



Childhood in the **Anthropocene**

VOL 1, No. 1. 2025, 39–44

Big Mac and Unicorns: Exploring a child rights-based transformative ESD approach for early childhood education and care with young children and ECEC practitioners

 **Muireann Ranta** South East Technological University, Ireland

Corresponding author: Muireann Ranta, muireann.ranta@setu.ie
DOI: [10.64952/cia.1.58843](https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58843) / ISSN: 1234-5678

Abstract

This short article stems from a PhD study that explored the perspectives of both young children (2-5yrs) and early childhood educators on Nature learning. Findings demonstrate that children can confidently make both their own connections to Nature and define their own participatory rights in a learning space. By using the children's connections and definitions, educators can involve children in making a child rights-based curriculum for education for sustainable development (ESD) that is meaningful to them and their local context. Findings from the educators however, demonstrate that the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector requires much more support (via training, resources, professional autonomy) to do this.

© 2024 The authors. This article is published open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons CC BY-NC license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which allows use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original work is properly cited. The material may not be used for commercial purposes. Citation: Ranta. M. (2024). Big Mac and Unicorns: Exploring a child rights-based transformative ESD approach for early childhood education and care with young children and ECEC practitioners. *Childhood in the Anthropocene*, 1(1), 39–44.
<https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58843>

Introduction

Providing children with an education that supports a respect for Nature is a legal curriculum entitlement, specified under Article 29 1 (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as follows: “The development of respect for the natural environment” (UNCRC, 1989, p. 9). During my PhD research, I worked with children and early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners to explore their perspectives and views under Article 29 1 (e) to demonstrate how they could contribute to developing a ‘bottoms-up’ transformative child rights-based education for sustainable development (ESD) approach. My findings indicated that young children define their own relationship with Nature and make their own connections with it.

Furthermore, in claiming their right to education about Nature, they also establish their own definitions of participation. However, for ECEC practitioners to fulfil their duty-bearing responsibilities under Article 29 1 (e), much more must be done regarding leadership and resources (training, time, and regular access to Nature) to promote such an approach.

Methodology

The study was divided into two iterations. The first iteration took place over a 9-month period in an early childhood setting in Southeast Ireland in 2019. Grounded in a child rights-based, participatory methodological paradigm, methods using nature-based activities were designed with the support of a Children’s Research Advisory Group (CRAG) (n = 7) (3-5yrs) (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011; 2012).

They were subsequently implemented with a second group of child participants (n = 9) (2-3yrs) for data collection (Ranta, 2023). The second iteration followed a participatory action research (PAR) approach to share the children’s contributions with ECEC practitioners. In keeping with the concept of a ‘bottoms up’ educational approach (Ferreria et al., 2015), this research space was conceptualised as a ‘community of practice’ (CoP) to work directly with practitioners to gain their professional insights (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Findings from the children

The findings suggested that given the right resources (access to Nature, time, flexibility, and a familiar listening adult), children define their relationship with Nature and connect with it. This ranges from how they engage with natural artefacts to choosing their play to share knowledge and ideas.

The findings also showed that taking the time to listen to these Nature connections then using them to influence learning in the research space meant that the child participants themselves could contribute competently to developing an ESD approach that had meaning for them. For example, a keen interest in

animals could be identified among the child participants, which promoted learning activities such as insect hunts and making bird feeders. Figure 1 provides examples of some of the children’s knowledge about insects.

