A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The aim of this research was to design and implement an appropriate consultation with babies, toddlers and young children on what is working well with Aistear as they experience it and how it might be updated. NCCA are world-leaders in this regard, because while other jurisdictions may consult with children in curriculum change, wide-scale consultation with the youngest children from birth is to our knowledge extremely rare. This executive summary gives a brief overview of the methodology, ethical considerations, sample, and key findings of this consultation.

Methodology

There is a growing critique of consultation processes as tokenistic (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012), particularly when engaging with the youngest children (Wall et al., 2019). Partnership with practising educators who know children well, and with whom children are comfortable, supports research where babies, toddlers and young children feel at ease to express their views. Through familiarity with the children, educators can identify the (often subtle and nonverbal) ways they communicate. Therefore, this project employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O'Toole, 2020) with early childhood educators as 'co-researchers'. The role of the co-researcher educators was conceptualised as interpreters of the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1996); it was important that they were viewed by researchers and viewed themselves as *interpreters of children's voices* rather than direct informants to ensure that the focus was always on children's perspectives, rather than adults' experiences. These co-researcher educators were supported by other educators in their settings to collect the data.

The consultation used a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) with a suite of co-designed methodological instruments drawing on the approaches to pedagogical documentation already used by the educators. These included:

- Observations and learning stories
- Photography (by adults and children)

- Video
- Children's drawings
- Other arts-based methods (e. g. puppets, role play)
- Child conferencing, etc

Ethical Considerations

Our ethical perspective viewed babies, toddlers and young children as agentic and capable of self-expression, while acknowledging power imbalances for them. The consultation was underpinned by Lundy's (2007) model of child participation which conceptualises the child's right to participation using the concepts of 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence'.

Figure 1: Lundy's Model of Child Participation (2007)

'Space' means that children are provided with inclusive opportunities to express their views. Leveraging the pre-existing relationships with educators rather than 'parachuting' in researchers who would be strangers to the children provided safety and space for expression. 'Voice' means that children are facilitated to express their views, and this was achieved through use of creative methodological tools, and the fact that children's early childhood educators who know children well can pick up on small cues that would most likely be missed by external researchers. 'Audience' means that children's views are listened to, and 'influence' means that they are acted upon. These are provided by NCCA who are giving audience to the views of

babies, toddlers and young children through engaging with the reporting of the consultation and are acting upon them by ensuring that these views influence the updating of Aistear.

We sought a relational approach to ethics (Arnott et al., 2020) whereby consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis through attunement, respect and responsiveness towards the unique, and often subtle, modes of communication of babies, toddlers and young children (Skånfors, 2009) to complement formal ethical procedures. Extensive care was taken with the issue of 'adult gaze', which refers to the necessity for raw data from the settings to be interpreted through an adult lens. The role of reflexivity was strongly centred to identify and acknowledge the lens we use when interpreting children's voices, and a detailed theoretically-based underpinning for the data analysis strategy is provided in the full report. Importantly, the process of analysing the data to identify what children were telling us about their experiences of Aistear (the consultation) has been kept separate from the process of engaging with the granular detail of Aims, Learning goals, etc to tease out what changes to Aistear may be appropriate based on what they told us (curriculum framework development). This ensured that, to as great an extent as possible, the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were not obscured by adult agendas (NCCA, 2023).

Additionally, Arnott et al. (2020) note that formal ethical guidance (e. g. from ethics committees) often frames children as a vulnerable or high-risk group, and rarely gives direction about how to support them to give consent, sometimes advocating that researchers instead engage with gatekeepers like parents. This potentially excludes babies, toddlers and young children who do not sit comfortably in formal consent procedures from research, and there is a fine line between protecting our youngest citizens and silencing them by rendering them invisible. For example, one non-negotiable requirement of the formal ethical approval provided was that no children's faces could be visible in any data that were published. This has left the research team in the deeply uncomfortable position of obscuring the faces of the children in the photographs shared in the data analysis section. This is an example of the tensions often involved in negotiating potential conflicts in the requirements of formal data protection and ethics procedures and a more nuanced approach to ethics that seeks to centre and make visible the voices of babies, toddlers and young children (and we would argue, other groups traditionally framed as 'hard to reach').

Sample

While research employing quantitative methodologies like surveys tends to have a wide sample with high numbers of participants, such methodologies would have been highly inappropriate to access the voices of babies, toddlers and young children. Instead, detailed, rich, qualitative data typically relies on much smaller samples, aiming for depth rather than breadth, and using multiple data sources for triangulation to ensure rigour (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

This consultation adopted a case study approach, with a purposive sample chosen on the following criteria:

- Settings in which we knew, through our networks, that there was an educator with the expertise to take on the highly skilled role of 'interpreter of the hundred languages of children'. The co-researcher educators who led the consultation in their settings for the most part held Level 8 qualifications or higher and had experience with educational research, but the qualifications of the supporting educators in their settings ranged from Level 5 to Level 8.
- Settings to cover all categories relevant to Aistear (home, naíonraí, pre-school/sessional, full day-care, Early Start, infant class in primary school, childminder, private settings, community settings);
- Settings with a diverse range of babies, toddlers and children, regarding language (including Gaeilge), culture, age, disability/neurodiversity, gender, family structure, social and economic (dis)advantage;
- Geography: rural, towns and cities;
- Settings with positive Tusla reports[1]

Across the 11 settings which constituted the final sample, 136 children took part, ranging from 9 months to 6 years. There were less participants in the birth to three-years cohort (28) than in the three-years to six-years cohort (108) due to features of the early childhood sector outlined in detail in the main report. Nevertheless, the sample of 28 babies and toddlers was deemed sufficient within a detailed qualitative research design focused on depth rather than breadth. The experiences of babies and toddlers are presented separately from those of young children

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[1] This criterion obviously did not apply to the home setting.

in the Findings section of the full report to ensure that their voices are not obscured by the larger sample size of young children.

There were a diverse group of children involved, 72 boys and 64 girls, with 18 different languages spoken in their homes, a wide range of family structures, cultures and religious backgrounds represented, 23 children with additional needs, at least 10 children living in consistent poverty and 3 children experiencing homelessness. It should be noted that this sample unfortunately did not include any Traveller or Roma children or any children with same-sex parents in spite of targeted efforts to include these groups. Their inclusion will be an important consideration for Phase 2 of the research, and at time of writing detailed plans are in development, in collaboration with the Traveller community in particular, to ensure this gap is addressed in Phase 2.

There were 11 co-researcher educators who were a direct part of the research team, but 23 additional educators were involved in data collection (32 educators in all). It is important to note that with their high level of qualifications and research experience, the co-researcher educators are not representative of the typical early childhood educator in Ireland, but representativeness was not necessary or even desirable for the co-researcher educators because their role was not as direct informants. Rather than being typical of educators in the sector, it was necessary for this group to be highly skilled in accessing the voices of children, and to be relatively familiar with research processes. The supporting educators in their settings had qualifications ranging from Level 5 to Level 8.

Key Findings

In general, findings were similar *conceptually* for children from birth to three and children from three to six but could look quite different *when enacted in practice*. Multiple rich examples from the data are shown in the full report to illustrate this, structured around the Principles and Themes of Aistear, but a brief overview is provided here.

In reviewing what babies, toddlers and young children told us about their experiences of Aistear, perhaps most notable is its power to provide excellent opportunities for learning and development in the hands of informed, highly-educated, expert early childhood educators who

form strong relationships with children and families, communicate and interpret the 'hundred languages' of children, and provide opportunities for learning and development in fully resourced indoor and outdoor environments.

Relationships underpin how educators see and hear children, how they respond to their needs and strengths in attuned ways, and how affordances are translated through interactions into learning and development. These babies, toddlers and young children told us that their relationships are of the utmost importance to them. Some areas to consider for updating Aistear are to focus more on children's friendships, to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like and to empower them to implement it.

Personal and family identities are very clearly represented in the data, and educators view babies, toddlers and young children as confident and competent learners. Aistear frames their practice to support children to see themselves that way too. However, one area of potential focus for updating Aistear could be to make more explicit the relevance of culture for practice, to explain what is meant by multiple identities (gender, disability/neurodiversity, language, etc) and to show what authentic, meaningful culturally responsive pedagogy could look like in practice. Visibility of multiple dimensions of diversity in the books, toys and resources used, and visibility of children in their communities could be foregrounded in an updated Aistear.

Further areas for consideration are to explore babies', toddlers' and young children's rights *and* responsibilities as democratic citizens and to continue and extend the focus on modes of communication beyond language, with support for educators to document this. Other findings recommend foregrounding children's freedom of movement and choice, continuing the emphasis on play, and reconsidering the role of creativity and ICT in Early Childhood Education and Care.

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Abbreviations

DCEDIY   Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

DCYA   Department of Children and Youth Affairs

ECI   Early Childhood Ireland

GDPR   General Data Protection Regulation

ICT   Information and Communications Technology

MU   Maynooth University

NCCA   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PAR   Participant Action Research

SUC   Stranmillis University College, Belfast

UDL   Universal Design for Learning

UNCRC   United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

In September 2021, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) awarded the tender for a consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) to a consortium of researchers from Maynooth University, Stranmillis University College Belfast and Early Childhood Ireland. The overarching aim of the project was to design and implement an appropriate consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to capture their views on what is working well with Aistear as they experience it and how it might be enhanced or updated and, in the second phase, to access their views on the proposed updates developed by NCCA.

To meet this aim, three key issues come to the fore:

1. To design and implement appropriate tools, activities and contexts that will allow all children from birth to express their views;

2. To develop a methodology that enables babies, toddlers and children's views and perceptions to be elicited throughout the entire project; and

3. To share the findings with NCCA structures and beyond (inclusive of professional and academic communities) to inform the decision-making process.

1.1 National and International Context

Since the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly articles 12 and 13 (UNCRC, 1989), there has been a growing move both nationally and internationally towards greater consultation with children in terms of research, policy, curriculum development and practice (Wall, 2017). As rightsholders, children are entitled, rather than merely able, to engage in research, which places a concomitant duty on adults to facilitate such engagement (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). Equally, as Wall et al. (2019) point out, if we are to foster democratic skills and understanding in children and young people, we need to develop practices that support this from the earliest age, even from birth. Respecting all children's views from birth has become not just a model of good practice but is now a legal right. Ireland, like most other countries across the globe, has showcased its commitment to ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard and acted upon, as evident in multiple recent policy (e. g. DCYA, 2014; 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019) and curriculum development initiatives (e. g. NCCA, 2015; 2020).

However, participation with the youngest age groups of children tends to be less well developed in research, policy and curriculum development, in spite of advancements in pedagogy and practice (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Clark and Moss, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2022). This may be principally due to the dominance of literacy or language-based methods such as questionnaires and interviews as a means of eliciting children's voices for research. NCCA are world-leaders in this regard, because while other jurisdictions may consult with children in curriculum change, wide-scale consultation with the youngest children from birth is to our knowledge extremely rare, and in fact those who are not immersed in the work of early childhood education may even question whether it is *possible* to genuinely consult with babies, toddlers and young children.

The current research project is firmly positioned in arguing for both the abilities and rights of the youngest children to be consulted with, but we are also mindful that if such abilities and rights are to be genuinely enacted, increasing emphasis is needed on accessing more suitable methods for babies, toddlers and young children to express themselves. Differing means of communication and meaning-making must be offered to babies, toddlers and young children to honour and make explicit their contributions to research (Stokes, 2019). Child-centred, creative methods have been identified in recent years to help the youngest participants to engage more fully in the research process and give meaning to them (Arnott and Wall, 2022), affording the youngest children from birth the opportunity to express an opinion and have their voices heard (Wall et al., 2019). In addition, the adults involved in such research must have a degree of agency and flexibility as to what specific methodologies they choose to implement, taking into consideration the needs and interests of the specific babies, toddlers and young children concerned. In so doing in this research, we leverage the power of relationships in early childhood, and display respect for and interest in the responses of all babies, toddlers and young children (Harris and Manatakis, 2013).

1.2 Introduction to the project

The research team for this consultation have developed an innovative methodology built around partnership with early childhood educators as co-researchers and '*interpreters of the hundred languages of children*' through a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach. The overall

project is structured in two Phases; Phase 1 involves consultation with babies, toddlers and young children on their experiences of Aistear, and Phase 2 involves asking children their opinions on the changes proposed by NCCA. This report outlines Phase 1, the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children, including a detailed overview of the methodology, ethical considerations, sampling, data collection tools, procedures for data analysis, challenges faced, key findings and conclusions / recommendations.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In developing this consultation, the first task was to develop clear, comprehensive research questions which would guide all aspects of the research. Influenced by Aistear itself, the research questions were structured around the principles of Aistear and worded in the first person from the child's perspective, encouraging adults to enter the child's 'internal frame of reference' (Rogers et al., 2013) from beginning of the project – see Appendix A. We then needed to develop a research design that could help to answer these questions, and Participant Action Research (PAR) was identified as the most appropriate approach.

2.1 Participant action research (PAR) and early childhood educators as co-researchers

There is a growing critique of consultation processes as being largely superficial and tokenistic in style (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Palaiologou, 2014; Wall, 2017), particularly when engaging with the youngest children (Wall et al., 2019). Due consideration of the context in which the consultation process is undertaken is crucial, and the role of the adult/researcher/educator in eliciting voices must be thoughtfully considered and conducted (Wall 2017). Partnership with practising educators who know children well, and with whom children are comfortable, supports research where babies, toddlers and young children feel suitably at ease to express their own views and opinions. Therefore, this project employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O'Toole, 2020). In traditional research, researchers stand outside a situation and objectively investigate it scientifically; very often in educational research this has involved academics from outside the educational setting studying educators and children or introducing and measuring the impact of specific interventions developed by the academics themselves, often without any input from those being studied.

Action researchers, on the other hand, are 'insiders' who seek to evaluate and improve their own work (Baumfield et al., 2013), or genuinely access the voices of the children with whom they work (O'Toole, 2020). Outside academics can contribute and support such research, but educators themselves must be core to educational action research (McDonagh et al., 2019). Participant Action Research (PAR) is a specific form of action research involving;

the active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction

of knowledge; the promotion of self and critical awareness that leads to

individual, collective, and/or social change; and the building of alliances

between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation and

dissemination of the research process.

<div align="right">(McIntyre, 2008, p. ix).</div>

PAR has gained prominence in recent years due to increasing recognition of the need to engage respectfully with research participants' lived experiences, rather than imposing the views of external researchers, and so is highly appropriate for a consultative study. PAR views the adults, babies, toddlers and young children in educational settings as co-researchers, with agency and capacity to contribute, rather than 'subjects' upon whom research is conducted (O'Toole, 2020).

2.2 Co-researcher educators as 'interpreters of the hundred languages of children'

In this study, the early childhood educators with whom the children were familiar collected data, alleviating several potential tensions around truly accessing their voices, as children already had a relationship with the educator and were very familiar with the early childhood setting where the activities were undertaken. The role of the co-researcher educators was conceptualised as *'interpreters of the hundred languages of children'* to which Malaguzzi (1996) referred – it was important that they were viewed by researchers and viewed themselves as *interpreters of children's voices* rather than direct informants to ensure that the focus was always on children's perspectives, rather than adults' experiences. Their role was similar to that of an interpreter in research (for example in anthropology) where a local guide supports an outside researcher to understand the culture and language of the population being studied – the co-researcher educators were immersed in the culture of the children and had the expertise to interpret their many languages.

It was important however that babies, toddlers and children did not feel obliged to respond in a way that would please the educator. For this reason, the research team initially envisaged all co-researcher educators being upskilled through training from the research team, not only on

the type of methodologies that could be used to access children's voices, but also the process of putting such methodologies into practice with babies, toddlers and young children in non-leading ways, and appropriately documenting the outcomes. However, on reflection, we realised that the concept of 'training' of educators by researchers was not consistent with a truly participative approach as it underestimated the expertise of the educators as co-researchers. When the specific co-researcher educators were recruited, the extensive expertise they brought to the project reinforced this (see Table 2), so in reality, the researcher-educator sessions were opportunities for co-construction of the research together, rather than training. Co-researcher educators and researchers worked together to fine-tune the research questions and identify appropriate data collection methods based on both academic evidence and pedagogical experience; as Hall and Wall (2019) point out, when working with very young children, good pedagogical approaches *are* good research approaches, because of the focus on accessing and responding to the child's interpretation of their world. Recognition of this supported practising educators to develop self-identity as researchers because our approach is dependent on the pedagogical expertise in which the educators are very confident. This approach also had practical benefits in that many of the data collection activities stemmed from pedagogical activities that would already be happening in the settings[2], so that the time demands on participating educators would be boundaried. Equally, this gave a genuine, authentic overview of children's activities in a way that planned extra activities developed solely for research purposes could not.

2.3 Co-construction of the research design

The co-construction sessions for researchers and co-researcher educators took place online through both synchronous means (where researchers and co-researcher educators engaged with each other in real time) and with asynchronous resources (materials and communication forums available for each to access independently). This approach both COVID-proofed the research and facilitated a geographical spread of participants without undue inconvenience on those taking part. The asynchronous resources were hosted on the SUC Canvas facility (online learning platform). Together we also planned time-lines, developed data collection tools, explored ethical considerations (see below) and teased out dilemmas of data analysis. Co-researcher educators were then supported in some settings by other early childhood educators

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[2] Only materials / activities that were covered by participant consent and assent were included in the data. See section on ethics below.

working directly with children, with the co-researcher educators as leads. Early childhood educators were empowered in this way to act as data collectors for the project, and each setting was given a tablet on which to record their data. As incentive for participation and in recognition of their work, the educators' settings will keep these tablets at the end of research period, subject to deletion of all project data in keeping with our data protection policy.

2.4 Data Collection Tools

Darbyshire, McDougall and Schiller (2005) believe that research with young children requires creativity, not only on the part of the researcher but also on the data collection methods adopted for the study. Nomakhwezi, Mayaba and Wood (2015) concur with this thought by remarking that collecting data from children is not 'child's play' but rather a challenging task which requires thoughtful design on the part of the researcher. In recent years, participatory and flexible yet rigorous methodologies have emerged in the form of more visual approaches that rely less strongly on language skills that could exclude the voices of pre-verbal children (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Wall et al., 2013). This consultation project was participatory in design, using a rights-based lens drawing on approaches to pedagogical documentation developed through Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 2011), and the concept of a Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) whereby multiple data sources are combined to create a full picture of the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children.

Greene and Hill (2005, p. 8) ask the question "How can information be obtained from children in developmentally appropriate ways?" This is an important consideration in the current work, because the capacities and needs of babies, toddlers and young children are likely to change significantly as they grow and develop. While babies, toddlers and young children cannot be treated identically in developmental terms, research instruments must avoid underestimating or undervaluing children's contributions and abilities (Greene and Hill, 2005) while also ensuring that power differentials and vulnerabilities are not overlooked.

Many factors can impact on individual babies', toddlers' and young children's abilities or preferences to engage successfully with specific research instruments, and the efficacy of those instruments in accessing their voices. Simply tailoring methodologies to suit the notional capacities of a child at a certain age is not likely to create a useful research design - not all babies follow the same trajectory and this applies across the age range. Researchers often rely

on approaches that are inappropriate and ineffective for accessing the voices of children in the age range of the youngest in this cohort (Palaiologou, 2014; Wall et al., 2019), but our methodologies were inclusive of a greater range of communication strategies beyond words, such as behaviour, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, play choices and artistic expression (Wall et al. 2019).

In addition, an understanding of diversity and the key role it plays in individual experiences and capabilities was also crucial to this work. Children, and indeed their educators, are not all the same; as Frønes (1993, p. 1) puts it, "there is not one childhood, but many, formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. Different positions in society produce different experiences". Therefore, research design must take account of the fact that there is no such thing as children's 'voice' - rather children have a multiplicity of voices and these can be accessed in a variety of ways (O'Toole and Hayes, 2020).

The research team in collaboration with the co-researcher educators designed a suite of methodological instruments based on the concept of universal design for learning (UDL) (DCYA in collaboration with CEUD-NDA, 2019) and drawing on the pedagogical approaches already in use by the educators to access children's perspectives (Hall and Wall, 2019). As already noted, the fact that these instruments were used by adults with whom the babies, toddlers and young children are already familiar (their early childhood educators) also increased the likelihood of genuinely accessing their perspectives on Aistear. While the research instruments designed took account of the three stages of the research participants (babies, toddlers and young children), and guidance was given on which tools *may* work best with children at each stage, there was a high level of freedom built in for educators doing the data collection, consistent with a Participant Action Research approach. Educators knew best which tools were most appropriate and useful in accessing the voices of the particular babies, toddlers and children in their setting, and in this research they were given freedom of choice to access those they judged best. Choice was also be offered to babies, toddlers and children in terms of their medium of expression.

2.5 Pedagogical documentation and a Mosaic approach

Pedagogical documentation, inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Edwards et al., 2011), has recently been recognised as a research methodology (Biffi et al., 2021). Documentation is pedagogical in terms both of its object, children's education and development, and in terms of its application, and its provision of educational opportunity. It enables a transition from observing the child to developing and evaluating an action and the potential to return to the action with increased pedagogical awareness. This represents a playful research method which extends the practice of 'observe-think-act-document-reflect' to 'explore-collect-assemble-perform'.

The practice of pedagogical documentation is firmly established among early childhood educators in Ireland, where it holds a fundamental role in the facilitation of Aistear. This holistic approach endorses multi-modal representation, is co-constructive in nature, and thereby honours children's competency and creativity as participants. If an approach is likely to engage with children's voices and perspectives for the purpose of pedagogy and assessment, it is equally likely to access those voices for the purposes of consultative research (Hall and Wall, 2019). These ideas are also reflected in Clark and Moss' (2008) concept of a 'mosaic approach', an integrated process using multiple sources of information and evidence as a jigsaw to build a clear picture of babies', toddlers' and children's perspectives. Creative techniques can aid the communication process when collecting data with children however additionally, as highlighted by Spratling, Coke and Minick (2012) they can also serve as direct data sources rendering them even more worthwhile.

The specific data collection instruments used included the following, culminating in 885 items of data (See Table 1).

2.5.1 Observations

Observations can be used to gain insight into the lived experiences of babies, toddlers and young children in practice and research (Halpenny, 2020; Roberts-Holmes, 2018), and many existing observation tools were suitable for a consultation with them on their experiences of Aistear. For example, the most commonly used observation tools for this research were anecdotal, narrative observations and learning stories. Observations sometimes took place over short periods of time or could be used to create 'portraits' of specific children or groups of

children over periods of days or weeks, similar to the approaches taken in NCCA's (2007) portraiture study.

2.5.2 Photography

Visual methods are particularly helpful for babies, toddlers and young children to explore both positive and negative experiences (Kleine, Pearsons and Poveda 2016). Increasingly research with children is drawing on visual tools like photographs to access babies' toddlers and young children's voices (O'Toole and Hayes, 2020). Photo-voice and participatory photography allow young children to document their lives or explore issues of interest to them by taking photographs of what matters to them (Spyrou, 2011). In this research, photo-elicitation (NicGabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006) involved the older children of our cohort being invited by educators to talk about photographs that they took, or ones presented to them by the educators. In one setting for example, the co-researcher educator conducted interviews with the children using photographs that they had taken themselves of their favourite activities and areas in the setting. The children ranked the photographs in order of preference so that the co-researcher educator could access their voices on the activities they enjoyed most. Photographs of babies' and toddlers' participation were also analysed by researchers and co-researcher educators, and the meaning-making value of these were enhanced by narratives added by educators indicating what was happening in the photograph and what it told us from the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child in that moment. Video recording was also similarly employed.

2.5.3 Children's drawings

Drawing is one of the most important means by which children express themselves as it is a natural activity that they engage with on a regular basis. Drawing techniques with young children include support tree, amoeba people, drawings of significant others and house people (Taylor, Clement and Ladet, 2013). Drawing as a participatory technique is suitable not only for children who do not have language fluency to express themselves but for all children since drawing is, in itself, considered to be an alternative language for children of all ages (Hamama and Ronen, 2009). Participatory drawing has been identified as a highly efficient and ethically sound research strategy that is suited for work with children across a variety of cultural contexts (Kiely et al., 2021; Literat, 2013; O'Toole and Hayes, 2020), and a wide range of children's drawings were provided by the educators. In most cases, the drawings were annotated, explaining the circumstances under which they were drawn, and their interpretation of what

the baby, toddler or young child was expressing through their drawing. For verbal children, often their direct utterances about their drawings were noted.

2.5.4 Other Arts-based methodologies

Arts-based techniques are a recognised conduit for babies, toddlers and young children to express their views on many different topics that interest them. Art is regarded as the symbolic language of children through which they express their feelings and viewpoints (Coad 2007). Arts-based research methods incorporate the arts as a means of better understanding and re-thinking important social issues (Barone and Eisner, 2011). Arts-based research methods can be drawn from a myriad of art forms to offer variety, both in the medium of inquiry and its constituent data. Arts-based methods have playful attributes, whereby children can express themselves through creativity (Biffi et al., 2021). Thus, in research with children, arts-based methods can stimulate responses to the research question more effectively than traditional data collection forms. Further, the use of the arts as a method for involving children in their own meaning-making processes can offer insights that sometimes words cannot achieve (Biffi et al., 2021). Thus, the 'one hundred languages' of children can be honoured. We used a range of innovative methods such as interaction with puppets (Epstein et al., 2008), analysis of play episodes, role play particularly with microphones whereby children could tell their stories or make statements (Wall et al., 2019), drama, story-telling, literacy-based activities with books as prompts and other narrative approaches (Lewis, 2021).

2.5.5 Focus groups / Child conferencing / Interviews

Focus groups and child conferencing are only relevant for verbal children, but we considered them useful as part of a suite of methodologies, once we ensured that preverbal children were well represented using the other tools. Focus groups are a discussion between groups of children facilitated by the educator, and they can showcase a range of views while also giving a picture of a shared cultural understanding (Hall and Wall, 2019). Child conferencing involves an interview with the child and a friend (NCCA, 2007). According to Barbour (2008), it is ethically appropriate to use such group approaches in situations where respondents might find one-to-one interviews intimidating or where there are balance-of-power issues at stake. She particularly identifies young children as a group for whom these approaches are appropriate. Allowing children to discuss their experiences in groups may mean that children feel more comfortable expressing their views with the support of their friends (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Among the benefits of using focus groups with children identified by Lancaster and

Broadbent (2003) are new meanings and ideas generated through interaction, development of confidence and empowerment since children are positioned as experts, access to insights on shared understandings of children, and the fact that many children are familiar with these types of activities through experiences of approaches such as 'circle time'.

Of course, children may find it difficult to express views opposing those of their friends, and many educators found that once one child expressed an opinion in group discussion, all other children simply followed suit. This is identified by Barbour (2008) as a potential limitation of focus groups in general, as there is always the danger of participants telling researchers what they want to hear, or simply conforming to the group norm. As such it was important for the data collecting educator to establish a non-evaluative, nonthreatening environment where children felt free to express themselves (Wall, 2017), to emphasise that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, that the research was seeking their opinions and experiences, and that it was okay for children to disagree with each other (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). The pedagogical skills of practising educators were leveraged in this regard. Equally, educators used their knowledge of the children along with their ethical and pedagogical skills to identify when one-to-one interviews were more appropriate, and these were also used as part of the suite of data collection methods.

Table 1: Forms of data collected

Data type	Number of items
Photographs taken by adults (annotated, explaining circumstances, often with children's direct utterances noted)	484
Photographs taken by children	55
Videos	26
Engagement with puppets	11
Direct quotes from conversations with children	37
Observations / Learning stories	113
Focus groups / Group discussions with children	7
Interviews with children with photographs used to support ranking activity (photo-elicitation)	7

Children's art-work (annotated, explaining circumstances, often with children's direct utterances noted)	44
Extracts from Aistear books / learning journals	63
Literacy-based discussions (books as prompts)	6
Role play with microphone	4
Wall displays	7
Digital notes	21
Total	**885**

2.6 Ethical considerations

An ethics proposal for this research was submitted to the MU research ethics committee as lead institution, and data collection did not proceed until ethical approval was granted. However, ethical considerations are not 'completed' once an ethics committee has signed off on the work, and consistent with a PAR approach, this research team view ethics as a *process* rather than a destination. Throughout the consultation, consideration of ethics was iterative and reflexive and was constantly revisited as the project unfolded. All of our research was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the research team through an ethical lens on an ongoing basis. Research with babies, toddlers and young children brings ethical dilemmas that may not be so apparent with adults or older children. Therefore, while this section of the report outlines typical ethical concerns such as data protection, it also explores the ethical dilemmas that are particularly evident (albeit not unique)[3] to research with the youngest children.

2.6.1 An ethical view of children balancing the need for protection with the need for recognition of agency and the right to visibility as a citizen

The ethical underpinnings of the current research direct a view of babies, toddlers and young children as autonomous, agentic and capable of self-expression. Adult perceptions of what children think, do or need may differ substantially from what children themselves communicate. In spite of the increasing emphasis on children's right to 'voice' in theory and research (largely stemming from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,

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[3] While issues like visibility vs protection are explored here in the context of research with babies, toddlers and young children, we argue that they may also be relevant regarding other groups that have traditionally been framed as 'vulnerable' or 'hard to reach' (O'Toole, 2022).

1989), in every-day life the experience of children may be as subordinate to adults, particularly in educational settings, and children may find it difficult to disagree or express an opinion other than that they think an adult wishes to hear (Greene and Hill, 2005; Hill, 2005). Certainly, many children are unaccustomed to being asked their views or they may feel that their views are often disregarded by adults (Hill, 2005; Smith, 2011), and young children in particular may be vulnerable within research processes as a result (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Therefore, as Arnott et al. (2020) point out, a balance must be reached, whereby our recognition of children's competence and agency cannot be simplistic, but rather must recognise potential power imbalances between adults and children.

This resonates with Lahman's (2008, p. 285) description of the "competent yet vulnerable child", deconstructed by Mukherji and Albon (2018) to highlight the potential of seeing babies, toddlers and children as partners in research while also maintaining awareness of the ethical requirement to protect them where necessary.

In order to mindfully counteract potential power imbalances for children, this research was designed with Lundy's participation (2007) model in mind, which indicates that mere 'voice' is insufficient, but rather from a rights-based perspective, we must consider 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence'. This model conceptualises the child's right to participation as described by Article 12 of UNCRC (1989).

Figure 1: Lundy's Model of Child Participation (2007)

'Space' means that children are provided with safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views. Our co-constructed seminars with co-researcher educators within the current

research included deconstruction of power relationships, and development of strategies to mitigate the imbalance of power that may be inherent in the adult-child relationship. Leveraging the pre-existing relationships between the educators and the children, rather than 'parachuting' in researchers who would be strangers to the children, also ensured a sense of safety and space for expression.

'Voice' means that children are facilitated to express their view, and this was achieved through the use of the creative methodologies described above, and the fact that children's early childhood educators who know them very well can pick up on small cues and communications that would most likely be missed by external researchers.

'Audience' means that children's views must be listened to, and 'influence' means that they must be acted upon as appropriate. These are provided by NCCA who are giving audience to the views of babies, toddlers and young children through engaging with the reporting of the consultation and are acting upon them by ensuring that these views influence the updating of Aistear (see NCCA, 2023 for an outline of this process).

2.6.2 Ethics as an iterative relational process

Arnott et al. (2020) note that formal ethical guidance (e. g. from ethics committees) often frames children as a vulnerable or high-risk group, and rarely gives direction about how to support them to give consent, sometimes advocating that researchers instead engage with gatekeepers like parents. This potentially excludes babies, toddlers and young children who do not sit comfortably in formal consent procedures from research, and there is a fine line between protecting our youngest citizens and silencing them by rendering them invisible. For example, one non-negotiable requirement of the formal ethical approval provided was that no children's faces could be visible in any data that were published. This has left the research team in the deeply uncomfortable position of obscuring the faces of the children in the photographs shared in the data analysis section. This is an example of the tensions often involved in negotiating potential conflicts in the requirements of formal data protection and ethics procedures and a more nuanced approach to ethics that seeks to centre and make visible the voices of babies, toddlers and young children (and we would argue, other groups traditionally framed as 'hard to reach').

Once formal ethical approval was granted and as the research progressed, we sought to take a relational approach to ethics (Arnott et al., 2020) whereby consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis through attunement, respect and responsiveness towards the unique, and often subtle, modes of communication of babies, toddlers and young children. The ethics for this research have been situated and dynamic, and while we did use traditional checklists and consent forms as required by the ethics committee, this was not considered to be enough. Rather 'ethical dilemmas' (Koushoult and Juhl, 2021) often occurred in situations where researchers and educators needed to deal with contradictory concerns with no unequivocal or obvious 'right decision'. Often, such situations were unique; not something that could be solved once and for all, but that needed to be continuously addressed.

Addressing ethics as "dilemmas" creates the opportunity to make visible, and explore, processes of "not knowing" (Koushoult and Juhl, 2021) and this is very consistent with Participant Action Research (O'Toole, 2020). As noted by Stokes (2019, pp. 10-11)

> Some ethical encounters may be possible to anticipate, for which preparation
> to address may be as part of the completion of the institutional ethics process.
> Many other ethical encounters, will by their nature, be unexpected and
> therefore, more difficult if not impossible to strategize for. They demand
> 'ethics-in-action', akin to Schon's 1991 'reflection-in-action', where the
> researcher responds earnestly to ethical dilemmas as they arise.

In practice, this required trusting the participating educators as the experienced experts who were closest to the children as best placed to manage this. This was most clearly relevant in relation to the concept of informed consent.

2.6.3 Procedures for ensuring informed consent

Ethically speaking, it is vital that children are not pressurised into taking part in studies they do not fully understand, since they may be vulnerable to persuasion, adverse influence and even harm in the conduct of research (Hill, 2005). The idea of consent becomes complex with babies, toddlers and young children, because 'informed consent' requires that participants understand the purposes of the research, what precisely they are being asked to do (for example how long an interview will take), anonymity, their right to withdraw, how the data will be stored and what it will be used for (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

Informed consent by verbal children in this project was sought through language adapted to their linguistic understandings, including checks and repetition. Written informed consent was of course sought from parents, but young children were given the opportunity to verbally or behaviourally augment or rescind the written consent that parents had given on their behalves (commonly known as 'assent') and a picture based assent form was shared with children who had the capacity to engage with it. For preverbal children, particularly the youngest in our cohort, it was crucial that consent was negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis – any babies, toddlers or young children who showed behavioural indications of discomfort with any research activities such as turning away, being quiet or refusing to take part in discussion were allowed to disengage with a minimum of fuss. Skånfors (2009) refers to this as the use of an 'ethical radar', and Arnott et al. (2020, p. 788) similarly describe assent thus:

> Assent has been described as the child's acquiescence to being involved (Coyne, 2010). In this situation, consent is inferred from their body language. The researcher has a responsibility to observe and consider this body language in order to ensure that only willing children take part.

This research recognises the rights of both children and adults to be informed about the nature, intentions and purpose of the research, to feel confident that the study is worthwhile, and to feel respected as they participate (Hill, 2005).

2.6.4 Child protection processes and measures

In order to ensure child protection as well as providing space for their agency, the core team of academic researchers did not have direct contact with any children since data collection was completed by educators within early childhood settings that the babies, toddlers and young children were attending anyway, regardless of involvement in the research. The child protection policies of the early childhood settings applied, and only settings with positive reports from Tusla in this regard were included in the research. While confidentiality was maintained in the research process, this was limited by child protection concerns – should any disclosures have been made, child protection procedures would have been followed involving the designated officer within the setting in question. Thankfully, this did not arise in the course of the research. All team members are vetted and trained in Children First guidelines (DCEDIY, 2017) and recognised their duty of care in the event of any safety/welfare issues coming to their attention. Anonymity was maintained by ensuring that no children's faces are visible in data as required

by ethics permissions, but as noted above, the researchers recognise and are concerned about the ethical tensions in erasing the children's visibility through this practice.

2.7 Data protection processes and measures; Approach to data management and storage

All data storage has been maintained in strict adherence to GDPR legislation. All reasonable measures have been taken to ensure security of data, and the highest level of privacy of participants has been preserved as default. All data sets have been coded, anonymised and password-protected and consent forms have been stored securely and separately from other data collection measures. Pseudonyms have been used at all times. All data were digital in nature; each co-researcher educator was provided with an electronic tablet, and data were only stored on this device. When educators were ready to share the data with the academic research team, each was provided with their own individual Microsoft Teams channel to which to upload. Data were anonymised and the Microsoft Teams system is password protected and only accessible to members of the project team. During data analysis stage, anonymised qualitative data were analysed using the MAXQDA programme. All files were password protected and again, accessible only to project team members. At no stage were data accessible to anyone outside of the research team, with the exception of the data from the Gaeltacht Naíonra which was securely shared with MU Oifig na Gaeilge for translation. The data from the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra were translated by the participating educator herself.

A separate database of names and contact details has been retained for purposes of follow-up for Phase 2, but this is held away from the other data and there is no means of linking the two. All data protection procedures have been carried out under the guidance of MU's designated data protection office: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/dataprotection

2.8 Sample

It is well-established in social and educational research that sampling strategies should align with and flow from the research methodology and design. The design is in turn chosen to best respond to the research aim and objectives, research ethics, and a consideration of the capacities and rights of research participants (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2017).

The Request for Tender published by the NCCA (2021, p. 18) sought the design and implementation of an *appropriate consultation* with babies, toddlers and young children, where "babies', toddlers' and young children's participation provide opportunities to meaningfully connect with their everyday experiences while recognising the range of out-of-home settings and schools in which their learning and development is shaped and informed by Aistear". The rationale for choosing Participant Action Research as the most appropriate research design to meet the NCCA's objective to conduct an appropriate consultation through a research design that would take account of the ethical requirements, ages and stages of child development, strengths, views and interests (NCCA, 2021, p. 22) has already been described.

That our research design used the PAR approach to meet the objective of consultation reminds us that consultation is composed of stories, and researchers can enrich what we know about storytelling by applying systematic methodologies that listen, resulting in a rigorous and generative path to knowledge (Clare, 2022). Listening to children's 'stories', their views and experiences, through expert, careful pedagogy and documentation by early childhood educators requires a sampling strategy that focuses on the richness of the data and perspectives, and the expertise of the co-researcher educators to access them. While research that employs quantitative methodologies like surveys tends to have a wide sample with high numbers of participants, such methodologies would have been highly inappropriate for attempting to access the voices of babies, toddlers and young children. Instead, the collection of detailed, rich, qualitative data typically uses much smaller samples, relying on depth rather than breadth, and using multiple data sources for triangulation to ensure rigour (Mukherhi and Albon, 2018). Participant Action Research is context-specific, engaging with research participants' lived experiences, which is highly appropriate for a consultative study with an objective to explore babies', toddlers' and young children's lived experiences. Therefore, this consultation adopted a case study approach, with a purposive sample of 13 settings as individual case studies originally. Ethical procedures require that participants must be free to withdraw from the research at all times, and unfortunately one setting availed of this right due to time constraints and another withdrew due to illness, leaving 11 participating settings in the final sample.

This strategy aligns with that adopted previously by the NCCA, where 12 children in 11 early childhood education and care settings were facilitated as partners in developing the Aistear framework through a 'portraiture study' (NCCA, 2007). Portraiture is a form of qualitative research that seeks to give voice to the experiences of research participants in a particular

setting, through a story that documents and illuminates the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, in context, and shaped through dialogue between the researcher and the research participants, providing rich and generative insights. However, while 11 settings also took part in our research, there was a much higher number of participants within the settings. Across the 11 settings (a comprehensive range of settings to show-case the different and varied contexts in which children experience Aistear), 136 children took part, ranging in age from 9 months to 6 years. There were 11 co-researching educators who were a direct part of the research team, but 23 additional educators with a range of qualification levels were involved in data collection also (32 educators in all; see Table 2).

