

# Art & Ecology project for Babies, Toddlers and Young Children and Childminders and Carers



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# Foreword

*It is in the act of slowing [ ] down that we notice, connect, learn and give babies, toddlers and young children agency and choice by following their lead. It can be likened to a dance where we (babies, toddlers and artists) moved, watched and responded to each other while being influenced by time and each other. P 24*

I have the pleasure of reading this beautiful publication from the other side of the world, in Christchurch New Zealand/Aotearoa where I am visiting the University of Canterbury on an Erskine Fellowship. While here, I've been privileged to learn about Māori perspectives on children's learning and development, which are deeply relational and rooted in interconnectedness. Māori locate human beings within the context of their relationships with each other, with their families and communities, and with the natural world; Māori pedagogy is centrally focused on taking us back to our connections to each other and to nature. Knowledge is shared intergenerationally over centuries through song and story, through enactments and visualisations – in other words, through the arts. Western understandings and pedagogical approaches are slowly catching up to such indigenous wisdom that is replicated in many cultures worldwide, and the Art & Ecology project for Babies, Toddlers and Young Children and Childminders and Carers provides a wonderful example of this.

Like in Māori pedagogy, this project has leveraged the power of providing space, time, food and companionship in partnership with the natural world, recognising the agency of children, to foster deep learning. Providing opportunities for our youngest citizens to engage with the arts in the outdoors through this project also centres the importance of play and risk tolerance. In our modern world we can be distracted by fears of dirt and illness, of risk and liability. This project provides a template for how to authentically, safely and

creatively allow babies, toddlers and young children to guide us in their engagement with the arts and with the world they live in.

The authors of the report have skilfully linked these ideas to the latest developments in early childhood education in Ireland, showing how their work resonates with the principles of the newly updated Aistear (NCCA, 2024). Their approaches closely mirror what babies, toddlers and young children told us mattered to them in the Consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (O'Toole et al., 2023;2024) – time to play and enact their agency in natural environments, in the context of strong connections with and between the people who care about them. In developing partnerships between artists, child-minders, families, Kildare County Childcare Committee and Creative Places Athy, this project has not only provided access to the arts in the moment but has laid the groundwork for sustainable partnerships into the future, for the benefit of all involved. It has also foregrounded the strengths and importance of two cohorts that are long overdue the centre of the stage in early childhood education in Ireland, our babies and toddlers, and our childminders.

Maith sibh!

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# Introduction

The Kildare Art & Ecology early childhood project for babies, toddlers and young children aged 0-3 years was developed by Kildare County Childcare Committee (KCCC) and Creative Places Athy and was facilitated by multidisciplinary artist, researcher and early childhood arts lecturer Jackie Maguire and Forest School Educator, artist, researcher and lecturer Trisha MacLaughlin. This project ran over six sessions and operated out of Gaelscoil Átha Í and Athy Library. Weekly workshops were held during the months of March, April and May 2024 and Kate Maher of Dúlra Forest School Kildare attended as an observer.



*\*The term artist will be used in this research to refer to the combined experience of both Jackie Maguire and Trisha MacLaughlin in the arts and forest school education.*

# Context



## Planting the idea

The seed was planted in 2022 when Louise Quinn of KCCC and Eilish Langton of Creative Places Athy developed a partnership to secure funding for a 6-week pilot arts programme that would engage with potential and existing Childminders and babies, toddlers and young children aged 0-3 yrs from Kildare. Artist Jackie Maguire was invited to collaborate in 2023 and at the time was studying a Professional Diploma in Art & Ecology at NCAD. The idea of connecting art, ecology and the outdoors, was influenced by her Professional Diploma and the importance of giving babies, toddlers and young children access to the outdoors and to nature. Jackie then invited Trisha MacLaughlin of Sligo Woodland School to collaborate with her, both of whom brought their combined knowledge and experience of the arts, forest school education and ecology to this project. The Art & Ecology project was funded under the Creative Places Athy initiative, supported by The Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and Kildare County Council. The project acted as a *'bespoke resource to support the quality of childminding provision'* in Kildare and aimed to build relationships and engage in a meaningful way with Childminders/potential Childminders and babies, toddlers and young children as a pilot *Staffed Local Network* that was supported by KCCC's newly appointed Childminding Development Officer Barbara Alessandrini (DCEDIY, 2021).

## Participant group

The babies, toddlers and young children who attended the Art & Ecology workshops ranged in age from 0-4 years. In total there were two babies under 12 months, ten toddlers and one young child, totaling thirteen. In addition, nine adults regularly attended, and they consisted of Childminders and Carers.

## Babies and toddlers aged 0-3 years

The recent Literature Review conducted by DCU to support the updating of Aistear highlighted *'a dearth'* of evidence-based literature on children's learning from birth to three years, despite the significance of this stage of development (French, 2022, p.8). It was because of this 'dearth' that the 0 to 3 years cohort was prioritised for the Art & Ecology project, alongside an artistic and forest school education approach as this would enable the babies, toddlers and young children to engage in hands-on, sensory and inquiry-based experiences through the arts and by being outside.



*'Babies, toddlers and young children learn best in play, active, hands-on and inquiry-based experiences through which they learn about the world around them and develop holistically' (NCCA, 2023, p.15)*

## The risk and risky play

Current research tells us that children's outdoor 'boundaries' are largely being reduced due to parental concerns for their safety and a loss of spare time and access to 'safe' outdoor space for play (Francis, 1991, Kyttä, 2004). Safety and 'risk' are closely linked, with risky play being replaced with a more risk aversion pedagogical approach.

