

Playing on the Edge!

Funded by the Froebel Trust

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Play Preferences and Provision in Dublin City Urban Neighbourhoods:
Perspectives from Children, Parents/Caregivers.

Facilitated by The Froebel Department of Primary & Early Childhood Education,
Maynooth University (MU) and Dublin City University (DCU) in partnership
with Our Nursery, Ballymun.



Project Report for
Our Nursery, Ballymun



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The objective in this phase was to support and enable children and families to create a vision for play spaces and play opportunities they would like in their communities.

The challenge for the researchers was to create the context and conditions that would encourage children to express their play preferences and that could be interpreted authentically.

Acknowledgments



The researchers from Maynooth University (MU) and Dublin City University (DCU) would like to convey our sincerest thanks to the staff in Our Nursery, Ballymun for engaging with this project so wholeheartedly. We acknowledge and appreciate the time that was freely given by everyone in Our Nursery, which enabled the forging of relationships and trust between the researchers, the educators, and the parents/caregivers. It has been a joy to work with such a professional team in Our Nursery, with and from whom we have learned so much.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the children and parents/caregivers from Our Nursery, Ballymun for the authentic sharing of their experiences and perspectives on play and for consenting to the publishing of photos within this report.

This project and engagement with everyone in Our Nursery, Ballymun, would not have been possible without the support of The Froebel Trust, who funded this work and continue to be champions for play.

We hope that this report will be a resource to Our Nursery, Ballymun in their advocacy for children and families living in the community. To this end, the report is presented in a style that we hope will be more accessible than some traditional research reports. In this way, the findings of the report may be easier to share and draw upon as needed.

The MU & DCU research team

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In January 2019, researchers from Maynooth University (MU) and Dublin City University (DCU) recognised that the lack of play opportunities in urban areas was a troubling issue for young children and their parents/caregivers.

The research team could see the exciting potential that Froebelian principles held as a vehicle to advocate for better play provision, to support children, parents/caregivers and educators in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings and to simultaneously contribute to government policy. The Froebel Research Trust issued a call for research projects which examined the relevance of Froebelian principles in children’s lives today. Following the submission of a research proposal, The Froebel Trust supported the application and provided the necessary funding to facilitate this project.

The research was undertaken in partnership with two settings, Hill Street Family Resource Centre (FRC) and Our Nursery, Ballymun between 2021 and 2023. This report pertains especially to Our Nursery, Ballymun as the MU team engaged consistently with the participants in this context. The original timeline spanned 2019-2022. However, this timeline was adapted due to the Covid-19 pandemic which restricted possibilities for research engagement. The revised timeline is outlined below:

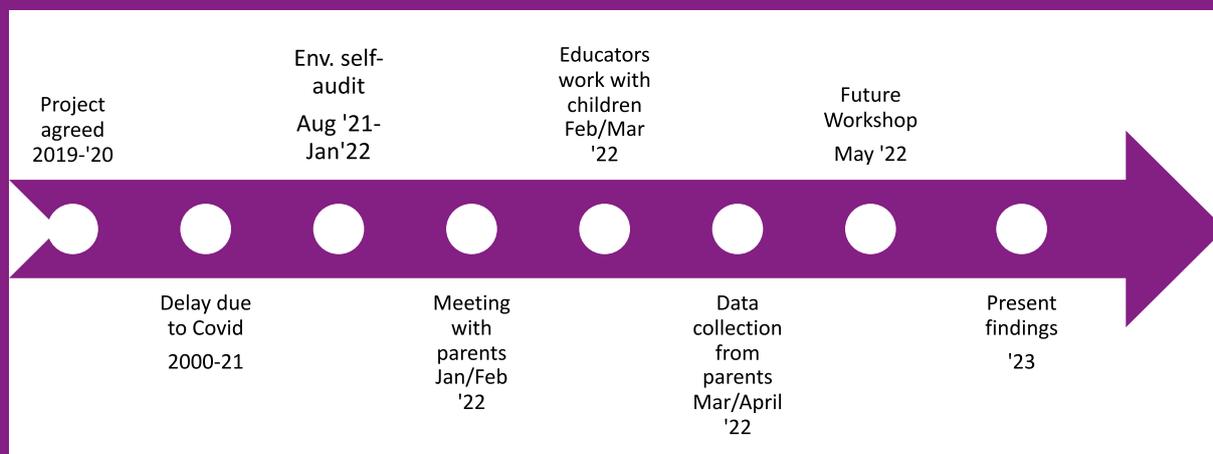


Diagram 1: Project Timeline

Findings from the project, as outlined in this report, emerged from the combined work of educators, children and parents/caregivers from Our Nursery, Ballymun in partnership with researchers from Maynooth University and Dublin City University.

Profile of our Nursery, Ballymun

Ballymun is a designated 'very disadvantaged area' in North Dublin City (Pobal, 2022) which "has been the focus of a significant development and regeneration process since 1997 when it was decided to demolish the local authority flat blocks and to carry out an extensive regeneration process addressing the physical, social and economic needs of the area" (Dublin City Council, 2022:420).

The 2016-2022 Dublin City Development Plan designated Ballymun a Strategic Development and Regeneration Area (SDRA). The Ballymun Local Area Development Plan 2017 (DCC, 2017), which has been extended to 2027, has two key objectives (see below) that support the provision of suitable outdoor spaces for young children and their parents/caregivers. The first related objective (KP8) pertains to Sports, Recreation & Open Space and aims to "consolidate existing sports and recreation facilities and open space areas to maximise their use by the whole community' (DCC, 2017:8). The second relevant objective (KP9) refers to Green Infrastructure & Biodiversity and aspires to "provide and maintain landscaped parks, greens and tree lined streets respecting the established public realm principles' (DCC, 2017:8).

Our Nursery was invited to participate in this research project as it is situated in the heart of Ballymun. It is a purpose-built early years facility that caters for children from four months to school age living in the area. This early years setting has achieved the highest rating (i.e. Level-4) in all 16 Siolta Quality Standards (CECDE, 2002). All staff are HighScope trained and the HighScope curriculum is implemented in the setting (Weikart, 1988). Our Nursery has won numerous awards including the "Healthy Ireland Preschool" award and the "Investing in Childcare" award. The research team recognises Our Nursery as a high-quality setting and had collaborated previously with the staff in the setting. The cohort of children engaged in this project were aged 2.7 years to 5 years. Below is a photo of the Our Nursery building.



