement in this research study.

The findings generated from this study and focus group shall be used in my dissertation in Masters of Science in Advancing Health and Social Care. Similarly, it may be used in journal articles, future research studies or academic papers. You participation shall be greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully

*Mary Doohan McCraith*

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**Mary Doohan McCraith**



**Appendix 5: Letter of Participant Consent**

## Participant Consent Form

**Rural\Urban:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Participant Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Study title:** “Exploring Early Years Educators’ Perspectives of Outdoors Play”

I have read and understood the Early Year Educator Letter in respect of this research project. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I do not have to take part in this study and that I can opt out at any time (prior to transcription/analysis/dissemination). I understand that I do not have to give a reason for opting out.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I am aware of the potential benefits of this research study.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I give permission for completion of the anonymous Early Years Focus Group Demographic Form. I have been assured that information is anonymous and does not require insertion of my name, setting name or address, thus ensuring privacy and confidentiality.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given a copy of the Early Year Educator Letter information letter and this completed consent form for my records.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I consent to take part in this research study having been fully informed of the full context of the study.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
I give informed explicit consent to have my data processed as part of this research study.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>

### Storage and Use of Information - Retention of research material in the future

I give permission for material/data to be stored for possible future research related to the current study as approved by LyIT Research Ethics Committee.	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
---	--	---------------------------------------

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**To be completed by the Principal Investigator.**

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the benefits involved as a result of their participation. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Mary Doohan McCraith**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**Appendix 6: Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire**

## Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire

**Urban/Rural:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participants No:** \_\_\_\_\_

\*Please tick accordingly

Q. 1 Employed in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector for:

1 year
2 years
2-5 years
5-10 years
10 years plus

Q. 2 Current position: \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 3 Time within this role: \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 4 Type of Setting:

Sessional Service
Part-time Day Care
Full-day Care
Childminder
Other

Q. 5 Type of Service:

Private
Community

Q.6 Indicate the number of children catered for: \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 7 Partaking in the National Childcare Scheme: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Q. 8 Qualification attainment:

QQI Level 5 Major – full award \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Level 6 Minor – component \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Level 6 Major – full award \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Level 6 LINC award \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Level 7 Degree/Diploma \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Level 8 Honours Degree \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Masters \_\_\_\_\_

QQI Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_

Grandfathering Declaration \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 9 Tick courses completed: Aistear \_\_\_\_ Síolta \_\_\_\_ Hanen \_\_\_\_ Lámh \_\_\_\_

List those not included: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Q. 10 Member of organisation: Teaching Council: \_\_\_\_\_ Trade Union (name): \_\_\_\_\_

Professional Body: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Groups: \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 11 Access to outdoors?: Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

How long do you spend outdoors: \_\_\_\_\_

Q. 12 Can you give details of your outdoors: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Your time and attention is much appreciated in respect of completing the above questionnaire. Your confidentiality, privacy and anonymity is guaranteed and protected at all time.

## **Appendix 7 - Possible Questions for Focus Group**

\*You will not be asked about individuals and we would ask that in the course of your participation you do not name any individual or provide any details on third parties that may be identifiable.

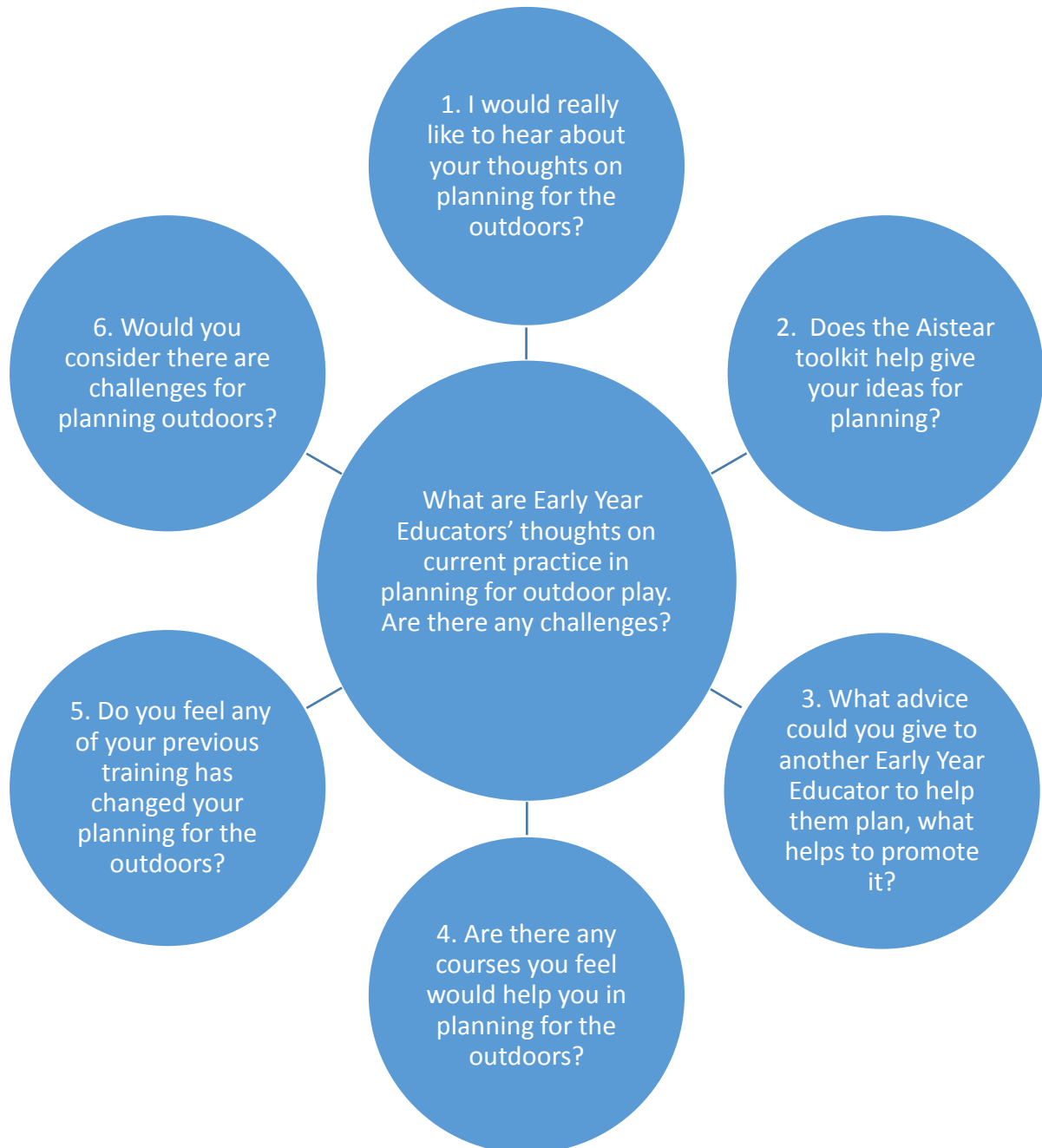
### Question 1

What are Early Year Educators' experience and perceptions of Outdoor Play?