We the artists wanted to understand the idea of *risk aversion* by creating a weekly space where babies and toddlers could be outside on the ground in all weather and participate in artistic, sensory and often messy risky play together with their Childminder/Carers and other babies, toddlers and young children. Chipeniuk (1994) acknowledges the importance of being outside and notes that *'a child playing outdoors, albeit in a garden or wild area, can help connect them with the many elements of nature and gain and instill an appreciation with the natural world'*. Tusla's recent report *'When the roof is the sky'* concurs with Chipeniuk and notes the significance of the outdoors and that children's *'creativity, curiosity and motivation arise naturally from play and learning in natural outdoor environments'* (Tusla, 2023, p.4)

## The Arts and Forest School Education approaches in early childhood education and care

Article 31 of the UNCRC recognises the *'right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'*.

Babies, toddlers and young children have a right to participate freely in the arts and engage in 'outdoor' play under the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Art & Ecology project met these rights by creating a space where babies, toddlers and young children could participate freely in the arts and outdoor play by being, playing and connecting with nature outside and alongside the artists and the children's Childminders and Carers.



### The Arts in early childhood education and care

Babies, toddlers and young children are open to the arts as it gives them freedom to create, move, explore and respond to artistic invitation (O'Sullivan et al., 2018). Similarly, the arts provide a rich base from which children can explore their worlds and include: *'words, movement, drawing, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play and music'* (O'Sullivan et al., 2018, p.781). Aistear recognises the holistic development of babies, toddlers and young children through the 100 languages of communication and *places 'a notable focus on the arts'* (NCCA, 2025).



*The dandelion paint brush*

Garvis and Nutbrown highlight the sensory dimension of the arts and *argue 'that because young children's response to the world is primarily sensorial and aesthetic that early year's experiences should give due attention to the arts'* (O'Sullivan et al., 2018, p.781). The 'Aistear and the Arts Blog' reinforces the significance of the sensory, hands on and active dimension of the arts noting that *'through their active engagement with the arts, babies, toddlers and young children have the opportunity to be creative, take the initiative to explore, and to express themselves'* and in the sensorial making and creating *'they experience the power, joy, excitement, beauty, potential and relevance of the arts'* (NCCA, 2025). It is because of the live and sensorial nature of the visual arts and music that these art forms were explored during the Art & Ecology project.



*A Reggio and nature inspired light table*



*Printing, hammering and discovering together*

### **The Importance of Outdoor Nature Play and Learning, Forest School Education**

Playing in nature is a child's 'birthright' and an integral part of childhood (White, 2006). Many of our own wondrous childhood experiences are filled with memories of exploration and free play within nature (Pyle, 2002). By allowing children to play in nature it provides them with direct contact therefore enhancing their personal development, appreciation, knowledge and awareness of environmental values (White, 2006). This 'wonder of nature' and a child's growing and unique relationship with nature and the outdoors must be nurtured and encouraged as early as possible. When children are given the opportunity to play and connect with nature, their play is more imaginative and varied and Crain (2001) tells us that nature helps embed a sense of peace and 'being at one' with the world (Moore, 1996).



*Imaginative play: My stick is a?*



*The stick becomes a brush, pointer and support*

# Guiding Principles



## Guiding principles of the Art and Ecology Project

Within the draft updated Aistear and under **Learning Environments**, it acknowledged that the environment, both indoors and outdoors, influences how and what children learn (NCCA, 2023). *'My environment needs to be well-kept, accessible, inclusive, safe yet challenging, empowering and connected. I like being in spaces that allow me freedom of movement between the indoors and outdoors. I benefit from being outside in all kinds of weather!'* (NCCA, 2023)

The Art and Ecology project provided a space both indoors and outdoors that gave the babies, toddlers, young children and Childminders/Carers freedom of movement and allowed them to connect with the natural world and with each other. Making **connections with nature** was a key principle of this project so that babies, toddlers, young children and adults could learn about and be 'with nature' outside. We wanted to respond to the disconnect that exists between the human and 'the more than human worlds', to create a connection between the babies, toddlers, young children, adults and the plant and animal kingdoms.

Within the **learning environment** at Gaelscoil Átha Í, we the artists embraced the possibilities in the local outdoor environment *'through a sense of ómós áite (value of place) and place-based learning'*, while also focusing on dúlra (nature) and provocations (NCCA, 2024). Within the learning environments we understood this also to go beyond the physical, but instead to encompass **'relationships and interactions'** between the babies, toddlers, young children, artists, Childminders and Carers and within the outdoor and indoor spaces (NCCA, 2024).

**Care and sustainability** were indeed some further guiding principles. One of the artists completed a Professional Diploma in *Art & Ecology* at NCAD in 2024 and so this project was inspired by this course and the importance of care for our environment, understanding that we are all connected and that we need to radically review our relationship with nature.



Another principle that informed the Art and Ecology project was **relationships**. We wanted to create a space where babies, toddlers, young children, Childminders, Carers and artists could spend *'unhurried time'* together and where relationships could be nurtured. A space without distraction, where the adult could be attentive and responsive to the baby, toddler and young child. Similarly, we wanted to support and foster **early friendships** between babies, toddlers and young children as it is these connections *'within and between the child's social worlds which are central to wellbeing, learning and development'* (NCCA, 2023). The music space, outdoor learning environment (the outdoor artist's studio) and the social picnic space all supported these early friendships greatly.



