

Embracing Changes Outdoors for Children Under 3:

Pilot Study of a Community of Research and Practice

Evaluation Report
April 2023



Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The lack of attention to outdoor provision for babies and toddlers in ECEC practice and research was a key motivation to pilot a community of practice and research approach that would empower early childhood educators in Ireland to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision. Between May and November 2022, 11 educators from three ECEC services in the South Dublin region participated in the pilot. It was titled, Embracing Change Outdoors for Children Under 3 Community of Practice and Research (ECO-3). The six meetings of the ECO-3 community were facilitated by two development officers from South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) and a researcher from Hibernia College. The cycle of change underpinning ECO-3 involved choosing to change; planning for change; creating the change; sharing first insights and sharing with others.

The evaluation of the pilot addressed the following questions:

- 1) What impact did ECO-3 have on pedagogical practice, knowledge and time outdoors?
- 2) What features of ECO-3 process contributed to the participating early childhood educators to reflect and improve their outdoor play and learning provision?

Findings

- ECO-3 had the effect of the participating early childhood educators broadening and deepening their understanding of outdoor play pedagogy in ECEC in general, and for children under 3.
- Most of the educators strongly agreed that they had gained a new perspective about outdoor play and learning for children under 3 since starting the ECO-3.
- Educators reported being more attentive to children's interests and changing developmental needs. This in turn informed planning for and implementing small scale but significant change.
- Educators also reported being more open to the possibilities of using messy and risky play; drawing on everyday experiences and found materials in nature in their practice.
- Another change was that educators recognised community outdoor spaces as outdoor play and learning environments that ECEC services could use.
- ECO-3 did not have a major impact on the amount of time educators reported spending outdoors with children under 3. There was

a large variation between educators in the average amount of time they spent outdoors with babies and toddlers outdoors. This ranged from less than 15 minutes to 1 to 2 hours.

- The reported barriers to bringing babies and toddlers outdoors concerned (bad) weather; the lack of appropriate outdoor clothing; safety concerns; outdoor time 'rotas' for different age groups and educators' perceptions that parents do not approve of outdoor play for babies, especially in cold weather.
- Whilst participating educators were interested in and confident in communicating with parents in general, they may still lack confidence in the explaining the role of outdoor play in babies' and toddlers' development and learning.
- The most effective and valuable aspect of the ECO-3 approach for the participating educators was the opportunity it provided to exchange knowledge and experiences with colleagues from their own setting and with peers in other ECEC settings.
- The second most valuable aspect of the ECO-3 approach was viewing and discussing photos and videos of outdoor practice with babies and toddlers. These served as provocations for educators to see new possibilities for pedagogical work outdoors.
- Handouts with short texts about pedagogical practice outdoors and other suggested reading to read between meetings were viewed by the participating educators as less effective, compared to peer discussion and joint viewing of photos and videos, in improving outdoor provision.
- The involvement of external facilitation in ECO-3 was welcomed by the participants. It motivated participants, provided a welcome 'other' perspective, and the creation of a safe climate for discussion

Implications for professional learning and development, research and scaling up

Budgetary provision for communities of practice and research

- For the ECO-3 approach to be brought to scale within SDCCC and in all 30 City and County CCCs¹ it will be necessary to make budgetary provision for a set number of paid hours for early childhood educators to participate in facilitated communities of research and practice.

Change in professional practice is possible, but takes time

- A minimum of 6 months should be planned for a community of research and practice. The number of meetings, their format and venue should be negotiated and agreed upon by the participants. The length of time and number of meetings will also depend on the goal of the community of practice.

A whole team and facilitated approach works best

- A whole team and facilitated approach whereby communities of practice and research involve managers, room leaders and staff working directly with children and families works best.
- In further iterations of ECO-3, it is advised that facilitators strengthen the links between discussion points arising in the meetings and the underpinning theory and pedagogical guidelines contained in *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.
- It is recommended that communities of practice and research are facilitated by development officers and/or lecturer/trainers from HEI or other training and research institutions who have experience in ECEC and community-based action research and group facilitation.

¹ Or the proposed structures that eventually may replace CCCs (DECDIY, 2023).

Involve others in the community in planning for and enacting quality ECEC

- ① There is a need for greater attention to be paid to planning and maintaining accessible and integrated outdoor and natural spaces in the community, which would link and provide safe green routes between young children's homes, ECEC outdoor environments and other community spaces.
- ② Depending on the focus of the community of practice and research, it is recommended when planning a community of research and practice, to consider who else in the community might be directly included in (part of) a community of research and practice: parents or grandparents, others living in the neighbourhood; other professionals from educational, health, sports and recreation or cultural services.

More research needed on experiences of children under 3 outdoors in ECEC in Ireland

- ① The findings of the ECO-3 evaluation point to the following areas as needing further research: 1) the impact of a ECEC service's daily routine and time slots for different groups outdoors on quality of outdoor experiences of babies and toddlers; 2) related to this, outdoor play as an opportunity for mixed-aged play involving babies and toddlers and its impact on learning and development, 3) how to work effectively in partnership with parents, families and communities in providing for outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers in ECEC.





1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale for ECO-3

The curriculum and quality frameworks² for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland identify outdoor play and learning as an important part of good practice. Additional guidance such as that contained in [Aistear Síolta Practice Guide](#) and the [Universal Design Guidelines for ELC Settings](#) and its accompanying self-audit tool (Grey et al. 2019) provide support and advice to services to reflect on and improve their outdoor play provision. However, whilst early childhood educators believe in the importance of outdoor play for children's learning and development, it remains a challenge for many to provide stimulating and diverse experiences outdoors all year round, especially for babies and toddlers (under 3s) (SDCCC, 2021). An absence of attention to outdoor provision for babies and toddlers is also reflected in international research reviews about outdoor provision in ECEC, where outdoor provision is characterised by the 'confinement' of very young children indoors (Kemp & Josephidou, 2021; Santos da Costa et al. 2021).

² *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006).

There is strong evidence from international research demonstrating that meaningful in-service training and protected time to reflect, to plan with colleagues in teams has an impact both on children's child development and learning and professional development (OECD, 2018; Peleman et al. 2018; Doan & Hendra, 2022). This is not only relevant to outdoor play, but to ECEC practice in general. In its 2021 review of quality of ECEC in Ireland, the OECD recommended that attention be paid to measures that built early years' educators' capacity for self-evaluation and improvement planning (OECD, 2021).

Amongst the benefits of facilitated group reflection are that it changes perspectives on daily situations, it helps to concretely transform and improve daily practice and it helps educators link theory and practice (Hayes & O'Neill, 2017; SEED, 2019). Facilitated group reflection which is based on the needs of the group also contributes to personal growth and shared support amongst early childhood educators (SEED, 2019; Doan & Jang, 2020;). An evaluation of a collaborative embedded CPD intervention for early years educators in an urban area of disadvantage in Ireland involving both early childhood educators and managers indicated that changes made during the intervention are sustained and can have an ongoing impact on practice (Hayes & O'Neill, 2017).

In 2021, a needs analysis conducted by South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) showed that outdoor play provision for children under 3 was a challenge for ECEC services. In response, SDCCC in partnership with the School of Education at Hibernia College embarked on a research project which involved piloting an approach to community-based action research to improve the outdoor play and learning provision for babies and toddlers. It was titled, 'Embracing Changes Outdoors for Children Under 3: A Community of Research and Practice' – or ECO-3 for short. The participants in ECO-3 were 11 early childhood educators, two development officers from South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) and a researcher from Hibernia College. The six meetings of ECO-3 took place between May and November 2022.

The overall aim of ECO-3 was to explore a community-based action-research approach that would engage, empower and give agency to early childhood educators working in urban settings to improve outdoor play and learning provision. Funding was secured from South Dublin Sports Partnership for €250 for each participating ECEC setting. The remaining costs for ECO-3 were jointly borne by SDCCC and Hibernia College.

This report presents the findings of the evaluation component of the ECO-3 pilot. The evaluation focusses firstly, on the impact ECO-3 had on pedagogical practice, knowledge, time outdoors and secondly, on the ECO-3 process and the features that contributed to (or hindered) the participating early childhood educators to reflect and improve their outdoor play and learning provision.

1.2 Who is this evaluation report for?

The findings of the ECO-3 pilot are designed to assist SDCCC in fulfilling its commitment to enhance quality early childhood education and care and school-age provision in South County Dublin. The findings are also relevant for all city and county childcare committees and other organisations whose mission is to provide continuing professional development (CPD) for early childhood educators and/or to enhance outdoor play and learning provision for very young children.

It is also hoped that the insights gained in ECO-3 will inform the work programme of the Irish government's *Workforce Development Plan* for the Early Learning and Care sector, which recognises the value of non-formal CPD and communities of practice (DCEDIY, 2021). The findings are also relevant for the updating of *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, that is due to be complete in 2024.

This report is also of value for the various programmes of study in Hibernia College. Designing and researching the ECO-3 process and impact is part of the College's commitment to developing practice-based research, and to college-community partnerships. The ECO-3 approach and this evaluation will be of value to researchers, trainers, teacher educators, early childhood educator trainees in Ireland and elsewhere who are interested in practice-based action research.

1.3 Outline of the report

The first section of the report sets the context for the pilot by describing how outdoor play provision and regulation in ECEC in Ireland has evolved from 2005 to the present (Section 2). Section 3 describes the background and key features of the ECO-3 approach. This is followed by the research aims and objectives of the ECO-3 and a section that describes the evaluation methodology (Section 4). The key features of the model of implementation are outlined in Sections 5. The findings of the evaluation are presented in Sections 6 and are organised in two parts. The first part focuses on the impact participating in ECO-3 had on pedagogical practice, knowledge and amount of time spent outdoors (Sub-sections 6.1 to 6.4). The second part focusses on the ECO-3 process and the features that contributed (or hindered) the participating early childhood educators to reflect and improve their outdoor play and learning provision (Sections 6.5). The final section of the report presents overall conclusions and implications for professional learning, scaling up and research (Section 7).

A note on terminology: ECEC (early childhood education and care) and ELC (early learning and care) are used interchangeably throughout the report. The preference of the authors is the term ECEC in line with international discourse and EU policy. However, since the Irish Government currently use ELC in their policies about the care and education of young children this term is also used.



2. Background and context: outdoor play and learning in ECEC

2.1 Outdoor play provision in development: 2005 to 2020

Over recent decades there has been a gradual increase in outdoor play opportunities for young children in ECEC settings in Ireland. Perceptions and understandings of the function of the outdoors as a play and learning environment have also evolved in this period.