## Question 2.

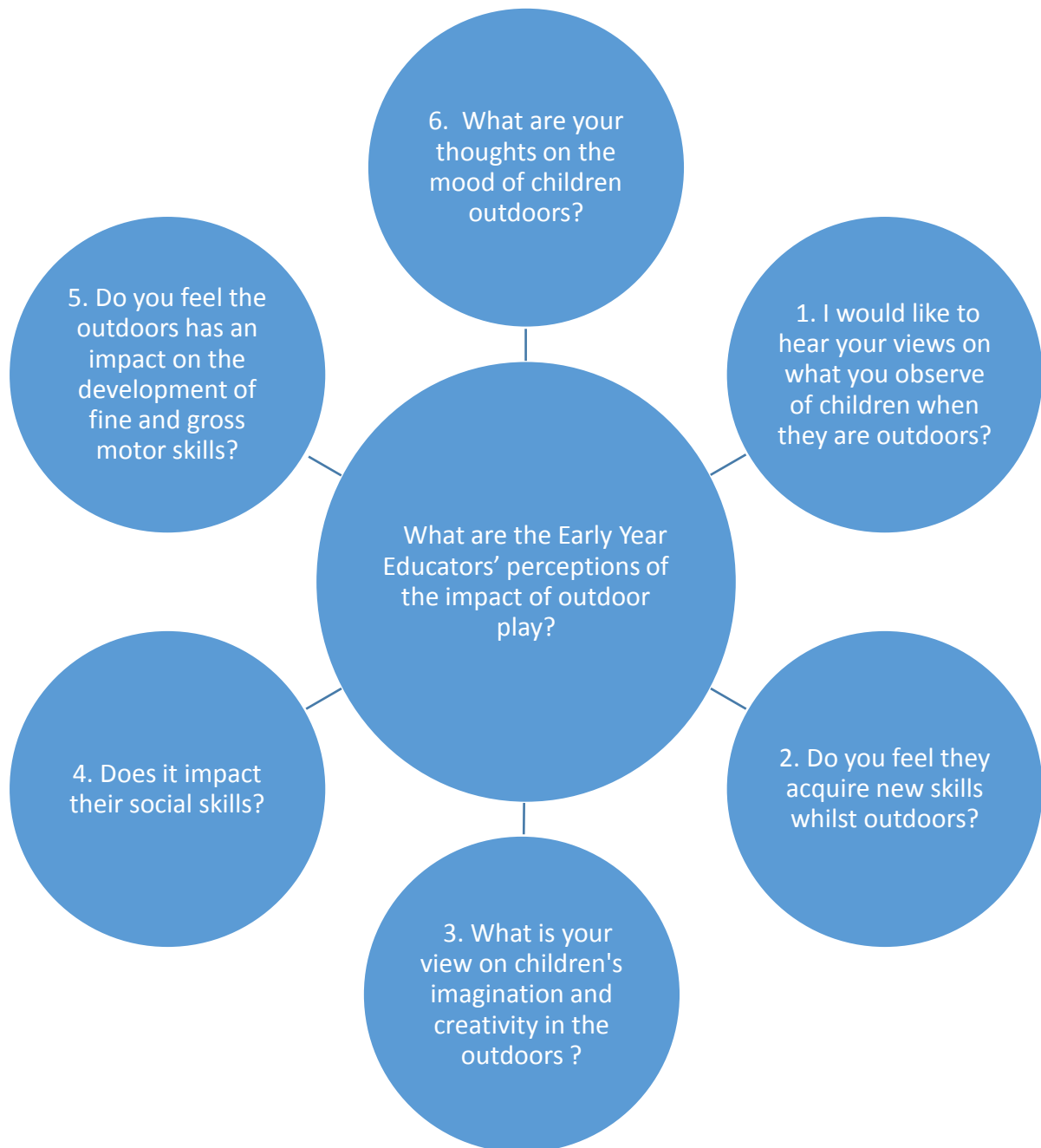
What are Early Year Educators' thoughts on current practice in planning for outdoor play? Are there any challenges?





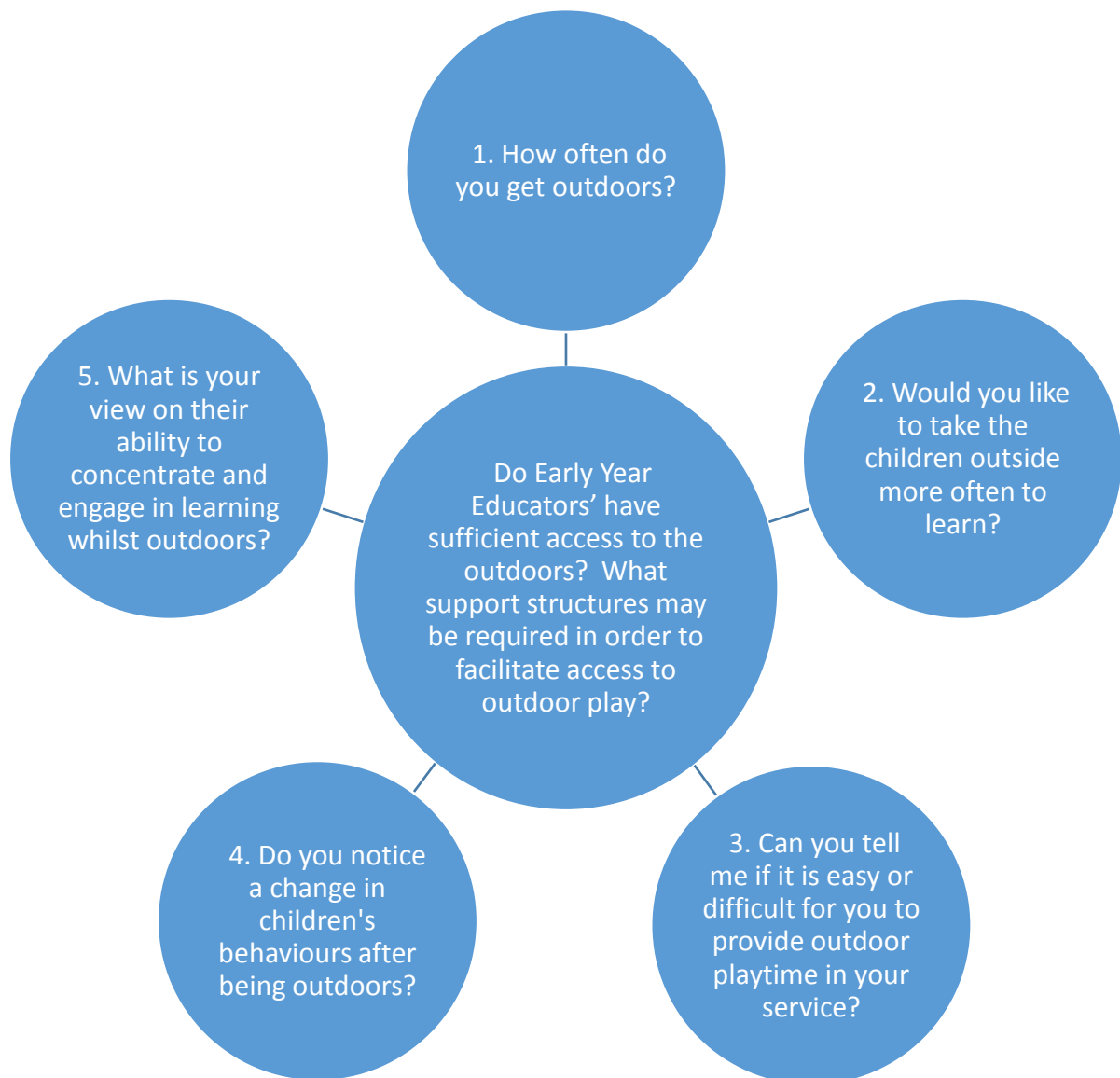
**Question 3.**

What are the Early Year Educators' perceptions of the impact of outdoor play?



#### Question 4.

Do Early Year Educators' have sufficient access to the outdoors? What support structures may be required in order to facilitate access to outdoor play?



## **Appendix 8: Facilitators' guidelines for conducting the Focus Group**

## Facilitators' guidelines for conducting Focus Group

(Krueger 2015; Krueger and Casey, 2009)

### **Introductions:**

- ✓ Introduce myself as the researcher, my role, outline that this is part of my Masters dissertation/research study.
- ✓ Introduce participants to each other by name.
- ✓ Describe briefly the aims, objectives and purpose of the study and in particular the benefits of their presence.
- ✓ Discuss what will happen to the data collected and how it will be processed.
- ✓ Enquire if anyone has any further questions or queries relating to the research study.
- ✓ Discuss the role of the facilitator, that is, to keep the discussion focused on the topic and to seek clarification on answers given.

### **Participants:**

- ✓ To ensure Data Protection and GDPR (2018) allocate each participant a number.
- ✓ Ensure that the participants know that they are free to speak whenever they have something to say and suggest they use/identify their number before commenting.
- ✓ Suggest that the participants talk to each other rather than the facilitator thus promotion of a natural discussion.
- ✓ Advise against more than one person talking at once as this will be transcribed verbatim.
- ✓ Encourage participants to give open and honest accounts, to say what they really mean and feel, making sure that they are aware that the facilitator has no vested interest in the nature of the responses.
- ✓ Reassure participants about confidentiality and privacy and that no content will be discussed outside of the focus group.

