



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

PHASE TWO



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# Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

This is a report based on a national research project which aimed to consult with and access the voices of babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The overall project was structured in two phases. Phase 1 involved consultation with babies, toddlers and young children on their experiences of Aistear, and Phase 2 involved asking babies, toddlers and young children their opinions on the changes proposed by NCCA to update Aistear.

## Summary of Phase One

In Phase 1 of this consultation, the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were listened to, documented, and collated in a bid to critique Aistear and inform how it might be enhanced. Phase 1 employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) design, in partnership with early childhood educators known to the children, and with whom they felt comfortable and at ease.

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), early childhood educators collected data using their pedagogical skills to document the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children. The role of these ‘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. Various data sources including learning stories, photographs and observations were gathered to create an insight into the views of babies, toddlers and young children. These views were shared with NCCA in the [phase 1 report](#) and informed a series of developments for Aistear.

Babies, toddlers, and young children communicated that 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 communicated that some areas to consider for updating Aistear are: to focus more on their friendships; to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing

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pedagogy looks like, and to empower them to implement it; to focus on wider aspects of identity beyond family and local culture; to further explore their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens; to continue to 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 to reconsider the role of ICT in Early Childhood Education and Care.

## Phase 2

On completion of Phase 1 of the consultation process, NCCA incorporated the findings from all consultations, including that with babies, toddlers and young children, into a new draft updated Aistear. The central research questions for Phase 2 of the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children are:

- Do babies, toddlers and young children agree with the key changes proposed by NCCA in the draft updated Aistear?
- Are there any proposed changes with which they disagree?
- Are there any additional considerations that would be important in an updated Aistear from the perspective of babies, toddlers and young children that have not been included in the draft?

For consideration by all contributors to the Phase 2 consultation, including babies, toddlers and young children, the key areas noted for development in Aistear by NCCA were as follows (see Appendix 1 for more detail):

- Relationships and Interactions
- Citizenship: My Rights and Emerging Responsibilities
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Play and Hands-on Experience
- Transitions: Continuity of Experience and Progression in Learning

The aim of this phase of the consultation therefore was to access the views of babies, toddlers and young children on these key proposed changes to Aistear.

## Methodology

As highlighted in Phase 1, there is a growing critique of consultation processes as being largely superficial and tokenistic in style, particularly when engaging with the youngest children (Wall et al., 2019). Drawing on the Lundy participation model (Lundy, 2007), four separate factors were considered: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence to ensure that babies and children's views are not only listened to, but also heard and acted upon. Like Phase 1, Phase 2 of the consultation employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) design (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O'Toole, 2020), with early childhood educators in the role of 'co-researchers'. The [Phase 1 report](#) provides a detailed elaboration of the rationale for this approach and how it has been enacted in the consultation, so we have not reiterated this in detail in the Phase 2 report. Briefly, partnership with practising educators who know children well, and with whom children are comfortable, supported this consultative research with babies, toddlers, and young children, giving them space to feel at ease to express their own views and opinions. Educators accessed their perspectives using their existing approaches to pedagogical documentation, including photographs, observations, children's artwork, videos, etc.

To initiate Phase 2, co-researcher educators were provided by NCCA with an advance copy of the proposals to update Aistear. They engaged in an online workshop (see Appendix 2) led by NCCA to help them understand the proposed changes so that they could identify the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children on these changes. To structure data collection for Phase 2, a child profile form (Appendix 3) and guiding document (Appendix 4) were co-constructed with the co-researcher educators with the following guiding objectives:

1. Ensuring to access the genuine perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children, without being overshadowed by adult interpretations and agendas;
2. Ensuring that the babies, toddlers and young children had the opportunity to both agree and disagree with the proposed changes to Aistear;
3. Ensuring the diversity of the sample of babies, toddlers and young children was not hidden by the inclusive practice of the educators, without of course impinging on the inclusivity of that practice.

Data collection was structured in the child profile form around the key topics identified by NCCA for change within an updated Aistear, but with direction in the guiding document to enable framing the inquiry on each topic from the perspective of the child.

Both the child profile form and the guiding document also had sections on “other opinions / experiences / perspectives of significance to the baby, toddler or young child,” asking “What significant experiences have I had that do not fit in the above categories? Are there any struggles or challenges that are not visible in Aistear?” In this way we hoped to capture the ‘silences’ or the ‘gaps’ that may not have been adequately covered in the proposed changes. As a result of the child profile and guiding documents, educators were supported to submit rich data on children’s responses to each of the identified topics and the related changes, with diversity foregrounded. A focus group was also held with educators to ensure we were clear on the messages being communicated by the babies, toddlers and young children, as they understood them. Data were analysed and categorised under each key change, interpreted to centre the voice of the child, and triangulated against the findings from an educator focus group.

### **Sampling**

In further developing our sampling for Phase 2, we took a similar targeted approach to that taken in Phase 1, with the aim of ensuring a rigorous, valid, and diverse sample. A detailed rationale for the purposive approach used for sampling is provided in the report for Phase 1. Again, for Phase 2, 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. All Phase 1 settings were invited to take part in Phase 2. Of eleven invited settings, eight initially agreed to take part but one (Gaeltacht naíonra) withdrew over the course of the research. In expanding our sample settings for Phase 2, we reflected on gaps that needed to be filled to ensure we met the requirement for diversity:

- We had been unsuccessful in Phase 1 in gaining consent for inclusion of any Traveller/Roma babies, toddlers and young children, and they urgently needed representation in Phase 2;
- The Phase 1 and initial Phase 2 sample was skewed in favour of children in the age range 3-6 years, so more babies and toddlers needed to be included;
- Phase 1 did not include a large privately-owned daycare chain setting, and babies, toddlers and young children experiencing Aistear in such a setting needed to be represented.

In Phase 1, we were unable to garner consent for working with any Traveller/Roma children within the sample settings in spite of efforts to do so outlined in the Phase 1 report. 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 was required for Phase 2, for this dimension of diversity. As a research team, we were highly committed to addressing this acknowledged limitation in the Phase 1 methodology. We began by meeting with a member of the Traveller community with expertise in the area of education and curriculum development. We engaged in joint exploration of the aims of the consultation in the context of the potential reluctance of Traveller parents to trust or engage with a settled-led piece of research due to generational experiences of marginalisation. With the support of this expert, the research team then identified and met with representatives of a Traveller Health and Community Engagement project and again explored possibilities for genuinely accessing the voices of Traveller babies, toddlers and young children within a culturally responsive approach. They agreed to support the research team to engage with a preschool with a high proportion of Traveller children which is also led by educators from the Traveller community. This setting in turn agreed to take part in Phase 2 of the consultation. The co-researcher educator from the Traveller-led preschool and a representative from the Traveller Health and Community Engagement project took part in the workshops on the updated Aistear delivered by NCCA and the aforementioned sessions, co-constructing the methodologies. Unfortunately, however, the Traveller-led preschool withdrew without specifying a reason and with insufficient time to seek an alternative setting with a significant proportion of Traveller children attending, as is their ethical right. This presented a thorny ethical dilemma (Koushoults and Juhl, 2021) to the researchers because on the one hand the right to withdraw is a key cornerstone of the ethical underpinnings of this research and on the other, exclusion of the voices of an entire cohort of babies, toddlers and young children brings ethical concerns of its own. After much critical reflection, the researchers approached this issue with the mindset of both/and rather than either; we needed to find a way to both honour the right of the Traveller-led preschool to withdraw and also find a way to include the voices of Traveller babies, toddlers and young children within the very limited timescale remaining to us. This was achieved by leveraging pre-existing relationships between the research team and a setting with Traveller children in attendance, but by necessity the methodology employed needed adaptation, with direct support for the co-researcher educator from the research team, and a shorter timescale for data collection.

It is also worth noting that the voices of babies, toddlers and young children in Irish-medium settings are missing from the Phase 2 data. The non-Gaeltacht naíonra from Phase 1 declined to continue with Phase 2, and we did not seek to replace this setting as the Gaeltacht naíonra was initially still committed to Phase 2, ensuring the Irish language perspective would be represented. Unfortunately, however, as aforementioned, the Gaeltacht naíonra withdrew towards the end of the process with insufficient time to seek an alternative Irish language setting. Again, the right to withdraw is a key cornerstone of the ethical underpinnings of this research, and the experiences of babies, toddlers, and young children in Irish language settings are very well represented in Phase 1 of the consultation to which two such settings contributed. All other elements of diversity are well represented in the sample, including gender, language, cultural background, family structure, socio-economic status, and disability / neurodiversity. A detailed overview is provided in the full report, but briefly, the sample included 30 babies, toddlers and young children with:

- 11 settings
- Age range 12 months to 6 years
- 19 male / 11 female
- 11 cultural / linguistic backgrounds
- Disabilities represented including physical delays (gross motor and fine motor), speech delays / disorders, sensory difficulties, behaviour difficulties, allergies, attachment difficulties, and anxiety.
- Multiple family structures including traditional family units with male and female parent, living with extended family, one-parent families and families with parent and step-parent.

## **Data Analysis**

Data collected from the participating babies, toddlers, and young children were analysed thematically, structured around the key topics identified by NCCA for change in the updated Aistear, as well as an additional topic to allow for areas of value to babies, toddlers and young children that were not included in the proposed changes to emerge:

- Relationships and Interactions
- Citizenship: My Rights and Emerging Responsibilities
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Play and Hands-on Experience

- Transitions: Continuity of Experience and Progression in Learning
- Other opinions / experiences / perspectives of significance to the baby, toddler, or young child

Data analysis was conducted in four layers.

1. The initial layer of data analysis was completed by the co-researcher educators. They categorised each item of raw data by their interpretation of its relevance to a specific theme.
2. The data for each theme were synthesised from across all settings by the core research team, separating out the experiences and perspectives of babies and toddlers (birth to 3 years), from those of young children (3-6 years).
3. The core research team then returned to the raw data to triangulate possible interpretations of what the babies, toddlers, and young children may have been communicating. This layer of data analysis was particularly relevant to the theme of ‘Citizenship’.
4. The findings were then triangulated against the data from the educator focus group to incorporate the elaborations given by educators on their interpretations of the messages being communicated by the babies, toddlers, and young children.

## Main Findings

Babies, toddlers, and young children expressed in a myriad of ways, that ‘Relationships and Interactions’ and ‘Play and Hands-on Experiences’ were important to them. These were the most salient themes in the data.

This consultation repeatedly shows the value that babies, toddlers and young children place on trusting relationships with adults, such as parents and educators, highlighting that relationships between homes and settings are paramount to them. The importance babies, toddlers and young children attach to friendships and connections with peers was also a recurring theme. Thus, **relationships and interactions** with educators, peers, family and the wider community matter greatly to the babies, toddlers, and young children who took part in the consultation. Focusing on building trusting relationships through a slow relational pedagogy and fostering enhanced connections with friends, communities, and neighbourhoods emerged as a particularly visible aspect in this consultation.



A variety of **play and hands-on learning** permeated babies, toddlers and young children's experiences and the findings highlight the importance they place on being agentic, having their own space, being afforded the freedom to make choices, being given access to resources, as well as time to explore their interests.

**Citizenship**, and the importance of instilling values of responsibility, empathy, respect, and active participation in babies, toddlers and young children, laying the foundation for them to become engaged members of a democratic society as they grow older was a complex theme in the consultation. Educators initially found it challenging to identify how this area applied to children, particularly the youngest babies and toddlers. However, deeper analysis demonstrated that showing respect for the views of babies, toddlers and young children and allowing them to make their own choices is important to them, helps them feel secure as they explore new experiences, and facilitates the beginnings of citizenship from the earliest days. Additionally, one of the strongest messages from babies, toddlers and young children in Phase 2 in relation to citizenship was their activism on behalf of the environment, the natural world and sustainability.

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)** as crucial principles in early childhood settings to lay the foundation for promoting fairness, respect, and belonging among babies, toddlers and young children from various backgrounds was also a notable theme, especially with regards to participants with a migratory background and those with additional needs. In the former case, babies, toddlers and young children were provided with opportunities to represent their cultural knowledge. It was often remarked how celebrating and acknowledging their families' traditions had a positive impact on both their confidence and their relationship with their peers and families. Moreover, the children and families were in control of how their cultural identity was represented, thereby avoiding cultural stereotypes. Awareness and appreciation of diversity also emerged as central to the successful inclusion of babies, toddlers and young children with additional needs. The new methodology employing the child profile form and guiding document was successful in foregrounding elements of diversity throughout the data, across settings and age groups, and across the key topics for proposed change.

Overall, the progression of learning in early childhood settings is a dynamic and child-centred process that honours the individual strengths, interests, and developmental trajectories of babies, toddlers and young children while providing the support and guidance needed for them to reach their full potential. The Aistear principle of **Transitions** was most evident in references

transitions into a new ECEC setting, transitions that occur as part of everyday ECEC routines, and transition into primary school. The participating babies, toddlers and young children showed that they benefit if they are allowed to settle into a new environment on their own terms. They communicated that they like their own space and time to settle in whether it be into setting for first time but also into and out of their play.

**Additional areas for consideration** highlighted by babies, toddlers and young children that fall outside of the ‘key changes’ identified by NCCA relate to areas that are proposed to be retained, such as Identity and Belonging, or further developed, such as Technology and Digital Learning. The one additional area for consideration in an updated Aistear may be to incorporate mechanisms for children to be consulted with, and to participate in decision-making within their early childhood settings.

**In summary**, while babies’, toddlers’ and young children’s day-to-day communications provided substantial data on the principles of “Relationships and Interactions” and “Play and Hands-on Experiences”, less data were accessible on “Citizenship”, “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion”, and “Transitions”. The educator focus group confirmed this finding, with educators stating that the principles of “Relationships and Interactions” and “Play and Hands-on Experiences” resonated most strongly with the participating children. For the most part, the views of the babies, toddlers and young children participating in this consultation showed approval for the key changes to Aistear proposed by NCCA, albeit with a need for support for educators to identify and enact the concept of citizenship in their work, particularly with the youngest children.

**Chapter 4** of the report moves beyond the consultation process to analyse, from the perspectives of the researchers, informed by the views of NCCA, the key implications of Phase 2 of the consultation for curriculum framework development going forward.

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## Abbreviations / Tables / Figures

<b>DCYA</b>	<b>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</b>
<b>DECDIY</b>	<b>Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth</b>
<b>DEI</b>	<b>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion</b>
<b>ECI</b>	<b>Early Childhood Ireland</b>
<b>ICT</b>	<b>Information and Communications Technology</b>
<b>MU</b>	<b>Maynooth University</b>
<b>NCCA</b>	<b>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</b>
<b>PAR</b>	<b>Participant Action Research</b>
<b>SUC</b>	<b>Stranmillis University College, Belfast</b>
<b>UDL</b>	<b>Universal Design for Learning</b>
<b>UNCRC</b>	<b>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</b>

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# Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

## 1.1 Background

In September 2021, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated the process for developing a consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009). The tender for this consultation project was awarded 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.

## 1.2 Introduction to the project

The consultation with babies, toddlers and young children was structured in two Phases. [Phase 1](#) of the consultation sought the views of babies, toddlers and young children on how best to enhance Aistear. NCCA then developed a set of proposals for an updated Aistear incorporating the views of babies, toddlers and young children and those views expressed in their [other consultations](#). Phase 2 of the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children returned to seek children's views on the proposed changes to an updated Aistear. This report focuses on Phase 2.

For Phase 2, the proposed key changes for Aistear provided a useful lens for seeking and understanding babies, toddlers and young children's views. 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' (Malaguzzi, 1996) through a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach.

Relationships have been recognised as central to participatory research practice. For example, Thomas (2012) highlights the importance of warm interactions, trust, and mutual respect for children in participatory work. This correlates with facilitating safe, and inclusive spaces that are conducive for the youngest participants to engage in the research process (Lundy, 2007), which in turn highlights the significance of early childhood educators' positionality; their relationships with and expertise about individual children that can facilitate the right to express views (Lundy et al. 2024). In Phase 1 of this research, one of the strongest messages from the children was the importance of relationships. In Phase 2 we again harness the centrality of

children's relationships in their early childhood settings alongside their familiar educators to ensure safe spaces where babies', toddlers' and young children's views can unfold.

### 1.3 National and International Context

The requirement to involve children in decision-making is set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), providing momentum and a framework for children's participation concerning their education (UN 1989; Lundy, Murray, Smith and Ward, 2024). Against the backdrop of the UNCRC, there has been an increasing amount of research and consultation with children and young people as a way to inform educational research, policy, curriculum development and practice (Wall, 2017). Nationally, children's participation in decision making has been embraced in Ireland, as evident in national guidance and evolving case studies that demonstrate how children's views are heard and acted upon (e. g. DCYA, 2014; 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCEDIY, 2021). However, in terms of early childhood education and specifically curriculum development, consultation with the youngest children from birth remains rare (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2022). One exception is Phase 1 of this current consultation with babies, toddlers and young children undertaken on behalf of NCCA who are leading the way nationally and internationally in this regard (NCCA, 2015; 2020; O'Toole et al., 2023).

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not impose an age limit on children's right to express views about matters affecting them (UN, 2009, para. 21), and early childhood researchers and professionals have developed creative or innovative practices that endeavour to seek and take seriously the views of young children (e.g. Cheeseman et al., 2022). However, Lundy et al. (2024) raise questions about credibility regarding (mis)interpretations of participation in early childhood, and caution against overstressing claims about what young children can, should and want to do. Notwithstanding that children can express views, from a rights-based perspective, children's views on issues being decided must be informed. Similarly, Salamon and Palaiologou (2022) problematise participation in relation to children under the age of three, suggesting that illusionary ideas of participation create challenges for researchers, whilst highlighting research that demonstrates difficulties in eliciting infants' perspectives and illustrating how they can influence research, practice, and policy.

Undoubtedly, participation in early childhood contexts can be complex and at times imperfect (Lundy, 2018; Murray, 2019). Seeking the views of infants and toddlers becomes even more

challenging when the issues (or proposals) being consulted on are conceptual rather than lived experiences. Herein lies the particular challenge in Phase 2 of this consultation, which is distinct from Phase 1, in that it involves asking children their views on the conceptual changes proposed by NCCA, rather than a more open exploration of their experiences in ECEC settings that are guided by Aistear as we did in Phase 1. It is undoubtedly difficult to ask babies, toddlers and young children to express their views on a document.

The current research project positions children as agentic meaning-makers and rightsholders who are entitled to engage in research and (not only can, but should) influence decision-making (Lundy et al. 2024; O'Toole et al., 2023). However, we are also mindful of the cautions regarding illusory participation and overstressing claims, given that some babies, toddlers and young children may not have views on the proposals or may not want to express their views (Lundy et al. 2024). In seeking babies', toddlers' and young children's meaningful and purposeful participation, transparency is needed on the processes for gathering and interpreting their views. This includes having the humility to acknowledge limitations, including imbalanced power relationships and imperfect interpretations of children's views (Palaiologou, 2020; Lundy et al., 2024). Nevertheless, we argue that through a reflective, iterative and deeply relational approach to consultation with babies, toddlers and young children, we have successfully ascertained the views of the participating children on the proposed changes to Aistear. This report outlines Phase 2 of the consultation, including a detailed overview of the methodology, ethical considerations, sampling, data collection tools, procedures for data analysis, challenges faced, key findings and conclusions, insights, implications and recommendations. Chapters 2 and 3 provide information on methodology and findings respectively of the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children, directly centring their voices. Chapter 4 provides an analysis by the researchers, informed by NCCA, of the implications of what the babies, toddlers and young children communicated, for curriculum framework development.



## Chapter 2: Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

Like Phase 1, Phase 2 of the consultation employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) design (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O’Toole, 2020), with early childhood educators in the role of ‘co- researchers’. The [phase 1 report](#) (O’Toole et al., 2023) provides a detailed elaboration of the rationale for this approach and how it has been enacted in the consultation, so we have not reiterated this in detail here. However, to frame our approach in Phase 2, it is worth re-emphasising that partnership with practising educators who know children well, and with whom children are comfortable, supported research where babies, toddlers and young children could feel at ease to express their views (Lundy et al., 2024). Through familiarity with the children, educators have been able to identify the often subtle and nonverbal ways they communicate. In Phase 1 of this consultation, the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were collated in a bid to critique the current version of Aistear and how it might be updated or enhanced. These perspectives were shared with NCCA, and on completion of Phase 1 of the consultation process, NCCA incorporated the [findings from all consultations](#), including that with babies, toddlers and young children, into a new [draft updated Aistear](#). Phase 2 of the consultation process seeks the views of participants on this draft. The central research questions for Phase 2 of the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children are:

- Do babies, toddlers and young children agree with the key changes proposed by NCCA in the draft updated Aistear?
- Are there any proposed changes with which they disagree?
- Are there any additional considerations that would be important in an updated Aistear from the perspective of babies, toddlers and young children that have not been included in the draft?