In 2006, a nationwide survey of ECEC services showed that 11 percent of ECEC services had no access to an outdoor space. Where outdoor space was provided, grass and safety surfaces predominated (Pobal, 2006). A more in-depth study of outdoor provision at that time showed that adults' perceptions about weather, risk and safety, limited young children's outdoor experience (Kernan & Devine, 2009).

The publication of *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in 2006 (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear*, The National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009 (NCCA, 2009) were significant in that both frameworks explicitly named the outdoors as part of the play and learning environment in ECEC³. This development, coupled with advice and support about outdoor play offered by national voluntary childcare agencies such as Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and the City and County Childhood Committees, and modules about outdoor play in preservice higher education programmes aimed to increase the understanding about the role of outdoor play for children's development, learning and general well-being. The gradual increase in attention being paid to outdoor provision was reflected in a 2010 survey of 42 early years' educators in the South-West region of Ireland about their outdoor practices. This indicated that early years' educators were introducing variety and diversity in the physical outdoor environment by including features such as seating, different levels, slopes, steps, sand, and water (Corbett & Kernan, 2010).⁴ Interest in playful and nature-based early childhood and primary education (sometimes referred to as Forest School Education) also began to increase in Ireland and internationally in this period. In 2016, the Irish Forest School Association was founded and a number of forest ECEC services were set up.⁵

The publication of the *Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning & Care (UDG)* in 2019 were a significant development bringing attention to the spatial features of ECEC services, how they impact on all children's wellbeing and development and how settings can be made accessible. The UD guidance for external spaces and the outdoors suggests the provision of 'accessible, easy to understand, usable outdoor spaces with a good transition between indoor and outdoor'; 'ample space for play, movement, adventure, and challenge'; 'weave together indoor and outdoor spaces'; and that 'children's spaces should, in some way, relate to the community' (Grey et al., 2019 p.142). Whilst not mandatory, the UD guidance and accompanying self-audit tool are intended to help managers, early years' educators and architects reflect on outdoor and indoor environments and plan for improvements.

³ The updated Aistear Curriculum framework is currently in a consultation phase and the finalized version, informed both by findings of the consultation and a systematic review of the research literature, will be published in 2024.

⁴ Findings of follow up study were published in ChildLinks, Journal of Barnardos, Issue 3, 2010.

⁵ <https://irishforestschoollassociation.ie/about/> accessed 13 December 2021.

2.2 Regulating outdoor play in ECEC

Early childhood educators in Ireland are held accountable for their outdoor provision via inspections conducted by Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency and by the Department of Education's Early Years Education Inspectorate and Skills (EYEI). How outdoors provision is regulated has also seen development since the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations were first introduced in 1996. The most explicit reference to the outdoors in the 1996 Regulations concerned securing outdoor areas against hazards. Additionally, Item 28 (b) stipulated that 'Adequate and suitable facilities for a pre-school child to play indoors and outdoors during the day' should be provided, 'having regard to the number of pre-school children attending the service, their age and the amount of time they spend in the premises' (Government of Ireland, 1997, p.161).

A significant addition in the 2016 Regulations, which still apply (also during the ECO-3 pilot), is the requirement that children have daily access to outdoors on the premises or in another outdoor space available to the children (see Government of Ireland, 2016, Section 20.2-5). Any new ECEC service, registered after 30th June 2016, is required to have an outdoor place on the premises. Schedule 5 of the Regulations stipulates that registered providers are also required to have a policy on outdoor play (Government of Ireland, 2016).⁶

An additional inspection process was introduced in 2016 for services participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme catering for children aged 2 years 8 months and until they enter primary school. The focus of the Early Years Education Inspections (EYEI) is on process quality e.g., relationships, interactions, use of space, role of play in learning. In the DES Guidelines about EYEI, the outdoors is explicitly named as an environment supporting children's wellbeing, learning and development. Outcome 7 specifies, 'Children have frequent access to outdoor learning environments. Resources are accessible, developmentally appropriate, and provide for multi-sensory learning experiences' (DES Inspectorate, 2018, p.20).

All these developments indicate that high value, in curriculum and quality assurance guidelines and regulation is afforded to the outdoors as an environment for learning and development in ECEC during the period that ECO-3 pilot took place.

2.3 Supporting outdoor play provision in ECEC during and post COVID Pandemic 2020-2022

Planning for the ECO-3 pilot took place as the world slowly emerged from the global COVID-19 Pandemic, and which continues to have enormous impact on social, education, health and welfare areas of life. As soon as it became clear that the COVID-19 virus was an airborne transmitted virus, and the risk of infection was therefore much lower outdoors (Lancet, 2020), the outdoors was positioned as a safer and healthier place to be. Furthermore, the necessity for physical distancing in education settings at the height of the pandemic in 2020, also put a spotlight on the possibilities that the outdoors offered as a play and learning space. The past two years has seen renewed interest in nature-based interventions in general such as walking or playing outdoors in nature, gardening or green-exercise, which have been proven in the past as effective in improving mental health outcomes for both adults (WHO, 2016; Coventry et al. 2021) and for children (Children & Nature Network Research Digest, October 2021). ECEC stakeholders interviewed as part of the ESRI policy analysis of ECEC provision in Ireland also commented that the Pandemic had the effect of raising awareness about the importance of outdoor play (Curristan et al. 2023).

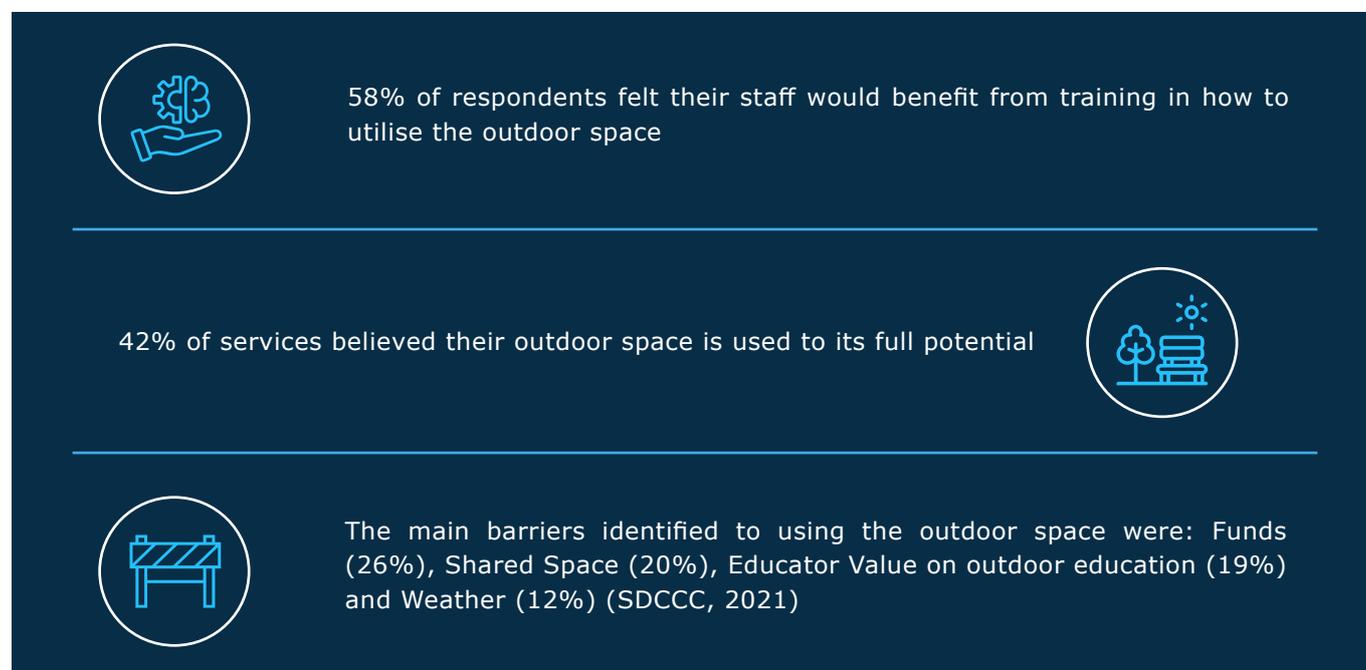
Throughout the Pandemic, City and County Childcare Committees, including SDCCC and membership organisations such as ECI, remained active in supporting services to improve the quality of outdoor provision through provision of online outdoor play-focused workshops, seminars, newsletters, webinars, and videos illustrating good practice in outdoor provision. In November 2021 the Aistear Síolta Initiative, the goal of which is to assist early years educators in their practice, published a booklet about [risky play for children aged birth](#)

⁶ Accordingly, this policy should specify 'the manner in which and the times at which pre-school children attending the service have access to outdoor play, whether on the premises or in another location, and (b) the manner in which the health and safety of the pre-school children attending the service while engaged in outdoor play is to be ensured' Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations p.46.

to 6 years (Aistear Siolta Initiative, 2021). Another development in 2021, was that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) added the development of outdoor-play based learning to their list of priority actions for ELC and School Age Childcare (SAC) services under the Quality Unit. The *Playing Outside Grant* was made available, to support all registered ELC and SAC services to enhance their outdoor provision as part of the *Summer of Play* initiative in 2021. This was extended into 2022 for services to improve indoor ventilation, facilitate additional outdoor activities and purchase outdoor wear for children and staff (DCEDIY and Pobal, 2021). In summary one of the positive effects of COVID was to draw attention to the outdoors as a healthy playing and learning space for young children.

SDCCC needs analysis of early learning and care and school age childcare services 2018-21

Yet despite all these initiatives, access to outdoor play for children attending ECEC services remained a challenge for services. A review of Tusla inspection reports conducted by SDCCC covering the period 2018 to early 2021 showed that the most common compliance issues in relation to outdoor play for ELC services in the region were: little or no access to outdoor play provided; little or no access to outdoor play for babies; (concerns about) safety outdoors; lack of equipment, resources and planned activities outdoors (SDCCC, Internal Report, 2021). An internal needs analysis survey of all the services in SDCCC region in 2021 showed that:



The ECO-3 pilot was one of a few actions initiated by SDCCC in response to this needs analysis⁷. As noted above, it took place at time when educators were, as described by one of the ECO-3 participants, 'just coming up to breathe post COVID-19 restrictions'. The early year's sector was also dealing with persistent poor working conditions, low status and high staff turnover (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020). However, the promised actions of the Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY, 2021) and the publication in December 2021 of the New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Children, and a new Employment Regulation Order (ERO) and linked higher capitation rates for the ECEC sector were significant. These engendered very cautious optimism and 'a positive step towards ensuring better pay and conditions for staff (Curristan et al. 2023, p.81).