### **Data Collation:**

- ✓ Outline how the session will progress, audio taping, taking of notes throughout.
- ✓ Confirm that the participants consent freely to participate within the session.
- ✓ Clarify if anyone wants to withdraw and inform them that they can withdraw at any stage prior to transcription and dissemination of data.

- ✓ Obtain written consent for future use of data by completing Letter of Participant Consent (Appendix 5).
- ✓ Make written notes - body language.
- ✓ Recap/summarize the main points being discussed and allow opportunity for participants to reply.

**Facilitators:**

- ✓ Ask periodically if everyone agrees with the comments made or the discussion, in particular ensure quieter participants are included continuously.
- ✓ Ask periodically if anyone has a different opinion or view to those expressed by participants in response to questions.
- ✓ Allow periods of silence to occur – do not fill the gaps.
- ✓ At the end of the session thank everyone for participating and ask them if they have anything further to add.

**Appendix 9: Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis**

**Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis**

(Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Step 1	Become familiar with the data
Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Define themes
Step 6	Write-up

## **Appendix 10 – Definition of Terms**



## **Definition of Terms**

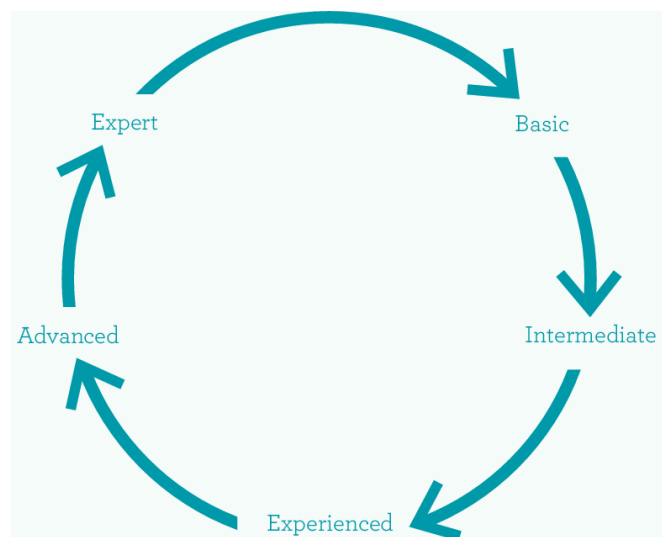
### **Outdoor Play**

Tremblay *et al.* (2015) engaged with (n=17) cross sectional stakeholders in an effort to critically appraise literature and research in order to develop a position statement on Outdoor Play. Endorsement of the statement was received from 14/17 participants. The investigation culminated in a definition of outdoor play as having “access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks— is essential for healthy child development. Recommending increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in child care, the community and nature.” This definition is close to Lipnowski and LeBlanc (2012) who defined toddlers, and pre-schoolers having 180 minutes per day of activities in outdoor play, including dancing, tumbling, running, supervised water play, throwing and catching. The definition of outdoor play has evolved with literature citing the advantage of outdoor play as an environment which promotes exploration and the prospect of active, hands-on play opportunities (Rivkin 2014). Maynard and Waters (2007) rich research into outdoor play details how the ever-evolving environment, where freedom is encouraged, fine, gross and boisterous movements promoted all the while become significantly aware of nature and evolving seasons. Bilton (2017, p. 2) highlighted how the outdoors allows play opportunities due to space, fresh air, freedom and allows the child to enhance and work on their current area of interest. Further detailing how it provides for one of the most natural and powerful modes of learning for the young child. In particular reflects “the outdoor area is a complete learning environment, which caters for all children’s needs – cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and physical”.

## Early Year Educator - educators

An educator is an individual working directly with children in settings. They are required to hold a qualification of at least a Level 5 on the NFQ framework (Childcare Regulation 2016). In recognition of an evolving sector and in acknowledging the need to professionalise the sector, team leaders are required to have a Level 6 qualification. DCYA (2015) acknowledges that quality is firmly linked to professional qualifications. As such introduced higher capitation as an incentive for ensuring higher skilled educators, qualified to degree level 7 actively worked in the settings. This was similarly advocated by DES (1999), recognised the necessity for highly trained and skilled personnel. The NCCA (2009, p. 19) endorses that the descriptive nature of the four themes within Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework ‘expressed through a total of ninety-six broad learning goals necessitates a high level of expertise on the part of the adult’ to deliver quality learning experiences to children within their care. International recommended for the sector proposed five professional development profiles which are operational in the sector at present (Urban *et al.* 2017) (figure 1).

Figure 1



Basic	NFQ level 4
Intermediate	NFQ level 5
Experienced	NFQ level 6
Advanced	NFQ level 7/8
Expert	NFQ level 9 +

## Perspectives

Perspectives can be best described as one's particular attitude toward something or a way of thinking about something (Fowler *et al.* 2000). Perspectives in this instance will involve understanding educators' relationship with the outdoors. However in an attempt to understand barriers to outdoor play Ernst (2014) findings acknowledged educators positive relationship with nature does not significantly influence other belief variables. The most substantial barrier of (n=46) educators was the difficulty in using outdoor settings. Educators' perspectives included lack of access, time and safety concerns. Notably, this study was carried out in Northern Minnesota and the researcher did acknowledge the impact of winter weather on access. Arguably when comparable to Norwegian settings where children spend 70% outdoors in summer and 30% in winter, regardless of the harsh conditions, the educators' perspective, beliefs and culture is a vital determining factor on access (Moser and Martinsen, 2010). Consistently, McClintic and Petty (2015, p. 38) pivotally addressed educators' perspectives of the value of outdoors and surmised that logistics, safety, lack of supervision and "teachers' perceptions that indoor classroom learning is more important than outdoor learning". As such, impacted on the disengagement between educators' comprehensions on the outdoors as a valued resource, therefore impacting upon their teaching practice and planning. This study shall allow for the exploration of educators' perspectives in County Donegal to be deciphered, and the researcher acknowledges the variable which can impact upon such perspectives.

**Appendix 11 – Inclusion of expert peer reviewed sources**

### **Helen Little**

Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood and Associate Course Director (Early Childhood) in the Department of Educational Studies in Macquire University, Sydney, Australia. She has been working in the early childhood sector for the last nineteen years. Her research primarily examines children's engagement in risk-taking behaviour in outdoor play. Her current focus relates to how the physical features of the outdoor environment and teaching practices impact on children's experiences of risk-taking in play.

### **Trisha Maynard**

Emeritus Professor at Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, United Kingdom. She focuses on the importance of children experiencing enriched outdoor opportunity in their early years, both in terms of development and interactions.

### **Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter**

Professor at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Trondheim, Norway. She appreciates the need for children to enjoy free play in their childhood education. She has a particular interest in outdoor play and acknowledges an overly cautious society in terms of affording children opportunities for play in the presence of "cotton wool children and helicopter parents."

### **Shirley Wyver**

Senior lecturer in child development in the Department of Educational Studies. Her PhD research was in young children's outdoor play and learning and continues to conduct research in this area. She is also a chief investigator in a multidisciplinary team known as the Sydney Playground Project. Future research directions includes the examination of outdoor play and executive functions.