Image 1: Our Nursery Building, Ballymun

Project Objective

This project had a dual focus. Whilst fundamentally it was about exploring play preferences and provision in urban communities, it was also concerned with voice, participation and power in these communities. Since the voices of young children on matters that affect or interest them are often overlooked in local and national policy, along with the perspectives of their parents/caregivers, this project positioned children as citizens and rights-holders (UNCRC, 1989). It adopted the belief that children's opinions should be heard and acted upon and was concerned with finding a way of sharing the lived experiences and perspectives of these children, their families and educators with policymakers and government agencies. Therefore, a key objective was to identify and implement a model of participation that supported empowerment.



Why the Issue of Play?

Play has long been recognised as a complex activity which is intrinsic to human development (Bandura, 1986; Izumi-Taylor, 2010). From Froebel (1826) and Tagore (1929) to Gupta (2010), the important role of play in learning and development has been recognised across cultures. In acclaiming play as the highest phase of child development, Froebel (1826) identified the value and power of play in early childhood education and beyond.

Young children are intrinsically motivated to play and will instinctively seek out places and resources to engage in all forms of play (Bruce, 2012; Bruce et al., 2017; Tovey, 2017). It appears that play is universal in nature and is critically important for children's wellbeing and development, bringing social, emotional and health benefits to the early years and across the life span (NCCA, 2009).





Adventurous and challenging play can be more easily facilitated in outdoor settings. The natural environment presents open-ended play prospects for both risk-taking and problem-solving, which in turn develops imagination and creativity (Tovey, 2012, 2017; Willoughby, 2013; Ó Néill, 2020). The value of play is well recognised internationally and yet children's access to outdoor play space is diminishing (Kalpogianni, 2019). This is not a story particular to Ireland or Dublin City but is a global phenomenon. The need for local, adequately-resourced play spaces that work for children and families, is an important issue for all. To this end, since children and parents/caregivers have unique, lived experiences of play provision in their communities, their perspectives on what is required are most valuable.

Changes in the demographic composition of families living in Dublin City over two decades presents challenges for children's play. Major issues include the lack of well-designed indoor spaces for families living in apartments as well as the diminishing availability of outdoor play spaces (The Housing Agency, 2019).

The importance of play in the city was highlighted in a media report in 2022 identifying the need to create more safe streets for children, enabling them to engage in spontaneous play (Burns & Copland, 2022). The Irish Government in Better Outcomes-Brighter Futures (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2014) also acknowledges the need for child-friendly, outdoor green spaces for play. More recently, First Five (Government of Ireland, 2019) advocates for the development of public play spaces specifically designed for babies and young children in order to provide opportunities for engagement and connection. Play is not only vital for children's well-being, it also supports community cohesion, builds a sense of belonging, combats loneliness and improves the overall standard of living in an area. In fact, Macintyre et al. (2002) propose five features that affect the health of a neighbourhood, one of which is play environments (cited in Errigo, 2019).



Play is an issue of interest to children, families, educators, policymakers and politicians. However, ensuring adequate play spaces and affording appropriate play opportunities requires the perspectives and insights of those who are primarily affected by its current provision. Children and families, who use and depend on local play areas, have tacit knowledge that needs to be shared with those who produce the policies and design the play spaces, in order to better inform their design and access.

Chapter 2

Methodology

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The participation of children and families was core to the success of this project and informed the research design. The methodology chosen is consistent with the Froebelian emphasis on the uniqueness of each child and their central positioning within the research.

The Maynooth University/Dublin City University team adopted a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach that focused on listening to those who had direct experience of play in the community. A PAR approach ensures that research is done “for and with people who define issues of pressing concern” (Egmoose et al., 2020, p241). The project sought to develop a vision for play in Dublin City, designed by children, their parents/caregivers and educators. To this end, the Future Workshop approach, a research method suited for use with PAR, provided guidance on how to elicit and listen to the perspectives of the research participants at each stage of the project (Jungk and Müllert, 1987).

Future Workshop Approach

Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert developed the Future Workshop methodology to provide a research framework to support the empowerment of participants and to enable them to create their own futures (Ollenburg, 2019; Jungk and Müllert, 1987). Effective Future Workshop approaches take time, as they require the building of relationships between researchers and participants. Participants need to commit to the research, be willing to share their perspectives and visions to inform the data collection. A level of trust between participants and researchers is critical to support authentic engagement in the Future Workshop (Jungk & Müllert, 1987).



The Future Workshop consisted of four phases:

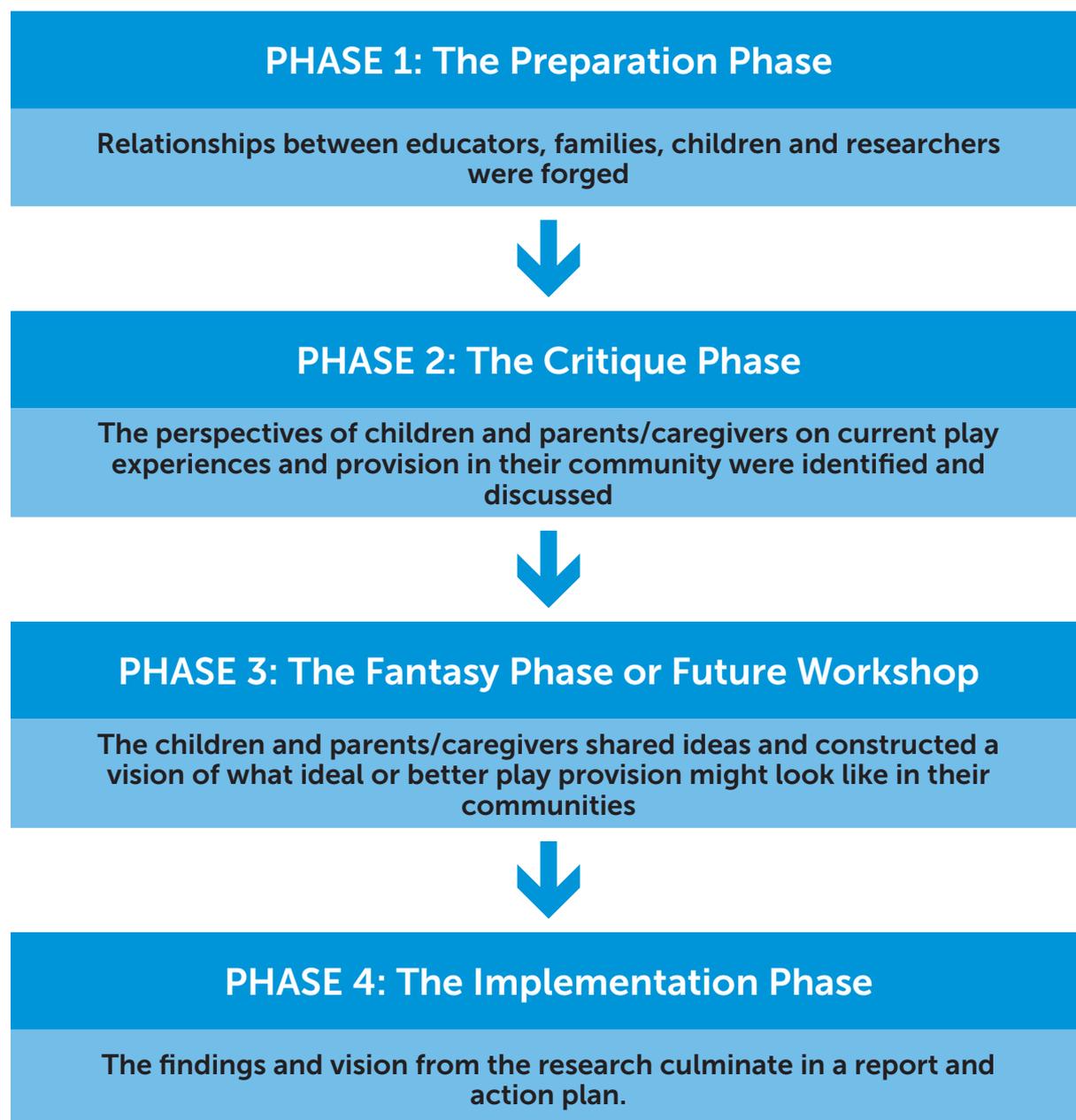


Diagram 2: Four Phases of a Future Workshop

Summary of the project

Phase 1: Forging Relationships Between Educators, Parents/Caregivers, Children and Researchers

Researchers met initially with the manager of Our Nursery, Ballymun, and subsequently with the educators working directly with the children. Time was spent with the educators, discussing play within the setting, which provided an opportunity to discuss shared values and understandings of play to emerge. To begin the research process, educators were asked to complete a self-evaluation tool from the Aistear/Síolta practice toolkit. This provided a baseline on play practices within the setting (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, (NCCA, 2011).

With the support of the manager and educators, the researchers met with the parents/caregivers on two occasions. Over tea and biscuits, an overview of the project was provided to inform them of what was involved and to gain consent for participation and engagement in the project. The research team asked the parents/caregivers to discuss play preferences at home with their children, to explore where children liked to play in their neighbourhood and to consider the barriers that exist. Art packs were provided to the families to help children express play preferences in a variety of ways. Parents/caregivers were invited to capture children's words as they described their play preferences at home. Art materials were also provided to the setting to enable educators to capture children's ideas in the settings.



Phase 2: Gathering Perspectives on Current provision and Children's Play Preferences

In this phase of the project, researchers gathered the perspectives of children and parents/caregivers on their assessment of play provision in their communities. Researchers visited the setting on two occasions to observe the children as they engaged in art activities and discussed play and play spaces with the educators. Following this, a small focus group was held with parents/caregivers to explore more deeply their perspectives and experiences on play in the community and to gain insights to the barriers encountered in finding safe, appropriate, and stimulating places for their children to play.

A variety of data sources and approaches, including observations, artwork, mark making and focus groups were used to ensure the voices of children and their parents/caretakers were heard.

Educators and parents/caregivers authentically captured children's words and ideas over a number of weeks by listening to their views, expressed through discussion and mark making using paint, crayons, pencils and play dough. Parents/caregivers gathered and shared stories, photographs, and art (mark making) with researchers to highlight play preferences i.e. where, how and with whom children enjoyed playing.

The data from multiple sources (i.e. the self-evaluation tool from Our Nursery; perspectives of children gathered by the researchers, educators, and parents/caregivers through discussion; photographs, and art (mark making); and the insights from parents/caregivers was analysed thematically to inform Phase 3 of the research project.

Phase 3: Creating a Vision for Children's Play – A Future Workshop

Using all of the data gathered in the previous phases, the researchers designed a Future Workshop, which took the form of a play event. The workshop or play event took place outdoors in an expansive green space on the university campus. Play stations were set up with open-ended materials, construction equipment and animals (petting farm), all of which the children had identified as being important to their play.



The objective in this phase was to support and enable children and families to create a vision for play spaces and play opportunities they would like in their communities.

The challenge for the researchers was to create the context and conditions that would encourage children to express their play preferences and that could be interpreted authentically.

Image 2: Invitation to the Future Workshop

Children, parents/caregivers and educators were invited to spend time engaging with the space and the materials (see Image 2 above). As the children played, researchers noted their preferences through photographs, observations and informal conversations with the children and their parents/caregivers.

Following the morning of play, everyone came together indoors to share food and begin the process of imagining or designing their ideal play space. The Play Officer from Dublin City Council and a Local Councillor joined the gathering, engaging in informal conversation around play experiences with the children and their parents/caregivers. Views and visions were collated, analysed and themed. It is these perspectives that inform this report.

Phase 4: Presenting Findings

Perspectives from each phase of the research project informed the creation of a utopian future play space as imagined by the children and families. This aligns with the final stage of a Future Workshop which involves reviewing the vision created by the research participants and to consider the practical steps which can be taken to realise the plan, in this case, for a utopian play space in urban Dublin (Jungk & Müllert, 1987).



Chapter 3

Findings

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This section of the report echoes the opinions of children and their parents/caregivers on play provision in their communities. Feedback highlighted current provision for play preferences and aspirations for play in their communities, as well as the barriers to play encountered as they engage locally in play. Finally, the report reflects a vision of play spaces proposed and designed by the children and their parents/caregivers.