For consideration by all contributors to Phase 2 consultation, including babies, toddlers and young children, the key topics noted for development in Aistear by NCCA were as follows (see Appendix 1 for more detail):

- Relationships and Interactions
- Citizenship: My Rights and Emerging Responsibilities
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Play and Hands-on Experience
- Transitions: Continuity of Experience and Progression in Learning

The aim of this phase of the consultation therefore was to access the views of babies, toddlers and young children on these key proposed changes to Aistear.

To achieve this aim, Phase 2 replicated the original methodology of Phase 1, with participant action research (PAR) at the core. Our conceptual framework drew on the idea of the ‘hundred languages of children’ (Malaguzzi, 1996), which shows how babies, toddlers and young children communicate their views and what is important to them through a wide range of communication strategies beyond words; behaviour, actions, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, artistic expression, play choices, etc. The communication of these languages is conceptualised as context specific, dependent on the individuals with whom it is happening and the level of familiarity, dispositions and competencies of all. Therefore, our conceptualisation of how to go about consulting with babies, toddlers and young children to answer the research questions and achieve our aims was reflexive, dynamic and deeply rooted in relationships.

The methodology drew on approaches to pedagogical documentation developed through Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 2011), and the concept of a Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) to seek the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children. The educators working with the children collected the data, and the role of these co-researcher educators was conceptualised as interpreters of the ‘hundred languages of children’. 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. Multiple data sources including photographs, videos, Aistear books, learning stories, children’s artwork and observations were gathered to create a full picture of the perspectives of babies, toddlers, and young children. Table 1 below outlines the types and numbers of data sources collated.

**Table 1: Overview of data collected**

Photographs taken by adults (annotated/annotated artwork, explaining circumstances, often with children’s direct utterances noted): 81
Videos: 2
Observations/Learning stories/ Aistear: 49
Focus groups / Group discussions re children: 6

Graph:1
Digital notes: 2
<b>Total 141</b>

## 2.2 Co-construction of methodology through a PAR approach

Throughout Phase 2, the co-researcher educators were core contributors to the development of the methodology and honing of research questions. To initiate Phase 2, co-researcher educators were provided by NCCA with an advance copy of the proposals to update Aistear. They engaged in an online workshop (see Appendix 2) led by NCCA to help them understand the proposed changes so that they could identify the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children on these changes. Those who were involved in Phase 1 were given the opportunity to reflect on that experiences and make suggestions for continuation of approaches that they found helpful, and adaptation of approaches that they found unhelpful. The co-researcher educators that were new to Phase 2 were also given the opportunity to tease out how the PAR approaches might work best in their specific settings.<sup>2</sup>

All participants then attended a co-construction planning session (see Appendix 2) for researchers and co-researcher educators to discuss the findings from Phase 1 and to decide on the approach that would be implemented in Phase 2. This co-construction session took place synchronously online through Teams and using the SUC Canvas facility (online learning platform) to provide support materials asynchronously. Together, timelines were planned, data collection tools agreed, and data analysis and ethical considerations were explored.

In designing data collection tools together, and in thinking through how the educators' pedagogical practice might inform the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children on the proposed changes, our discussions coalesced on three key issues of concern:

1. Ensuring to access the genuine perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children, without being overshadowed by adult interpretations and agendas;
2. Ensuring that the babies, toddlers and young children had the opportunity to both agree and disagree with the proposed changes to Aistear;

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<sup>2</sup> See Sample section for details on participating co-researcher educators.

3. Ensuring the diversity of the sample of babies, toddlers and young children was not hidden by the inclusive practice of the educators, without of course, impinging on the inclusivity of that practice.

Each of these concerns was addressed through the co-creation by the core research team and the co-researcher educators of a child profile form (Appendix 3) and guiding document (Appendix 4) that would frame and structure the collection of the data. These concerns and how we addressed them are further teased out here:

**Adult gaze:** A particular focus for the development of these methodological tools was reflection by all participants on the issue of adult gaze, and the importance of ensuring that the data reflected the genuine voices of babies, toddlers and young children without being overshadowed by interpretation of co-researcher educators and the core research team. While this issue was explored in detail in Phase 1, it was an even more pressing concern for Phase 2. For Phase 1 we could ask open-ended questions about babies, toddlers and young children's experiences in early childhood settings that were relevant to Aistear, but in Phase 2 we were seeking feedback from babies, toddlers and young children on a specific proposed document, which is not a straightforward endeavour for a team committed to avoiding tokenism *in as much as possible* (see Lundy, 2018 on this dilemma, and Lundy et al., 2024 on the importance of not over-stating the extent to which adult concerns can be separated from children's participation).

To separate out the communications of the babies, toddlers and young children from the interpretation of the adult, we drew on a suggestion from one of the co-researcher educators, Rhonda<sup>3</sup>, who described the approach to observations she has developed in her practice to address this issue: first writing down only what she saw with no interpretation and only later ascribing meaning to it, so that the child's unfiltered communication is documented first. Based on this, the guiding documents for data collection directed the educators to first identify what they saw without any interpretation (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc). They then responded separately to the following prompt for each item of data: As 'interpreter of the hundred languages', why did you (educator) include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding...' each theme identified by NCCA as an element of the proposed changes (e. g. relationships and interactions, citizenship, etc).

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<sup>3</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

***Opportunity to dissent:*** Secondly, we reflected on how in a genuine consultation, participants have the opportunity to either agree or disagree with proposals. We discussed with both NCCA and the co-researcher educators how children’s experiences of the curriculum framework are mediated by the practice of their educators, but that the process of embedding genuine curriculum change in practice can take years (OECD, 2020). It was unlikely that co-researcher educators and their supporting educators, no matter how expert, could change their practice, directed by the updated Aistear, to a degree likely to be recognised and responded to by babies, toddlers and young children within the research data collection period (September 2023 to February 2024). Additionally, the practice of very expert educators is often ahead of the process of curriculum development in any jurisdiction, so that many of the key changes identified for an updated Aistear, may already have been an element of the existing practice experienced by these babies, toddlers and young children before now.

To try to address these dilemmas, data collection was structured in the child profile form around the key changes identified by NCCA for change within an updated Aistear, but with direction in the guiding document for how co-researcher educators could best frame the inquiry on each topic from the perspective of the child. Both the child profile form and the guiding document had sections on “other opinions / experiences / perspectives of significance to the baby, toddler or young child” asking “What significant experiences has the baby, toddler or young child had that do not fit in the above categories? Are there any struggles or challenges that are not visible in Aistear?” In this way, we hoped to capture the ‘silences’ or the ‘gaps’ that may not have been adequately covered in the proposed changes.

***Visibility of diversity:*** The use of the child profile form also helped to ensure that the diversity of the children in the sample was more evident in Phase 2 than in Phase 1. As noted in the report for Phase 1, despite ensuring diversity in the sample in most dimensions (albeit with some notable exceptions), these dimensions of diversity were not as visible in the data as we would have predicted. One possible explanation we offered for this was that the educators in question were practising in such inclusive ways (for example using a universal design for learning [UDL] approach) that potential points of ‘difference’ were not visible. For instance, even though one of the settings in Phase 1 was specifically designed for children with additional needs, and all children in this setting had some form of disability, disability was rarely mentioned in the data from this setting and was only visible in relation to communication and accessing the voices of children. Instead, the children in this setting were 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 (see Figure 1 for an example of this).



*Figure 1: Data from Phase 1 showing a young child participating in artwork in an early childhood setting. This child's disability is not evident in the data.*

For Phase 2, the child profile form was structured so that information on dimensions of diversity such as language, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc could be captured and directly linked to each item of data, contextualising all data through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### 2.3 Data collection

With an understanding of the implications of the updated draft of Aistear and the key changes proposed, the co-researcher educators returned to their settings, to collate again the voices of the babies, toddlers and young children in their care. In this phase they were tasked with using the child profile form and recording template to focus on each of the key changes identified for development by NCCA, from the child's perspective. The co-researcher educators were invited to consider each of the key changes with the children in their setting, and find examples of how babies, toddlers and young children communicated their views on these key changes using their 'hundred languages'. In order to complete the template, early childhood educators gathered evidence from the children's everyday communications of their experiences in the early childhood setting. Co-researcher educators were given a period of approximately twelve weeks to complete Phase 2 data collection. The procedure for data collection was somewhat different in the setting where the voices of Traveller children were accessed, with a shorter data collection period and direct support offered to the co-researcher educator by a member of the core research team. Reasons for this are outlined in detail below in the section on Sampling.

### *Focus Group Interview*

At the end of the main period of data collection, a focus group session was completed to allow co-researcher educators to reflect on the data collected in Phase 2. In a bid to further qualify and quantify the data collected, the focus group session was completed with co-researcher educators and four members of the research team. This aimed to allow educators to discuss, from the child perspective, the updates to Aistear on a more general basis, and ensure in as much as possible that we were accurately interpreting the views of babies, toddlers and young children. The educators had the opportunity in the focus group to give us more information on exactly what they felt the babies, toddlers and young children were communicating in relation to each of the key changes, as well as any other topics to emerge outside of these. They were also given the opportunity to reflect on their experience of involvement in Participant Action Research across Phase 1 and Phase 2. Questions in the focus group explored the key changes which babies, toddlers and young children felt were most relevant and appropriate, those which were less so, and those which were potentially not relevant, or which were difficult to evidence (see Appendix 5).

As noted by Gournelos, Hammonds and Wilson (2019), the aim of a focus group is to have a shared conversation about a particular subject. Therefore, it is important to avoid circumstances that lead to ‘group think’ (when people coalesce around a viewpoint to preserve social cohesion) or that permit one or more members to dominate the conversation. Considering this, members of the research team served as focus group moderators, supporting the focus of the conversation and the participation of all co-researcher educators. One research team member acted as lead moderator, asking all questions for consistency.

The focus group enabled co-researcher educators to reflect on their observations and experiences with the children, offered them the opportunity to discuss their observations collaboratively and encouraged professional dialogue in this regard. All co-researcher educators from Phase 1 and 2 were invited to participate in this focus group due to the methodology of the study being discussed also. The discussion of the methodology formed the first part of the focus group with the second part focusing on Phase 2 data and involving only Phase 2 co-researcher educators.

## 2.4 Ethics

In the report for Phase 1 of this consultation we gave a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of key ethical considerations for this work. We highlighted that although an ethics proposal for this research was submitted to the MU research ethics committee as lead institution, this was deemed necessary but not sufficient. Data collection did not proceed until formal ethical approval was granted but ethical considerations were not considered to be ‘completed’ once an ethics committee had signed off on the work. 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. The Phase 1 report outlines how we have adhered to typical ethical concerns such as data protection and storage, confidentiality, etc. but also, less typical ethical concerns since research with babies, toddlers and young children brings ethical dilemmas that may not be so apparent with adults or older children, for example:

- viewing babies, toddlers and young children as agentic and capable of self-expression, while acknowledging power imbalances for them;
- ethics in research with babies, toddlers and young children as an iterative, reflective, relational space;
- ensuring informed consent and assent, and what that looks like for preverbal children;
- child protection measures and potential tensions with children’s right to expression and visibility.

We have not revisited all of these considerations and concerns in detail here, but they do apply to Phase 2 of the research just as much as Phase 1, so we refer the reader to the [phase 1 report](#) for more in-depth consideration of these issues.

It is worth reiterating here however, that 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 2: Lundy's Model of Child Participation (2007)

'Space' means that babies, toddlers and young 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 them, provided safety and space for expression. 'Voice' means that babies, toddlers and young children are facilitated to express their views, and this was achieved through use of creative methodological tools, and the fact that their early childhood educators who know them well can pick up on small cues that would most likely be missed by external researchers. 'Audience' means that babies, toddlers and young 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 both phases of the consultation and acting upon them by ensuring that these views influence the updating of Aistear.

After completion of Phase 1 of the consultation, the process of analysing the data to identify what children were telling us about their experiences of Aistear (the consultation) was 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 communicated (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). For Phase 2, we have facilitated the process of providing 'audience' and 'influence' through the inclusion of an additional chapter in this report, Chapter 4, which analyses the implications of what the babies, toddlers and young children have told us for curriculum development. The reader should note therefore, that Chapter 4 is written from a solely adult perspective and is outside the scope of the 'consultation' that has provided 'space' and 'voice' to the children for Phase 2. We argue that notwithstanding reflection on the issue of 'adult

gaze’, this is an ethical and methodologically sound approach, because as Lundy’s model argues, having space and voice is not of much use to children if nobody listens to their views or acts upon them. The role of reflexivity has been strongly centred throughout the report to identify and acknowledge the lens we use when interpreting children’s voices, and to ensure that we do not over-stretch our claims of what the children have told us versus how we have interpreted that (Lundy et al., 2024).

Another ethical concern that became very central to Phase 2, and is thus worth reiterating here, is the right of all participants to withdraw from the research at any time, without any penalty, for reasons that they are not required to specify. The concept of ‘informed consent’ requires that participants understand the purposes of the research, what precisely they are being asked to do, anonymity, their right to withdraw, how the data will be stored and what it will be used for (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The consent form for participating educators in Phase 2 states: “Participation is voluntary, which means you can stop taking part at any time without saying why”. Unfortunately, two of the participating co-researcher educators chose to withdraw during the course of the research for Phase 2, as is their right. This is explored further in the Sample section. The right to withdraw was equally applied to babies, toddlers and young children in this research. Within our ethical framework, 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, and this overrode their parents’ consent. Skånfors (2009) refers to this as the use of an ‘ethical radar’. This was particularly relevant in the community creche and preschool where we sought the voices of Traveller children (see Sample). Although we received parental consent for four children to participate, and although the researcher did start to observe all four, she did not feel that one child assented to the observation. Therefore, data from only three children in this setting are included in the analysis.

Beyond the exploration of ethics in the Phase 1 report, additional ethical considerations for Phase 2 arose for the focus group and we submitted a second updated ethics application to the MU research ethics committee to incorporate the focus group. All focus group participants received an email to invite them to the session with a copy of the focus group schedule to allow them to feel confident and prepared. This email also outlined the relevant ethical issues, and the participants were provided with an updated information sheet and consent form (see

Appendix 6) that allowed them to choose which elements of the research (data collection / focus group) they would like to take part in. Participants could choose to participate in data collection with children and not do the focus group if they wished. Some participants from Phase 1 chose not to collect data for Phase 2 but chose to take part in the focus group, and this was also facilitated. All focus group participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, with assurances also made regarding data being stored safely on password-protected computers for 10 years, after which it will be destroyed. All participants gave permission to record and transcribe the focus group, with awareness that recording on Microsoft Teams includes both video and audio recording. They were invited to turn off their cameras if they did not wish their video to be recorded, but nobody chose to do this. They were also made aware of their right to leave the focus group at any time without having to specify a reason, but nobody chose to do this. The facilitator of the focus group was mindful of ensuring that every participant had the opportunity to speak equally.

## 2.5 Sample

### *Settings and co-researcher educators*

A detailed rationale for the purposive approach used for sampling is provided in the report for Phase 1. All co-researcher educators from Phase 1 were invited to participate in Phase 2. In total, eleven co-researcher educators from Phase 1 were invited to participate in Phase 2. Eight initially agreed but one (Michelle<sup>4</sup>, Gaeltacht naíonra) withdrew over the course of the data collection period without giving an indication of the reason for this, as is her right. The remaining three who took part in Phase 1 but declined to take part in Phase 2, joined the educator focus group and explained their decisions not to engage with Phase 2. Two of them (Paula, non-Gaeltacht naíonra, and Elaine, specialist pre-school for children with disabilities), described their decision in terms of time constraints. They each highlighted the huge value they ascribed to the work and their great regret at having to turn down the opportunity to engage with Phase 2:

*I personally think it's nice to be able to step back and to look at the work that you're doing. It was nice for my team to reflect on the work that we do and in that sense, it was really, really good. It also professionalises the sector and I think that's really,*

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<sup>4</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

*really important because I so believe in early ed and the importance of it in children's overall development... I think across the board... it's just such a busy environment... I have two sessions, so I suppose there are full full days. It's a full week... I found it [taking part in the research] really valuable, but just time constraints. I think in early ed, there's just never enough time.*

(Paula, non-Gaeltacht naíonra)

*I really enjoyed the first phase and was disappointed that I couldn't actually participate in the second one because of time and stuff and everything as well. The focus on nonverbal communication within Aistear and recording it is a lot of the time focused on what children say, and [the consultation] raised our awareness of the nonverbal communication that goes on that is missed in the business of the classroom. I would have a huge interest in that going forward, I'd love to even focus a lot more on that.*

(Elaine, specialist pre-school for children with disabilities)

Clíona, the junior infant teacher, had moved on to a new role and was no longer working directly with junior infants and so was unable to contribute to data collection for Phase 2, but again she highlighted the positivity of her experience in Phase 1:

*I only participated in Phase 1 and the reason for that was because I only had a class during that phase... but I did find the whole period that I was involved with was very valuable... I found for myself it really made me look at my values... I love listening to the early years educators and getting ideas from them and how, you know how they get involved in their children's play or let them play... For me it was very enriching to hear the early years side of things and hear how much freedom that they have in terms of Aistear and play. I really hope with the new [primary] curriculum coming down the line that we'll be afforded the opportunity as well to have more play from this... But I loved the whole experience, and I would definitely love to be part of it again. You know, it's brilliant.*

(Clíona, Junior Infants)

In further developing our sampling for Phase 2 we took a similar targeted approach to that taken in Phase 1, with the aim of ensuring a rigorous, valid, and diverse sample. As with Phase 1, 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 expanding our sample settings for Phase 2, we reflected on gaps that needed to be filled to ensure we met that requirement. We did not seek to replace the non-Gaeltacht naíonra as the Gaeltacht naíonra was initially still committed to Phase 2, ensuring the Irish language perspective would be represented. Unfortunately, however, as aforementioned, the Gaeltacht naíonra withdrew towards the end of the process with insufficient time to seek an alternative Irish language setting. The right to withdraw is a key cornerstone of the ethical underpinnings of this research, and the experiences of babies, toddlers and young children in Irish language settings are very well represented in Phase 1 of the consultation to which two such settings contributed.

In consultation with the co-researcher educators, we were also confident of a strong cohort of babies, toddlers and young children with additional needs across the other settings and agreed that a specific setting for children with disabilities was not required to meet that criterion (Table 3 below outlines the diversity of the sample in this regard). We also did not replace the junior infant setting as this cohort will now be served by the new primary curriculum framework which emphasises playful pedagogy and a smooth transition from Aistear. Equally, with the almost universal take-up of the 2-year ECCE scheme, children in junior infants are increasingly beyond the age-range of the focus of this consultation (up to 6 years).

There were however some cohorts that required further engagement based on reflection on gaps in the sample, some of which were highlighted as limitations of Phase 1 and some of which were identified in the initial Phase 2 sample:

- The Phase 1 and initial Phase 2 sample were skewed in favour of children in the age range 3-6 years, so more babies and toddlers needed to be included;
- Phase 1 did not include a large privately-owned day-care chain setting, and babies, toddlers and young children experiencing Aistear in such a setting needed to be represented;
- We had been unsuccessful in Phase 1 in gaining consent for inclusion of any Traveller/Roma babies, toddlers and young children, and they urgently needed representation in Phase 2.

The requirement for a large privately-owned day-care chain setting to be included, and the requirement for increased representation for babies and toddlers were in fact mutually supportive, because many baby rooms are located in the full day-care sector (Pobal, 2024). The engagement of three settings catering for children ranging in age from 1 year to 3 years within a privately-owned day-care chain supported both requirements. Five additional co-researcher educators took part in the educator sessions and collected data across the three new settings, supported by the Quality Development Manager of the day-care chain.

In Phase 1, we were unable to access consent for working with any Traveller/Roma children within the sample settings in spite of efforts to do so outlined in the Phase 1 report. 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 was required for Phase 2 for this dimension of diversity. As a research team, we were highly committed to addressing this acknowledged limitation in the Phase 1 sampling. We began by meeting with a member of the Traveller community with expertise in the area of education and curriculum development, who advised the team on relevant issues of cultural awareness. We engaged in joint exploration of the aims of the consultation in the context of the potential reluctance of Traveller parents to trust or engage with a settled-led piece of research due to generational experiences of marginalisation. She suggested engagement with a Traveller Health and Community Engagement project who could further advise the research team, and she supported us to set up an initial meeting.