## **Appendix 12 – Historical overview of ECCE in Ireland**

## **Historical overview of ECCE in Ireland**

The Primetime investigative documentary “A Breach of Trust” (2013) exposed the standards in three childcare settings in Ireland which were in breach of Childcare Regulation (2006). Varying degrees of mistreatment of children was highlighted, including the systematic provision of inadequate care of vulnerable children. This documentary brought an intense focus on a sector whose staff were characterised by a significant proportion of semi-skilled and unqualified educators. It highlighted lack of leadership resulted in the absence of influence “over a group of individuals, workers or employees aimed at gaining their commitment to shared values and goals” (Dimmock 2012, p. 6). Such was one of the drivers for government to regulate the sector and ensure only staff with appropriate qualifications would be eligible for positions, thus ensuring quality provisions within settings (Urban *et al.* 2012; Urban *et al.* 2017). Childcare Regulation (2016) emphasised in part III, section 4, the need for staff to have a minimum level 5 NFQ qualification. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2010; 2009) outlined in the ‘Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector’, the importance of skills ability and qualification of personnel in determining high-quality outcomes for children in ECCE settings. This study will explore educators’ thoughts on planning, in particular for OP. Nutbrown (2012) surmised the foundation for quality is ensured by experienced, educated educators who skilfully aids the child through their early years of development. Correspondingly, sets the foundation for competence and coping skills that will affect the child’s learning potential, behaviour and emotions throughout life. Positive ECCE experiences form the basis of lifelong learning. DCYA (2017) noted the importance of differentiation of capitation funding for settings who participate in ECCE scheme. Such was achieved by increased funding as a result of the qualification profile of degree educators working directly with children (Moloney 2010). The Early Childhood Care Health and Education (ECCHE) degree programme delivered by Letterkenny Institute of Technology affords students studying to level 8, two modules with outdoor-based content and opportunity to study a semester in Norway. Comparably, ECCHE degree delivered by Dundalk Institute of Technology only offers one module on OP and ECCHE in University of Limerick (UL) does not specify an individual OP module (see appendix 2). No sole outdoor module is available for NFQ Level 5/6 ECCE, and there is limited opportunity to engage in CPD in this field. It is evident that it ultimately depends on where the educator studies as to whether exposure to nurturing the outdoors has been inspired. This study shall explore

educators experience and perspectives of gaining access to course/training in OP and whether their qualification attainment alters their attitudes.

With government amendments to regulations and absence of sectoral engagement, burdening of an already overworked sector has occurred (DCYA 2018; DES 2015; Childcare Regulation 2016; Core 2011; DES 1999). Untenable expectations in the administration of schemes, providing high-quality ECCE provisions, facilitating inspections by DCYA, Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), Pobal, TUSLA and County Childcare Committee (CCC) inspections have overstretched personnel. In a sector staffed by educators in receipt of little above minimum wage of €10.10 (€10.76). Aspirations of the living wage, €12.30 is currently beyond their reach (DEASP 2020).

The unprofessionalism and lack of recognition the work educators personally invest, to delivering best outcomes for children combined with CPD in upskilling to level 6, 7, 8 and 9 have not resulted in the government introducing a pay scale. Mounting unrest within the sector on 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 culminated in 30,000 educators marching on the Dáil. The demands included professional recognition in the form of a pay scale, increased investment in ECCE sector and extension of funding strands to include 52 week period (DCYA 2018). Moloney and Pope (2013) notably outlined degree graduates of ECCHE in UL felt undervalued and under-appreciated as a professional in Ireland, in comparison to their primary school teacher contemporaries. It shall be advantageous to explore whether the above impacts upon educators time and ability/opportunity to plan for OP and whether lack of incremental non-contact payment by government and the administrative burdens allows educators sufficient time to access OP.



**Appendix 13 – Additional constraint to OP**

## Constraints

Interestingly, the participant (rural FG) identified outdoor space as an issue “our outdoor area is so small” and highlights “we don’t have an awful lot of room for activities”. Even so, the participant believed “it would be great to have more space cause ours is very small, but they love outdoors” (p. 2). Detailing all available space was utilised and worked within said constraints. Such concurs with Nicaise *et al.* (2011) LR findings, where space was limited, educators’ intervention was imperative to engage enriched affordances of OP. Two participants expressed child participation concerns “there is the odd one or two that might have issues about going out” (p. 4). Another concurred “I always find in September .... you always have a few children that don’t want to go outside ... get dirty .... a lot of drama” (p. 23).

While a participant considered the challenge of weather “different cultures feel that children shouldn’t be out in the cold” (p. 19). One participant acknowledges the impact of breaking the routine of OP for children with additional needs due to weather “we have got a wee boy with autism and if he doesn’t get out, we can really see the difference in his whole demeanour” (p. 18). Shared outdoor space was accredited as a negative “outside is difficult as we have a shared playground” and is dependent on allotted time afforded by the manager. Parental views were deemed a constraint “parents expect you to be indoors teaching them ABC’s and 123’s and that can’t be done outside!”. Identifying the need to get parents on board “show them what to do, sell it to them” cited as a solution (p. 23). The difficulty of no direct access to outdoors was considered a challenge, “is like a two-minute walk from the main playground” across a car park and identified in icy conditions the group are slowed down (p. 23). The need to “have to have a risk assessment done for any sort of risky play .... is more work as well every time you go to do something” recognised as a constraint (p. 14). Couple with fear of litigation “culture we live in .... it is scary because if there is an accident” impedes affordances of RP/OP (p. 32). Such concurs with Kalpogianni (2019) LR findings where policy context influences the affordance of OP. Consensus on lack of availability of courses on OP was believed to be a limitation as was inspections and regulation “not really supporting you” (p. 15).

**Appendix 14 – Exerts of focus group transcriptions**

## **Focus Group Urban**

## Focus Group/Urban – 23/4/20 - 3 pm

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Mary            So we are just going to discuss outdoor play and your perspectives and ideas, so unfortunately when I have to record – if one person could talk at a time because you can't get the voices of two people working at the same time. So I will put it out here to anyone who might like to answer - just what is your thoughts on outdoor play? I will give it to any of you!

No. 1            Do you want to go No. 3

Mary            Perfect No. 3 – you start off then

No. 3            When I began my training I was hoping to become a primary school teacher and I did my last placement of my degree in an outdoor preschool and that got me interested working in the early years - I loved my experience in the outdoors and decided to give preschools a go and I have been working there for 10 years – in a preschool and really enjoying it

Mary            Anybody else want to go there

No. 1            I think outdoor play is so important and I try to get outside every single day, I think it is so good for the children to get out to kinda let off steam, they have so much energy, I think it is good for them to be as there is a lot more space – a lot more freedom and I really do think it is so important for them as part of the curriculum

Mary            Perfect, thank you No. 1, No. 2 will you take it away!

No. 2            Yea, I am going to kinda say the same as No. 1 , for development, growth, for their physical development, their emotional development, you know, their social development – outdoor, do you know, the fresh air do you know, for kids that maybe need extra breaks. Getting them outdoors I think is an essential part of everyday – you know for all our children for learning

Mary            Perfect – thank you No. 2 - No. 4 what do you think

(Page 17)

No. 4 I think it's already been said, I think and mirror everything they say, basically a learn through play is so essential for early years and I always say to the kids "there is no roof if there is no door" outdoors, you are not confined and imaginary play is a big one outside

Mary Yea- and has getting outdoors impacted upon yourselves, do you enjoy getting outdoors, would it impact you as a practitioner yourself or if you are indoors all day how does that make you feel? No. 3, I will start with you.

No. 3 Yea, I love getting outdoors, sort of when you look out in the morning, is it going to be a day to get out a lot, kinda effects your mood going into work when you know it is a nice day and you are going to spend the whole day out – you sorta bounce into work but when the weather is bad, although we still go out in the weather – do you know, you are not going to keep them out in the rain for long periods of time, you sorta dragging the feet into work – it is very important to get them out in the bad weather but it's sort of definitely helps your day getting the children out to use up their energy – makes the day better getting outside for staff and kids, we all need the fresh air you know

Mary Anybody else there?

No. 1 I find myself looking at the weather app in the morning just to see when it is our outdoor time just to see "yes" we can get out doors or "no" we won't get out today. It makes such a difference to the children. I have got a very big room, with four members of staff with 43 children, and my god whether we don't get out makes such a difference to the whole morning. So we just find – when the children don't get out, especially we have got a wee boy with autism and if he doesn't get out, we can really really see a difference in just his whole demeanour, he just loves to get out run around and burn off some energy emm but the same goes with all the children really and I personally enjoy going outside as well – I don't mind wrapping up

Mary Yea, anyone else there?

No. 4 Love the outdoors, love the open space, hail rain or snow, kids love it – never complain when cold, I have them suited and booted – never a word out of them, indoors yea, all the time, they are complaining "I am bored", you never hear that from them outside – happier all the time

Mary No. 2, what do you think

No. 2            Personally, yea, I love getting the kids outdoors

Mary            The internet went there, so do you think the Irish weather impacts opportunities for play, No. 2 I will start with you. We can go around the other way now

No. 2            Do you know what, does it impact emm, I would be a believer that there is no such thing as bad weather, its just bad clothing, do you know, you can dress appropriately really for all kinds of weather but I find that out, even though we have requested, do you know, for the children to bring in like wet suits, you know, the tops and the bottoms – that most of our children don't have that so yes it definitely , the weather impacts you know, for us to get out but as I say we have a wee bit of a covered area so we try and get them out even if it is just you know, to do a sitting game, do you know, just that they are getting fresh air but definitely

No. 1            You are back Mary!!