Three main themes are presented with corresponding sub-themes as follows:

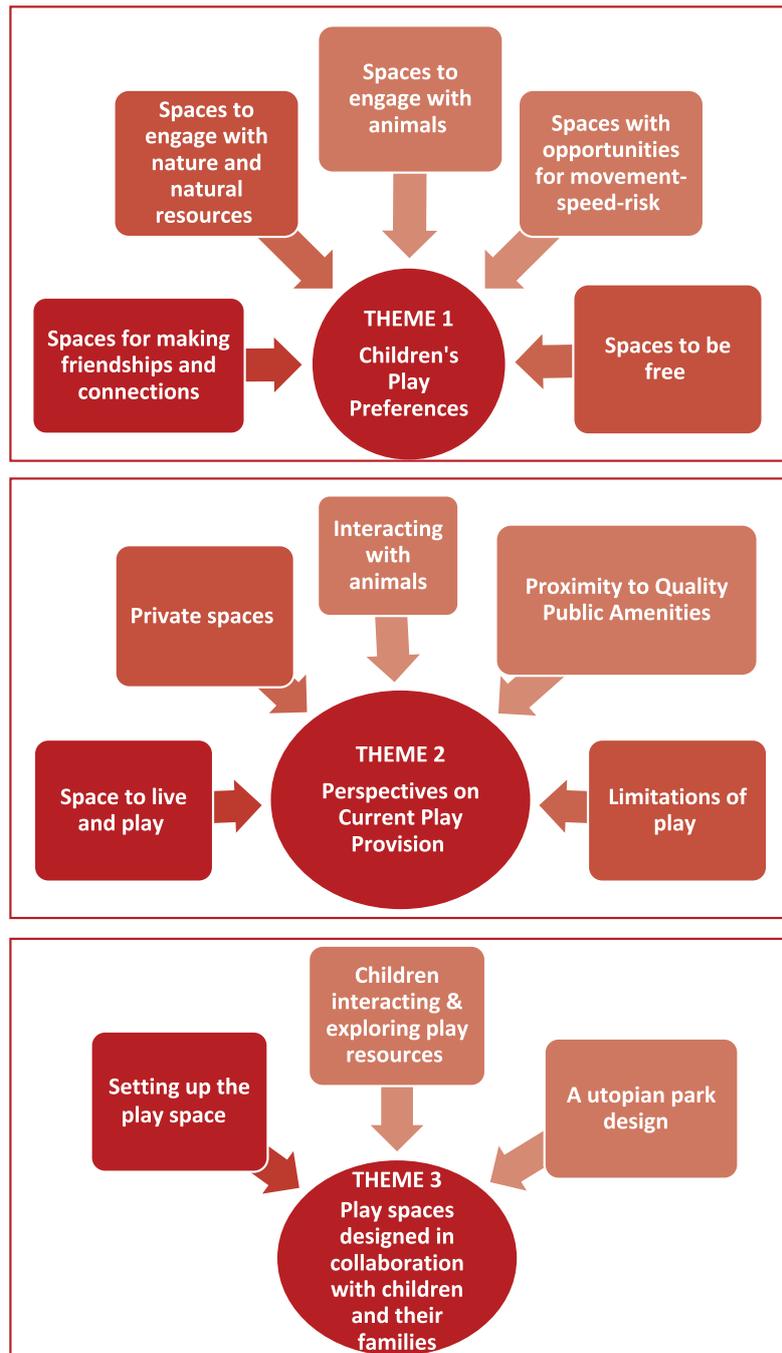
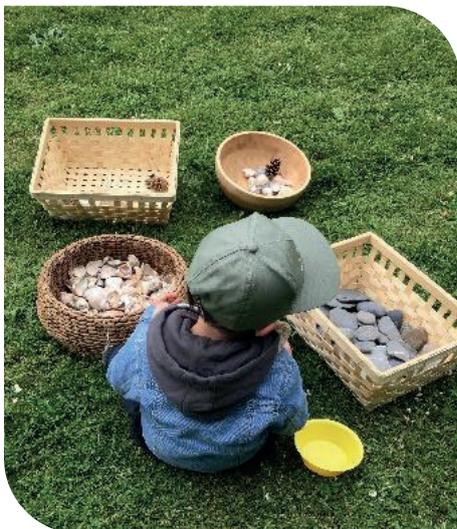


Diagram 3: Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes

THEME 1: Children's Play Preferences

The children who engaged with this project were confident in sharing their play preferences with the educators and the research team. The need for access to outdoor play spaces within close proximity to their communities was strongly expressed. Such spaces would mean that they could meet the same children on a regular basis, enabling them to make friends and together, pursue their interests through play.

The children reflected a strong desire to connect with nature and to play with natural materials such as sand, water, stones, sticks and leaves. Additionally, they sought spaces that accommodated more freedom to experience speed and risk on bicycles and scooters, as well as on fixed equipment such as swings. Interestingly, whilst the children enjoyed the freedom of having open spaces to run and chase, they also valued private spaces in which to play. Many expressed a desire to engage playfully with animals and pets. However, the constraints of apartment living often denied children such opportunities.



The following section highlights the play preferences expressed in drawings and words. The sub-themes which emerged are depicted in Diagram 4 below. Children’s voices are captured in **green font** and their parents/caregivers in **purple**.

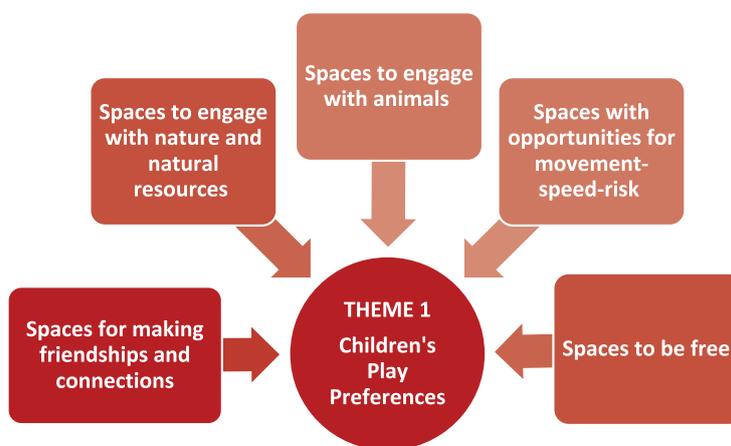


Diagram 4: Theme 1: Children’s Play Preferences

Sub Theme 1: Spaces for making friendships and connections

Comments from the children, parents/caregivers highlighted the importance of providing spaces where friendships and connections can be nurtured within a community. In particular, the potential of the outdoors (e.g. parks and playgrounds) was emphasised in enabling connections with other children and creating opportunities for interacting socially through play. Below are a sample of comments from individual children:

I like making new friends in the playground.