### *Social music space at the beginning of each week*

The final principle underpinning the project was the idea of **'unhurried time'** and creating an atmosphere of unhurried time, where the artists would be guided by the babies, toddlers and young children and adults and allow time for exploration, discovery and creating alongside and with each other (Hayes et al, 2021). We were also interested in the idea of **slow pedagogy** and the need for time, unhurried time for listening, slow teaching and slow knowledge (French et al., 2022). French notes that very young children require sensitive, responsive caregiving from educators who are attuned to them, affectionate, and available and so slow pedagogy was practiced by the artists during this project (French et al., 2022).

# Research Methods



## Research Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used in this small-scale research study. A *questionnaire* was used to capture quantitative data while qualitative data collection methods included *ORID*, the '*Noticing Question*' in the Social Picnic space and *Photographic Documentation*.

- A *questionnaire* was created that Childminders and Carers filled in at the beginning and end of the Art & Ecology project. The aim of the questionnaire was to capture if change occurred in the frequency of time spent accessing the arts and nature following the Art & Ecology project.
- The *ORID* (Objective, Reflective, Interpretative, Decisional) critical reflection framework was used by the artists after each workshop. Using *ORID* allowed both artists to stop and reflect on the workshop together, which informed possible lines of artistic and nature inspired inquiry.
- Key insights were gathered from Childminders and Carers at the end of each workshop to record what '*they noticed*' about the baby, toddler and young child's engagement that week. This question was posed and recorded by the artists during the social picnic space where we shared food together and chatted informally at the end of each weekly Art & Ecology workshop.
- *Photographic documentation* was taken at each workshop which captured moments in time.

The Art & Ecology project was unique as the artists had a dual role and acted as researchers and artists. In addition, pseudonyms have been used in this report when reference is made to babies, toddlers and young children.



# Key Findings



## Key findings from the Quantitative Data

Seven **questionnaires** were completed, one was fully completed and six were partially completed. Two adult participants did not complete the questionnaire, and this may have been due to the nature of the weekly workshops and the fact that Childminders and Carers were busy engaging with babies, toddlers and young children each week.

However, three Childminders/Carers who partially (2 x adults) and fully completed (1 x adult) the questionnaire, noted a **significant increase in the frequency** of engagement in the arts and outdoor play/education at the end of the Art & Ecology project. Childminders and Carers were asked to circle how often they did art and music with the child/children they childminded/cared for at week 1 and then again at week 6, to capture change. Of the three participants who completed this section, they all recorded an **increase in the frequency** of engagement in art and music at the end of the Art & Ecology project. One participant noted going from 'once a week' to 'twice a week', while another noted going from 'twice a week' to 'daily' and finally, one Carer noted the most significant change from 'never' engaging in art and music with their child to now engaging 'once a week' and noting *'that the company and the connection brought out Tom'*.

Similarly, two of the same respondents noted an **increase in the frequency** of times that they engaged in outdoor play and education. Both adults noted radical change with one Carer going from 'once a month' to 'daily' engagement, while another Carer noted 'never' engaging in outdoor play to 'daily' engagement. The third respondent noted no change as they had engaged 'daily' in outdoor play and education at the beginning and end of the Art & Ecology project.

Despite the quantitative data being limited and the short duration of the Art & Ecology Project (6 weeks), the results demonstrate change and show a significant increase in the frequency of time spent engaging in the arts and outdoor play and education following the Art & Ecology project. Some Childminders/Carers went from never engaging in art & music and outdoor play to now engaging once a week in art & music and to daily experiences in outdoor play. These results demonstrate the importance of this type of project as it can change behaviour and increase babies, toddlers and young children's access to the arts and the outdoors within a very short timeframe. In addition, the questionnaire recorded the Childminders and Carers responses to a question concerning what kind of art, music and forest school education inspired activities were the Childminders/Carers doing with the babies, toddlers and young at the end of the 6-week Art & Ecology project.

These responses are of a **qualitative nature** and so will be considered in the next section under qualitative data as they directly relate to the project's key findings under *relationships and interactions* and *a connection to nature*.

## Qualitative data: Key Findings

A number of key findings emerged from the **qualitative data** collection methods and they have been grouped under the following research themes:

- Relationships and interactions and early friendships
- Unhurried time and slow relational pedagogy
- Transitions
- Sensory and hands-on experiences
- A connection with nature (citizenship) and the outdoor learning environment

Interestingly, the research themes mirror the key findings from the recent consultation research with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear by O'Toole et al. (2024). Likewise, Hayes (2021) and French (2022) highlight the significance of unhurried time and slow relational pedagogy and the updated Aistear (2024) identifies '*Relationships and Interaction*' as one of Aistear's Principles with a focus on slow relational pedagogy. Similarly, the other research themes align themselves with the updated Aistear Principles specifically; *Play and hands on experiences*, *Agentic global citizens* and *Learning environments* (Aistear, 2024).

This section proved challenging to write as the research themes were interconnected and straddled several of Aistear's Principles, and so it was difficult to separate and present under different headings. For example, the research theme of Relationships and Interactions, connected to Learning Environments as Relationships and Interactions are also implicit in Aistear's Learning Environment's Principle. Therefore, in this section movement within and across research themes occurs due to their interconnection. In response to this, a less linear and more interconnected rhizomatic writing approach has been adopted which is informed by ecology.

Secondly, at the end of writing this research the updated Aistear Framework was made public online in December 2024 and so the lead author made the decision to incorporate the updated 2024 Aistear Framework into this small-scale research report.