Mary            My internet went away – it just broke up there, do you feel that your children have adequate clothing, are you happy with what they have to get them outdoors, obviously NO. 2 you are saying some of them aren't sending it in, do any of you have wet gear for them?

No. 3            Just to ensure they are sending in adequate clothing we would have spares but we wouldn't have enough to kit out 20 children or whatever amount of children in your room but with parents of different cultures to consider as well – different cultures feel that children shouldn't be out in the cold so that is some of the challenges that are there for early year workers

Mary            What do you do when you are faced with situations when parents don't want them outdoors?

NO. 3            We would just tell them that it is our policy to go out and if they are not happy with their kids outside perhaps keep them at home – it is just part of our curriculum that we would spend time outside, it sounds harsh but it is the same with parents that take in children who are sick – “they can't go outside if they are sick”, if they are well enough to come to crèche, they are well enough to go outside. If they are sick, they go outside so they may as well stay at home.

(Page 19)

Mary            Very good attitude there No. 3, no messing with No. 3! Yes No. 1

No. 1            Emm at our open day as well, emm me and No. 3 work together by the way but in different rooms and different buildings – emm at our open day our manager will tell the parents that as well emm that outdoor play is a big part of what we do so from day one, if she is giving somebody a tour from day one these guys go outside as much as possible, no messing.

Mary            And what are your thoughts on planning for the outdoors, do you have to put in a lot of work on planning for the outdoors ? I will give that one to No. 4

No. 4            Yea, what we would do yea, we would give them free play first and I would get the ideas from the kids a lot of the time – say if you see a bird in the sky – learning could be through that. We use a lot of their ideas, you see, it good to get their ideas as well and always have a backup of Montessori if you have to think on the spot. I would do half hour of free play, half hour of learning and exercise, I would give them a lesson on that.

Mary            Do any of you feel the Aistear toolkit helps you at all or do you not use it or do you not need it.

No. 3            Outside it is difficult as we have a share playground so each room get the allocated time to go out so curriculum planning is kind of tricky sometimes emmm in our setting, by the time you would have set up it would be time to come back in again, it depends what time your allocated time is emmm if we had access to outdoors all the time I find it would work easier because of our allocated time it is quite difficult . The likes of you said No. 4 – setting up your Montessori for half an hour, do you know that kind of way – I find it difficult when you are sharing the outdoor spaces, it is not like you have the whole morning, you just have your wee allocated time. By the time you get coats, sorted and out, and tidy up for the next group coming it is quite difficult to do a lot of the curriculum outdoors so we work around it at times.

Mary            And what would any of you have advice for others, practitioners that are looking now to plan for outdoors, do you have any advice for these staff members?

No. 4            It is difficult to get the parents around to it, but we have the two years to work on the kids, cause they are here for the two years now so it is usually into the second year before we have the parents around to it but our kids come suited and booted to the side gate and they have a box when they are leaving to take off their gear whether it is mucky, wet and get into their car, you know simple things like that makes it so much easier for parents



No. 1            Can I ask you No. 4, what kind of setting are you, are you a preschool, are you in a rural place

No. 4            No we have just a huge back garden – it is not for profit like a lot of places

No. 1            Oh very good

No. 1            What about you No. 2, what is your setting like?

NO. 2            What I was just going to say regard to the question that Mary asked was, what we have started doing recently is put in big boxes, you know the fish boxes, and put in loose part plays and tarpaulins, you know, all different stuff, you know all you do is we have a shed outside so all you do then is once the kids have had their free play, we just bring the boxes with different themes on the boxes and we bring them into the area, do you know, we just let them do whatever they want to do, whether it is a den, whether it is whatever the theme is, do you know, sometimes it is just bits of wood sticks, you know – that kind of stuff – No. 1 do you not know where I work i- we are like an old day crèche, it is a community crèche – there is about 100 in odd kids

Mary            Yes No. 3

No. 3            Myself and No. 1 will come visit some day

No. 2            Of course

Mary            Are there any courses you feel might help you plan more or give you more ideas on outdoors, would there be any that you think are...

No. 3            Just before we move on we got our accreditation through the Siolta and as part of the outdoors, we set up every area we had inside we brought outside and had all the different area, anything that you can teach inside, we put on our hat and so we have a library area, construction, dramatic play, set up a home corner, kitchen area – you know that kind of thing, so it is important that what you have in your indoor environment they have access in the outdoors

(Page 21)

Mary            That's a lovely idea, so Síolta helped with all of that and it all fell into place, so do you think is there any course out there might help any of you with the outdoors or do you think we are lacking in that area

No. 1            I did a few through Síolta – it was more kind of workshops as opposed to courses emm it was a lot of ideas, loads and loads of ideas on how to make the most of your environment, like that is what kinda inspired us to bring the inside out but not so much about kinda planning emm, planning aspect of it - I haven't been on anything that is kinda planning focused, this is more ideas focused – we had lots of ideas but

Mary            Yes, No. 3

No. 3            I just don't want to be cutting in, I just want to be next, sorry, I just want to say same as No. 1, there is not a lot of courses and that on it but one thing I will say is Glenn Outdoor offer opening evenings for staff of other settings to come have a look at their outdoor area and how they implement the curriculum which is quite beneficial, I know people who have went to it, I myself haven't but I did 6 or 10 weeks work placement in the Glenn Outdoors which was good to get ideas on that but they offer that you can go and visit their service which is quite good but I am not sure of any courses as such

Mary            Do any of you feel that any of the training or courses you have done before has helped give you any ideas on outdoor play?

No. 3            Apart from Síolta – No

No. 1            That Síolta workshop was quite good, I haven't actually been on many that is focused on outdoor play

Mary            Yea, that is what we are finding – it is an issue

No. 1            In the degree Mary, which we did there was well we touch on it a few times, there was the risky

Mary            So that is level 7 or 8 degrees yea

No. 1            We did touch on it but I think there is room for more

Mary            Would any of you think there is challenges to planning and getting outdoors, what challenges would you find there are?

No. 3            Parental views, parents perceptions of outdoors, play and the importance of it, parents expect you to be indoors teaching them ABC's and 123's and that cant be done outside, it can only be done inside sitting at a table with the chair pushed in correctly – so it is about getting parents on board, perhaps even showing them what to do, sell it to them, different cultures have different ideas of what learning is so you have to bring all of that on board

Mary            Anybody else there, any barriers to getting outside – any difficulties?

No. 2            I always find in September times kinda, you always have a few of the children that don't want to go outside and that don't want to get dirty and then when they do go outside and they do get dirty - there is a lot of drama emm about it and you know the parents then, they are like – oh my goodness your good shoes or that's your good outfit you know emm, we always, usually once the child has been exposed to it for a few weeks, we always find the child ends up loving it, you know, we never had a child that is constantly been outside but we have had parents question us – why you were outside, you know, it was too cold or its raining or you know – we should have been inside but emm most of the time it is fine

Mary            Any barriers there No. 4 – would you recognise?

