

Researchers call for change to Irish schoolyards to support children's play

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Researchers are calling for increased attention to the design of schoolyards and provision of diverse spaces for play in primary schools, to address issues of exclusion, bullying and racism in Irish schoolyards.

[A study](#) led by University College Cork (UCC) researchers has found that the limited attention given to children's right to play in [school](#) policies and practices contradicts with inclusive school ideals and government commitments to children's rights. The study has been published in the *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*

More than half a million children share schoolyards in over 3000 Irish [primary schools](#) for a mandated, supervised breaktime that is more than 10% of each school day.

Over a three-year period, the multi-study research project investigated play in Irish schoolyards as central to the production of intersectional inequities central to exclusion particularly for disabled and minoritized children.

Teachers cited challenges and tensions in creating conditions for play in schoolyards including limited policy and practice guidance, contradictory expectations and litigation fears and the need to negotiate diverse individual and collective interests, prioritizing safety and an absence of conflict.

Michelle Bergin, [occupational therapist](#) and Ph.D. Student at UCC, will present the research at the Futures Research Conference at UCC's College of Medicine and Health today Thursday, 21 September.

Irish schoolyards were described as hard surfaced, restrictive, empty spaces with few, often broken objects and limited access to natural areas.

The study found that working with children and [teachers](#) to understand each particular context and identify possibilities for change is central when planning schoolyards that will increase play choice and inclusion in

schoolyards.

Michelle Bergin said, "Children described football, tag, fighting and sustaining friendships as routine. They said that exclusion happened within play linked to social and spatial restrictions for example racism identified as a significant barrier to Irish Traveler children's play."

Researchers are calling on the government to harness the new Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028 (DCEDIY, 2022) which forefronts children's rights and integrated policy and practices to review how to integrate school breaktimes in inclusive, intercultural, and sustainable [school policies](#) and provide time, funding and guidance to schools towards enacting these policies.

This will require dialog regarding the provision of play rights but also clarity on funding, practice guidelines and the challenges of litigation fears, racism, bullying and exclusion in schoolyards.

"Our research calls for greater consideration of the transformative potential of play to contribute to more equitable, inclusive and sustainable futures. Our study highlights that play in Irish schoolyards is fundamental to children's social lives, identities, friendships and experience of fun and offers possibilities to create connections of care and solidarity," Michelle Bergin said.

Professor John Cryan, Vice President for Research and Innovation at UCC, said, "This extensive study highlights the essential need to make the school playground environment a more inclusive, fair and equal environment for all children. UCC has a long track record of research involving children across a variety of disciplines and themes.'

"In the coming months, we will launch UCC Futures Children, and along with this research in Future Medicines, children's health, well-being and

their rights will continue to be at the forefront of research at UCC."

More information: Michelle Bergin et al, Irish Schoolyards: Teacher's Experiences of Their Practices and Children's Play-"It's Not as Straight Forward as We Think", *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/19411243.2023.2192201](https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2023.2192201)

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