She doesn't like to play alone, and her big sister is not always there to play with. It would be great if there were places where the children could play pretend games with other children.

I think what is needed, in addition to playgrounds, are small places to play, maybe near the apartment. This would allow the children to get to know other children in the same area.

He loves to meet other kids in the park - he loves playing with other kids and share small cars and chacks.

When we are in the park, he encourages other children in the playground to chase him, but he will not share the ball with them. It's a good place for him to meet others.

Sub Theme 2: Spaces to engage with nature and natural resources

Children and parents/caregivers articulated a desire for play spaces that facilitated engagement with nature and natural resources. Sticks, stones, mud, flowers and water were mentioned but sand stood out as the favourite play resource for children. Below are a sample of quotes from children and their parents/caregivers:

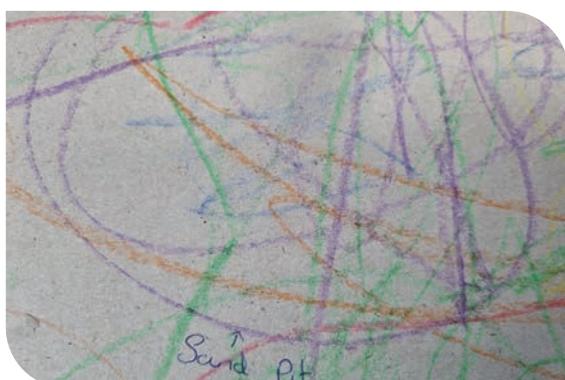


He likes to play with stones and muck. Sometimes I bring some home so he can play with them on the balcony.

My favourite place to play is the beach.



My children love playing in the sand. Especially when it is wet, and they can make castles. They make them with anything, buckets, pots, anything. They just like making things with it.





She loves playing in the park.
She likes trees and flowers.
She likes to smell the flowers.

My sister loves to play with
the sand, the slide and the
swings and I like smelling the
flowers. I like the trees. I like
playing with the little girls in
the park.

They love finding and
playing with sticks
and to run around. My
children are happy when
they are outside playing
with whatever is around,
even mud.



He loves to find sticks
and play with them. It's
the best part of the day
when he finds a stick!

Sub Theme 3: Spaces to engage with animals

Living in apartments meant that many children were denied the opportunity of having family pets. This was deemed important to the children in the study, who wanted to engage with animals and featured frequently in many of the comments made by parents/caregivers. Playing with dogs, caring for the ducks, and chasing pigeons were some of the comments which emerged from participants.

He really likes to look at the ducks and he really loves dogs and playing with dogs. Sometimes I have to bring him to Drumcondra Park so he can play with the dogs that are being walked early in the morning before he comes to pre-school.

We are not allowed to keep pets in the apartment. All that is possible are stuffed animals at home.



He adores animals and he loves to play with the dogs in the park and sometimes chase them if he can.



My child loves to feed the ducks. She told me that we should not eat all the bread, that some of it has to be saved for the ducks.

She loves being close to nature and loves chasing the pigeons and watching the ducks.

Sub Theme 4: Spaces for movement, speed and risk

The stories from parents/caregivers and children reflect the importance of large outdoor spaces which facilitate greater variety of movement. Such outdoor play can support risk-taking and self-regulation – freedom, anticipation, joy and a sense of agency (NCCA, 2011). The comments below from children reflect preferences for such play experiences:

We can go high and jump off the swings. I like the swings because they go really fast.

I like to play bicycles so I can exercise my legs.

And the parents/caregivers told us:

He likes to climb and swing. He loves the bikes and playing with his friends.

My girl loves to play with the large blocks and dress up. In the playground she loves to climb and play on the swings and slide.

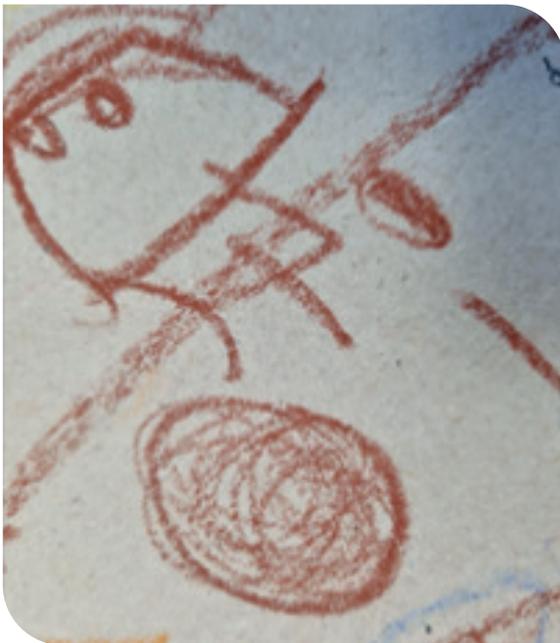
She loves to play in the park. She loves the slide and swings.



My son will only spend five minutes in a playground and does not go near the equipment that is there. He prefers the freedom of running and playing with his ball. He loves nature, but he also enjoys having 'nets' when playing football. He just wants to run; he needs lots of space outdoors.

Sub Theme 5: Spaces to be free

When discussing play, parents/caregivers often reflected on their own experiences of play and the absence of any limitations placed on them. They recalled the sense of community spirit that fostered shared responsibility and yearned for some of this for their own children. One mother who lived with her family in an apartment missed having ready access to outdoor communal space. The limitations caused by the nature of their accommodation was clearly an impediment to play, hence the keen desire expressed for spaces that provided greater freedom.



I live in the flats, and I like playing football, but I can't!