In the following section (Section 3) we describe the key features of the ECO-3 approach to continuing professional development (CPD) and action that we hoped would engage, empower and give agency to early childhood educators working in urban settings to improve outdoor play and learning provision.

⁷ Other actions initiated by SDCCC were: Introduction to Outdoor Provision training and mentoring programme for services; sharing information about outdoor play via theme blogs and videos; promoting the Outdoor Classroom Day via weekly bulletins in May. An Outdoor Themed Webinar in November, at which Dr. Margaret Kernan spoke, led to development ECO-3 pilot.

3. ECO-3 approach to community-based research and practice

3.1 Influences on ECO-3 approach to CPD

Embracing Changes Outdoors for Children Under 3 or ECO-3 was designed as an approach to continuing professional development and action research which, we hoped would improve the outdoor play and learning provision for babies and toddlers. The ECO-3 approach to CPD draws on principles and approaches of communities of practice (Wenger et al. 2002), community-based participatory research (Tandon et al. 2016) and the lessons learned from previous action research projects designed to bring about meaningful change in ECEC through action research and team reflection (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009; Hayes & O'Neill, 2017; SEED, 2019). Previous research about collaborative research between academics in higher education institutions (HEI) and early childhood educators (Tajik & Singer, 2017; Doan & Hendra, 2022) were also influential in the development and evaluation of the ECO-3 approach. In essence it is a form of action research implemented via community-HEI-research partnership to co-create knowledge to bring about transformative change. The intention was that ECO-3 would be action-oriented and participatory (Tandon et al. 2016).

3.2 Features of the approach

Features of the approach which were piloted, and which were identified at design stage and further elaborated in the early meetings of the ECO-3 were as follows:

- The goal of the approach is social action for the purpose of achieving **positive change for children**, and their families and communities.
- The **lived experience and practice-based knowledge** of the participating early childhood educators with respect to outdoor provision guides the research process.
- The approach involves **mutual learning** – all participants are teachers and learners i.e., early childhood educators learning from each other; development officers learning from early childhood educators; HEI educator learning from development officers and early childhood educators; early childhood educators learning from parents and children.
- **Trusting relationships** – time given to building relationships amongst all partners. Trusting relationships also entailed respecting each other, no judging, listening to each other, not talking over each other, turn phones to silent during meetings.
- **Experiential learning** – learning by doing.
- **Research ethics and values** emphasised and discussed and reflected on throughout. It was agreed that personal information stayed in group, and that sharing of information about children, families and colleagues would be done in a respectful manner and no names or identifying information would be used.
- **Multiple modes of enquiry** – open to using many ways of generating knowledge, thinking, understanding e.g., photos, stories, observations, conversations (semi-structured interviews), community mapping – guided by a simple action research/finding out cycle – think, do, think.

- The research should **primarily serve the participating ECEC services**, the community in which they are situated, the academic community and City and County Childcare Committees. As noted in the introduction, it would also inform the actions of DCEDIY led *Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028* by providing insight into a particular form of non-formal CPD
- Research process, insights, learning would be **shared using many and creative forms** and in a **range of fora**: e.g., staff meetings within ECEC services; local community sharing events; presentations at national and international education conferences; blogposts; other publications.

Additionally, a commitment was made by the facilitators to document the approach in a user-friendly format so that SDCCC, Hibernia College and participating early years' services could continue to use the approach beyond the pilot. A workbook of the ECO-3 process which includes all the activities and resources shared was developed and given to ECO-3 participants at the end of pilot. The Workbook is organised into five sections to reflect how ECO-3 evolved over the meetings of the community of research and practice (see Figure 1 below and Figure 2 in Section 5). At the end of each section there is space for early childhood educators to add their own personal notes and reflections. Links to range of resources shared during the meetings are also included⁸.

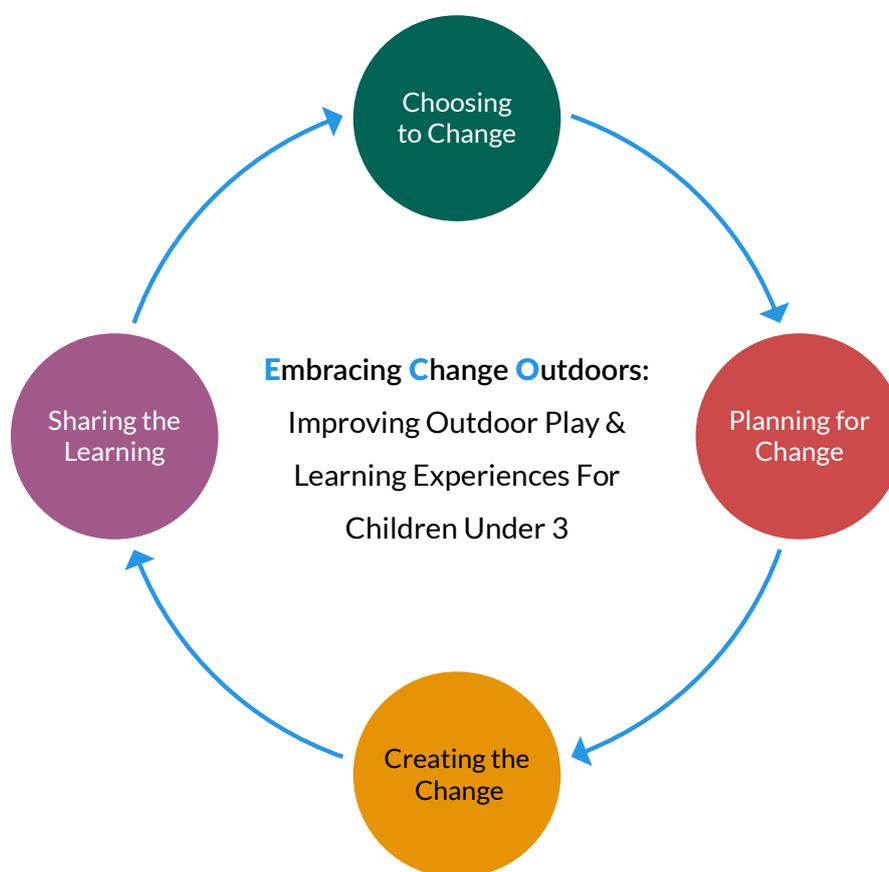


Figure 1: ECO-3 research and practice model. The cycle of ECO-3 research and practice model was inspired by and adapted from MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) model of action research.

All stages of the ECO-3 Community of Research and Practice were guided by the guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018) and by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al. 2016). Participation in the ECO-3 pilot and in its evaluation component was based on voluntary, informed consent (See Section 4 and 5 for more details).

In the following section we describe the aims, objectives and methods of the evaluation component of the ECO-3 pilot.

⁸ For more information about ECO-3 Workbook contact Margaret Kernan, margaret.kernan@gmail.com or Marie Dowdall or Marianne Casey (SDCCC), info@southdublinchildcare.ie



4. Aim, research objectives and methods

4.1 Aim and research objectives

The overall aim of ECO-3 was to explore a community-based action research approach that would engage, empower and give agency to early childhood educators to improve outdoor play and learning provision.

The approach being explored is designed to support the development of reflective skills in a community of practice environment which prioritises the lived experience and practice-based knowledge of outdoor play and learning.

At the outset of ECO-3 we formulated a list of short and medium terms benefits, which we hoped and anticipated would accrue from the ECO-3 pilot. The medium-term ambition of ECO-3 as a social action initiative was to achieve positive change for very young children, and their families and communities with respect to their experience of outdoors. Our immediate focus of attention was early childhood educators and the services in which they worked.

The expected benefits in the short term were:

- that the voice of early childhood educators would be raised and heard
- that early childhood educators would be empowered by creating and sharing practice-based knowledge

- that their understanding of their practice in relation to the outdoors, specifically babies and toddlers outdoors would be deepened
- and that children's play and learning experiences outdoors would be improved.

It should be noted that as SDCCC covers only urban settings.

ECO-3 pilot sought therefore to address the following research question:

How does community-based action research work to empower urban-based early childhood educators in Ireland to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision?

Sub-questions of the pilot and its evaluation concerned the resources (or inputs) invested in ECO-3; the actual process of the community of research and practice, and its outcomes.

Questions about the inputs:

- What are the costs involved e.g., staff time, infrastructure?
- What are the time costs for facilitators?
- What prior experience of reflection and change do participants bring to the process?
- What prior experience and knowledge do participants bring to ECO-3?
- What are the main barriers that participants experience before ECO-3 in facilitating outdoor play and learning for babies (up to 1 year) and for toddlers (1- to 3-year-olds)?
- How frequently do participants report that babies and toddlers have access to the outdoors in the ELC setting before ECO-3?

Questions about the process

- What are the experiences of all the participants in the community action research process?
 - Learning about themselves, about doing action research, relationships in the community of research and practice between ELC Services and the CCC and the HEI?
- Which aspects of process have most impact on changing perspectives on outdoor play and learning?
- What features of community-based action research contribute to bringing about change in outdoor play and learning provision in urban ELC?

Questions about the outcomes

- What actual change was made to outdoor provision for babies and toddlers?
 - To early childhood educators' (or children, parents, others⁹) perceptions about outdoor play and learning for under 3s?
 - To arrangement of physical environment?
 - To time and scheduling outdoor play?

4.2 Evaluation methods

The participants in ECO-3 were 11 early childhood educators, two development officers from South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) and a researcher from a HEI. Evaluation of the ECO-3 pilot involved all participants, and took place throughout the whole process. Evaluation methods and activities included: a baseline and post ECO-3 online questionnaire that was completed by the early childhood educators and mid-process reflection and evaluation activities in which were facilitated by one of the development officers and the researcher. Other sources of data included the ongoing informal reflection.

Baseline questionnaire and participating early childhood educators

The aim of the baseline questionnaire was to gather data about participating early childhood educators' perceptions and experiences about outdoor play before the ECO-3 meetings commenced in May 2022. This data was important as 'base' indicator by which to measure change over time. The baseline questionnaire also had the effect of prompting educators to think about the potential of outdoor play for babies and toddlers, what aspects of their outdoor provision that 'niggled' them, that they were curious to find out more about and they wished to change. Insights gained from the baseline also informed the planning for the initial meetings of the ECO-3.

Eleven early years' educators completed some or all the baseline questionnaire. Four of the respondents worked in a private full day-care setting and six in a community full day-care setting (same setting). Just one of the respondents worked in a part-time day care setting (Note this participant withdrew from ECO-3 having completed part of baseline – See section 5.1 below). Just one of the three settings, a private full-day setting, had babies under 1 year attending at the time the baseline questionnaire was completed.