## Relationships, interactions and early friendships

Relationships developed between the artists, babies, toddlers and young children and the Childminders/Carers early in the project. Following week two's workshop, the artists noted that *'relationships had developed quickly'* with children being and appearing comfortable around each other and the adults. The artists reflected on 'the why' of this and felt that *the outdoor learning environment, being with nature* and *slow pedagogy* had facilitated these relationships to develop and evolve so quickly. The fresh air, the sensory dimension, the space and freedom to move and explore, as well as the discoveries and artistic provocations all came together to support and develop relationships during the Art & Ecology project.

An **atmosphere of unhurried time** was created by the artists in weekly workshops, so that babies, toddlers and young children and their Childminders/Carers could slowly engage in the artistic and nature inspired provocations at their own pace e.g. clay, printing, hammering, experimenting with light, music, drama etc. One parent noted this atmosphere of unhurried time and how it enhanced relationships and said, *'today I felt the energy (of us being) all together'* and that there was a *'slower pace of being together'* (ORID, week 2).

Relationships were enhanced because of the freedom and choice given to babies, toddlers and young children each week. They had *'paints to squeeze and water to pour, permission to lead'* and *'no limits'* were placed on the babies, toddlers and young children and this coupled with access to art materials in an *outdoor learning environment* meant they could paint, print, pour with each other and the adults, without worrying about 'the mess'. An outdoor artist's studio was created which afforded great freedom to all the babies, toddlers, young children, Childminders and Carers.



*The outdoor studio space*

We observed peer learning and social interactions occurring where one child showed another child how to pour (ORID, week 2) and where a baby watched an older child play with a stick that took on symbolic meaning. Similarly, we observed the children taking great care around the babies who were seated on the ground outside at times and this transferred into the social picnic space inside. We witnessed **caring dispositions** being shown by the toddlers as they moved in and around the babies who were often on the ground (NCCA, 2024a)



*Care in and around the baby*

One Carer said that *“It is just a lovely group, so nice to each other. I was singing and Thomas was playing his music and shaking”*. This was a newly formed group and so many of the babies, toddlers and young children had never met each other before. We saw evidence of **early friendships** being created and observed the care and consideration extended to nature outside permeating the project, with babies, toddlers, young children and adults showing care towards each other. This idea of **care and nurture** was also evident at the end of each session where a social picnic space with fresh food was set up by KCCC’s Childminding Development Officer. This became a social space where relationships and early friendships were further developed between babies, toddlers, young children and adults.



*The social picnic space*

In the social picnic space, the Childminders and Carers shared one key insight into what they **‘noticed’** about the babies, toddlers and young children’s engagement that week, while the children shared food, talked and played together. Similarly, the adults ate and chatted and an atmosphere of *‘unhurried time’* was created for all. Both artists see relationships as being central to their practice, in particular the act of sharing food and eating together, as it is through this act that conversations happen and relationships are developed. In addition, one artist is a socially engaged artist and so creating convivial spaces where relationships can grow is key to her practice. The artists wanted to ensure that relationships could be developed each week as this was a new group, and it was the hope that this group would continue beyond the Art & Ecology project with the support of KCCC and Creative Places Athy and Kildare County Council Art’s Service. It was during this social picnic space that an adult shared their observation of relationships being

enhanced between babies, toddlers, young children and Childminders/Carers, thus reinforcing the importance of creating a space where babies, toddlers, young children and adults could simply be and share together in a social picnic space.

*'There was a number of times this week where there were two pairs of hands in the activity, the carers and the child's. Many beautiful moments of engagement'* (ORID, Week 4).



The idea of coming together as a **community, enhanced relationships and well-being** was touched on further by a Childminder who said that today *'felt more like a community and very comfortable in our interaction'*. The Childminder observed *'more organised play between kids and that they knew what order the toys should be'* and that the workshop was *'very calm and easy'*. *'At the start adults were caring for the child but now adults are enjoying it themselves. Not sure if they are here now for the children or themselves!'* (ORID, wk 4). We see the 'sona' (joy), fun, playfulness and care all evident in the Childminder's remarks as well as high well-being and a sense of peace.

## Unhurried time and slow relational pedagogy

**Unhurried time** and **slow relational pedagogy** will also be considered under relationships, interactions and early friendships as we the artists found that by giving babies, toddlers, young children, Childminders and Carers real and unhurried time together that relationships were enhanced.

The Aistear Guidance for Good Practice document (2024) refers to slow 'relational' pedagogy and notes that this type of pedagogy is about '*slowing down, taking time*' and '*being present in that moment with the baby, toddler and young child*' (NCCA, 2204a, p 11). By slowing down and being present in that moment during the Art & Ecology project, relationships were fostered between babies, toddlers, Childminders, Carers and artists. Aistear notes that the very act of slowing down and being present builds '*a secure attachment*' and relationship, thereby putting the relational in slow pedagogy (NCCA, Aistear, 2024 p 17).

One parent noted after week 1 that '*I could stand back and give that space and give time to be present with her*'. Similarly, the artists remarked on this idea of unhurried time and commented on '*the joy of being able to just do with them (the children and carers), of being able to spend unhurried time exploring, creating, discovering and chatting together*' (ORID, wk 2). Another parent noted this atmosphere of unhurried time and how it enhanced relationships and said '*today I felt the energy (of us being) all together*' and that there was a '*slower pace of being together*' (ORID, wk 2). The immediate impact of this on the child, carer and artists was of **high well-being** where we felt content, connected and really with each other, either by talking together or exploring the world beneath our feet or experimenting with art materials. The artists commented on the high well-being and said that there was '*a very content feeling throughout all stages of the session today*' (ORID, week 3). Similarly, a Childminder noted '*they are enjoying being here, they are loving it, they are benefiting from it*' (ORID, week 3).