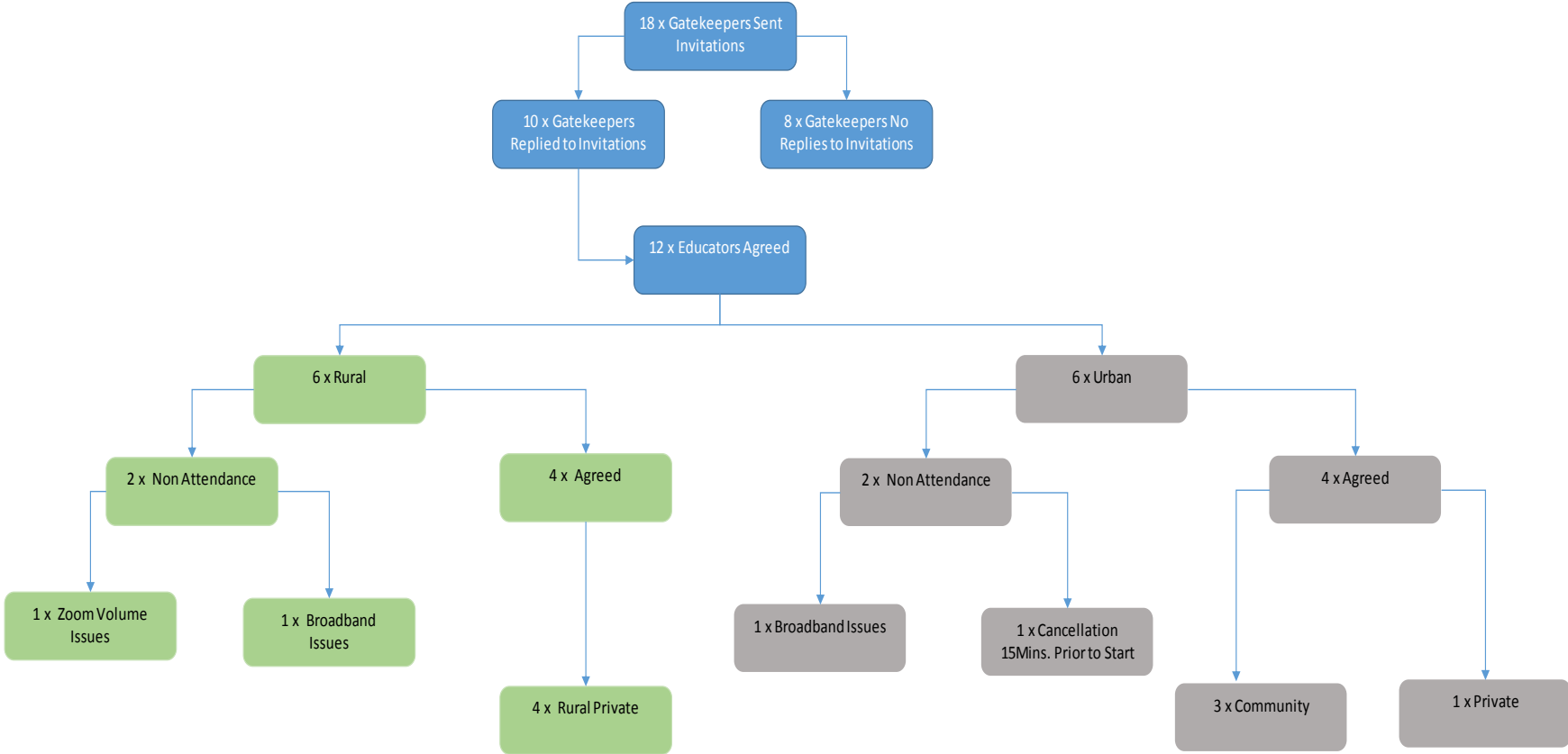
No. 4            Yea, the same, yea, the parents would be the biggest one and a little bit of the weather but you just work around that

No. 1            Me and No 3. Work in the same place and but no. 3 is based in the main building and she has got the play grounds there and I work in the ECCE building which is the other side of the car park which is like a two minute walk from the main playground so my time to go out is 9.30 – 10 and so I would get the children ready maybe twenty past and march them over but barriers for me would be like if a parent came in late or something like that or kinda slowed us down a little bit or maybe if it is icy outside and I have to walk two full minutes to the playground or if there is absolute torrential rain, I can't just take them out for a wee five minute sing song, run around or story or whatever – I've got to walk the whole way so just the way our service is, I in my room find it a challenge to go out for my allocated time whereas No. 3 it is easy enough to get the children out for a wee 10 minutes cause it would be less hassle, you know what I mean.

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## **Appendix 15 – Process of securing participants**

# Process of securing participants



**Appendix 16 – LYIT application form for ethical approval**



lyit

Institiúid  
Teicneolaíochta  
Leitir Ceanainn

Letterkenny  
Institute  
of Technology

## LYIT APPLICATION FORM FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Approval will not be granted if recruitment and/or data collection has already begun- there are no retrospective approvals.
2. Copies of proposed questionnaires or a list of questions to be included in any questionnaire should accompany this application form.
3. All fields should be completed. Where Not Applicable applies, please enter N/A.
4. All researchers must complete Section A and, where applicable, Section B and Section C.
5. Section D will be completed by the Schools Research Ethics Committee (SREC) or Institute Research Ethics Committee (IREC).
6. Appeals of the decision of the SREC, IREC should be completed in Section E
7. Please email completed form to.
8. **When submitting your form please ensure the Subject Line of your email contains the words “Ethics Application”, followed by your name.** ]

**SECTION A**

**Project Title** "Exploring Early Years Educators' Perspectives of Outdoors Play".  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Submission** 24/1/20  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Name of all person(s) submitting research proposal**  
Mary Doohan McCraith  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Type of Research** Phd  MSc by Research  External Research Funding

**Position** Student yes  Staff   
*If student, Student No.* L00113346  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Department/Centre** Department of Nursing  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Email Address** mccraith@hotmail.com/L00113346@student.lyit.ie  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Principal Researcher (if different from above e.g., Student's Supervisor)**  
Mary Doohan McCraith  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Position Held** Student  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Pre-existing approval and Multi-agency research**



1. If your research has pre-existing ethics approval please attach the approval and submit directly to Berni Carlin in the Development Office ([researchethics@lyit.ie](mailto:researchethics@lyit.ie).)
2. If your research is to be carried out across two or more research centres and ethics approval has already been granted by another agency/institution then please attach the approval and submit to Berni Carlin in the Development Office ([researchethics@lyit.ie](mailto:researchethics@lyit.ie)).

**In both instances there is no requirement to complete the remainder of the application form.**

## **SECTION B**

1. Background to and rationale for the project.

Outdoor play in the 0-6 age range has been under studied in Ireland. 94% of childcare settings availing of government childcare subsidy have access to outdoor space (DCYA 2018). This research proposal wishes to explore early year educators' perspectives of outdoor play. It is envisaged that early year educators' shall be invited to partake in two focus groups to explore, discuss and deliberate on this topic. Focus groups based on geographical locations shall be utilised (rural/urban). The focus group structure and findings will allow the researcher to consider participants self-reflection of their practice which will therein allow the researcher to explore how to improve practice, improve situations in which practice takes place and ultimately improve understanding of practice. It is hoped that the dissemination of findings in publications and conferences will contribute to the debate on Outdoor play in an Irish context.

A purposeful sample shall be utilised and the use of childcare facilities as listed on Donegal County Childcare Committee website shall be used as a database for setting selection. Managers shall be contacted to act as gatekeeper. Upon agreement from manager/s, early year educators' shall be invited to partake in the study. This purposeful sampling strategy will ensure representation of the population. Employment within the Early Childhood Care and Education (0-6) sector, and working directly with children, will be stipulated as a criteria for inclusion. The researchers' current pupils are excluded from participation due to the potential for an unequal relationship which may impact on the validity of data generated and findings. Ideally, it would be envisaged that 8 – 10 early year educators' would take part in each focus group. A time and date shall be arranged to suit the participants.

A pilot study shall be conducted initially which will allow for the researcher to hone skills and identify if there are any questions or areas that could be altered for the main focus groups. The questions included with the application are a guide and the researcher will explore emerging themes as they arise during the pilot study (appendix 5).

The pilot focus group participants shall have the opportunity to give the researcher feedback on the process.

2. Main purpose and aim(s) of the project.

The purpose and aim of this research is to investigate and explore:

1. What are Early Year Educators' experience and perspectives of Outdoor Play? Do these perspectives correspond with professional practice as outlined in the Aistear Curriculum or Síolta Framework?

2. What are Early Year Educators' thoughts on planning for outdoor play? Are there any challenges?

3. What are the Early Year Educators' views of the benefits of outdoor play?

4. Do Early Year Educators' have sufficient access to the outdoors? What support structures may be required in order to facilitate access to outdoor play?

3. Please give a summary of the **design and methodology** of the project (suggested headings are provided but additional information should be provided as required). **Please note** that copies of proposed questionnaires or a list of questions that will be included in any questionnaire should accompany this application form (Compulsory not optional). The personal data collected in the questionnaire must be kept to a minimum in line with GDPR Regulations.