2.8.1 Selecting the sample

The NCCA's Request for Tender requested the delineation and identification of a cohort of children and early childhood settings in which the children participate (to include Irish language settings). The document also required that the research design take account of the ages and stages of development of the babies, toddlers and young children participating, be adaptable for English and Irish-medium settings and schools, and take account of linguistic diversity, gender balance and additional needs. The 'purposive' sampling strategy employed for this research was entirely appropriate to the tender requirements. The settings were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Settings in which we knew, through our networks, that there was an educator with the qualifications, expertise and experience to take on the highly skilled role of 'interpreter of the hundred languages of children'. The co-researcher educators who led the consultation in their settings for the most part held Level 8 qualifications and had experience with educational research, but the qualifications of the educators in their settings who supported them with data collection ranged from Level 5 to Level 8.
- Settings to cover all categories of early learning setting relevant to Aistear (home, naíonraí, pre-school / sessional, full day-care, Early Start, infant class in primary school, childminder, private settings, community settings);
- Settings with a diverse range of babies, toddlers and children within the settings, with regard to language (including Gaeilge), culture and ethnicity, child age, disability / neurodiversity, gender, family structure, social and economic (dis)advantage;
- Geography: rural, towns and cities;

- Settings with positive Tusla reports[4]

2.8.2 Co-researcher educators and supporting educators

In order to identify an appropriate sample, the research team drew on the extensive networks of its institutions within the sector. Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) is the leading membership organisation in this sector in Ireland, with over 3,800 members providing ECEC services to over 120,000 children and their families. The Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in MU deliver educational degree programmes that incorporate a strong emphasis on accessing children's voices through practitioner research. This consortium has access through ECI membership and MU alumni and current students to a network of highly-skilled, practising early childhood educators who already possess the research knowledge to engage in data collection as envisaged in our planned methodology.

The research consortium adopted a strategy of preference for degree-led settings in which co-researcher educators would have the skills and expertise required for data collection and an understanding of research methodologies with babies, toddlers and young children, which remains a specialist research knowledge base in Ireland. This strategy delivered high-quality data. It is important to note that these co-researcher educators are not representative of the typical early childhood educator in Ireland, but representativeness was not necessary or even desirable for the co-researcher educators because as already indicated, their role was as 'interpreters of the hundred languages of children' rather than direct informants. Rather than being typical of educators in the sector, it was necessary for this group of co-researcher educators to be highly skilled in *accessing the voices of children*, and to be relatively familiar with research processes. However, these lead co-researcher educators were supported in many settings by colleagues with qualifications ranging from Level 5 to Level 8 who were also highly skilled in pedagogical documentation.

This is also an important point to note in relation to the parent participant. This parent is certainly not typical of a stay-at-home parent in Ireland, but rather has extensive experience in practice in the early childhood sector and strong familiarity with Aistear. She has completed a dissertation through Action Research for her degree in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning

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[4] This criterion obviously did not apply to the home setting.

and so had both the curriculum knowledge and the data collection skills to be able to interpret her children's voices through the lens of Aistear.

Table 2 shows the qualifications, years of experience and length of time working in their current setting of each of the co-researcher educators, whether they were supported by additional educators in collecting the data, and if so, their qualifications.

Table 2: Co-researcher educators and supporting educators

Pseudonym	Setting	Qualification	Years of experience	Time in current setting	Support with data collection from other educators
Margaret	Childminder (4 babies) and toddlers)	BA in Early Childhood Education (Level 8)	16 years (12 years in creches internationally, 4 years childminding)	4 years	No
Elaine	Specialist preschool for children with disabilities	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) Master of Education (Level 9)	17 years	17 years (own setting)	No
Michelle	Gaeltacht Naíonra	At time of data collection, in 3rd year studying for Level 8 degree in Early Years and Montessori QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 6) NVQ Leadership and Management	21 years	3 years	No

		in Childcare and Young Persons' Settings (Level 5 - UK) NVQ Early Years (Level 3 – UK)			
Bernadette	Private ECCE preschool	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 6) LINC Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (Level 6) Diploma in Early Childhood Education (Level 5) Short courses: Speech & Language, Autism and Special Needs and Play Therapy	15 years	9 years (own setting)	3 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 5 (1) Level 6 (1) and Level 8 (1)
Tanya	Parent (toddler and young child)	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) Train the trainer (Level 7) Currently studying for PhD (Level 10)	14 years experience as an early childhood educator 2 years tutoring Level 5 and 6 ECEC students 1 year delivering Aistear support for County	2 years as a stay-at-home parent	No

			Childcare Committee		
Mary	Full day-care, community setting, baby room, wobbler / toddler room and ECCE room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8)	24 years	12 years	11 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 5 (1), Level 6 (6) and Level 8 (4)
Ger	Early Start	BSc Psychology (Level 8) PGCE Early Years (Level 9) Master of Education (Early Years) (Level 9)	35 years experience as an early childhood educator 7 years lecturing in ECEC at university level while also still in practice	13 years	1 additional early childhood educator, qualifications at Level 6
Bernie	Full day-care, community setting, ECCE room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 6)	23 years	17 years	2 additional early childhood educators, both with qualifications at Level 6 and studying for Level 8 at time of data collection
Paula	Non-Gaeltacht Naíonra	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) QQI Early Childhood Care	14 years	8 years (own setting)	2 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 6 (1) and Level 8 Psychology /

		and Education (Level 6) LINC Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (Level 6) QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 5) Montessori diploma			Level 6 ECEC (1)
Clíona	Junior infants	BA History (Level 8) PGCE Primary Teaching (Level 9) Currently studying for M.Ed (Level 9)	13 years teaching Published author of two phonics books and supporting material	13 years in current school, 9 years in junior infants	1 SNA, qualifications at Level 6
Sheila	Full day-care, community setting, baby room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8)	27 years	15 years	3 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 6

Totals: Highest qualification award noted	Educators with Level 9 qualifications	3 (3 co-researcher educators)
	Educators with Level 8 qualifications	13 (7 co-researcher educators, 6 supporting educators)
	Educators with Level 7 qualifications	0
	Educators with Level 6 qualifications	15 (15 supporting educators)
	Educators with Level 5 qualifications	2 (2 supporting educators)

Totals:	Co-researcher educators	11
	Supporting educators	23

2.8.3 Settings and children

The annual profile of the ECEC sector published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) further guided the sampling strategy. 403,919 children under 6 years in the Republic of Ireland (https://ws.cso.ie/public/api.jsonrpc) and 105,975 children benefited from the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme in 2019/2020 (Pobal, 2020), representing almost all children eligible to participate in this free preschool programme, which was the most recent data available to the research consortium at the time of sampling. That participation in this Programme is near universal for children in the two years prior to primary school entry let to a sample weighted towards children in this age group, with research conducted in the associated sessional service, who tend to provide the ECCE Programme only.

On a related issue, the child ages represented in the sample lean towards those aged from 3- to 5-years of age. Again, this reflects the predominance of this age group in the ECCE sector. The majority of Early Childhood Educators (61%) work with children aged from 3 to 5 years, and only 4% work with babies in ECEC settings (Pobal, 2020, p. 82). These statistics reflect the fact that babies and toddlers are in the minority in the child population attending ECEC services. Only 32% of services are full day care (Pobal, 2021), which is where babies and young children under the age of 3 years are found. This structural issue in the ECEC sector had implications for securing the participation of a full day care setting to participate in the study, in that there are fewer to identify. Also, the strategy to work with co-researcher educators with ECEC degrees reduced the likelihood of accessing this element of sample as 86% of educators working with babies have qualifications at NFQ levels 5 and 6 (Pobal, 2021), and while educators at these levels did participate in the research as already noted, we needed highly qualified co-researcher educators in each setting to lead the research. Nevertheless, the sample of 28 babies and toddlers was deemed sufficient within a detailed qualitative research design focused on depth rather than breadth. The experiences of babies and toddlers are presented separately from those of young children in the Findings section in order to ensure that their voices are not obscured by the larger sample size of young children (108).

Likewise, there are only 58 childminders registered with Tusla in Ireland. Through our consortium network a registered childminder (with a degree level ECEC qualification) was identified and did participate in the study. The children participating in her service ranged from

10 months to preschool, which supported achieving an age range in the sample. The majority of childminders (15,000 to 22,000 as an estimate) are invisible to the State. As well as the childminding setting, participating babies were in baby-rooms in community settings, with babies from 9 months old included. In spite of extensive efforts across multiple networks we did not manage to find a full-daycare setting from a corporate chain that had educators who were in a position to take part in the research. Table 3 shows the settings chosen, the number of children that took part in each setting (which is highly variable as the number of children accessing different types of services is highly variable), and the age range in each setting.

Table 3: Sample – settings and children

Type of setting	Locality	Number of children	Age range	Number of children Birth-3 years	Number of children 3-6 years
Child-minder	Small village Own home	4	10 months - 2 years 8 months	4	0
Specialist preschool for children with disabilities	Large town	5	3.5 years- 5 years	0	5
Naíonra	Gaeltacht	3	3 – 5 years	0	3
Private ECCE preschool	Suburban	16	3yrs – 4 years 6 months	0	16
Parent	Rural	2	2 years and 6 years	1	1
Community setting, full day care, baby room, wobbler room, toddler room, preschool	Rural, DEIS area	36	9 months – 5 years	16	20
Early Start	Large city, DEIS area	10	3yrs 9 months – 5 yrs. 3 months	0	10

Community setting, full day care, ECCE Room	Small town	16	3 – 5 years	0	16
Naíonra Sessional	Non-Gaeltacht	22	2 years 10 months - 5 years 4 months	1	21
Junior infants	Suburban, DEIS area	16	4 - 6 years	0	16
Baby room, full day care, community setting	Small town, rural	6	10-21 months	6	0
Totals	**Comprehensive range of settings showing different contexts in which children experience Aistear**	**136 children**	**Age range 9 months – 6 years**	**Babies and toddlers: 28**	**Young children: 108**

2.8.4 A rigorous, valid, diverse sample

We do not make any claim to have provided a statistically representative sample, but rather the sampling strategy enabled the research team to select ECEC settings that would support the NCCA's requirement to represent diversity in the sample. This is a strength of a qualitative research design, where the child sample is not required to be representative of the child population as a whole. In developing the sampling approach for this project, we aimed for 'equity' rather than just 'equality'. The development of a statistically representative sample would require every individual in the population from which it is drawn, in this case every individual early childhood setting, to have an equal chance of selection, and researchers using such approaches rely on random sampling across large numbers (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). In this case however, such sampling methods could have led to a lack of representation of

certain groups of babies, toddlers and young children. Instead, our targeted approach ensured that a range of in-depth perspectives could be accessed to help us understand the voices of a diversity of babies, toddlers and young children in Ireland. Table 4 shows the dimensions of diversity of the children in the sample, and these include gender, multingualism, culture, Traveller / Roma identity, disability / neurodiversity, family structure, religion, and homelessness / poverty. Almost all dimensions of diversity are well represented in the consultation; for example there are 18 different home languages included. However, it is important to note that there were no children with same-sex parents in the sample, and we were also unable to access consent for working with any Traveller / Roma children within the sample settings in spite of efforts to do so. Only 18% of ECEC settings have children from Traveller backgrounds accessing their services (Pobal, 2020), and so a more detailed, targeted sampling approach, developed in collaboration with the Traveller Community will be required for Phase 2 for this dimension of diversity.

Interestingly, in spite of ensuring diversity in the sample on most dimensions, these dimensions of diversity were not as visible in the data as we would have predicted. One possible explanation for this is that the educators in question are practising in such inclusive ways (for example using a universal design for learning [UDL] approach) that potential points of 'difference' are not visible. For instance, even though one of the settings is specifically designed for children with additional needs, disability is rarely mentioned in the data from this setting, and is only visible in relation to communication and accessing the voices of children. Instead, the children in this setting are shown in the data participating fully in their early childhood education without barriers, ensuring the kinds of inclusive environments for children to which Aistear aspires, but perhaps obscuring the impact of diversity for research purposes. This is explored further the 'Key Findings' section below, and will also be centred in Phase 2 of the research.

Table 4: Dimensions of diversity among participating babies, toddlers and young children (X = does not apply)

Type of setting and number of children	Gender	Multi-lingualism (languages spoken at home)	Culture / Ethnicity	Traveller / Roma	Disability / Neurodiversity	Family structure	Religion	Poverty / Homelessness
Child-minder (4)	2 boys 2 girls	X	White Irish	X	X	All children live with mother and father	1 family feel very strongly about child not being included in any religious activity	X
Specialist preschool for children with disabilities (5)	0 boys 5 girls	5 English	White Irish	X	5 AIM support[5] Sensory needs, nonverbal – use i-pads with communication app	Small number of one parent families and parents who are co-parenting	Catholic	All families, in many cases as a direct result of having children needing additional support. Many parents spend a significant amount of their income each week on Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational

[5] AIM (Access and Inclusion Model) provides support for children who have additional needs without requiring a label of disability: The Access and Inclusion Model Homepage - Access and Inclusion Model (aim.gov.ie). The children referred to in this category have additional needs but their diagnosis is not provided or there may not be a diagnosis.

								Therapy. Wage wise may not be on the lower scales but due to children's circumstances are in financial difficulty
Gaeltacht Naíonra (3)	3 boys 0 girls	3 Irish and English	White Irish	X	X	All children live with mother and father	Catholic	X
Private ECCE preschool (16)	7 boys 9 girls	10 English 2 Romanian 2 Malayalam 1 Tamil 1 Portuguese	White Irish Romanian Brazilian Tamil Malayis	X	3 neurodivergent	All children live with mother and father	Christian Hindu	X
Parent (2)	1 boy 1 girl	X	White Irish Mother Polish, children born in Ireland	X	X	Live with parents and grandparents	Non-practising Catholic	X
Community setting, full day care, baby room, wobbler room, toddler room, preschool (36)	21 boys 15 girls	35 English 1 German	White Irish German	X	2 AIM support	2 one parent families 34 children live with both parents	All Catholic	While no children were directly identified as being particularly vulnerable to poverty within

								this group, this setting is located in an area traditionally serving a high-poverty cohort. Therefore it is likely that at least some of these children are living in consistent poverty
Early Start (10)	5 boys 5 girls	4 English 1 English and Irish 1 English and French 1 English and Romanian 1 English and Russian 1 Mandarin	White Irish French-Mauritian Han Chinese Romanian Latvian-Romanian	X	2 SLT 1 Language delay 1 Autism 1 ADHD	6 live with both parents 4 parents live apart	9 Catholic 1 no religion	1 homeless
Community setting, full day	8 boys 8 girls	10 English 1 English and Slovak	White Irish Slovak Hindi	X	1 Autism	All children live with both parents	9 Catholic 3 Hindu	X

care, ECCE Room (16)		1 English and Hindi 2 Romanian and Mauritian Creole 1 Polish 1 Latvian	Romanian Mauritian Polish Latvian					
Non-Gaeltacht Naíonra (22)	13 boys 9 girls	12 English 3 Irish 1 English and Norwegian 1 English and Croatian 1 English, Irish and Mandarin 1 English, Irish and Polish 2 Portuguese 1 Italian	White Irish Mixed race – Dad from Nigeria, mam White Irish Black Irish – parents from Zimbabwe and Nigeria Croatian Irish – Dad from Croatia/Mum Irish (spends all holidays in Croatia and taken care of by Croatian grandparents in Ireland at times)	X	2 AIM support and awaiting assessment (rigid play, struggle with social skills and emotional regulation) 1 global developmental delay, autism, non-verbal	3 boys and one girl living with grandparents (the girl stays in her dad's parents' house at weekends) Shared parenting with one family – boy spends time in mum's house and for some days of the week stays in dad's – receiving support from TUSLA 1 one parent family unit – mum and four	1 child: religion very important to family and is evident in child's language and role play Muslim Christian Catholic Church of Ireland No religion/ athe-ist	Social housing – 5 children (one family living in a hotel before starting in the setting – now in social housing)

			French culture strong in household, French grandparents come to stay regularly Norwegian (Grandparents from Norway visit often) Chinese culture very strong in household – all family from China / speaks Cantonese and shows awareness of Chinese culture Latvian (spends holiday time there				children (little contact with dad)		
Junior infants (16)	9 boys 7 girls	All speak English and learn Irish 1 Polish 1 Hindi 1 Romanian	White Irish Parent Polish, born in Ireland Indian	X	1 diagnosed autism and low muscle tone 3 currently undergoing	8 children who live with both parents and siblings 1 child who lives with both parents,	11 Catholic 1 Orthodox 2 no religion 1 Hindu 1 Born again Christian	1 in emergency accommodation 30km away from the school due to homelessness.	

			Parents Romanian, born in UK		assessment for autism	brother and grandmother. 1 child who lives with Mam and sister. Dad lives in alternative accommodation. Mam and Dad are together 1 child who lives with Mam, sister and grandmother. Dad has no contact with the child. 1 child who lives with Mam, grandmother and uncle. Dad has no contact with the child. 1 child who lives with Mam, brother and grandmother (Dad is disabled and lives in his family home as it was adapted for	(Catholic school)	1 in temporary accommodation due to homelessness (While no other children were directly identified as being particularly vulnerable to poverty within this group, this school has DEIS status as it is located in an area traditionally serving a high-poverty cohort. Therefore, it is likely that at least some of these children are living in consistent poverty)

Setting	Gender	Language	Ethnicity		Additional needs	Family	Religion	
						him prior to the children being born) Mam and Dad are together. 1 child who lives with Mam, brother and sister, Dad is deceased. 1 child who lives with Mam and sister. Mam and Dad are separated. 1 child who lives with Dad, Step Mam and Step Siblings and half-sister. Mam has contact at the weekend		
Baby room, full day care, community setting (6)	3 boys 3 girls	3 English 1 English and Italian 1 Croatian 1 Hindi	White Irish Croatian Indian Italian	X	1 with indications of autism	5 children live with both parents 1 child lives with mam and two uncles in grandmothers house	Religious backgrounds not noted	X

Totals	Boys: 72 Girls: 64	Languages spoken (18): English Irish Romanian Malayalam Tamil Portuguese German French Russian Mandarin Slovak Hindi Mauritian Creole Polish Latvian Norwegian Croatian Italian	Cultures represented: (19) White Irish Black Irish Romanian Malayis Tamil Portuguese Brazilian German French Russian Han Chinese Slovakian Hindi Mauritian Polish Latvian Norwegian Croatian Italian	Traveller / Roma: 0	Children with additional needs: 23	Diverse and complex family structures represented, but no family with same-sex parents included	Religious backgrounds represented (6): No religion / atheist Catholic Church of Ireland Other Christian Hindu Muslim	Poverty / Homelessness: At least 10 children living in consistent poverty. This is likely to be higher. 3 children homeless

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2.8.5 Data Analysis

Using the child-centred approaches described above, the research instruments investigated babies', toddlers' and young children's perspectives and voices to capture their views on what is working well with Aistear as they experience it and how it might be enhanced or updated (Phase 1) with a view to informing the ongoing redevelopment work on Aistear by NCCA (Phase 2). When data collection for Phase 1 was completed by educators, the researchers completed data analysis to document, synthesise and analyse the messages from babies, toddlers and young children, identifying themes and key findings. Materials in Irish were translated into English to facilitate consistent data analysis. The MAXQDA digital tool was used to support data analysis, and an interpretivist lens was employed. Fourteen initial codes were developed - the nine research questions asked and the five different lenses identified (Wellbeing in children from birth, Communication in children from birth, Identity and belonging in children from birth, Exploring and thinking in children from birth, and Education and care for children from birth) (see Appendix B).

The codes were then interpreted and applied to the data using a matrix built from the literature, using Aistear and its background papers primarily. This is provided in Appendix C. The segments were then cross referenced with a second set of codes, which emerged from the initial coding of the data (see Appendix D). Each question was answered with the coded segments but was then further broken down under headings of each type of setting, to allow for greater understanding and further analysis (age-group, geography, business model – private / community etc). The coded segments were then triangulated, guided by the following concepts:

- Educator as interpreter of the 100 languages of children
- Educator as an insider researcher within the community of the ECEC setting
- Allison James' (2007) paper on the problems and pitfalls of interpreting children's voices
- Laura Lundy's (2018) 'In defense of tokenism' paper

The themes emerging from this were then re-synthesised within the three groups of Aistear Principles, to provide answers to each of the nine research questions from the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children. Finally, the answers given by the children were collated into recommendations for what is working well and what might be considered for redevelopment, structured by the Aistear Themes. The specific examples of data provided

below are a very small subsection of the extensive data collected and were chosen as illustrative examples of the points raised.

2.8.6 Challenges

Commissioning a consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to enable their participation in the review of national policy is a highly innovative approach by the NCCA. Children of all ages, from birth onwards, have the right to participate in decision-making, to express their views in all matters affecting them, and to have those views considered and given due weight (United Nations, 1989). However, models, approaches, and techniques to enable the participation of the youngest children, particularly babies and toddlers, in decision-making in ECEC are limited (Correia and Aguiar, 2022), as they are in the Irish national policy arena.

The internationally well-regarded Irish *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (Government of Ireland, 2021) includes a rigorous participation model based on the Lundy Model described earlier, but *how* the framework could be used to support the participation of young children, particularly babies and toddlers, has yet to be fully articulated. Internationally, we have yet to emerge from the marginalisation of young children, particularly non-verbal children, from consultation and research, and there remains a gap in understanding that children express their views and voices through indirect means such as play (Murray, 2021). In the field of research, approaches and methods with babies, toddlers and young children are far less well-developed in the field of research than for older age groups (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Cassidy, 2021).

The reflections of the research team in this 'challenges' section are a source of learning on ethical, developmentally-appropriate, rights-based consultation and research practices in early childhood, not only for the research team, but for the NCCA for future consultations, other Irish governmental agencies and departments, and for child rights advocates. Some of these challenges were anticipated and reflected on as a research team before acting, and some emerged in the course of the research, requiring ongoing dynamic reflective action, as appropriate within a Participant Action Research approach (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). They were documented and mitigated to the greatest extent possible by the research team. The lessons learned are opportunities for new learning to feed into Phase 2 of this Aistear consultation. They provide learning for advocacy for the voices of babies, toddlers and young

children within governmental structures and activities and institutional research ethics structures and governance.

First, as described elsewhere in this report a rigorous ethical approach was required. The research team, as experts in the field of early childhood education and care, were all confident in their knowledge that ethics with babies, toddlers and young children must be situated and relational, not based on a checklist approach to ethics. Drawing on the work of Skånfors (2009) and Koushoult and Juhl (2021), the team recognised that ethical dilemmas can occur in situations where researchers must deal with contradictory concerns where there is no unequivocal or obvious "right decision" that can be anticipated fully in an institutional research ethics policy and process. Rather, situations can be unique and a process of 'ethics in action' is required where the researcher responds earnestly to ethical dilemmas as they arise. PAR allows for and supports the sometimes uncomfortable experience for researchers of 'not knowing', teasing out and reflecting (O'Toole, 2022). However, institutional ethics committees are still learning about this approach to research with children, and research where the researcher, and children as co-researcher, are powerful agents in how the research emerges and unfolds over time in sometimes unpredictable ways. Through the institutional research ethics process, a dialogue emerged between the ethics committee concerned and the research team. While the process was a challenge in terms of the timing when getting this consultation off the ground it also provided learning for all actors involved. The process provided learning for institutional data protection offices and research ethics committees on PAR as a methodology and on competence for participation in decision-making in early childhood, although some points of tension, such as visibility of children's faces in photographs, could not be resolved. Additional learning for researchers is to build additional time into the work plan for these ethical encounters.

Second, a significant effort to build up trust between the researcher and research participant is crucial when working with babies, toddlers and young children. Early childhood educators, as the experienced experts closest to the children, engaged directly in the data collection processes, and the trust they had already formed with the children was central to the success of this project. This approach relies heavily on the expertise and capacity of the educators to ensure appropriate data is gathered and presented in a way that supports analysis. The recruitment of educators on this project was not a significant challenge, but there were cohorts that were more challenging to recruit and retain than others, for example, childminders and

corporate full-day care, which impacted on sampling, as discussed elsewhere in this report. Because of hard work on the part of the project partners to support the educators as researchers throughout the collection of data, and the outstanding commitment to the principles of the project on behalf of the educators themselves, recruitment and retention challenges were kept to a minimum. However, the research team were confronted by the gap between the sampling strategy and the diversity of the eventual participants on the basis of consent. Deep critical reflection (as appropriate for PAR) will underpin a more mindful and appropriate engagement with the Traveller community for Phase 2.

Third, the issue of 'adult gaze', which refers to the necessity for the raw data from the settings to be interpreted through an adult lens, was discussed in depth on an ongoing basis by the research team. In the design of consultation and research projects with babies, toddlers and young children, the focus of commissioners, policymakers, researchers and advocates tends to be on issues of sampling and 'child-friendly' consultation methods and media. Less attention is given to the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from children (Nutbrown, 2021). Nutbrown argues (2021) that research can run the risk of becoming tokenistic and inauthentic, and that faithfulness, integrity and trustworthiness are required to truly tell a story that represents the reality of the research context and represent the lived experiences of young children. We must therefore bear this notion of 'adult as interpreter' of children's views and perspectives in mind and learn from the challenges presented. The role of reflexivity is strongly considered as an attempt to overcome some of these challenges around interpretation whereby each educator is supported to reflect on their role with children as part of the research process to identify and acknowledge the lens they use when engaging with children and interpreting their 100 languages. Importantly, the process of analysing the data to identify what children were telling us about their experiences of Aistear (the consultation) has been kept separate from the process of engaging with the granular detail of Aims, Learning goals, etc to tease out what changes to Aistear may be appropriate based on what they told us (curriculum framework development). This ensured that, to as great an extent as possible, the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were not obscured by adult agendas (NCCA, 2023).

The final learning from Phase 1 is on 'Aistear as framework' as opposed to 'Aistear as practice' and the complexity of disentangling one from the other. Although the remit of the research project was to consult with babies, toddlers and young children as a means of capturing their views and perspectives on Aistear i.e., the curriculum framework, if we replaced the word

'Aistear' in any of the nine questions (taken from the proposal document to code) with the words 'pedagogy' or 'practice', or indeed 'ECEC in Ireland', the children's responses might look exactly the same. In this way, the collated data from the babies, toddlers and young children is to some extent framed by the educators' interpretation of Aistear, the framework in practice. Young children can only comment on their 'lived' experience within their setting and we know that such 'lived' experience has been heavily influenced by the practice / pedagogy of the educators involved which has been informed to a greater or lesser extent by Aistear, the framework. Therefore, we acknowledge that it could be argued that very young participants' perspectives and views on the curriculum framework do not occur in a conceptual or abstract way but are based on the educators' interpretation of that framework i.e., the pedagogy and practice children experience daily. However, this is also the case for any consultation with children on curriculum development, such as the recent consultation with primary aged children on the draft primary curriculum framework also commissioned by NCCA (Kiely et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, we have framed these considerations as 'challenges' rather than 'limitations' as we do not believe they have 'limited' the validity of the research. Rather, continuous critical reflection on how to *genuinely* access the voices of babies, toddlers and young children has in fact *strengthened* the research, and so these considerations are shared here in order to make clear the rigour with which the key findings were developed.

Chapter 3: Key Findings of the Consultation

The key findings of the consultation are presented here firstly for babies and toddlers (birth to three years old) and then for young children (three to six years old) in order to ensure that the visibility of the youngest children is not obscured by their smaller numbers in the sample. The presentation of the findings is structured around the principles of Aistear, providing children's 'answers' to key questions developed from the principles (see Appendix A). Some examples of data from a range of settings have been included to help the reader understand how the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were translated into the answers given. Since Aistear itself is an integrated curriculum framework which recognises the holistic development of the child, there are crossovers evident between the principles, the answers and the sample data; some data were relevant for multiple sections, and while we have allocated each example to only one answer, the reader should note the dynamic, intertwined nature of children's perspectives and how we have captured their voices. Equally, in many cases the 'answer' to the questions may be the same or similar *conceptually* for children from birth to three and children from three to six, but may look quite different *when enacted in practice*. The examples from the data selected for the two different cohorts illustrates and reflects this. Therefore, specific examples from the data were selected using the following criteria:

1. Ensuring that a range of age-ranges are represented so that the experiences of babies, toddlers and young children are all included, illustrating potential differences and similarities in how concepts can look in practice for different age groups.

2. Ensuring that a range of settings are represented to illustrate the multiple and diverse contexts in which babies, toddlers and young children are experiencing Aistear, and the perspectives of all contributing settings and children can feel visible in the report.

3. Accessing a range of data types. However, some data forms are not possible to share in a report format. For example, videos cannot be shared even in a digital report as it would not be possible to safeguard the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms are used where referring to all children and educators. Readers should also note that pixelation of children's faces in photographs was not by the choice of the researchers, but rather was a non-negotiable condition of ethical approval. The nuances and tensions relating to this are explored in detail in the Methodology chapter.

4. Identifying particularly illustrative examples from the extensive range of data so as to help the reader understand how the 'answers' were generated. It should be noted that

this is not 'cherry-picking' as the answers themselves were generated from the full range of data using the rigorous data analysis procedures described above. Rather, we have chosen examples of data that clearly illustrate the conclusions that were drawn through analysis of the full data set. The examples used should be viewed as a very small subset of the overall data-set.

## 3.1 The voices of babies and toddlers (birth to 3 years)

3.1.1 Aistear Principles Group 1: Children and their lives in early childhood (uniqueness; equality and diversity; children as citizens)

As a baby or toddler… How are my unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities and experiences supported through Aistear?

The unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences of babies and toddlers are supported through Aistear by having informed educators and adults who understand Aistear and how to implement it, connecting it to their practice and relationship-building. When those who educate and care for babies and toddlers give them the space and time to play and experiment in an environment that is rich with resources, this inspires them and builds on their interests, needs, strengths, abilities and experiences. Having people who understand and listen to them through their different ways of communication, builds important relationships that guide their learning and development.

Evidence from the data of the home setting illustrates how Robbie's[i] unique strengths, needs, abilities and experiences are understood within the Aistear framework. The informed adult, in this instance, the child's parent, notices her toddler's play, as he watches the builders working on the family site next door. The parent provides Robbie with space and time, enabling him to play out his experiences and interests uninterrupted.

The documentation of this play captures Robbie's interpretation of observations, as he uses a calculator as a mobile phone, *"J, hi! How are you J?! Roof on! Blocks on! No, no floor!" (shouts the toddler into an old calculator held at his ear, being used as a mobile phone).* This demonstrates how Robbie is making sense of the world around him, through the people in his life and his everyday life experiences within his home, which link with Aistear's Themes.
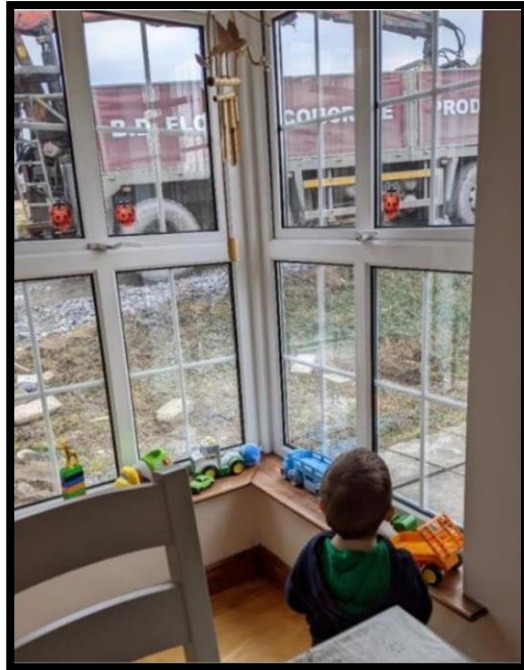
Another example of how children value space and time was found in the data from the childminding setting as the babies engage in and explore water play. The interests of the babies in sensory play are evident in the activity which was set out for them in the kitchen, providing an inviting and therapeutic experience for the babies transitioning into the service. The principles of Aistear are visible in the respectful regards for babies' preferences, enabling them to play alongside each other with their individual pots and bowls for water exploration.

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This extract from the data captures this play.

"It was a wet morning outside so we decided to explore some water in the kitchen. We gathered some towels for the floor and filled some metal bowls and pots with water. First the children splashed and used their hands before we added some droppers and sea creatures to our play. Ana spent a sustained period of time exploring the water and began to pour the water out to make a drum using the container. Ana will increase her fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination through actions like pouring, squirting, scrubbing, stirring and squeezing."

*Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval*

Babies and toddlers showed in the data that time, space and opportunities to experience rich and open-ended resources not only builds on their strengths and abilities, it can stimulate new interests. This exploration is again visible as the babies engage in messy paint play. Their laughter noted in the educator's pedagogical documentation of the experience indicates the joy that such freedom of creative expression brought to the group, supporting the development of relationships and social interactions.

"Linda and Christof spent some time exploring paint today. I set out some paint and paper with no instruments to see how they would explore. It was delightful to watch as they both painted using their fingers. Soon this experience turned into a face painting experience and the beautiful sound of laughter could be heard throughout the house."

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The following excerpt from the data gathered from Sheila's baby room highlights how the formation of a relationship between the baby and educator can support the interpretation of the baby's different forms of communication.
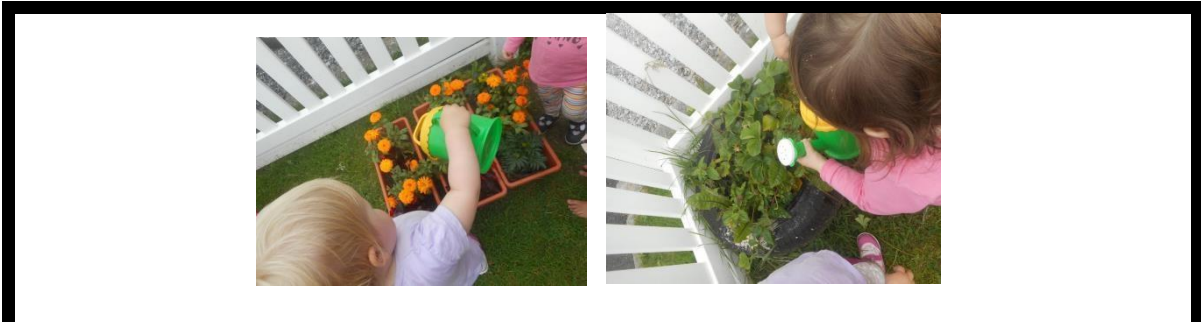
"Mary: Are you thinking about pouring your water out?

Willa: Yeah! (with a smile).

Mary: I know you love pouring and playing with water, how about we play with the water tray that is set up outside?

Willa: (Shakes head).

Mary: How about we water the flowers as they might be thirsty too?

Willa: Yeah! (with a nod, and a smile, and off she goes looking for something. 20 seconds later W is back with a watering can and hands it to me)

Mary: Will I fill this up for you so you can water the plants?

Willa: Yeah!

The importance of the relationship is again evident as the findings document how the baby was *"all business carrying the can to the flowers outside",* yet *"she looks back to check if I am there, so I follow her"*. This demonstrates how listening to the baby's different ways of communication guides and empowers the baby to pursue her interests.

Following the lead of babies and toddlers can enable them to make choices about their play and engagement with their environment. This is illustrated in the data taken from the same baby room. Emilie (age 1.5 years) is observed in imaginative role play with the doll and buggy, responding with *"her big smile"* when asked by the educator if she wanted to go for a walk. By interpreting and responding to children's different forms of communication, adults can support their learning and development.

This is captured here, as Emilie indicates her plans by pushing the doll buggy over to the gate:

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"Emilie was pushing the buggy around the room competently, steering around the obstacles in her way, she appeared to be looking for something and as I continued to watch her, she found a doll, she stopped, picked it up and put it into the buggy. She caught my eye and I asked her if she was taking the baby for a walk. She smiled her big smile showing off all her teeth and while pushing the buggy, kept an eye on me to see, I expect, to see if I was following her. Emilie made her way outside (seamless indoor /outdoor) and stopped at the gate to exit the play space (into carpark and lawned area), she again caught my eye and waited by the gate. I knew then that she wanted to out and have a walk around. I made my way over and asked, are we going out the gate for a walk, and Emilie laughed excitedly and said "yeah". Nothing goes unnoticed by Willa who was quick to join us at the gate, the two girls smiled excitedly at each other and danced about until I got the gate open and

off we went with the buggy to explore the outdoor spaces. The voice of the child has been seen here in her choice, interest, and decision making being respected and followed through on."

Similarly, Joey (aged 20 months) and Evan (19 months) who attend the setting five days a week, communicate their interests and wants by having the freedom to *"to move between indoors and outdoors"*. They are observed spending time on the climbing cube and *"trying out new ways to down the slide"*, illustrating the active physical play they enjoy, challenging themselves and learning about their bodies as they grow and develop. There is a sense of adventure in Joey's play in *"rolling cars down the slide and then sliding down himself after the car"*. The children are again given the time and space to explore and express these interests, thereby supporting their learning and development.

Aistear gives the adults and educators who care for babies and toddlers the tools to see them, communicate with them, understand and interpret their hundred languages. It gives adults the skills to build relationships with babies and toddlers; and it gives them the skills, tools, and ideas to create a physical and social environment that allows babies and toddlers to discover and develop their unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences. This is illustrated below through the documentation of children's hundred languages (Malaguzzi, 2004) in Mary's community full day care setting.

Handwritten notes (left box):

…you very much enjoy independant play but have built close relationships with peers of similar interests. You enjoy sharing your key worker your interests in your learning journal & through books. When playing in a large group, I understand this can be a little overwhelming & encourage you to use your words & validate your feelings. We encourage lots of conversation in order to help expand on your interests within the room.

use of :emotion mirror
→ Words
→ Timer
→ Learning journal

Handwritten notes (second box):

…we make a conscious effort to make your learning journey accessible for you to showcase your interests + work

we include pictures, books relative of farming, aswell as farm animals, real astro turf etc to participate & expand on your pl… We also make sure these materials available indoors outdoors.

In summary, the unique strengths interests, needs, abilities, and experiences of babies and toddlers are supported through time, space and relationships in well-resourced environments that allow for choice, exploration and play.

As a baby or toddler…To what extent are my multiple identities included, supported and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy?

The multiple identities of babies, toddlers and young children are supported through culturally responsive pedagogies, particularly in relation to their families and local communities, when they are given the space and opportunity to engage in and share their family relationships and experience community spaces. An example of this is found in the data from the full day care, small town rural community setting (Sheila). Here, the educator observes a baby, looking through their family book, *"I am so happy that you want to share your family with me. It is such a delight to see how much your family means to you as you flicked through the pages, naming your mammy, daddy, your brother, and your grannies and grandas"*. By having the opportunity to bring their family relationship into the setting and the physical and emotional space to sharing it with others, the baby's sense of identity can be reaffirmed.

"Having family books available to each of the children, which they can access independently has a positive impact on children's sense of identity and sense of belonging within their learning environment. Each child will recognise that they are unique and loved by their family at home and by the educators in the room. This deepens the connection/relationship and allows the voice of the child to come through." (Sheila)

Engagement with and visibility in the local community can support multiple identities of babies and toddlers as they explore their surroundings and become familiar with these community spaces. In Margaret's childminding setting, the children are given the opportunity walk through the main street, where they frequently observed a shop which is decorated for different occasions. On this occasion, it was in support of Galway in the all-Ireland final. The children discussed the decorations, with one child recognising the Galway colours *"Christof: "Up Galway"*.

