

**Muireann Ranta**

**Environmental education/ education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Children's Rights Perspective**

The development of respect of the natural environment is one of the young child's education rights, under the UNCRC, which opens up possibilities to think about with ways young children and adults together can protect, enhance, restore and create biodiverse habitats for nature in the young child's playful learning environment. This study will, in the first instance, explore young children's perspectives and engagement with the outdoors and the non-human world (nature), using a child rights-based methodology. Recent research (DYCA, 2017) has emphasised the active, open and relational aspects of outdoor play for younger children and the affordances the outdoor environment offers for both structured and unstructured play opportunities, enabling younger children to master physical skills and learn about the natural world. While the benefits of play in the natural world, related to spirituality, quality of life and well-being of the young child have been explored in the literature (Waller, Arlemalm-Hagser, Sandseter, Lee-Hammond, Lekies and Wyver, 2017) common images of the child in ECEC contexts as innocent and too young can mean that issues of environmental sustainability are considered problematic in ECEC contexts (Duhn, 2012). Where environmental education does take place, short-term education interventions have been found to have some educational gains for children in terms of knowledge but not in attitudes towards the species they encounter (Randler, Ilg and Kern, 2005). A Belgian study by Boeve-de Pauw and Van Petegem (2013) on eco-schools found no effect on environmental behaviour of students, however the study failed to include the environmental values and behaviours of the educators, leadership or school climate. In spite of these challenges, the role of initial practitioner education in the area of environmental and nature education is set to become more pronounced (Meier and Sisk-Hilton, 2017). Taking as a starting point a definition of environmental education for early years as education in, about and for the environment (Davis, 2009) and the seminal work of Louv (2005, 2011), this study will explore the synergies and intersections between a child rights based

approach to early childhood education and environmental education, positioning of the child in relationship with their community and immediate local environment. Drawing on a theoretical and pedagogical framework informed by place pedagogy and intergenerational education (Mannion, 2012) this study will explore with young children how ECEC settings might provide encounters for young children to nurture and care for the environment, and in doing so, could enable a more deeper connection and respect for the natural world, enabling ECEC settings and the adults therein to participate in social accountability for children's rights (Tisdall, 2017).

The key general objectives guiding this research project are to develop a child rights-based, inclusive, innovative and creative research methodology for research with young children about their encounters with the natural world. A second objective is to develop a child rights-based, inclusive, innovative and creative model for Environment education/ Sustainability Education in ECEC setting (s) and initial education of ECEC educators. While finally, this study hopes to advance knowledge of children's rights in early years, specifically related to the development of respect for the natural environment, under article 29 1 (e) of the UNCRC, and build the capacity of duty bearers to fulfil their obligations.