## **Research Methods**

For the purposes of this study it will be necessary to adopt an exploratory qualitative approach. A focus group interview will allow for rich explorative qualitative data to be obtained on the subject matter, two focus group interviews shall be carried out, one rural and one urban. In respect of the pilot study, a practice run through of the focus group shall be conducted to test the questions, recording and analysis. This will allow for the researcher to hone skills and identify if there are any questions or areas that could be omitted from the other two planned focus groups. The pilot focus group participants shall have the opportunity to give the researcher feedback on the process. The researcher will use this information to shape the way forward in the main study. The pilot focus group shall be carried out using a small group of early year educators' identified by their ability to comment on the topic and give honest feedback on the processes (n=5).

## **Sampling**

Purposeful identification of settings containing a mix of community based and "private for profit settings" located within the county of Donegal shall be contacted. A letter of invitation will be forwarded to a gate keeper (management of a setting) outlining all relevant information with respect of the intention, purpose and methodology style of the proposed research (n=25). A follow up call will be made to the manager to determine if the setting wishes to participate. Permission shall be sought to contact their employees. Once consent is given for access to staff an invitation shall be given to early year educators' to partake in a focus group in order to get their individual perspectives on the outdoors (appendix 2). No selection bias shall be adopted as both community based and "private for profit" settings shall be given equal opportunity to take part, as will focus groups from both rural and urban locations, thus adopting a purposeful sampling approach. Employment within the Early Childhood Care and Education (0-6) sector, and working directly with children, will be stipulated as a criteria for inclusion. It is envisaged that n=8-10 would attend the focus group. Krueger and Casey (2000, p.12) recommend at least 6-8 in a focus group and outlined "focus groups determine perceptions, feeling and thinking of people about issues, products, services and opportunities "which will be paramount in determining the answers to the above questions. The researchers' current pupils are excluded from participation due to the potential for an unequal relationship which may impact on the validity of data generated and findings.

## **Recording Devices**

An appropriate time and place will be allotted to accommodate the early year educators' agenda/schedule. A comfortable room will be hired ensuring that it is private with a "Do not Disturb" sign and can accommodate all participants. As a welcome gesture refreshment will be provided to ensure the comfort of the participants. An informal approach will be adopted to guarantee participants are at ease with a welcome expressed for attendance and general pleasantries exchanged.

To facilitate recording of the discussion, early year educators' will be invited to sit around a table. The participants shall be informed again that audio recording shall commence. Recordings shall be transcribed verbatim and participants anonymity is guaranteed as no names will be used (participants no. 1, no. 2 etc. shall be utilised). The researcher will ensure that no one participant dominates the discussion and that all have equal opportunity to actively contribute in the focus group. Again, the conversation shall be audio recorded only (no visual). Participants shall be informed that the researcher as a mandated person shall comply with Children First (2015). (Mandated persons are people who have contact with children and/or families who, by virtue of their qualifications, training and experience, are in a key position to help protect children from harm).

## **Data Analysis**

It shall be necessary for the researcher to adopt an open mind when exploring the qualitative data utilising thematic analysis. To systematically consider the research question and identify if a patterned response is becoming apparent. To identify the significant emerging themes from the number of instances the theme has occurred. It shall be necessary to use good judgement to determine significance of themes within the

data set. Furthermore, to determine and analyse what themes have potential for importance. Hence the importance of utilising a pilot study and two focus group interviews, which will ensure questions are relevant for the exploration of the area and that terminology/language used by the researcher is understood by participants.

It shall be important to provide within the study detailed descriptive statistics in respect of summarising the findings of the Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire (appendix 4). This will involve getting a clear representation on the population in respect of the early year educators' qualification, location (rural/urban), years of employment, type of setting and time spent outdoors which may or may not impact on their perspectives. The descriptive statistics findings will be presented in chart formation.

4. Please complete the research ethics checklist below:

- |  | <b>YES</b>                   | <b>NO</b>                |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a) Does the research involve human or animal participants?   | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) Does the research involve data of a personal or confidential nature?  | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent:   |                              |                          |
| 1. Children under 18 years of age  | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Students  | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. People who have language difficulty   | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. People who have a recognised or diagnose intellectual or mental impairment  | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Older people  | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. People confirmed to institutions ( <i>prisoners, residents in nursing facilities</i> )  | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Person in unequal relationships with the <i>researcher (teacher/student, therapist/client, employer/employee)</i>   | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Others ( <i>please specify</i> )  | <input type="checkbox"/>     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d) Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for access to participants? (e.g. teacher, local council) Yes <input type="checkbox"/>                            |                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e) Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places) | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f) Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)?   | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g) Are there issues of safety for the researchers or subjects, aside from those documented in Institute or Departmental Health and Safety procedures?                        | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| h) Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?                                | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| i) Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?   | No <input type="checkbox"/>  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

j) Does the research involve a conflict of interests?

No

**If you have answered ‘NO’ to all of the questions above there is no requirement to complete the remainder of the form. Please submit to the SREC or IREC**

**If you have answered ‘yes’ to questions please continue and complete the remainder of the application form submit to ([researchethics@lyit.ie](mailto:researchethics@lyit.ie))**

## SECTION C

5. Describe the research procedures as they affect the research subject and any other parties involved.

Circa 60– 90 minutes of n=8-10 early year educators’ time will be required to carry out the focus groups.

An appropriate time and place will be allotted to accommodate the early year educators’ agenda/schedule. A comfortable room will be hired ensuring that it is private (do not disturb sign placed on door) and can accommodate all participants. As a welcome gesture refreshment will be provided to ensure the comfort of the participants. An informal approach will be adopted to guarantee participants are at ease, with a welcome expressed for attendance and general pleasantries exchanged. A Participant Consent Form (appendix 3) shall be presented for completion, thus ensuring ethical compliance. To determine the characteristics of the group an Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire (appendix 4) information sheet was designed and will be presented for completion. To facilitate recording of the discussion, early year educators’ will be invited to sit around a table. The researcher will ensure that no one participant dominates the discussion and that all have equal opportunity to actively contribute in the focus group. The topic of conversation shall be audio recorded only (no visual). The recordings shall be transcribed verbatim and participants anonymity is guaranteed as no names will be requested or used (participants assigned no. 1, no. 2 etc. shall be utilised).

6. What in your opinion are the ethical considerations involved in this proposal? (You may wish for example to comment on issues to do with consent, confidentiality, risk to subjects, etc.)

### Ethical

The dignity and rights of all participants shall be ensured. Wellbeing and comfort shall be safeguarded throughout the study. Participants' will be given accurate, detailed and honest information with respect to the nature and purpose of the study (appendix 2). The researchers' current pupils are excluded from participation due to the potential for an unequal relationship which may impact on the validity of data generated and findings.

### Consent

There will be no possibility to coerce participation as interested parties can freely come forward, the researcher shall discuss the rationale of the research by presenting the letter of invitation to interested participants and answer all questions participants may have. Attendance at the assigned location will establish voluntary focus group participation. A participant Consent Form shall be presented for completion, thus ensuring permission in line with ethical guideline.

### Privacy

Participants' name or setting names will not be disclosed during the process, they will simply be referred to as participant n=1 – 10. Participants' will be invited to complete a Focus Group Demographic Information Sheet to determine the characteristics of the group, again no names/work locations shall be disclosed during the documenting of the data for publication. Ethically, considerations with respect to the storing of participants data shall be acknowledged. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be assured by only storing data securely in a locked filing cabinet, electronically secured on a password protected encrypted computer, again in a locked office. The transcribed data will equally be stored in the same manner as will the physical recording tapes.

### Confidentiality

Participants will be advised on the importance of safeguarding the confidentiality and privacy of all participants by not discussing with non-participants the observations made or opinions expressed during the course of the focus group meetings. Researcher will make it clear to participants that as a mandated person and in keeping with Children First (2015), should a disclosure concerning the welfare and/or the protection of children be highlighted, it will be referred to Tusla.

### Validity

The researcher shall make every effort to ensure that this research is conducted in an objective, honest and unbiased manner. The researcher acknowledges that the participant/s may perceive a risk of giving a truthful response during discussions, due to the possibility of being prejudged by their fellow participants. It shall be made clear to participants that this study is part of a Masters dissertation and may not influence or impact policy or practice within the sector.