⁹ At the outset of ECO-3, the scope of this question was left open and depended on the focus of participating educators' setting-based action research – i.e. what they wanted to change.

Most of the participating early childhood educators had either a Level 5 or 6 qualification in ECEC on the national framework of qualifications. The exceptions were the two managers participating, one of whom had a Bachelors degree in ECEC (Level 7), and the other, a Master' Degree in Early Childhood Studies (Level 9).

Mid-process reflection and evaluation activities

Half-way through the process and as part of Meeting 3 (mid-June 2022), participants took part in interactive reflection and evaluation activities. These focused on process factors e.g. what aspects of ECO-3 were working to bring about positive change outdoors for educators, and for children and what were the participants experiences of the process at that point.

Post-ECO-3 questionnaire

Many of the same questions posed in the baseline questionnaire were asked again the final questionnaire. Additional questions asked participants their views about the impact of ECO-3 on their practice, the preferred number of staff from a setting who should participate, the most effective number of meetings of the research community and the value of facilitation. The post ECO-3 questionnaire was administered in the week after the final ECO-3 meeting in November 2022. Six of the 11 participants completed the final questionnaire; three from the community-based full-day care setting and three from a private full day-care setting. None of the participants from one of the settings complete the post ECO-3 questionnaire. These three participants also disengaged with the process by the 5th of the 6 meetings. The implications of this for the pilot evaluation are discussed further in the findings and conclusions (Sections 6 and 7).

The ECO-3 process and in particular the six meetings of the ECO-3 (see Section 4 below for more details) were also evaluated in an iterative process which involved the facilitators collaborating in a plan – do- review cycle before, during and after each—meeting.

Before reporting on the findings of the evaluation, we first describe how ECO-3 worked in practice.



5. Implementation of the ECO-3 pilot



The implementation of the ECO-3 pilot had three phases:
1) Planning, including design of approach and recruitment of participants; 2) Implementation, including joint reflection, planning, action, review (plan/do/review), agreeing next steps) and 3) Sharing learning and insights and analyzing evaluation findings. Each are very briefly outlined below.

5.1 Planning, design and recruitment (Dec 2021 - April 2022)

This phase involved seeking approval for proposal from both facilitating organisation: SDCCC and Hibernia College; agreeing roles and responsibilities of facilitators and participants; seeking ethical approval for the research from Hibernia College Research Committee; agreeing on a recruitment strategy and selection criteria for ECO-3 participants.

As a pilot, ECO-3 was purposefully designed to include only a small number of settings (4 to 6) and early childhood educators who work with babiWes and toddlers.

All 50 Full Day Care/Part Time services in the SDCCC¹⁰ area who had children aged 0 to 3 years attending were invited to complete Expression of Interest form (see Appendix 1). It detailed purpose of ECO-3, expectations of participants, including anticipated time commitment, and their completion of baseline questionnaire, mid-research reflection activity and post-pilot research questionnaire for the evaluation component. Commitment was specified as 'approximately 6 x 1.5 hours of face-to-face peer-interaction sessions between April and September 2022; Work with your team in planning and making change to outdoor provision for Under 3s in your setting; Sharing your experiences with early years educators in other settings'.

Selection criteria were the following: Setting has children ages 0-3 enrolled; at least 1 staff member working with 0-3 year-olds nominated to participate; demonstrated motivation and ability to reflect (based on change statement in Expression of Interest); willingness to be active participant in community of research and practice; willingness to participate in evaluation activities.

Five services completed 'Expression of Interest' and were deemed eligible to participate. Educators from four of these services completed the baseline questionnaire. Two of the five participants withdrew their participation in advance of the first meeting of the community of practice due to staffing shortages. Three ECEC services and 11 early childhood educators participated in some or all of the five meetings of the community of research and practice.

The two SDCCC Development Officers were the direct contact person for participants before, during and after ECO-3; whilst the HEI Researcher was overall responsible for the evaluation research, documenting the ECO-3 process, and seeking and incorporating input from all participants for the evaluation.

5.2 Implementation process (May – November 2022)

Implementation phase involved a repeating cycle of joint reflection (thinking) /asking questions, planning how to find out answers, action (doing), review, agreeing next steps together and sharing insights with others¹¹.

The cycle of ECO-3 research and practice model was inspired by and adapted from MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) model of action research and is captured in the Figure 1 below:

¹⁰ In total there are 214 ELC services in the SDCCC region.

¹¹ MacNaughton & Hughes (2009) describe the cycle as follows: 1. Choosing to change; 2. Planning for change; 3. Creating the change; 4 Sharing the Lessons.

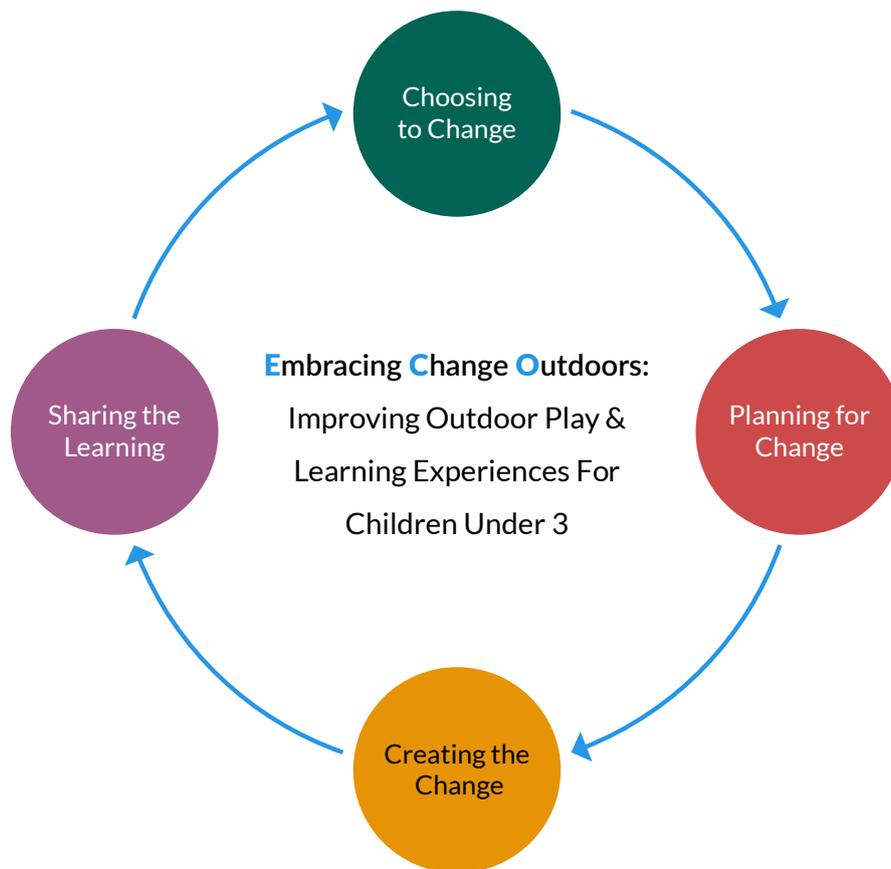


Figure 1: ECO-3 research and practice model

All six core meetings of the community of research and practice were in person. The Focus of Kick-Off meeting (Meeting 1) was on getting to know each other, building relationships of trust, introducing, and understanding the approach, beginning discussion about change educators wanted to make and research ethics and values. Participants also had the opportunity to contribute to design and planning e.g. expressing their needs from the ECO-3 community; discuss and agree on start time of meetings, venues and dates of subsequent meetings.

The precise focus of the action research for each setting/service was decided on by the participating educators based on specific need or question they had about outdoor provision in their setting; is there something about outdoor play provision that bothers them or puzzles them, that they would like to improve on, or better understand or bring about change.

Questions and areas of interest that the educators mentioned at Meeting 1 that they wishes to explore further were: Setting 1: Improving layout – too much equipment outdoors?; Babies seemed to prefer to be outdoors with older children – why? ; Setting 2: Took much stuff outdoors, too much plastic toys; rethinking artificial grass; shed not being used well; Setting 3: concrete window sill a hazard; want to bring more nature in; want to involve families more.

At meeting 1, it was also suggested that participants keep a logbook throughout the process where they documented observations, notes to remember or share. They were free to do this in whatever format worked for them. Additionally, in Meetings 2 and 3, the [Aistear-Siolta Action Planning Tool](#) was suggested as an easy-to-use planning tool and copies and was shared with the group.

Each meeting had a focus and overall aim. See Figure 2 that summarises the process of ECO-3 across the six meetings of the community of research and practice.