"We love to stop for a look at M.'s on the main street as she always has beautiful window displays to go with every occasion. On this particular week Galway were playing in the all-Ireland final. The town of xxxxxxxxx was well decorated with flags and bunting in support."

"M.'s shop and some lovely crochet ducks caught Linda's and Christof's attention. A discussion was had about these ducks and where was their mammy?

Linda.: "Where mammy go" (pointing to the duck)

Christof: "Up Galway"

Linda: "Teddy""

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

These expeditions have strong links to Aistear as they can support a child's sense of local culture, but also their family identity, such being the case with Christof. However, the recognition of a child's multiple identities can also occur through the representation of roles and activities of family members through play. This is evident below as the data captures Christof cutting the grass.

Through engaging with Christof's mother, the childminder, Margaret, is given insight as to where this interest stemmed from, *"Christof's mum B. was telling me that he loves watching daddy at home doing the lawn and he will watch closely."*

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

Another example of recognising a child's multiple identities is through conversations shared with the children. This was captured in the data gathered from Mary's full day care, community setting as the educator spoke to children about their experiences with their family members. For instance, David spoke of time spent on the farm with his Dad, discussing the *"Big Tractor"*.

> [REDACTED] I was asking you the colours yellow and green you replied excitedly by painting we learn colours in a fun way, I have dandelions at my house you said with mammy there yellow too it was beautiful to hear you recall a memory from home with mammy about flowers. 😊 I was asking you about the daffodils and asking had ye daffodils at your house too, just dandelions you replied.

> [REDACTED] you really enjoy telling me of your days off with your Dad on the farm. You even call your Dad's tractor 'the big tractor'. We've made a conscious effort to showcase pictures of your family in your learning journal & family wall.

> on his adventures in [REDACTED] enjoy? watching at the cars, tractors + trucks go by! 😊

The role of the family in supporting a child's sense of self through interactions was evident in the data, as Robbie (Home setting - child aged 2 years) clearly demonstrates his *"preference to be called by his name at all times. If we messily call him something like: a ticket/a monkey he replies with: "Me NOT monkey. My name Robbie!"*.

The home setting also demonstrates the exploration of different identities through play with different resources such as dress up and tools, *"The same goes for her brother. It's ok for Robbie to wear…a pink hat, to fix things, to be kind, to play with trucks, to be a Super-man formula driver wearing a hairband."*

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

Overall, in general, babies and toddlers identities within their families and communities are clearly and strongly centred and represented. However, representation of multiple dimensions of diversity is limited.

As a baby or toddler…How are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen enacted through Aistear?

The rights and responsibilities of babies and toddlers as full citizens are enacted through Aistear when their educators recognise and realise their rights as set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in their practice. Babies and toddlers are offered the opportunity to make choices and decisions, and also given autonomy over their bodies, their emotions, their learning, their environment, and their communication. When they are given opportunities to realise their responsibilities to their peers, family or environment in a genuine way with real tasks and jobs that have meaning, they can see that they have a balance of rights and responsibilities.

An example of this is captured below, where Robbie and his sister, Katherine's rights are recognised as they are playing together with small world animals, Lego blocks and beads. The children have shaped the environment with different resources to enhance their play.

Next, customers (animals) cued up to get their dinner.

Video 13 and 14-how the system works and filling the truck

Then they thought it was too busy (K. explained that during Covid you can't have too many people together, especially not wearing masks), so they designed a train delivery system.

"Then they thought it was too busy. Katherine explained that you can't have too many people together, especially not wearing masks, so they designed a train delivery system".

Similarly, in the baby room of Sheila's full day care setting, the data demonstrate two different ways in which the babies' rights are recognised and realised. Firstly, through the provision of autonomy over their environment, *"Willa has the opportunity daily to have choice and to decide on where and what she will play with".* The second example is ensuring that the babies can enact their right to choice and decision-making over their learning through accessing the resources within the environment:

"All toys, loose parts, etc are at the child's level to make sure that they have every opportunity to gain independence and develop their individual personalities and dispositions."

While the data show that babies' rights are recognised and supported within the environment, they also demonstrate that there are occasions when adults may have to make decisions to ensure the babies' development and learning is cared for:

"On occasion, the adult will have to make decisions in the best interest of the child (too hot for outdoors), keeping in mind to give other opportunities for play experiences."

The act of adult-led activities also has links to Aistear as part of the role of the educator.

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When babies and toddlers are offered opportunities to experience real-life tasks and meaningful jobs, they are empowered to enact true citizenship. The data gathered from the childminding setting illustrates this principle in practice; *"Daniel asks Pauric* (adult) *'What jobs do we have today?' when he comes home from work".* The adult responds by providing an appropriate job for the child, *"Pauric left this job for Daniel and he was straight to work gathering the long grass left behind after mowing the lawn".*

"Daniel decided to use the dumper to gather the grass and bring it to the compost bin! What a great idea. Well done, Daniel."

Within the same setting, we also see how Linda and Ana are also given opportunities to care for their environment, another link to the Aistear framework.

"The children have been showing great care and respect for our garden. They love to 'mow the lawn', help with weeding and watering the plants. This is illustrated in the photos below".
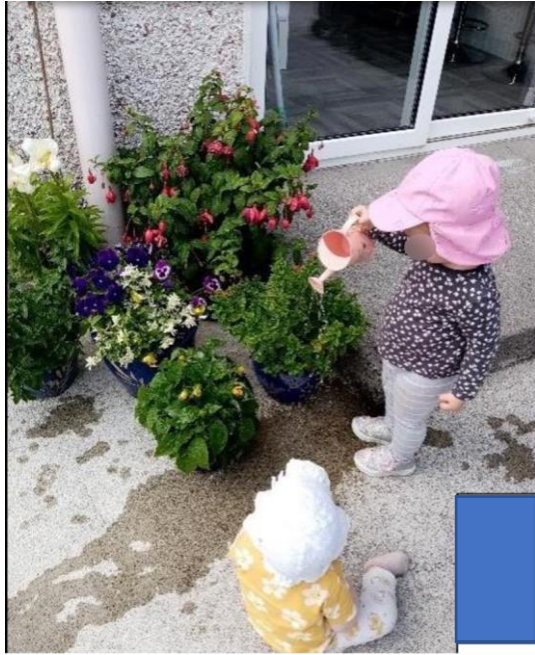
Linda helps to water the flowers as Ana observes keeping a close eye on the water to play in."

Educators who implement a rights-based approach, as demonstrated in all participating settings, frame their practice and engagement with babies and toddlers through a rights-based lens. The different examples show the multiple ways that children's rights were respected and empowered, by structuring their learning environment with accessibility of resources so they could enact their right to autonomy. Educators also offered babies and toddlers opportunities to engage in activities that support their rights and while enabling them to experience real and meaningful responsibilities.

3.1.2. Aistear Principles Group 2: Children's connections with others (relationships; parents, family and community; adult's role)

As a baby or toddler… Do the interactions and relationships I experience through Aistear support my learning and development?

The interactions and relationships babies and toddlers experience through Aistear support their learning and development in a positive way in the educational setting. When they experience meaningful relationships and interactions with their educators, families and other children in their setting, this allows them the safety to explore, learn, investigate, and experience all their

feelings. Positive relationships also allow them to communicate in multiple ways. Through strong relationships with them, educators or parents can observe (interpret the hundred languages), assess and plan the environment or resources to allow them to expand on their learning and development. An example of how interactions and relationships with family members provide children with a safe environment to explore and learn is demonstrated in the data. Robbie, (home setting, child aged 2 years) who is currently living in his grandparents' house with his sibling and parents, is exposed to different activities with different family members which expands his learning and development.

"At a home setting there is more scope for an apprenticeship style of an interaction, as we as parents hold strong values, which we aspire to pass on to our children. My husband shares his passion for Lego and I share my passion for books and reading. Granny is a former piano teacher and a keen gardener. Of course, the children are encouraged to make their own decisions and choices but are continuously exposed to these activities."

In addition to this, this data demonstrate how positive relationships can enable children to communicate in multiple ways, such as through physical affection, playing with Lego with his sibling, through learning *"some yoga moves which he then practices at tea-time with his Granny"*, and sharing a story with his family.

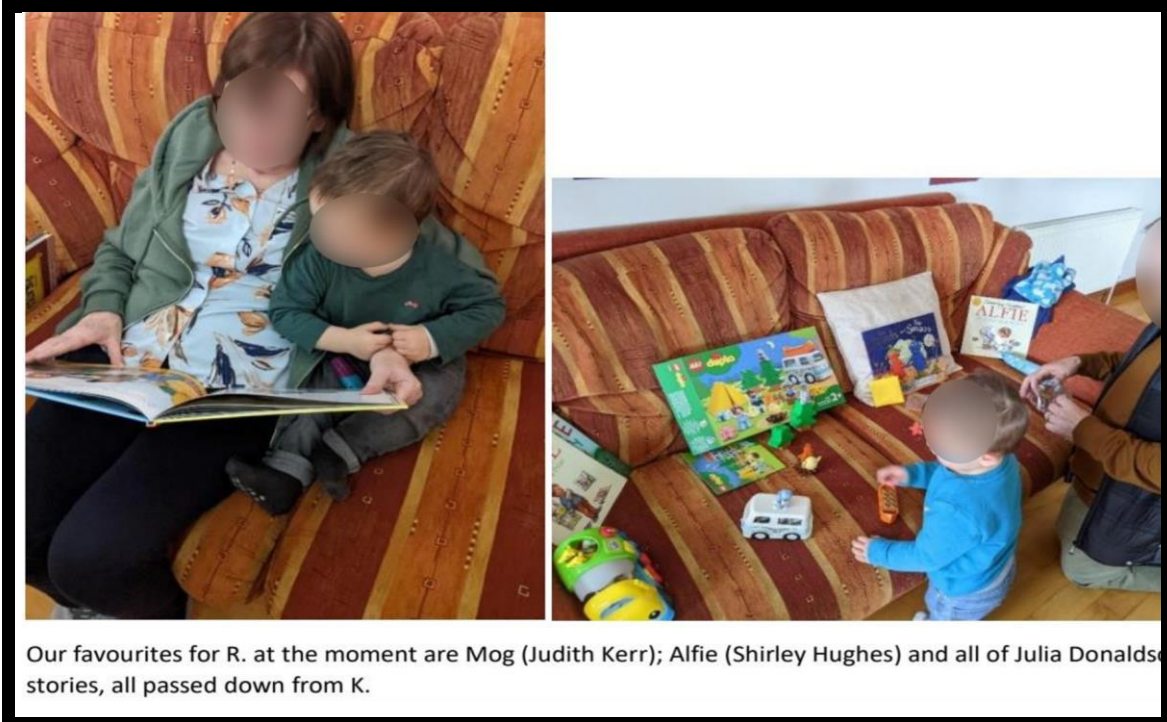*Downward dog (plus upward dog and cobbler)*
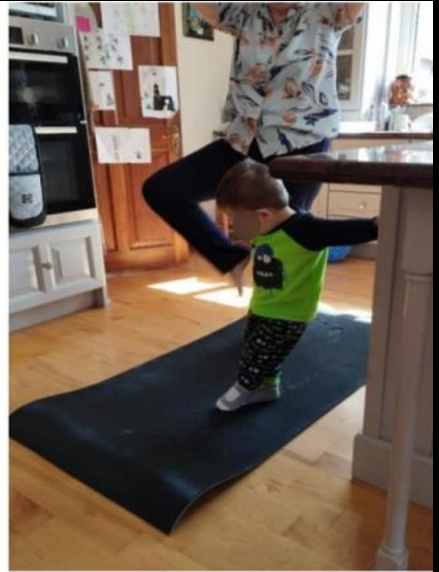
Tree pose

Read it again...Just one more!

"Reading is an integral part of our family unit. We spend a lot of time reading."

Our favourites for R. at the moment are Mog (Judith Kerr); Alfie (Shirley Hughes) and all of Julia Donaldso
stories, all passed down from K.

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Positive relationships with peers play a significant role in learning to communicate and play with other children. They also offer babies and toddlers the opportunity to form and maintain friendships. The interactions and relationships that babies and toddlers experience with the other children in the setting are influenced by how Aistear guides their educator to observe and allow for space and time through a slow, nurturing pedagogy.

In the childminder setting, the data show that children can experience friendship that is not only fun but also fosters communication and negotiations through relationships with their peers.

"David (aged 2 years 10 months) and Ana (aged 1 year) have developed a beautiful friendship. David is very caring and kind to Ana. He loves to help her. He helps making bottles and feeding Ana."

Within this reciprocal relationship, both Ana and David are secure in their expression of feelings.

"Ana loves me, (smiles) we are best friends!" David explained, with great excitement, as he spoke to Ana with his shoulders lifting and a big smile on his face."

> *"While on the rocker Ana's hat was falling off and David without hesitation spoke softly with a smile to her saying "Your hat is falling off". Ana smiled back at David as he fixed her hat."*

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Within these data, the meaningful relationship shared between David and Ana visibly supports their learning and investigation:

> *"While playing at the water table David holds up the water container so that Ana can play with the water as it comes out. "Ana likes playing with water and splashing it around" as he laughed. David is sharing his knowledge and skills with his friend at the water table."*

"David always talks about his friend Ana so gently and with a smile on his face. It is wonderful to watch their friendship develop so naturally."

The value children place on their friendships is also evident in Mary's community setting.

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Similarly, in the baby room of Sheila's community full day care setting, the educator, through a positive relationship, observes and interprets Willa's hundred languages:

"Our relationship and connection is strong, you knew that I would know what you wanted and that I would be happy to be with you on your wander in the outdoors."

The emotional safety and security which this relationship offers Willa supports her learning and investigation of her environment, as documented by the educator.

"She feels safe in her environment and safe with me to want to expand her play to the wider service environment."

Relationships are a common theme within these data, as Willa and her peer also form a relationship. The educator documents how the babies' interpret each other's hundred languages.

"They understand each other having spent a lot of time together, they know what each other will enjoy and respond to each other's interests and their sense of fun."

This builds on their experiences of fun, play and friendship. The role of relationships in the babies' learning and development is recognised and explicitly documented by Sheila. This excerpt resonates with Aistear, as relationships and following the child's lead are central to the framework.

"Relational pedagogy is to me one of the most important parts of gaining the voice of the child. Time and a slower pace allow for deep connections to be made and a deep knowledge of each child to be made… The voice of the child along with the voice of the educator. A sense of knowing each other and togetherness."

In summary, the relationships in the lives of babies and toddlers are crucial for their learning and development. While Aistear already centres such relationships with adults, these babies and toddlers have expressed the centrality of their relationships with other children.

As a baby or toddler… How does Aistear support my educators, family, and community to collaborate for my benefit?

Aistear supports educators and families to collaborate for the benefit of babies and toddlers by encouraging the sharing of information from home to setting and from setting to home. Sometimes this helps to regulate babies and toddlers and make them feel safe and secure, and other times it helps them to find things in their home life to broaden or deepen their learning in their setting. When educators bring babies and toddlers into their communities and allow them to create genuine ongoing relationships with places, people and businesses, it gives them a secure identity and sense of belonging.

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It is notable that meaningful collaboration between community and family (that goes beyond family photos or family books) is limited in the data for children from birth to 3 years, other than in those settings that are in a home (parent and childminder). Exploration of the community and engaging with local members of the community can reaffirm babies' and toddlers' sense of identity, not only within the group, but as an individual. The documentation of the children in the childminder setting captures the relationships formed with members of the community:

"*Michael is the local butcher. Each day when we are passing the shop the doors are always open and the children all say hello. He will always come to talk to the children and ask how they are doing. This has become part of the routine now. When we get ready to leave the house Christof will say "I have to say hello to Michael".*

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This setting also highlights how exploring the community can offer opportunities of learning to occur. As documented in the data, the children had the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of people's roles within the community.

"Linda takes some time to smell the flowers. While out for our walk we are very lucky to see all the beautiful flowers and the hard work the tidy towns do to keep our community looking so good."

This exposure and exploration of the local community reaffirms the children's sense of identity and belonging.

"We are sure to see or hear something different as well as meeting the locals in our community who stop to say hello".

The data also show that these children engage within members of their community from their setting.

"The children always hear the bin lorry coming and race to the gate or the window to say hello and watch the great job these guys do… Our very friendly bin men give the children a great big wave when they arrive every week".

The photographs below illustrate the children waving to the bin men and anticipating the arrival of the post man. The impact of these *"adventures"* as termed by a child, David, are documented by the childminder.

I wonder does he have anything for us today is top of the agenda when the post man arrives.

"The children have gained so much confidence as they say hello to everyone and are well known around the town of B.!"

The data also demonstrate how children can apply their previous learning to new opportunities:

"The children have been learning from the first day they have come for a walk how to be safe and what to do when crossing the road. We "Stop, Look and Listen". We wear

our hi vis so we are easier to be seen on the road. The children love giving the cars a thumbs up and a wave when they stop to let us cross"

Bringing items from home into the setting can support the educator's understanding of babies' and toddlers' family relationships. Having access to these items can reaffirm their sense of identity within their families. Understanding who these people are and recognising their relationship with them can occur through partnership and communication with babies and toddlers and their families.

The baby room of Sheila's full day care setting demonstrates how the impact of family books and their accessibility to babies and toddlers can bring about enjoyment for the children and an opportunity to share their family with their educators and peers:

"We flip through the book several times, giving you and I lots of time to chat and acknowledge your family as being the centre of your world. Other children come and sit with us and look and listen to us chatting about your family."

Similarly, the educator's documentation from the full day care room in the community setting note the significance of collaboration between the educator and the parent and how this partnership can support a child's development. The mother of the child, shared information relating to the child's eating habits:

"Mammy says that you aren't the best grubber, and would love to see you eat more, so let work together and introduce you to lots of yummy food!"

Within the short piece, it states on two occasions, "*let's work together",* which implies the process of collaboration is not a once off occasion in the sharing of information, nor is it a process which excludes the children from their learning and development.

The strong relationships between babies and toddlers and their grandparents is also evident:
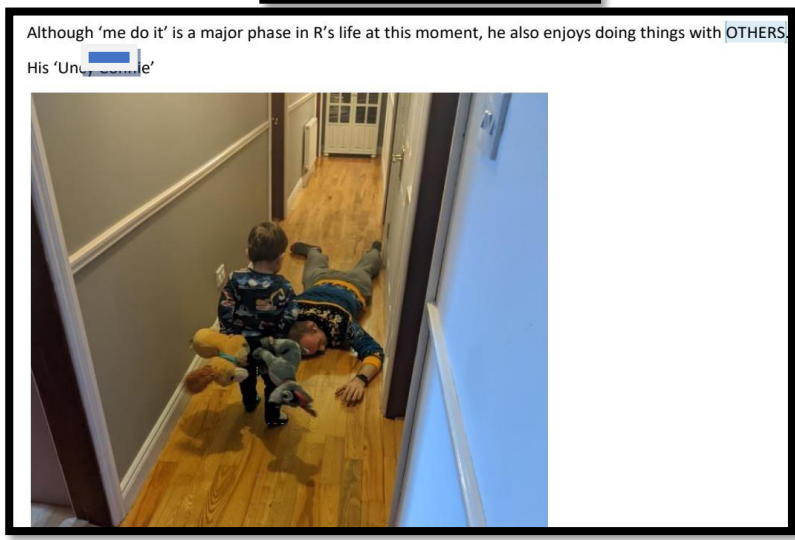

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Sheila highlights the impact of relationships, as she and a colleague reflect on a baby's growth and development:

"Your speech is coming on great, and your communication skills are fantastic. Lucy, your educator for today and myself discuss the way you are playing and how you have learned to be tender and loving. Lucy described it beautifully when she reflected on you being well nurtured since birth, both by your wonderful family at home and then and continued by all your educators who love and grow with you in the centre."

The data from the home setting of parent Tanya, and her two year old Robbie, demonstrate the collaboration that can occur with other members of the child's family, in this case an uncle can affirm Robbie's sense of identity.

Learning how to interact with our dog-Jerry: "Stop jumping Jerry. Rub you?".

Although 'me do it' is a major phase in R's life at this moment, he also enjoys doing things with OTHERS. His 'Uncle Connie'

The practice of the adults who support learning and development of babies and toddlers is framed by Aistear to encourage the building of strong relationships and the utilisation of a slow, relational, nurturing pedagogy (Hayes, 2004). Strong relationships with babies and toddlers allow adults to recognise all of their languages and to respond to them with a loving pedagogy that is fun, safe and warm. In analysing the data, this code focused on the pedagogy and practice of the educator but it is interesting to note how often it overlaps and entwines with the codes on relationships. It seems the babies and toddlers in this data-set experience a form of relational nurturing pedagogy and have strong bonds and relationships with their educators and caregivers.

An example of this fun, safe, warm and attuned pedagogy is found in the data findings from the childminder setting, as the childminder combines Ana's interest with her development:

"I will continue to provide opportunities for Ana to explore her interest in water and to further develop skills such as fine and gross motor skills. Ana will increase her fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination through actions like pouring, squirting, scrubbing, stirring and squeezing".

It is again illustrated through the childminder's interpretation of the children's different languages, as she observed Daniel and Christof in the local shop:

"Today Daniel and Christof stopped at the biscuit aisle although not on our list. I stood back and listened to the conversation unfolding between the boys. The boys looked for a while saying umm yummy and laughing before looking back at me. I couldn't help but smile and said let's pick one pack for tea and without hesitation they did the rich tea won this time around. They were really yummy".

Another example is found in the data gathered from the baby room in the community setting where the educator documents her feelings toward her relationship with Adam, describing it as *"Our strong attachment"*. The impact of this relationship on the educator's practice and Adam's learning and development is also described:

[Our relationship] "*has allowed me to recognise that Adam needs challenge while he is developing and refining his gross motor skills. He enjoys choice and has a great sense of belief in his abilities, as do I. He shows me daily how determined and motivated he is to be mobile, and I respond by making sure he has ample resources, equipment and space to do so.*"

The development of how this *"strong attachment"* came to be, and how it will continue to develop is eloquently documented by a fellow educator:

"*She has built up a relationship with you over time and knows when you will need support during your learning. This support has increased over time and will continue to adapt and change to fit what you need in order to progress in your development. The educator is attuned to your needs by the knowledge and experience she has had with you over the last few months.*"

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Observing and interpreting the different methods of communication of babies and toddlers can support the educator in following their lead in learning, supporting them in regulating their emotions and promoting their sense of security within the setting. The ability to do this stems from a slow, nurturing and reciprocal relationship which can be informed through the Aistear framework. An example of this is again captured in Sheila's baby room, as the educator states:

"I have taken on board that you like to move and walk so I have made sure to include different types of equipment within the indoor and outdoor environment to offer you challenge and risk."

In another extract from the data, the educator's recognition of Willa's language through a myriad of methods also illustrates the impact of relational pedagogy:

"In this observation Willa was very clearly telling us what play she wanted to achieve, she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that this was in play and not about her wanting to go to bed (something that she is not fond of most days). She trusted that we would play along, and again this stems from the time spent in each other's company, building a relationship based on respect, knowledge, and love."

The educator goes on to link this observation of Willa with the Aistear framework, noting the emphasis Aistear places on relationships:

"Aistear talks about strong relationships and attachments, being confident to explore and play, to express themselves creatively and show increasing independence… Willa's voice is clearly heard here, made easy for her due to the layout of the environment and the knowledge we have as educators through continuous professional

development in what is key to children developing holistically through play and through deep relational pedagogy."

In short, the data show multiple ways in which children's connections with others underpin their learning and development within the Aistear framework.

3.2.3 Aistear Principles Group 3: How children learn and develop (holistic learning and development; active learning; relevant meaningful experiences; communication and learning; the learning environment)

As a baby or toddler…To what extent am I respected as a competent and confident learner?

Babies and toddlers are respected as competent and confident learners when they are given space and respect to be themselves, have all their feelings, and explore what they can do and what they want to do. Aistear provides adults and educators with strength-based ways of observing, assessing, and building, interpreting the languages of babies and toddlers (physical, vocal, arts-based etc.) which helps them see what they are competent at and confident in doing. Through Aistear, adults and educators learn to recognise what babies and toddlers already know, and what they are capable of doing. Adults then use this information to provide an environment which will allow babies and toddlers to explore their interests and build on what they know through planning and providing an environment which stimulates and supports further learning. The impact of this child-led curriculum framework is evident throughout the data. However, it is also emphasised that strong, reciprocal relationships enable adults and educators to interpret the languages of babies and toddlers correctly, and without them misinterpretations could happen leading to communication difficulties that would hinder the learning of babies and toddlers.

As already noted, when babies and toddlers are given opportunities to perform 'jobs' or 'tasks', when they are given a *real* responsibility for their environment and their learning, they are recognised as competent and confident learners. Through respecting children and viewing them in this way, they are afforded space to explore their capabilities. This element of the Aistear principles along with the power of interpretation and strengths-based observation of children's language is clearly demonstrated in the excerpt below, which was collected from the full day care baby room in the community setting. While observing Joey, the educator noted how she

"marvelled at your (Joey's) *ability to negotiate the slope that leads from indoors to outdoors, staying on your feet all the time and recognising to slow your pace and lean back to slow the ride-along you are holding onto. You have such belief in your abilities and have mastered the slope with ease."*

Joey's desire to explore these abilities is observed by the educator, as she gains more knowledge in the skills which Joey has learned to master.
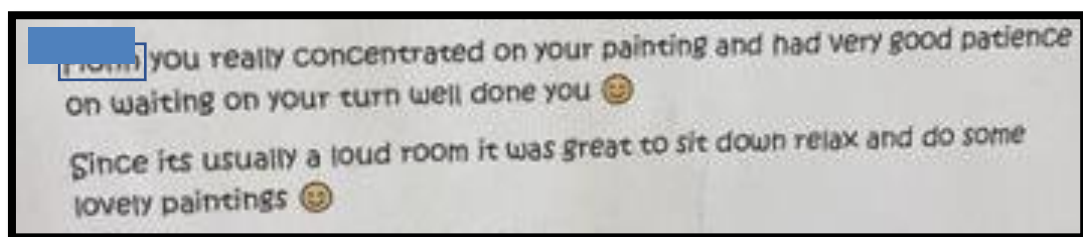

Similarly, in the excerpt below, the educator observes and interprets the babies' language, as they display their physical capabilities and play skills. While there is no verbal language uttered between the babies, both Joey and Emilie observe and interpret the messages which are simultaneously being sent.

"*Joey runs around the climbing cube to the steps, having a quick look behind him to make sure Emilie is interested and following him, and she definitely is, hot on his heels".*

The excitement between the children is almost palpable, as Joey, climbs up the slide, "*nearly wobbling with the anticipation of Emilie coming behind him".* The educator, an onlooker to this play, can interpret the body language and *"squeals of excitement"* of Emilie, as she and

Joey, continue this play of quickly climbing the ladder of the climbing cube and sliding back down. She recognises that "*They both are confident in their choice of risky play, they both have a sense of mastery*", as they change position. Emilie *"manoeuvres herself into a different position, on her belly and slides down feet first",* she notices Joey is "*processing how to achieve what Emilie has just managed, he takes a few attempts to figure out how to position himself, to be on his belly and to have his feet pointing in the right direction, but he gets it".*

The data accumulated from Mary's community setting (full day care) also demonstrates educator's recognition of children's interests and abilities.

you really concentrated on your painting and had very good patience on waiting on your turn well done you 😊

Since its usually a loud room it was great to sit down relax and do some lovely paintings 😊

Through utilising these observations an educator can build on children's learning and development, through the provision of a stimulating child-led environment that recognises babies and toddlers as competent and confident learners. By respecting babies and toddlers as learners and offering them time and space to complete a task, at their own pace, they too can recognise their own abilities. Strong and reciprocal relationships enable adults to interpret babies' and toddlers' language and support their learning.
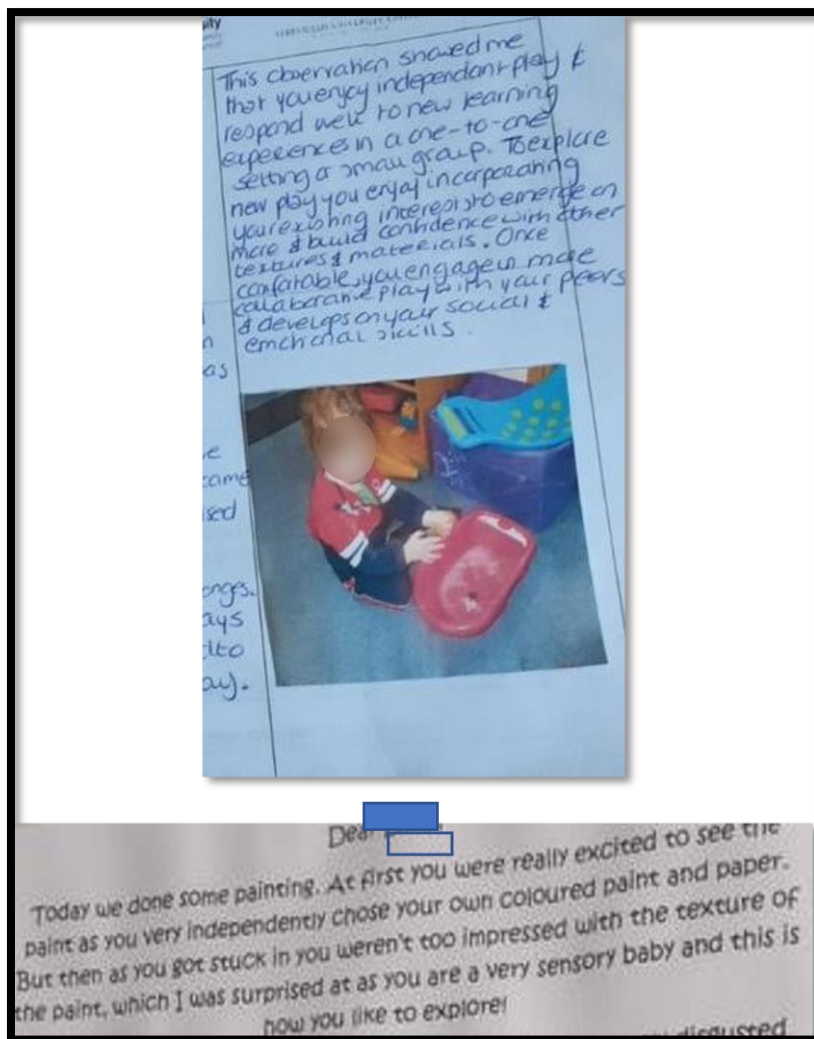
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This is demonstrated in the findings from the home environment. As Tanya, the parent of the two-year-old boy, Robbie, demonstrates her understanding of his language and provides him with time and opportunity to perform tasks, *"Me do the straps! Me do it Mammy!"*

1Me do the straps! Me do it Mammy!
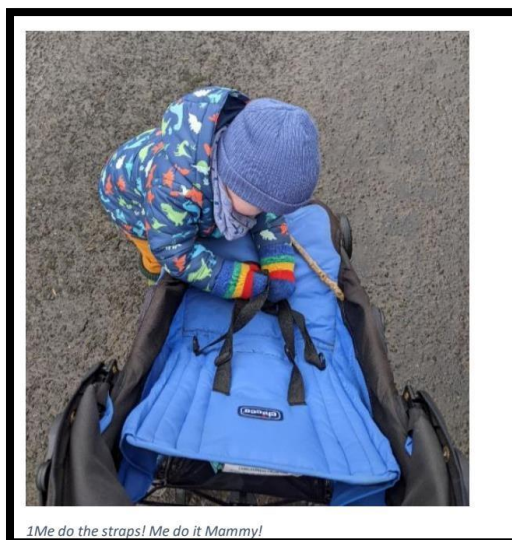
The opportunity to engage in child-led activities and real-life tasks and jobs, is also illustrated in the childminder setting, as the children set about making playdough. The activity was initiated by Daniel, who *"asked to make some playdough"*. The educator called out the list of ingredients and "*Daniel found most of the items in the cupboard"*. Christof decided to join the activity. From the data it is evident that the children took the lead in this activity, as

"*Daniel measured out his ingredients and placed them a large bowl with a helping hand from Christof. They worked together calmly, taking turns and Daniel spoke throughout telling Christof what to do next"*.

The recognition of children's previous knowledge and skills to achieve their goal in making the playdough was noted by the educator:

"*The children took their time and took the opportunity to use their knowledge and apply it by measuring, counting, following a sequence, and following direction"*.

Again, in this observation, respect for the children as competent learners is demonstrated through ensuring children have the time and space to explore and engage in their interests.

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Another common theme apparent in the data is affording children the opportunity to share their knowledge with adults/educators and their peers. This is evident in the observation above, when making playdough Daniel not only "*found most of the items in the cupboard*", he also "*measured out his ingredients.*" Children may utilise their hundred languages to demonstrate their knowledge, for instance below we see Daniel verbally share his expertise in machinery:

"Christof: "Wow tractor"

Daniel: "That's a bailer it cuts the grass and goes round and round in the grass like

this" (makes some hand movements).

(Linda and Ana listen carefully as they look at the tractor)

Daniel: "That thing is very sharp (pointing to the back of the tractor) it cuts the grass

for the bailer." Daniel was very keen to share his knowledge of this machinery with

his friends and did so with great confidence."

Another example is found in the baby room of the full day care community setting. Here Sheila documents Adam sharing his knowledge of caring for babies through play.

"Adam you are growing and mastering all areas of your development at present. You

have achieved so much in the short months that you been with us."

"You come out with a blanket and bring it to the soft cosy area, you do this four

separate times until it seems you have enough. With concentration and a plan etched

on your face you then set about another task, you return this time with a baby, then

another. You gather all the blankets and dolls around you as you snuggle into a little nest you have created. You then pull the blankets up around the two dolls, giving them little rubs and rocking and singing as you play."

In summary, throughout the data, rich examples of babies and toddlers are provided showing how educators view them, and they view themselves, as competent, confident learners.

As a baby or toddler…How are affordances for holistic learning offered to me in my environments through Aistear?

Affordances for holistic learning are offered to babies and toddlers in their environments through Aistear when:

- They are offered loose parts, open ended and natural resources and materials,
- They can play inside and outside at their own choice, time, and leisure,
- They feel safe and understood in their relationships with their educators,
- Their educators understand their non-verbal communication.
- Their rights are respected, and their responsibilities are taken seriously and afforded to them,
- Resources and props are offered to them at their height,
- A wide range of artistic mediums are available to them to express themselves,
- Their emotional needs are recognised,
- They can access materials they recognise from their home and family life,
- They are afforded time in multi-age groups or intergenerational age groups,
- They are allowed to explore their local community and area.

This is the code with the highest incidences. However, it is notable that there is little mention of race, gender, cultural or ethnic materials (or anything from identity and belonging other than the immediate nuclear family). There is also no mention of toys, books, or other resources with identifiable medical or social needs, disabilities, etc. Considering the fact that the sample of children was specifically chosen with diversity on these dimensions in mind, this was contrary to the prediction of the research team ahead of time. While it could certainly be argued that visibility of diversity within the affordances offered (books, toys, etc) is an area for further development in Aistear based on these data, in engaging more deeply with the data, one possible explanation for the general lack of discussion of diversity is that the educators in question are

practising in such inclusive ways (for example using a universal design for learning [UDL] approach) that potential points of 'difference' are not immediately obvious. The babies and toddlers are given many opportunities to explore, think and communicate with their environment, other children, and any adults in the setting in very open-ended, individually accessible ways, which they seem to value very much. They are offered a wide variety of purposeful, fixed end materials, as well as open ended and natural materials to engage with on their own terms. Therefore, while the sample is made up of a diverse range of children, what we see in the data are children engaging freely in playful learning and development without barriers.

Outdoor spaces in particular hold huge value and opportunity to the children in this dataset. An example of children's play moving from the indoor to the outdoor environment, is found within the data from the home setting of the parent and two-year-old child, Robbie, with the parent noting that *"The vehicle world often ventures outdoors, where other explorations take place."*

Observing lambs

The use of combining open ended and fixed materials, is also noted within the data, "*Or longer projects, like combining their latest favourites: dried chickpeas and Duplo. They decided to make a factory, which produces 'beads'. They used excavators and dumper trucks to fill the containers first (poured down the production line-the slide).*"

The data from the childminder setting captures the children's journey to the forest, where they play with natural materials such *"sticks, leaves, moss and mud",* while spending an extended period of time *"exploring and finding natures treasures, which created endless opportunities for play."*

Exploring our local forest together all year round provides us with the opportunity too see the ever-changing landscapes through the seasons.

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Within the same setting, the data describes how the children have engaged in sensory play, *"We have been busy exploring our senses in many ways"*. The children can be seen in the photograph below, playing as a multi-age group, with resources at their level or sitting among them.

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The use of outdoor spaces is again evident, as found within the baby room in the full day care, rural community setting, with lots of data showing the babies in the garden. The educator notes that this "*offers lots of space, texture (grass, and rubber mats)*". Again, reference is made to the provision of babies' accessibility to resources:

"Play equipment (push along car to either aid standing and walking, or to get into, climbing frame suitable for all age groups in this room, to encourage risk, provide different levels, to provide opportunity for physical development and fun, also available is sand and water trays at different levels to provide for children who are not walking yet, also available is a rug with books, blocks and toy cars)."

In addition to the provision of large resources, a combination of loose and open ended materials are freely accessible to the children:

"All toys, loose parts, etc are at the child's level to make sure that they have every opportunity to gain independence and develop their individual personalities and dispositions."

This excerpt also notes the importance of providing children in a group care setting opportunities of *"time of quiet for children to think, reflect and explore"*. The recognition of this time is founded on the educator's knowledge that "…*the environment can be over stimulating, noisy and over narrated, must have a balance between spoken communication and non-verbal communication. The beautiful thing in our wobbler room is the opportunity for quiet, calm, and peaceful learning."*

Ensuring that babies and toddlers have access to different types of resources, such as open ended and natural to singular use equipment, can stimulate their new interests and learning. By using observations to make informed decisions in providing certain types of equipment, such as climbing equipment and malleable equipment, adults can support learning and development.

A wide range of artistic media being offered to the children was documented in the data from the childminder, as the children explore painting. The childminder notes that *"I set out some paint and paper with no instruments to see how they would explore".* This purposeful activity, led to children experiencing sensory play with the paint:

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The use of different artistic mediums being offered to the children was again captured in the data from the childminder setting. However, on this occasion the use *"we have been using lots of things from around the house!"* As illustrated below, the children are using formula tins to slot shapes and coins through and to pull ribbons through.

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The natural environment appears heavily within the childminder setting, even when found in an urban area. For instance, the children have found a puddle of water which they jump into.

We love finding a good puddle to jump in on our walks. We know just the spots to find them!

Water appears again, when Daniel states "*I want to put stones in the river",* and he and Christof set off to find some stones. The educator discusses *"being safe on the bridge while throwing stones in the water."* However, their senses are captured by the sound of *"A buzzy bee".*

Within Sheila's baby room (full day care) of the rural community setting, the children's interests are observed and educators make provisions within the environment to engage their interests while supporting their learning and development:

"At present I have noticed that you are most interested in being on your feet as often as you can. You delight at anything which you can pull yourself up on.."

The photographs also illustrate how natural and open-ended resources are accessible to children, placed either on the floor or at hip level to ensure they can play with ease.