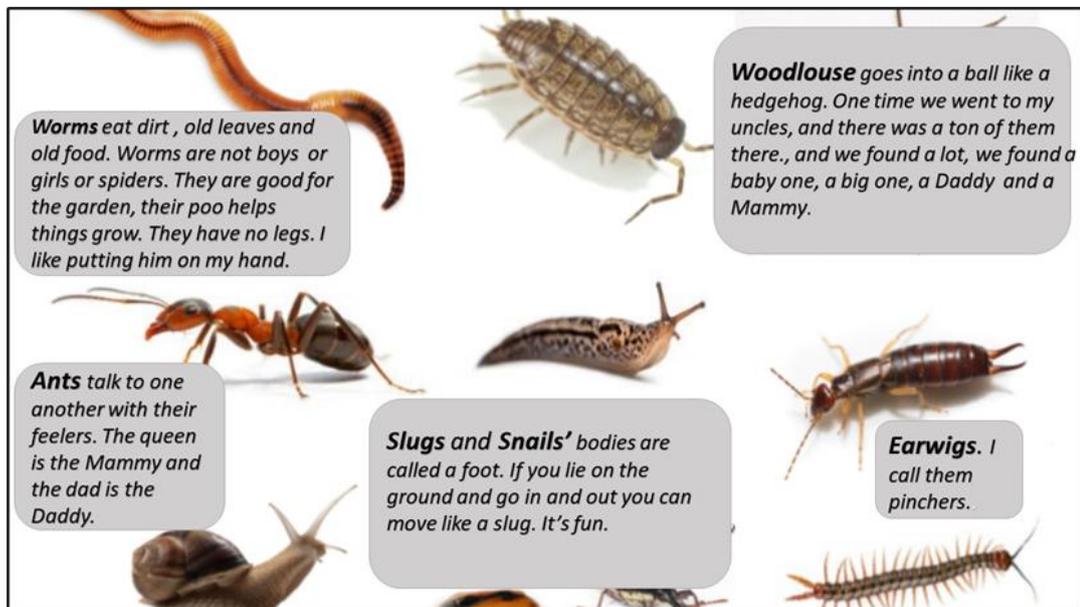
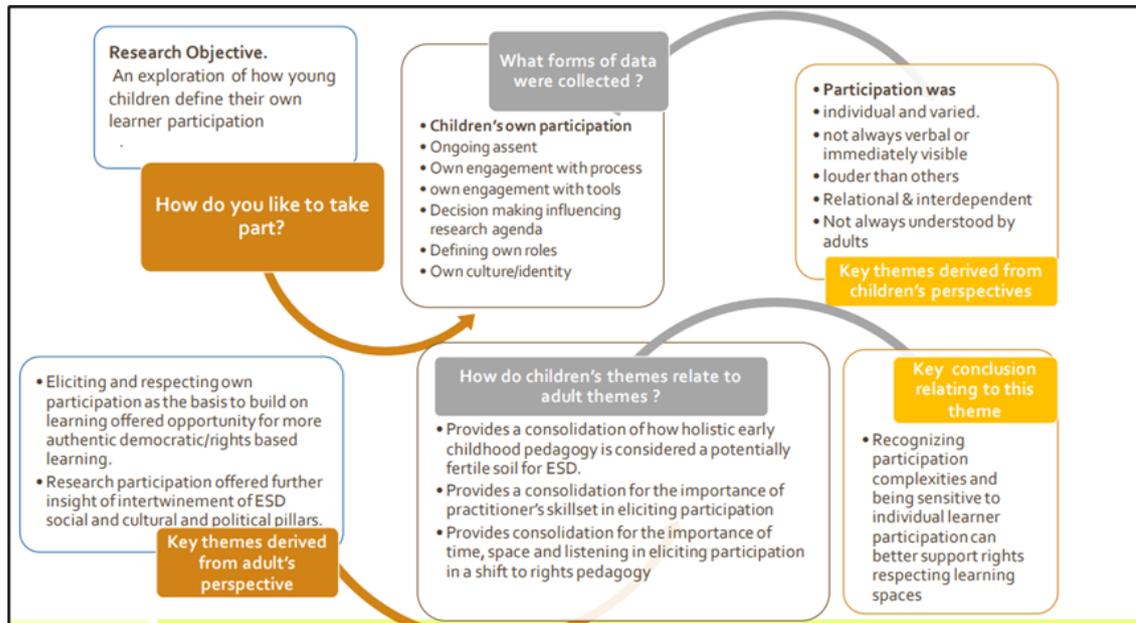


Figure 1: Extracts from the child participants’ self-published text, *The Children’s Nature Book* sharing their perspectives on insects.

Furthermore, as the children made these connections, they helped shape a series of definitions of participation that supported my responsibility of ensuring that their participatory rights were authentically enjoyed. In this study, I identified various modes of child participation, e.g., verbal, or non-verbal participation, free-flowing participation, relational participation, engagement with research tools and cultural participation.

By taking these definitions of participation, alongside the child participants’ own Nature connections, I could establish how young children can be supported as partners with rights in creating authentic ESD curricula. An overview is offered in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of findings for developing a child rights-based research methodology.



However, establishing that level of participation required much time, which, when presented to the ECEC practitioners in iteration two, was problematic.