We noticed that the babies, toddlers and young children explored the outdoor space at their own pace. They too seemed to adopt this idea of unhurried time. The artists noted that there were '*no restrictions, they (the babies, toddlers and young children) had the space and were offered sensory experiences*' (ORID, Week 2). They moved at their own pace and went in the direction and to the spaces they wanted to go to, whether that was the outdoor artist studio space, the huts, the open grass area, the sheltered tarpaulin area etc. The children were given agency and choice and the '**Agentic Global Citizen**' was visible and supported each week (Aistear, 2024). One Carer noted the significance of giving the child agency and said that '*she got confidence indeed here without me, she found her thing without me*' (ORID, wk 3).



The babies, toddlers and young children not only went at their own pace, but things slowed down between their Childminder and Carer too, where the Childminder/Carer was led by the child, or where the Childminder/Carer stopped and discovered alongside the child.

Here slow relational pedagogy is observed, where time was given to listen, to talk, to investigate, to stop and to move together. A Childminder commented on slow relational pedagogy identifying it as *'a natural and nice pace'* and commented *'again feeling very comfortable with the group. Relationships between parents, children and the team are very comfortable and relaxed and even playful (ORID, wk 2)'*.



*Being led by the child*

## Transitions: The relationship between slow pedagogy and transitions

Aistear states that ‘*all transitions are important and are recognised as a process that takes time rather than a once-off event*’ (NCCA, 2024). *Transitions* were considered by both artists in the planning of the Art & Ecology weekly workshops as they were interested in using other forms of communication (an instrument, the voice, gesture and movement), inspired by the 100 languages of communication to mark a transition, as well as observing babies, toddlers and young children and giving them agency so that they could lead the artists and signal when they were ready to transition. The updated Aistear also notes that ‘*playful pedagogies*’ can make transitions more enjoyable, positive and effective and so artistic and playful pedagogies were used through the Art & Ecology project (NCCA, 2024, p18).

As previously mentioned, the idea of *unhurried time* was a key principle of the Art & Ecology project and this informed the artists’ practice and every aspect of the weekly workshops. Slow time and slow pedagogy influenced and permeated the workshop transitions. The artists slowed down the transitions and took time to notice. Each week they were guided by the babies, toddlers and young children and their Childminders/Carers and observed and waited for prompt/signals to move to another space with the children.

Babies, toddlers and young children had free play inside at the beginning of each workshop with nature inspired instruments and materials to explore and then the group moved to another part of the hall for the welcome and singing circle. The artists observed the group and only **transitioned** to the welcome singing circle when they felt the children were ready to move there. An invitation was extended to the children through song and they would then follow the artists to the singing circle. Often the children moved to the singing circle space first, which became a prompt for the artists to call the others over through song and gestures. The artists did not use verbal communication as they wanted to explore other forms of communication inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach.



*Taking time to discover together in the singing circle*

Following the music circle inside, we then moved to the outdoor space, and this was punctuated by a kalimba instrument being played in the hallway where the children were individually and 'slowly played to' as they left the space. The kalimba marked this **transition** and only ceased being played once every baby, toddler, young child and Childminder/Carer had left the hallway, thereby giving time for each child to move outdoors at their own pace while being played to.

The group would transition outside gradually and they often ran and played together first in the small wooden huts and explored these enclosed spaces outside. As time passed, the babies, toddlers and young children would then **transition** to the big open green space and run, play and notice and connect with nature and life in this area.

Following this the group would naturally move to the outdoor artist studio space that was set up both under and around the tarpaulin shelter. This outdoor studio space facilitated painting, printing, music and singing, tepee construction, sculpture by working with clay, potion making, working with plant dyes and mixing oil to name but a few. Songs were sung in this area relating to dandelions and the mother tree as well as the opportunity to play some hanging instruments and listen to instruments being played. Towards the end of the session the children's **'tummies talked'** and they would then lead the adults back into the hall for the social picnic space, yet another transition. Therefore, we see the connection between slow pedagogy and transitions as it is in the act of slowing transitions down that we notice, connect, learn and give babies, toddlers and young children agency and choice by following their lead. It can be likened to a dance where we (babies, toddlers and artists) moved, watched and responded to each other while being influenced by time and each other.

## Sensory and hands-on experiences:

### The Arts and Forest School Education approaches

Following the recent consultation with babies, toddlers and young children, O' Toole et al. (2024) highlighted the importance that babies, toddlers and young children placed on sensory and hands on learning experiences as these experiences gave them agency, space, freedom to make choices, access to resources *'as well as time to explore their own interests'*. Young children explore their world primarily in a sensorial and aesthetic way and so due attention must be given to **the arts** for this very reason (O'Sullivan et al, 2018).

The artists created a sensory and hands-on **outdoor artist's studio space** inspired by nature for the babies, toddlers and young children each week. This studio space was inspired by what the artists had observed the previous week, in terms of the children's emerging interests, ideas and engagement. The artists noted that children were really given the *'freedom to engage with the sensory'* (ORID, wk 2). Similarly, they observed the children *"becoming comfortable outside and with sensory play (water, painting, printing). The outdoors allowed us to really engage with 'the mess', we could mix paint with water, add oil and see the effects, print, work with clay on large surfaces"* (ORID, wk 5).