Theme 2: Perspectives on current play provision

This theme elucidates the perspectives parents/caregivers and children have on play provision in urban Dublin. Participants expressed the need for neighbourhood spaces that are organised, safe, and suitable for play. They identified the barriers they encountered in current public provision and described 'good' places they have sought out in other areas. The sub-themes which emerged are depicted in Diagram 5 below. Children's voices are captured in **green font** and their parents/caregivers in **purple**.

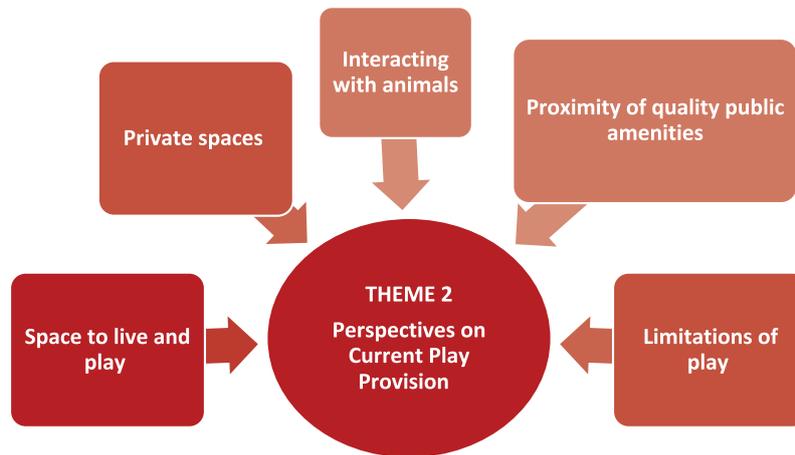
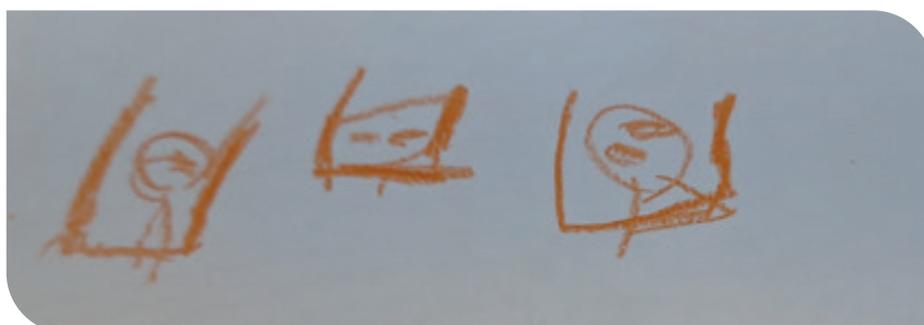


Diagram 5: Theme 2: Perspectives on current play provision

Sub-Theme 1: Space to live and play

The participants highlighted the challenges associated with playing in the places where they lived. In many cases, children referred to play on balconies where there was insufficient space. Additionally, some places were simply deemed unsafe for children to play. This points to the need for accommodation suited to families with children, which balance the requirements of living with the desire to play. While drawing, individual children expressed their frustrations saying:

I play on the balcony but I need more room on my balcony so I can play with my cousin.



I have a flying pixie fairy too, but I don't play with it on the balcony because it might fly away. I can only play with it in my Nanny's garden.



I like playing with my car. This is a road with a car and two roundabouts and two dead-ends. Mammy won't allow me play outside.

Parents/caregivers identified specific obstacles to play for their children in their living situations and their local area. Outdoor play was definitively prohibited by the management of apartment blocks and certain forms of indoor play was deemed too "messy".

We live in an apartment complex (four buildings with an inner open space). The signs say 'no balls', 'no bikes', 'no on the grass' - why can the children not play outside their homes and meet other children in the neighbourhood?

My little one has a chalk board at home and loves to draw on it. Both children love to draw on paths with chalk, but we can't do that outside our apartment.

Messy play in an apartment is not possible and certainly, no water play.

Sub-Theme 2: Private spaces

Interestingly, parents/caregivers recognised the need for children to have some privacy in play. This aligns with Burke's (2005:44) assertion that "indoor and outdoor play in closed, intimate or private spaces is an important strand of children's preferred play experience". Additionally, she indicates that "intimate, explorative and dramatic play such as dressing up could take place in spaces that felt safe and private where children were known and loved" (Burke, 2005:44). However, the participants in this study did not feel the presence of such spaces:

Here in Dublin, there are no outside private play spaces, where children can be supervised but where they can have a sense of privacy.



In the apartment, the children love playing dens indoors - they put up sheets and blankets across the back of chairs, but it is not as good as playing outside.

Sub-Theme 3: Interacting with animals

Participants bemoaned the lack of opportunities to engage with animals. Once again, due to urban living, the nature of apartment dwelling often precluded them from having domestic pets. In observing the children interact with animals, some of the parents remarked on how gentle and quiet their children were when they were petting and touching the animals.



We are not allowed to keep pets in the apartment.

All that is possible are stuffed animals at home.

Sub-Theme 4: Proximity to quality park amenities

Public amenities such as parks, the zoo and museums are well known to families. In the absence of play spaces outside their apartments, the parents/caregivers were resourceful and utilised what amenities were available, often travelling distances to find what is important for their children. Parents/caregivers visited a wide number of parks with their children in order to access quality play environments. They were very clear on the parks they preferred and the reasons why.

We get the bus or sometimes we drive to Poppintree Park. Coultury Park is nearer, but it's not as good.

We will always travel at the weekends to bring our daughter to good play areas. She also gets to meet other children.

Sub-Theme 5: Limitations of play spaces

Parents/caregivers value the public parks as these are the main and sometimes only designated spaces where their children can play, but there are limitations. One parent highlights the limitations placed on her and her children when engaging in risky play and using natural resources outside the boundaries of the playground area.

Outdoors my boys favourite play is climbing trees. People sometimes come up to me and say that it is dangerous, and they should come down. They can climb quite high. Other people seem nervous to look at them, but I know that my boys are capable climbers. I sometimes feel annoyed and maybe embarrassed when people say this to me and so I get the boys down. I have been told 'they are not allowed to climb trees, there is a playground over there for them to use'. They just love climbing trees. I have always encouraged that because I loved it myself as a child.

Some parents went on to highlight other resources they felt were important and necessary in parks to support children to engage in play:

Why can't we have little gyms and small basketball hoops and football nets?