The images captured by the educators in Mary's full day community setting, again demonstrate not only the provision of resources but ensuring they are easily accessible to the babies.
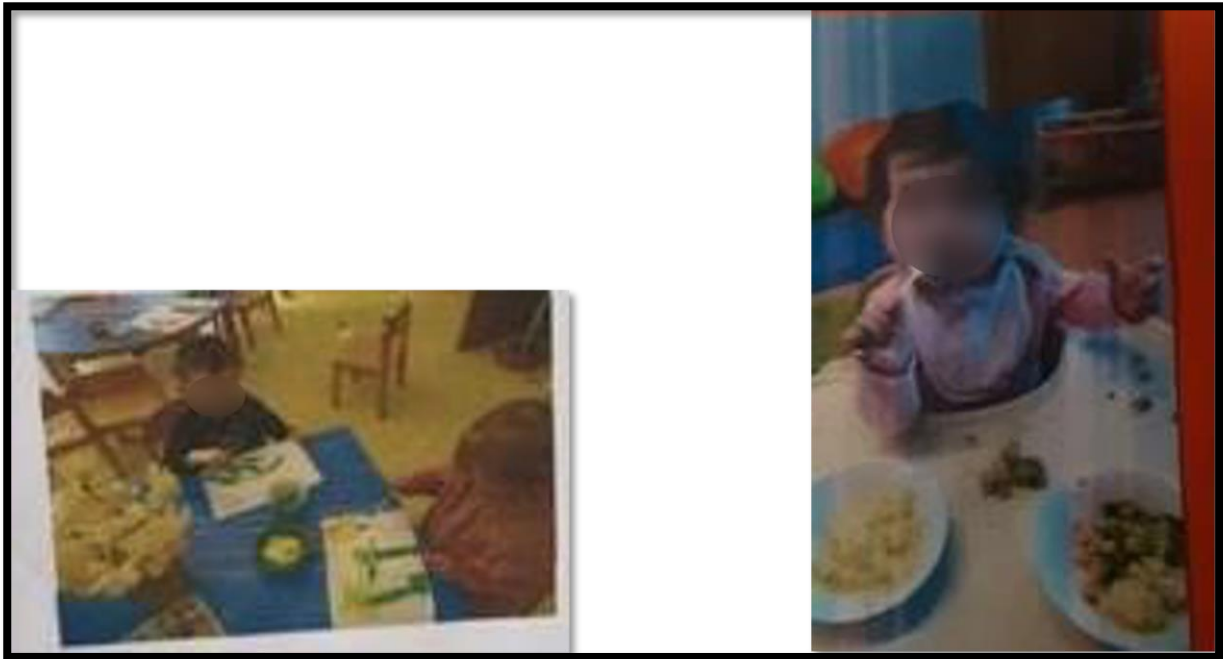
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In addition to accessibility to resources, consciously introducing familiar resources from the child's home and family life was noted in this setting. While ensuring children have ample floor space to comfortably play in, areas of interest were also documented.
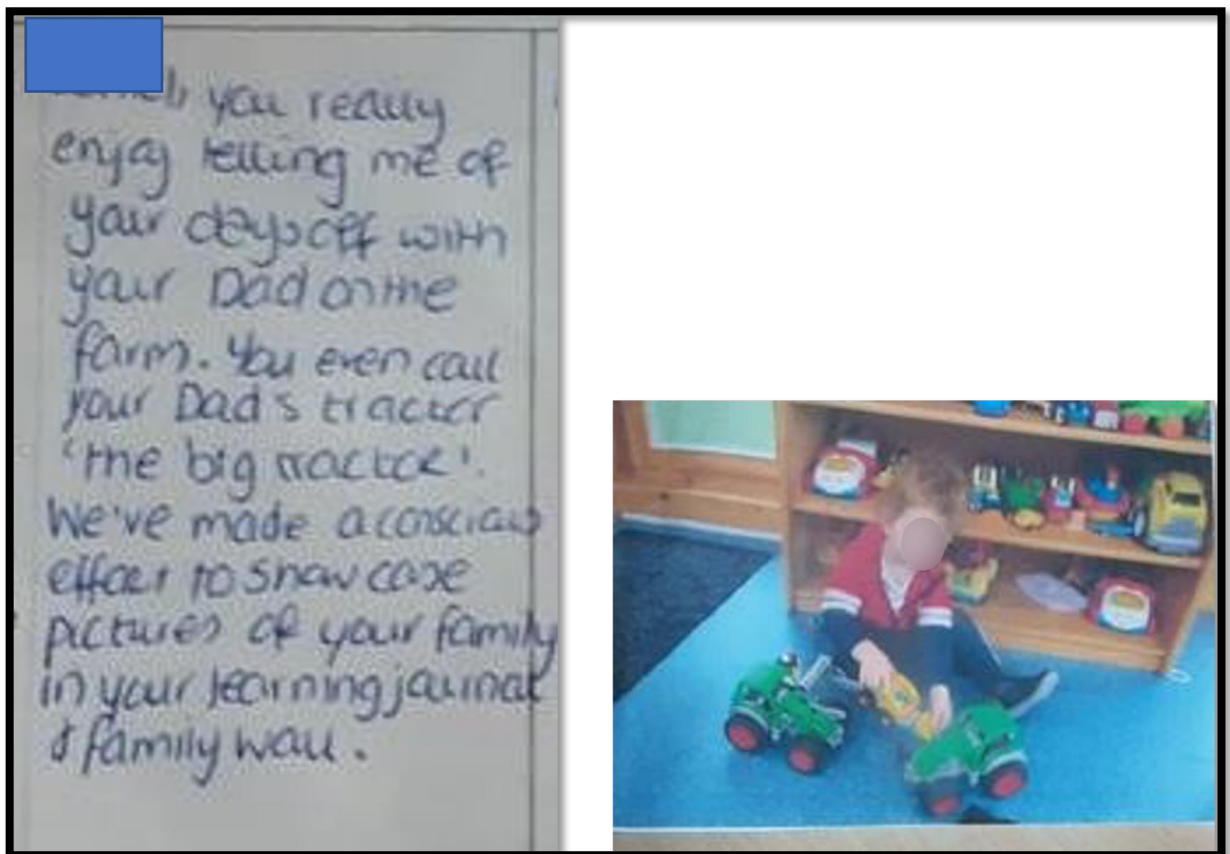
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Overall, the data show babies and toddlers accessing a wide range of affordances in well-resourced environments indoors and outdoors.

As a baby or toddler…How does Aistear support me to communicate through multiple modalities?

Aistear supports babies and toddlers to communicate through multiple modalities by having educators and adults who understand the importance of forming strong, close and reciprocal relationships with them. These relationships enable them to see all the different ways babies and toddlers can communicate and help them to understand, who they are and what they enjoy. Using the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1996), educators and adults can learn more about babies and toddlers and their ideas, thoughts and feelings. Their means of communication is more than words, phrases and sentences. They use non-verbal communication, such as body language, facial expressions, play opportunities (particularly outdoors) and art (painting and mark-making), to show how they are feeling and share

information with those in their environment. Having a close relationship with the baby or toddler makes these means of communication more visible.

An example of the role of relationships in communication can be found in the data of the baby room in the rural community setting, where Emilie uses "*eye contact and a smile*" to communicate her desire to play with Joey. Joey understands this communication and "*softens his face and smiles at her encouraging her to join him*". Another example can be found in the following extract from an educator in the same room. Here the importance of forming strong, close and reciprocal relationships with babies to facilitate communication is evident:

"She was clear in her communication with me; even if her speech was limited, her nonverbal communication skills are second to none, aided by the fact that we have a beautiful reciprocal relationship which benefits our understanding of each other. I believe her voice came through loud and clear."

Communication by babies and toddlers through multiple modalities gives them the opportunity to express themselves through creatively playful moments. Evidence from the data shows this in the following playful episode between Willa and two educators in Sheila's baby room.

"Willa walked out of the room with a confident stride, she knew what she was looking for, she picked up one of the blankets that she had left there from the day before, again the confidence in her walk, definite in her plan. As she went, she made sure to get my eye contact and the other educators' eye contact also, drawing us in to her play. A slight smile on her face as she went into the sleep room (a connecting room to the main room). She appeared back at the doorway and said "night" and myself and Anne said "night, night", she looked towards Lisa, the other educator who was present in the room, who had been busy with another child. Willa again said "night" a little louder this time so Lisa would hear. Lisa knew by the look on Willa's face that she was being drawn into a game and went along with her, giving her a wave and saying, "have a good sleep Willa". Willa leaned back and gave a great big giggle as she knew that everyone was joining in her game."

Creating an environment filled with everyday toys, real objects, natural resources, art and mark-making materials supports the ability of babies and toddlers to communicate and

participate in the setting through multiple modalities. Providing such a stimulating environment where babies and toddlers can explore a variety of sensory resources offers them therapeutic benefits and further supports their ability to communicate while enhancing their well-being, as shown in Mary's baby-room:

Dear

Today we done some painting. At first you were really excited to see the paint as you very independently chose your own coloured paint and paper. But then as you got stuck in you weren't too impressed with the texture of the paint, which I was surprised at as you are a very sensory baby and this is how you like to explore!

...ely disgusted

look at your face in the picture!

We have been doing lots of sensory play in our baby room, which you have really enjoyed so I will keep encouraging you to paint to see if it grows on you. This would be great because painting can be so beneficial to you as it can be therapeutic and can be a great way for to non-verbally express yourself!

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Art with an emphasis on painting and mark-making feature strongly for the children from birth to 3 years. The photograph above from Mary's baby room and the following extract from the

childminding setting again demonstrate the importance of relationships for understanding non-verbal communication.

"Martha at the chalk board, she was so engrossed in what she was doing. She spent a sustained period of time drawing all by herself. Every now and then she would laugh and continue to talk. Although I could not make out what Martha was saying I continued to smile and nod showing interest in what she was saying. When she had finished talking, she smiled and continue to draw using the chalk."

Purposefully placing photographs of people or characters displaying different emotions beside a mirror in the setting can help babies and toddlers in expressing themselves through facial expressions and recognising those of others, supporting emotional literacy. This is illustrated in the data extracted from Mary's community setting, full day care (0-3 years).

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Babies and toddlers can also very accurately communicate their feeing through their behaviour as shown in childminder's data.

"She shared such delight as she explored the water container splashing the water. She would lift her arms in the air and make a great big splash into the water"

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In summary, babies and toddlers are supported to express themselves through multiple modalities, including their behaviour, their movement, their vocalisations, their facial expressions, their play and their artistic endeavours.

3.2 The voices of young children (3 to 6 years)

3.2.1 Aistear Principles Group 1: Children and their lives in early childhood (uniqueness; equality and diversity; children as citizens)

As a young child…How are my unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities and experiences supported through Aistear?

As with babies and toddlers, young children's unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences are supported through Aistear by having informed educators and adults who:

- Understand Aistear and how to implement it and connect it to their practice and relationship building,
- Give young children the space and time to play and experiment,
- Prepare an environment rich with resources that inspire and build on their interests, needs, strengths, abilities, and experiences,
- Provide a range of natural resources and materials,
- Provide open ended resources and opportunities as well as predetermined toys,
- Understand and interpret all forms of communication – body language, facial expressions, sounds, utterances, drawing, painting, playing etc,
- Build strong relationships with the young child.

Aistear gives the adults and educators who care for young children the tools to see them, communicate with them, understand and interpret their hundred languages. It gives them the skills to build relationships with young children; and it gives them the tools, and ideas to create a physical and social environment that allows young children to discover and build on their unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences.

Evidence gathered from the Gaeltacht Naíonra captures a moment in which the educator interpreted a child's language and identified his desire to return to his play, stating:

"The child was very happy with his friends during the act but he was also ready to go back playing once it had been completed". The educator expands on this noting, *"It was clear to me as the action was taking place that children are happy to sit down and do something but also*

they are ready to go and play and not be sitting down in one position for a long stretch at a time."

The child was offered space and time to play with resources with build on his strengths, interests and experience:

"The child was building a wall for the farm and he was very careful about the way in which the block were fitting together. And he was getting the animals from boxes, with the child then putting them into their new home."

Another example of the provision of space and time was collected in the data from the private ECCE setting. Here the educator observed Tommy's level of engagement in Mobilo construction.

"Tommy was totally engaged in building a Mobilo construction today. He spent all morning adding to it and taking away pieces of his construction. When he had finished, he came towards me and said, 'Come and see what I have made.'"

This space and time to explore and experiment can offer children moments of joy, as they immerse themselves in their interest. "*I could see that he was very happy and excited as he had a broad smile on his face*".

For educators, it can offer insight into the child's strength, knowledge and interests. *"He took my hand to lead me to where he had been building his construction as if he was in a rush. He pointed to his model and said, "this is a rocket, it is powerful and can go to the moon and outer space". He explained by pointing to a part of the rocket, 'These are speakers, I put them on the rocket so that when we land on a planet we can hear if a child is calling out for help'. He was so proud of his model and the other children gathered around to have a look at his rocket."*
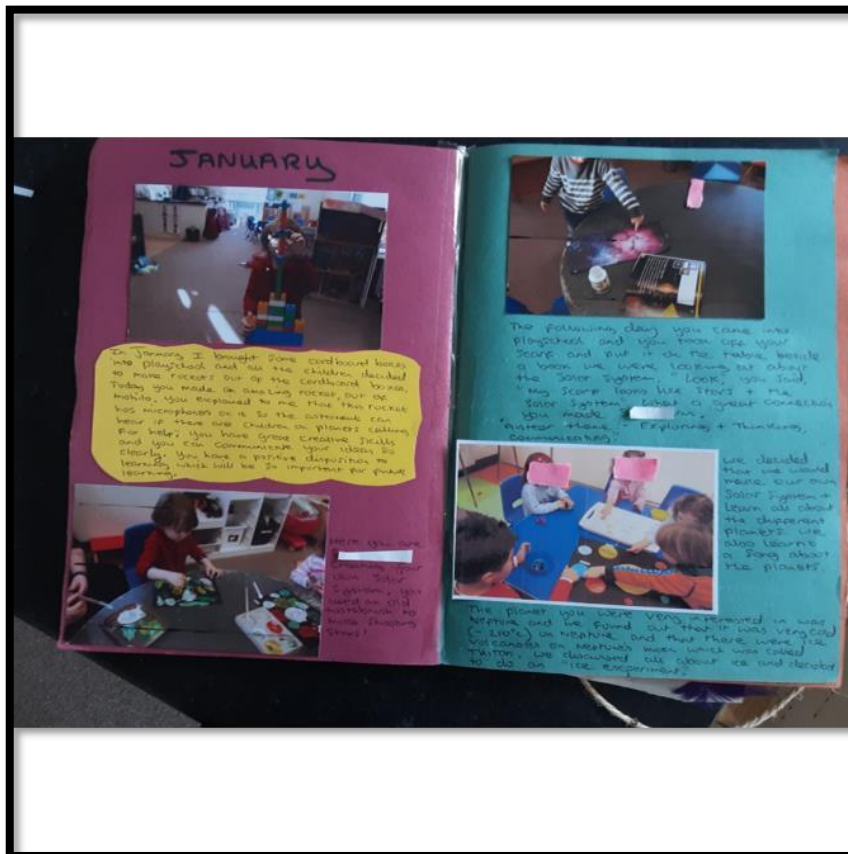
The recognition of Tommy's achievement was not only observed by the educator, but by Tommy himself.

"Tommy showed through this learning story that he believed in his ability to create a rocket independently."

The educator noted the role of the environment in supporting Tommy to complete this task and meeting his goal: *"He chose to do so with the help of an enabling environment."*

Aistear supports the adults who care for young children by giving them different ideas to create a physical environment which allows them to communicate. Through the provision of different art-based resources such as paint, pencils, crayons and other mark-making materials, young children can illustrate their different experiences.

Pedagogy guided by young children's interests and experiences was documented in the private ECCE setting, as the children witnessed a storm. Their experience of watching the storm outside and "*pointing to leaves that were flying around and how the trees were moving in the wind",* were transcribed by the educator, with one child referring to a family experience of a storm, *"one of the children said that their daddy was once in a boat when it was stormy".*

Once the storm had passed, *"the children asked if they could paint a picture of storm Eunice".* The children's captured their accounts of the storm through their art.

"*Here are two of the children from the group painting what a storm looks like. The bottom picture was painted by Sean. He said when describing his painting to me 'there are lots of petals blowing. He said "the wind is not so windy now the storm has gone away". This was how this child explained what they had painted!"*

The following day, music and dance were used to revisit the children's experience of the storm:

"W*e danced and moved around the room with scarves to stormy music, Beethoven symphony No. 5 – music for studying thunderstorms, rain and storms."*
The use of mark-making materials was also captured in the data gained from the Specialist preschool for children with disabilities.

"This week the children decided that they would like to explore various tools to apply, mix, and print with using paint"
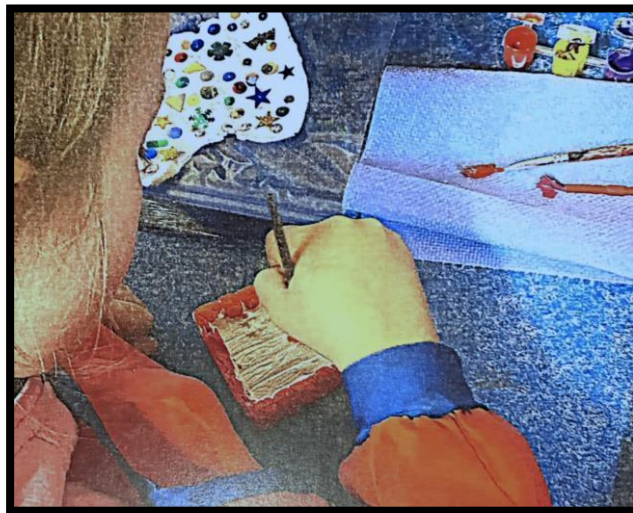
This opportunity to engage in a materials of their interest shows how through exploration and investigation, here the children could creatively problem solve to ensure their goal was achieved, engaging in the activity without any barriers related to additional their additional needs.

"*Expansion of children's repertoire of applications of paint, the resistance of a shiny surface to paint. The problem solving of how they could 'paint the sun'. They found a way of mixing the water on GPP and how the paint refused to apply evenly. As the interest and ideas flowed they decided to mix the colours on the GGP and then transfer this merger of colours to the white paper. One child compared the colours that another child had mixed to a 'volcano'."*

It is worth noting that all of the children in this setting have additional needs and yet they have been supported by the materials and relationships in their environment to engage in higher level thinking through their self-guided exploration.

Within the Early Start setting data, we again see the provision of time and space and so children can pursue their interest, while uncovering new interests and learning, individually or collectively as a group. Here the children use a combination of resources to follow their unique interests:

"Interest in the bee-bots has developed recently and stimulated investigations involving mapping, maze building and programming. The moves needed to negotiate the road map were acquired quite quickly, with forward and backwards manoeuvres most easily performed. Moving to the maze challenge presented more difficulty with the need to figure out how far to send the bee-bot and which way to turn, either left or right?"

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Within the same setting, child conferencing is also documented in the data, as children are given the opportunity to take photographs of their unique interests. These photographs and their meaning are then interpreted by the educator who, through the formation of a reciprocal relationship has insight into the children's interests and abilities.

"The central area and garden photo reflected her interest in climbing, bike riding and baby play. The inclusion of construction resources in her selection represents her interest in organisation and a schematic fascination with stripes, circles and patterns. The white board photo reflects her passion for dancing; she demonstrates her own dances in response to selections from YouTube and recalls dances she has learnt at classes. She discovered how to use the graphics package recently and has mastered the art of changing pen colours, shapes and has learnt how to print out her drawings. Her selection portrays a range of images reflective of her interests; tree climbing, balancing on logs, balance bike and various plants and flowers."

Building strong relationships with young children can provide adults with the tools to hear their voices and interpret their many forms of communication. It can also create an enabling social environment, which empowers them to express their interests, needs and thoughts. An example of this is gathered from the home setting. This extract demonstrates how through the combination of a strong relationship between the adult and the child, a thought-provoking book can ignite a conversation about change, and our feelings towards it.

"Here is another insight we teased out, while reading Melissa Harrison's 'By Ash, Oak and Thorn'. Quote from the book: 'Yes, but…I don't like the sudden changes or when things get worse, said Moss. I only like change when it's good'.
"Mam: Do you like change, Katherine?
Katherine: I'm a bit like Moss-I don't like the big changes. I like small, exciting ones, like going to the playground or getting a present.
Mam: Tell me about a big change you didn't like.
Katherine: Changing school, because everything was new and scary.
Mam: So how do you know what type of change is coming up? I mean, will it be exciting or scary?

Katherine: It's scary when too many things are changing. Can we keep reading now Mam?"

While the parent notes the advantages of themed books, she is also conscious of enabling children to explore their interests through choice, *"Of course children are encouraged to make their own decisions and choices, but are continuously exposed to these activities."*

Within the primary school setting, we see the junior infants are provided with a range of resources to experiment with such as materials to colour in with and playdough. These varied resources create a social environment in which the children interact with each other, and discuss their feelings towards these materials and why:

"I like colouring in the pictures, it's my favourite thing to do. I'm going to make this rainbow toothpaste. I really wish I had rainbow toothpaste!"

"I like playing with the playdoh because I can mould it into teeth! I love the playdoh. I love to roll it and make teeth! "When I grow up I want to be a dental nurse and put braces on peoples teeth like the play doh!""".

During this activity, "*The boy in the navy asked could he play guitar while the other boy was building 'town'".* When asked why by the educator, the child explained, *"he told me after a recent trip to Dublin City Centre, he saw a boy playing the guitar on the street while he was shopping. He said if the boy in the red was building a town, there needed to be singers for the people going to the shops."*

This application of a previous experience to participative play was enabled through the provision of a range of materials. It is again documented as Damien states:

"I'm building a restaurant, just like Johnny's. I go there. I don't need to draw it, I know what it looks like when I close my eyes!".

The observation and interpretation of a child's unique experience can be built upon through time, space and resources.

The provision of time, space and resources in the outdoor areas was documented in the ECCE room of the Community setting. Here the data show the exploration and investigation that can occur through open ended and sensory materials: *"I want to do experiment.""*

This extract also demonstrates the integration of volume and capacity within the play: "*After lots of mixing and stirring you make a discovery 'Look Carly.' demonstrating as you push your hand down the mixtures flows over. 'It's lava' you explain proudly."*

The images below capture the role of the natural environment in children's learning and interests. Here the children are digging in the garden and on a mission to save the worms from the ever-vigilant birds.

"Is he dead?" asks [redacted]. "No" I explain "I can see him moving"

• Great cooperating & collaborating as you solve problems together.

[redacted] & I are in the digging garden - we are finding worms in the soil. Ssh... we hear the birds, they're watching us "They're going to eat the worms" I say to Louis. "We have to save the worms." I find a really big worm, quick we run + I take the big worm with me.

• There's a new wormery in our new sensory garden." Yeah we [redacted] put it there "- I agree with [redacted].

In the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra, we again see from the data the use of natural materials. On this occasion, a child brought a branch into the setting:

"At home time you came to show me that you found a great big branch that had fallen off the tree. Very carefully you and Carly, carried it into Naíonra."

The child initiated this interest and through an enabling environment, was given the opportunity to share it with their friends. The endless learning opportunities such as mathematics through measurement are captured in the evidence:

"The next day we all had great fun measuring you and your friends against the branch. 3 of you could lie beside it. We measured it using the tape too".

This interest led to a collective group interest in branches and sticks, whereby the children worked together towards a common goal, as seen in the data below.

1. Ag am dul abhaile tháinig tú chugam Emily, le ghéag mór.

An chéad maidin eile, thóg muid do ghéag mór isteach agus thomhais mé tusa agus do chairde.

Rinne sibh an limbo

You used the branch to dance the limbo

7/2/22   Bhí suim i ngéaga ann.
Inniu chuamar go léir amach ag lorg géaga. Tháinig muid ar a lán.

The next day we all went to hunt for sticks that had fallen down from the trees. We found so many. Liam and John suggested we use them to make a den.

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"Tríd an suim a bhí agat Eimear, bhí seans iontach againn bheith ag foghlaim faoi chrainn agus géaga. Through your interest in the fallen branch we all got to investigate and learn about branches and the different trees we have in Ireland. Go raibh maith agat Eimear for sharing your interest with us!"

Documenting and discussing young children's unique strengths, interests and experiences with them can support them to revisit previous learning and enable them to recognise their achievements. These discussions can also support the educator to create an enabling environment, which both challenges children and stimulates their learning and development. Evidence from the data gathered from the Private ECCE room shows the educator engaging in a discussion with the children of their previous learning through engagement with their learning stories:

"Then the children sat around the table discussing which was their favourite part of the learning story and proudly showing their photos of themselves in their own learning journal. The individual learning journal shows how each child is unique and that we respect each child as an individual. It enables each child to have a strong sense of identity within the group. This helps to build relationships within the group and promote strong and positive interactions. Each discussion and chat helps the children to grow and learn."

The use of documentation is often highlighted in the data as a means to identify children's unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities. In Mary's community setting, (full day care, 3-6 age group), the data illustrate how through observation and documentation of a child's play, the educator gains insights into their unique interests, experiences and progression within a new environment.

> You are having so much fun in the Junior Pre-School room. It's lovely watching you grow each day and become more and more comfortable in this new environment. One of your favourite areas in the room is the Home Corner, I often see you playing in the pretend kitchen.

Today you were cooking up a storm. I watched you gather up some pots and placed them into the microwave and turned the dial on it. Once done you opened the microwave door and took out the bowls and handed them to me. I pretended to then eat the food and this put a big smile on your face as you were so excited to see me eating your lovely food, and began to clap your hands.

You love to potter around our kitchen and it's lovely to see you having such a keen interest in this area of our room. It's brilliant to see you using some of the kitchen equipment so appropriately, I'm sure you are use to helping mammy and daddy out in the kitchen.

In summary, as with the birth to three cohort, young children's unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences are supported through Aistear with the provision of a wide range of resources and the time, space and opportunities to explore them within the context of warm relationships.

As a young child…To what extent are my multiple identities included, supported and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy?

Aistear encourages my multiple identities to be supported and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy by allowing my educators to assess my environment, and the resources in it, and through provision of materials and experiences that explore my local community's culture and my family's different identities. Throughout the data for the 3-6 year cohort, local culture, individual character traits or identities (scientist, artists etc.) and family identity are very positively represented and valued within the environment, resources, and activities experienced by young children. It is noticeable that the two naíonraí in particular have an impressive support of the child's Irish culture and wider nature within the local community. However, surprisingly considering the diversity of the sample, like with the birth to 3 years cohort, wider identities (culture, language, gender, (dis)ability and neurodiversity, etc) do not feature strongly in this particular data set, albeit with some exceptions. This does not mean that it is not addressed or experienced by babies, toddlers and young children more broadly in Ireland in their interactions with Aistear, or even that this cohort do not experience visibility of their multiple identities. They were not however, strongly visible in the data-set. As noted in the Sample section however, there are hints in the data that inclusion is 'baked-in' to practice and sometimes loses its visibility as a result:

It gave the children who wouldn't normally engage with the group, because they did not understand some of the games the others played, an opportunity to be accepted into the group in a different way, so it really showed how this type of learning is very inclusive. The confidence of the children grew within the group and it really bonded the children together after that." (Private ECCE setting).

The interpretation of children's hundred languages was repeatedly documented in the data in this regard. The non-Gaeltacht Naíonra educator's observation of children's interests showed how the learning of a young child with disability could be expanded by providing a variety of resources:

"Since we had noticed your interest in the music wall in the gairdín mór we decided to play some music and introduce the music and movement box. I modelled dancing with the silk scarves and immediately after seeing me you went and chose a blue one. You twirled around in circles holding it out in front of you. You saw your friends investigating the music box and went straight over. You investigated the box and took out two cymbals and clashed them together. You went back into the box and took out the wooden shaker. I could see how engaged and active you were, investigating all the different resources. You then took out the drum and beat 6 steady beats. I noticed how well you modelled behaviour and noticed what your friends were engaged in. I can see how well musical resources ignites your interest, energy and motivation."

"Cian is receiving AIMs Level 7 support. He has a diagnosis of global development delay & autism. He is also described in his report as non-verbal. He showed great interest in the cooking activity and loved flipping his pancake after watching the other children practicing their flipping with an educator. He likes to observe and then models his peer's behaviour. Freedom to participate is so important for all the children but especially for children with similar needs such as Cian's. As you can see from the video I have attached he felt a great sense of achievement and success after his flipping exercise." (non-Gaeltacht Naíonra).

The educator notes a change in a child's confidence, which she credits to the formation of a relationship with a peer.

Young children's multiple identities are shown in this data to be informed through their family experiences, both habitually and through purposeful activities. Sharing their experiences of these activities through different ways, such as through the arts and story-telling, can reaffirm their sense of family identity.

For instance, evidence gathered from Bernie's ECCE room, shows a child's drawing of activities which occur on their family farm.

"My Daddy works and he's a farmer. When I grow up I want to be a farmer."

Similarly, in the Gaeltacht Naíonra, the data documented a child sharing his experience of digging with his Grandad:

*"He said that he digs in the garden with his Grandad and that they do the gardening together".*

The educator notes that during this time the child is also gaining new Irish words from his Grandad:

"It was lovely to hear that he does working with his Grandad and learns old words from him like tochailt (digging)."

The educator goes on to discuss the effect this sharing of activities has for child.

"The child is learning from things that he has seen in the environment, the child also understanding that people are listening to him and taking an interest in the story."

This understanding of a child's interest in their family and the role this plays in offering the child a sense of security within the setting is documented by an educator in the ECCE room of the Bernie's setting.
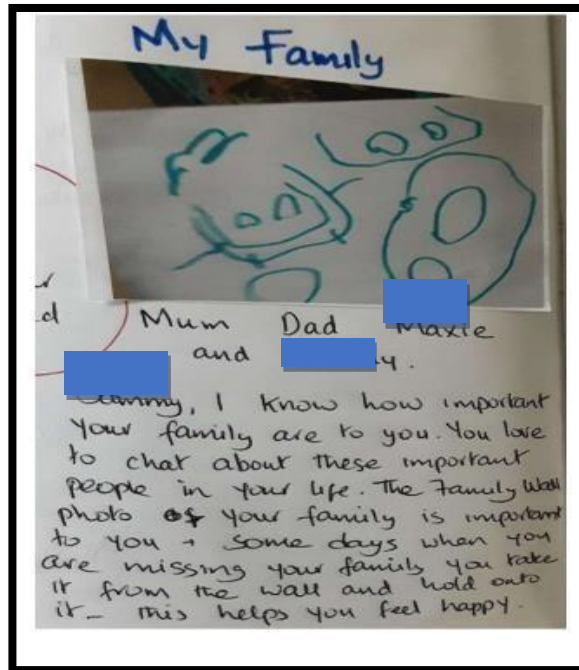
This integration of family member's identities was also documented within the data gathered from the Mary's community setting, full day care (3-6 age group), as illustrated below.
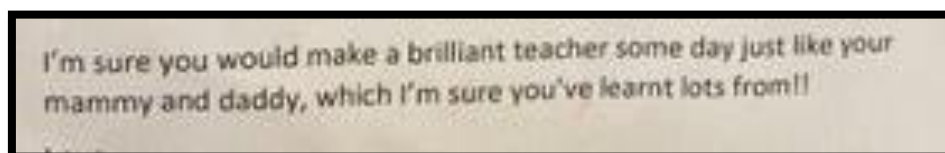
The influence of materials and resources on a child's multiple identities, such as musician and artist, was found in the data from the Early Start: Urban Area DEIS School.

"The second photo of art materials was chosen as 'I like to make things, especially with the glue gun and I can make things for my baby sister'…. Her photographs were taken with a high degree of specificity; recording her artwork, best friend, items in the home corner, computer and a glass bottle xylophone she helped make."

"He uses the big white board to 'draw Spiderman (C 4.6 - make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas) and to do the 'Wellerman' dance (A tiktok sea shanty dance he is particularly fond of"
"Painting … I'm good at painting, I make stripes and butterflies and love hearts … and sometimes with LR I make up colours'."

"The white board photo reflects her passion for dancing; she demonstrates her own dances in response to selections from YouTube and recalls dances she has learnt at classes. She discovered how to use the graphics package recently and has mastered the art of changing pen colours, shapes and has learnt how to print out her drawings"

A physically and emotionally enabling environment which is developed through a responsive pedagogy offers young children the opportunity to express their multiple identities. In addition to this, having the opportunities to use familiar items from their home within the ECCE environment positively reaffirms their families' identities. Examples of this were found in the data collected from the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra. Here the educators applied their knowledge of family identities to the environment.

"Knowing that Eimear's mammy has her own cake business we decided to explore painting the new year numbers using icing bags. Eimear appeared at the table excited and purposeful. She explained that she uses those 'bags for buttercream with mammy'".
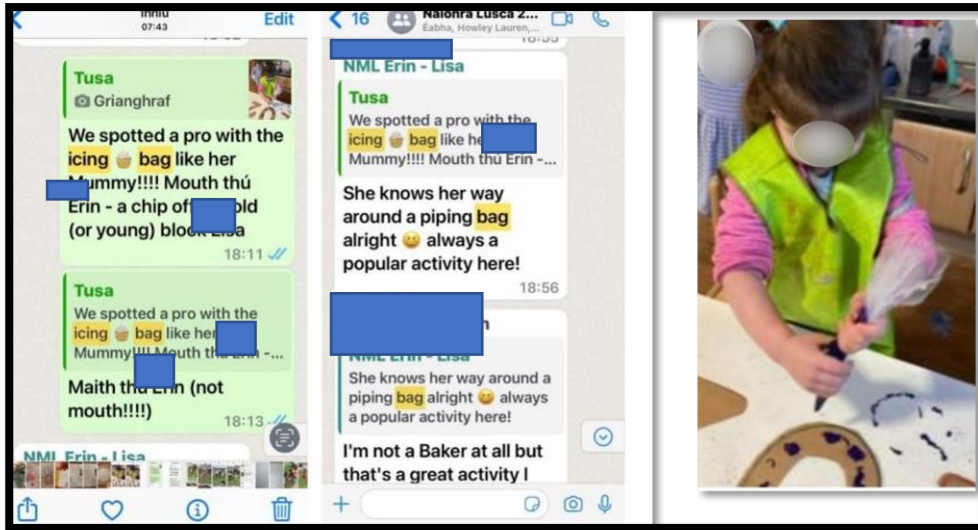
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Through activities such as baking and role playing, the children in the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra were empowered to embody new identities which they have observed in their experiences:

"*Lá na pácóga a bhí ann – rinne na páistí pancóga le chéile. An lá roimhe sin, rinne na páistí a bpancóga fhéin as gcartchlár. Tharraing said ciorcal agus chuir said maisiúcháin orthu. Rinne said siopa pancóga leo.*

For Pancake Tuesday the children make their own pancake mixture and then we cooked the pancakes for them. They were served from a pancake shop that we set up with the children. The previous day the children made their own pancakes from cardboard and decorated them. They then began to role play cooking and selling them in the pancake shop."

Providing children with opportunities to bring home traditions into the early childhood setting can open dialogue among the group, comparing and contrasting different traditions within each of their families:

"*Listening to each child's traditions of pancakes respected each of them as individuals and as part of families."*

Aistear recognises the significance of supporting young children's unique multiple identities through responsive adults in their environment. Similarly, it recognises that these adults act as

role models when it comes to valuing the unique multiple identities of others. This is captured in the extract below, from the home setting of parent, Tanya, her daughter Katherine (6 years old) and their family:

"It spurred Katherine's artistic flare and below are some of the many rainbows she decided to incorporate into her home/school drawings (she thought it was important to carry the message everywhere she went, especially during her last month in school, which coincided with Pride Month (June) and her uncle's birthday."

"Initially, we had doubts with regards to introducing this topic [LGBTQI+ pride] *to Katherine and generally young children, but we decided that it is never too early to speak about kindness and love and treating all human beings with respect. Katherine's uncle is a very important part of our family and we are delighted to advocate for his community, of which he is a wonderful representative. This reflects the Aistear's theme of Well-being and a true sense of Belonging, which can be a real struggle for the LGBTQIA+ groups. It also portrays uniqueness as a positive quality. Katherine's active citizenship glowed brightly, when she took time to advocate for what mattered to her and her family."*

This piece illustrates how Katherine's multiple identities as artist and niece, intertwined through the modelling of her family to celebrate and value her uncle.
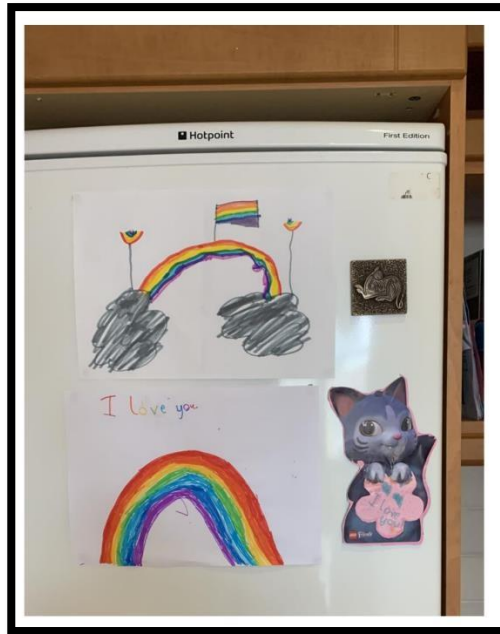
In short, children's identities within families and communities are well supported but there may be room for further emphasis on visibility of multiple dimensions of diversity within settings.

As a young child…How are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen enacted through Aistear?

Young children's rights and responsibilities as a citizen are enacted through Aistear when their educators recognise and realise their rights as set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their practice; when they are allowed the space and time to advocate, mediate, negotiate conflict, navigate big feelings, to be offered choice and make decisions, and also given autonomy over their bodies, their emotions, their learning, their environment, and their communication.

Again, like in the baby and toddler cohort, all settings work from a rights-based approach, and the centrality of children's rights is evident in the data. However, while it may be because of the small data set, it is noticeable that the direct and implied rights and responsibilities of children as citizens in the three to six years cohort are most heavily documented in the home setting and in those settings traditionally classed as 'disadvantaged' (Community settings and DEIS area). In particular, the right to experience and solve conflict and to be responsible for tasks within the environment and setting are highlighted.

An example of the promotion of children's rights balanced with their responsibilities as citizens is documented in the data from the ECCE room in Bernie's community setting. Here daily roles and opportunities for leadership and teamwork are highlighted. The first example is the weekly role as "*Star-helper*". These roles began at the start of the academic year, with groups of *"three/four children"* taking on the responsibility of *"calling the roll, checking that everyone has signed in on our sign-in board, setting up our snack area, clearing it away and bringing everything back to the kitchen, water plants, … on certain days of the week"*.

The role of "*Star-helper* "comes with perks, such as *"wearing a star-helper medal (with great pride)"*, the opportunity to *"pick songs from the song mala and sit on the comfy couch at the end of the morning session,"* and "*they are first to sign out and lead the group to meet our families at the front door*". This role is afforded to all children within the room, and the routine provides predictability for the children, as they *"can be heard regularly reminding each other after consulting the chart "you're star-helper today"* or *"it's not your day."* By incorporating a visual aid of the *"Star-helper"* routine, at children's level, it also contributes to the children's understanding of turn-taking (see below).