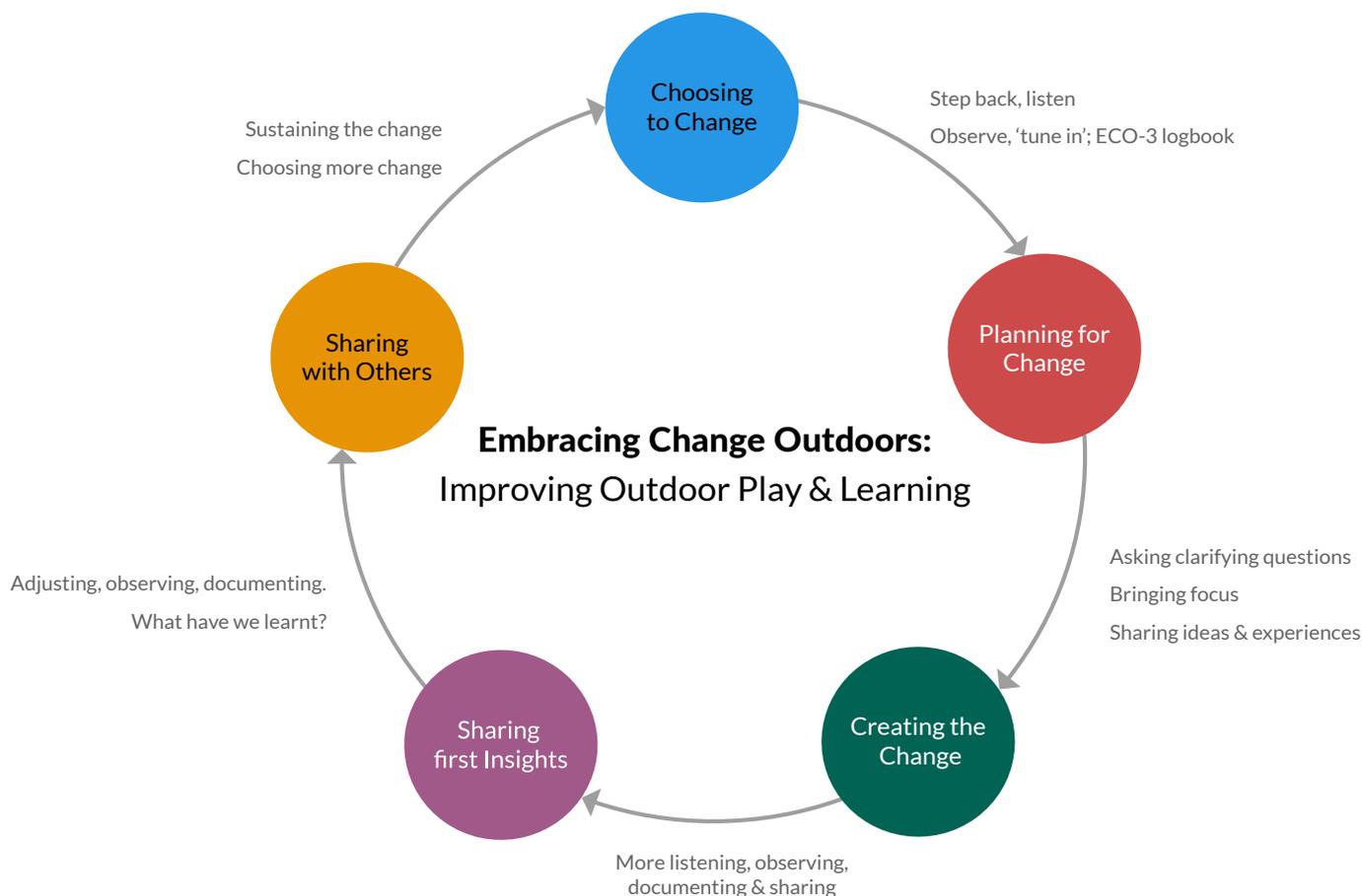


Figure 2: ECO-3 research and practice model (elaborated)

The actual programme for each of the 5 core meetings, which lasted approximately 1.5 hours had a common but loose structure that evolved over the pilot based on review of 'what worked' or what participants requested. A typical meeting included:

- ⦿ Opening Circle: 'checking in' time
- ⦿ Sharing updates and observations plans, actions so far
- ⦿ An activity where videos, resources, 'tips' discussed
- ⦿ Next steps i.e., agreeing date and venue and things to do prior to the next meeting:
- ⦿ Closing circle: The opening circle and closing circles typically involved an outdoor themed game, energizer, or yoga activity – something that could also be adapted for young children.

The first and final meetings took place in venues organised by SDCCC. The other four meetings were hosted by two of the participating settings and food and beverages were provided by the hosts. During the whole process, the facilitators (the development officers and researcher) visited each setting at least once (each facilitator visited one of the three settings). The purpose was to meet with the few participants who hadn't been able to participate in mid-ECO-3 group evaluation and to offer individualised mentoring. The final meeting, Meeting 6, an occasion of celebrating what had been achieved, also open to supporters and funders of ECO-3. A representative of South Dublin Sports Partnership and the Dean of Hibernia College attended and participated in discussions along with the participants.

6. Findings



How does community-based action research work to empower urban-based early childhood educators in Ireland to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision?

Before presenting and discussing the findings we make a few preliminary notes regarding the positionality of all the participants. The early childhood educators who took part in ECO-3 either chose to participate based on their interest in outdoor play or were nominated by or encouraged by their manager to participate. We don't know how many came into the process completely voluntarily, although the indication at the kick-off meeting was that many of the participants were already enthusiastic about outdoor play and most were interested in exploring their outdoor provision further. Likewise, we the facilitators as development officers and lecturer/researcher had a particular interest in and commitment to the rights of all children including babies and toddlers to access

outdoor play in ECEC. We were also committed to learning from the process and letting the lived experience and practice-based knowledge of the participating early childhood educators take the lead (see Section 3.2).

The findings of the ECO-3 pilot are organised in two parts:

The first part focuses on the impact ECO-3 had on pedagogical practice, knowledge and time outdoors (subsection sections 6.1 to 6.4). The second part focusses on the ECO-3 process and the features that contributed to (or hindered) the participating early childhood educators to reflect and improve their outdoor play and learning provision. Almost all of the educators participated in the baseline and mid-process evaluation activities. However, only 6 of the 11 participating early childhood educators completed the post-ECO-3 evaluation questionnaire. One of the three settings was not represented amongst the respondents in this questionnaire¹². This limitation should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

Significant findings and issues that would benefit from further exploration and analysis in future studies are highlighted in bold text throughout.

6.1 Educators' views about benefits of outdoor play for babies and toddlers

Baseline pre-ECO 3

As part of the preliminary process participants were asked the open-ended question about what they considered to be the benefits of outdoor play for children under 3 years of age. The most frequently mentioned benefit concerned the opportunity to explore the environment, especially nature, and to experience the special nature of being outdoors.

This was expressed by the educators as follows:

'It allows them to explore and appreciate the nature of the outdoors'.

'Learn about the benefits of nature, i.e., planting, caring for the plants, watching the plants growing, cooking and eating the produce'.

'Exploring nature for example sand water grass etc'.

The next most frequently mentioned benefit related to outdoors as being **supportive of children's physical development, their motor skills and desire to be mobile and their general health including sleep.**

'They get to become more active and build on their fine and gross motor skills'.

'It helps them to gain mobility quicker in my opinion'.

¹² This may be explained by the fact that educators from this setting did not participate in the final meeting as they had disengaged from the process by this point.

'The benefits are huge for younger children, sensory, full body movement...movement around the centre. Also reduction in illness and infection'.

Outdoors, according to one educator is a time for very young children to *'get fresh air and a change of scene to break up their day'.*

Other benefits included in the responses to this question were that **children experienced a different kind of play and learning outdoors, compared to indoors** i.e., more *'risky' play and messy play* and *'gives children more freedom to expand their learning and try new things by playing with toys outside in the setting like bikes and slides etc'.*

Finally, social skills and peer play was mentioned as a benefit by a few of the educators. Emphasised by this participant was turn taking for equipment,

'learning how to play and share taking turns, e.g. queues for swing or slide. No pushing and enjoying the free play'.

Post ECO-3

Post ECO-3 responses to the same question yielded **similar responses**, with a **major focus on nature and fresh air and all-round development**. However, compared to baseline there were **more elaborated references to benefits for young children learning about nature through playing outdoors and, to experiencing different elements of nature and weather conditions**. There were also **more references to risky and messy play** as a benefit to outdoor play. This indicates that the ECO-3 experience had broadened at least some of the participants' views of the role of outdoor play in very young children's lives.

These are two of the responses about the benefits of outdoor play and learning for children under 3 post ECO-3.

'Explore nature, more space, Change of environment, Clean air, Different toys to play with, More opportunities for risky play'.

'Appreciation of the beauty of nature, learning about animals, learning about plants, flowers, and vegetables; Building their self-confidence; Engaging in risky play...Encourages foraging and messy play; Fun and excitement; Discovering the natural habitats of animals; stimulates the senses; Tactile play strengthens muscles, develops fine and gross motor skills, visual stimulation'.

6.2 Barriers to facilitating outdoor play and learning

Baseline- pre-ECO-3

Before ECO-3 process began, the participants were asked about the main barriers to facilitating outdoor play and learning for babies (up to 1 year) and in separate question, for toddlers (1- to 3-year-olds). Five participants answered the question in relation to babies.

Babies

Two respondents mentioned the **size of garden** (outdoor space in the setting) as a barrier. One identified the weather as a barrier, *'I can imagine weather is a big barrier for babies'.*

One respondent focussed on health and safety concerns: *'The main barriers would be corners edges of outdoor playground, keeping area clean for the babies to crawl on. Keeping objects out of mouth'.*

Other respondents mentioned **within child factors as barriers**: for example, children's lack of upward mobility, *'That they may have restricted movement, like with walking, climbing'; or having a 'a suitable outdoor area for children who aren't yet walking' or 'children being ill'.* These were all factors that had the effect of babies being confined indoors, similarly observed in previous national and international research about baby's experiences in ECEC (Kernan & Devine, 2009; Kemp & Josephidou, 2020; Santos da Costa et al. 2021).

Pedagogical factors or within educator challenges were identified by two of the respondents who remarked on the difficulty for educators in *'Trying to think of new activities they can engage in outside'* and being able to *'explain their learning and development'* outdoors.

Toddlers

Many of the same barriers listed for babies, were also listed for toddlers. The **size of outdoor/garden space** was identified by five of the respondents. One respondent mentioned **the indoor/outdoor area** as a barrier, perhaps referring to the **transitional space between indoors and outdoors and/or the access to the outdoors from the indoors**.

Another space related barrier mentioned by three of the educators was being able to *'finding the right kind of equipment that was suitable for toddlers'* or finding equipment and materials that was affordable. One educator noted the absence of storage area for new equipment as a barrier.

Three of the respondents cited the **weather as barrier**. One elaborated that while the toddlers get out every day regardless of the weather (unless there is very strong winds), staff's perception of what is 'good' or 'bad' weather or 'how on board they are with getting out every day' can also be a barrier. For participants in one of the settings, weather was also linked to the growth of moss, which was perceived as causing the ground to be too slippery and unsafe and therefore a barrier to outdoor play.

Another physical environmental barrier identified by one respondent was the **lack of shade and shelter outdoors**, perceived as a barrier both in hot weather and when the weather was bad.

Finally, as with the babies under one, some of the barriers to facilitating outdoor play for toddlers could also be categorised as **within child or within educator (pedagogical) factors**. These included a lack of interest from the child (in being outdoors) and **constraints educators felt in having to think of new activities for the outdoors and how to encourage a child who does not enjoy the outdoors**.

Of note in these responses was **on the focus of (lack of) materials, equipment and adult-devised activities for babies and toddlers, the weather and safety concerns as barriers to facilitating outdoor play in ECEC**.

Post ECO-3

Babies

In the post ECO-3 survey only those educators who were working with babies under 1 year were required to respond about barriers to facilitating outdoor play with babies. Thus only two were eligible to respond. The two respondents focussed on quite different concerns.

The first identified the need *'to supervise babies closely, because of their tendency to put everything in their mouths'*; **lack of appropriate waterproof clothing** and the fact that **parents are concerned about their children getting sick if the babies are brought out in cold weather**.

The second educator mentioned shortage of time outdoors as a barrier which was a consequence of staff shortages and the impact this had on the outdoor rota (for different groups).