The research team met with representatives of the Traveller Health and Community Engagement project and again explored possibilities for genuinely accessing the voices of Traveller babies, toddlers and young children within a culturally responsive approach. They agreed to support the research team to engage with a preschool with a high proportion of Traveller children which is also led by educators from the Traveller community, and this setting in turn agreed to take part in Phase 2 of the consultation. The co-researcher educator from the Traveller-led preschool and a representative from the Traveller Health and Community Engagement project took part in the workshops on the updated Aistear delivered by NCCA and the aforementioned sessions co-constructing the methodologies. Unfortunately, however, the Traveller-led preschool also withdrew without specifying a reason, as is their right. This presented a thorny ethical dilemma (Koushoul and Juhl, 2021) to the researchers because on the one hand the right to withdraw is a key cornerstone of the ethical underpinnings of this

research and on the other, exclusion of the voices of an entire cohort of babies, toddlers and young children brings ethical concerns of its own.

After much critical reflection, the researchers approached this issue with the mindset of both/and rather than either/or; we needed to find a way to both honour the right of the Traveller-led preschool to withdraw and also find a way to include the voices of Traveller babies, toddlers and young children within the very limited timescale remaining to us. The values underpinning this Participant Action Research are deeply relational and so again we drew on our relationships to identify a setting with a cohort of Traveller children attending it who might be willing to support the research at short notice. One of our research team members had a strong pre-existing relationship with one such setting, a community creche and preschool in a large town, and with their support, consent was sought and obtained from parents of four children. As aforementioned, data from only three of these children were included in analysis due to concerns around assent. Chapter 3, Findings, includes data from this setting, but it must be acknowledged that there are some potential limitations in this data as compared with those from other settings. Firstly, due to the very limited timescale available, the observations that supported these data took place over one day in April 2024, as opposed to the more extended period of time afforded to the other babies, toddlers and young children involved. Secondly, since the educator in this setting had not been involved in the detailed co-construction process and sharing of knowledge outlined in section 2.2, we felt it would be unethical and ineffective to expect her to collect data alone. Therefore, the team member who had the pre-existing relationship with her visited the setting on the day of data collection to support and guide her. We acknowledge that the procedure for data collection employed with the Traveller children is different to that employed with the other children in the sample, and this may be subject to criticism from a methodological perspective. However, we argue that from an ethical standpoint, the inclusion of the voices of Traveller babies, toddlers and young children, albeit in a limited way, was important enough to diverge from our established methods, and this was the best that could be achieved within the timeframe available to us.

Incorporating the six new co-researcher educators across the four new settings and the Quality Development Manager from the day-care chain, this brought the total number of co-researcher educators in Phase 2 to fourteen.

For the focus group session, all participating co-researcher educators from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 were invited to take part. Overall, ten co-researcher educators attended the focus group.

Of this, three took part in Phase 1 only, two took part in Phase 2 only, and five took part in both phases. Table 2 shows the profile of all the co-researcher educators who took part in data collection for Phase 2 and the co-researcher educators who took part in the focus group.

*Table 2: Co-researcher educators*

Pseudonym	Setting	Qualification	Years of experience	Time in current setting	Support with data collection from other educators	Took part in focus group?
<b>Margaret</b>	Childminder (4 babies) and toddlers)	BA in Early Childhood Education (Level 8)	17 years (12 years in creches internationally, 5 years childminding)	5 years	No	Yes
<b>Bernadette</b>	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	16 years	10 years (own setting)	3 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 5 (1) Level 6 (1) and Level 8 (1)	Yes
<b>Tanya</b>	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 3 years tutoring Level 5 and 6 ECEC students 2 year delivering Aistear support for County Childcare Committee	2 years as a stay-at-home parent	No	Yes
<b>Mary</b>	Full day-care, community setting, baby room, wobbler / toddler room and ECCE room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8)	25 years	13 years	11 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 5 (1), Level 6 (6) and Level 8 (4)	No



<b>Ger</b>	Early Start	BSc Psychology (Level 8) PGCE Early Years (Level 9) Master of Education (Early Years) (Level 9)	36 years experience as an early childhood educator 8 years lecturing in ECEC at university level while also still in practice	14 years	1 additional early childhood educator, qualifications at Level 6	Yes
<b>Bernie</b>	Full day-care, community setting, ECCE room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 6)	24 years	18 years	2 additional early childhood educators, both with qualifications at Level 6 and studying for Level 8 at time of data collection	Yes
<b>Sheila</b>	Full day-care, community setting, baby room	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8)	28 years	16 years	3 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 6	No
<b>Rebecca</b>	Day-care chain setting toddler room	Level 5 and 6 QQI Early Childhood Education	6 years	6 years	Supported by Quality Development Manager, Millie	No
<b>Janet</b>	Day-care chain setting baby room	Level 6 QQI Early Childhood Education	Missing data	6 years	Supported by Quality Development Manager, Millie	No
<b>Rhonda</b>	Day-care chain setting wobbler room	Level 5 QQI Early Childhood Education plus 4-year degree programme in Italy	19 years (3 in Italy, 16 in Ireland)	16 years	Supported by Quality Development Manager, Millie	Yes
<b>Jen</b>	Day-care chain setting wobbler room	Level 5 QQI Early Childhood Education Level 6 QQI Special Needs Assisting	6 years	2.5 years	Supported by Quality Development Manager, Millie	No
<b>Maria</b>	Day-care chain setting wobbler room	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	Supported by Quality Development Manager, Millie	No
<b>Millie</b>	Quality Development Manager supporting across day-care chain settings	MA in Early Childhood Studies	20 years	2 years		Yes

<b>Sarah</b>	Community creche and preschool with Traveller children	BA in Early Childhood (Level 8)	15 years	4 years	Supported by research team member	No
<b>Totals:</b>	Co-researcher educators who collected data in Phase 2		14			
	Co-researcher educators who took part in the focus group		10			
<b>Took part in focus group only</b>						
<b>Elaine</b>	Specialist preschool for children with disabilities	BA in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (Level 8) Master of Education (Level 9)	18 years	18 years (own setting)	No	
<b>Paula</b>	Non-Gaeltacht Naíonra	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) QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (Level 5) Montessori diploma	15 years	9 years (own setting)	2 additional early childhood educators, qualifications at Level 6 (1) and Level 8 Psychology / Level 6 ECEC (1)	
<b>Clíona</b>	Junior infants	BA History (Level 8) PGCE Primary Teaching (Level 9) M.Ed (Level 9)	14 years teaching Published author of two phonics books and supporting material	14 years in current school, 9 years in junior infants, 1 year in literacy support	1 SNA, qualifications at Level 6	

### ***Babies, toddlers and young children***

As evident in Chapter 3, Findings, the development of the child profile form and guiding document was largely successful in ensuring we addressed the aforementioned concerns around adult gaze, the opportunity to either agree or disagree with the proposed changes, and the visibility of dimensions of diversity. Nevertheless, this approach did require the co-researcher educators to engage in a significantly increased amount of work. In Phase 1 they simply gathered evidence like photographs, observations, learning stories, etc. and submitted them to the core research team for thematic analysis. The aim was for the educators not to have additional work to do beyond the documentation they would normally be engaged in as part of their everyday practice. Phase 2 was significantly different in this regard. Their work for Phase 2 included gathering the data, linking it to specific children in the child profile form, completing the first round of data analysis (see details below) by locating each item of data within the thematic framework provided by the child profile form and guiding document, and writing a piece to explain both what they felt the child was communicating and why they felt that was relevant to the specific theme chosen. This far more in-depth engagement with the data by co-researcher educators and the increased workload it placed upon unpaid research team members who were engaging in this work on their own time alongside their ongoing practice, necessitated more focused engagement with a smaller number of children. This in-depth approach would not have been feasible with a sample size similar to that in Phase 1 (n=136). In Phase 2 while there were the same number of settings involved (11 in Phase 1, 11 in Phase 2), there were a smaller number of children involved (n= 30) in a more in-depth, focused approach. Table 3 gives details of participating babies toddlers and young children, including dimensions of diversity.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Data collected from the participating babies, toddlers and young children were analysed thematically, structured around the key topics identified by NCCA for change in the updated Aistear, as well as an additional topic to allow for areas of value to babies, toddlers and young children that were not included in the proposed themes to emerge:

- Relationships and Interactions
- Citizenship: My Rights and Emerging Responsibilities
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Play and Hands-on Experience

- Transitions: Continuity of Experience and Progression in Learning
- Other opinions / experiences / perspectives of significance to the baby, toddler, or young child

Data analysis was conducted in four layers.

1. The initial layer of data analysis was completed by the co-researcher educators. They categorised each item of raw data by their interpretation of its relevance to a specific topic.
2. The data for each topic were synthesised from across all settings by the core research team, separating out the experiences and perspectives of babies and toddlers (birth to 3 years) and those of young children (3-6 years).
3. The core research team then returned to the raw data to triangulate possible interpretations of what the babies, toddlers and young children may have been communicating. This layer of data analysis was particularly relevant to the theme of ‘Citizenship’.
4. The findings were then triangulated against the data from the educator focus group to incorporate the elaborations given by educators on their interpretations of the messages being communicated by the babies, toddlers and young children.

We must acknowledge that this means that despite our efforts to minimise ‘adult gaze’, the findings presented in the next chapter are essentially filtered through the lens of four layers of adult interpretation of children’s voices. Therefore, in Chapter 3 we have also provided many examples of raw data so that the unfiltered expressions of the babies, toddlers and young children can be viewed by readers.

## 2.7 Summary and conclusion

The methodology for Phase 2 of the consultation mirrored that of Phase 1, using a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach whereby the educators working with the babies, toddlers and young children collected data based on pedagogical documentation. Their work was structured using a child profile form and guiding document that linked the children’s individual dimensions of diversity, their communications evident through their ‘hundred languages’ and the key changes to Aistear proposed by NCCA. An ethical dilemma prominent in Phase 2 included enacting the right of participants to withdraw at any time without specifying a reason, while also ensuring that no cohort of babies, toddlers and young children was excluded from the consultation.

**Table 3: Profile of Participating babies, toddlers and young children**

<b>Babies and toddlers (birth to 6)</b>						
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Cultural / linguistic background</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Family structure</b>
Annie	Bernie's full day-care, community setting, ECCE room	2-3 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and younger brother
Nathan	Mary's full day-care, community setting, baby / wobbler room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older sister
Ellie	Margaret's child-minder setting	1-2 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older brother Cillian, who also attends the setting, and granny. Granny's partner who also lived with them passed away recently
Louis	Sheila's full day-care, community setting, baby room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older brother
Jayden	Sheila's full day-care, community setting, baby room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam and dad
Patrick	Sheila's full day-care, community setting, baby room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	Patrick's mother suffers from severe mental ill-health; his older brother has a diagnosed additional need (not specified), and he has been referred to the setting for support with attachment and social engagement	Lives with mam and older brother

Johnny	Rebecca's day-care chain toddler room	2-3 years	Male	Irish and British, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older brother
Ben	Janet's day-care chain baby room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	Delay to physical development requiring physiotherapy	Lives with mam, dad and two older brothers
Niamh	Rhonda's day-care chain wobbler room	1-2 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older brother
Cian	Rhonda's day-care chain wobbler room	1-2 years	Male	Irish and Italian, both languages spoken at home	X	Lives with mam and dad
Gabriel	Jen and Maria's day-care chain wobbler room	1-2 years	Male	Irish and South African, English spoken at home	X	Not specified
Sonny	Jen and Maria's day-care chain wobbler room	1-2 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam and dad
Keeley	Sarah's community creche and preschool	2-3 years	Female	Traveller Community	X	Not specified
<b>Young children (3-6 years)</b>						
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Cultural / linguistic background</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Family structure</b>
Róisín	Bernie's Full day-care, community setting, ECCE room	4-5 years	Female	Irish and Malaysian, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam and dad, youngest of 7 children
Enda	Bernie's Full day-care, community setting, ECCE room	3-4 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and younger sister
Robbie	Home setting	3-4 years	Male	Irish and Polish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam (who is Polish) and dad (who has got only one leg and plays amputee football), but

						also Granny and Grandad. Uncle has a room in Granny's house too
Nadia	Mary's full day-care, community setting ECCE room	3-4 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older sister
Bobby	Mary's full day-care, community setting ECCE room	3-4 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	Sensory and behavioural difficulties	Lives with mam, dad and two older brothers
Tilly	Mary's full day-care, community setting ECCE room	4-5 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	Significant speech delay/disorder	Lives with mam, dad and younger sister
Brody	Ger's Early Start	3-6 years	Male	Irish, English and Irish spoken at home	Some anxiety and fine motor challenges	Lives with mam, dad, older brother and new baby brother
Elaine	Ger's Early Start	5-6 years	Female	Irish and Croatian	Significant speech delay/disorder	Lives with mam, her partner and older sister
Hailey	Ger's Early Start	3-6 years	Female	Irish, English spoken at home	Allergies	Lives with mam, dad, older brother and older sister
Miguel	Ger's Early Start	3-6 years	Male	Brazilian, Portuguese spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, sees dad regularly
Zhi	Ger's Early Start	3-6 years	Male	Chinese, Mandarin spoken at home	Speech delay	Lives with mam, dad and older brother
Kashvi	Bernadette's private ECCE setting	5-6 years	Female	Indian, Hindi spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older brother
Jake	Bernadette's private ECCE setting	5-6 years	Male	Chinese, Mandarin spoken at home	X	Not specified
Cillian	Margaret's child-minder setting	3-4 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and younger sister, Ellie, who also attends the setting, and granny. Granny's partner who also lived with them passed away recently

Danny	Margaret's child-minder setting	4-5 years	Male	Irish, English spoken at home	X	Lives with mam, dad and older sister
John	Sarah's community creche and preschool	4-5 years	M	Traveller Community	X	Not specified
Shauna	Sarah's community creche and preschool	4-5 years	F	Traveller Community	X	Mam, dad, two siblings
<b>Totals</b>	11 settings	Age range 1-6 years	19 male 11 female	10 different cultural / linguistic backgrounds including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irish,</li> <li>- English,</li> <li>- South African,</li> <li>- Polish,</li> <li>- Brazilian/Portuguese,</li> <li>- Indian/Hindi,</li> <li>- Chinese/Mandarin,</li> <li>- Croatian,</li> <li>- Malaysian,</li> <li>- Italian</li> <li>- Traveller</li> </ul>	Disabilities represented include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- physical delays (gross motor and fine motor),</li> <li>- speech delays / disorders,</li> <li>- sensory difficulties,</li> <li>- behaviour difficulties,</li> <li>- allergies,</li> <li>- attachment difficulties, and</li> <li>- anxiety.</li> </ul> <p>Some babies, toddlers and young children showed difficulties that may be predictors of future diagnosis but were too young for diagnosis at time of data collection. In the planning session for development of research methodology, educators indicated that the level of need that children are experiencing has increased hugely in recent years. Participating babies, toddlers and young children also experienced disability in the home, with one father who is an amputee, one mother who is suffering from debilitating mental health difficulties and one brother with an unspecified additional need.</p>	Multiple family structures including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- traditional family units with male and female parent,</li> <li>- living with extended family</li> <li>- one-parent families</li> <li>- families with parent and step-parent</li> </ul>



# Chapter 3: Findings- Babies’, toddlers’ and young children’s views on the consultation proposals for updating Aistear

## 3.1 Introduction

Based on the initial consultation processes in Phase 1, changes to Aistear were proposed by NCCA regarding Relationships and Interactions; Agentic Global Citizenship; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Play and Hands-on Experiences; and Transitions. As part of the consultation process involving babies, toddlers and young children, educators submitted rich data on children’s responses to each of these topics and the related changes, as well as to our query on whether there were any gaps in these proposals. The findings in this chapter are presented according to what babies, toddlers and young children experienced or expressed in multi-modal ways in relation to each topic. The experiences and views of babies and toddlers (birth to three) and those of young children (three to six) are separated under each theme in order to give full visibility to each cohort. The modes of communication from the babies, toddlers and young children are highlighted in bold font where appropriate.

## 3.2 Relationships and Interactions

The Phase 2 consultation proposals for updating Aistear propose drawing greater attention to the importance of interactions and relationships by

- Focusing on building trusting relationships with babies, toddlers and young children through a slow relational pedagogy
- Re-affirming the importance of a key person approach, and
- Fostering enhanced connections with friends, communities, and neighbourhoods.

The evidence gathered clearly shows that relationships and interactions matter greatly to the babies, toddlers and young children who took part in the consultation. ‘Focusing on building trusting relationships through a slow relational pedagogy’ and ‘fostering enhanced connections with friends’ were particularly visible aspects of this in the data. Like in Phase 1, one of the strongest messages that babies, toddlers and young children provided us with was that their friendships are a crucial element of how they experience early childhood education and care, and they really matter to them. The ‘importance of a key person approach’ was only explicitly mentioned once but was often implied in the emphasis on trusting relationships between

children and their educators. Relationships within communities and neighbourhoods were also evident but are explored under other themes, such as Ellie's enjoyment of the library and the children's engagement with the park in Ger's Early Start setting which are described in the section on Citizenship, Tilly's experiences walking to the local village with her friends in Mary's community full day-care setting explored under Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and the nature walks experienced by Jake in Bernadette's ECCE setting described under Play and Hands-on Experiences. Some illustrative examples of the views of babies and toddlers on relationships and interactions are initially presented, followed by those of young children.

### Babies' and toddlers' views on relationships and interactions

In Mary's full day-care community setting, toddler Nathan<sup>5</sup> shows the value that he places on trusting relationships built through a slow relational pedagogy. Nathan is in the age range 12-18 months and is a boy from a local family who has one older sister who is 3 and in preschool in the same setting. He lives with his mam and dad. He is very curious and loves the outdoors. He likes to be acknowledged, so whenever anyone comes into his room in the setting, he keeps calling to them until they say hello to him. According to his educators, he is very capable and competent, and loves to be 'in the thick of' everything so as not to miss out. He loves attention, and he is a very happy child who knows what he wants and how to communicate this. He is very independent.

When Nathan was introduced to pottery clay for the first time, he initially appeared to be intrigued and curious, but cautious to engage. In his learning journal, his educator wrote:

*I thought you would get rightly stuck in and one of the first to engage in it, but you just sat and watched, taking it all in, then you **crawled away** engaging with toys across the room but always **watching**. You really surprised me! You had no interest! After your friends moved away from the tray you **made eye contact** with me while **pointing** to the clay. I asked you if you wanted to play with the clay and you **smiled, nudging closer** very slowly. You were really apprehensive to this new thing in our room! When you got close enough you **poked the clay, pulling your hand back quickly**, examining the bit of clay that had stuck to your finger. After another couple of minutes of watching and poking you picked up a piece and squeezed it, **shook your hand***

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<sup>5</sup> Note: All names used are pseudonyms

*vigorously to get it off but it was stuck! You **looked back and forth** between me and the clay stuck in your hand before **laughing!***

Nathan's educator reflected that Nathan needed "time and space to adapt and become secure", as well as the support of a trusted educator who "could see his apprehension and appreciate that he needed the time to decide if he wanted to engage or not". This is resonant with the concept of slow relational pedagogy outlined in the updated Aistear.