Star-helpers chart, displayed at child level so children can reference.
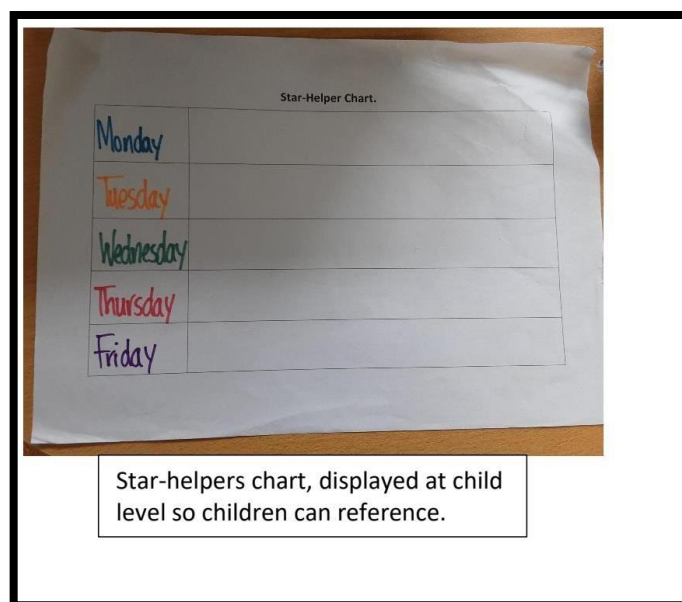
Each morning, the children take responsibility for signing in and out of the ECCE session. "*As children arrive into their preschool room they sign-in with their velcro-backed photo. As they leave at collection time they sign out with their photo*". The educator notes how this aspect of the routine came about, *"This routine began when a child questioned, if their parents and*

teachers sign in why do children not sign in?" The example demonstrates how seriously children's questions are not only heard but responded to.


Another example of the recognition of children's rights to choice and autonomy within this setting occurs during snack times. The educator discusses this period of the day, and how the rules were agreed upon and implemented through child consultation.

"After the Star-helpers have set up our snack area, food is available whenever we feel we are ready to eat. We have agreed some rules for our area. First, we wash our hands and then we choose what we want to eat. If we have a spill, we just clean it up, anybody can have an accident! If all the spaces are taken at the table we just wait until somebody is finished. When we have had enough to eat, we clear away our plate and cup into the dishwasher basin, all ready for the star helpers to take to the kitchen."

This balance of rights and responsibilities within the ECCE room, during snack time clearly demonstrates a rights-based approach to pedagogy, as informed by Aistear. Furthermore, through real life tasks, children are afforded the opportunity to experience the balance of their rights and responsibilities.

The image below is of a recorded observation of a child engaging in negotiation, mediation, and advocating for the rights of her peers. This demonstrates how the child has enacted her right to communicate her emotions, while advocating for equality for her peers.
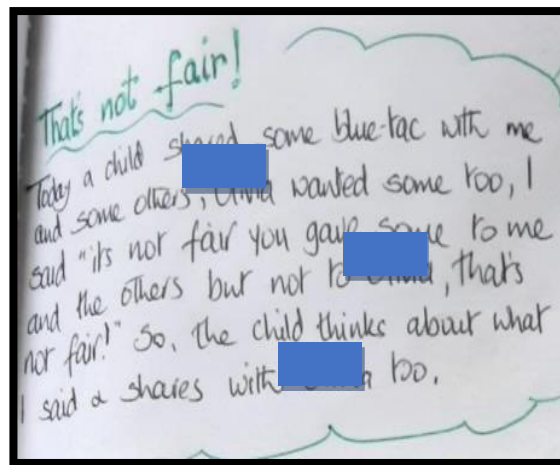
Similarly, the data from the Early Start, Urban Area DEIS School records occasions when children act as mediators and engage in conflict resolution among their peers:

"These relationships can at times be precarious with others falling out over items or strategies to use. Kyle often serves as the mediator in these conflict situations by suggesting alternatives or supporting them practically with offers of help and guidance."

The data also show children's right to choice being enacted in the Early Start: *"She selected the book photograph first explaining that she loves reading and she thought that learning to read was 'what you have to do at school."*

Young children's rights as citizens with opinions and feelings can be promoted through the provision of time and space to navigate these feelings and express them in a responsive and respectful environment where they are not only heard but acted upon.

We see this principle in practice as the educators from the Early Start consult with the children in regard to the research. Firstly, the child, Kyle gathers as much information as possible, showing the young child's ability to seek and provide informed consent:

"He asked who the other researchers were and specifically what were their names."

Once, Kyle became aware that his opinion was being sought by adults, he began to offer valuable information, enjoying sharing his voice:

"*He was pleased that other adults would be looking at his replies and asked me to let them know that he likes preschool and doesn't want to go to junior infants as 'you get homework'."*

"Kyle was the only child that questioned the motivations for doing the activity, wanting to know why and, importantly for him, what the other children had done in response to the questions."

Here Kyle probed for more information before making a decision. His questions were answered honestly and directly by his educators, supporting him to make an informed decision. This practice was again evident when Susie expressed her preference in relation to data collection: *"Susie chose not to take photographs, 'No Thanks'".* This expression of the child's dissent was respected, giving an example of genuine ethical engagement with children themselves rather than relying solely on parental consent.

Similarly, the excerpt below taken from the Private ECCE setting also clearly shows how the educators enact children's rights in their learning through interactions and engagement. Again, this was achieved through implementing a responsive pedagogy, facilitating the children's investigation and exploration in their learning and following their lead. There are clear links to the acknowledgement of children's rights and ensuring each child is heard.

"*The children were exploring their interest in rockets with cardboard boxes which I had brought into playschool in January. The children asked if they could make their own individual rockets and as we had enough boxes we were able to have a box rocket*

for each child. Each child's voice was heard by choosing their own colours of paint and design for their rockets.

This learning story shows how the children's voices were heard and their interests acted upon. They were given the time over a few weeks to really engage in the rockets, painting them, choosing the different shaped windows they each asked for in their own rockets. Discussing, listening, co-construction of learning. Observing what their peers are doing and listening to what they are saying. A positive learning environment where the children are supporting each other's views, listening to everyone's ideas and sharing the materials to create a group learning experience."

The data documented by the educator of the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra is comparable to this as she also highlights her knowledge in relation to enacting children's rights in practice: *"It is critical that children have the freedom to take part or not in activities."* She consciously makes links between the UNCRC and the Aistear framework:

"This learning story highlights how nature and the outdoors greatly supports Aistear and can lead to learning about the seasons, citizenship and the role children can play in helping wildlife living in their community."

"This learning story highlights how observant children are in their environment and how respectful they can be when they understand the responsibility they have as caring citizens."

In summary, all settings are underpinned by a notable rights-based approach to early childhood education, and some settings provide templates for how children's responsibilities can also be appropriately centred within a citizenship model.

As a young child…Do the interactions and relationships I experience through Aistear support my learning and development?

The interactions and relationships that young children experience through Aistear support their learning and development in a positive way in the educational setting. The relationships and interactions with their educators in the settings, when reciprocal and meaningful, give young children the safety to explore, learn, investigate, and experience all their feelings. These relationships allow them to communicate and allows their educators to observe (interpret their hundred languages), assess, and plan the environment or resources to allow young children to expand on their learning and development.

The interactions and relationships young children experience with the other children in the setting are influenced by how Aistear guides their educator or adult to observe, assess, plan, and allow for space, time, and safety. This allows children the opportunities to not only have fun and play with the other children but also to experience conflict, communication, and negotiations. Young children's friendships are very important to them. The interactions and relationships young children experience between their family or caregivers and their setting, encouraged by Aistear, support the positive, relevant learning and development that they experience.

The data gathered from the Gaeltacht Naíonra provide an example of how the relationships between adults and children can promote a sense feeling safe and secure to explore and experience all feelings. The educator explains that the children "*were doing an activity for Fathers' Day",* and typically *"the children don't really want to use paints and get messy".* However, she goes on to document how one child, *"was happy today to sit with one of my teachers and paint his hands. He laughed a lot when the paint was being applied to his hands. He was saying that it was tickly! This was a major thing for this child because even when he paints a picture he doesn't be happy but he said that he would do it for Dad."* A photograph of this moment is included:

Tá Tom brea sásta ag fáil
a lámha péinteáilte agus
ag suí síos chun pairt
a glacadh 😊

"That tickles"

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

Similarly, the interactions and relationships young children share with their peers can support their emotional regulation, offer them feelings of comfort and security and give them a sense of identity within the setting. The evidence found in the private ECCE setting, similarly documents this in practice:

"They thought this was amazing. The discussions and the fact they were so interested in the ice brought the group closer and after this learning story, the group played much more with each other than previously".
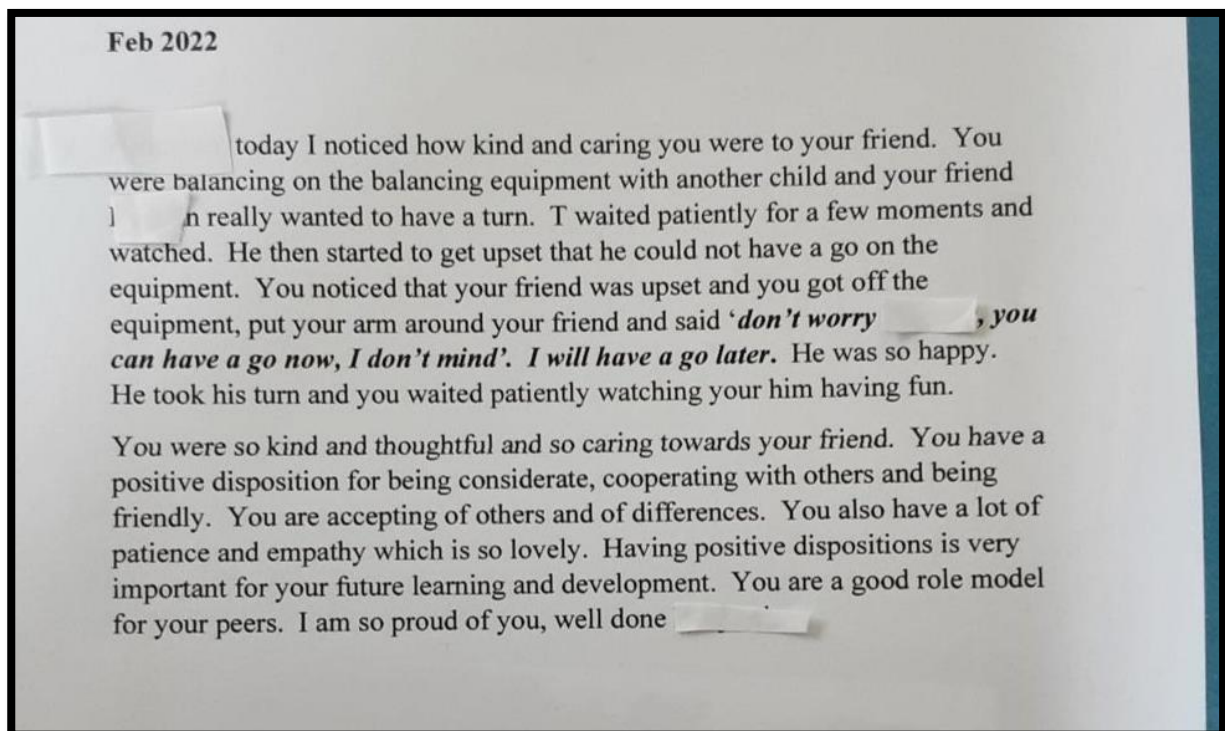
The educator of the setting evaluates the impact of this moment for all the children involved, while making relevant links to Aistear:

"The interactions and relationships experienced through Aistear and built through learning stories like this do support each child's learning and development. This whole process really enabled the children to work together as a group and was a turning point for this group. It really enabled all the children, especially those of the group who had found it difficult to interact with the group on occasions, to interact and to find a common goal and theme with which to bond them together. The change in these

children was so heart-warming to see. They were all relaxed, all participating at the same time (which was not often the case), all with advice and wisdom to add to the activities, especially the ice activities. The confidence and self-esteem of the children grew and the quieter children really came out of their shell."

This extract taken from the same source of evidence, demonstrates the important role of friendships among children in ECCE settings: *"I am happy in this environment, happy coming in in the morning knowing that my friends will be there before me. I want to be with my friends."*

The same setting captures a moment of kindness shared between friends. Here, the child's dispositions and efforts are affirmed through documentation, showing the child's abilities to not only form friendships, but maintain them through interpersonal skills.

Feb 2022

today I noticed how kind and caring you were to your friend. You were balancing on the balancing equipment with another child and your friend n really wanted to have a turn. T waited patiently for a few moments and watched. He then started to get upset that he could not have a go on the equipment. You noticed that your friend was upset and you got off the equipment, put your arm around your friend and said '*don't worry , you can have a go now, I don't mind'. I will have a go later.* He was so happy. He took his turn and you waited patiently watching your him having fun.

You were so kind and thoughtful and so caring towards your friend. You have a positive disposition for being considerate, cooperating with others and being friendly. You are accepting of others and of differences. You also have a lot of patience and empathy which is so lovely. Having positive dispositions is very important for your future learning and development. You are a good role model for your peers. I am so proud of you, well done

The Early Start setting also provided data regarding the role relationships with both adults and peers have on a child's sense of adventure and risk taking within play. Here, we see how the

provision of time, space and opportunity to communicate, negotiate and have fun led to meaningful learning as a group.

"This activity enthused several other children who joined in the more challenging version. Several rounds were played before adaptations were made either by inverting the boards or including the wheeled tyres. They remembered this more entertaining revision the following day and asked to take the boards into the garden where a role-play game of 'surfing' continued with additions of water pumps and music."

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

Within in the same setting, the evidence documents a child, Lara celebrating their birthday. Lara had made *"several requests"*. These requests were communicated to the educator, *"We all needed to sit at the same table and there had to be dancing."* This data illustrates the value Lara places on her friendships and her recognition of the fun friendships can bring to celebrations.

"The birthday cake was shared between the children and then a game of musical statues was played. The children danced with great enthusiasm – asking for many contemporary songs."

Celebrating occasions such as these, reaffirms a child's sense of identity and belonging within the setting.

The Early Start setting also documented the role of the adult in modelling and facilitating the formation of relationships. The educator notes that a child *"really enjoys the board games",* as these activities *"give him the opportunity to work more closely with the others in the class – and enables him to receive adult support to interact with his peers, something he isn't always confident to do independently."*

Similarly, data from the Specialist preschool for children with disabilities shows how communication and negotiation can be supported through meaningful friendships. The children in the setting were exploring clay, *"a large selection of sequences, sparkles and small shiny shapes introduced a new currency! They shared, swopped and traded their very valuable 'diamonds'.* Through conversations with friends they articulated their ideas and choices, *"their concentration on the positioning of the small shiny objects was fantastic. They commented and asked each other about their choices."* The interest in this activity grew among the group as time and space was provided for this interest to develop, *"as the children explored clay and its various qualities, another aspect became more dominant".*

"One observation I made was the 'connectedness' between the children in this small group. The shared interest in the exploration of materials available created a bond between the four children." The activity became a routine among the children, *"In the third week they began to come together after lunchtime in anticipation of the introduction of additional materials".*

The data once again captured the role friendships have in supporting children's learning and developed. The photographs below were taken from the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra. The educator narrates the photographs for the child, Ella[6]:

"It was so lovely to see how well your social skills are progressing Ella and how you can cooperate with friends on projects. You and Ruthie worked very hard together making all those beautiful cakes from sand. I noticed how you expanded on Ruthie's phrase as Gaeilge and how you are using your Gaeilge with ease. This is so lovely to listen to."

Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval

Children's expression of feelings towards their relationships and friendships comes in different forms, such as verbal communication, body language, facial expression and art. For example, within this data children used whiteboards, took photographs of their peers or created pictures of or for their loved ones in an expression of their feelings towards them. The following excerpts discuss children using photography to document their relationships with their peers. It also includes images which illustrate the role art has in the expression of children's feelings towards their relationships and friendships. The Early Start setting gave the children the opportunity to use different resources to capture their interests, such as taking photographs and displaying them on the whiteboard. The findings indicate that relationships with educators and peers rank highly in their interests:

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[6] Data submitted with faces covered.

"His photographs reflected his interest in social contact, cohesion and attachment, including me and some of his friends. He recorded a couple of toys likes to play with, not reflected in his ranked choices – the Playmobile, sand tray and a bike."

A child offered an exploration for his decisions, which again shows the role of relationships:

"He chose painting, water, art and sand as 'I can play with my friends', the water is where 'I get to put the pirates in the boat' and at the sand he 'can play dinosaurs, ice creams and ... make castles and that thing with the, the hard thing that's in the sea."

The impact of friendships on children's decisions in relation to play and exploration was also noted:

"He has recently begun to draw and model more frequently. He particularly enjoys making rockets from recycled materials using tape and the glue gun (C 4.2 - express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing). He carefully selects materials to use, mostly opting to work in a small group with his friends."

The data show that relationships and collaboration with peers was a common theme in relation to children's interests:

"His photographic collection demonstrated a relationship with his array selection in that the sand tray was included as well as a collaborative building project he completed with his friend."

"The white board he considers a useful tool '... we can do the milkshake dance, and there's 'Shotgun' and LR likes the JoJo dance ... 'Boomerang'?' (C 4.3 – listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments). His interest in collaborative work and social integration was more evident in his interview than other children's."
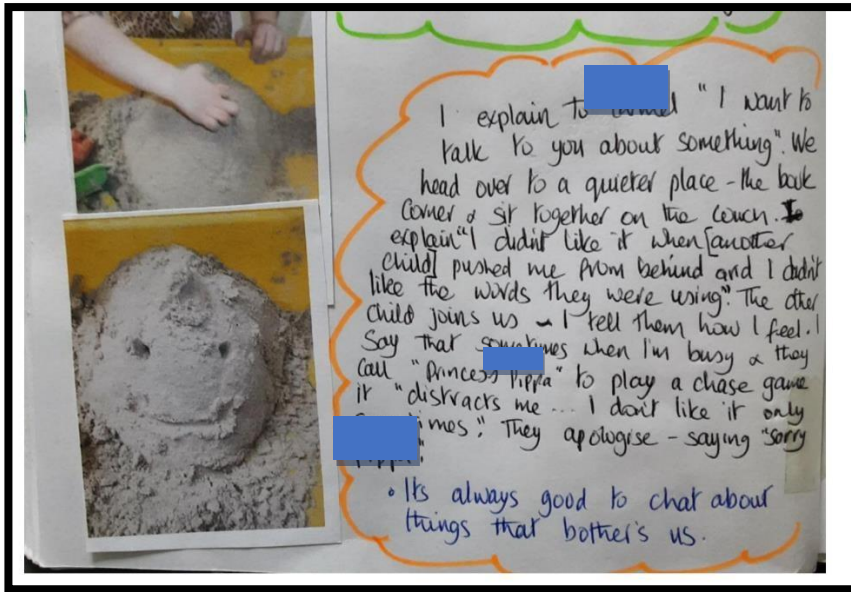
"Kyle's photographic documentation focused almost exclusively on a set of Paw Patrol toys – this would tally with his observed preference for imaginative and social

engagement with small world resources items. He also photographed more people than the other children indicative also of his strong personal connections and enjoyment in the company of his classmates."

Each of the settings provided multiple art pieces created by the children and narratives written by the educators based on their observations of children that illustrated the impact positive, genuine and reciprocal relationships have on children and how they express their emotions towards them. Tanya, the parent, highlighted how the love between the children and for her parents is evident in Katherine's art work:

Bernie's community ECCE room documented how communication, conflict resolution and negotiation can be enhanced through relationships as they often provide a safe space in which children can openly express their feelings and thoughts:

I explain to [name] "I want to talk to you about something". We head over to a quieter place - the book corner & sit together on the couch. I explain "I didn't like it when [another child] pushed me from behind and I didn't like the words they were using". The other child joins us - I tell them how I feel. I say that sometimes when I'm busy & they call "Princess Pippa" to play a chase game it "distracts me... I don't like it only sometimes". They apologise - saying "sorry".

• Its always good to chat about things that bothers us.

The children in the community setting ECCE room similarly expressed their love for their families through art:

"That's me and mammy, x means kisses."
Sometimes I miss mammy, I drawed this for her.
"Drawing is my favourite."
"When I come in [to preschool] I like to go to the art table first."

The importance of the relationships between children, as well as those with their families, is evident throughout the data from this setting:

"*We chat about the important role that the older and experienced children have working with younger children: 'I love playing in the kitchen with my friends....I love going in the van with Daddy to school'*"

██████ notices what you are doing, she is very interested. You explain about acting out the story with the puppets. Kindly, you suggest that you will read the story as ████ acts it out.

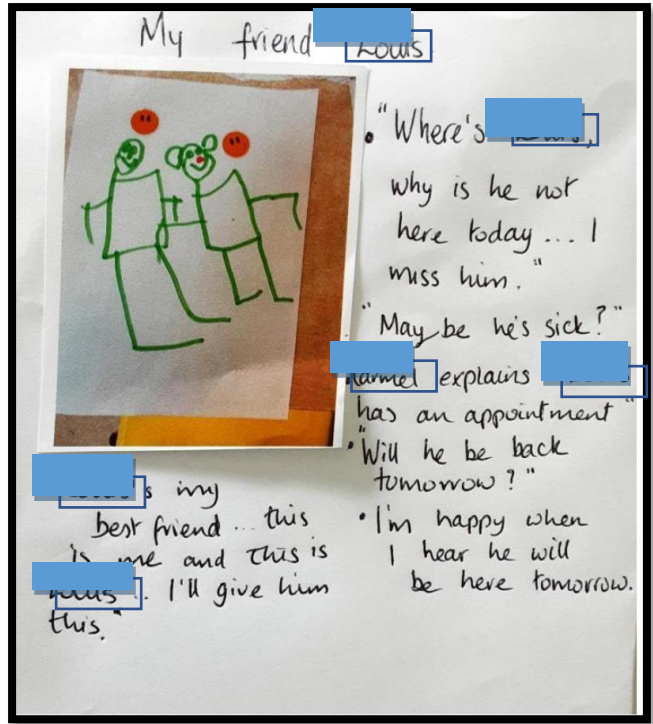██████ and ██████ arrive at the Puppet Theatre - they are really interested. You are happy for them to join in.

"I'm so excited" says ████████

"That's Spiderman" as we chat abou███ new teacher in big school Alfie says " you're my teacher, you're my superhero"

One girl speaks about her brother " he says he's going to miss here."

The centrality of friendships to the day-to-day experiences of early childhood education for young children is evident in the data below, showing how much children miss their friends if they are not in the setting:

My friend ▓▓▓▓

"Where's ▓▓▓▓,
why is he not
here today... I
miss him."

"Maybe he's sick?"

▓▓▓▓ explains ▓▓▓▓
has an appointment"

"Will he be back
tomorrow?"

• I'm happy when
I hear he will
be here tomorrow.

▓▓▓▓ s my
best friend... this
is me and this is
▓▓▓▓. I'll give him
this.

Children in Mary's community setting also showed in multiple ways how important their friendships are to them:

work to do. Your first job was to read a story! You open ▓▓▓▓ r book first Molly and began to tell your friends what was happening on each page! Your friends were so engrossed in the story Molly, you were doing ▓▓▓▓ job 😊 Once you had finished the s▓▓▓▓aid 'the end'. And closed the book wi▓▓▓▓ile on your face. It was then your friend Mia's turn to share her story with you and Marianna. And finally, you waited patiently for Marianna to do her story!

It was lovely to see you being so confident as you read your story in front of your friends. You were proud as punch once you had finished! You done super listening when your friends were reading their stories also Molly, well done!

Making friendships is so important to your development. It benefits you by creating a sense of belonging and security. It helps with your quality of life and ability to adjust to changes within your environment. It also helps your self-confidence. I have really seen more confidence coming through every day now in you and how comfortable you have gotten with your peers and teachers. Growing your confidence is so important to get you ready for the next stage of moving to senior pre-school.

In summary, one of the key findings from multiple data sources is that children's relationships with adults are crucial to their experiences in early childhood settings but that equally their relationships with other children define their day-to-day experiences.

As a young child...How does Aistear support my educators, family, and community to collaborate for my benefit?

As with the birth to three years cohort, Aistear supports educators and families to collaborate for the benefit of young children by encouraging the sharing of information from home to setting and from setting to home. Sometimes this helps to regulate young children and helps them to feel safe and secure and other times it helps them to find things in their home life to broaden or deepen their learning in their setting. There is extensive collaboration between family and educators in the three to six years cohort in terms of identity and belonging exercises, particularly through family books, family walls, discussion of experiences in the home, etc. However, one potential area for redevelopment of Aistear could be to support educators to collaborate meaningfully with families to support learning and development, rather than only focusing on identity, as shown in this innovative example from the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra. Liam shared his passion for mushrooms with his peers, which led to the children all sharing ideas relating to mushrooms. The educator documents how this interest grew from one child to the children and families of the room. As the educator writes:

"The children experienced many new areas of learning from the sighting of a humble mushroom." This information was then *"shared with parents and the children all became great mushroom detectives. The learning was enriched further when fungi were explored and*

experiments deepened the learning. Positive parental partnerships led to the sharing of a microscope and there were many mini scientists excited about bacteria in naíonra."

The setting showed how photographs of Liam and *"his friends in action spotting mushrooms [were] shared with parents through WhatsApp group. Children were spotting mushrooms in the gardens at home, on walks with parents and bringing them in to naíonra."*

The educator described how this interest grew for Liam:

"D'fhás suim L. i mbeacáin. Fuair Mamaí agus Daidí Leo leabhar dó ar bheacáin. Bhí sé ina shaineolaí sa   Naíonra ar bheacáin. Scaip an suim i mbeacáin tríd an Naíonra. Bhlais na páistí na gnáth beacán a bhí   cócaráilte againn.
L.'s interest in mushrooms grew and grew. His parents bought him a book on mushrooms which he took to the garden each day in case he spotted some mushrooms and wanted to identify them"[7].

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[7] Data submitted with faces covered

*"D'fhéach muid ar an bhfíseáin seo lena páistí.*

"This information was shared with educators and we watched the video with the children on the ipad."

"Tá mamaí agus daidí A. ag obair mar múinteoirí bitheolaíochta agus thug said micreascóp dúinn .

Aine's mum and dad are both Biology and Science teachers. They sent in a microscope for us to examine the bacteria."

Smaointe na páistí
The children's thoughts
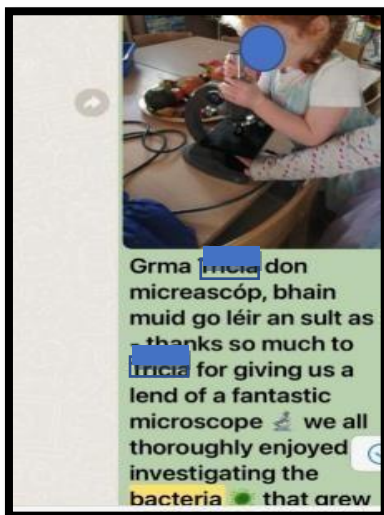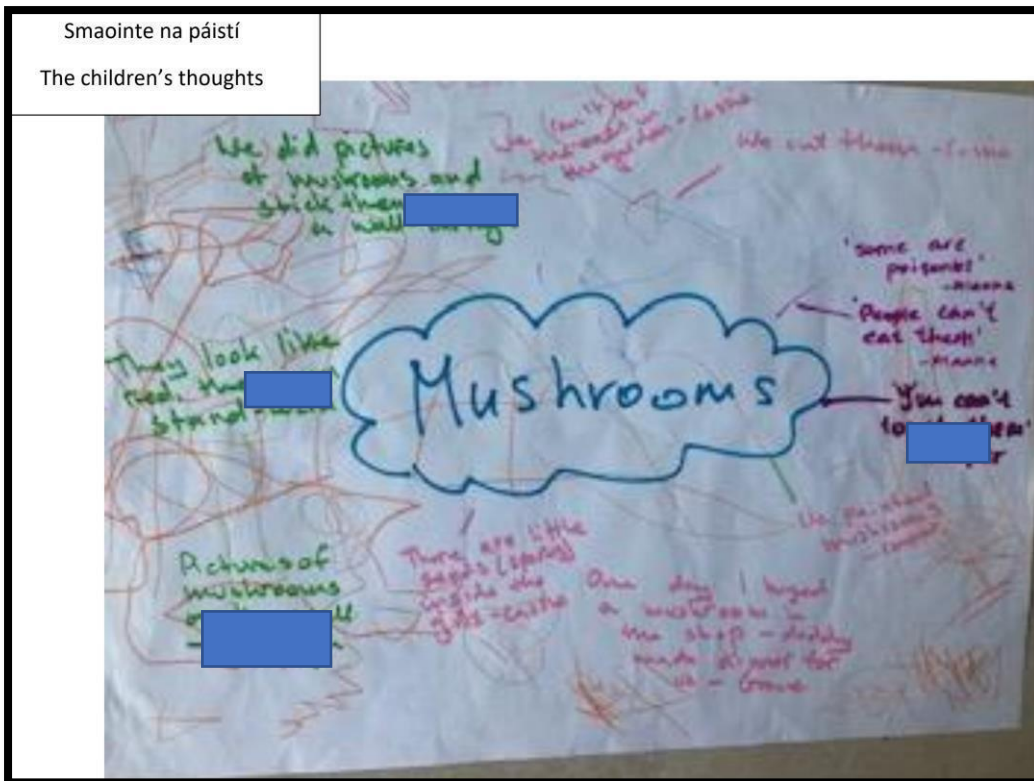
The educator concludes this piece stating, *"You (Liam) proudly reflect on this during our parent meeting. You smile as you listen to mammy explain how amazed she was by the way you confidently got everyone involved in your project. This story emphasises the importance of educators building positive partnerships with parents."*

Within the ECCE room of the Bernie's community setting, the data finds collaboration between the children and educators in preparation for the move to primary school:

"Since March there has been a growing interest and excitement about the move to big school by the majority of the children in our group, eleven are heading off to school while five will be remaining in the setting for their second ECCE year. Photographs of the various primary schools are put up in a display area. Children place their photograph next to the school they will be attending. There's great excitement with the realisation, by some of the group.

A child, who will be returning for their second ECCE year asks "but where is my big school?" A photograph of the preschool setting is then added to the display, the children who will be returning, place their photo next to it. Everyone is included in the

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'Transition' display area. This area becomes a space where children have discussions about their expectations of big school and where they share their funds of knowledge."

This form of inclusive collaboration among children, families and educators in preparation for a transition can support the children feel secure during these times of change. Through conversations and collaboration with families, they learn that some friends will be joining them on their move to their primary school and gain more information as to what to expect, which can lessen those uncertain feelings.
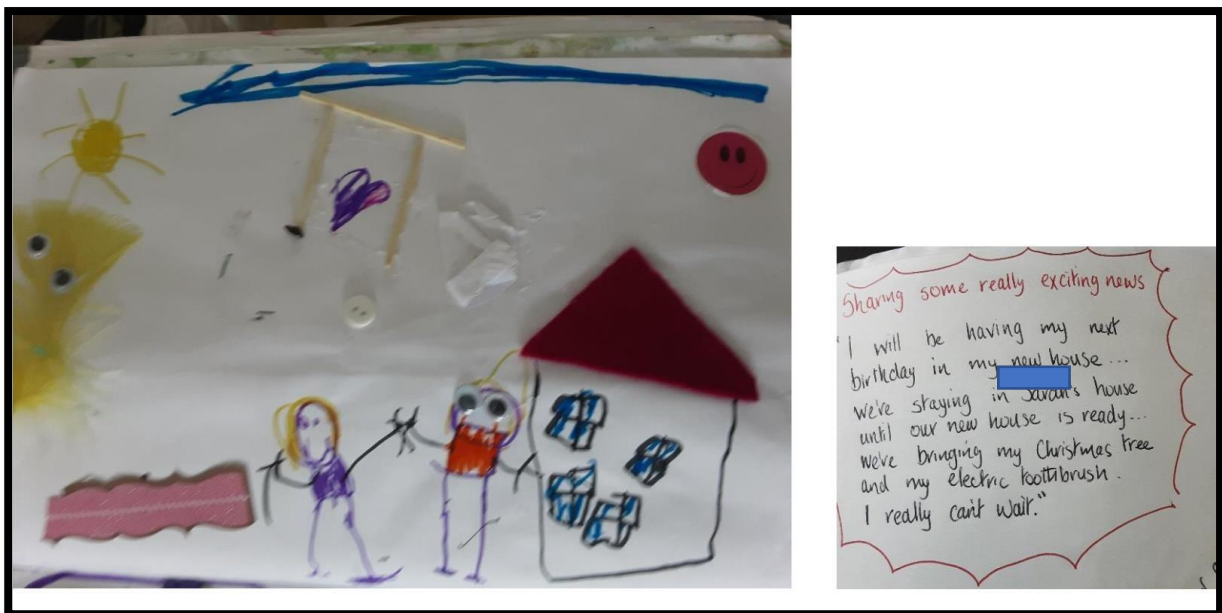
Again, within the same setting, data show collaboration among families and educators in preparation for a transition. Here, *"two families are relocating to various parts of the country",* with one of the children stating, *"Mammy got a letter, it says I can go to big school." She says "yeah, it's good, I'm going in Sally's school" (older sister).*

"One day as they are playing and chatting at the sand box, they discover that both are moving to a new house "far away" and they will be going to "Daddy's school." The educator notes the children *"were amazed at the similarities of their story. At collection time the story was related to their families by the children, one parent comments that this shared experience is really helpful to know about".*

Items from home or photographs of family can help children regulate their feelings, support them in feeling secure, reaffirm their sense of identity or remind them of special occasions with

loved ones when in an ECCE setting. Ensuring children can access these items at all times enables them to go to them when they need to.
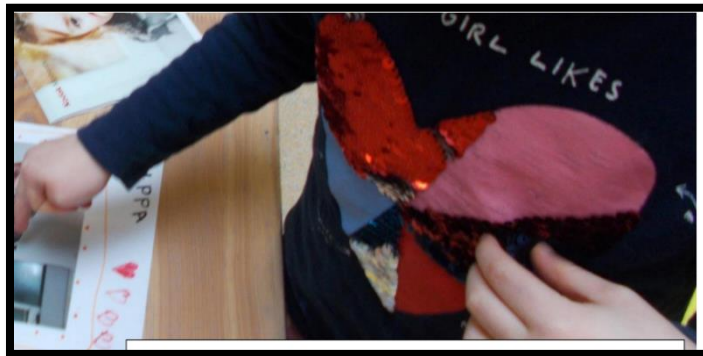

"*Pauline is decorating her family photo for our family wall. You are really interested as you look at the photograph. "I like that unicorn cake." Pauline explains, "it's my birthday cake, I made it with mammy." "How did you make it?" you ask. She agrees to ask her mammy about the recipe and how to make the unicorn horn. "Will you take a photo of the cake?" Great idea, some evidence for your research. We chat about research and finding out about things that interest us. You decide to ask your mammy to ask Pauline's mammy about the cake. Mammy explains that you have reassured her that you understand your birthday is almost a year away*."

Some collaboration among educators and families may be small tokens of support, such as writing a message to children's family from them to explain their art work: "*Will you write for me -Dear Mummy and Daddy, I was thinking about you and I painted this for you."*

Children also showed how important it was to recognise the centrality of their families and to give them the space and time to talk about them. These actions can help children feel safe and comforted.
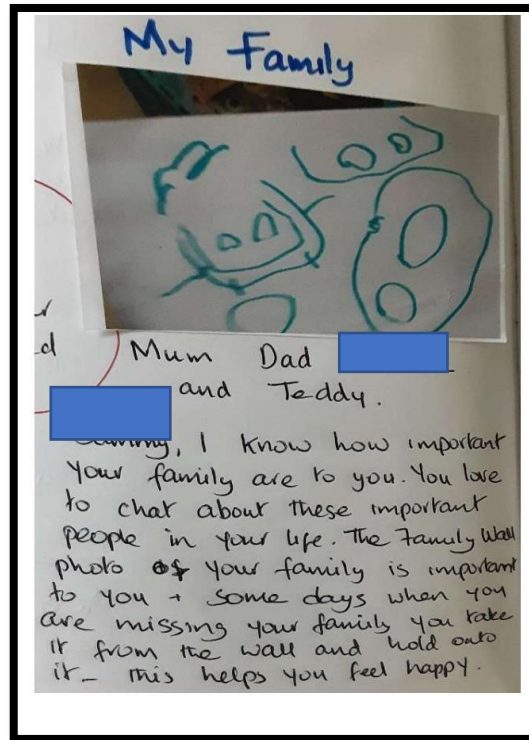
The data gathered from the primary school also demonstrated how the link between school and home is reciprocal. In the first example we see the educator sharing photographs with parents at the request of the children to share their achievements with their families.

"This little girl asked me to send the photo of her winning her competition home. This little boy asked me to send the photo of him winning his competition home to his mammy. He said 'teacher she is going to be so proud of me!'"

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In the second example, we see how the educator initiated an activity whereby the children bring items from their home into the school to discuss them with their peers.

"*Below you can see a selection of the children participating in show and tell. I asked the children to bring something in from home that they wanted to share with the class. It was interesting throughout the year to see the items the children brought in. The parents got involved as they were asked to send me a reason as to why the child chose the item at home. It was a great success and I found it was great for connecting school and families.*"

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[8] Data submitted with faces covered.

This collaboration with families was a common theme throughout the data, with the private ECCE setting asking families if they had resources at home which the children were currently exploring:
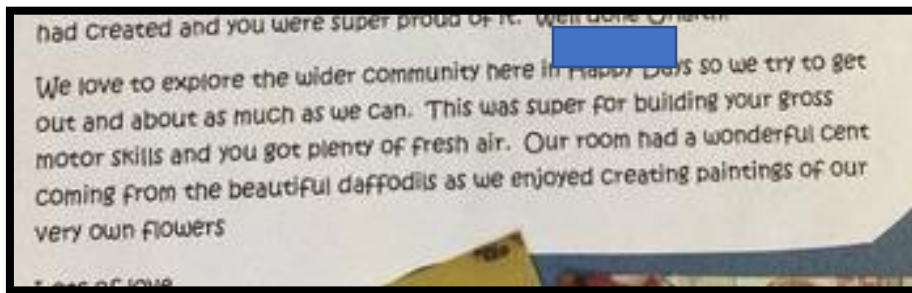
"We then continued the exploration by finding out facts and photographs all about storms in books and asked the parents if they had any books at home about storms to include them in the children's learning."

This setting also documented the sharing of activities and interests with the families. "*The parents joined in as we sent the words home for them to practice with their child*." In addition to this, "*These pictures are placed in each child's learning journal or the children can choose to bring them home at any point".*

Thus, the links between home and early childhood setting were strong in all cases. However, unlike the many examples of community visibility in the child-minder's data in the birth to three cohort, there was minimal evidence presented in the data from the three to six year old cohort of collaboration with the community. This does not mean that it does not happen, perhaps it is less frequent than collaboration with the family or perhaps it is valued less; more likely is that there is no map or guide as to what meaningful collaboration in the community looks like within the Aistear documentation. Nevertheless, while children's visibility within local communities in this data-set was limited, there was some community collaboration in evidence. For example, when children were asked about their interests or activities outside of the setting, they shared their experiences with their peers and this sometimes initiated different types of interests or play. The data documented form the Early Start setting showed two children who were willing to collaborate to show their peers the dance moves they had learnt in dance class. As documented, this led to a group interest in dance:

"Lara and Ava demonstrated some of the moves they had learnt at dance classes outside of school. More dancing was instigated the following day with the inclusion of chairs – a game they self-manage and complete with good humour. Having equipment that is familiar and recognisable from their home environment seems important to encourage engagement and co-operative play."