There should be little private houses or dens in the park, in which the children can play and have a sense of privacy.

We need places that children can explore, places with trees and long grass.

Not many areas that have access for children to play with water - water appears to be off limits, but they love it.

There is not enough for the small child. All the park equipment is for older ones. What about small nets for the younger group? My younger son who is 2 ½ years loves being outside and likes to stop and look at things and touch things. He loves water and will play with it anywhere, if there is a puddle he will sit in it.

Preparing to spend a day with children in the park requires planning and the parents/caregivers included some practical recommendations for consideration.

There are many playgrounds in Dublin and that is good, but the playgrounds themselves are bad. There are no bathrooms. There should be bathrooms (clean and free) in every park.

A little place in the park....to get coffee and juice would be good.

With the weather in Ireland, every park should have outdoor-protected (courtyard like) spaces.

Water play, water walls; somewhere they can build dams.

A canopy to pull over the playground, so that children can play out in all weathers.

THEME 3: Play spaces designed in collaboration with children and their families

In this final phase of the data collection, the researchers set up a play space on the grounds of St Patrick's Campus in Dublin City University informed by the play preferences noted by children and their parents/caregivers. The children, along with their families and educators were invited to come to the campus, to explore the play space and engage with the materials. The day ended with a sharing of food and discussion to inform the design of future play spaces. The sub-themes which emerged are depicted in Diagram 6 below. Children's voices are captured in **green font** and their parents/caregivers in **purple**.

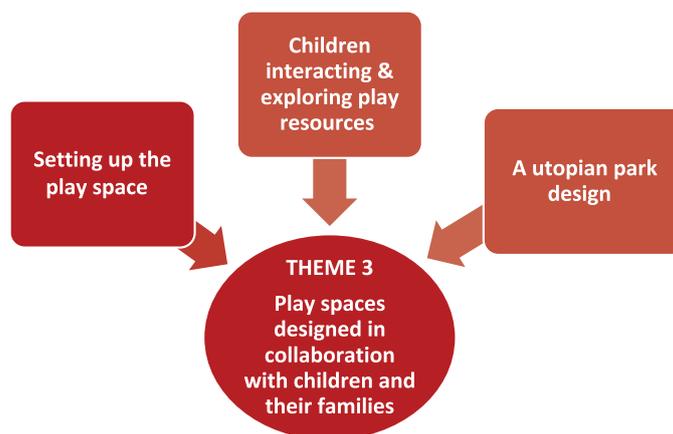


Diagram 6: Play spaces designed in collaboration with children and families

Sub Theme 1: Setting up the play space

The researchers drew on the identified play preferences of children and parents/caregivers when preparing the outdoor play space. A mixture of natural, found, and open-ended materials were included along with animals from a mobile petting farm (see below).



Sub Theme 2: Children interacting with and exploring play resources

During the morning, children moved freely between the play stations. Many children remained immersed in their preferred play areas, constructing towers, pouring water, mixing sand, and stirring stones. Parents/caregivers and educators remained on the edges of play, watching the children, responding where necessary and engaging with the researchers. The team of researchers from DCU and MU observed the children, noting their interests through their words, body language and levels of engagement with the materials and animals.



The verdict as summarised by one young boy at the end of the morning was that it was *'The best day ever'*

Another said:

I'm a great builder. That's the hardest work I ever did!

Sub Theme 3: A utopian park design

The children and families engaging with the research have lived experiences of parks and play spaces accessible to them. They shared visions of their designs for utopian play spaces in their areas. For parents/caregivers, the location of play spaces within close proximity to the apartments where they live, was critical. There was a distinct preference for open, large spaces for children to be free, yet there was also a call for nearby "pocket" play spaces, where children could play safely and where parents/caregivers could connect with neighbours.

Nature and natural materials were central to the design of the park or open play space. In addition, participants requested access to sand, water, grass, trees and plants, with the preference that the various elements are laid out as they would be in nature. Children demonstrated a strong affinity with nature, and a common planting area which would allow them to grow food and in time, harvest and take home produce for cooking and consumption.

In summary, moveable loose parts, such as tyres, planks, stones, tubes, cardboard, logs, and blocks are required in the play space to stimulate interests, encourage cooperation and allow for creativity and inquiry. Children's desire for access to animals and pets was a recurring theme, which was evident in the time they spent at the petting farm, fascinated by looking at, and where possible, touching the animals. The provision of acoustic materials to create music and sound in open spaces was identified as important to the children. While children were clear on their desire for natural and open-ended materials, they also highlighted structured features which included slides, swings, ziplines, climbing frames and dens as being required in their utopian play spaces. The accessibility of inclusive sports areas for all ages and abilities featured in children's drawings and parents'/caregivers' feedback. Practical requirements which enable play include, safety and cleanliness, universal access for all children, access to shelter for all, access to toilets and nappy changing, benches and seats with access to refreshments.

CHAPTER 4

Recommendations

Following the time spent exploring and engaging with the resources provided, everyone moved inside to share some food and come together. Drawing materials and photos were laid out on tables and on the floor for easy access. Parents/caregivers, educators and researchers talked with the children, inviting them to design a play space, to indicate what they would like to play with all the time.

The following are some samples depicted in children's art/mark-making of the designs created:



'A pond where you can swim and ducks in the pond'



'Blocks'



'Monkey bars'



'Sand pit'



'Planks and tyres'



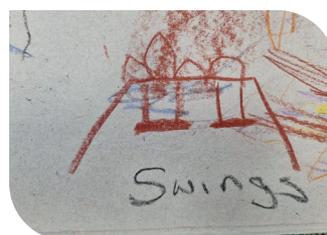
'Flowers'



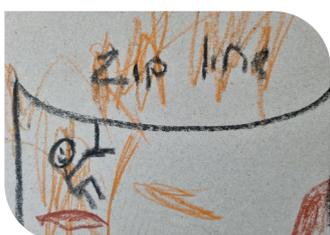
'Strawberries, apples, blueberries'



'Football'



'Swings'



'Zip line'



'Animals'

The aim of using a Future Workshop model is twofold. Firstly, that local residents, in this case children and parents/caregivers, come together and jointly design a utopian play space that meets their needs. Secondly, they consider the long and short-term steps that can be taken to realise their vision. What has been achieved through this study is that the quiet and unheard perspectives of parents/caregivers and children in an urban area of Dublin City have emerged strongly, and now need to be heard. When implemented, the practical recommendations identified in this study will transform the daily lives and experiences of children and families who use play spaces in the north inner city. Below are the recommendations arising from the study.