Slow relational pedagogy can be particularly valuable for babies and toddlers who may have some additional challenges. Patrick is a boy in the 1-2-year age range who attends Sheila's full day-care community setting baby / toddler room. He lives locally with his mam and dad, and his older brother. The language spoken at home is English. Patrick loves playing with water, and he loves other sensory play also, he loves emptying and filling. He enjoys one on one time with an educator for short periods before starting to play again. He has a strong connection with one adult in particular and can become upset if she needs to leave the room. Patrick's older brother has a diagnosed additional need and since Patrick's birth, his mam has been experiencing significant mental health challenges. She has been receiving support and Patrick has come to the setting because it was noted that she would benefit from time to help her recovery. It was also felt by the referring agency that Patrick would benefit from some time with other children around his own age in a social environment, with a focus on attachment, play and engagement. Patrick communicated how he benefitted from time and space to slowly develop trusting relationships with educators:

***Patrick lifted his arms** to me today while I had stopped by to say hello, this was the first time since settling 8 weeks ago that Patrick felt happy to be comforted by me. I bent down and asked if I could lift him up, **he leaned forward** and I picked him up, **his arms went around my neck** and he **snuggled in**, we rocked gently for a few minutes while I hummed gently. Patrick understands that when he needs comfort, he can rely on and trust the adults around him. He has learned this over a period of time. He continues to bring more people into his circle. Patrick may have experienced adversity through his Mammy's mental health issues (though she is doing her very best), but through widening the circle, both Patrick and his Mammy are gaining a stable warm space to feel heard, safe and loved, aiding in her recovery and positively impacting on Patrick's development.*

The following vignette about toddler Jayden also reaffirms the importance of trusting relationships. Jayden is in the age range 1-2 years and also attends Sheila's full day-care community setting baby / toddler room. He lives at home with his mam and dad, very close to the creche where he attends daily while his parents work. According to his educator, he loves having fun with the other children in the room, the more adventurous the better. He likes to keep moving and the educators understand that without being given opportunities daily to have big movements, he can turn to wrestling his friends to get some input. Here Jayden shows from the perspective of the toddler how a key person approach can help form a strong bond and promote a deeper connection between a toddler and his/her educator. A key person approach facilitates a strong connection that allows for communication and understanding through means other than spoken language, which is particularly valuable for babies and toddlers:

*Jayden visited me in the office today along with his key Educator, Lorna. Jayden had a look around while Lorna and I had a brief conversation. Lorna looked down at Jayden and asked if he was ready to go, and Jayden **nodded** and proceeded to take big, long, slow strides. Lorna noticed this and asked Jayden if he was going on a bear hunt again. Jayden suddenly **became very animated** and **started rhyming** off as best he could the words to "We're going on a bear hunt". Up and down the corridor he went, **leading** Lorna, acting out their favourite book. The interactions between them were fun, natural, and authentic ... [Jayden and Lorna] have a great understanding and connection, that Lorna instantly knew by a long stride what Jayden was doing. She joined him immediately in the **game that he was leading**, it was a lovely reciprocal interaction between two people who spend time together and understand what each other enjoys. ... It was wonderful ... [that Jayden] is able to communicate his interests through very little spoken language, and have his interest acted upon.*

Like in Phase 1, the babies and toddlers in Phase 2 strongly identified the value they place on their friendships. Connections with friends matter greatly to them, and this was illustrated by Keeley in Sarah's community creche and preschool. Keeley is in the age range 2-3 years and is a member of the Traveller Community. Keeley has a friend called 'Millie' who also attends the setting for different sessions twice a week, but they often play together on their site.

In the following observation Millie was not in the toddler room:

*Keeley chose a piece of chalk from the tub then ran around the outdoor space, stopping momentarily to **draw** on different surfaces. She **tells** an educator, 'I had blue, and Millie had pink'. Another child points to the pink piece of chalk but Keeley **shakes her head**, 'No, that's Millie'. When asked, 'Where's Millie?' Keeley **explains**, 'Millie at home with her mam and dad. Wait for Millie to come. Millie wants all the toys'.*

In Rebecca's day-care chain toddler room, Johnny also illustrates the importance of friendship through his play. Johnny is in the age range 2-3 years, and lives with his mam who is Irish, his dad who is British and one older brother. The family speaks English at home. Johnny loves to play with Lego, cars and puzzles. According to his educator, he is "great at problem solving, has great knowledge and understanding of the world around him. He has great language and communication skills, is very social and looks out for his friends":

*When doing our art activity Johnny really interacted with his friends. Johnny **said to me**, "Look Rebecca my wheels have snow on them". Johnny then **gave his friend a toy car** as well. Johnny shows me great sharing skills and loves to interact with his friends during activities. He loves to **chat and discuss** with them. Johnny shows me great communication and language skills.*

In Janet's day-care chain baby room, 13-month-old Ben shows how his developing skills have supported his relationship building. Ben lives at home with his dad, mam and two brothers who are 6 years and 4 years old. His family are Irish and speak English at home. His grandparents live in the same town, and he gets to see them all the time. According to his educator, he enjoys making decisions for himself. He likes risky play and demonstrating independence. He loves to make noise with the musical basket, and the ball pool where he throws the balls out of the pool onto the floor with his friends. He loves to paint and do messy play. He really loves to interact with his friends and educators and to investigate, explore and learn in his environment. Ben and the other babies in the room:

*will **babble in communicating** with each other. They will use **facial expressions** and early **vocalisations** to show feelings and share information. They can combine **verbal and non-verbal communication** to get their point across.*

As Ben becomes more mobile, relationships and interactions with both children and adults are facilitated:

*Ben has learned to crawl. He needs some physio on his legs to help him to start moving [but] is starting to make great progress. He is **screeching with laughter**, and he appears to be **delighted with himself**. He is starting to gain strength in his gross motor skills and his confidence is soaring. Ben loves coming to creche, he loves interacting with the other children through **smiling, screeching, and babbling**. He sometimes **leans in** to give a hug. Ben **reacts well** when you are showing him love and he responds by cuddling into you. He is a **very affectionate** little boy.*

*[Ben's new ability to crawl] is important regarding relationships and interactions because he can now move and join the other children with the floor activities. He will gain more independence and become more resilient when taking turns and interacting with the other children. Ben has a newfound freedom where he can follow his friends and engage with them on a different level. The best part is that they are all having fun, **laughing, screeching, and babbling** with each other.*

In Rhonda's day-care chain wobbler room, Niamh shows how her learning and development is immersed in a whole ecology of relationships - between adults themselves, between adults and children and between children themselves. She also shows how relationship building skills are modelled for babies and toddlers by adults. Niamh is 1 year 11 months old, and lives at home with her mother, father, and older brother. The family are of Irish heritage. Niamh has a very nurturing personality, always helping others around her. She helps her friends during dinner time and likes to give them the water bottles. She likes to play with dolls, especially during sleep time. She likes cars too. She is very chatty and has lots of words so is easy to engage in a conversation.

Niamh showed her empathy and interest in building relationships when she witnessed her educator hugging another educator who was feeling tired, and later hugging a crying child. Seeing this, Niamh approached her educator to ask for a hug too. Niamh then "turned around and, with a **big smile**, she **opened her arms** and started to **give her friends a big hug**. All the children ... came to her for a big hug, and they were very happy." Niamh observed how hugging could make others feel better. In an environment where she was safe to show her feelings, Niamh felt confident to try this for herself – with great success.



A similar dynamic is shown by 1 year 6-month-old Ellie in Margaret's child-minder setting. Ellie lives with her mam, dad, Granny B and her big brother Cillian who also attends the setting. Ellie's family do not practice any religion and feel strongly that Ellie and Cillian should not be

exposed to religious rituals. Her uncle and his partner live across the road, and they see each other often. Granny B's partner who lived with Ellie passed away the week before Christmas. Ellie often visits her mam's family in another county and loves Granny E., Granpa, aunties P., S. and L. and uncle B. Ellie is a busy little girl who loves reading, music, and dance. She sings all day long and according to her educator she can often be found bopping around saying "dance, dance". Ellie loves to hop up on the couch for a cuddle and a story especially when tired and loves to suck her thumb. Ellie also enjoys caring for the dolls and playing with her big brother Cillian and gets very excited when her friend Danny arrives back from playschool to play.

*Ellie often takes on a **caring role** with the dolls. She especially loves to feed them and take them to bed. Their favourite place for sleep is the couch. Today, I heard Ellie **making a crying sound**, and then **said**, "OK OK baby," before placing a bottle in one of the babies' mouth and feeding the others. She places them all on the couch and got them some blankets. Ellie often brings herself to the couch when she is tired and has been known to nod off in seconds... Ellie is very caring and can often be heard **sympathising** with the dolls. She sees to their needs and **shows a happy disposition** when she does.*



Showing the interactive nature of the themes under consideration in this chapter, in Jen and Maria's day-care chain wobbler room, Gabriel also uses play and hands-on experiences to proactively engage in relationship-building with both children and adults. Gabriel is in the age range 1-2 years. He is an only child who was born in Ireland, but his family are from South Africa. English is spoken in Gabriel's home. He loves playing with cars, trains and kitchen toys



and recently has begun to play more *with* the other babies and toddlers, whereas up to now he often played *beside* them, showing as Ben did, that sometimes the dynamic of friendships is influenced by babies' developmental processes. Gabriel enjoys repetition in his play. He is very affectionate with both adults and children, seeking lots of cuddles.

*When Gabriel is looking for interactions during the day he always uses toys as a tool with the rest of the children and the staff too. Even if at first he **seems shy** and is observing the environment for a while, he loves to **play** with and beside others... He was trying to **show his friends the game** with his dinosaur sponge and when he noticed the approval on the staff's faces he was very happy and **laughing**.*

Gabriel's competence and sophisticated social skills are evident here, both in how he uses toys as a tool to form connections with others, and in how he can both read and respond to the adult's subtle, non-verbal communication of approval for his activities.



**In summary**, babies and toddlers showed in many ways how important their relationships and interactions are to them. They demonstrated that they are happy, relaxed, secure, and free to learn to their potential in the context of trusting relationships with educators. These can take time to form. They also again confirmed the importance of their friendships and interactions with their peers in their early childhood settings. Lastly, they showed how the dynamics of their relationships, and their relationship-building skills are intertwined with their development.

## Young children's views on relationships and interactions

The data collected show that building trusting relationships with educators matters to young children also. An example of this is provided by Jake, who is 4 years, 9-month-old and attends Bernadettes's private ECCE setting. Jake's family are from China, and they speak Mandarin at home. He really likes music, and he is interested in wildlife and looking at books about wildlife. He can build amazing constructions and explain in detail how each part of his construction works. Jake sometimes finds it hard to make friends and understand and join in the games the other children play. He also finds it hard to engage in some activities and to concentrate for long periods. It can be difficult for him to join in conversations with his peers and understand the context of the conversations because English is his second language. According to his educator, he can also find it hard to join in games with his peers without support from an adult. Jake communicates the importance of the trust that has developed between him and his educator that allows him to explore his interests and fully engage with his learning in the context of a warm, supportive relationship:

*“Jake was **telling** me all about mushrooms, different types of mushrooms, where they grow, how some mushrooms are poisonous, etc. He **told** me that he had been looking at a programme with his mum and dad at home all about mushrooms. He then **went over to** one of the activities where you can create with textiles that stick to a black piece of card called “Crayola textile Art”. He was **very busy and engaged** for quite a while. When he had **finished** he called me over **saying** “look Bernadette, I made a mushroom”. As he **pointed** to his creation he **explained** that “the mushroom needs soil to grow and there are lots of squiggly roots under the grass so the mushroom can drink water”.*



*This trust between Jake and myself is important for Jake to enable him to learn and develop his interest[s] further. Jake knows he can communicate his thoughts and ideas and knows his interests will be valued and respected due to strong relationships having been built up through positive interactions over a period of time. Without strong reciprocal relationships, Jake may not have shared his interest with me.*

Like in Phase 1, some of the strongest messages from children in the data for Phase 2 again showed how young children value not just relationships with adults but enhanced connections with friends. For Jake:

*This learning experience made him visible within the group. The other children **came to look** at the mushrooms he found outdoors, and when they were dissecting the mushrooms, they **involved Jake** in their discoveries. This created **positive interactions** between Jake and his peers... he also realised the joy in sharing the learning with his peers.*

Bernie's community ECCE setting provides a vivid picture of the importance Enda and Róisín place on their friendship. Enda is 3 years old and lives with his parents and his big sister. He was born in Ireland and English is his home language. He is interested in what is happening around him and likes to take his time and observe what is happening before he gets involved. Making new friends is important to him. He enjoys imaginary play, story time, creating his own stories, playing outdoors on bikes, going for walks, and having a chat. He can be shy and may need time to adjust to new experiences. Róisín is 4 years old and lives with her parents and siblings. She is the youngest of seven children. Her parents are Irish and Malaysian, and English is the main language spoken in her home. She likes to spend time drawing and creating art pieces, and gardening is one of her favourite things to do.

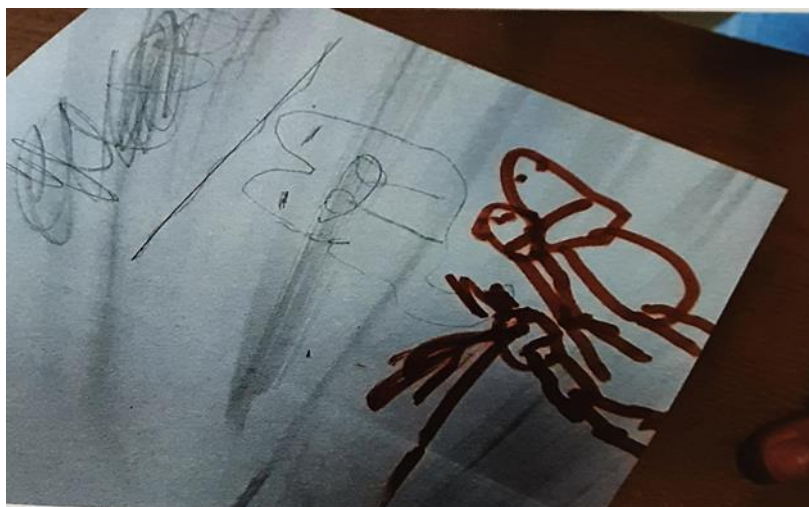
According to Bernie, "Enda and Róisín value their friendship and it is central to their preschool experience". The growing bond between the two young children is supported by actively acknowledging and naming their friendship and by pointing out to them the day-to-day actions that helped build and deepen it: "[the] reciprocal relationship [between Enda and Róisín] is valued by the educators in the room, [Enda and Róisín's] preferences are continually considered and acknowledged."

Enda's learning journal provides a site for this acknowledgement, shining a spotlight on his growing friendship with Róisín, highlighting the ways in which both children actively work on building their bond:

*At the snack table Bernie offers you a plate with the last two pieces of scones, you really love scones. You take both pieces **explaining** "one is for Róisín", you go and **give it to her**. You **smile a wide smile** when she smiles, saying "thanks, Enda".*

*I recall at the beginning of this term you **explained** to me that you didn't know anyone yet, "I feel a little bit nervous" **you said**. Enda, I notice the growing friendship between you and Róisín. She has been ready to support and help you to settle in at preschool. In the morning as we gather together to sing our "clap hello" song to everyone **she keeps the seat beside her as she waits** for you to join the group. Your mam explains [that] at home you **wonder** if Róisín misses you when you are not there.*

*You are not in preschool today, Róisín **wonders** "will Enda come tomorrow?" She does some **artwork** and explains to me: "this is you, me and Enda ... just the three of us". This friendship is important to both of you and I continue to see this regularly. **Taking Róisín's hand** as you walk up the hallway to the kitchen you **say**, "it's best we go together".*



*Róisín: "This is you, me and Enda .... just the three of us."*



*“It’s best we go together”.*

Another example from Ger’s Early Start setting shows that young children value the ability to choose their play mates, which requires opportunity, time, and space. Brody is in the age range 3-6 years, and he is the middle child at home. He has an older brother and a new baby brother. He lives with his mam and dad locally. His mam is on maternity leave from her job as an SNA at a local school. He speaks English and has a few Irish words. Lots of his family live close so he often gets to see his grandparents and uncles and aunties. He enjoys computer games and investigations involving construction or cars. He has several friends in the school community and looks for their company especially when he is playing in the garden where they climb the trees and play super-hero games. Brody is sometimes anxious about new situations and needs to bring his own packed lunch as he is uncertain if he will like the school dinners.

Brody **set up a game** with foam blocks in a separate area and **invited** another child, Zhi, to join him and knock them over together. Zhi is four years old. His family came from China, and he lives in Ireland now with his older brother and his mam and dad. His grandparents visited in the summer, so he got to spend quite a bit of time with them. He **speaks** Mandarin Chinese at home, but his family find it difficult to understand what he is saying sometimes and would like some extra support for his speech. He is just discovering that he can **represent things he sees on paper**. He is especially interested in **drawing** pictures of police cars. He likes to **play** in the sand with the dinosaurs and use the scissors to **cut shapes** out of paper. According to his

educator, he needs adults to listen to him carefully, to watch what his interests are, to fully understand what he is saying.

When Brody invited Zhi to play, “they then took it in turns to set up the towers and then crash into them from the slide”. Brody **explained** that he asked Zhi to join him because “he’s good at it too ... and he can help he build the shapes up ... he plays with me and he doesn’t push me” – alluding to a different child who had pushed him in the past and showing the link between children’s relationships and their protection rights. Brody appreciated the ability to “play with others he chooses and ... to play unhindered from interference by children he doesn’t enjoy the company of”. This joyful shared play experience, facilitated by the abundant space, time, and freedom available in the setting, helped foster a new friendship between the two children:

*The joy and exuberance from both participants was so evident and they hadn’t at this time known each other very long; the space, time and freedom from interruption were important in allowing this relationship to develop and flourish.*



*Brody and Zhi playing together on their own terms.<sup>6</sup>*

Children also showed how their friendship and togetherness can be communicated in quiet, subtle ways, as shown by John in Sarah’s community creche and preschool. John is in the age range 4-5 and is a member of the Traveller Community. According to his educator, he enjoys boisterous play, but he is very gentle. Observations show that he enjoys moving and appreciates

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<sup>6</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



the open space outside, but also that his experience of these are mediated by contact and connections with friends. John spent much of the time in the outdoor space running around and reaching out to other children, often following but sometimes leading. Connecting with peers appeared to be very important to him (more evidently than adults):

*John runs around the entire perimeter of the outdoor space, **smiling**. He **appears to enjoy** the open space as he **stretches his arms** out and occasionally **throws them up** in the air. As he moves around, he also **reaches out** to different children he meets, **gently touching** them as if he is playing ‘tag’. Some encounters are quite fleeting, but others last a little longer. ‘Hey, hey’, John **calls** out to a boy who is passing on a bicycle, then follows until he catches up. The boy shouts, ‘Yahoo’. John **echoes the sound**, picks up a bicycle and jumps on. They cycle off with John leading the way. When the boy stops cycling and gets off the bike, **John stops too**.*

In another observation, a small group of children were gathered together, crouched down while one of the group was intently digging a patch of mud. John’s **facial expression looked sad**, then the following **exchange** occurred:

*John: ‘Stop digging’.*

*Educator: ‘You don’t want them to dig?’*

*John: No, I want to play with him.*

*Educator: But you can watch.*

*John: Noone wants to play with me.*

*Educator: Who do you want to play with?*

*John points to Shauna’s best friend [a girl], who nods and takes his hand.*

By the small action of **taking John’s hand**, without words his friend communicates that the other children do want to play with him and he is welcome in their play. Equally, this vignette from the Early Start setting highlights the “quiet companionship” between Zhi and Elaine. Elaine is 5 and lives with her mother and her partner in the local area. She has a 7-year-old sister old who also went to the Early Start setting. Her heritage is Croatian, and she has been to see her grandparents in the summer holidays. Her mam works managing a pizza restaurant. Elaine loves to **play** with cars, doll’s houses and in the home corner with animals and dressing up clothes. She is discovering drawing, painting and has started to **make marks** representing

her name. Elaine is preverbal and has been diagnosed with a speech disorder affecting the way she is able to communicate with her friends and the adults around her. She has been referred for speech therapy, but it has taken over a year on the waiting list to be assessed.