Sometimes children did access their local communities and the benefits of this were clear. For example, the data from the community setting, full day care (3-6 age group) found that an expedition into the wider community where daffodils were picked, led to inspiration for artwork.

had created and you were super proud of it. Well done children
We love to explore the wider community here in Happy Days so we try to get out and about as much as we can. This was super for building your gross motor skills and you got plenty of fresh air. Our room had a wonderful cent coming from the beautiful daffodils as we enjoyed creating paintings of our very own flowers

In summary, the data from the three to six-year cohort showed that Aistear supports strong collaboration with families in terms of identity and belonging, but also highlighted opportunities for development regarding collaboration for learning and development and visibility in communities.

As a young child…How does Aistear frame the practice of the adults who support my learning and development?

The practice of the adults who support young children's learning and development is framed by Aistear to:
- Encourage and promote positive, reciprocal relationships with children and their families,
- Observe them and learn all of their one hundred languages,
- Assess their learning and development with a growth mindset and strengths-based perspective – to start at what they are competent and capable of doing – to recognise their already existing funds of knowledge,
- Plan for their extended learning, building on what they already know and to use a wide variety of open-ended and fixed purpose materials to do so.

Educators and carers in the three to six years cohort use more formal learning opportunities, lessons, resources and mind-maps or forms of co-documentation with

the children as is appropriate for their ages. This allows children to see their learning extended and documented. It also affords them the opportunity to document their own learning and development, linking into identity and belonging in an educational setting. This code focuses on the pedagogy and practice of the educator, but again it seems most of the children experience a form of relational nurturing pedagogy and have strong bonds and relationships with their educators and caregivers.

The data below was gathered from the Community setting, full day care (3-6 age group), and it shows the documentation of children's observations by educators. The format of the observation is written to each child, and they are specific to each child, recognising and celebrating their achievements, abilities and interests, while considering ways to extend the child's learning and development. A portrait of each child's learning and development is provided through careful observation and documentation.

Hello Finley,

This month we introduced you to all about wellbeing, which included yoga, learning about your emotions and feelings and just about looking after ourselves in general. This is a very important topic as it is fundamental to your overall physical development and help you to support positive relationships with other children. Not only that but it will support you to create healthy coping strategies as you grow and develop through life.

the music you were able to identify what she was asking.

Finley, it was lovely to see you truly learning all about wellbeing, because of this I think it would be a great idea to extend your learning and hold a wellbeing day in the Senior Preschool Room for you and your friends, I think you would certainly enjoy it and maybe you could even come to school in your pyjamas!!

Love,

furthered your interest + we did a Tuff Tray of with Horses + horse Jumps, Sheds you Just loved it

...aw a loving and caring side to you as you shared all the coloured pencils with your friends your turn you would say as you passed all the colours around.

Next it was lunch tim... ...en you go to the kitchen to get our pretend food for your friends great thinking Ruth ☺

I put a bell on hey google and you jumped up 'home time' let's go to the bus and off ye all set with your bags.

T... ...ou and your friends had a great adventure today on the bus and can't wait to watch you on lots more adventures and I will continue to support your interests ☺

Lots of Love,

This evidence gathered from the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra discusses how the educators collaborated with the children to explore a topic of interest and what area they would like to pursue. This form of documentation supports each child's voice being heard in relation to the topic:

"We did a KWL (Know, Wonder and Learn) *chart to think about what we knew about birds, what we wondered about and what we learned about them through our books and research."*

An educator was at the beach and came across a dead dolphin which she showed to the children, hence dolphin chat here too

Thoughtful consideration regarding the role of the educator in supporting children's learning and development is also documented.

"[This] highlights how learning can emerge when children's interests and experiences are supported by trained and passionate educators who listen to the children and give them the freedom to explore their ideas and collaborate on projects. It emphasises how critical educator attitudes are and how their enthusiasm, innovation, flexibility and ability to listen closely is key to supporting an emergent curriculum such as Aistear. The experience opened up new learning and play experiences around dens, how to make camp-fires, camping. It also encouraged collaboration teamwork and cooperative play."

In addition to this, the data highlight the role interactions play in gathering an understanding of children's thoughts and demonstrating the significance of these interactions through documentation:

"The interaction with the educator exploring how the children thought the hatchling died encouraged the children to think deeply and voice their opinions. Writing the children's thoughts on paper showed them that the educator listened closely to their views and valued what they had to say. It also shows how important it is for educators to listen to children, act on their comments, acknowledge their observations and follow their concrete interests."

The role of the educator in encouraging the exploration of new interests was noted:

"The educator recognised the sighting of the fledgling as a wonderful opportunity for exploration and learning. The children made some food for the tired little birds who were learning to fly and needed energy. This story emphasises the importance of educators acting on and being enthusiastic about children's observations and using them to drive their inquiry and learning."

As Learning stories are the chosen observation approach within this setting, the educator notes the merits of using such an observation and how it can support practice.

"This learning story highlights how much information children can have already and how educators should acknowledge these funds of knowledge and use them to empower children and help them feel their identity and uniqueness is appreciated and respected. It is important to ensure that children's funds of knowledge and identity are represented within the environment and materials that are provided".

The data also explore how children experience the outcomes of such detailed observations that are implemented into the environment and into the practice of the educator. While children may not be directly aware of the educator's practice in this regard, their lived experience of the resultant sense of being listened to is evident throughout the data:

"This story emphasises the importance of educators being enthusiastic about children's experiences and using them to drive their inquiry and learning. It also highlights how educators must listen to children's ideas and thoughts and use those to support the curriculum. Freedom to express interest and learning in many different ways is fundamental in supporting every child in the setting. The experience opened up new learning around birds and their life cycles. It also encouraged an exploration of many different ideas using an array of mediums."

Finally, the educator demonstrates her awareness of how the attitude of the educator can hinder or nurture these new interests:

"It also shows how educator attitudes greatly influence how these experiences can become wonderful learning opportunities for all the children and educators alike."

The data from the Non-Gaeltacht Naíonra highlighted that providing children with a variety of open ended and fixed purpose materials can extend their interests, learning and development. They can also encourage children to engage in different types of play with their peers. An example of this is found when educators noticed a child's interest in the "*music wall in the gairdín mór".* Since observing this interest, the educators decided to introduce new resources into the area:

"*Since we had noticed your interest in the music wall in the we decided to play some music and introduce the music and movement box."*

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The educator then modelled one way in which the resources could be used, which the child mimicked. *"I modelled dancing with the silk scarves and immediately after seeing me you went and chose a blue one. You twirled around in circles holding it out in front of you"*.

The exploration of the different resources continued, as the child moved to his peers. "*You saw your friends investigating the music box and went straight over. You investigated the box and took out two cymbals and clashed them together. You went back into the box and took out the wooden shaker. I could see how engaged and active you were, investigating all the different resources. You then took out the drum and beat 6 steady beats.*" The educator concludes this observation, with plans to further the child's interests. "*I will build on this interest in musical instruments and music and help you explore them in more detail. I will continue to use music and song to help motivate you and develop serve and return relationships.*"

Similarly, the data collected from the Private ECCE setting, showed that children experienced a curriculum that was planned and enacted through observation and consultation with them on their interests:

"*As the children were discussing and playing with the rockets and talking about what planets they were visiting, the moon, Jupiter, Mars, etc. It shows that they are interested in the world around them and that real life experiences is a very important precursor for their interests in certain areas of the curriculum.*

I looked for some books on the solar system and as we looked at the books and pictures of each planet we talked about all the different planets and I read some interesting facts about them.

We then decided to make our own 'solar system' chart. We talked about the different size of each planet, (early mathematical concepts and words were introduced such as sphere and larger, diameter, etc.) whether they were hot or cold planets and we could see from our chart how far away from earth each planet was. We learnt to sing a song called "There are eight planets, in our solar system" to help us all to remember the names of the planets."

The evidence also demonstrates how the children's learning is displayed in the setting, taking pride of place, recognising their strengths, knowledge and learning:

"A photograph of the Solar system chart we made and it shows how we displayed the Artefacts the children painted depicting each child's individual image of the Solar System. This shows how we admire and respect each child's work and that we are happy to display their work so everyone can admire it. This builds the children's self-esteem and confidence. It promotes their well-being. They can choose what they feel is best for them. Giving the children choices gives an important message to the children, that their voice matters in what we do in playschool and we respect their choices. Such a strong message to give a child."

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Here is your Solar System, It is absolutely Fabulous.

Here is the Solar System Chart we made together.
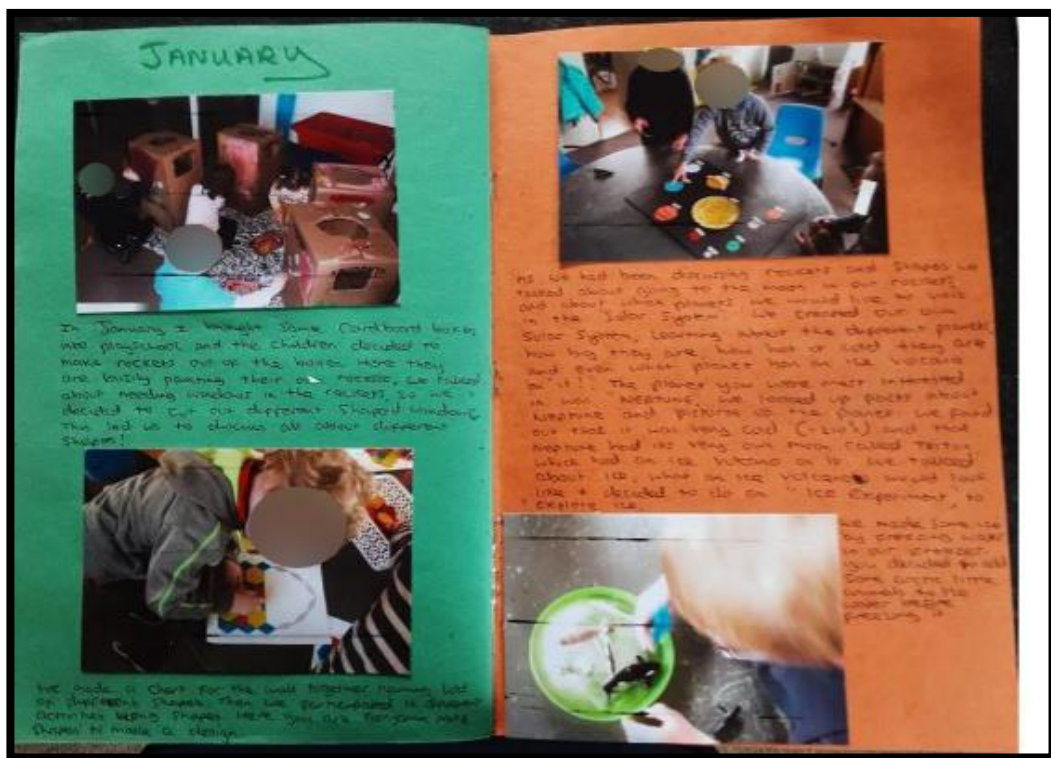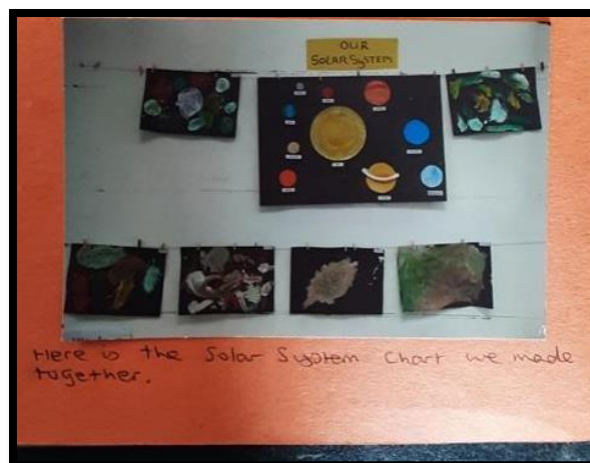
Children's learning and development can occur through planned activities based on their interests or through spontaneous play. The data show that as an adult it is important to interpret children's hundred languages as to whether they are content playing alone or with their peers, or if they would like the adult to join. If the adult is invited to play, this is an opportunity to build on children's learning by introducing relevant new language, appropriate challenges or tasks, all of which can occur within play. An example of this is documented by the educator in the private ECCE setting:

"*As the Educator, I was invited to be the paying customer coming to their restaurant and ordering a meal. The learning was extended as we explored food, costs, writing menus, serving customers, communicating, mark making and making signs to say whether the restaurant was open or closed, working together in the kitchen of a restaurant, negotiating differences of opinions, problem solving, and lots more. Aistear enables learning to extend in any direction, this shows how important this aspect of Aistear is for the learning the children gain from a child led curriculum facilitated by an adult! The children feel that they are exploring what they are interested in. This story shows that this really works well.*"

The provision of open ended and sensory resources to extend children's learning and development was found to be a common practice among the settings. In Bernie's community ECCE room, the educators and children are planning "Arts Week". This involved consultation among the educators and children as to what each day would hold and altering the environment to immerse the children in this learning:

"*We are planning 'Arts Week'. In consultation we plan activities for each day: Music Monday; Arty Tuesday; Wondrous Wednesday; Touchy Thursday; Fantasy Friday.*
On Tuesday our room is set up as an art studio, it was suggested and agreed by the children to have flowers as our still life subject."

An observation of a child painting a still life picture, notes the child's levels of concentration and planning involved.

"As you sit at the art table looking across at the snack table, you are focusing on the bowl of apples and oranges. You begin to draw what you see. You are so involved as you concentrate intensely. "What a wonderful piece of still life art." I comment. "Still life, yeah I just wanted to draw that. Now I'm going to put in blueberries, I like blueberries." We agree blue looks nice with orange and green."

The educator taking on the role of facilitator in activities is a common occurrence within the data and is again found in the Early Start setting, where the children's learning was sensory based and involved food and food preparation. The children took an active role in preparing the food, cutting it and trying it.

"Ingredients were tasted and combined to make the hummus according to the recipe. Vegetables were chopped and placed on plates ready to eat. Most children were happy to taste the hummus and vegetables, some just decided to eat the carrot or the bread sticks."

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Again, within this data there is evidence of children experiencing involvement in planning and co-constructing curriculum. In this case, the children plan to continue their exploration into different areas of food the next day.

"We talked at length one day about what they liked to eat for breakfast, toast being suggested as the most popular choice. The next day a toaster, plates, knives, bread, spread and jam were sited in the role-play area and the children were supported to

make their own breakfast. This prompted much discussion about where breakfast is
eaten, what they eat on the toast and who makes their breakfast."

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The evidence gathered from the Specialist preschool for children with disabilities, shows the purposeful introduction of clay. The educator documents how this sensory material would support children's learning and development.

"This week I decided to provide clay as a provocation to explore texture, temperature,
and how it can be moulded and shaped. It prompted the use of both hands, this child
is visibly deep in concentration exploring the clay."

The level of educator support to the children altered as their ability progressed:

"As the weeks progressed the level of support was altered to enhance each child's growing confidence and exploration. As the children engaged with the expanding range of materials it was evident how their skill set was developing."

Similarly, within the home setting, we see the parent follow the lead of the child in relation to the level of scaffolding offer during a board game:

"Another example of scaffolding-where Katherine dictates the pace. The same is happening with Monopoly Deal at the moment. She fluctuates between requiring help and not. Some evenings she prefers to play cards up, other times - she keeps the cards

close to her chest. We mostly go with her choices but encourage independence as much as we can."

K. learning how to play Cluedo Junior

We started off playing in pairs -
You needed to observe first. You
watched every move and stayed so
focused. Then You decided to venture
out by yourself, but with Pandy
at your side.
"What Pandy? Oh! that's a good idea!
Let's do that!"
After 3 games, you said:
"I don't even think I need Pandy".
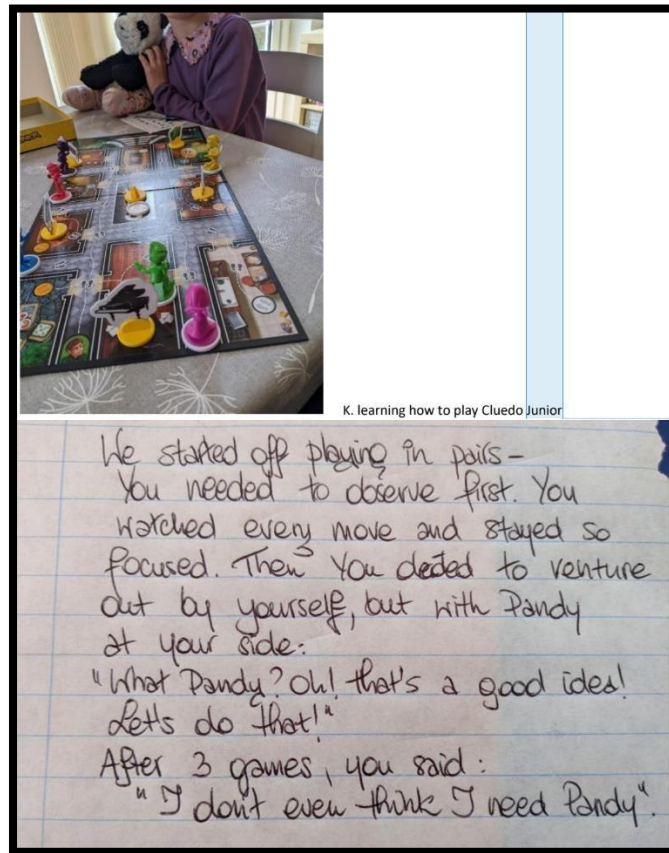
The findings also offer insight into the parent's thinking when gauging the level of support which should be offered to her child, and highlights how children's views on themselves can be clearly expressed once adults know how to look for it:

"*It reminded me to refrain from judgement - my daughter didn't see herself as timid or shy, she highlighted her mature outlook of a "sensible" person, who takes time to observe and assess prior to jumping in.*"

This is a common trend within the evidence gathered, whereby educators reflect on their role in supporting children's learning and development through their interests. An example of this is found in the data gathered from the Gaeltacht Naíonra:

"Also it showed to me how much early educators change depending on the interest that a child shows and that you have to be ready and willing to change your plans depending on the interest that a child shows".

This extract has clear links to the Aistear framework, as it promotes following the lead of the child in their learning and development. Similarly, conscious reflection on one's practice also aligns with the Aistear framework. The following extracts from the data demonstrate educators actively engaging in reflective practice.

"*Making sure that I give the child enough time to speak to me and for me to listen to him when he was telling me the story of what he was doing. Making sure that I showed plenty of interest in the story and in what was taking place.*"

Children were very capable of expressing their voices in identifying how such practice feels to them: *"I like it when grown-ups listen to me."*

The educator in the Gaeltacht Naíonra noted:

"*Through this as an early years' educator, it was clear to me how important it is to give time to children to be able to do things.*"

"Taking the time to tell the child that it is ok to be late in the morning and that he can still take part in the class and what is happening in the room."
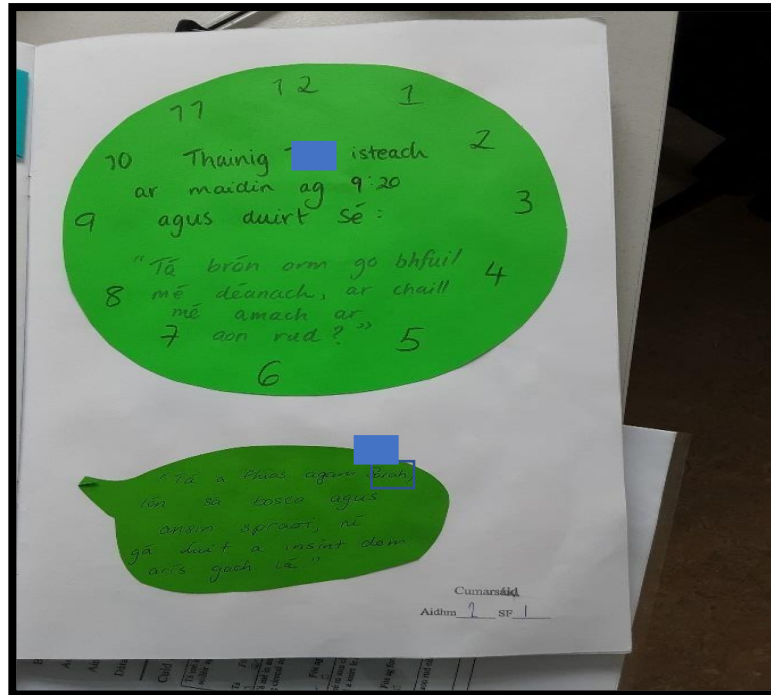
In summary, the appropriate role for an adult engaging with young children was identified as incorporating a slow, relational, nurturing pedagogy that takes the time to really listen to children in order to build on their strengths and meet their needs. The capabilities of children to engage in co-construction of curriculum when given the time and space to do so by attuned educators was striking.

3.2.3 Aistear Principles Group 3: How children learn and develop (holistic learning and development; active learning; relevant meaningful experiences; communication and learning; the learning environment)

As a young child…To what extent am I respected as a competent and confident learner?

Like the data from the baby and toddler cohort, the data from young children show that they are respected as competent and confident learners when they are given space and respect to be themselves, have all their feelings, and explore what they can do and what they want to do. They are also respected as competent and confident learners when they are given opportunities to realise their responsibilities. Aistear provides adults and educators with strength-based ways of observing, assessing, and building, interpreting young children's multiple languages (physical, vocal, arts-based etc.) which helps them see what I am competent at and confident

in doing. This is particularly so when they have diverse needs – Aistear encourages educators and provides them with opportunities to use a slow relational nurturing pedagogy.

Through Aistear, adults and educators learn to recognise what children already know and what they are capable of doing. They can use this understanding to provide an environment that will allow them to explore their interests and build on what they know – planning and providing an environment which stimulates and supports further learning through a child-led curriculum as noted in the section above. Without strong, reciprocal relationships, adults and educators may not interpret children's languages correctly, leading to communication difficulties which would hinder learning.

An example of children being respected as competent and confident learners is taken from the evidence gathered in the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra. Throughout this strengths-based observation, the educator refers to the children's funds of knowledge and the transfer of this knowledge from their home to the early childhood setting. This practice, as noted by the educator, has profound effects on the child's sense of identity, not only within the realms of their family, but as a competent learner in the setting.

"This learning story highlights how much information the children have already and how this should be acknowledged from the outset."
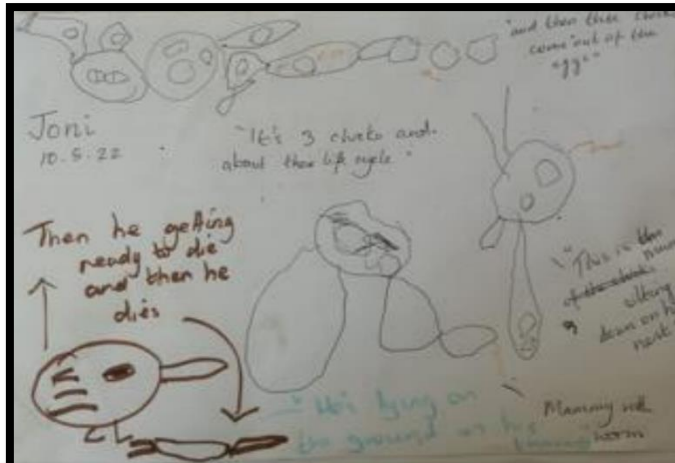
"*Go raibh maith agat Áine. Tríd do scileanna dianbhreathnóireachta bhíomar in ann foghlaim faoin éaníní*".

"*Your awareness in the garden helped you find the hatchling Áine. We were all able to examine a real hatchling and enjoy learning new facts about birds. This learning story highlights how children's funds of knowledge can be explored and their traditions that they share with their families promoting connections to home, promoting self-esteem and making a more authentic learning environment for children. They can also be used to empower children and help them see themselves as capable and confident.*"

Another strengths-based observation and assessment found in these data also makes reference to the children's application of previous learning from their home to an activity within the setting. The observation begins by providing context to the activity, as the educator and children work in partnership to explore their interest.

"The week opened with a chat about pancake Tuesday. We looked up the recipe for pancakes in our cookery book so that we could check if we had the correct ingredients."

The recognition of children's knowledge and was documented by the educator, as were the children's learning dispositions such as co-operation, directing their own learning and concentrating on the task at hand.

"We noticed that a lot of the children were familiar with the ingredients needed. This experience helped the children build on life skills - cooking. They also explored tastes and made choices. Creating the pancakes and their shop helped empower the children and see themselves as capable and competent.

This learning story highlights how much information children may have already around recipes and traditions. Because of their funds of knowledge, the children had a real sense of purpose and were very focused on the task in hand. It is important to ensure that children's funds of knowledge and identity are represented within the environment."

The role of children's lived experiences and previous learning can be applied to the play they engage in with their peers. This supports them in making sense of the world, extending their play, sharing knowledge, introducing new language into their play and trying out new roles. The data collected from the private ECCE setting highlight this:

"Ben was bringing his funds of knowledge into the game to explore what it was like to be a pizza maker and a delivery person. He knew exactly what to ask them on the phone. It showed how he had observed this happening perhaps at home and through this experience he was able to explore the world of pizza delivery services in a safe environment with his friends."

The opportunity to share this knowledge with his peers, supported Ben in taking on the "*leadership role*". In addition to this, the provision of a safe and respectful play environment supported Ben in embodying the role as Pizza shop owner.

"*Ben seemed to thrive in this leadership role and he really owned the pizza shop. He spoke with confidence on the phone and showed good communication skills. He seemed to really enjoy mixing the ingredients and making the pizzas. The children discussed different food toppings that they liked and disliked."*

Socio-dramatic play, such as this can extend children's learning by initiating dialogue among them as to what their experiences were:

"The learning was extended as we explored food, costs, writing menus, serving customers, communicating, mark making and making signs to say whether the restaurant was open or closed, working together in the kitchen of a restaurant, negotiating differences of opinions, problem solving, and lots more. The children discussed their own lived experiences of going to restaurants with their families. This was a great example of the children using their funds of knowledge to explore their outside experiences inside a safe environment with their friends. This all started with a piece of cardboard from a pizza base!!!!!"

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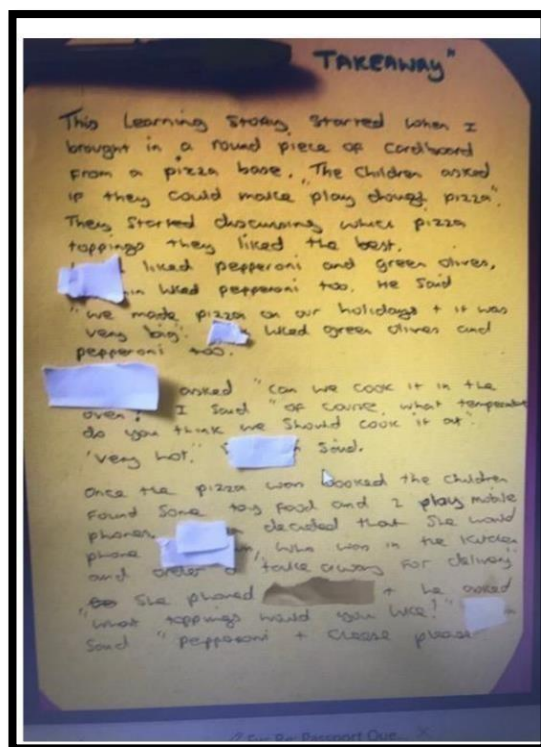
The impact this of this play extended beyond Ben's learning as the educator notes in her assessment:

"The reaction of this child when we praised his actions and we wrote out his 'wow moment' to read to him and all his friends was a huge smile on his face, he looked as if he was so proud of himself as we celebrated his achievement. He was respected as part of the group and the sharing among the other children in the group escalated, which was so good to see. He was a positive role model for the other children in the group and they started behaving in a similar fashion. He had a really positive influence on the other children.''

The educator also documented the links to Aistear such play scenarios have on children.

"Aistear enables learning to extend in any direction, this shows how important this aspect of Aistear is for the learning the children gain from a child-led curriculum facilitated by an adult! The children feel that they are exploring what they are interested in. This story shows that this really works well."

In Bernie's Community Setting ECCE room the recognition of children's knowledge, expertise and lived experiences is also extended to parents of new children joining the setting:

"An open night for parents of the children who will be starting preschool in September has been organised. Children in our room are invited to share advice with parents because they are the experts of preschool."
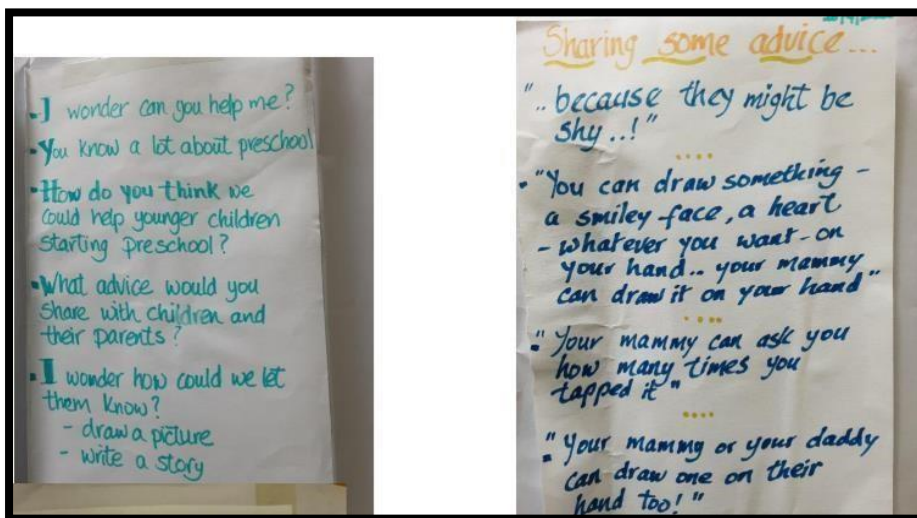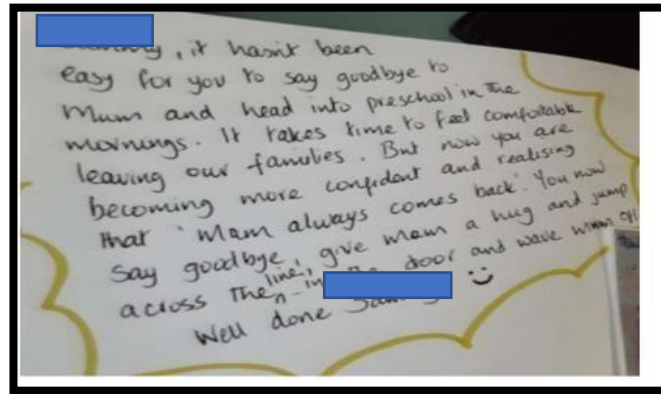
The same setting also documents the purposeful introduction of resources to build on children's learning:

"Sadie with a number of other children- 'rising 5's', have an emerging interest in numbers and counting. Various resources have been recently introduced to support their interest. "Well done Sadie great counting" the educator says. Smiling, Sadie

replies "did you not know that I know all them numbers...I can count to 20 before I was 5, when I was 4."

Later in the week as Sadie was outdoors playing hide and seek, the educator hears her counting up to 29. Afterwards while chatting about the game the educator says, "I heard you count all the way up to 29, remember you told me you could count to 20, well now you can count higher. Well done Sadie." She smiles proudly."
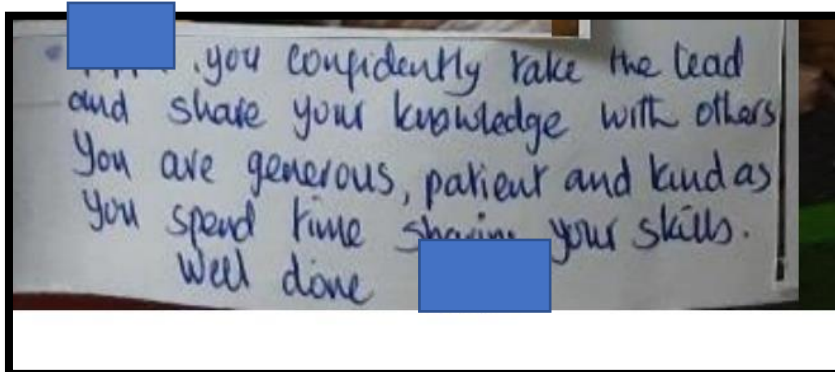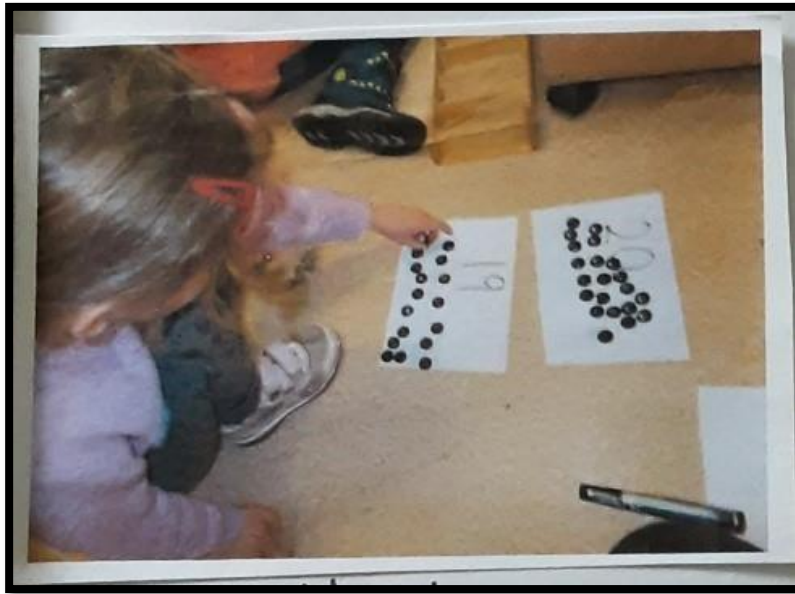
In the Junior Infants room, the educator documents a child's modelling their knowledge of brushing their teeth to their peer:

"Observing-
-You have to do a good job brushing your teeth! Otherwise they go rotten!

-Let me show you (takes the large teeth down)

-Here you have the big brush, we'll have the small ones and we'll show you what to do!" [9]

Similarly, in the Community setting, full day care (3-6 age group), an educator documented a child taking the lead and share their knowledge of caring for animals.

You loved being in charge and the leader today, as we all watched and played with your friendly lambs. You shared lots of information about your lambs to your friends which was lovely to see. I'm sure you take great care of your pets at home as well.

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[9] Data submitted with faces covered

Dear Ruth

Today you were on the school bus at school, you have a great imagination as you lined all the chairs up and got all your friends to get a seat.

Seat belts on you said, well done ░░░░ of thinking and remembering safety first such a clever girl ☺

I asked you were you and all your friends were going big school you replied like ░░░░

Off ye set all too big school you have such a great imagination ░░░░ down to road here you said ☺

The provision of a nurturing and enabling environment merged with the interpretation of children's hundred languages supports them in exploring their interests and building on their learning and development. This is evident in practice throughout the data. For example, within the Early Start, the documentation of children's competence comes in the form of risky play over a number of days. The progression of the children's capabilities is document, along with the ingenuity when creating a new game:

"*Lara and Kevin invented their own game of tennis during a session in the central area, they wanted to make it difficult so decided to use the wobble boards to balance on at the same time*."

The same setting also provided data in which the educator recorded a child's determination to achieve a task:

"*Demonstrating great tenacity and focus she spent several days in a row pushing the 2-wheeler bike around until she reached the critical speed to lift her feet off the ground.*"

The child's progress was duly noted, as was her sense of confidence as she showed the children and educators her new skill:

"*Initially she could only wobble a couple of metres but after concentrated practice she was able to circumnavigate the garden completely on 2 wheels. She enjoyed demonstrating her new skills to the staff and other children.*"

The setting also documented Katelyn's growth and progression during a game of hide and seek. She is observed taking risks and ownership of her development in completing a task unaided *"and as she went looking she attempted the log stepping stones, something she has only had help with balancing. This time she managed to negotiate the steps independently."* Her achievement promoted her self-confidence, as she shared her new skill with her peers. *"She was so delighted with herself she encouraged the others to join in with the challenge."*

Respecting young children as competent learners and providing them with space and time to complete tasks at their own pace supports them in recognising their own capabilities. This is further supported through a slow relational nurturing pedagogy. This is again evident in the data from the Gaeltacht Naíonra, which documents children's progression in relation to their fine motor skills through daily repetition of *"manipulative skills enjoying rolling, flattening, cutting"*. The educator describes how the play has become purposeful for Alan, through mastering this skill.

"He is now making representational forms with the playdough, this example includes the construction of an aeroplane which he has able to articulate the name of"

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A common theme within the evidence is the recording of children's progression. This strengths-based approach to observing and assessing children's learning reaffirms their identity as a respected, confident and capable learner.

The educator in the specialist preschool for children with disabilities notes:

"*This photo demonstrates the confidence F. has in mixing the colours with her fingers on the grease proof paper, and then transferring to A4 sheet of paper*"

"*She chose a large paint brush and paint. However, as she proceeded to apply the paint to the circle she was amazed that the paint would not 'stick' to the paper. So as she looked at the blob of paint that had amalgamated from the various drops, and commented ' Let's make rain' and proceeded to use the spray bottle and applied water to the paint on the grease proof paper(GPP). Child 2 is looking on and suggests that she puts the paper on top of it. The delight when she lifted the GPP and the watery paint had transferred to the paper.*"

The art of intentional positioning !

"As the weeks progressed it was notable how invested they had become in their creations. This child decided she needed more space and she had the confidence to own it!"

"This child immersed herself in experimenting with all the materials and provocations provided over the past few weeks. For me this picture says so much, 'Look at me, I am confident, capable, happy, with a sense of pride in my creation"

Reciprocal relationships play a significant role in understanding and interpreting children's different forms of communication. Correct interpretation can enable the educator to recognise when to offer appropriate support and when to step back and give children the opportunity to complete the task alone. Examples of this in practice are demonstrated below.

Gaeltacht Naíonra; *"It was interesting to see the child laughing when he was getting paint on his hands but at the same time he didn't want to do it by himself. It is important to understand that not every child will want to do things that are full of mess and they shouldn't be pressurised into doing things before they are ready."*

Specialist preschool for children with disabilities: *"The child was building a wall for the farm and he was very careful about the way in which the blocks were fitting together. And he was getting the animals from boxes, with the child then putting them into their new home. The child did not want any help, he was happy doing what he had in hand."*

In the home environment of Katherine, her parent Tanya, documents gauging the balance of recognising Katherine as a respected and capable learner, while allowing her to take ownership of her learning:

"My daughter began this special ritual when she was quite young. As a timid and reserved child, she required time to adjust to social situations, but with physical challenges she would push herself that little bit more. Upon arrival she would scan the place and decide what her next goal would be. You could nearly see the cogs turning. It used to be zip-lines. She fell off one in Galway years ago, when she was still quite small. It took her a while to get back up on it, she repeated: "I'm too small Mammy".