Toddlers

All six educators who completed the post-ECO-3 questionnaire wrote about their perceptions of barriers in relation to 1- and 2-year-olds. Significantly, four of the six responses concerned the weather and related to that, **the lack of suitable outdoor clothing**. Here the lack of suitable outdoor clothing is attributed to parents, 'Parents are constantly being asked to provide waterproof coats, trousers, and wellington boots'.

Other barriers mentioned by one respondent each were: 'lack of equipment for outside'; 'lack of space'; 'risk assessment'; 'possibility of injuries'.

Two educators mentioned time restrictions as a barrier.

In summary, on the one hand one of the changes in educators' perceptions about value of outdoor play was **increased appreciation for risky and messy play** and less reliance on the notion of adult-devised activities and the requirement for a lot of outdoor equipment. On the other hand, **concerns about safety, injuries outdoors and the need to undertake risk assessments continue to be perceived by educators as barriers to bringing babies and toddlers outdoors**. During the ECO-3 meetings interactions with parents about outdoor play came up in discussion from time to time. **There was both a realisation and desire to bring parents 'on board'** and to **work in partnership with parents in relation to outdoor provision**. **The question of whose responsibility is it to provide outdoor clothing and shoes/boots: parents, or ECEC services was a discussion point**. Arising from this discussion was an exchange of information about where to access affordable outdoor clothing.

Thus the ECO-3 process was making space for peer exchange and empowering educators to share insights and experiences with each other. More time, and perhaps additional curriculum input from facilitators, may have been required so that the educators were confident to share the role outdoor play has on babies and toddlers learning development (see also Section 6.4).



6.3 Time outdoors

Baseline- pre-ECO-3

Babies

One of the concerns of SDCCC before ECO-3 took place was the short time babies and toddlers spent outdoors. Before ECO-3 meetings began, participants were asked to select one option in answer to this question: 'Which of the following best describes the frequency babies (under 1 years=) have access to the outdoors in the ECEC setting where you work? Just two respondents answered this question, reflecting the fact that **only one setting had babies under 1 year-old when the baseline survey was administered**. Both selected the option '**the babies access the outdoors daily**', one elaborating that they have the option of going twice daily. One of these educators noted the average time she spent outdoors with babies when she brings them out is 30 minutes to 1 hour. The other educator responded 15 to 30 minutes.

Toddlers

The same questions were posed in relation to 1- to 3-year-olds. Six respondents selected the option, '**Daily, all year round in all weather conditions**'. Four respondents replied: 'Three to five times weekly, all year round, when the weather is considered good enough'. In terms of average time toddlers spent outdoors during each period, three respondents estimated it to be 30 minutes to 1 hour; 3 respondents 15 – 30 minutes and one respondent ticked, less than 15 minutes.

One respondent selected other, describing further as follows: '*Our toddlers access the outdoor area twice a day at least, for 45-60 mins in the morning and 60-75 mins in the afternoon, unless it is really cold, then it may be a little shorter*'.

Additional information provided by respondents indicated that **weather conditions were a key influence on the length of time spent outdoors**. These are two of the comments:

'I take them out twice daily for 30 mins to an hour each time weather permitting. As we use wet gear unless torrential rain they are out for this length of time. In heavier rain I give them at least 15 mins as our outdoor has a shelter'.

'Each group gets 30 minutes in the morning and in the afternoon, it can range from 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on the weather and if we do activities outdoors'.

Post ECO-3

Babies

One of the two respondents working with babies under 1 when ECO-3 ended, selected the option 'Three to five times weekly during Spring and Summer seasons only (March to September)' with the second respondent selecting: 'Once or twice weekly during Spring and Summer seasons only (March to September). The **average length of time outdoors in both cases was 15 to 30 minutes**, with **weather being the deciding factor** as described by one of the educators, '*The babies are brought out into the mulch area depending on the weather and spend 15 to 30 minutes in the area when the weather is fine. They love the outdoors and crawl/sit playing with toys/sand or observe the older children playing*'.

Toddlers

Unlike the situation for babies under 1, it seems that the **one- and two-year-olds had access to the outdoors all in round and in all weather conditions**. Four of the respondents noted that this was three to five times weekly and two responded, 'daily, all year round in all weather conditions. However, like the baseline survey before ECO-3, there was **great variability amongst educators in the average amount of time the spent outdoors with the toddlers when they brought them outdoors**. Two respondents selected 15 to 30 minutes, two selected 30 minutes to 1 hour and two selected 1 to 2 hours.

Additional information provided indicated that **length of time outdoors was determined by the 'time slots' for a particular group**, usually two timetabled slots per day, **and weather** i.e. on very cold days time spent outdoors is shorter.

Based on these findings we can (tentatively) conclude that although **ECO-3 did not have a major impact on the amount of time spent outdoors overall, it did stimulate educators to think about outdoor play for babies and toddlers in a more expansive and inclusive manner**. This is discussed in greater detail in the sections to follow. However, the **great variability in the average length of time spent outdoors at both at baseline and post-ECO-3 and the impact of timetabling slots for outdoor play for different age groups is noteworthy**.

6.4 Educators' perceptions of their knowledge and confidence about the outdoors

Baseline- pre-ECO-3

We were interested in finding out about educators' confidence in their knowledge about outdoor play and learning before ECO-3 and what (if any) impact participating in ECO-3 had on confidence and knowledge.

Before the process began, nine of the 10 respondents who responded to the statement *'I feel confident in my knowledge about outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers'*, agreed to 'to a moderate extent'. Just one ticked 'to a great extent'.

Participants were also asked about their levels of enjoyment of outdoor time with babies and toddlers. Overall, most were very positive, agreeing to a great extent: *'I generally enjoy outdoor time with babies and toddlers'*.

Therefore, it was clear that even **before ECO-3 began participants both enjoyed being outdoors with young children and were moderately confident in their knowledge**. So what, if anything, did participating in ECO-3 change in terms of educators' confidence and learning?

Post ECO-3

By the end of the process, confidence levels were the same or improved a little, with 2 of 6 participants agreeing 'to a great extent' and four agreeing 'to a moderate extent' with the statement about feeling confident in their knowledge about outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers'.

Significantly, **all participants noted changes in their views and behaviours about outdoor play and learning because of ECO-3**. Mid way through the process, **nine of the participants strongly agreed with the statement 'I have gained a new perspective about outdoor play and learning for children under 3 since starting ECO-3'**.

Here is how one educator captured the new insights she gained.

'Yes, it's going back to basics, keep it simple, [I have a] new view about rain'.

Four of 6 participants in the post-ECO-3 survey noted that **participating in ECO-3 meetings had changed their views about outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers 'to a great extent'**, with two responding 'to a moderate extent'.

Other changes that occurred because of ECO-3 concerned educators' awareness of how children play and learn outdoors. Five of the 6 respondents agreed 'to a great extent' with the statement 'Since participating in ECO-3 I am more tuned into how children play and learn outdoors'.

Here is how one participant captured this change mid-way through the process: ***'I am more observant and take time to watch what the children are doing outdoors. I didn't do that before'***.

For **some participants developing the habit of noting observations of children's play in a logbook was significant**.

'We are more attentive to what children are doing, where they play, and what they like to do. We are writing down our observations, seeing patterns, and noticing how play changes as children get older.'

A less dramatic shift across the group was evident in how outdoor environment was laid out because of ECO-3. Three educators agreed 'to a great extent' that they 'organize the outdoor environment (materials and equipment, arrangement of space) differently' since participating in ECO-3. Two replied to 'a moderate extent' and one 'to a minor extent'.

Nevertheless, during meetings participants reflected on the impact of small changes to the arrangement of space and materials could have on children's behaviours outdoors and the opportunities for risk and challenge (see also Section 6.5 below).

As a consequence of ECO-3, **the participants in one setting were also looking more to community spaces for outdoor play and learning, something that had hardly occurred prior to ECO-3.**

'We will use the green space across the road from the creche to go for walks, collect seasonal items, go on picnics, and read stories. We had been blind to these spaces before!'

Another 'change' statement concerned educators' confidence *'in talking with parents/guardians about outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers'*. Before ECO-3, three of the nine participants (a third) who responded to this question agreed to a great extent and six agreed to a moderate extent. Post ECO-3, the proportions were similar, two of the six participants (a third) agreed to a great extent, and four agreed to a moderate extent. **This suggests that ECO-3 process did not have a significant impact on participants confidence in engaging with parents about outdoor play for babies and toddlers. However, as noted earlier parents' perspectives about outdoors were a frequent topic of conversation during meetings.**

Educators expressed the desire to be more active in involving parents and sharing knowledge and experience with them about the benefits of the outdoors for young children. In the section where respondents were invited to add further comments or suggestions about the ECO-3 process could be improved two participants referred to parents:

'I would like to see more parents involved and show them how important it is for children of all ages to be allowed to explore their environment in a safe setting.'

This ambition was also articulated in the blog co-authored by participants:

'ECO-3 has given us the skills and confidence to observe children outdoors and enact change and share what has worked and needs improvement. We are very excited about the changes that we have implemented so far. Now the challenge is to keep it going. We want to share our enthusiasm for playing and learning outdoors, get all our colleagues involved and bring parents on board with us' (Donnelly et al. 2022).

Based on these insights, **we can conclude that involving parents and community members more actively in planning and developing outdoor play provision, and how this might be undertaken, is an issue that needs more explicit attention both for the participating groups and for further iterations of ECO-3.** This was a point of discussion with the representative of South Dublin Sports Partnership, an invited participant to the final meeting of ECO-3. **More accessible and integrated outdoor and natural spaces, which would link and provide green routes between children's homes, ECEC outdoor environments, intergenerational public green spaces were discussed as a constructive way forward.** This acknowledges that public green spaces are a health and wellbeing promoting asset for children in neighbourhood environments. It is also important to note that **research demonstrates that the most vulnerable children often have least access to nature and those who benefit most from nature engagement** (Olsen et al. 2022).



6.5 Participants' experiences of the ECO-3 process

An important goal of the pilot was to assess which aspects of ECO-3 process had most impact on changing participating educators' perspectives on outdoor play and learning. This involved exploring with participants their experience of the time commitment involved in engaging in the community of research and practice and which features they found useful or not useful.

Time commitment

As noted in the introduction, previous research has pointed to the value of protected time of early years professionals to reflect and plan in teams for transforming and improving practice (OECD, 2018; Peleman et al. 2018; Doan & Hendra, 2022). One of the conclusions of the SEED research was that 'Child-free hours (paid hours without children) are needed for ECEC staff to meet, plan, reflect on a regular and continuous basis' (SEED, 2019). Unfortunately, the current staffing conditions applicable for most ECEC services in Ireland don't allow for such paid planning and reflection time (Murphy, 2015).