*Zhi was working away on his own building separate towers of blocks in the central area when Elaine came out with a plate of crackers. She sat on a block and balanced the plate on her lap. Zhi saw her and identified a way of making a table by upending a block and **placing it in front of her**. He then **requested** some crackers himself and proceeded to replicate the table and chair combination from the blocks. Very few words were spoken between them, just **glances and smiles** to affirm their shared experience.*

This example is also relevant to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion as it shows the power of friendship to overcome potential barriers of language, culture and (dis)ability. The children communicated the “importance of sharing quiet moments to build stronger relationships”. The power of children’s relationships to support their inclusion is also evident in Elaine’s interactions with Hailey:

*Elaine **worked collaboratively** with the group to set up the train tracks, she was able to **share** the train carriages and using **gestures** communicate to the others where she’d like the trains to travel – she **pointed** to under the table ‘It’s a bridge Elaine isn’t it?’ suggested Hailey. Elaine sometimes struggles to work cooperatively given her*

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<sup>7</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



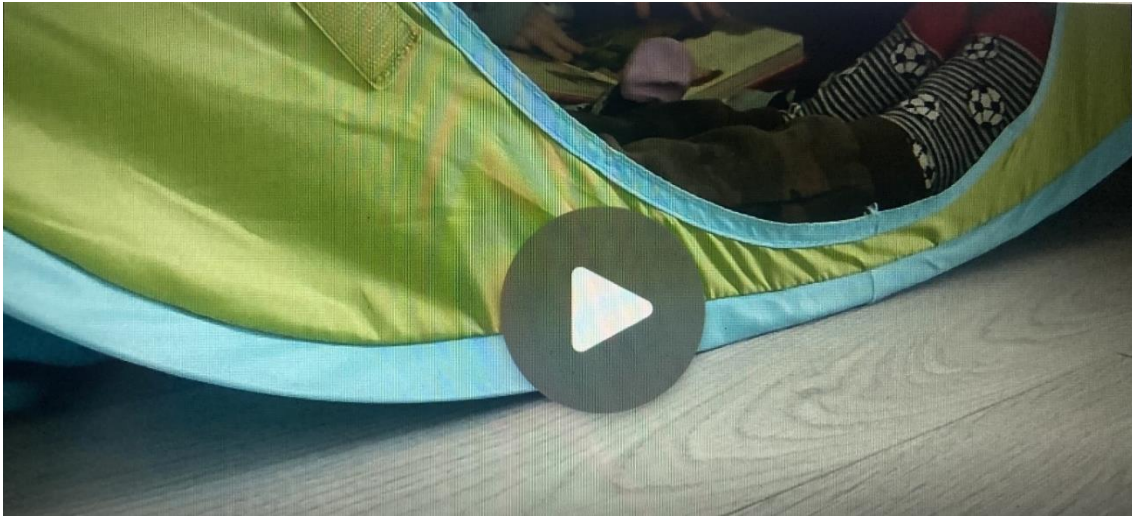
*difficulties with spoken language – since she has been part of a smaller group (of five children) she has been able to more effectively engage in social learning experiences... This consistent social structure has afforded her the opportunity to develop confidence and more positive connections with others.*



In a video clip from Margaret’s child-minder setting, Cillian and Danny show us how their learning can be developed in the context of peer-interactions, often without adult input required. Cillian is 3 years and 2 months old, and his family was described above when introducing his younger sister Ellie who also attends the setting. Cillian has a love of books and role play. He has great language skills and is very social. According to his educator, he can get very emotional and sometimes needs help to regulate by giving hugs, and reassurance and reading books. Danny lives with his mam, dad and sister who is aged 6. His granny lives across the road with his uncle, and his ‘poppy’ passed away earlier in the year. His daddy works on the farm and Danny likes to help him with the cows, giving them silage and nuts in the shed. He likes it when his mammy reads him stories and plays with him. Danny also often talks about his granny T and gangans, his uncle C and aunty F.

The video clip shows Cillian ‘reading’ the Gruffalo to his friend Danny. As he recites the well-known phrases in the book, the two children **point** out interesting elements of the illustrations, **ask** each other’s opinions and offer reassurance to each other: “It’s just a book Danny, it’s not scary”. At times they **giggle** together, at other times they engage in **intense conversation** about the content of the book, communicating their enjoyment of the shared activity. In another video

clip, the two boys and Cillian's sister Ellie **take their books into a tent** away from the prying eyes of adults, clearly communicating 'we want time and space to ourselves'.



The children think about each other when outside of the setting, as shown by gift brought by Cillian and Ellie for Danny from their holidays:



Kashvi, a 4.5-year-old girl who attends Bernadette's private ECCE setting also shows the importance of relationships with friends, families, and educators in the early childhood setting. Kashvi's family consists of her mother, father, older brother, and herself. Their culture is Indian, and they speak Hindi at home. Kashvi likes to participate in all the different activities in playschool. She particularly likes books, role play and creative activities. Because English is Kashvi's second language, she "sometimes struggles to be understood by friends and educators when speaking" which sometimes leads to her speaking less than other children.

Kashvi decided to share her interest in and knowledge of Diwali with the other children in playschool. Kashvi's mother also came into playschool to celebrate Diwali with the children. Kashvi was **visibly delighted** with her mother's visit and Kashvi's mother confirmed that the experience had been exciting and important for her:

*It built relationships with not only her own family but also her friends in playschool. As she introduced her mother to her friends, I noticed how proud she was that her mum had come into the playschool. I believe this is important for Kashvi's relationship with her friends and her mum. It made Kashvi more visible in the classroom and gave importance and respect for her culture and her voice. Relationships were built between Kashvi, her mother and the children and educators in the playschool. In the weeks after Kashvi's mum came into the playschool, I noticed **an increase in Kashvi's confidence**, which is so important for her. Her mother also mentioned to me about how she noticed Kashvi's confidence had grown.*



<sup>8</sup> Covering of faces a condition of ethical approval.

As noted in the Phase 1 report, “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” (O’Toole et al., 2023: 206). Kashvi’s example shows how young children’s learning and development is holistic and intertwined, with elements like ‘relationships and interactions’ underpinning elements like ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’. Kashvi also shows how children live in an ecology of relationships including educators, friends and family. Shauna who attends Sarah’s community creche and preschool, also illustrates this point. Shauna is in the age range 4-5 years, and lives with her mam, dad and two siblings. The family are members of the Traveller Community and speak English at home.

*All the children in the pre-school are having breakfast. Shauna is sitting at the table with a group of her peers eating jam and grated cheese on toast. When this unusual combination is observed, Shauna **laughs and explains** ‘sometimes I copy my friend’ **gesturing** to her friend who was sitting next to her. Then she spontaneously **initiated a conversation** about her family, saying her parents and her siblings names. **Smiling**, she **describes** her brother and their relationship. ‘My brother is still a baby. My brother cries, every day. He laughs when I wiggle him’.*

Shauna enjoyed the opportunity to engage in a conversation about her friends and family, suggesting that friends and family are particularly important to her.

*Shauna is **playing together** on the tyre swing with her ‘best friend’. Shauna **says**, ‘I push this way, and you push that way [friend’s name]’. When Shauna’s friend leaves the swing, to put a plaster that has fallen off her finger in the bin, Shauna **follows**. After that, Shauna notices and picks up a tricycle, but only spend a few moments on it before the two friends run together to the see saw. They **giggle** as the see-saw goes up and down. Shauna **spreads her arms out wide and smiling broadly says**, ‘I look like a bird’. The two friends throw their heads back **giggling**.*

Robbie also foregrounds the importance of family relationships. Robbie is a 3-year-old boy, who lives with his older sister, his mam, Tanya who is Polish and dad who has got only one leg and plays amputee football, and also his Granny and Grandad. His uncle has a room in Granny’s house too. Tanya is one of the co-researcher educators taking part in this consultation, exploring Robbie’s experience of Aistear in a home setting. Like Kashvi, Robbie



shows how important relationships within families are for learning and development, and particularly for learning how to cope when times are tough:

*“My arm is hurt. I need a sling because my bones are broken. Like (uncle’s). I had an accident and my bone cracked, but I’m ok now”. Robbie’s family serve as his role-models. He is making sense of the situation using the medium of relationships-testing it out in a safe environment. Copying someone who he looks up to and watching for cues on how to act in a situation like this.*



The home context gave another example of the integrated nature of various themes, through an important observation in relation to digital technologies, play and hands-on experiences and relationships: Tanya observed that, rather than having an isolating effect, her young son’s use of digital technologies generally served as another avenue of engagement with his family:

*Even within the digital technology, the relationships were kind of built into it.... There was never an incident of digital technology that I’ve documented that wasn’t in a relationship with somebody else. So, the only experiences that my little boy had were either **asking** Granddad to show him a video of tractors on the phone, or my daughter was doing Reading Eggs for school and he’s always very eager to kind of **come over and help** with that. ... If*

*they're watching cartoons a couple of times a week, that's what they do together ... And then my 8-year-old's shows are a little bit different, but they always want to do it together. It's never a case of I want to sit down and do this alone, so I suppose even through that technology [there's an emphasis on] relationships.*

A similar point emerged in Ger's Early Start setting:

*The Dance Mat example gives us the opportunity to see how surprising connections can be made with home-life. Through technology Brody's parents were able to extend his interest in dancing and value his talent by supplying the resource at home for him to continue to enjoy. They also commented after that they had be struggling to limit Brody's screen time on a PlayStation and this had given them the opportunity to support his interest in gaming through much more active involvement. Many forms of communication are needed to build relationships and co-construct multiple connections between home and school life.*



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**In summary**, just like babies and toddlers, young children clearly communicated the importance of relationships and interactions to them. They highly valued their warm, trusting

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relationships with their educators, but even more evident again was the exceptional place of friendships in their lives and in their experiences in ECEC settings. Friendships provided a particularly effective context for inclusion of all children and relationships and interactions were highlighted by babies, toddlers and young children in relation to other themes under consideration. Children also communicated the importance of the three-way flow of relationships between children, educators, and families.

### 3.3 Citizenship

#### Babies' and toddlers' views on citizenship

For babies and toddlers, their citizenship was enacted through making choices and being publicly visible members of their communities. The case of toddler Nathan whose exploration of pottery clay was discussed above with regards to relationships is also relevant to citizenship. Nathan “needed the time to decide if he wanted to engage or not. The respectful relationship was very evident as the respect was given to the child to decide for himself at 12 months old, he had the right to decide if he wanted to or not.” Showing respect for the views of babies and toddlers and allowing them to make their own choices is important to them, and it helps them feel secure as they explore new experiences. Agentic exercise of choice is central to citizenship in early childhood, and in reality in early childhood settings, babies and toddlers often enact their choices through their activities. In Janet’s day-care chain baby room, 13-month-old Ben is “taking responsibility for his own learning through discovery, **exploring** and refining his gross and fine motor skills.”

Babies and toddlers also enact their citizenship through their enjoyment of being visible, participative members of their community. For example, in Margaret’s child-minder setting, Ellie communicates through her concentration and engagement how much she values regular trips to the library.



*Today we went for a visit to the library, and found lots of lovely books to read. We sat and read together and sometimes by ourselves. We had so much choice... Cillian and Ellie share a love of books, and reading together. The children have **great concentration** and love to **discuss***



*their books and what they see... We hope to visit the library on 1<sup>st</sup> December for the “Anyone 4 science” event and 19<sup>th</sup> December for “Songs and stories with Frances” event too.*

**In summary**, babies and toddlers show their citizenship by making agentic choices and being visible members of their communities. The data on citizenship was very limited for babies, and potential reasons for this are discussed below.

### Young children’s views on citizenship

Citizenship was a more prominent theme in the data for young children. In the home setting, Tanya described how sibling play afforded opportunities for a young child to explore responsibilities and boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Robbie and his older sister were colouring together, sharing a single colouring sheet with different areas assigned to each of them. Robbie commented:

*“I am **drawing** the map. I am doing my part, which is 1, 2, 3 and 4 (counts using his fingers, one at a time). (My sister) is doing the other numbers 5 and 6 and 7. My part is at the top and (sister’s) part is at the bottom. I can’t do any of the bottom bits-not even Glitter Pants. Except the sweet cart.”*



*“I am doing my part.”*



Robbie's mother explained that Robbie learns about rules, boundaries, and fairness from his sister, who is "a rigid rule follower", while Robbie enjoys playing with rules and exploring boundaries. Robbie's example shows that opportunities to experiment with rules and boundaries in a safe environment and within strong and trusting relationships are important and interesting to young children and support them as they begin to relate to their responsibilities in society.

Another example of children developing responsible selves was observed in the Early Start setting. Hailey is four years old and is the youngest of three children. Her brother goes to secondary school and her sister to a local primary school. She is in her second year at preschool and has extended family members in other classes. She lives with her mam and dad; her mam works as a hairdresser and her dad drives a van. She went to New York and Florida for her holiday at Christmas time which she enjoyed very much. She loves chatting to adults in the preschool, helping out and playing in the home corner with her friends – especially Elaine. According to her educator, she is quite confident and really enjoys the company of adults and children. She is also helpful with the other children, showing them where to get aprons or getting a tissue if they are crying. She is aware that she has certain allergies, she cannot eat strawberries or drink much milk. This sometimes makes her a bit reluctant to try new foods, so she tends to stick to chips and pasta.

Hailey and Brody were debating suitable gear for playing in puddles:

*With Hailey, Brody moved the big tyre to a space in the garden where there was a large puddle – They **worked cooperatively** to place it where there was a sizable pool: 'We made a swimming pool!' Then they splashed around with their wellie boots. This was after a very rainy day and they had been indoors for a while, coats were rejected but suggested boots were accepted. There was considerable **debate** over which ones to choose – Brody remembered the last occasion the puddles were so big, and he only had runners on – he **mentioned** this to Hailey, and it persuaded her to follow his example.*



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Brody showed that “the ability to demonstrate self-control and to exert a positive influence on other children’s choices” had a “high priority” for him, and that making informed choices based on experience impacted positively on his confidence and prompted him to “encourage others to join him in the journey”.

Migel also showed his capability to act as a responsible citizen, and in fact to show leadership in this regard when a new park was being built opposite the Early Start setting. Migel is the oldest child in the class but has only been part of the group since September 2023. He is Brazilian and lives with his mam locally. He sees his dad quite often and dad picks Migel up from school a couple of times a week. His mam minds another Brazilian child in the preschool – he is Migel’s best friend. Migel speaks Portuguese at home and quite a lot of English now. He loves the garden and all the opportunities for riding bikes, climbing trees, and playing with the blocks in central area. He loves to play with dinosaurs and often talks about the different species and where they might live. He is helpful in the class, tidying up after himself in the home corner when he has been playing cooking and he is able to place the blocks back in their correct box. Migel is a very active child and needs space to run around and explore the world physically. He can be very sensitive to criticism, so his educators are mindful of this and have been helping him build resilience in his daily social interactions.

In this example, the children, led by Migel, showed their capacity to consider and take responsibility for issues like safety, and to be part of the decision-making process regarding routines, curriculum changes or visits:

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A new feature in the local area is the building of a park adjacent to the school. The children have **patiently watched** the construction work with new climbing frames, slides, swings and sand play area. Unlike the previous park the area is wider and unfenced so educators were a little reticent to take groups to visit as it was unclear how the area could be sufficiently and safely supervised. After **staring through the fence** one afternoon, Migel **asked** if we could go, 'I go with my mum', I suggested we try the next day with the second-year group (of 5 children), 'How can we make sure you stay safe in the park?' I asked,

*'We can hold hands? (I think he was remembering our 'Beep, Beep day walk')*

*'We could but how would you go down the slide?'*

*'We have the jackets?'* (The yellow tabards worn on the walk)

*'We could wear the yellow vests and then we could see where you are!'*

The following day the group agreed to wear the vests and that they would stick to the blue and yellow playground markings. They **responded very responsibly** during the trip, staying within the agreed zone, and returning to the school when requested. Migel responded to the concerns of staff regarding the park visit.



As well as taking responsibility, like for babies and toddlers, young children's citizenship is often enacted through choice and self-direction. For example, in Margaret's child-minder setting they take the lead in activities through their interest in space:

*The interest in space continues, and the children have been fascinated **asking lots of questions** from reading books. The tent became a rocket ship, as well as the children*

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*creating and building* their own rockets using loose parts and construction materials. The children and I are learning lots of new words and discussing our findings from books. Danny said, “Margaret do you know when it’s daytime here it’s nighttime where Colm lives in America!”. Danny is **intrigued** and loves to know why this is so off we go for a look. When parents arrived, the children looked up to the sky, saying, “Crescent moon.” We had just been reading about the moon and its different shapes.



Children’s sense of competence is also central to their citizenship. In Ger’s Early Start setting:

*Brody **showed** Zhi how he climbs in one of the trees in our garden – using foot and handholds branches he successfully scaled the lower branches to reach quite high up. ‘Look at me! ... I’m soooo high ... I’m bigger than you!’*  
*I asked why he enjoyed climbing the tree ‘It’s something I can do ... I’m good at climbing ... I get to climb there ... in the diamond park, but not the trees ... here is the only place I climb them’.*



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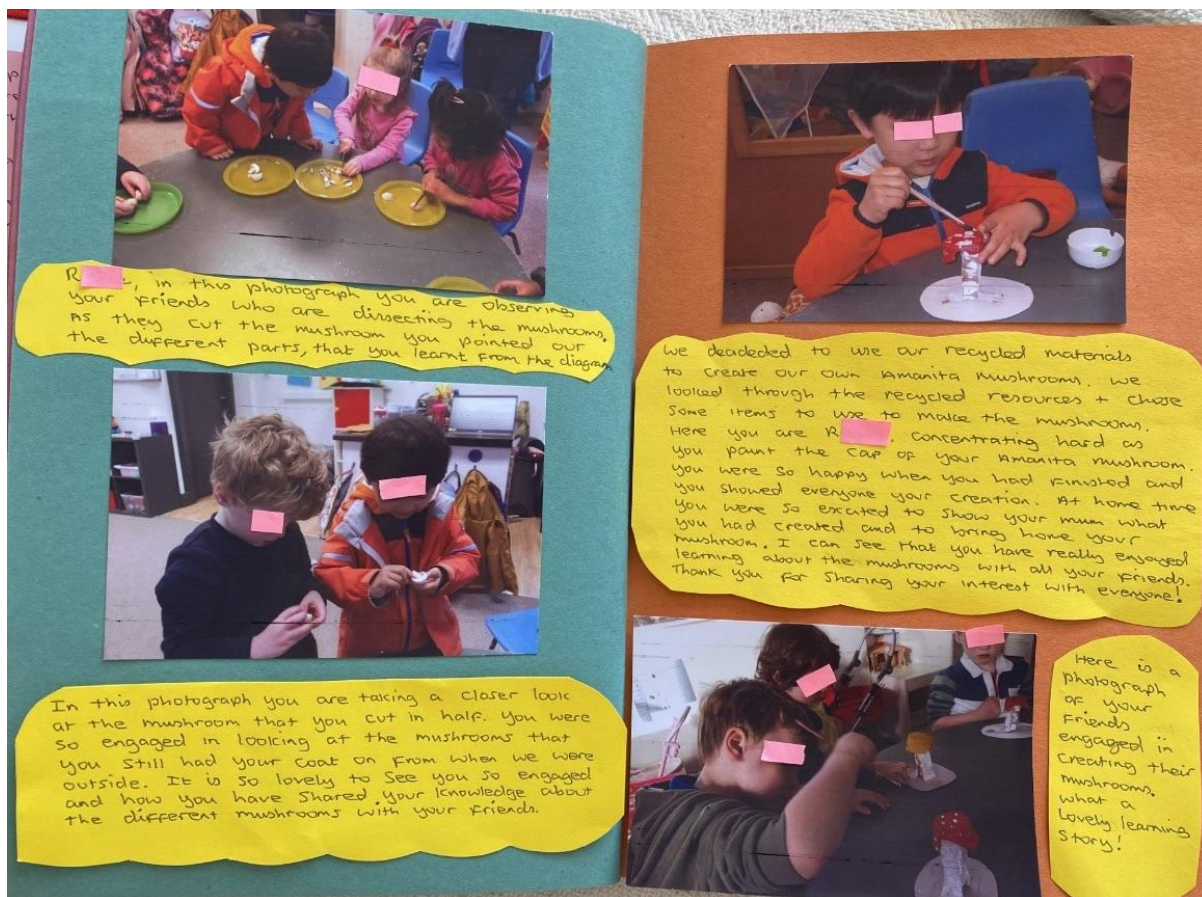
In Bernadette’s private ECCE setting, Jake shared his competence and in-depth scientific knowledge of mushrooms:

*When we returned to the playschool, we investigated the mushrooms further ... Jake **was so engaged**. He cut the mushrooms in half and observed the different parts closely. He **told** his friends the names of the parts too. He then cut the mushroom up into tiny pieces... I asked him what were the mushrooms like and he **replied** telling me that “some were red, some were black or brown and some were poisonous so that means you mustn’t eat them or you will die” ... Jake **informed** us that “my favourite mushroom is an Amanita mushroom”.*

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Finally, but significantly, along with the importance of their friendships, one of the strongest messages from the young children in the data is the value they place on the natural world, and their commitment to sustainability. This emerged repeatedly from multiple children in multiple settings. In the educator focus group, educators also drew attention to the aspect of sustainability and care for the environment which is practised in ECEC settings through daily activities, such as recycling, gardening, feeding wildlife, and careful use of resources, and how important this is from the children's perspectives. In fact, in the educator focus group Ger from the Early Start setting laughed when she told us that "some four- and five-year-olds can be very opinionated and quite judgmental when it comes to things like recycling or that kind of stuff". Several such examples were included in the children's data gathered throughout the consultation process, although they not always recognised as relevant to citizenship in the initial layer of data analysis conducted by co-researcher educators. For example, several children showed interest in outdoor activities that involved caring for the environment (such as gardening) or wildlife (such as feeding birds). Sometimes these were included by co-researcher

<sup>13</sup> Blocking of faces a condition of ethical approval.

educators under the theme of Citizenship but sometimes these were included under the area of Play and Hands-on experiences without recognising that children were expressing how much they care about these elements of sustainable citizenship. This shows that outdoor play and learning, in addition to being valuable in its own right, also provides opportunities for children to engage with other key areas of Aistear, such as citizenship.