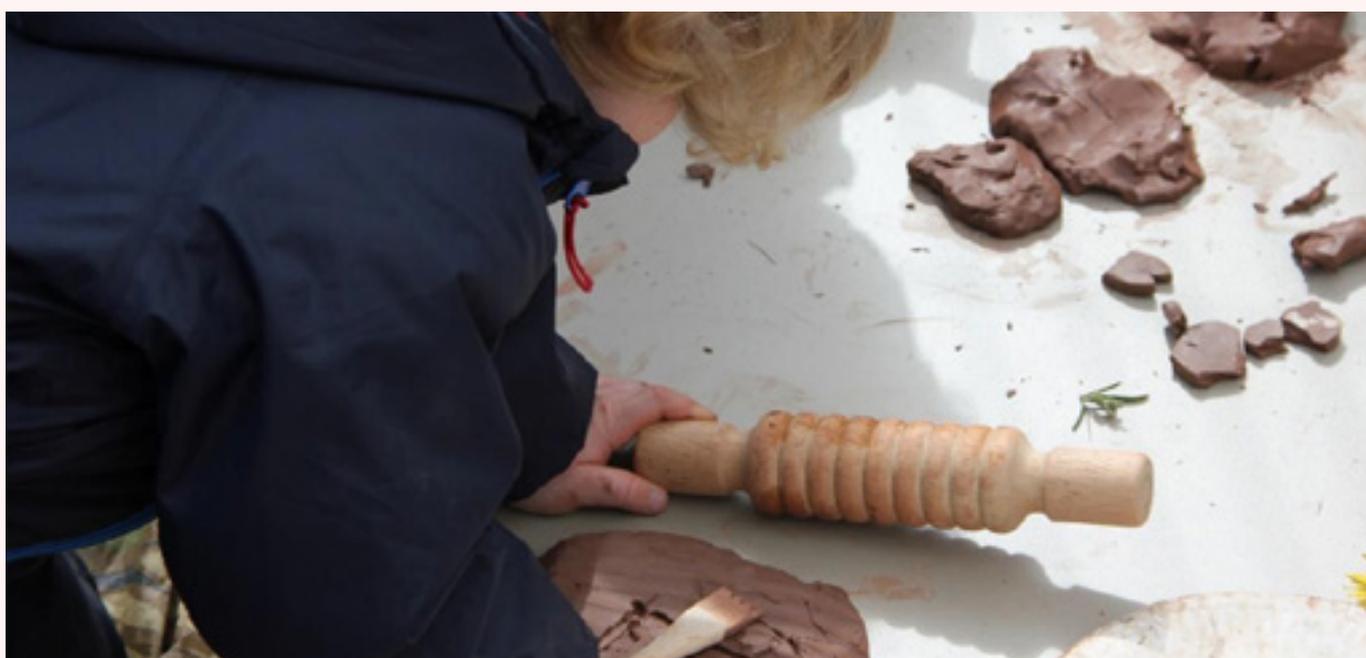


Similarly, the artists noted the almost primal and sensorial way in which the babies, toddlers and young children engaged with charcoal, as they spent time *'crushing the charcoal'* and really exploring the material (ORID, week 2). A Childminder talked about a child *'who normally only climbs, however, today he got involved with clay and used it'*.

We noticed how babies, toddlers and children were drawn to the sensory hands-on dimension of the art and natural materials presented. In the final ORID reflection session the artists commented that *'children were not afraid to engage with paint and other sensory materials by the end of the arts programme'*. They became comfortable being outside, getting dirty and wet and engaging with artistic sensory hands-on materials. The children and their carers had accepted this way of exploring their world and there was no resistance, which had been observed at the beginning of the Art & Ecology project for one toddler. The babies, toddlers and young children were now *'working with the mess and being able to cope with it, accepting it'* (ORID, wk 2)



*The child who loves to climb*



*An outdoor clay workshop*

During one workshop the theme of light was explored and light tables were set up in the small huts where children could experiment and engage with the light tables. One grandmother managed to hunker down and squeeze her way through the small door into the small wooden shed to explore the light table with her grandchild. The excitement and sense of 'sona' (happiness) in this tiny space was palpable as observed by an artist.



*"She was in the hut with the lights, she loves interaction and lights and exploring. She was very involved with what she was doing" (ORID, wk 2)*

One Childminder also noted the 'sona' feeling that a toddler got when engaging with sensory and light inspired provocations during the Art & Ecology programme.

*'She loves the water, the colours. She loved the light tepee and the colours, using the torches, tracking the lights. She would have been happy to just stay there' (ORID, wk 2).* Similarly, this idea of 'sona' and 'high involvement' prompted by sensory hands on experiences was observed by another Carer. *'She was very involved with the water, squirting etc., she just took over and did it herself, mixing. She had fun making jars and putting flowers in the water and shaking. The instruments and items were great for her' (ORID, wk 2).*

Furthermore, 'sona' was further reinforced by a Childminder who noted greater engagement in music and dance and that they are now *'listening to music and dancing, found the music and songs great and they were relaxing and fun for the children'*. The creation of an outdoor artist's studio space that was nestled in nature allowed babies, toddlers and young children to really explore their world in a sensory and physical and full bodied way, and at their own pace which was informed by slow pedagogy. This brought sona to all and the sensory hands on dimension of art and nature prompted high involvement and learning.

## Connection with nature and the outdoor learning environment

As Agentic Global Citizens, babies, toddlers and young children have deep connections with people and the environment (NCCA 2024, p16). Within the **learning environment** at Gaelscoil Átha Í, we the artists embraced the possibilities in the local outdoor environment *‘through a sense of ómós áite (value of place)’* and connecting babies, toddlers, young children, Childminders and Carers with dúlra (nature) by simply being outside and in nature for some time.

The natural outdoor learning environment and ecosystems guided us each week where we noticed dandelions growing, rain falling, smelt wild herbs, saw small insects and worms busy about their day. During a time of climate crisis and disconnect from nature we wanted to bring the very young outdoors and their carers so that they could reconnect with nature.