Accepting the invitation to participate in the ECO-3 pilot, **participants committed to participating in six evening meetings of the community of research and practice**. Given that this was extra, unpaid time, it was a big commitment.

Mid-way as part of the mid-ECO-3 reflection and evaluation activity participants were asked to respond to statement 'It can be challenging to motivate myself to come to ECO-3 meetings after a day's work' Some of the participants agreed explaining, 'It can be hard to get up and come out again after I've got home from work'. And 'My day starts at 6am – it's a very long day'. Two participants, both managers, disagreed with

the statement noting that they love participating in training¹³ and learning, but acknowledged that it might be different for them as managers.

The consensus of those who agreed, and those who were neutral that once they were at the ECO-3 meeting, they were happy that they had come. There was representation from two of the three settings at all six meetings. One setting struggled more than the others with the commitment involved but still managed to attend four out of the six 1.5-hour meetings.

As part of the post ECO-3 survey participants were asked their views about the **optimal number of ECO-3 meetings**. They could choose one from the following three options:

- 6 meetings in total are about right to empower early childhood educators to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision.
- More than 6 meetings are necessary to empower early childhood educators to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision.
- Fewer than 6 meetings would work to bring about change to outdoor provision.

There was not clear consensus on the optimal number of meetings for a community of practice and research. Three of the 6 participants who responded to the post-ECO-3 survey selected the first option, two selected the last option i.e. fewer than 6 meetings and one selected 'More than 6 meetings are necessary'. While participants were mostly committed to attending ECO-3 meetings some found them more beneficial than others. This may have impacted on the drop-off in attendance by the end. Participants' understanding of the goal and expectations of ECO-3 differed. The process also seemed to work most effectively for settings where there was whole team engagement with managers, room leaders and staff all involved.

The impact of facilitated joint reflection

A core aspect of ECO-3 approach was that it creates a space for facilitated joint planning and reflection which takes a bottom-up approach i.e. the concerns and actual experiences of the participants outdoors are the starting point.

At the baseline stage, participants were asked **if time for planning and reflecting about our outdoor play and learning provision for babies and toddlers was valued in the setting where they worked**. Of the nine who responded to this question, **three participants replied 'to a minor extent'; three 'to a moderate extent' and three 'to a great extent'**.

During the actual process of ECO-3, **it became clear that dedicated time to jointly reflect and exchange experience in own teams and with peers from other services to discuss practice with peers was highly valued by the participants, once they managed to get to the meetings.**

At the mid-ECO-3 in one of the activities the participants were asked to complete this statement: 'The most valuable feature of ECO-3 for me so far is ...'

Six of the participants chose: 'getting to know other educators' views and experiences'. The remaining five chose: 'time to discuss and plan outdoor provision with my own colleagues'.

The group **selected 'viewing and discussing photos and videos (together) as their second most valuable feature**. Nobody selected the other two options: 'articles, blogs, handouts provided' or 'food and drinks provided'.

Individual participants explained the reasons behind their choice as follows:

'Time away from children to discuss things is most valuable'.

'We feel a (new) excitement as a team – a feeling that everyone is on board together'.

'It's great when you hear about what is working in other creches'.

¹³ Despite the facilitators' best efforts to emphasize that ECO-3 process was not a training, participants continued to refer to ECO-3 as a training experience.

Added value of external facilitation?

One of the features of the ECO-3 approach was that meetings would be facilitated. In all meetings two or three of the facilitators were present and active. Typically, one facilitator took the lead in facilitating the discussion **making sure that all voices were heard and taking care not to impose a particular agenda or position**. Second (or third) facilitator focussed on taking notes, (also for the evaluation), managing practical issues about resources. These roles were rotated amongst the facilitators and discussed and agreed in planning sessions. **Often, the facilitators' role was to step back and say nothing, to make space for the participants to exchange ideas amongst themselves**. Whilst facilitators suggested texts as useful resource material and provided occasional handouts, these were not presented as 'required reading'.

Post ECO-3, one of the evaluation questions asked participants, 'What is the added value (if any) of the ECO-3 meetings being facilitated by an 'external' i.e. someone other than the participating early childhood educators?'

The responses confirmed that there was an added value. External facilitation brought a different perspective - 'an extra set of eyes'. One educator noted that 'the mix of different professions felt helpful for different inputs and outlooks, as well as for setting the tone of the sessions so that they remained 'equal and respectful.' One educator suggested 'that staff are more motivated by an external person presenting the information compared to an internal'. This suggested that creating and maintaining a climate which was positive for safe discussion was an added benefit of external facilitation.

In summary, **involvement of an external facilitator provided extra motivation, a welcome 'other' perspective, and the creation of a safe climate for discussion**. This is also one of the findings with respect to effective CPD involving group reflection (see Doan & Hendra, 2022 and SEED, 2019). While two or three facilitators were active in each of the ECO-3 pilot meetings, **in normal circumstances it would be sufficient to have just one or two facilitators, on condition facilitators also had access to peer support**.

Costs involved

Any type of community of practice and research has associated costs. Reference has already been made to the fact that the participating **early childhood educators gave up personal time in the evening to come to the ECO-3 meetings**, (and indeed to complete the baseline and post ECO3 questionnaire). Two of the three services hosted two meeting each in their setting, which meant the pilot didn't need to rent a room. The exception was the first meeting and the final meeting, the (in-kind) costs of which were covered by a South Dublin County Library and South Dublin CCC respectively.

Group facilitation also comes with a cost: **facilitators' time for planning, for actual facilitation, equipment and materials, travel time**. For the purposes of the pilot, these costs were covered by Hibernia College and South Dublin County Childcare Committee. Further costs were the additional time and financial costs for dissemination (writing time, presentation preparation, conference registration and travel).

If ECO-3 as an approach is to be brought to scale, it is important to value and budget for the time commitment for facilitation, and educators' participation.



Conclusions and implications

The lack of attention to outdoor provision for babies and toddlers in ECEC practice and research was a key motivation to pilot a community of practice and research approach that would empower early childhood educators in Ireland to reflect on and improve their outdoor play and learning provision. For short. Between May and November 2022, 11 educators from three ECEC services in the South Dublin region participated in the pilot. It was titled, Embracing Change Outdoors for Children Under 3 Community of Practice and Research (ECO-3). The six meetings of the ECO-3 community were facilitated by two development officers from South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) and a researcher from Hibernia College. The cycle of change underpinning ECO-3 involved choosing to change; planning for change; creating the change; sharing first insights and sharing with others.

The evaluation of the pilot aimed to address the following question: How does community-based action research work to empower urban-based early childhood educators reflect on and improve their outdoor learning provision?

More specifically it addressed the following questions:

- 1) What impact did ECO-3 have on pedagogical practice, knowledge and time outdoors?
- 2) What features of ECO-3 process contributed to the participating early childhood educators to reflect and improve their outdoor play and learning provision?

This final section of the evaluation report summarises the key findings and the implications for professional learning, development and research.



7.1 What impact did ECO-3 have on early childhood educators' perceptions and experiences of outdoor play and learning?

- ECO-3 had the effect of the participating early childhood educators **broadening and deepening their understanding of outdoor play pedagogy** in ECEC in general, and in particular for children under 3.

The following changes were evident:

- The majority of the educators strongly agreed that they had gained **a new perspective about outdoor play and learning** for children under 3 since starting the ECO-3.
- Educators reported being **more attentive to children's interests and changing developmental needs**. This in turn informed planning for and implementing small scale but significant change.
- Prior to ECO-3 there was a perceived reliance on bought outdoor equipment and play materials and adult-devised activities to facilitate outdoor play with babies and toddlers. Educators described how they were now **more open to the possibilities using messy and risky play** in their practice. They were also more open to using **everyday experiences** (a rain shower) and **found materials** in nature. This was described as **'keeping it simple'**, or 'going back to the basics'.

- Another positive change concerned educators' recognition of public, **community outdoor spaces as outdoor play and learning environments that ECEC services could use**. The participating educators expressed interest in further developing this area of their practice.

- A notable finding was that ECO-3 did not have a major impact on the amount of time educators reported spending outdoors. Furthermore, there **was a large variation** between educators in the average **amount of time they spent outdoors** when they did bring babies and toddlers outdoors. This ranged from less **than 15 minutes to 1 to 2 hours**.

- The reported barriers to bringing babies and toddlers outdoors concerned **(bad) weather, the lack of appropriate outdoor clothing, safety concerns** and constraints on time outdoors due to **outdoor time rotas for different age groups** in a ECEC service.
- Educators also reported that **parents were concerned that babies might get sick** due to being outdoors in cold weather. There was also a **suggestion that parents do not approve of outdoor play for babies and toddlers** and some frustration that parents don't provide appropriate outdoor clothing.
- How to actively engage with and include parents in planning for and valuing outdoor play and learning for very young children was a discussion point during some ECO-3 meetings. Whilst the findings indicated that participating educators are interested in and confident in communicating with parents in general, they may still lack confidence in the explaining the role of outdoor play in babies' and toddlers' development and learning.
- With **more time and additional curriculum input**, an approach such as ECO-3 could further empower educators to share their new knowledge with parents regarding the health, development and learning benefits for babies and toddlers of playing outdoors.

7.2 What did ECO-3 teach us about professional learning and development in Communities of Research and Practice?

The second aim of the ECO-3 pilot was to find out what features of community-based action research contribute to bringing about change in outdoor play and learning provision in ECEC especially for children under 3.

- A clear finding of the evaluation was that the **most effective and valuable aspect of the ECO-3** approach for the participating educators was the opportunity it provided to **exchange knowledge and experiences with colleagues** from their own setting and with peers in other ECEC settings.