When she did, her entire outlook changed and remained determined ever since. All new places undergo the same scrutiny. The easy targets are identified and completed first, while she figures out how to tackle the more complex ones. With this particular visit to a playground, she observed the chain bridge for a while. I saw her hesitate in front of it for a split second, just before she threw herself right onto it and ran. It was

the same with a 'spinning spider-web' (video 2). At a bigger playground, like M. for instance, she needed a longer time to complete the more advanced climbs and tackle the tubular slides. In E., the challenge was more complex-a long queue of other children, who would constantly try to squeeze in front. She practiced holding her ground calmly and assertively. She returned to the same spot, again and again and again, until the discomfort eased."
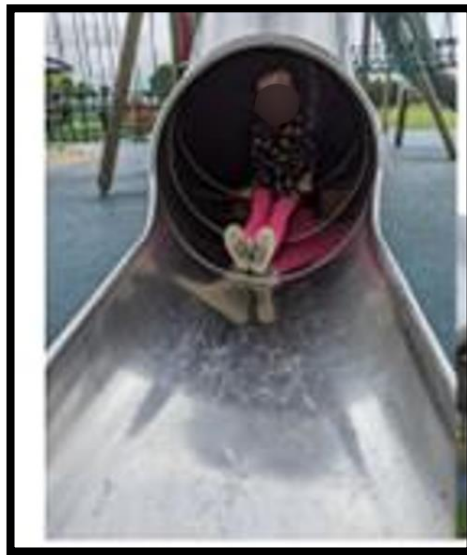
"She views herself as competent and capable outdoors and this fits in with the 'older sister' persona, where she guides and looks after her little brother."

In summary, Aistear provides a framework for children to be viewed and to view themselves as competent and confident learners, but strong reciprocal relationships are crucial for the enactment of this understanding.

As a young child…Are affordances for holistic learning offered to me in my environments through Aistear?

Affordances for holistic learning are offered to young children in their environments through Aistear when:

- They are offered open ended resources such as block, lego, playdoh, blankets,
- They can play inside and outside at their own choice, time, and leisure,
- They are offered loose parts and natural materials,

- They are allowed to use ICT for their own interests e.g. popular trends in their social world like dancing to songs that are popular on social media as well as for experimenting and literacy,
- They feel safe and understood in my relationships with their educators,
- Their educators understand their non-verbal communication,
- Their rights are respected,
- Resources and props are offered to them at their height,
- A wide range of artistic mediums are available to them to express themselves,
- Their emotional needs are recognised,
- They can access materials they recognise from their home and family life,
- They are offered the time, space, and understanding to enter into and resolve conflicts with other children and adults,
- The adults and educators in their lives build on their interests and extend their learning through play and exploration.

This is the code with the highest incidences. Children are given many opportunities to explore and think and communicate with their environment, other children, and any adults in the setting – which they seem to value very much. They are offered a wide variety of purposeful, fixed end materials, as well as open ended and natural materials. Outdoor spaces hold huge value and opportunity to the children in this dataset.

However, like in the baby and toddler cohort, and as explored with regard to multiple identities for young children, it is notable that there is little mention of race, gender, cultural or ethnic materials (or anything from identity and belonging other than the immediate nuclear family). There is also no mention of toys, books, or other resources with identifiable medical or social needs, disabilities etc. As already explored, children representing multiple dimensions of diversity appear to be seamlessly included in these settings, but nevertheless the visibility of multiple identities in terms of the affordances offered (books, toys, etc) is an area for consideration.

There is also limited reference in the data set of the three to six years cohort to anything about musical instruments. ICT is used in one setting for popular music but it is noticeable that reference to singing and musical instruments are largely missing in the dataset, with some exceptions such as the example of the music wall in the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra already noted

above. In that data, the child's interest in the music wall was observed, acknowledged, and valued. This interest was then further supported indoors. His love of musical sounds and instruments was supported by allowing him explore music, dance, movement and various instruments independently. This child is in receipt of AIM support and is preverbal, and the data give a nice template for other educators as to how music could be incorporated as an affordance for expression and learning.

The provision of space, time, open ended and sensorial resources was apparent throughout the evidence gathered. In the Specialist preschool for children with disabilities, the children took ownership of their learning and exploration with the resources, the accessibility to the resources supports this.

"*The materials were placed on a table for the children to use freely with no direction.*"

"*One child was observed measuring and positioning some wool. She then used it to make a print. They also started using the Tuff Tables as areas where they could paint and use a variety of tools.*"
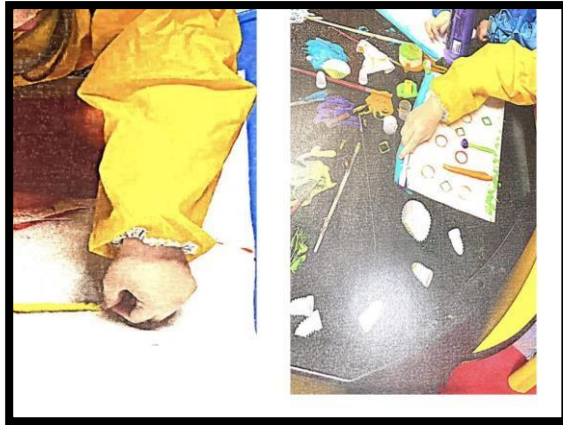
Within the Private ECCE, the children were again given the opportunity to take ownership of their learning and the provisions provided:

"*The children were asked, "what they would like to do, painting, sand play or water play, etc. They asked for water play. We set up the water play and the children chose what tools they wished to play with. They took a teapot from the kitchen, pipettes, small containers and a waterfall item*".

The space and time to explore these materials, supported the children in their investigation and use their previous learning to extend their play.

"*They spent ages exploring the water. Pouring the water from the containers and the teapot into the funnel so that it would make the water flow down to make a water wheel move and then fall into the water. Ben said, 'the water is sinking down!' Siobhan said, 'storm Eunice is gushing in the sea, look at the water flowing.'*"

Similarly, the data from the ECCE room in Bernie's Community Setting, shows children reliving previous play experiences through still-life art:
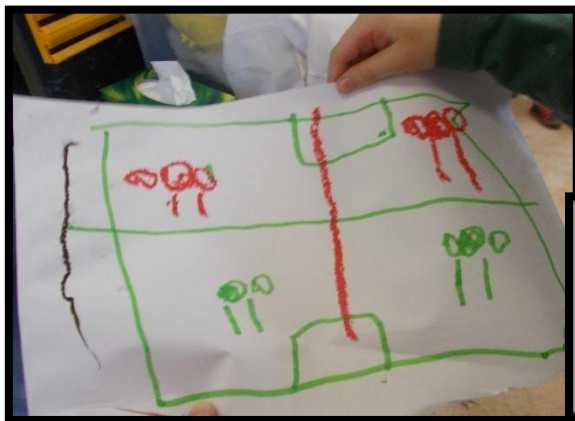
"I'm drawing the climbing frame...I just like climbing on it...and the slide."

"Playing tag....the door is opened means I can go out whenever I want."

Children have access to a range of art materials.

"Art is everywhere. There is always open access to the outdoors in our room. This child decides to follow her love of art, flowers and the outdoors to complete this piece of collage."

The data from this setting also demonstrates experiments in the mud kitchen and the challenges, opportunities for co-operation and joy a muddy hill can bring.

"I'm making medicine for my kid ... he's really sick ... he got sick at school today... he doesn't have a name, I don't want him to have a name."

• Imagination
– telling a story
• Creativity

"This is special cement.. this is how you make medicine. If you put in any more it will over flow."

▭ & ▭ join in, they bring over big containers of water - we pour it into the sink ..." it over flows "

"... I love that"

• Testing my theory

Having fun.

on the muddy hills
We are: • slipping • sliding
• skidding • running
• balancing • falling
• laughing

The themed books to support children's learning regarding difference was documented in the data gathered from the home setting of parent, Tanya and her child, Katherine (6 years old).

"Our discussions were supported by some literature celebrating difference. Here are just a few titles."
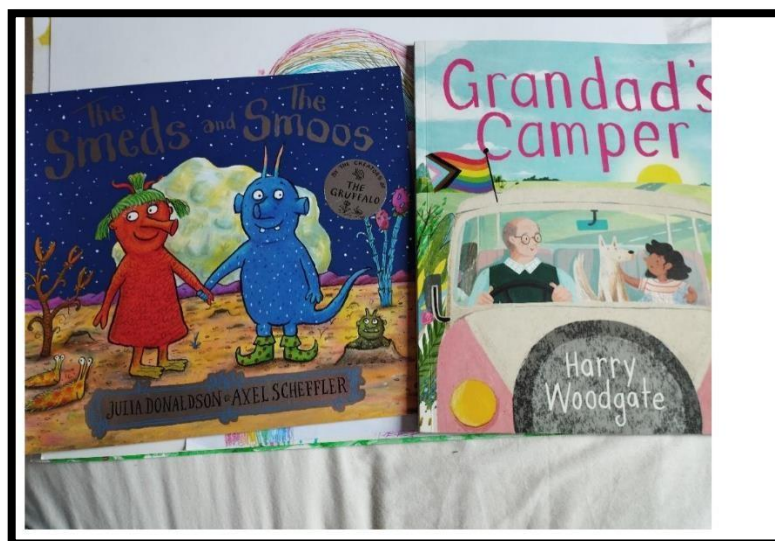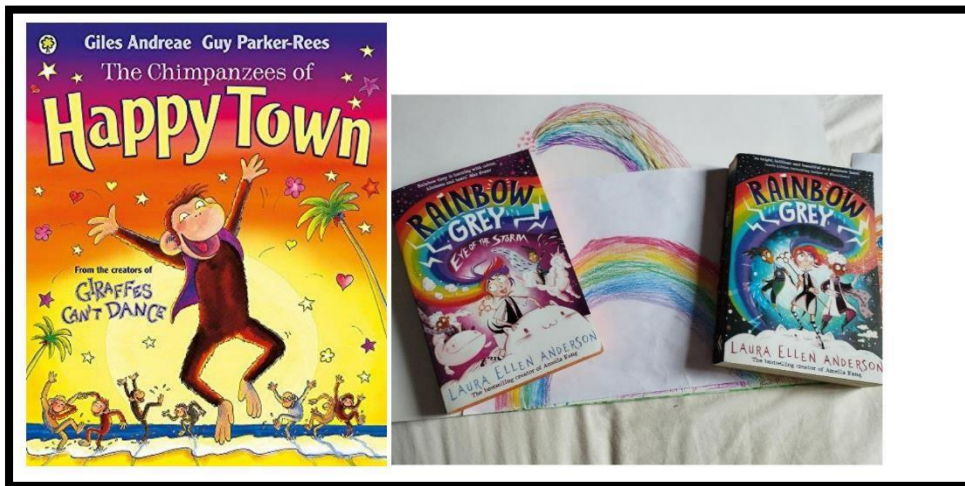
In the Junior Infants class, the extract below, documented by the teacher, demonstrates how through the provision of space and time to play children often relive experiences.

"Role play- At the restaurant.
Teacher- girls what are you doing?

-I'm the receptionist, I take the time people want to come and eat.

-We're the friends, we're eating.

-I work here, I take the orders

-And I collect the plates!"[10]

"There's so many toys to play with! I have that kitchen at home in my house!"

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[10] Data submitted with faces covered

The evidence also demonstrates that in this setting too, children are asked for their opinions in what resources they would like to play with.

"Teacher- Which blocks are best for constructing boys?
-I like all the blocks and the tools!
-I like the Jago blocks
-I like lego, can we have the lego next week?"
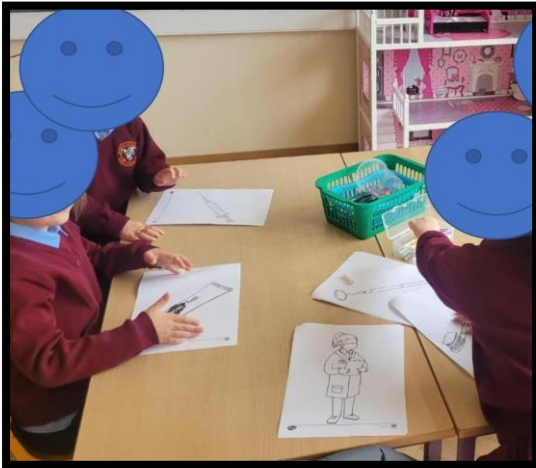
-I like colouring in the pictures, it's my favourite thing to do!
-I'm going to make this rainbow tooth paste, I really wish I had rainbow tooth paste!

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The opportunity for children to communicate, participate, negotiate and have meaningful discussions regarding their environment was also documented, and it is interesting to note children's capacity to use their voices to very clearly protest the experiences they did not like. From the children's perspective, freedom of movement and choice of how to engage with the affordances provided is crucial, and the following extract from the data shows their abilities to make their voices heard when they are unhappy with an adult's decisions one give space to do so:

"I have always allowed the children move freely from station to station during Aistear,
however I changed this during my research to see if their oral language skills would
improve, if I kept them stationary with a play rota. Interestingly their language did
improve, but their interest in play and behaviour all decreased:
'This is NOT play time teacher!'
'How come SHE (Rosie the puppet) gets to move around and we can't!'
'I hate sitting on this chair- this is not fair!'
'But I want to talk to my other friends, not just sit here with these guys'

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'Teacher, I DO NOT want to play with these blocks! I don't play with blocks ever! I like to colour.

'For 2 minutes can I go over there (points to the role play corner) please!' 'Moving around is fun! I get to play with lots of toys and my friends. I get bored staying in my chair.'

'I like to move around when we play because I like talking to everyone. I get cranky sitting in my chair'

'I like to choose what I want to play with, then I play with different things'

'I like to move around, I like trying out lots of things'

There are times that young children like to play in a large group, sometimes a smaller group, or even pairs. There are also times they like to play by themselves, and the data show the importance of offering them the space, time and opportunity to do this too. Through understanding children's hundred languages and getting to know their individual personalities, educators could recognise the times they wished to play alone. Understanding what children need can go beyond the resources provided as it can extend to time alone or with others. This understanding and interpretation of the hundred languages was found, for example, in the data from the Gaeltacht Naíonra:

"Then the children went outside and the child went up on the frame and he said that he was going to bring the boat into the harbour. When the children went back into the room the child was building, using mobile and lego. He was happy working with himself but he would come back to me to tell me what he had done."

The Early Start setting documented how accessibility to open-ended and natural materials can extend outdoor play:

"One of the main instigators of the play now is Kyle who encourages others to engage in various role-play scenarios. He discovered the large pots and pans and decided to make soup with his friends. They gathered leaves and mixed up water, mud and sand to make various concoctions. They used the wheel-barrows to transport the containers around the garden, offering it up for other children to taste."

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The provision of resources which build on play and create social interactions, such as dress up, also extend play:

"This example documents Alan engaging in imaginative role-play; he was imitating a group of other children by dressing in the fire-fighter hat and using the hose. He followed the group around the room making noises representative of fire engines and

the whooshing sound of water. He was reminded of the fire-fighter song 'jump on the engine' which he then started to sing and act out on the climbing frame. He used the trike to ride around making his game more dynamic, moving from frame to wooden block to see-saw. He demonstrated great enthusiasm."

By introducing real life materials to children's environment, affordances can extend young children's learning and interests. They help children understand how items work in real life and support my recognition of this within their homes.

"As part of an energy saving project the doll's house was fitted with different types electrical equipment; motors, lights, propellers, batteries, wires and connectors. The children were introduced to the concept of circuits and then given the opportunity to independently explore how the motors and lights could be turned off and on."

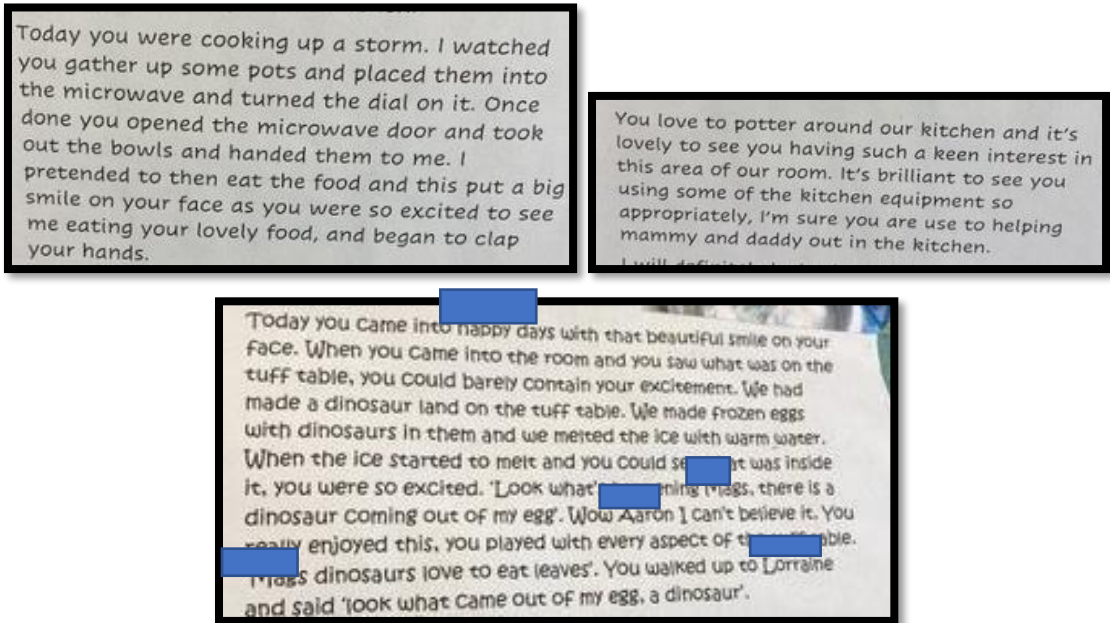*"Abby and Carly were particularly engaged in this activity, spending considerable time making and breaking the circuits. Carly asked lots of questions mostly centred on how the propeller went round, why do batteries die noticing how the triangle shape turned into a circle when it rotated."*

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"The glue gun represents a popular piece of equipment in the class"

Within Mary's community setting, full day-care (children 3-6 years) the use of real-life equipment was also documented, as children were observed applying their life experiences to play. The educator also documents how new ideas, such as these "frozen dinosaur eggs," can provide children with feelings of joy and curiosity.

Today you were cooking up a storm. I watched you gather up some pots and placed them into the microwave and turned the dial on it. Once done you opened the microwave door and took out the bowls and handed them to me. I pretended to then eat the food and this put a big smile on your face as you were so excited to see me eating your lovely food, and began to clap your hands.

You love to potter around our kitchen and it's lovely to see you having such a keen interest in this area of our room. It's brilliant to see you using some of the kitchen equipment so appropriately, I'm sure you are use to helping mammy and daddy out in the kitchen.

Today you came into happy days with that beautiful smile on your face. When you came into the room and you saw what was on the tuff table, you could barely contain your excitement. We had made a dinosaur land on the tuff table. We made frozen eggs with dinosaurs in them and we melted the ice with warm water. When the ice started to melt and you could see what was inside it, you were so excited. 'Look what' ____ning eggs, there is a dinosaur coming out of my egg'. Wow Aaron I can't believe it. You really enjoyed this, you played with every aspect of t___ ___ble. 'Eggs dinosaurs love to eat leaves'. You walked up to Lorraine and said 'look what came out of my egg, a dinosaur'.

Overall, the data from all settings showed a wide range of affordances provided to children both indoors and outdoors allowing for inclusive, playful, self-directed experiences of learning and development. One potential area for further development would be explicit representativeness of multiple dimensions of diversity within these affordances.

As a young child…How does Aistear support me to communicate through multiple modalities?

Aistear supports young children to communicate through multiple modalities by encouraging the adults and educators to form strong, close relationships with them which enable them to learn their 'one hundred languages' and in doing so communicate with them and understand them. Through close, reciprocal relationships and an environment filled with resources such as art and craft supplies, role playing opportunities, natural resources, and opportunities for mark making, children are able to communicate and participate in the setting through their multiple modalities.

Arts and Crafts feature strongly in this code for the three to six years cohort as well as creative play (mud kitchens, sandpits, gross motor equipment), social opportunities (particularly outdoor) as well as the importance of relationships for understanding non-verbal communications. As already noted, reference to music and singing is somewhat limited, but all settings use creative and often very innovative ways of providing 'space' for children to use their (multi-modal) 'voices'.

In the Junior Infants setting, the children are given a 'microphone' to reflect and *"retell their favourite station they played at. This gives me an indication of the popular and not so popular stations. It gives the children a voice and I make changes according to their feedback."* This supports the child in verbally expressing their interest and the educator, in recognising the areas the children enjoyed most.

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The data also captured a moment in the class, in which a child, Lee, who was "*diagnosed with Selective Mutism prior to beginning Junior Infants",* chose to speak to the class puppet 'Rosie'. Through collaboration with Lee's family, his SNA and his educator, different modalities were introduced to support him. These included "*behaviour management strategies to try to ease his anxiety… and picture cards to help him to communicate his basic needs".*

 "On the 2nd of February 2022, Lee approached the role play area where Rosie [puppet] and I were sitting. He sat beside us, and I tried to initiate a conversation

with him. He did not respond and continued to play alone. I decided to see if he would respond to Rosie. Much to my surprise; Lee spoke for the first time. He spoke to Rosie. I later wrote about it in my reflective journal".

> 'He spoke! I cannot believe it! He actually spoke! He has NEVER spoken to any of us! Never, ever... I heard his little voice today, I could actually cry! I think Rosie is going to change our little world here in room 12!'
>
> 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (2nd February 2022)

"Lee continued to speak with Rosie about going to the barbers and we discovered the reasons why he didn't like going through words and hand gestures he used".

> 'Me no like it!'
> Child L 3rd February 2022

> 'Too loud!'
> Child L 3rd February 2022

> 'Too scratchy!'
> Child 4th February 2022

"Lee told Rosie that he did not like going to the barbers. The razor was loud. The scissors made a noise he did not like. The gown was scratchy, and that the hair hurt him when it fell on his neck. Each time the child opened up about his dislike towards the barbers; Rosie the puppet sympathised with him, acknowledging that there were times when she did not like the hairdressers". This instance is supported by Freire (1970), who discussed the importance of communication as a reflection on life experience and moving that reflection into action. Freire discussed this process of reflection and action and referred to it as praxis. This can be directly related to Lee's situation where the child acknowledged his own dislike to going to the barbers and continued to discuss and explain his feelings after reflecting on the puppet's acknowledgment of her fears and dislikes about going to the hairdressers.

Using role playing with Rosie and a social story I tried to help Lee. I used a toy razor and ear defenders to help him with the noise. I put tissue around his neck before

putting on the gown to help with the Velcro and finally I used feathers to help him to get used to the hair falling on his neck. After several weeks Lee's mother approached and asked if Rosie could accompany him to the barbers.

Lee got his haircut. This finding can be related to Whitehead's principles of self-creation (1978). The introduction of the pedagogy of puppetry, which can also be viewed as a form of art, allowed Lee to become more social and emotionally expressive through role play (Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, & Prater, 1999). In doing so, the puppet allowed him an equal opportunity to speak and become more sociable in our class".

The significance of this moment cannot be overlooked. Through collaboration, research, relationships and the provision of multiple modalities to support Lee, he decided to speak. This is a powerful illustration of how educators' mindful support for developing and responding to children's 'hundred languages' beyond the verbal can actually be transformative for children and families. Providing multiple modalities supports children's communication, the development of their relationships, and opportunities to participate. However, it is the practice of interpreting what they are communicating through these multiple modalities which greatly supports children's development. For example, the educator in the Gaeltacht Naíonra documented her interpretation of a child's experience while observing the room and playing:

"I like playing, I like building. I am learning and sharing stories, conversing through doing things that I like and I learn in this way. I am happy when the grown-up listens to me because I like to hear stories. I like coming into the class. I like playing, I like making things from building materials."

The educator, knowing the child through a reciprocal relationship, evaluates this observation and assesses what the child was communicating to her:

"The child likes when he is spoken to quite a lot and when things are explained to him. What's happening, why, when…..?? The child was taking in what was happening in the room and what everybody was doing. He was walking around trying to find out what was happening and he was taking everything in and not saying anything."

Examples of the observation and interpretation of children's hundred languages was a common theme in the data. In the specialist preschool for children with disabilities, a child's body language was interpreted and understood by the educator:

"The body language is calm, relaxed and purposeful. She watched intently as she added more and more water".

While she makes clear links to *Aistear, "During our period of creative activity, looking at the language used in Aistear, I found many of the Aims are based on the assumption that all children are verbal. As we work with a number of non-verbal children, the following Aims and Goals presented issues.*
• Communicating: Aim 2- 1.2.3.4.5.6.
• Aim 3-1.
• Aim-4 1"

"Aistear- Is the language used inclusive? The Theme Communicating refers a lot to verbal interaction. However, the Theme Exploring and Thinking is very conducive to inclusion and participation in so many different aspects. E.G Aim 3.- 4. Well –Being refers to 'expressing themselves creatively' which summarizes our adventures over the past few weeks."

Similarly, within the non-Gaeltacht Naíonra, the mode of communication for children was the interpretation of body language:

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"This learning story began with a child who receives AIM support. Declan prefers to play alone. He has fixed interests in numbers and letters, is rigid in his routine and does not engage in social conversations or interactions".

"Declan's joy was visible, and he was very engaged in his explorations. Even though he did not use words, the educators' close observations enabled Declan to communicate what he liked, enjoyed and was interested in."

This theme of evidence which demonstrates the importance of reciprocal relationships in understanding what the child is communicating is also found in other settings. For instance, the data from the Early Start setting also discusses how one child can chose different modes to communicate. Firstly, we see the use of facial expressions as a means of communication:

"Although he doesn't usually communicate verbally with his peers or the staff, he will now give eye contact to gain attention and illicit comment on his creations."

In addition to this, the request of certain resources, informs the educators, that the child is seeking comfort:

"Playdough is the experience that he most frequently requests, if he is upset he will ask to take it out and often plays with it in the home corner. He will keep a small ball of playdough in his pocket and carry it out into the garden for comfort."

Similarly, the data from Bernie's ECCE room in the community setting, notes the progression of a child's speech and how his interest in arts and crafts enables him to demonstrate his creativity:

"This boy's speech is emerging and communicates non-verbally. He is growing in confidence to follow his own creative ideas. In this space a small group of children are doing some arts and crafts. He arrives to the area. He observes the children working on their various ideas"

Within the same setting, again the provision of arts and crafts was used as a method of communication was captured:

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"Andy arrives into preschool with a plan: 'Paint digger, yellow digger'. We go to the art shelf where he takes the bottle of yellow paint 'yellow paint' he says assertively and with prompts from the educator he squeezes paint into the tray. 'Paint digger' as he selects a digger. 'Great idea to paint the digger' the educator affirms and he holds eye contact and smiles proudly".

We see how the method of communication moves to body language, facial expression and laughter:

"Hannah sits opposite Andy and chats to him, he looks at her, listening and laughs when Hannah laughs. About five minutes later they finish the activity. Hannah agrees with the educator that Adam came up with a great idea to paint the digger, he smiles proudly saying 'paint digger'."

Offering young children different means and resources in which they can express themselves can lead to a greater understanding of their interests and learning for both their educators and family. An example of this is found in the Mary's community setting, as the educators offer children the opportunity to look through their art and photos with their families:

"Our end of year parent meetings include the child, parents and lead educator. During our meeting we are chatting about experiences and memories in preschool. Lead by

the child we reflect through their Aistear book. Here, Ethan explained "I really loved that!" with a big smile."

The data taken from the Early Start setting also found that photographs were used as a very useful and effective mode of communication. Here the children were given a camera, so they could take photographs of areas or resources which interest them:

"The photos he took independently better reflected his interest in the garden space and riding on the bikes, additionally he was able to capture a single car parked on floo.r"

"She chose the computer and painting as 'I'm good at those' and parties as we can 'do dancing and have fun."
"Kyle's selection processes were the most indecisive of the group. He changed his mind several times before settling on the final selection and order. Initially he chose the hall picture first but then he noticed the Playmobile, which I would have indicated as his first preference. He then found the following photos difficult to decide on, checking a few times what Kyle had chosen."

As already noted, children's choices to decline taking part in activity were also highlighted as a valid form of communication:

"Sadie chose not to take photographs, 'No Thanks'."

"From the children's selections, both using the picture arrays and their own photographic record, it is apparent they are capable of capturing their personal engagement with the early years curriculum."
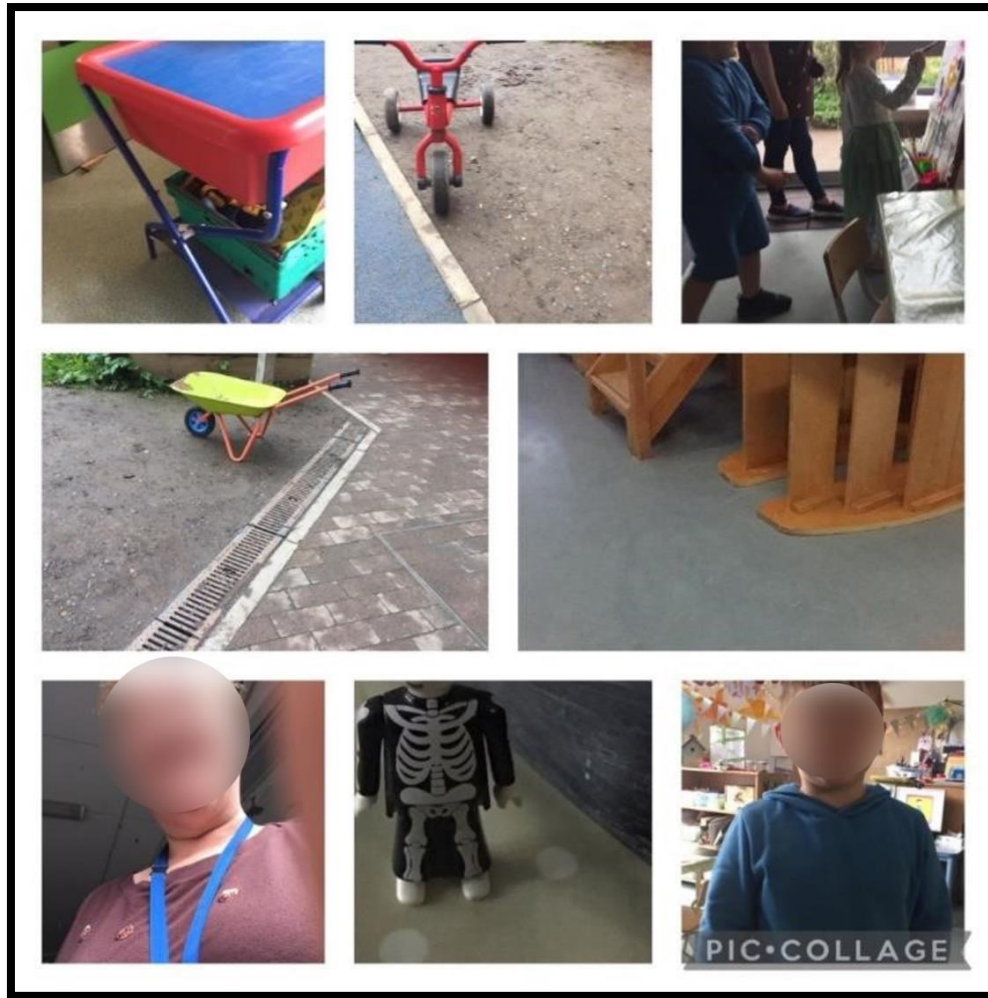
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In summary, the data showed that young children communicate in multiple and diverse ways, including through their behaviour, their play, their art-work, their facial expressions, their movement to name and even their refusal to join an activity. However, oral language development is an important focus in Aistear for this age group, and multiple supports for verbal communication were also offered by educators, including materials and provocations like microphones, puppets and photographs to help children feel comfortable expressing themselves verbally.

Chapter 4: Summary and Conclusions

4.1 What is currently working well in Aistear and what could be updated?

In reviewing what babies, toddlers and young children have told us about their experiences of Aistear, perhaps what is most notable is the power of Aistear to provide excellent opportunities for learning and development when in the hands of expert early childhood educators. The co-researcher educators and supporting educators in this research each had extensive experience and expertise which directed them to form strong relationships with children and families, communicate, interpret the 'hundred languages' of children, and provide opportunities for learning and development in fully resourced environments. These educators were crucial to the success of this research and their expertise in interpreting children's voices allowed those voices to be heard, providing further evidence, should it be needed, that our youngest citizens from birth have the right and the ability to be consulted with.

Our findings show that in terms of what is working well with Aistear as children experience it, there is plenty of which to be proud that should be maintained. Our data also show some areas in which, from the perspective of babies, toddler and young children, Aistear might be enhanced or updated. A summary and overview of what is working well and what could be redeveloped is presented here, structured within the four themes of Aistear.

4.1.1 Well-being

Based on these data, it would seem that the Well-being theme of Aistear works very well to promote practice that centres choices and independence, relationships and attachments, emotional support and co-regulation to build resilience, and healthy and fit babies, toddlers and young children. The Wellbeing theme promotes respect for children's bodily integrity, experiencing the arts, learning through play, care for the environment, increasing mastery over time, and the importance of slow relational nurturing pedagogy. All of these elements are clearly evident in the data.

In particular, relationships are central to Aistear, and these babies, toddlers and young children have told us that their relationships are of the utmost importance to them. The relationships

between children and educators are crucial and are implicit in almost all the data, beyond those examples we have shared specifically about relationships. Relationships underpin how educators see and hear children, how they respond to their needs and strengths in attuned ways, and how affordances are translated, through interactions, into learning and development. Additionally, however, children in this data-set are telling us loudly and explicitly that their friendships with other children mean the world to them, and are absolutely fundamental to how they experience Aistear and ECEC in general. In its current draft, the word 'friend' appears in the 'Principles and Themes' document only seven times, spread across the document. While maintaining the focus on the fundamentally important relationships with educators and other adults, an updated Aistear might consider more clearly and explicitly foregrounding the relationships of babies, toddlers and young children with their friends within the Well-being theme. This would also be important for the other themes too.

Additionally, while these participating educators were highly expert in practising a slow relational nurturing pedagogy, the general population of early childhood educators is often under significant pressure in terms of paperwork, inspections, varying curricula, etc. The current draft of Aistear certainly makes the importance of relationships clear, but in a redevelopment of Aistear, NCCA might consider explicitly stating that it is not only okay but actually desirable to take the time to 'meet children where they are at' and put resources and efforts into building relationships. Some guidance on what slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like in practice could be provided, perhaps drawing on examples from the current research.

4.1.2 Identity and belonging

Aistear's Identity and Belonging theme highlights children's strong self-identities including group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended. Personal and family identities are very clearly represented in the data, and these elements of identity and belonging are foregrounded and valued. These are two areas in which, based on these data, Aistear appears to be working very well. Equally, children's sense of themselves as capable learners, as dictated by the Identity and Belonging theme, is also evident. Educators clearly view babies, toddlers and young children as confident and competent learners, and Aistear frames their practice to support children to see themselves that way too.

However, focus on wider dimensions of identity and belonging (e. g. culture, language, gender, (dis)ability and neurodiversity, etc) is somewhat limited in this data-set. Considering the diversity of sample (albeit with acknowledged gaps in dimensions of diversity regarding Travellers and Roma, and elements of LGBTQA+ in family structures) the limited focus on multiple identities outside of local community and family is notable in its absence, albeit with some exceptions. This is particularly note-worthy in a sample specifically chosen for its access to a diverse population, and therefore it is possible that this may be even more evident in the wider population.

Based on this, one area of potential focus for updating Aistear could be to make more explicit the relevance of culture for practice, to explain what is meant by multiple identities and to show what authentic, meaningful culturally responsive pedagogy could look like in practice, and to elaborate on wider cultural and identity-based elements using all the dimensions of identity indicated in our sampling strategy.

Additionally Aim 3 indicates that "Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others". While children's rights are explicitly identified in this Aim, their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society are understated, albeit implied. This is evident in the data showing that children experience a rights-based approach through the practice of educators that is framed by Aistear. They also certainly have the voices, and ability to express those voices, to advocate for their own rights, but their responsibilities are not always so evident. ECEC is viewed internationally (e. g. Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki) as a way to promote democratic thinking in citizens from their earliest days and to support democratic negotiation of multiple realities. Children's responsibilities as citizens could be highlighted in updating the Identity and Belonging theme.

4.1.3 Communicating

In its current form, Aistear, and particularly the Communicating theme provides an excellent framework for recognising the 'hundred languages of children'. The data show that babies, toddlers and young children are supported to communicate through a wide range of modalities. The sheer range of modes of communication identified in these data is striking, including everything from talking into microphones, to engagement with puppets, to children taking photographs of their favourite activities, to observations of body language and facial expressions, to artistic expression and play – even seeing refusal to take part in an activity as

communication. Accessing children's voices is an increasing area of academic and practice-based focus and in recent years a very strong body of knowledge is emerging showing how best to communicate with babies, toddlers and young children. An updating of Aistear could draw on national and international academic work, including the current research, on children's voices to further clarify and give examples for educators of how communication can work for babies, toddlers and young children (acknowledging that the current draft already does already provide good direction). For example, the potential of music for communication is underutilised in this data-set, albeit with some exceptions.

In particular, an updated Aistear could provide support for educators to document children's perspectives on their own learning, development and experience of the world. Returning to the concept of a slow relational nurturing pedagogy, pressures of 'paper-work' can sometimes interrupt the flow of such practice, and the general population of educators might benefit from support to document Communication (and other themes) in organic, creative, multi-faceted ways, similar to the Reggio concept of 'documentality' or Clark and Moss' mosaic approach. There are many excellent examples of such documentation in these data.

Additionally, as Aistear is currently structured, there is a weighting towards verbal, language-based communication, with two Aims focused on language and two others for all other modes of communication. Of course, language is a hugely important focus for learning, development, education and care in the early years, and this should be maintained in an updated Aistear. However, the 'hundred languages' of children are important to understand also, not just for babies and toddlers who are pre-verbal. When language is centred as the main form of communication it can inadvertently be exclusive of children with additional needs who may not communicate through language but do communicate in multiple other ways. In fact, the concept of multiple modes of communication are equally important for older, verbal children too, and so a redeveloped Aistear might consider building on the existing emphasis on multiple modalities of communication to somewhat strengthen this point.

4.1.4 Exploring and Thinking

One of the most populated codes in the current data-set was that on the creation of affordances for babies, toddlers and young children to use their senses, their minds and their bodies to find out about and make sense of what they see, feel and experience in the world around them, as advocated by the Exploring and Thinking theme of Aistear. Children have told us that for the

most part they are supported to move, make choices and explore in well-resourced environments. A wide variety of materials and experiences are shown, both indoors and outdoors. Play is recognised by Aistear as one of the primary means through which children learn and develop, and 'play' or 'playful' is mentioned 146 times in the 'Principles and Themes' document. This is reflected in this data-set, which provides strong evidence of playful engagement with the environment and other people. Extensive support is provided for mark-making, exploring, being creative and imaginative, revisiting and extending understanding over time, facing and overcoming challenges and being curious.

Examples are evident of children's interests, strengths and challenges being listened to, taken seriously and responded to, and Aistear has framed the child-led practice of these educators. Importantly, the babies, toddlers and young children clearly expressed that freedom to move and choose is very important to them; for example, when the educator in the primary school setting experimented with more directive approaches, children were very capable of expressing their dissatisfaction and clearly protested such restrictions. In terms of the primary sector specifically, this is important to keep in mind not just for a updating Aistear, but also in terms of implementing the new Primary Curriculum Framework (although that is beyond the scope of the current research).

In terms of materials to support Exploring and Thinking, one area that could be further developed is to support educators to incorporate more inclusive materials for learning and development. In its current form, Aistear shows how play in all its forms should be accessible to all children, but an update might foreground materials that represent multiple identities and ways of experiencing the world. As already noted, there is little mention of race, gender, cultural or ethnic materials. There is also no mention of toys, books, or other resources with identifiable medical or social needs, disabilities, etc, and there is limited reference in the data-set to anything about musical instruments, albeit with exceptions. This is not to say that these items are not available to children; there is just limited reference to them within this dataset, and an updated Aistear could foreground such materials not just to support Exploring and Thinking, but also to foster Identity and Belonging.