The artists noted that we were *‘making connections with nature, noticing and responding’* to it together. During week two an artist remarked that *‘we were moving and examining the grass to see who lived there’* and that it was *‘really playful engaging with the grass’* (ORID, wk 2).



*What's in the ground? Making connections with nature together, going low and slow.*

## Listening and dancing to music, feeling rain, the leaves and the bark

This *greater connection to nature* was reinforced by a Carer who commented at the end of the Art & Ecology programme about Tom the baby and that they are now *‘going for walks, feeling rain and water play, feeling trees for leaves and bark’* (Questionnaire). Interestingly, the same Carer noted that *‘Tom seemed to move more and wants to be outside all the time’*, therefore highlighting the importance of allowing young babies to really be outside, to sit and crawl on the ground, to engage with and observe nature, while feeling connected to their Childminder/Carer. The **outdoor learning environment** provided a space where Tom could be outside, where he and his Carer could slow down, notice and feel the rain, the bark on a tree and simply be together. The updated Aistear Framework (2024) references the idea of **‘noticing’** and that *‘noticing is seeing what matters’*.

Here we see how Tom's Carer notices his motivation and new desire to be outside following the Art & Ecology project. Aistear states that *'noticing is about respecting the voice of each baby, toddler and young child and valuing the importance of what they are telling us'* (2024, p 28). We can see from the carer's response in the questionnaire that Tom the baby is telling her that he *'wants to be outside all the time'*. It is this very act of *'purposeful noticing'* and attunement to Tom that will enhance their relationship and support the babies future learning and development in and outside of the home learning environment.



*The tarpaulin shelter*

### The tarpaulin shelter in the outdoor learning environment

Each week **a shelter** was assembled using a tarpaulin and bungees to wrap around the trees. This provided shelter from the wind, rain and sun and allowed us to set up an outdoor artist's studio space that we could work underneath regardless of the weather. During one session there was considerable rainfall, and the tarpaulin acted as a rain catcher. It was bulging and so the Childminders and Carers tipped it and the water cascaded downwards much to the babies, toddlers and young children's delight. The tarpaulin acted as an essential piece of kit as it gave the babies, toddlers and young children shelter from the elements and encouraged the group to go outside every week.



*The dandelion became a central character*

What distinguished this early childhood art project from other art projects was the context and the fact that considerable time was spent outside in an **outdoor learning environment**. By being outside the babies, toddlers and young children were able to connect with nature in their own time and notice the more than human world. Being outside allowed us to have conversations about what might be in the ground and we discovered and noticed things together. For example, we discovered that dandelions could survive being cut by a lawnmower and curl up in the early morning, but open up as the day warmed up. The *dandelion became a central character* in the project through

mutual discovery and we sang songs, printed and painted, moved and danced like dandelions during the project. One Childminder noted that the Art & Ecology project was *'very different, with lots of different experiences'* that encouraged involvement and *'different types of play outside'*. The **outdoor learning environment acted as the third teacher** and connected us to nature and the more than human world, giving us space and time to really engage with sensory and artistic materials, time to play and be outside, while also enhancing our well-being and regulating us (Reggio).

# Summary



## Summary

The Art & Ecology project was a 6-week programme and despite the quantitative data being limited and the short project duration, the quantitative results demonstrate a change in behaviour and show a significant *increase in the time spent engaging in the arts and outdoor play and education* at the end of the project. Some Childminders and Carers went from never engaging in art, music and outdoor play to now engaging once a week in art and music and to daily experiences in outdoor play. These results demonstrate the importance of this type of targeted project as it changed behaviour and increased babies, toddlers and young children's access to the arts and the outdoors and nature, within a very short timeframe.

In addition, the qualitative research findings point to how *relationships and early friendships* were developed in this new group and connections made between the weekly participants including the babies, toddlers, young children, Childminders, Carers, artists, KCCC and Creative Places Athy. This can be attributed to several factors including the arts and forest school approaches which are collaborative in nature and so brought everyone together (both inside and outside) in an atmosphere of 'unhurried time', where slow creating and slow pedagogy occurred. Similarly, a socially engaged arts practice concerned with building relationships and bringing the group together to eat, sing, play, create and make outside in a nature inspired artist's studio underpinned the project and this social practice further enhanced and developed relationships. The *social picnic space* at the end of each workshop created a convivial space where babies, toddlers, young children and adults shared food and talked. The act of eating and sharing food brought the group closer and developed *relationships and early friendships*. One Carer touched on the idea of 'care' and said that *'It is just a lovely group'* and they are *'so nice to each other'*. Therefore, the 'care' and consideration that was extended to nature outside permeated the project, with babies, toddlers, young children and adults showing care towards each other.

The social picnic space also created the time and space for Childminders and Carers to share one key insight into what they *'noticed'* about the babies, toddlers and young children's engagement that week. The updated Aistear Framework describes noticing as *'seeing what matters'* and it was within this space where Childminders and Carers commented on moments where they had noticed the babies, toddlers and young children's engagement in artistic and nature inspired hands-on sensory provocations. By reflecting in the social picnic space, the Childminders and Carers were 'tuning into' the baby, toddler and young child that they cared for, while the artists were able to capture valuable qualitative data.

The research comments on the significance of *unhurried time and slow relational pedagogy* and how it enhanced relationships, increased well-being and brought 'sona' and joy to all participants. The slow approach from the artists had a ripple effect and the babies, toddlers and young children not only went at their own pace, but things slowed down between their Childminder and Carer too, where the adult was led by the child, or where the adult stopped and discovered alongside the child.