Findings from the ECEC practitioners

Findings indicated several areas that could be considered as possibilities or barriers for a child rights ESD approach. First was an area I have called existing knowledge that analysed practitioners' knowledge of ESD and children's rights. The analysis identified clear examples of varying degrees of learning about sustainability and child rights approaches in different settings. The most common forms of sustainable practices included recycling and composting, reusing materials for art, water management and learning about Nature. Practitioners described child rights approaches as: listening to young children's interests in organising activities; giving opportunities to make choices; and, having flexibility within an activity to change direction to follow the children's lead. Some barriers identified were the limited access to Nature for some settings and a lack of sustainability training or knowledge among the practitioners.

The second area was practitioners' capacity to enact change as the possibilities to make the changes necessary in everyday practice for more sustainable behaviours varied within the group. Sageidet (2014) argues that an educator's attitude and the value they place on the importance of sustainability plays a role in effective ESD. However, Ferreira et al. (2015) maintain that without support from management or colleagues, the capacity to change to more pro-environmental behaviours at a whole system or, in this case, the whole setting level is also a barrier. Moody and Dahlberg (2019) further this by underlining that to effect

change across a complex system such as ECEC practitioner training, change is required amongst a wide range of training institutes, universities, government agencies, statutory authorities, and early years settings. Within this study, having the capacity and support to make changes to practice differed between participants.

The final area of interest, I named paradigms of pedagogy (hooks, 1994; 2003) and involved an examination of early childhood pedagogy with the practitioner participants. While slow pedagogy (Clark, 2020) and listening relational pedagogy (Lyndon et al., 2019) were identified as mutually reinforcing within a rights based ESD approach, participants also highlighted a need to instil a sense of wonderment. Specifically, wonderment surrounding Nature for the practitioners themselves before considering the more practical aspects of sharing sustainability knowledge with young children. Additionally, the participants considered that linking sustainability practices with funding and policy could further change behaviour.

Conclusion

Under the CRC, young children should be supported as partners in ESD curriculum-making and overall education that develops a respect for the natural environment. However, ensuring that ECEC practitioners can fulfil their educational responsibilities requires more leadership (whole system buy-in at government and local setting levels) and resources (access to Nature, training, time and extra hands). Contributions from both study iterations offered insights into what a 'bottoms up' transformative approach looks like and where the opportunities are for all those involved early childhood education and beyond to contribute.

References

- Clark, A. (2020). Towards a listening ECEC system. In C. Cameron & P. Moss (Eds.), *Transforming early childhood in England: Towards a democratic education* (pp. 134–150). UCL Press.
- Ferreira, J., Ryan, L., & Davies, J. (2015). Developing knowledge and leadership in pre-service teacher education systems. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 31(2), 194–207. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2015.24>
- hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- hooks, B. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CB09780511815355>
- Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2011). Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed view. *Childhood*, 11(1), 16-28.
- Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2012). Childhood, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and research: What constitutes a 'rights-based' approach? In

- M. D. A. Freeman (Ed.), *Law and Childhood: Current legal issues* (pp. 75-93). Oxford University Press.
- Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working with young children as co-researchers: An approach informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education & Development*, 22(5), 714–736.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463>
- Lyndon, H., Bertram, T., Brown, Z., & Pascal, C. (2019). Pedagogically mediated listening practices: The development of pedagogy through the development of trust. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 27(3), 360–370.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2019.1600806>
- Mukherji, P. & Albon, D. (2018). *Research methods in early childhood: An introductory guide* (3rd Edn.). Sage Publications.
- Moody, Z., & Darbellay, F. (2019). Studying childhood, children, and their rights: The challenge of interdisciplinarity. *Childhood*, 26(1), 8–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218798016>
- Ranta, M. (2023a). “Can we see our voices?” – young children’s own contributions to authentic child participation as a pillar for sustainability under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 31(6), 914-931.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2214716>
- Ranta, M. (2023b). *Positioning the young child as a rights holder within ESD curricula making under Article 29 1 (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. An Leanbh Og ESD Special Edition.
- Sageidet, B. M. (2014). Norwegian perspectives on ECEfS: What has developed since the Brundtland Report. In J. Davis & S. Elliott (Eds), *Research in early childhood education for sustainability: International perspectives and provocations* (pp. 112-124). Routledge.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. UN General Assembly.