Establish Park Ranger roles

Parents/caregivers in this study highlighted the contrasting quality and provision of parks in the city and outer suburbs. While diversity of provision is good, a stark difference is noted between the descriptions of parks in the centre of the city compared to those located in the suburbs. A basic requirement for families is for parks to be safe and clean. More resources and manpower are required to achieve a basic level of safety and cleanliness in city centre park spaces. This could be achieved through the establishment of Park Ranger roles, potentially through Employment Activation schemes. In addition, a phone helpline to report dangerous activities or issues relating to the maintenance of the park could be made available for families. Signs with the contact number could be installed in all parks so that 'it shouldn't feel dangerous for me and my boys'. This would provide a safety net for parents/caregivers.

Provide hygiene facilities in public parks

Public parks serve a public good and are provided to encourage all the community to engage in outdoor activities, providing much needed free recreational space. The provision of toilets, nappy changing areas and hand washing facilities along with access to refreshments and shelter are very basic, yet extremely important features, which would allow parents and children to spend extended periods of time in parks. This is especially relevant in situations where those living in apartments have no outdoor communal spaces.

Re-wild traditional playgrounds

Removing rubber matting and steel structures and returning traditional playgrounds to a natural state would not only support the main features requested by children and families but would enhance the city centre supporting the achievement of Global Sustainable Goal 11, sustainable cities and communities (UN, 2015). The Liberties Greening Strategy (Dublin City Council, 2015) resulted in the opening of Bridgefoot Street Park with an emphasis on nature. Recommendations from Child Poverty Monitor signposts the need to emulate this model and set aside funding for the City Council to support similar development (CRA, 2022).

Re-claim and develop “pocket” play spaces

While the preference of parents/caregivers and children emerging from this study is for large outdoor natural spaces, the reality is that in Dublin City space is limited. Despite the pressure of available space in the city, new building continues. However, seven out of 10 new housing units under construction in Dublin are now apartments (Weston, 2022).

Under state planning guidelines from 2001, creche/play facilities must be included in all new residential building projects of 75 units. However, a recent study undertaken by the Business Post (Woods, 2022) highlighted that a third of all large-scale apartment projects submitted to An Bord Pleanála in 2021 had no childcare facilities included in the design. Therefore, while the construction of apartments continues in the city, there appears to be little evidence of design considerations for children and families. This report is emphatic that future apartment developments in Dublin City should have planning requirements for the provision of natural green communal spaces for play and family recreation both indoor and outdoor. Signs restricting play in apartment grounds should not be permitted, and the use of apartment rooftops as communal spaces for play should be considered.

This study highlights the need for children and families to have access to natural play areas close to home. The value of small play spaces cannot be under-estimated. Pockets of derelict and under-developed spaces in the north inner-city area, in close proximity to where families live, could be re-claimed, and re-planted with designs that support play.

Provide accessible loose parts for play

The availability of loose parts extends children’s play opportunities and promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As evidenced from the Future Workshop, loose parts are inexpensive and support the up-cycling of materials. Introducing loose parts would require the provision of storage containers along with the establishment of a Play Officer or Park Ranger whose role, in addition to other duties, would be to provide access to loose parts at certain times of the day and replenish stocks as necessary.

Enable contact with animals

The benefits of child-animal connections (Melson & Fine, 2015) are well recognised and parents/caregivers in this study lamented the absence of animals in the lives of their children. Because animals (domestic and wild) featured in the children’s feedback, the research team endeavoured to meet this need as part of the Future Workshop. Providing access for children to interact with animals was a challenge for the researchers when designing the play space. However, sourcing a mobile farm offered children opportunities to see and interact with a wide variety of animals. The creation of a partnership between Dublin City Council and owners of mobile farms could create regular access to animals for children in the city areas. A rota could be developed whereby the mobile farm would visit certain parks on certain days of the week. Alternatively, Dublin City Council could secure funding to create and manage a council-owned mobile farm in the Dublin area.

It is clear that the lived experiences of children and families in this study provides a form of tacit knowledge that needs to be heard. The recommendations arising from this study have been made previously in different contexts. However, this study is significant due to the inclusion of perspectives from very young children and their parents/caregivers.

Conclusions

Working with the staff team, the children and parents/caregivers in Our Nursery, Ballymun has re-affirmed that participation and the active involvement of families is critical to the process of designing play spaces, which they are familiar with and regularly use. Children and their parents/caregivers are the experts in the matters of parks and play provision in their communities. This study highlights that in creating authentic opportunities for active participation and local decision-making in matters that directly impact them, parents/caregivers and young children in this disadvantaged community are committed to advocating for play spaces that are fit-for-purpose.

The families in this study have identified the play requirements that will improve the well-being and development of their children and of others in the wider community. However, the feedback on play provision from parents/caregivers and children also brings a wealth of unintended benefits, namely, stronger communities as a result of connections through communal play spaces; global citizenship education, as children learn to grow food, care for animals and the local environment. The recommendations provide opportunities for the creation of new posts for park rangers and play officers, which will enable the safe and confident use of parks by families and extend play possibilities for a broad age range. The reclamation of derelict natural spaces has the potential to transform play, and ultimately the quality of life for people living in the centre of the city.

Recommendations from the study support the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ensuring the voices of very young children, are heard, and listened to in the matter of play and recreational opportunities (UNCRC, 1989). Adopting the recommendations of parents/caregivers and children from Our Nursery, Ballymun will also support the achievement of the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Goal 11.7:

“By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2015:26).

Closer to home, these recommendations have the possibility to contribute to the long-term objectives stated in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy framework for Children & Young People 2014 - 2020 that aims to:

‘make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.’ (DCYA, 2014:2).

The children, parents/caregivers and educators of Our Nursery, Ballymun have taken time to share their knowledge and insight and hope this report will provide the additional impetus, motivation and rationale required to move from consultation to action and prioritise funding to commence regeneration of much needed play spaces. We hope that all those who have taken the time to read this report will join us and together move hope into reality.

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