Time was given to listen, to talk, to investigate, to stop and to move together. In slowing down and allowing the baby, toddler and young child to lead without imposing restrictions, they became *agentic* with one Carer noting that *'she got confidence here without me, she found her thing without me'* (ORID, wk 3).

Slow pedagogy influenced the *transitions* during the workshops, as the artists intentionally slowed things down and used the 100 languages of communication to mark a transition. In doing this the artists waited and followed the babies, toddlers and young children. Transitions became slow, child led and artistic. For example, each baby, toddler and young child were played to on a Kalimba while leaving the hall to go outside, or we (the artists) used a gesture, a note, a song to prompt interest in a space. At other times we waited and followed the babies, toddlers and young children as they discovered and moved to different areas and all the while being influenced by time and each other. Therefore, we see the connection between slow pedagogy and transitions as it is in the act of slowing transitions down that we notice, connect, learn and give babies, toddlers and young children *agency and choice* by following their lead.

Each week the babies, toddlers and children became more confident and comfortable being outside, getting dirty and wet and engaging with *artistic sensory hands-on materials*. In fact, the artists noticed that the babies, toddlers and young children were drawn to the outdoor nature inspired artist studio space which concurs with O'Toole's recent consultation research where babies, toddlers and young children expressed a desire to engage with sensory and hands on experiences (O'Toole et al., 2024). The children and their carers had accepted this way of exploring their world and there was no resistance, which had been observed at the beginning of the Art & Ecology project for one toddler. They had time to really explore the materials, to crush the charcoal, to print with flowers, to make impressions as well as being able to work outdoors on big and small canvases. Nature often provided a canvas to work on that was influenced by light, shadow, wind and rain.

The act of being outside for long periods of time each week enhanced the group's *well-being* and brought us 'sona' as we could breathe in the natural air, play in the outside space at our own pace and spend time in areas of interest. The creation of an outdoor nature inspired artist's studio that was nestled in nature, allowed for babies, toddlers and young children to really explore their world in a sensory and physical and full bodied way, and at their own pace which was informed by slow pedagogy. This brought 'sona' to all and the sensory hands-on dimension of art and nature prompted high involvement. This idea of 'sona' was further reinforced by a Childminder who noted greater engagement in music and dance and that they are now *'listening to music and dancing, found the music and songs great and they were relaxing and fun for the children'*.

The research data also indicates a *greater connection to nature* which was reinforced by a Carer who said that they are now *'going for walks together and are taking the time to notice and touch*

the bark and the leaves on trees. The same Carer noted that *‘Tom seemed to move more and wants to be outside all the time’*, therefore highlighting the importance of allowing young babies to really be outside without limitations, to sit and crawl on the grass, to engage with and observe nature, while feeling connected to their Childminder/Carer. The *outdoor learning environment acted as the third teacher and* provided a space where Tom could be outside, where he and his Carer could slow down, notice and feel the rain, the bark on a tree and simply be together. In addition, the outdoor learning environment connected the group ‘with’ nature and gave the group the space and time to really engage with sensory and artistic (often messy) materials, time to play outside, while also enhancing our well-being. Interestingly, what distinguished this early childhood art project from other art projects was *the context* and the fact that *considerable time* was spent outside in an outdoor learning environment with babies, toddlers and young children. A Childminder concurred with this and noted that the Art & Ecology project was *‘very different, with lots of different experiences’* that encouraged involvement and *‘different types of play outside’*.

During this project and by being outside the babies, toddlers and young children had the *time to observe and connect with nature* and by slowing down and going down to the soil on the ground, by looking and listening to what was above ground, we all connected with nature in a meaningful way, thereby fostering empathy and care for nature. *Nurture and care for the environment* also extended into ‘the human’ world each week. KCCC’s Childminding Development Officer and their Information Officer were on hand to prepare the food for the picnic social space which was bought freshly that morning. This attention to care was evident throughout the project and influenced the purchase of healthy food and resources as the hall space was set up with nature-inspired musical instruments which the babies, toddlers and young children could play with each week.



*An acorn and egg shaker*

As an **addendum to the study**, subsequent data gathered from KCCC noted that three new Childminders were added to KCCC's Childminding database following the Art & Ecology project and that KCCC provided support, advice and information to the newly registered Childminders so that they could continue to provide high quality Childminding services through the National Action Plan for Childminding (NAPC). The relationship between KCCC and the new Childminders was lasting, as all three Childminders attended an Art Christmas event in December 2024, that was held months after the Art & Ecology project.

This project allowed KCCC, Creative Places Athy and KCC Arts Service to establish new relationships with a wide range of organisations and groups including Dúlra Forest School, local family resource centres, Athy library, Parent and Toddler groups and Carers and Community workers in the locality. Through these new relationships KCCC was able to share information on how they support Childminders and provide NAPC updates. It is envisaged that these relationships will continue to positively impact the work of KCCC, Creative Places Athy and KCC Arts Service in a community where information and support in relation to Childminding services is beneficial to the whole community.

Projects of this scale although small can have a real and lasting impact which is evident from this research in terms of greater access and engagement with the arts and nature, enhanced relationships between Childminders/Carers and babies, toddlers and young children, improved relationships across organisations and within the community sector, increased well-being and 'sona' for all by being able to connect with and be in a nature inspired artist studio space with access to sensory and hands on materials, as well as connecting with nature and understanding that 'we are nature'.

For a small project that went low and slow and connected with nature both below, on and above ground it had significant and big outcomes, which we hope will grow and develop as the seasons change in Kildare.



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