For example, four-year-old Róisín in Bernie’s community ECCE setting showed her commitment to sustainability in an extract from her Aistear book:

*Bernie, will we go and do some gardening?” **you invite**. It is a very rainy day so, we put on our wet gear and head out to our sensory garden. I notice you **exploring** the space where our Lupin flowers had grown. “They’re gone now” you **say**. “It’s time to harvest, gather, the seeds” I reply. As I pick a seed pod, you pick one too, you **watch closely** as I pop the seed pod open. “Seeds, there’s seeds inside” you **say, sounding impressed**. You pop open a pod, remove the seeds and place them in a container. Some children approach, they look on with interest, enquiring what are we doing. “We’re harvesting seeds” you **explain** as you **demonstrate** with expertise how to remove the seeds. You **suggest** putting the pods in the composter and **lead the way** to put the pods in.*

*As you continue to **explore** in the garden you discover more seed pods. “This is peas, look....” you say when you open the sweet peas pod. “It’s like a boat” you notice as you place it in a puddle. “It floats!” you conclude.*

*We **chat** about our plan to plant these seeds in springtime. “They turn into flowers again” you theorise.*



*[Róisín shows her] emerging and growing interest in nature. Her commitment to our responsibilities of nurturing and caring for our garden as the seasons change is inspiring. This episode demonstrates how generous she is in sharing her knowledge, as a wonderful role model she motivates others to participate. Róisín's sense of agency is evident as she follows her own preferences. She has a real sense of belonging in this space where she is free to explore and discover how to live sustainably as a caring global citizen.*

Hailey from Ger's Early Start setting even has a formal role of responsibility with regards to sustainability. She is the green school representative on the school's committee where she has meetings with other classes.

*One of the enduring themes of interest to Hailey is feeding the birds in the garden. She often **suggests** we fill up the bird feeders; she will then **wait** for the birds to arrive and **watch** as they visit the feeders hung up in the trees. To follow-on and extend her engagement with bird food we made fruit and seed garlands to hang from the trees. Hailey enjoyed the opportunity to engage meaningfully in this opportunity to extend the biodiversity of our garden. She is a member of the green school committee so is aware of other sustainable practices around the school – recycling the milk cartons, composting the food waste and turning the taps off in the bathroom. She **demonstrates***



*responsibility in her actions and feeding the birds has permitted her to very practically display a care for the school and the local environment.*



These data show that young children want to be involved with the natural environment and believe that sustainability is important. Children are willing to take responsibility and do the work required to live sustainably. This links to rights as envisaged in UNCRC (Article 29 which indicates that the aims of education should be directed at nurturing respect for the environment and the new general comment 26 which confirms that children have a right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.) Children’s intentional respect for their environment/natural world is strongly evident in the data. This commitment was even evident when consideration of sustainability might impinge on their own self-interests:

*Zhi **observed** closely the building of a neighbouring park. He **stood at the fence** most days to inspect the progress made. We set up a small world recreation of the building site where he was able to manipulate the various features to create his own version – including soil, trucks, stones, building blocks and trees. The opportunity encouraged many **conversations** surrounding what was going to be included in the park and when they would be allowed to play there. [Zhi identified] benefits as in a new play space but also the negatives aspects. Many trees have been lost to building work and the children have noticed the impact – ‘where will the birds make their nests?’*



In spite of the potential benefits to himself (a new playground), Zhi was still concerned about the impact of the new park on the natural world, highlighting his strong commitment to sustainability.

**In summary**, young children showed their citizenship through making informed, responsible choices, being active in directing the course of their learning, sharing their competence and knowledge, and most importantly by being vocal and active advocates for sustainability and care of the natural environment.

### 3.4 Diversity, Equity and inclusion

The topic of diversity, equity and inclusion is embedded in many of the experiences of early childhood education described in the other topics and we have highlighted these as we progress. Here we provide some more direct examples of children's experiences of and opinions on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

#### Babies' and toddlers' views on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

While the data did not provide direct, explicit evidence on the youngest children's perspectives on diversity, equity and inclusion, babies' and toddlers' experiences of inclusive approaches within warm educational settings where every child is welcome were implicit in many of the examples shared in relation to the other topics. The example of Patrick in Sheila's full day-care community setting baby / toddler room shows how a child facing some family-based challenges communicated the value of his experiences in his early childhood setting in addressing potential attachment difficulties, and in supporting him to feel safe and secure. Ben in Janet's day-care

chain setting was experiencing some physical developmental challenges, and needed physiotherapy to help his legs to strengthen to the point where he could begin to crawl. Rather than a deficit focus on Ben's physical difficulties and the delay in developing the ability to crawl, his newfound abilities are celebrated to the point where Ben is "**screeching with laughter**, and he **appears to be delighted** with himself". Babies and toddlers of all cultures experience inclusion in the early childhood settings, for example Gabriel whose family are South African communicates his happiness in the setting: he is "very **happy and laughing**."

**In summary**, while diversity, equity and inclusion may not be an explicit focus of the data from babies and toddlers, they are implicit in the sense of belonging and inclusion communicated by babies and toddlers in many of the examples highlighted in the other topics.

### Young children's views on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

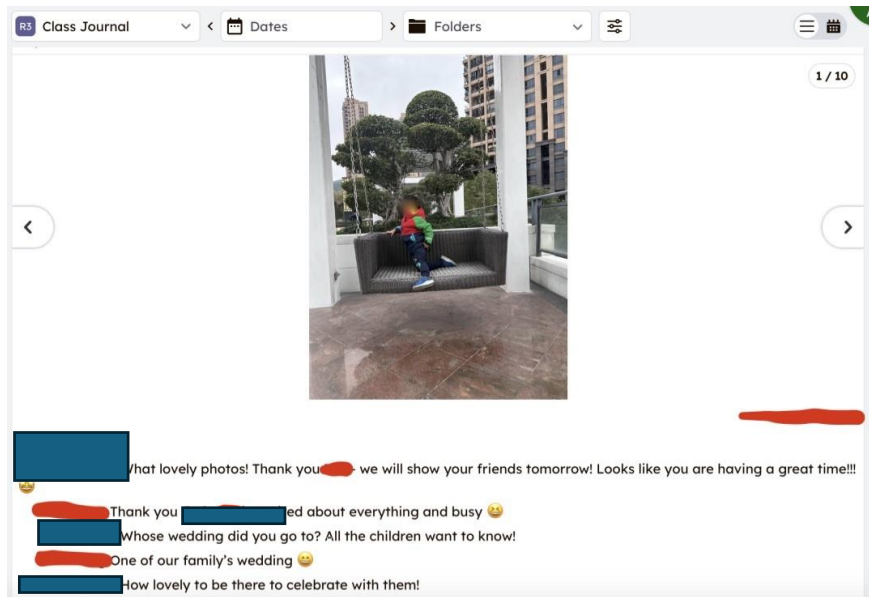
Several examples relevant to diversity, equity and inclusion were provided by young children and their educators. Tanya pointed out that in an increasingly diverse society, commercial experiences around Christmas – such as the new tradition of the "elf on the shelf" – can help children "find common ground and have something they can all relate to":

*Robbie often refers to it at drop-off and collection times. He **approaches one of his friends** every morning to compare notes about the Elf's nightly escapades. It seems as if this is an important point of reference-something in common, a thread of a relationship building, a reason to interact.*

The value of respecting and celebrating diversity, similarity and connectedness was frequently raised in data from young children – especially children with a migratory background and children with additional needs. In the former case, it is clear from the data that the migrant children delighted in sharing their cultural knowledge. It was often remarked how celebrating and acknowledging their families' traditions had a positive impact on their confidence and their relationship with their peers and families. Key to these successful stories is that the children and families in question were in control of how their cultural identity was represented, thereby avoiding cultural stereotypes. For example, in the following example from Ger's Early Start setting, "real" everyday life as experienced by Zhi's family in their country of origin was shared in a way that was meaningful to Zhi as well as his curious peers:

*Zhi went on a family holiday to China. His mother was able to share photos with the educators and the children in the class via SeeSaw. We were able to*

*sustain a dialog with the family – asking questions and receiving replies. This example shows how technology has enhanced Zhi, this family and the class’s understanding of the life of a migrant family. Being able to show photos of real-life activities has enhanced everyone’s knowledge of China and the real lived experience of one family. The children have **shown genuine interest** in Zhi’s life and he **was delighted** at their involvement.*

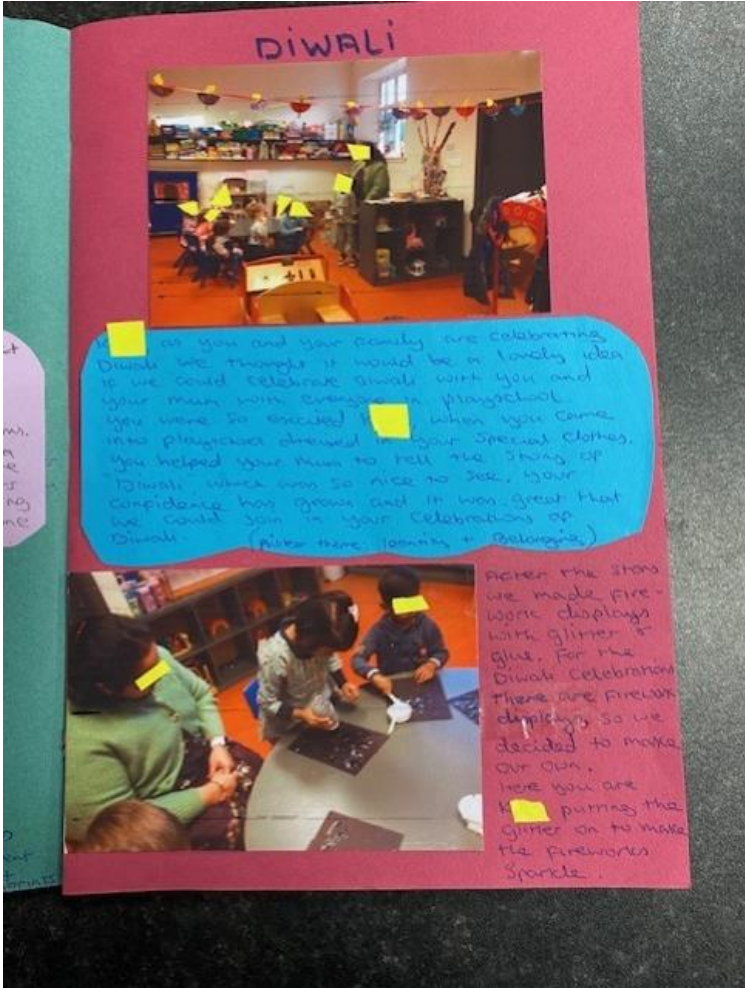


Kashvi’s story involving the celebration of Diwali in Bernadette’s private ECCE setting, as aforementioned, is another example. Kashvi and her mother shared the story of Diwali with the other children:

*Kashvi started to **tell** everyone the story of Diwali supported and prompted by her mother. She **was shy** but managed to **tell** the first part of the story. Kashvi showed how important this celebration meant to her and her family as she **was so excited** about telling the story. ... Kashvi and her mum created some **artwork** which were firework displays. Fireworks form a big part of Diwali celebrations, so we had decided to create our own displays. Kashvi’s mum sat beside Kashvi and her friends and helped the children as they created their artwork. Following the artwork, we put on music, suggested by Kashvi’s mum and **everyone danced** with Kashvi and her mum with musical instruments. At the end, Kashvi **did not want her mother to go**, indicating that she had really enjoyed having her mum in her playschool that day.*



This greatly increased Kashvi’s confidence: “Her confidence in speaking in front of people hugely increased which in turn has greatly helped her speech and language improve.” Kashvi was also very active in her communication with peers and educators about her culture, and in celebrating it through storytelling, music, dance, and art. Kashvi communicated her interest in her peer’s cultures, as well as her burgeoning confidence, by requesting a speaking part in the setting’s nativity play. She and the other children showed interest in “**discussions** about similarities about Christmas traditions and Diwali traditions such as gathering family around to eat food and exchange presents, decorating our homes with lights and candles, music, etc.”



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As aforementioned, Shauna in Sarah’s community creche and preschool enjoyed talking about her family and sharing their personal and cultural experiences. Sarah's creche and preschool provides a welcoming environment where children and their families are respected and valued.

<sup>14</sup> Covering faces a condition of ethical approval.

This was visible in Shauna's pre-school room where there was a photograph of each child with their family on a wall display.

Awareness and appreciation of diversity are also key to the successful inclusion of children with additional needs. Several examples demonstrated this. Bobby is a 3-year-old boy in Mary's full day-care community setting. He comes from a local farming family and lives with his mam and dad. He has a brother who is 16 and another brother who is 6. He loves the outdoors, he loves tractors and being on the farm with his dad, and he loves magnetics and construction. According to his educator, he "knows what he likes, and he knows what he does not like. He sometimes struggles in the setting as he is very sensorial, and he finds it very difficult to regulate. He sometimes needs support to manage his behaviour when dysregulated. When dysregulated he is unable to concentrate or hear others or play in the meaningful way he likes to play". Bobby **thrives when playing outdoors** and **spends most of his time** at the setting outside.

*You seem to **truly enjoy** being outside, as evidenced by the fact that you spend most of your days outside at [setting name]. You are **happiest while** you're playing outside. You absolutely **adore** [the outdoor play area], especially in the rainy days when you can **spend all day playing** in the sand and stones, running up and down the hills, sitting in all the puddles, and driving the tractors and diggers through the water, that's just a small amount of what you get up to, it is always endless fun in [the outdoor playground]! It is lovely to always see you being on some sort of adventure while outside playing, you get the chance to **explore** the natural environment. You continually **express yourself best through outside play** and I can see clearly how much confidence you have too! When you are outside you have endless space and lots of freedom, I can see your sense of relax and **calmness** come through which really supports your wellbeing. It is lovely to see you so **content** in the outdoors.*



Bobby’s educator explained that “being outdoors all day in all weathers” allows Bobby to “do what he needs to get that sensory feedback to enable him to regulate himself.” While this often implies being apart from other children and not participating in group activities, allowing Bobby to play outdoors on his own for most of the time enables him to “be in the room for the times when he is able” – thereby facilitating his inclusion. The clear messages from Bobby, **expressed through his behaviour and play choices**, are ‘allow me to do what I am interested in’ and ‘give me my own agency to choose’. This love for the outdoors is also relevant to young children as citizens within sustainable environments as aforementioned.

Elaine, who is preverbal and whose interactions with her friends at preschool through alternative media was discussed above, experienced an inclusive environment, and expressed deep engagement when being creative. This was evident on a school trip to a children’s cultural centre where the children worked with an artist:

*Elaine fully immersed herself in the project to make a story island. She helped Jane, the artist, to mould shapes from clay and add natural materials to make trees, animals, and buildings. She added water to the big dish to make smaller islands.*

The excerpt shows how Elaine’s educator recognised her ‘abilities, identities, needs and potential’, ensuring that she was included and empowered to participate in the

cultural experience' in a meaningful way. What is noticeable in the educators' reflection is how she feels that 'Including Elaine in the group had a very positive effect on the whole experience.' This suggests, perhaps, that removing barriers to ensure equitable access positively effects community togetherness, as well as individual children.



*Working with natural materials<sup>15</sup>*

Another example from Ger's Early Start setting shows how acknowledging various voices and languages matters to children and is especially important for the inclusion of children who have additional needs in relation to communication. Elaine's inclusion in a smaller group of only five children and modelling alternative ways of engaging and communicating with a non-verbal child has helped reduce her isolation and supported the other children in their attempts to include her better in the group, as demonstrated in the following examples.

*Miguel spent time with Elaine. He noticed she had removed the box of dinosaurs from the shelves and had started to place them on the carpet. Elaine finds verbal conversation difficult. Migel is aware of this; he smiles and asks, 'Can I play?' Elaine nods and he accepts this consent. He chats away to her, naming the dinosaurs, singing a song 'roly, poly ...'. He then starts lining the dinosaurs up, giving them a little pat each time. Elaine joins*

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<sup>15</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



*in and they end up alternating turns to set up their display. Migel demonstrates the sensitivity to connect with Elaine at her level. **Moderating his play style** to facilitate her inclusion in the game.*



This resonates with children’s rights to non-discrimination as expressed in the UNCRC (Article 2 and reinforced through the aims of education in Article 29 (d)). Elaine expressed in multiple ways how important these experiences are to her, in an example that shows how ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ is intertwined with ‘citizenship’ and indeed ‘relationships and interactions’:

*Retelling the story of ‘Brown bear, brown bear’ became a daily feature for a couple of weeks in October. Elaine became skilled at matching and sequencing the animals. Zhi and Hailey in this example were helping her label each one with the correct colour, Hailey **[said]**: ‘that’s the brown bear, then it’s the red bird ... Elaine, you have the goldfish’. Elaine particularly appreciates the peer-support for language play at the white-board; watching her **engagement and concentration** demonstrated that mutual support between children is possible given the correct resources. Elaine is telling us that visual aids, together with supportive companionship, enables her to participate in these games and feel genuinely included.*

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<sup>16</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



Another example from the Early Start setting shows how children’s experiences of inclusion can be influenced by materials available and the opportunity for self-directed creativity. Brody is unsure about using markers and paint brushes. He is left-handed, and his mam is worried that he is avoiding opportunities to practice his writing:

*The group of 2nd years were offered some new trays of watercolours – the others started by dipping brushes in the water and then **selected** various colours to paint on the page. Initially unsure what to do, I showed Brody how use the block paints. **Delighted** with the results, he went on to mix colours on a palette – methodically going through the combinations – red and blue, blue and yellow etc. The other children noticed that Brody was engaged in the painting – Hailey **commented** ‘That’s like the seaside Brody!’*



Tilly, a 4-year-old girl in Mary's full day-care community setting, comes from a local family and lives with her mam and dad and her baby sister. She loves playing with her friends in school and they play lots of imaginative play together. She loves going outside, arts and crafts, and listening to stories. According to her educator, she is confident and competent, and very independent. She loves to try things and do things for herself. She has a significant speech impediment which makes it hard for people to understand what she is saying as she does not say the start or end of many words. The following extract from her learning journal shows her experiences of inclusion based on recognition of her funds of knowledge:

**STICK MAN, OH STICK MAN, STICK MAN, THAT'S ME AND I WANT TO GO BACK TO MY FAMILY TREE**

Dear [REDACTED]

September has been a fast month but what do they say, 'time flies when you're having fun!'

😊 You have thrown yourself into your new room and new environment feet first. It is great to see you ooze curiosity and creativity towards our natural materials in the room. September has been the perfect month to explore all our beautiful village of [REDACTED] has to offer and the variety and uses of all the natural materials. You have had a great opportunity to explore the Autumn weather and the natural surroundings of the season.

[REDACTED] you and your friends have had great ideas to go for 'a walk to [REDACTED] with the mild weather. You have explored our woodland area and collected lots of sticks, leaves, acorns and conkers. This only made sense to incorporate these interests towards our new group names within the room and you have become a Leaf! This allows you to feel a sense of identity and belonging within the room and exercises the opportunity for you to socialise with other friends in a small group setting. This allows lots of time and space to investigate and explore as well as communicating with your teachers and peers.