### Limitations

Due to the childcare sector employing predominantly female staff, researcher identified this as a limitation. The short time frame for collection of data accounts for the limitation of only having time to carry out two focus groups. Ideally focus groups would have continued until saturation was evident.

7. Outline the reasons which lead you to be satisfied that the possible benefits to be gained from the project justify any risks or discomforts involved.

As participants are revealing personal information with respect to their background in the Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire (appendix 4), the researcher shall not require/request the participants' name, workplace or location address. The researcher shall be respectful of GDPR and participants shall simply be assigned a number, n=1 – 10. There shall be no risk to the participants as their privacy and anonymity shall be safeguarded and guaranteed. Participants shall be advised on the importance of safeguarding the confidentiality and privacy of all participants by not discussing with non-participants the observations made or opinions expressed during the course of the focus group meetings. The researcher shall respectfully ensure every participant shall have their voice heard and comments welcomed, ensuring a sense of equality and inclusion. It is hoped that the dissemination of findings in publications and conferences will contribute to the debate on Outdoor play in an Irish context.

8. Who are the investigators (including assistants) who will conduct the research and explain how the qualifications and experiences of the researchers on this project qualifies them to deal with the ethical issues. What is your relationship with the participants? (If you are in a position of authority, for example, indicate how you will deal with the potential influences of such a relationship.)

I, Mary Doohan McCraith will investigate and conduct this research. I hold a Hons. BSc. in ECCHE (Hons). I teach 8 modules of the level 6 (QQI) Childcare for Muintearas under Roinn na Gaeltachta part time one evening per week. I have guest lectured in LyIT on the part time BSc. ECCHE course. I have also taught level 6 Special Needs Assisting for ETB, Donegal and feel I have the skills, knowledge and competencies to complete this investigation. From my studies during my Masters with respect to research, I have opted to take a focus group approach as I understand they are useful in obtaining detailed information about personal and sector group feelings, perceptions and opinions. The pilot study will equally allow refinement of my skills ability. This will provide me with a broader range of information and the opportunity to seek further clarification on content arising by repeating within the two planned focus groups. The researchers' current pupils are excluded from participation due to the potential for an unequal relationship.

9. Are arrangements for the provision of clinical facilities to handle emergencies necessary? If so, briefly describe the arrangements made.

n/a

10. In cases where subjects will be identified from information held by another party (for example, a doctor or hospital) describe the arrangements you intend to make to gain access to this information including, where appropriate, which Multi Centre Research Ethics Committee or Local Research Ethics Committee will be applied to. The data controller should be identified including if relevant any joint controllers.

n/a

11. Specify whether subjects will include students or others in a dependent relationship and justify their inclusion.

The researchers' current pupils are excluded from participation due to the potential for an unequal relationship which may impact on the validity of data generated and findings.

12. Specify whether the research will include participants from vulnerable groups or unable to give informed consent e.g. children, older people, people with a mental illness, disability or handicap, people confined to institutions and persons in unequal relationships with the researcher. If so, please explain the justification of involving these individuals as research subjects. If 'Yes', has appropriate Garda clearance (or equivalent) been obtained (include details)?

n/a

13. Will payment or any other incentive, such as a gift or free services, be made to any research subject? If so, please specify and state the level of payment to be made and/or the source of the funds/gift/free service to be used. Please explain the justification for offering payment or other incentive.

n/a

14. Please give details of how consent is to be obtained. A copy of the proposed consent form (see appendix 2 for sample), along with a separate information sheet (see appendix 1 for check list), written in simple, non-technical language **MUST** accompany this form.

Letter will be forwarded to a gatekeeper to forward to interested early year educators' (participants) who may wish to partake in a focus group (see appendix 1)

A letter will detail reasoning for research, outlining consent to the focus group (see appendix 2).

Upon participation a consent form shall be signed by the early year educators' (see appendix 3).

Participants shall also be asked to complete an Early Years Focus Group Demographic Form (see appendix 4).



15. Comment on any cultural, social or gender-based characteristics of the subject which have affected the design of the project or which may affect its conduct.

The findings of this study may be impacted by a gender bias in that the researcher anticipates that it will be mainly female participants that will contribute to the study, therefore the male perspectives may not be represented. However, every effort to identify and invite male educators' to participate in the study shall be considered in order to attempt to overcome this situation. Findings from the Early Years Practitioner Survey acknowledges that early year education and care is overwhelmingly delivered by females who account for 98% and 2% delivered by the male demographic (DES 2016). This should not comprise the design or knowledge obtained from the participants. It is anticipated that no cultural, social or other gender-based characteristics shall arise, however should this occur, it shall be managed accordingly.

16. Please state who will have access to the data and what measures will be adopted to maintain the confidentiality of the research subject and to comply with data protection requirements e.g. will the data be anonymised? If personal data is being processed a privacy statement should be prepared in line with the research to ensure the data subject is informed about their data.

Investigator, supervisor and external examiner. Privacy and confidentiality shall be protected throughout the research study. All participants names, work settings or addresses shall not be requested or revealed to anyone outside the study. Information collected shall be kept in a secure location. Data collected will only be used for the purpose intended. Data will be correlated and stored on a hard drive of a desktop computer in a locked office. This information will only be accessed by the researcher, research supervisor and examiner. The computer will be password protected and encrypted for safety and security. Hard copies of data generated will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All information will remain confidential until it has been deleted/shredded 5 years after completion of the research.

17. Please specify who will have control of the data generated by the research and how any data obtained during the course of the research will be stored and how long the data will be retained for? Data should be retained for a maximum of 5 years in line with the LYIT's Retention Policy.

Data collected will only be used for the purpose intended. Data will be correlated and stored on a hard drive of a desktop computer in a locked office. This information will only be accessed by the researcher, research supervisor and examiner. The computer is password protected and encrypted for safety and security. Hard copies of data generated will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All information will remain confidential until it has been deleted/shredded 5 years after completion of the research.

Researcher shall comply with all LyIT data protection and GDPR guidelines.

18. Date on which the project will begin and end and start and end date for data collection

February 2020 subject to ethical approval and completion of Focus Groups in April 2020.

19. Please state location(s) where the project will be carried out.

County Donegal

20. Please state briefly any precautions being taken to protect the health and safety of researchers and others associated with the project (as distinct from the research subjects) e.g. where blood samples are being taken

n/a

21. Will the intended group of research subjects, to your knowledge, be involved in other research? If so, please justify.

No

22. Has permission been granted to use all copyright materials including questionnaires and similar instruments? If not please provide the reason

n/a

## DECLARATION

The checklist below is intended to aid your submission to LYIT for a full ethical review, by providing you with a reminder of all the documents you *might* submit in one file. All supporting documents should be inserted into this document where indicated. **Please note that your submission cannot be reviewed without the relevant Information Sheet(s) and Consent/Assent Form(s).**

Please tick

1	Information sheet for participants – Letter to Early Year Educators’ - Appendix 2	yes
2	Information sheet for parents/guardians	n/a
3	Information sheet for children	n/a
4	Consent form for participants – Letter of Participant Consent – Appendix 3	yes
5	Consent form for parents/guardians	n/a
6	Assent form for children	n/a
7	Interview schedule for interviews/focus groups – Possible Questions – Appendix 5	yes
8	Questionnaire - Early Years Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire – Appendix 4	yes
9	Advertisement/Poster/Flyers for recruitment of participants	n/a
10	Letter(s) of permission from external organisation(s) granting access to their business, school, charity, databases etc – Gatekeeper – Appendix 1	yes
11	Any other relevant supporting documents specifically required for your study  Reference list at end of Ethics Form	yes

I confirm that:

- This form gives an accurate account of the proposed research;
- This project is viable and is of research or educational merit;
- All risks and ethical and procedural implications have been considered;
- The project will be conducted at all times in compliance with the research description in this ethical approval application form/protocol and in accordance with the Institute’s requirements on recording and reporting;
- This application has not been submitted to and rejected by another committee; and
- Permission has been granted to use all copyright materials including questionnaires and similar instruments

Signature Researcher *Mary Doohan McCraith*

Date 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2020

Signature Research Supervisor *Magella Mc Bride*

Date 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020