- Educators had had varied experiences of joint reflection in teams prior to ECO-3, with a third noting time for planning and reflection was valued to a minor extent in their service, a third noting it was valued to moderate extent and a third to a great extent.
- The second most valuable aspect of the ECO-3 approach was **viewing and discussing photos and videos of outdoor practice with babies and toddlers**. These stimulated educators to see new possibilities for pedagogical work outdoors.
- **Handouts with short texts about pedagogical practice outdoors** and other suggested reading to read between meetings were **viewed by the participating educators as less effective** compared to peer discussion and joint viewing of photos and videos, in changing or improving outdoor provision or seeing
- This finding may partly be explained by the effort and commitment needed to come to the ECO-3 evening meetings. Participants noted that sometimes it was difficult to come after a days' work but once there, they were happy they had. Right from the first meeting of ECO-3, participants observed **that the time and space ECO-3 created to plan and talk with colleagues when no children were present was unique**. The everyday constraints of the day-to-day working in ECEC service did not normally make this possible.
- The participating early childhood educators also **welcomed the involvement of external facilitation** in ECO-3. This provided **extra motivation, a welcome 'other' perspective, and the creation of a safe climate for discussion**. While two or three facilitators were active in each of the ECO-3 pilot meetings, due to the pilot nature of ECO-3 and the ongoing evaluation research, in normal circumstances it would be sufficient to have just one or two facilitators. An important condition, if ECO-3 is to be scaled up, is that **ECO-3 facilitators also have access to peer support**. This recommendation is supported by other studies in relation to professional learning and communities of practice in ECEC (SEED, 2018; Doan & Hendra, 2022).
- The six **ECO-3 meetings took place on a mutually agreed day and time** which was Tuesday evenings 6.30 to 8pm. The meetings were spread over a **7-month period** (May to November 2022). There was a drop-off in attendance by the final meeting. Whilst non-attending educators were not asked why they didn't attend, a range of factors are likely to be at play. For some participants, the time commitment to participate in 6 meetings ECO-3 was perhaps too great and/or they felt they were not sufficiently benefiting. Personal circumstances and other responsibilities also influenced participants' ability to participate in all six meetings.
- The **costs involved in ECO-3** as noted above were the **early childhood educators personal time** to attend the ECO-3 meetings, **in-kind venue and refreshment costs** provided by two of the participating ECEC services, South Dublin County Library and South Dublin CCC; **facilitators' time for planning, for facilitation, equipment and materials, and travel time**. For the purposes of the pilot, these costs were covered by Hibernia College and South Dublin County Childcare Committee. Other costs associated with the pilot concerned the time and financial costs for research and evaluation and dissemination. If ECO-3 as an approach is to be brought to scale, it is important to value and budget for the time commitment for facilitation, and for early childhood educators' participation (see below).
- Finally, a key component of ECO-3 was the commitment to sharing the learning to wider ECEC community of early childhood educators, researchers, trainers and policy makers. In addition to the sharing within the ECO-3 community, the learning from the ECO-3 process has been shared publicly via: [a blog co-authored by ECO-3 participants](#) and posted on Early Childhood Ireland website; a presentation about ECO-3 at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association Conference, Glasgow in August 2022 (Kernan et al. 2022) and a joint presentation by one of the SDCCC development officers and one of the participating educators at the International CARN (Collaborative Action Research Network) 'Changing Lives through Action Research' Conference, Dublin, October 2022 (Dowdall et al. 2022).

7.3 Implications for professional learning and development, research and scaling up ECO-3

Budgetary provision for communities of practice and research

- For ECO-3 approach is to be brought to scale within SDCCC and in all 30 City and County CCCs¹⁴ it will be necessary to make budgetary provision for a set number of paid hours for early childhood educators to participate in such communities of research and practice on a regular basis.

Change in professional practice takes time

ECO-3 has demonstrated that time is needed to build trusting relationships in a community of practice, to reflect on and assimilate new ideas, to plan for change and create the change, to observe and document and to revisit points of discussion and adjust further. Locating the meetings of ECO-3 in the outdoor and indoor spaces of the participating ECEC services was viewed as an asset contributing positively to peer learning and exchange.

- A minimum of 6 months should be planned for a community of research and practice. The number of meetings, their format and venue should be negotiated and agreed upon by the participants. The length of time and number of meetings will also depend on the goal of the community of practice.

Whole team and facilitated approach works best

A whole team and facilitated approach whereby communities of practice and research involve managers, room leader and staff working directly with children and families works best. The starting point in ECO-3, providing input and motivation in ECO-3, was the lived experience and practice-based knowledge of the participating early childhood educators with respect to outdoor provision. In further iterations of ECO-3, it is advised that facilitators strengthen the links between discussion points arising in the meetings and the pedagogical guidelines and underpinning theory in Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. The recommended enhanced focus on curriculum and learning for children under 3 in the updated version of Aistear is a welcome development in that regard (French & McKenna, 2022).

- It is recommended that communities of practice and research are facilitated by development officers and/or lecturer/trainers from HEI or other training and research institutions who have experience in ECEC and community-based action research and group facilitation.

Involve others in the community in planning for and enacting quality ECEC

Depending on the focus of the community of practice and research, it is recommended when planning a community of research and practice, to consider who else in the community might be directly included for part of or all a community of practice: parents or grandparents, others living in the neighbourhood; other professionals from educational, health, sports and recreation or cultural services.

- With respect to learning and development outdoors, there is a need for greater attention to be paid to planning and maintaining accessible and integrated outdoor and natural spaces in the community, which would link and provide safe green routes between young children's homes, ECEC outdoor environments and other community spaces.

More research needed on experiences of children under 3 outdoors in ECEC in Ireland

A key finding of the literature review conducted to inform the updating of Aistear was the dearth of literature about curriculum and learning for children under 3 (French & McKenna, 2022). This was also noted in the introduction and rationale for ECO-3 (see Section 1) specifically with respect to outdoor provision.

- The findings of the ECO-3 evaluation point to the following areas as needing further research and analysis: 1) the impact of ECEC service daily routines and time slots for different groups outdoors on quality outdoor experiences of babies and toddlers; 2) related to this, outdoor play as an opportunity for mixed aged play involving babies and toddlers and its impact on learning and development, 3) how to work effectively in partnership with parents, families and communities in providing for outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers.

¹⁴ Or the proposed structures that eventually may replace CCCs (DECDIY, 2023).

Finally, whilst the ECO-3 approach pilot focused on reflecting on and improving outdoor provision for children under 3, the approach underpinning ECO-3 could be adapted to any area of ECEC or School-Age pedagogy. It is hoped that this evaluation will provide food for thought for policy-makers, trainers, HEIs, early childhood educators in Ireland and elsewhere who are interested in professional learning and practice-based action research.



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Appendix 1

More information about the ECO-3 pilot partners:

South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC)

South Dublin County Childcare Committee is one of thirty City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) around the country that are funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth (DCEDIY). SDCCC offers information and support to early years and school-aged providers, parents, childminders and employers to improve accessibility, affordability and quality of early years' services in South Dublin County. Actions to supporting outdoor play and learning are a priority of SDCCC. Currently, there are 214 Full Day Care/Parttime ECEC services and 25 standalone School Age Childcare services in the SDCCC region.

School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin

Hibernia College was founded in 2000 to meet the growing demand for flexible, lifelong learning that would not be restricted by location or time. The College is driven by a passion to provide equal education opportunities to students who have been excluded from various programmes or professions previously. It does this by delivering technology-enhanced and flexible programmes that are built around an e-learning model and that prepare students for today's complex professional roles.

The School of Education of Hibernia College Dublin is committed to providing high quality and innovative teacher education programmes at all levels. It provides a significant proportion of Ireland's teacher education. The College also offers an extensive suite of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes for education professionals. Deepening and broadening our research knowledge base is essential so that our programmes continue to be relevant and responsive to current social issues. The newest programme in the School of Education is the B.Ed in Early Childhood Education (ECE). A key feature of this Programme is the inclusion of a research module in all four stages, whereby students learn about and develop skills to engage in, analyze and apply new and existing research in ECE.

Appendix 2

Embracing Changes Outdoors for Children Under 3: A Community of Research and Practice

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING

April 2022



Are you enthusiastic about the possibilities outdoor play and learning can offer young children?

Is there anything about the outdoor provision for babies and toddlers in your setting that niggles you, that you would like to change for the better but need some encouragement?

Would you like to be part of a group of early years educators who will think, act and learn together to make the most of outdoor play and learning for babies and toddlers in their setting?

If the answers to any of these questions are 'yes', then the 'Embracing Changes for Children Under 3: Outdoors Community of Research and Practice' may be for you.

Read on for more information:

Over the past 15 years, there has been a gradual increase in outdoor play opportunities for young children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. While many early years educators like you believe in the importance of outdoor play for the learning and development of children you work with, it can be challenging to provide stimulating and diverse experiences outdoors all year round for babies and toddlers. Although the national regulations in place are there to improve quality and safeguard children's health and well-being outdoors, they are imposed from outside. They may have the effect of reducing your agency and motivation to improve your practice outdoors.

In this small project we are interested in exploring a new way of choosing to change, planning for change and creating change in outdoor play and learning. We would like to work with you - a small group of motivated early years educators who are open to learning with us.

A key ingredient of the approach is that you will decide on the precise focus of change you would like to make. It will be based on a specific need or question **about the outdoor provision in your setting; is there something about outdoor play provision for the Under 3s that bothers** you that you would like to improve on or better understand or change?

What will it involve for you?

- Active participation in approximately 6 x 1.5 hours of face-to-face peer-interaction sessions between April and September 2022
- Work with your team in planning and making change to outdoor provision for Under 3s in your setting
- Sharing your experiences with early years educators in other settings
- Complete a short baseline and post- research questionnaire and participate in a mid-research reflection activity

This is a joint initiative between the School of Education, Hibernia College and South Dublin County Childcare Committee.

Please complete the form below if you are interested in participating in the Embracing Changes Outdoor for Children Under 3: Community of Research and Practice, return by email to marie@southdublinchildcare.ie by Friday 8th April 2022.

Because it's a pilot project, there will only be places a small number of early years educators from 6 different Early Learning and Care settings with a maximum of 3 educators participating from each setting.

Note that if more early years educators and settings are interested, than there are places available; we will need to select participants based on their motivation.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact the following:

Margaret Kernan, Hibernia College on mkernan@hiberniacollege.net

Marie Dowdall , SDCCC on marie@southdublinchildcare.ie

Marianne Casey, SDCCC on marianne@southdublinchildcare.ie

Embracing Changes Outdoors for Children Under 3
EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM

Setting Name: _____

No. of Children between 0-3 enrolled:

No. of Staff who work with children between 0-3:

No. of Staff in the setting who would like to participate:

Our Service's motivation to participate:

Write a short paragraph (3 to 5 sentences) about the change for the better you would like to make to the outdoor play and learning provision in your setting.

Note, you may change your mind later about the focus. This is just to have a first impression about your situation, what bothers or niggles you about your outdoor provision for children under 3, or what you would like to better understand to plan for change.

Please indicate the day and time that would suit you and your team to attend meetings. You may select more than one option.

- Monday Mornings – Starting 10am
- Tuesday Afternoons – Starting 2 pm
- Thursday Evenings – Starting 6 pm
- No preference for day, no preference for time

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please print, scan form and return by email to marie@southdublinchildcare.ie by Friday 8th April 2022.



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