Whilst on a walk to the woodland area in [REDACTED] you and your friends decided to collect lots of sticks to return to [REDACTED]. 'This is a big' you said... 'It's like Stick Man'... 'I have that story at home'. This was a great opportunity to expand on a story you were familiar with, expand on conversations with your parents and home and you even kindly brought 'The Stick Man' story by Julia Donaldson to explore with your friends. We were conscious of taking our material outdoors to really expand on our play. 'I can read the story' you said [REDACTED] it was lovely to hear you narrate with passion and confidence with your friends. This also gave you an opportunity to practice sound recognition. Although your pronunciation at the beginning of certain words may be difficult, you were so ambitious to recall the story and it doesn't hold you back. You knew the story inside and out! 😊

As an investigation, I was mindful to ask you questions to explore the story and you could relate it to your play. 'Where does stick man live?' 'What does his home look like?' 'He has a bed with leaves.' 'We have sticks and leaves in Tellytubby Land'. Leading your own play, you gathered lots of wooden blocks. 'What are the blocks for [REDACTED] I asked. 'That's the bed... they're bunk beds. How clever! You carefully stacked the blocks and made a shelter for the Stick Man, his Lady Love and Stick children three. Expanding on this, I will be mindful to allow you to find time during the day to explore your interests through small group chats, create opportunities for you to tell stories of your weekend and what observations you made to include them in your play at Happy Days.

Well Done [REDACTED]

Lots of Love always [REDACTED] xx



*[Tilly could] tell her story that she was very knowledgeable in, be a leader to her peers. She was given the time and space; she was seen as confident and competent to tell the story even with a severe speech impediment. Respect for her funds of knowledge and being given the opportunity to allow her own this experience without doubt enhanced her confidence. Not only was inclusion hugely displayed here but respect.*

**In summary**, young children in this dataset experience equity and inclusion through the recognition and support for their diversity in terms of cultural backgrounds and (dis)ability. The children communicated that of key importance to this sense of inclusion and belonging are warm supportive relationships with educators and other children, the opportunity to build on developing skills through self-directed engagement with a range of resources and materials, and a strengths-based focus on funds of knowledge and competence, rather than deficit perspectives focused on what they might struggle with.

### 3.5 Centrality of learning through play and hands-on experiences

Learning through play and hands-on experiences is central to all babies, toddlers and young children's enjoyment and experience of Early Childhood Education and Care and the home environment and permeated all data collected. Alongside 'Relationships and Interactions', this was the most salient topic in the data, with extensive evidence gathered highlighting the importance of these from the perspectives of babies, toddlers and young children. Children communicated that encouraging a wide variety of play and hands-on experiences, including outdoor and adventurous play, and providing ample time, space freedom, choice, and resources, is beneficial for children of all ages and makes for enjoyable learning experiences.

#### Babies' and toddlers' views on learning through play and hands-on experiences

The contributions gathered from babies and toddlers highlight the importance of time, space, and freedom to explore new experiences. For example, in Janet's day-care chain baby room, 13-month-old Ben showed his educator that he was interested in developing his gross motor skills by "picking up speed with his crawling and pulling himself up to the table". Having plenty of floor space and introducing new floor activities supported Ben in advancing this emerging interest. As noted in terms of relationships and interactions, while play and hands-on experiences can support Ben's development, this works in the opposite direction too, so that his burgeoning gross motor skills expand the range of play options he has:

*As Ben is only 1 year old, he uses **facial expressions** to express himself. As Ben is making progress with his physical development the **smile** on his face says it all. He has progressed to walking around the table with small steps but most important is that he can move around the room with his peers. He interacts well with everyone. If he sees a toy, he wants he doesn't have to wait for someone to get it for him he can **crawl towards it** and get it himself. Ben's confidence has soared. Even at home he does not have to rely on his two older brothers to help him. Ben is taking more and more risks but gaining so much more confidence in doing so. He is demonstrating independence and persevering with challenges and difficulties.*

In Rhonda's day-care chain wobbler room, 19-month-old Cian, was intrigued by a tray of oatmeal and some cups and containers. Cian's mam is from Italy and his dad is from Ireland. He is the only child in the immediate family but spends holidays in Italy with his aunties and cousins. He understands both Italian and English. He is a very "smiley" boy who likes walking around the room to discover new things and activities. He likes singing and communicates by **pointing** at what he wants. He is very friendly and welcomes others in the room. He likes his soother and to have a sleep in the morning and afternoon. Cian experimented for some time with transferring oatmeal between containers using different tools and technologies – a fork, hands, and pouring. Not all methods worked equally well. When he figured out a successful method, he offered some oatmeal to his educator "with a **big smile** on his face", demonstrating his enjoyment of the activity:

*"Cian worked to find the solution all the time. He found something wasn't working the way he wanted it to do. Nobody showed him how to do it, and he had plenty of time to figure it out – Every child has a hundred ways to learn, we need to give them time, let them think by themselves how it can work."*



In Margaret’s child-minder setting, Ellie also showed that she wanted time to play her way:

*Ellie spent some time stacking the rainbow blocks this morning and looking through them. “All fall down:” she **laughed** as she knocked them over. Ellie **repeated** this process many times, and each time, she said, “build again,” with a **big smile**.*



In Rebecca’s day-care chain toddler room, Johnny showed his interest in play and hands on experiences by “getting really stuck in”. He enjoys learning and **exploring** new things and new learning experiences:

*When doing an art activity, Johnny and his friends stuck pages onto the table for a blank canvas, used different colours like white and blue to use as ice and snow. Instead of using paint brushes or sponges he used cars, tractors and materials from*

*our farm set. Johnny loved moving the car back and forth along the table. Johnny showed great skills of having fun, enjoying getting messy and **expressing himself through art and creativity.***



Babies and toddlers often communicated their particular interest in sensory play and hands-on experiences. In Jen and Maria's day-care chain wobbler room, Sonny expressed his excitement at the sensory experience of playing with paint. Sonny is 1 year and 1 month old and lives at home with his mam and dad. The family are of Irish heritage and speak English at home. Sonny is very outgoing and confident, and likes playing with blocks, in the kitchen area and through exploring sounds and textures:

*Sonny sat at the table with all his friends and proceeded to put his hands into the paint. He would **look around at all his friends in excitement and smile and laugh** along with them. [He showed that] he enjoyed the feeling of the paint between his fingers [because he] **continued to** squish it on his hand before putting any paint on the page... He was **very engrossed** in this activity...he continued to do this throughout the activity. He would take big lumps of paint in his hand, squish it between his fingers, **show us what he was doing**, and then put it on the paper.*



In Sarah's community creche and preschool, Keeley highlighted the importance of time, space, freedom, choice and resources to access a wide variety of types of play and hands-on experiences, both indoors and outdoors.

*Keeley **runs** to the small playhouse in the corner of the outdoor space. Standing at the window, **she calls out**, 'Ice-cream, ice-cream!' The researcher responds by asking, 'Can I have a chocolate ice-cream please?' [handing Keeley 'imaginary' money]. 'Here's some money'. Keeley **smiles**, 'Yes, there ya go' [giving the researcher an 'imaginary' ice-cream]. When the researcher says, 'Thank you', Keeley **smiling widely replies**, 'You're welcome'. Then she calls out again, 'Ice-cream, ice-cream!'*

*Another toddler comes to the window, **making eye-contact** with Keeley but does not say anything. When Keeley holds out her hand and says 'Pink', the toddler **nods her head** just once. 'I'm coming right up. Pink ice cream, have it'. Another child arrives at the window. Keeley appears to offer her a choice, 'Pink and blue' as she holds up two pieces of chalk.*

**In summary**, babies and toddlers communicated the value they place on time, space and resources to engage in play and hands-on experiences in their own ways. Sensory play features strongly in the data.

### Young children's views on learning through play and hands-on experiences

Several young children showed in the data that they value opportunities to engage in a wide variety of play and hands-on experiences. In the child-minder setting, Danny shows that he is very curious and inquisitive by **asking lots of questions and seeking detail**, particularly **enjoying exploring** outdoors. For example, he is very intrigued by trees and likes to investigate



while out for walks bringing his mini scopes and magnifying glasses and by doing his research in books and online.



Danny also enjoys messy play and “loves to really get into it with his hands, the messier the better for Danny!” He also

*shows a great interest in building and construction. He has been busy making many wonderful creations. Sometimes, Danny will use the instruction manual to build but mostly loves making his own unique creations! He likes to include his friends and works with them and sometimes helps with **giving instructions** on how it's done... Danny is developing an understanding of how different materials work and how to put them together to create his wonderful masterpieces.*



Like for the babies and toddlers, many of the data sources for young children highlight the importance of time, space, freedom, choice, and access to hands-on resources. In the home setting, Tanya describes Robbie's playful engagement with a wide variety of toys and resources

which Robbie combines and experiments with to creatively pursue his interests. Robbie also expresses his right to play:

*These active, hands-on experiences and play episodes are very important. Robbie recognises it and values it as play. He often says, 'Mam, I'd like to play'. He sees it as a positive opportunity to explore, test, persevere and let his imagination loose.*



*Robbie: "Let's build a pirate ship!"*

*'Hmm, ok let's try. What do we need? I'm not quite sure'.*

*Robbie: "I can tell you. It needs a base. And a mast. And a poop deck and planks. And a canon. I built my own pirate ship."*



*Robbie's staple games-chickpea truck loading and kinetic sand Lego figure hide & seek.*



*Robbie's older sister re-introduced this game of Blokus and he was very intrigued. We explained the rules and he watched us play first. Then he **said**- "Ok, I want to play my game now. We are building a house. I will be blue and yellow. You can be green and red. But you can't touch my house. Maybe get your own board?". It **lasted a few days**- experimenting with different configurations. Making machines, people, houses. Counting pieces.*

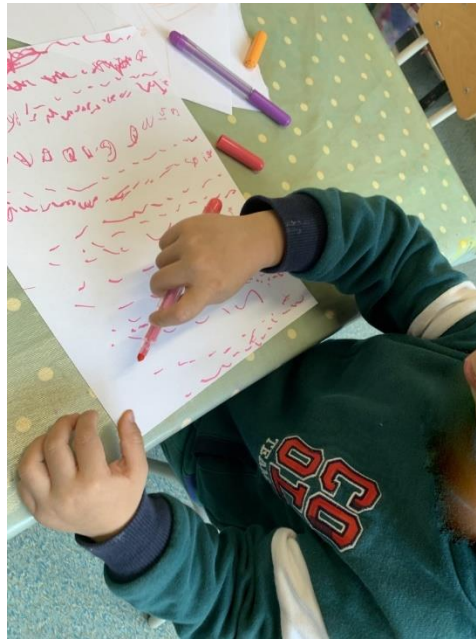
In Ger's Early Start setting, children also communicate the value they place on having a wide range of resources to facilitate their play and hands-on experiences:

*A workshop classroom environment is very important to Zhi's approach to learning. He has learnt to be very resourceful in managing his access to the curriculum as he sometimes finds educators don't understand his requests. He needs access to materials to pursue his interests ... having clipboards available to write on and loose-part materials to build with allows him to explore his imaginative interests.*

For example:

*Zhi's emergent writing – he enjoyed **making marks** this morning creating a series of lines – he'd been watching Hailey in the home corner using a note pad to take orders in the 'café'. He saw how she made lines with different patterns and shapes and set about recreating similar on his own page. He was asked about what he was doing but couldn't articulate a reply; he **smiled, laughed**, and carried on. Later in the day we*

*shared the writing with Hailey, and he was able to **explain** 'it's chips, fish fingers and red sauce'.*



*Using wooden sticks and 'lumberjacks' Zhi constructed his own marble run. He'd previously watched a group of children use the manufactured run and he'd set about recreating his own version. He tested the slope with marbles and although they didn't roll fast or straight, he was delighted with the result.*





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*Hailey and the others in the group spend time out in central area most weeks constructing various buildings – ‘it’s a restaurant’ or on one occasion ‘an animal hospital’. After a couple of sessions with the blocks they were able to build independently, with Hailey fetching additional resources from the classroom – blankets, pieces of fabric, soft animals, babies. Before the structures are tidied, we always have a **discussion** around what plans were made and what part of the game they most enjoyed. Hailey noted one day ‘the big blocks are better than the small one as you can get inside them ... and that makes you feel cosy’.*

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<sup>17</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



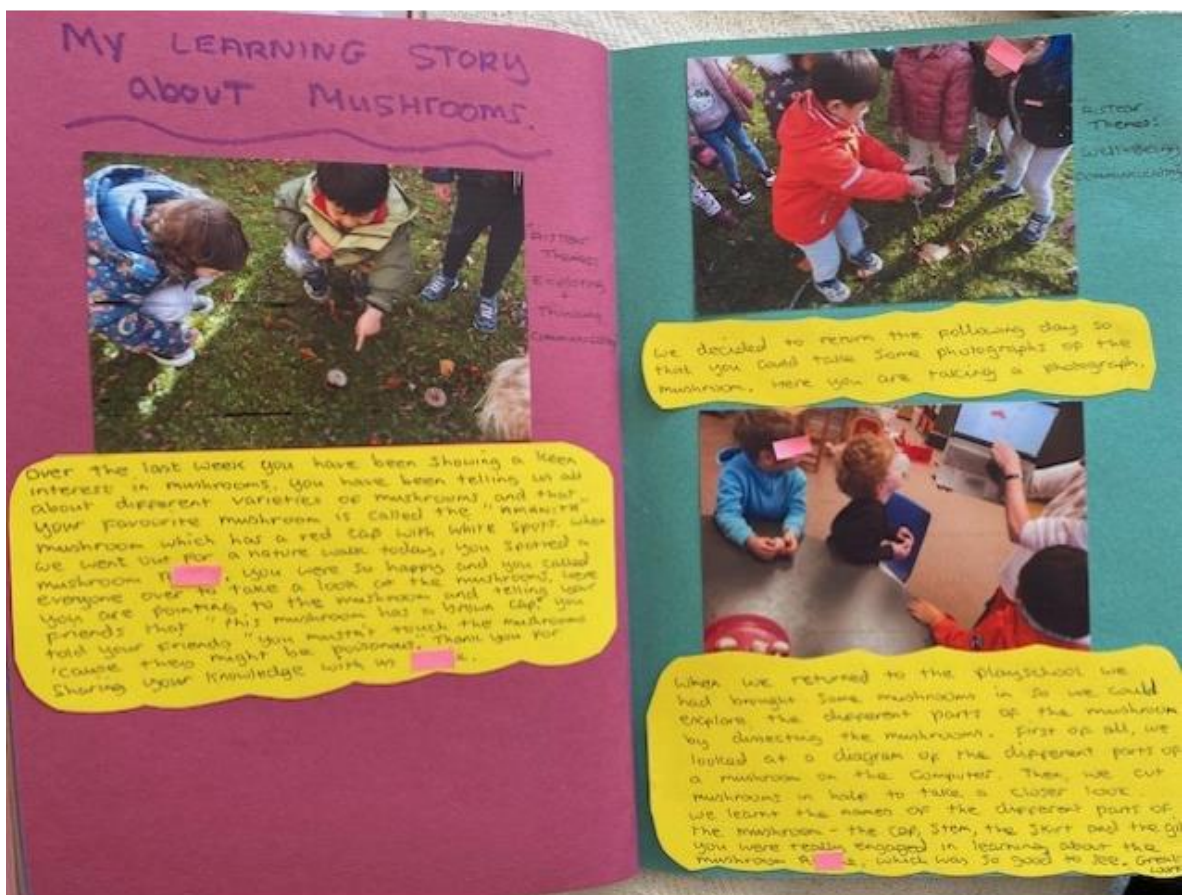
*Hailey enjoys mixing the paint, glue and different textures of collage – here using water colours, glue, pom-poms and buttons. [She] places work that's not 'finished' on the windowsill and comes back to it when she is ready to embellish her creation, so this piece was completed **over several days**. Hailey displays creativity, resilience, perseverance, and curiosity. She is generous in her ability to share experiences, experiment with techniques and take risks with new skills – using the glue gun is a particular favourite of hers. Using the larger format blocks allows her to **express her creativity** in a 3-dimensional way and incorporate imaginative **play** into the experience. This also offers her wider scope to use her **social skills** in encouraging others to collaborate and have agency to develop the game in ways that she feels satisfactory.*





In Bernadette's private ECCE setting, as already noted, Jake had communicated his interest in mushrooms, and he showed this interest through his engagement with a range of activities and experiences:

*The day after Jake had communicated his interest in mushrooms, we went out on a nature walk, which we regularly do, and Jake found some mushrooms. He was **very excited** with his findings and **called me over** to show me the mushrooms. "Bernadette, look, look, mushrooms, I found mushrooms". He bent over the mushrooms and a few of the other children came over to see what he had found. As Jake loved investigating the mushrooms we decided to go back to where the mushrooms were the following day so that Jake could take photographs of the mushrooms. Jake **took photographs** of the mushrooms, and he gave the camera to his friends so that they could also take photographs.*



<sup>18</sup> Covering faces a condition of ethical approval.

Jake also expressed his interest in mushrooms through his **play choices and artwork**, facilitated by access to a range of hands-on resources:

*Jake was enabled to learn about the mushrooms in a creative, playful and hands-on way. His **playful investigations** were facilitated by using a camera, dissecting the mushrooms, and observing, smelling, and feeling the mushrooms in a hands-on way and then providing a variety of recycled materials for Jake and his peers to create their own models of mushrooms. It shows the importance of having a variety of resources, e.g. recycled materials, paint, glue, books with pictures, textiles, etc., to be able to use provocations to stimulate Jake's learning by actively creating his own idea of a mushroom... These materials allowed Jake to learn by doing. He constructed his own knowledge through hands-on creative activities, thus promoting a deeper understanding for himself of his idea and interest in mushrooms.*

Children in Ger's Early Start setting similarly communicated the importance of accessible, hands-on resources to facilitate their play:



*Blocks feature heavily in Brody's repertoire of learning experiences. On this occasion an obstacle course was planned and built with the help of Zhi and Migel. Levels of difficulty were included – 'It's trickier over the mats' and the steps and slides were factored into the design. They tested and altered the layout as they went along, changing aspects of the course that failed. This **engaged their attention** for nearly an hour and they **returned to the venture** several times in the next couple of weeks. They*



were able to work cooperatively, **communicating ideas verbally and non-verbally**, supporting each other's imaginative ideas.

The children also show us here how their play is framed by their friendship, again highlighted the connections between 'relationships and interactions' and 'play and hands-on experiences':

*Hailey and Elaine ... decided to both dress-up as cats (it was Halloween and lots of costumes were available). They fully took on the role of being a cat, meowing and purring, going to the home corner and making cat dinners. A box was added to the play for the next day and that extended Hailey's interest in animal games, she **invited** Zhi to join in where they continued the theme. Hailey definitely values opportunities to immerse herself in role play over an extended period of time. To be given the time and space to develop characterisations, to include familiar people in her game and to have the adults' quiet and supportive involvement – offering ideas, finding resources, and sometimes taking on a role.*



Easy access to resources gives children agency in their play and learning and enables them to freely explore their interests. Children directly and explicitly tell us that free access to resources is important to them. For example, in the Early Start setting, Migel took an interest in a stomp

rocket that is normally kept in a cupboard and brought out by educators on request. When it was time to put the toy away, Migel begged the educators to “please, please, please keep it on [the windowsill] .... I can get it tomorrow”. The **request** was granted, and the toy was kept accessible for future use. Migel’s educator reflected:

*Having ready access to resources, especially ones that feature strongly in a child’s repertoire of investigative play [matters]. It is important for Migel to replicate and rehearse the action of the stomp rocket. Having to ask for the equipment hinders his flow of inquiry, limits social engagement and the possibility to make discoveries.*



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As Migel’s example shows, access to resources is relevant for all children. It is especially important for children with speech or language barriers for whom asking for access verbally may constitute a challenge. (This is of course also relevant to preverbal babies and toddlers). Diversity, equity, and inclusion can thereby be facilitated through play and hands-on experiences. The following example shows this clearly:

*One of Elaine’s favourite toys is ‘Paw Patrol’ – she **selects them to play with** most days, on this occasion she set up the chairs to act as ‘garages’ and sorted the vehicles and characters accordingly. Elaine was able to **articulate***

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<sup>19</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.

*the names of all the dogs and their vehicles. She later **allowed Migel to join** the game where they were able to mix up and recreate differing combinations.*



*These small loose part objects also feature highly in Elaine's play. The baskets are situated next to the carpet where she will **select items** so make patterns or buildings.*



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*In these examples, Elaine is showing us that certainly for a child with a communication difficulty free access to resources is imperative. Given the freedom to **explore** a wide range of materials enables Elaine to compose her own learning*

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<sup>20</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.