ICT is also an area for potential focus in a redeveloped Aistear. There was some reference in the data to ICT for further investigating areas of interest, for engaging with popular trends and for literacy. However, the digital world into which Aistear was published in 2009 was

significantly different to digital world in which today's babies, toddlers and young children are immersed, so an updated Aistear might give some guidance to educators on how to incorporate ICT into their practice.

4.2 Conclusion

This research accessed the voices of babies, toddlers and young children to inform the redevelopment of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). They told us that in its current format Aistear provides an excellent framework for the practice of adults who support their learning and development through relationships, play, self-direction and access to rich learning environments, both indoors and outdoors. They also told us that some areas to consider for updating Aistear are to focus more on their friendships; to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like and empower them to implement it; to focus on wider aspects of identity beyond family and local culture, while still maintaining these important elements; to further explore their rights *and* responsibilities as democratic citizens; to continue and extend the focus on modes of communication beyond language, and support educators to document this; to foreground children's freedom of movement and choice regardless of the specific setting in which they are accessing Aistear; to continue the emphasis on play, and extend the focus on inclusive materials; and finally to reconsider the role of ICT in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: Research Questions

In developing this consultation, the first task of the research team and the coresearcher educators was to develop clear, comprehensive research questions which would guide all aspects of the research. Influenced by Aistear itself, the research questions were structured around the principles of Aistear and worded in the first person from the child's perspective, encouraging adults to enter the child's 'internal frame of reference' (Rogers, et al., 2013; O'Toole and Hayes, 2020) from beginning of the project. We began by identifying broad-based research questions linked to the principles and themes of Aistear, which were then broken down into further sub-themes to guide the research. The final draft of the guiding questions were:

Principles Group 1: Children and their lives in early childhood (uniqueness; equality and diversity; children as citizens)

As a baby, toddler or young child…

How are my unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities and experiences supported through Aistear?

> What tells you that my unique strengths are supported through Aistear?
>
> How do I show that I am respected? (Consider my verbal and non-verbal communication)
>
> How am I respected as an individual?
>
> Do you build on my abilities and experiences to broaden and deepen my learning?

To what extent are my multiple identities included, supported and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy?

> Am I respected as part of a family and a community? How is this shown to me through daily activities and environments? Do I respond or show any interest in these activities?
>
> How do I react when you respect me as an individual with my own life story?
>
> Do I have a strong sense of self identity within this environment? What do I do or say that shows you that this is important to me?
>
> How do I react when I receive or see positive messages about my family, my background, my culture, my beliefs and my language?

How are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen enacted through Aistear?

Do I have a voice? Is this voice heard? How do I react when my voice/opinion is heard, and I am seen by the adult?

Am I part of the community? Is the community part of the environment which I am in?

How do I react when I am given a role within the environment e.g., job, turn taking, helping another child?

Principles Group 2: Children's connections with others (relationships; parents, family and community; adult's role)

Do the interactions and relationships I experience through Aistear support my learning and development?

Do I spend time with familiar groups of children and practitioners so that I can build strong relationships?

How do I react when you show me that you enjoy being with me?

Do you respect my individual temperament?

Do you support me to interact with my peers and how do I react when you I am with my peers?

Do the conversations/chats we have here help me to learn and grow?

Why do you say that? /How do you know?

How does Aistear support my educators, family, and community to collaborate for my benefit?

How does Aistear frame the practice of the adults who support my learning and development?

Principles Group 3: How children learn and develop (holistic learning and development; active learning; relevant meaningful experiences; communication and learning; the learning environment)

To what extent am I respected as a competent and confident learner?

How do I tell/show you that you take account of my additional needs or supports that I may require to participate as fully as possible?

How do I react if you give me feedback on what I am doing?

What is my response when you name and affirm my efforts?

What is my reaction to you when you celebrate my achievements?

Are affordances for holistic learning offered to me in my environments through
Aistear?

How does Aistear support me to communicate through multiple modalities?

Is the way I communicate acknowledged?

To tell you things, I like to use some or all of the following:

-words

-actions

-play

-music

-songs

-dance

-art

-music

-acting

Some of the ways I like to tell you things are by:

- speaking

- showing you with actions

- playing

- singing

- dancing

- drawing

- making music

- making crafts

- pretending

How do I react when you respect and respond to my chosen mode of
communication?

What is this telling you about my dispositions?

In answering the research questions, the focus was initially primarily on accessing
children's views on:

- Wellbeing in children from birth
- Communication in children from birth
- Identity and belonging in children from birth

- Exploring and thinking in children from birth
- Education and care for children from birth (to explore other emerging findings relating to an up-to-date vision of what excellent early childhood education and care *is* and what it is *for* with a view to informing the Principles of Aistear).

Appendix B: Initial codes

Q1	How are my unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences supported through Aistear e.g., UDL?
Q2	To what extend am I respected as a competent and confident learner?
Q3	How does Aistear support my educators, family, and community to collaborate for my benefit?
Q4	Through Aistear, to what extent are my multiple identities included, supported, and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy?
Q5	How are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen enacted through Aistear?
Q6	Do the interactions and relationships I experience through Aistear support my learning and development?
Q7	Are affordances for holistic learning offered to me in my environments through Aistear?
Q8	How does Aistear support me to communicate through multiple modalities?
Q9	How does Aistear frame the practice of the adults who support my learning and development?
WB	Wellbeing in children from birth
C	Communication in children from birth
IB	Identity and Belonging in children from birth
ET	Exploring and thinking in children from birth
EC	Education and care for children from birth

Appendix C: Matrix based in literature for each code

The matrix used to code the data was drawn from Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and the Aistear Background Papers. The important words used to interpret the data are highlighted in bold in each section, however they are contained within the whole quote or paragraph for context for the reader.

There is a lot of cross over in the research questions, the codes, and as such within the matrix used to code the data. This is because of the interrelated nature of both early childhood education and care and Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework document itself.

Code: Question:

Q1   **How are my unique strengths, interests, needs, abilities, and experiences supported through Aistear e.g., UDL**

"**Parents and practitioners need to communicate regularly about children's progress, interests, needs, and daily experiences**. Parents have a wealth of information about their children. Sharing this information with practitioners helps build a **more complete picture** of what children can do—their likes, dislikes, interests, and so on. It is important, therefore, that parents have opportunities to meet with practitioners and share information about their children." Aistear pg. 13

"**Good adult/child interactions are respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling, and rewarding.** Through these the adult:
- **respects all children as individuals with rights**
- builds **on children's abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds**, provides **for their needs and facilitates** them to initiate activities, to **make choices**, and to become increasingly independent and responsible

- **takes account of additional needs or supports** children may require in order to **participate** as **fully** as possible

- gives children **feedback** on what they are doing, **names and affirms their efforts**, **celebrates their progress and achievements**, and helps them **to learn from mistakes**, setbacks and challenges (See the guidelines, Supporting learning and development through assessment.)

  ■ **establishes and maintains good relationships with children's families**" Aistear pg. 27

"**Building Relationships:** Children learn by being with others. This strategy includes methods which **the adult uses to build relationships and to create an environment in which children feel secure and confident enough to take risks**, to explore, to take part in challenging experiences, and to **direct and co-direct** their own **learning**.

Facilitating: Children learn by being involved in **making choices and decisions**, and by feeling in control. **Learning is enjoyable and rewarding** for them when they challenge themselves and when they can use **and build on their existing knowledge, understanding and skills.** They enjoy learning through **childinitiated activities**. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to **encourage children to take the lead** or to **share the lead** with adults.

Table 1 : Aistear's continuum of interaction strategies

Building Relationships	Facilitating	Organising	Directing
Children learn by being with others. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to build relationships and to create an environment in which children feel secure and confident enough to take risks, to explore, to take part in challenging experiences and to direct and co-direct their own learning.	Children learn by being involved in making choices and decisions and by feeling in control. Learning is enjoyable and rewarding for them when they challenge themselves and when they can use and build on their existing knowledge, understanding and skills. They enjoy learning through child-initiated activites. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to encourage children to take the lead or to share the lead with adults.	Children learn in a well-planned and well-resourced environment. The environment represents all children in the setting and makes learning challenging and fun. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to create and maintain such an environment, including reflecting on the learning that is occurring in the environment and planning ways to enhance it.	Children learn through planned and guided activities which build on their interests and experiences. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to focus on children's learning and to develop particular dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding.

Organising: Children learn in **a well-planned and well-resourced environment**. The environment **represents all children** in the setting and **makes learning challenging and fun**. This strategy includes methods which the **adult** uses to create and maintain such an environment, including **reflecting on the learning that is occurring in the environment and planning ways to enhance it**.

Directing: Children learn through planned and guided activities which **build on their interests and experiences**. This strategy includes **methods which** the adult uses to **focus on children's learning** and to **develop particular dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding**."

Table 2 A Range of Interaction Strategies, Aistear pg. 28

"Five assessment methods Figure 4 presents five methods. These include **selfassessment and conversations in which children take the lead** in making judgements about their own progress as learners. **Observations, setting tasks, and testing involve the adult leading the assessment**. While these guidelines present the methods individually, **each method often involves using other methods** too. **A combination of methods helps the adult build richer and more authentic portraits of children as learners**." Aistear p. 80
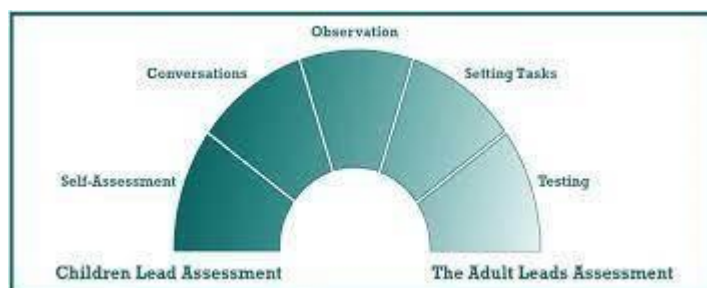
Q2   To what extend am I respected as a competent and confident learner?

"Assessment enables the adult to find out what children understand, how they think, what they are able to do, and what their dispositions and interests are. This information helps the adult to build rich stories of children as capable and competent learners in order to support further learning and development. In doing this, he/she uses the assessment information **to give on-going feedback to children about how they are getting on in their learning, to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences for them, to choose appropriate**

supports for them, and to document, celebrate and plan the next steps in their learning." Aistear pg. 72

"The paper Children's early learning and development (French, 2007) describes children as competent young learners, **able to make choices and decisions**, who **learn with and from each other at home, in early childhood settings and in their communities**. Through these different relationships children learn about their world**. Trust, respect, love, and care are at the heart of relationships** which enable children to grow, learn and develop. **Opportunities for cooperation, playfulness, problem-solving, and conflict resolution are all valued**." How Aistear Was Developed – Research Papers pg.4

"The NCCA's consultative document, Towards a Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, 2004) is premised on the understanding of the child as **rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and to other children** (Malaguzzi, 1993a, p. 10). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) enhanced this view of an intelligent child, **a co-constructor of knowledge; a researcher actively seeking to make meaning of the world**." Children's Early Learning & Development (French) p10.

"The image of the **child-developing-in-context** (Rogoff, 1990) provides for a more dynamic conception of learning and development and opens the lens through which we observe children. The child's participation in multiple sociocultural contexts of the family, the community and society at large is recognised. In doing so, we can choose to see the child as **having surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities** (Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 73). Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences (linguistic, musical, logico-mathematical, bodily–kinaesthetic, among others) celebrates the **variety of human capabilities and expression.** Collectively, these views give rise to the principles underpinning the consultative document (NCCA, 2004) and ultimately the Framework for Early Learning." Ibid

"…children as capable because they have **their own experience, ideas, interpretations, and viewpoints**" ibid pg. 11

"Drawing on centuries of research, the modern-day view of the child is one of him/her being a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; a **young citizen and participator in many contexts**; **actively learning in reciprocal**

relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the **child's present** rather than his/her future." ibid pg. 24

Q3   **How does Aistear support my educators, family, and community to collaborate for my benefit?**

"Learning is more meaningful when practitioners use **information from parents** about **children's interests, skills, abilities, and dispositions** as **a starting point** for new experiences." Aistear pg.8

"Parents and practitioners need to **communicate regularly** about children's **progress, interests, needs, and daily experiences**. Parents have a wealth of information about their children. Sharing this information with practitioners helps build a more complete picture of what children can do—their likes, dislikes, interests, and so on. It is important, therefore, that parents have **opportunities to meet with practitioners and share information** about their children" Aistear pg.13

"Information should be **shared in plain English/Irish**. **Writing notes, talking, using pictures, and translating information** are all helpful ways of communicating with parents." Ibid pg. 13

"**Parents** can make a valuable contribution to their children's learning and development by **sharing their time, experiences and talents** with the outofhome setting. For example, they can help with sports, drama or musical activities. They can **share information about their home culture and background**. They may be able to **suggest or organise places for the children to visit or interesting people to talk to**. Parents can also work together through **parents' associations** to support the setting and to improve their children's learning environment. **Grandparents** can contribute in similar ways. They can **visit the setting and talk about their childhood** helping the children to begin to develop a sense of time." Pg 19

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Aistear pg. 28

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Facilitating: Children learn by being involved in making choices and decisions, and by feeling in control. Learning is enjoyable and rewarding for them when they challenge themselves and when they can use and **build on their existing knowledge, understanding and skills.** They enjoy learning through childinitiated activities. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to encourage children to take the lead or to share the lead with adults.

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to focus on children's learning and to develop particular dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding." Table 2 A Range of Interaction Strategies, Aistear pg. 28

"This section reflected on the importance of relationships in children's learning and development and focused on the individual child; and **the child in the context of the family, carers, community, and society.** Each is a stakeholder in the child's learning and development. **Learning and development is shaped by the home environment, family values and beliefs, family income, physical and psychological well-being of the family, the neighbourhood, and relevant public and social policies relating to families with young children**. Bronfennbrenner (1989, p. 190) explained how young children's learning does not take place in a vacuum. We must explore the ecological niche in which the child is living. As socio-cultural theory proposes**, children's evolving membership in their culture, begins in the family and spirals outward as children engage with their peers and go on to create a further series of cultures which in itself is influenced by the institutional structures (faiths/non faiths, sports, leisure activities) of the adult culture (**Corsaro, 1997). In this way, children's learning and development is not confined to a single environment/setting, but is continually influenced by a **dynamic interplay between all those environments** inhabited by the child. This includes the linguistic environment" French. Pg 16

Q4 Through Aistear, to what extent are my multiple identities included, supported, and valued through culturally responsive pedagogy?
"Belonging is about having a **secure relationship** with or **a connection** with a **particular group of people**. When children feel a sense of **belonging** and sense of **pride** in their **families, their peers, and their communities**." Aistear Principles & Themes pg. 25
"**Positive messages** about **their families, backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and languages** help children to develop pride in who they are." Ibid
"By embracing difference, **by exploring their own attitudes** in relation to equality and diversity, and by **realising that their attitudes and values** influence children, **adults can develop the insights, self-awareness and skills**

that are needed to help children develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. This helps to ensure that all children are **respected and valued** and that they can recognise and deal with discrimination and prejudice." Ibid

"Good adult/child interactions are respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling, and rewarding. Through these the adult:

■ **respects all children as individuals** with rights

■ **builds on children's abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds**, provides for their needs and facilitates them to initiate activities, to make choices, and to become increasingly independent and responsible

■ takes account of **additional needs or supports** children may require in order to participate as fully as possible

■ gives children **feedback on what they are doing, names and affirms their efforts, celebrates their progress and achievements,** and helps them to learn from mistakes, setbacks and challenges (See the guidelines, Supporting learning and development through assessment.)

■ establishes and maintains **good relationships with children's families** (See the guidelines, Building partnerships between parents and practitioners)." Aistear pg. 27

"Promoting positive interactions

■ **acknowledging that people are different**, and **helping children to understand that difference is normal and important** by talking about skin colour, language, ability, boys, girls, religion, family structure, culture, values, and traditions" Aistear pg. 47

"In **choosing methods, the adult is mindful of children's backgrounds, cultures, family contexts and values, languages, abilities, interests**, and **areas requiring extra support**." Aistear pg. 79

"**play props** and materials should **reflect a variety of backgrounds, cultures, abilities, genders, and family structures**." Appendix 1 Aistear pg. 103

"Young children learn from the **range of experiences they have in their everyday lives**. They don't naturally compartmentalise this learning. Children's holistic approach involves them **intricately interweaving domains of social, emotional, personal, physical (sensory and motor), cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development**, and the whole system of

learning processes all of which influence each other in highly complex and sophisticated ways (NCCA, 2004, p. 21)." French 20

Play as pedagogy – "Wood (2004) suggested that a conceptual underpinning of **socio-cultural and activities' theories** could contribute to a firmer pedagogy of play. **Play becomes understood in terms of the relationships between coplayers, their actions, interactions, and the meanings they co-construct and the context in which the play occurs**." French ibid

Q5 How are my rights and responsibilities as a citizen enacted through Aistear?

"**Children are citizens with rights and responsibilities**. They have **opinions** that are **worth listening to**, and have the **right to be involved in making decisions** about matters which affect them. In this way, they have **a right to experience democracy**. From this experience they learn that, as well as having rights, they also have a **responsibility to respect and help others**, and to **care for** their **environment**." Pg. 8 Aistear

"■ explores and promotes the **concept of citizenship and social justice** with children and **respects them as young citizens**:

➔■ ensures **play is a fair and positive** experience for all children

➔■ introduces **games with rules**, for example card and board games, hopscotch, football, parachute game (trying to make a ball fall over the edge of a large sheet held by members of two teams)

➔■ **discusses important issues with children**, for example a newspaper article that might interest them, or concepts like fairness, power, responsibility, freedom, rights, or prejudice in the context of children's daily experiences

➔■ **involves children in decision making and rulemaking**, for example consulting with them on rules for talking and listening or turn-taking and exploring why the rules are important

➔■ **provides** children with **choices**, saying, for example, what would you like to do this morning? What story will we read? And inviting the children to vote or to reach a consensus

➔■ ensures **all children can participate in negotiations**, for example helping shy and quiet children to partake

➔■ **nurtures children's sense of empathy and fairness** by encouraging and supporting discussion when issues arise" pg. 23

"Aim 3 Children will be able to **express their rights** and **show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others**. In partnership with the adult, children will:

1. **express their views** and help **make decisions** in matters that affect them
2. **understand the rules** and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour
3. interact, **work co-operatively**, **and help** others
4. be **aware of and respect others' needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs**
5. have a **sense of social justice** and **recognise** and **deal with unfair behaviour**
6. demonstrate the s**kills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation, and conflict resolution**" pg. 25 Aistear

"■**explores and promotes the concept of citizenship and social justice with children and respects them as young citizens**" pg. 23 Aistear

Q6   Do the interactions and relationships I experience through Aistear support my learning and development?
"**Relationships** are at the very heart of early learning and development. Through their early interactions **babies learn to feel secure, to communicate, and to enjoy being with people**. As they grow and develop, **toddlers and young children love to play, to chat, to watch, and to be with others**. **Children build relationships, communicate, express love and affection, play together, learn, and have their needs met through contact with others**.

These guidelines identify a range of interaction strategies and methods which the adult can use to enhance children's learning and development." Aistear 27

 "Good adult/child interactions are **respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling, and rewarding**. Through these the adult:

■ **respects** all children as individuals with **rights**

■ **builds on children's abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, provides for their needs and facilitates them to initiate activities, to make choices, and to become increasingly independent and responsible**

■ takes account **of additional needs or supports** children may require in order to participate as fully as possible

■ gives children **feedback** on what they are doing, **names and affirms their efforts, celebrates their progress and achievements, and helps them to learn from mistakes, setbacks and challenges**

■ **establishes and maintains good relationships with children's families**" Aistear pg. 27

 ■ acknowledges and nurtures children's ability to do things themselves through **sharing control and empowering them**

■ assists **children's initiatives, perseverance and decision-making**

■ **encourages children** to **help** and **teach each other** (peer mentoring)

■ provides **temporary assistance** and support to children, through **scaffolding,** to move from one level of competence to another

■ **offers ideas, advice, suggestions, and recommendations when asked or when appropriate"** Aistear, P.29

"Thinking together to build meaning and understanding:

■ **plays, talks and works with children to make sense of experiences and learn from them**

■ follows children's leads

■ **helps, shows and explains when asked or when appropriate**

■ **explores with children to find things out together rather than providing immediate answers."** *ibid*

"Assisting children's thinking:

■ establishes an atmosphere that **encourages talk and discussion**

■ **listens carefully** to understand what children are thinking and feeling

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- **builds on children's contributions**, ideas and interests to **extend conversations**
- **helps children** to use their **full range of thinking skills**
- **poses appropriate, challenging questions**
- **helps children to recognise their own progress** and achievements and to build on these" Aistear pg. 29

"Relationships with peers provide children **with emotional support**, the **opportunity to play** with a friend, and **experiences in leading, following, negotiating, conflict resolution, making mistakes, and taking risks**. They also **learn skills and develop knowledge and values** through interactions with peers and mixed-age groups of children. Play also stretches and enhances learning and development." Aistear pg. 46

Q7 Are affordances for holistic learning offered to me in my environments through Aistear?

"Early years **learning environments that are well planned with a balance between care and education** and have **well-trained, confident and supported staff** lead to positive outcomes for children." Pg 3 Aistear Background Papers
"Effective early learning environments are **nurturing**. **Caring is educational**; **education is caring** and both are effective when responsive to the child." Ibid pg. 7
"There is clear evidence that **children's positive concepts of ethnic identity are related to self-esteem**, **reduced levels of depression and optimism** (Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Roberts, Phinney, Masses, Chen, Roberts, and Romero, 1999). It is also known that biases can develop very early in young children (Krogh and Slentz, 2001). Through **participating in everyday activities/routines and play, children absorb messages from people and the environment regarding their identity and social values**. Bonel and Lindon (1993) noted that practitioners should be aware of and respect areas of difference such as **gender, faith/no faith or family structure**. These **form part of a child's home experience and individual identity. Difference** in this sense should be **respected** in every aspect of early childhood work. By exploring our own and other cultural daily practices/routines, we **gain appreciation of our**

common humanity as well as **providing the optimal environment for children's cognitive, emotional and social growth** (Lave and Wenger, 1992)."
French pg. 10

"The **adult has a responsibility to provide rich environments** where children are able to **explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with different materials** (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2005, p. 413) and where **children can ask questions, make hypothesis and form new concepts**. Children have to construct learning for themselves, with the focus of learning on **the reasoning processes rather than on the end products**. This requires **time** for children to engage in their explorations." Ibid pg. 13

"■ Learning is a **continual process of meaning making**; it is not a linear input/output process. **Active learning, physical and intellectual engagement with people (ideas) and materials (experiences), self and group directed problem-solving and repetition** are at the heart of learning and development.
■ The adult has a **responsibility to provide rich environments** where children are able to **explore, touch, manipulate, and experiment** with a variety **of real life and diverse materials** and where children can **ask questions**, make **hypothesis** and **develop their thinking**." French executive summary pg. 3
"Good practice in equal opportunities in ECCE indicates a proactive role for early years **practitioners** with **respect** to **diversity and children's play** (DermanSparks, 1989; French, 2003; Nutbrown, 1996). This involves **reflecting all children's backgrounds and abilities in the design, resourcing and images displayed in ECCE environments**; **actively supporting bi/multilingualism**; being **nonjudgmental**, and **valuing a range of family forms, cultures and child-rearing practices, guiding children's developing attitudes and empowering them to stand up for themselves and others, and to feel proud of their own identity**; supporting their **sense of belonging** through their experiences of play; **carefully challenging and acting on discriminatory remarks and actions** (Dickins and
Denzeloe, 1998; Mac Naughton, 2003; Murray and O'Doherty, 2001; Nutbrown, 1996)." Kernan pg. 21
"A number of **practical planning, resourcing and everyday pedagogical practices** can contribute to ensuring equality of opportunity in play including: provision of kitchen implements from different ethnic groups in the dramatic

play/home corner; ensuring dolls and small people figures include men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds; talking about children's skin, hair, eye colour and hair texture; regularly reading appealing picture books that depict gender, racial, ethnic and physical ability diversity; encouraging children to use their home language in the ECCE setting whenever they are so inclined. Adults need to pay particular attention to supporting the communicative strategies of children whose first language is neither English nor Irish." Ibid pg. 23

"Clearly, the best way to develop inclusive play is **to consider the particular strengths and needs of the individual children in an ECCE setting**. At all times, it is also important to **display positive images** [in play materials, books, posters] of disabled adults and children in the ECCE environment participating fully in everyday life (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998). It is also important to note that delays in children's development may impact on their ability to play. This may require the adult to adjust his/her interaction strategies and/or provide greater levels of support and perhaps for longer periods of time." Kernan 24
"Children learn in a **well-planned and well-resourced environment**. The environment **represents all children in the setting** and makes learning challenging and fun. This strategy includes **methods which the adult uses to create and maintain such an environment, including reflecting on the learning that is occurring in the environment and planning ways to enhance it**." Aistear g 28
Table 2. Organising
"Structuring the learning environment (Table 5**) Structuring the environment both indoors and outdoors is important**, in order to ensure that it **supports children's learning and development across Aistear's four themes**. Through **planning, organising, resourcing, and evaluating** the adult continually makes **decisions about equipment, materials and people** in the environment. These decisions focus on:
■ **location** – the layout of where people and things are
■ **boundaries** – how areas are separated and divided into small, child-sized spaces
■ **variety** – the choice of materials and activities available
■ **storage** – where things are kept and displayed
■ **time** – the amount of time available for activities
■ **mood and atmosphere** – calming, inviting, home-like, busy.

How materials are grouped and presented, what equipment is within easy reach of children, and what is **accessible** to adults only are all important considerations. When structuring the environment, the adult thinks about when and where to place new materials, and how to **rotate old materials**, in order to encourage new and different activities and interactions. The location of adults in the environment is also a critically important part of structuring. **Children need to know that adults are physically and emotionally available to them.** When adults are positioned where they can play and interact with children, they can ensure that learning and development are supported. While an **overall plan for the environment is important, daily changes based on children's interests and ideas enrich and extend learning.** Wherever possible**, children need to be involved in structuring the environment**." Aistear pg. 42.

 "I learn best in a place which is:

➔■ **warm and inviting, acknowledges my family background, and makes me feel welcome and safe**

➔■ **well-kept, accessible, adaptable, and safe**

➔■ **well-resourced and well-organised**

➔■ **stimulating, challenging and empowering**. Create this environment for me." Aistear Principals and Themes pg. 12

Q8   How does Aistear support me to communicate through multiple modalities?

"Children share information and knowledge **through their play**. Their communication can **be verbal or non-verbal, simple or complex**." Aistear pg. 53 Table 7 (Characteristics of Play)

"Communication helps children learn to think about and make sense of their world. They communicate from birth using **many different ways of giving and receiving information**. Each of these ways is important in its own right. Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped **by two main factors: children's own ability and their environment**." Aistear Principals and Themes pg. 12

"Remember that **I give and receive information in many different ways**. I can communicate using **words, sign language, Braille, rhythm, number, movement, gesture, drama, art, and Information and Communications Technology** (ICT). When I am ready, support me in my writing and reading in a way that suits my needs best, and don't rush me. ■■ You have a key role in supporting my communication and language skills. T**alk to me, listen to me, respond to me, interpret what I say, and provide a place for me where I get the opportunity to share my experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others in all the ways that I can. Model communication and language skills for me**." Ibid

"**Communicating** involves giving, receiving and making sense of information. Children do this by using **nonverbal means of communication, talking, listening, thinking, and understanding. In time, the skills of reading and writing enrich this experience**. Communicating is a **two-way activity**; as well as learning to share their experiences with others children also learn **to interpret** what others are sharing with them. They communicate in many different ways including **facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds, language and for some children, through assistive technology**. **Children's language is more than words, phrases and sentences. It includes art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories.** While most children eventually master spoken and written language as their key means of communicating, they **continue to speak through their gestures, body movements and expressions to a greater or lesser extent**. Some children with **special educational needs may need additional and consistent support throughout their lifetime to practice, learn and perfect the art of non-verbal communication**" Aistear Principles and Themes pg. 34

Q9 How does Aistear frame the practice of the adults who support my learning and development?

"**Four sets of guidelines**, focusing on different aspects of pedagogy, describe **how the adult can support children's learning and development across these themes**. The guidelines focus on:

■ building **partnerships between parents and practitioners**

■ **learning and developing through interactions**

■ **learning and developing through play**

■ **supporting learning and development through assessment**." Aistear pg. 5

"Pedagogy refers to all the practitioner's actions or work in supporting children's learning and development. It infers **a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience** for all involved. **In Aistear, the terms 'pedagogy' and 'practice' are used interchangeably**." Pg 56 Principles and themes

"Relevant and meaningful experiences make learning more enjoyable and positive for children. **On-going assessment** of what children do, say and make, **and reflection** on these experiences **helps practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences** for children. This also enables them to improve their practice. **Assessment is about building a picture of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development**." Aistear Principles & themes pg. 11

"Given the young age of the children, the **adult has a responsibility to be open to the messages** children are giving through **their facial expressions, body movements, vocalisations, and words**. He/she needs to give plenty **of time to assessment** in order to capture the **breadth and depth of children's learning and development**. An increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population of children in out-of-home settings means that, in many cases, practitioners and children may have **different cultural perspectives**. In addition, for many children the language of the setting may not be the language spoken in their home. In these instances, **the adult uses his/her knowledge of how children learn first and second languages, and how these experiences shape how they learn to think, in order to make judgements about children's progress**. For these children, it is especially important that their **parents have opportunities to share information** with the setting so that **the children's portraits as young learners accurately reflect their strengths, interests and needs**." Aistear pg. 80

"The adult can **enrich and extend children's learning** through assessment by identifying learning and development, **feeding information back** to children, **celebrating their progress and achievement** with them, and **adapting practice and planning for further learning**. In this way, assessment helps the adult create portraits which show the richness of children's learning and development. In doing this, assessment also guides the journeys children make as they go." Aistear pg. 102

"**Interpretation has become central** to both children and adults as they participate in the process of early education: children interpreting and making sense of the world; and **adults observing, reflecting on and interpreting children's behaviour to assess, to plan the curriculum and to guide their practice**." Aistear Background Papers pg. 5

"It has been argued that reconceptualising care as **nurture** would strengthen the attention to the **educative value of care** and allow for a more appropriate 'nurturing pedagogy' to emerge in early education learning environments (Hayes, 2003b). Although not widely used in Ireland, **pedagogy is a word that captures the multilayered and dynamic practice necessary to support children's holistic development**. Petrie (2004) makes the case for using this term to reflect the complex roles of those working directly with children and she argues that the term creates the image of **a professional space where care and education meet, integrate and become one**. Combining the word pedagogy with the term nurture is intended to strengthen this case. The word nurture has quite a different tone to it than the word care. In comparing the meaning of the two words, **'nurture' is more engaging and active than 'care'**. To some the verb 'to care' is almost custodial in tone and requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. **To nurture, on the other hand conveys a far more engaged level of interaction and requires the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child through his/her practice**. If adults are to nurture children's learning they **must develop the skills of observation** and **reflection** to allow for **non-intrusive planning** and for the **provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends their learning.** This allows for increased attention to positive **interactions** between child and adult, and also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the **child as central**. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the practitioner evident from the research into Irish practice with young children in primary schools (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). It also strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role of the adult, sometimes absent in more play-based settings (Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997; Weikart, Olmsted & Montie, 2003). A **nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the**

context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now. This pedagogy highlights the importance of **initial and continuing professional development** for the adult." Hayes pg. 17 Background paper

"Emphasising **the dynamic nature of early education and the multi-layered effect of the processes on those involved**, and on the processes themselves, has led to a move away from drafting curriculum in the more traditional, prescribed manner typical of many primary and secondary school curricula. **Recognising the child's role in the process of learning**, compatible with the rise in attention from psychological, sociological and rights research (Hayes, 2001, 2002; David, 1999a) requires a shift in pedagogical approach from the traditional didactic approach frequently associated with the classroom and the approach associated with learning environments where **children are seen as active participants in learning**" Ibid pg. 12

"Where **early learning is understood as an active, social, dynamic and transforming process** the **role of the adult as responsive and flexible** becomes critical." Ibid pg. 14

"A nurturing pedagogy fosters the **processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge**. Where the adult is **observing** and **listening to children** and **reflecting** on these observations, the **curriculum plan is based on engagement with children**, assessment of their interests and developmental level as well as their **needs** and **the aims of education.** Through a reflective and nurturing pedagogy adults can **also identify difficulties in individual development and move to address them**, either in the context of the classroom setting or through outside interventions and supports. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that **pedagogy is an integrating process, a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum** (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards et al, 1995) and **a medium for assessment** (Carr, 2001a; Rogoff, 1997). Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the underlying idea of **respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process** while at the same time **recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education**." Hayes pg. 16

Children's Views:

WB   Wellbeing in children from birth

" Well-being focuses on developing as a person. It has two main elements: **psychological well-being** *(including feeling and thinking) and* **physical wellbeing**. *Children's* **relationships and interactions with their families and communities** *contribute significantly to their sense of well-being. Children need to feel* **valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included**. *They also need to respect themselves, others, and their environment. They become positive about themselves and their learning when* **adults value them for who they are** *and when they* **promote warm and supportive relationships** *with them. Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children's sense of well-being. Life is full of challenges and struggles. Therefore, being flexible and having a positive outlook on learning and on life is crucial. All these experiences help children to become resilient and resourceful and to learn to cope with change and situations in which things go wrong.*

Physical well-being is important for learning and development as this enables children **to explore, to investigate, and to challenge themselves in the environment**. *A growing awareness of their bodies and abilities is also part of this. The adult supports children's psychological and physical well-being by helping them to* **make healthy choices about nutrition, hygiene and exercise**. *He/she plans for and provides opportunities for children to express themselves, to encourage them to play and work with others, and to deal with challenges. The adult also helps children towards independence by providing them with choice in their activities, and by providing* **opportunities for them to make decisions and to take the lead**.*"* (NCCA, 2009 p.16)

C   Communication in children from birth

"Communicating involves **giving, receiving and making sense of information**. *Children do this by using nonverbal means of communication, talking, listening, thinking, and understanding. In time, the skills of reading and writing enrich this experience*. **Communicating is a two-way activity; as well as learning to share their experiences with others children also learn to interpret what others are sharing with them**. *They communicate in many different ways*

*including **facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds, language and for some children, through assistive technology.***

Children's language is more than words, phrases and sentences. It includes art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories. While most children eventually master spoken and written language as their key means of communicating, they continue to speak through their gestures, body movements and expressions to a greater or lesser extent. Some children with special educational needs may need additional and consistent support throughout their lifetime to practice, learn and perfect the art of nonverbal communication.

*Being a good communicator is crucial to children's development. The adult encourages children to communicate by listening to them, interpreting what they are saying, responding to them, and by modelling good communication. The adult also provides an **environment** which motivates children to interact with each other and the adult, and with the objects and places in it. By capturing children's interest and curiosity and **challenging them to explore and to share their adventures and discoveries** with others, this environment can fuel their thinking, imagination and creativity, thereby enriching communication. These early experiences support children in becoming confident and competent communicators."* (NCCA, 2009. P.34)

IB   Identity and Belonging in children from birth

"From birth, children develop **a sense of who they are**. **Relationships** with family members, other adults and children, friends and members of their community play a key role in building their identities. Children's sense of who they are is shaped by their characteristics, their behaviour, and their understanding of themselves, their family and others. **Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or a connection with a particular group of people**. When children feel a sense of belonging and sense of pride in their families, their peers, and their communities, they can be emotionally strong, selfassured, and able to deal with challenges and difficulties. This creates an important foundation for their learning and development.

Giving children messages of respect, love, approval, and encouragement enables them to develop a positive sense of who they are and a feeling that **they have an important contribution to make** wherever they are. Positive messages about their families, backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and languages help children to develop pride in who they are. These messages also give them confidence to voice their views and opinions, to make choices, and to help shape their own learning.

By embracing difference, by exploring their own attitudes in relation to equality and diversity, and by realising that their attitudes and values influence children, adults can develop the insights, selfawareness and skills that are needed to help children develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. This helps to ensure that all children are respected and valued and that they can recognise and deal with discrimination and prejudice." (NCCA, 2009. P.25)

ET   Exploring and thinking in children from birth

*"Children **use their senses, their minds and their bodies to find out about and make sense of what they see, feel and experience in the world around them**. They gather information and develop new skills, including thinking skills. They **form ideas and theories and test these out**. They refine their ideas through exploring their environment actively and through interacting and communicating with adults and with other children. Much of this happens through play and other experiences **that allow children to be creative, to take risks, and to make discoveries**. As they learn, they retest their theories adjusting them to take on board new discoveries and new experiences.   In early childhood, most children develop **physically and cognitively through exploring their environment**, though some have disabilities that make this more difficult to achieve. As well as building knowledge and developing skills, children also need to develop positive dispositions and attitudes towards learning. They have an innate drive to get to know the workings of their world. The adult can foster learning by planning activities for them through which they can experience success as learners. This means planning activities that are suited to children's individual needs and connect with their experiences*

and interests while at the same time challenging them to extend their knowledge, refine their skills, and work together to solve problems." (NCCA, 2009. P.43)

EC   Education and care for children from birth

*"It has been argued that reconceptualising care as nurture would strengthen the attention to the educative value of care and allow for a more appropriate **'nurturing pedagogy'** to emerge in early education learning environments (Hayes, 2003b). Although not widely used in Ireland, **pedagogy is a word that captures the multilayered and dynamic practice necessary to support children's holistic development**. Petrie (2004) makes the case for using this term to reflect the complex roles of those working directly with children and she argues that the term creates the image of **a professional space where care and education meet, integrate and become one.***

*Combining the word pedagogy with the term nurture is intended to strengthen this case. The word nurture has quite a different tone to it than the word care. In comparing the meaning of the two words, 'nurture' is more engaging and active than 'care'. To some the verb 'to care' is almost custodial in tone and requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. To nurture, on the other hand conveys a far more **engaged level of interaction and requires the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child through his/her practice**.*

*If adults are to nurture children's learning they must develop the skills of **observation and reflection** to allow for non-intrusive planning and for the provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends their learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between child and adult, and also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the child as central. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the practitioner evident from the research into Irish practice with young children in primary schools (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). It also strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role of the adult, sometimes absent in more play-based settings (Hayes,*

*O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997; Weikart, Olmsted & Montie, 2003). A nurturing pedagogy fosters the **processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now**. This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the adult."* (Hayes, 2007. P.7)

Other Codes:

EI   Educator's interpretation of child's voice
Any interpretation is a data the educator has gathered and explained outside of that which directly quotes the child(ren).
CV   Child's voice (quotes etc.)
Direct quotations from the child(ren) documented by the educator.
Emerging Themes as data is analysed:
AL   Adult Led
CL   Child Led
AEL   Adult Extended Learning

Appendix D: Second level of coding

EI	Educator's interpretation of child's voice
CV	Child's voice (quotes etc.)
CL	Child Led
AL	Adult Led
AEL	Adult Extends Learning

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[i] All names used for babies, toddlers and young children as well as their educators are pseudonyms, as required by ethical approval.