*experiences – often with high degree of self-organisation and mathematization of the materials. Here she is sorting, matching, and counting the paw patrol characters and the natural materials. Self-determined investigations for her are much more effective at engaging her interest than adult-directed activities. Framing the environment in such a way as to encourage autonomy importantly enables her to pursue creative endeavours that for her are more satisfying and extend her learning in a respectful and considerate way. The inclusion of open-ended materials in the repertoire of resources in an early years setting is important to Elaine as it allows her to **communicate her imaginative ideas non-verbally** and without a predetermined outcome.*

Highlighting the holistic nature of learning and development in early childhood, this example illustrates that experiences of play and hands-on experiences can also support meaningful inclusion. Children also showed us how they can also use their play to help them process and make sense of experiences in their lives. In Margaret’s child-minder setting:

*Cillian and Ellie have been playing with the wooden dolls and doing role play. This set has 7 members “mummy, dado because he has a beard like my dado, granny, P, Cillian and Ellie, and a baby called blueberry” according to Cillian. Today, Cillian has been placing his family around the table for dinner. “We are having burgers and chips today and a chocolate treat.” Ellie **joined in**, too, and **played** along with Cillian.” Dado is doing the turf. The ambulance also made an appearance for P and Cillian got one of the rainbow blocks which became a stretcher for the ambulance before long baby blueberry hurt his leg “do you see that blood all down his leg” Cillian **said** looking worried. “Oh dear, what will we do?” Margaret replied. “Quick get the stretcher, and let’s go.” Baby blueberry was taken off with the ambulance on a stretcher.... This is interesting to see Cillian playing out different scenarios as P had been taken away by ambulance recently and is in hospital. Cillian is developing his understanding through his play.*



Children can also use play and hands-on activities to tell others about their world and what is important to them. The idea to celebrate Diwali in Bernadette's private ECCE setting emerged from Kashvi's own decision to make a playdough candle for Diwali and to tell her educators about it:

*When Kashvi arrived into Playschool today she chose to come over to the table where we had just made some fresh playdough and the children were making all sorts of different things with the playdough as they chatted away. Kashvi started off rolling and cutting the playdough. She then started manipulating the playdough into a flat round piece and then started rolling another piece into a snake like object. She stuck this on top of the flat piece. Kashvi then asked if she could have some glitter. She then sprinkled the glitter all over her design. She was **concentrating and quiet** as she worked, showing me that she was engaged in what she was doing. Kashvi looked up and **said**, 'look Bernadette, I made a candle for Diwali'. She then started to **explain** that her family and herself were going to celebrate Diwali in her home the following week and that her 'other family' were coming over from India to stay with them. Kashvi explained that she was helping her mum to decorate the house with lights and candles, and they were making sweets and food to eat for Diwali. She was **animated and explained that she was so excited** about Diwali and that their house looked so nice with all the decorations and that she especially loved the sweets.*



As already noted with regards to citizenship, the evidence gathered also strongly shows that young children greatly value outdoor play and learning, and this was a recurring theme across settings. In fact, along with the value placed on their friendships, one of the clearest messages communicated by children throughout the whole dataset is the importance of play and hands-on experiences outdoors and their love for and respect of the natural world, relevant both to this topic and that of citizenship. Children showed how play outdoors can give them opportunities to display skills and interests that may not be evident indoors. In the Early Start setting:

*Migel rarely draws in the classroom. He occasionally **paints** but is generally reluctant to pick up graphics tools. On this occasion he noticed some chalks on offer in the garden he then set about **drawing** a large figure on the ground with comprehensive features including a face, hair and 'muscles'.*

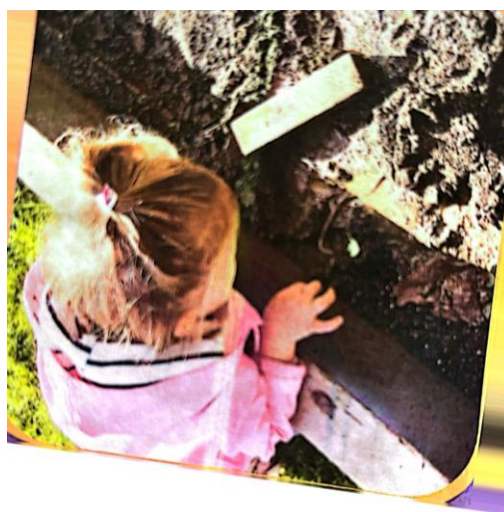


Adventurous play is an important aspect of outdoor play and the data collected show that young children enjoy the physical and sensory challenges these activities provide. The following vignette shows that young children value the agency, freedom and confidence afforded by adventurous physical play in outdoor spaces. Observing Brody and Zhi climbing trees as described above, their educator commented that “being able to make decisions about risky and challenging play naturally leads to a sense of mastery and a belief in oneself; Brody is **following his interests** and thereby developing confidence in his skills and encouraging others to join him in the journey”.

Adventurous play is often associated with physically “risky” activities, such as balancing or climbing. However, the following example shows that adventure and excitement can also be found in quiet exploration of the natural world.

Nadia, who is in her first ECCE programme year in Mary’s community full day-care setting has one older sister and lives with her mum and dad in the next village. She is very curious and loves outdoors. According to her educator, she “likes to be in the know and she does know a lot”. Mary tells us that Nadia is always asking questions and is a confident, competent girl who loves to be ‘in the thick of’ everything so as not to miss out. She is very independent. When Nadia discovered a worm in the grass in her preschool’s outdoor play area, she told her educator a story about worms. Her associations of worm slime with aliens shows the excitement of the experience, and again highlights children’s interest and care for the natural world:

*As you picked it up and observed it very closely you **described** it as “squiggly wiggly”. ... You also **told me a lovely story** about encountering a worm at your Nanny’s house and it went a bit like this... “He worms away from children in the grass. He wriggles in the grass. Snails are squiggly wiggly too. It was at Nanny’s house, he put slime on my sister. Then [my sister] had to take a bath. [My sister] touched the slime on the floor, slime is like aliens. ... He wriggled away then. I then put him in water to give him a bath. The slime helps him move faster, faster, faster. They live in the soil. It comes out of plants”.*



**In summary**, young children communicated how valuable play and hands-on experiences are to them. The data highlighted the importance of providing a wide range of resources, freely available without children having to ask for them. Some types of play enjoyed by children were sensory play, messy play, loose parts play, and most importantly outdoor play. Play that allowed for big movements and play that facilitated mark-making and early literacy skills were also evident in the data. Play was located in the context of children's friendships, and play could facilitate inclusion.

### 3.6 Transitions: Continuity of experience, progression in learning

The proposed Aistear key change of 'continuity of experience and progression in learning' was most evident in references to transitions into a new ECEC setting, transitions that occur as part of everyday ECEC routines, and transitions into primary school. The participating babies, toddlers and young children showed that they benefit if they are allowed to settle into a new environment on their own terms. Their actions, gestures and expressions convey that they like space and time, whether to settle into a new setting for first time or to engage in their play every day, supporting the emphasis in the updated Aistear on slow pedagogy.

#### Babies' and toddlers' views on transitions: continuity of experience and progression in learning

Annie, a girl of 2 years and 10 months who was availing of her first ECCE programme year in Bernie's community setting, initially struggled with separating from her mother during the transition into the setting. Annie lives with her parents, her older sister and baby brother. She was born in Ireland and English is the main language spoken in her home. Annie is interested in everything that is happening around her and is always eager to get involved. She is very independent and really likes to do things for herself, although she will ask for help if she needs it.

Annie's educators supported her during her transition to the setting by reassuring her and looking at a family wall with photos of Annie's family together. Annie clearly communicated her need for security and links with home, and she developed her own coping strategy – keeping her backpack on. This helped Annie feel more secure and supported the settling-in process. In Lundy's (2007) terms, Annie had audience and influence, not just voice, because her educators acted upon her expressed views:

*Annie, I notice how you like to wear your backpack into our room. As you play, you **continue to wear it**. At morning drop off mummy suggests putting*



*the bag on the shelf where the bags are stored outside our room, you are adamant that you want to keep it on your back. After a couple of weeks, you begin taking the backpack off for a short while until eventually one day you decide to leave it on the shelf. By this time, you are coping well, waving ‘see you later’ to mummy and happily come into preschool each morning. Mummy explains that you are disappointed that there is no preschool at the weekend! Annie’s transition into preschool demonstrates that it is a process, time and space have been central to her experience. ... Time was important for her to make her own decision about wearing her backpack. Through observation, the backpack appeared to symbolise ‘I need time to settle in, to become comfortable, to trust my new surroundings and new people.’*

Several participants observed that children’s wellbeing benefited from continuity between home and ECEC setting, which could be achieved in a number of ways. In the educator focus group, Margaret, the childminder described how a family wall with photographs of the children’s relatives encouraged the children to share stories about their families and to see their family as part of the setting, “because they call here home as well”. Observations of Ellie show how she communicates the value she places on being able to make connections between home and the setting:

*Ellie loves looking at the pictures and naming the people in them with a great big smile: “Mammy, Daddy, Granny, P, S, Cillian, Ellie”.*



The babies and toddlers communicated how their relationships exist in an interconnected ecology, and their experiences of transition cannot be separated from the relationships in which they are rooted – not only the direct relationships they have themselves but also the relationships between the adults who take care of them. Louis clearly communicated this in

Sheila's community setting toddler room. Louis is in the 1–2-year age range and he lives locally with his mam and dad, and his older brother. He has a strong connection with his extended family and visits on a weekly basis with his granny. The language spoken at home is English. Louis is lively, fun, boisterous, and adventurous. He loves climbing and jumping. He has a “glint in his eye and welcomes any type of mischief”. He loves stories. Louis loves Jaffa cakes “which he manages to get each morning before his daddy drops him off. He takes pleasure telling their little secret when he arrives each morning!” Louis loves to be challenged with new activities to meet his interests, and he is always up for something new. This vignette demonstrates how Louis's relationships frame his transitions:

*Louis's Daddy arrived to collect him from his room. When Louis noticed his daddy, he **shouted** “Daddy”, and **looked around** to make sure that everyone had noticed his daddy at the door. Louis's daddy opened the gate and lifted Louis up into his arms. Louis's **arm went around his daddy's neck** and they had a quick cuddle before Louis **slithered down** to the ground again. The Educator gave feedback on how Louis's day had been and what adventures that they had been up to. Louis in the meantime had got his bag and his coat from his hook with the help of the second Educator. Louis **watched on and smiled** as his Educator recounted the fun they had during the day. Louis's daddy spoke to and named each of the remaining children and was introduced to a new child who had been settling in over the past week.*

This interaction between Louis, his daddy, the educator, and the other children shows the connections that have been built up during the time that Louis has been attending the centre. Louis witnessed, through this interaction, how important he is in this circle of people. He also is seeing his daddy connecting to the children in his room which again extends the relationships and the feeling of belonging that Louis has.

Babies' experiences of mini transitions between activities are also of interest in the data. In Jen and Maria's day-care chain wobbler room, Gabriel communicates that he is finished with an activity and ready to move on by **simply crawling away**.

**In summary**, the strongest message from babies and toddlers with relevance to continuity of experience and progression of learning is that they value connections and relationships across the settings and between the people that are important to them. They also communicated that transitions are a process, and they sometimes just need a little bit of time to find their way through. Transitional objects can also be supportive at times of transition, and responsiveness

to babies and toddlers in-the-moment communications can help to support transitions between activities to happen at their pace.

### Young children's views on transitions: continuity of experience and progression in learning

Resonant with some of the experiences of the babies and toddlers, Tanya recalled that Robbie struggled with separation anxiety when he started attending preschool. He **cried** when Tanya left and **expressed** that he “didn't really like” the preschool room. Robbie's educators responded to this by adapting his preschool experience to match his preferences, which helped him settle. Robbie expressed his views in multiple ways both **verbally and through non-verbal communications like play choices**. These communications were acted upon, again giving the child not only voice, but audience and influence:

*The Educators picked up on his cues really well and kept embracing the outdoors until he was ready. He **responded well**. Gradually, they picked up from bits of conversations, the types of toys and activities he enjoys and began introducing those indoors. He also responded well. That he likes to be involved and help. They ran on little errands. They noticed interactions and relationships were important. They nurtured and encouraged peer connections, they waited for him to become used to the adults too. It was a beautiful journey to observe, despite the difficult moments at times.*

Here the power of observations and the skill of educators to tune into, interpret and respond to the child's interests and response are evident. In the end, Robbie communicated that what he needed for successful transition was simply to be given the time to feel ready:

*“I feel a little bit nervous because I don't know anyone”-the beginning of pre-school. We started off with me staying in the room and after a while he would ask of me to stay longer...and longer. We talked and he **said**- “I think if you give me a kiss and a hug tomorrow, you can go then”. We tried that, but it didn't quite work, so we went through a time of clinging and his Educator peeling him off. He would settle after that, but the actual ‘parting’ was very difficult. One morning, he **said**, while walking through the main lobby- “I'm ready to let you go”. And we haven't looked back since. He made the decision.*

Choices within transitions that occur as part of everyday ECEC routines are also important to children's wellbeing. In the following example Brody communicates through his **eating choices**

that involving him in the management of his own transition arrangements on a day-to-day basis helped him feel more secure and happy in the Early Start setting.

*Brody was reluctant to leave his mother for a few days in a row, there had been a few arguments at home about having breakfast and eating fruit at snack time. In consultation with his mother, a breakfast table was implemented in the home-corner to see if it helped ease the transition from home to school. After watching a few children make their toast and select toppings to spread he **joined in** and managed to eat one slice of bread. He shared this with his mother at home-time and together they agreed that for a week he would try breakfast at school. Demonstrating a responsive and flexible pedagogy in terms of Brody's transition to school allowed a more gentle and non-confrontational resolution to the issue of eating breakfast.*



Again, this shows the importance of forming links between the child's family and their early childhood setting. Robbie's transition into preschool was similarly aided by existing connections between the preschool and the family, which helped with building trust:

*Robbie's transition was certainly elevated by the multiple connections between home and EY setting. I was familiar with the Educators (a former employee), his sister attended the same pre-school, his Granny and Grandad*

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<sup>21</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.

*has a connection to it and it always worked both ways. It was (is) always reciprocated. The flow is seamless, and Robbie **often says** “I’m going to tell (my 3 Educators) about this”-whatever special thing happens.*

Like with the example of the toddler Annie, young children also told us that transitional objects help them feel safe and provide continuity of experience. Cillian has a comforter, a small piece of muslin cloth that he loves and brings to bed with him. He calls it a “boty” and **takes it to his child-minders with him each day**. In Margaret’s child-minder setting, these connections between home and setting are mindfully nurtured, and the children communicated through their **utterances, photographs, artwork and play choices** that they valued these connections:

*Family is always welcomed and talked about daily. The children love to **share stories** of their family and what they have been up to. This week, we asked for some family photos. These photos are lovely and create so much conversation among the children. Cillian **spoke** of how he reads stories with Uncle S, and he likes a cuddle with granny B on the couch with his boty. He spoke of his daddy and mammy and of their holidays at centre parks. Cillian talks about [visiting] granny E and all his family and the fun games they play. Danny explained how he loves a big ice cream with his sister and how he and his family had a lovely at the local tractor run. He also told a story of the picture with his grandparents, which created so much laughter, and the story is always remembered when looking at this picture. In the picture, it’s mammy birthday Danny told us, and he put his face into the cake to taste it! He told the story with great humour and brought a laugh to us all. These photos have been added to our play kitchen and are the topic of conversation daily. Sometimes, the children **like to just look** at the pictures and other days it creates new conversations. We read lots of books about family and friends and drew some wonderful pictures of our families. It wasn’t long until the children **began role playing** in the kitchen and throughout the house... Children have a sense of belonging and enjoy talking about their family and friends with great humour and love for each other.*





In terms of micro-transitions, the data show that young children value the ability to develop an interesting activity over time, whether over a single stretch of time or by repeatedly returning to an activity over the course of several days. Long, uninterrupted stretches of free play and the ability to revisit the theme the next day allow young children to really develop an idea they are interested in, as in the following example from the Early Start setting.



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*This is a play event that Brody **returns to frequently** – having figured out that ramps can be used in the water-tray to make a slide - he set about using the guttering in a different context. After searching the classroom for something to rest the slide on he found a chair served as a useful prop. After a few trials he was satisfied that the set-up worked well enough to propel the cars. He **showed other children** how to align the cars most effectively to get the maximum speed along the ramp. He supports three children in their experiments, giving **verbal encouragement** and feedback on their effort. He **returns the following day** to recreate the game ‘We made hot wheels!’*

This is resonant with an approach to slow, relational pedagogy that avoids unnecessary transitions in play, and allows children to revisit play activities.

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<sup>22</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



Finally, children expressed the need for support in relation to transitions to primary school, as in this final example. Having lost out on a place at her first choice of school, Hailey was feeling anxious about her transition to primary school. She **expressed her feelings in “play scenarios centring on schools and classrooms and what you would do once you got there.** This construction involved Hailey making rooms and chairs for Ted to sit on, she was happy to evolve this game herself and only chatted to me about her decisions.” Hailey’s **play choices** revealed her need for greater support through **role play, small world play and conversations** surrounding the move.



*A school for Travelling Ted*

**In summary,** like babies and toddlers, young children clearly communicated that strong links across the settings and between the people who are important to them facilitate their transitions, continuity of experience and progression in learning. Also like the babies and toddlers, young children showed that they often need time and space to become comfortable with new things, and time and space to direct the course of their learning. Transitional objects can contribute to a sense of safety and continuity of experience, and children may wish to use play to process their emotions and support their understanding at times of transition.

### 3.7 Additional areas for consideration

The majority of the data collected related to the key changes proposed by NCCA for implementations to the updated Aistear. We can tentatively hypothesise that this is because

these are the themes that are of importance to babies, toddlers and young children, but this must be tempered by acknowledgement that it may simply be that these are the areas that the adults involved (co-researcher educators and the core research team) focused on. Nevertheless, there were some themes raised by the babies, toddlers and young children in Phase 2 that did not fit neatly into the key areas for change identified by NCCA for the new Aistear. These additional considerations by babies, toddlers and young children also support some areas being retained in the updated Aistear (Identity and Belonging) and some areas being further developed (technology and digital learning).

## Identity and Belonging

Identity and Belonging was a theme in the original Aistear, and this is retained in the proposed updated version. The children in the consultation supported the importance of Identity and Belonging as a theme. In the child-minder setting, Ellie showed her interest in her developing sense of self and identity through **repeated self-directed activity**:

*Ellie was spotted playing peek a boo with the mirror today. She could be heard through the house **giggling and saying**, "Peek-a-boo can't see me." Ellie is developing a sense of self.*



In Ger's Early Start setting, Migel showed how his sense of identity is influenced by supportive relationships with his peers, again highlighting the inter-related nature of these findings:

*At a monthly occasion, when the school gathers in the garden to recognise individual achievements and to celebrate festivals, Migel was captured dancing vigorously. Other children admired his exuberance, and many joined in, copying some of his*

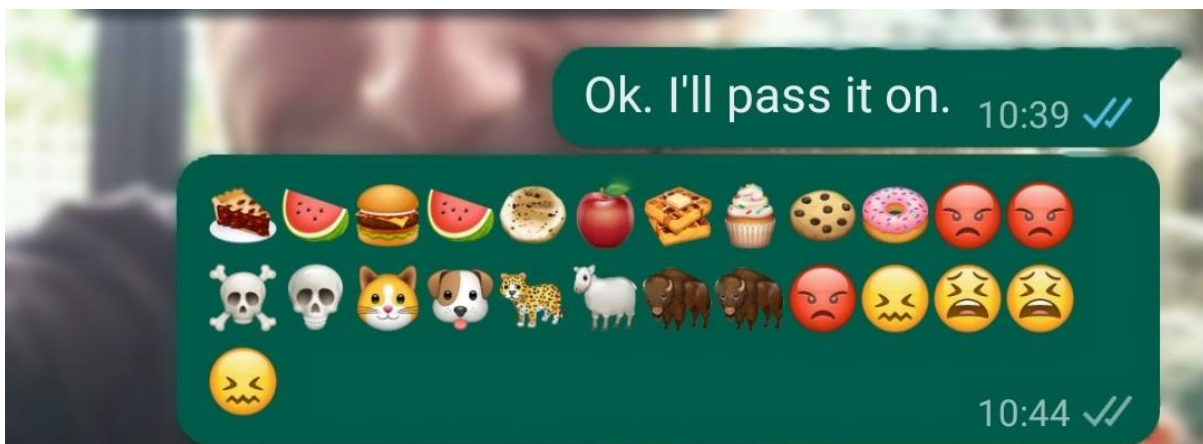
moves. He was **delighted to demonstrate** his dancing: 'I'm a Spiderman dancer'. Performance events represent a key opportunity for Migel to exhibit his prowess at dancing. Given his lack of self-confidence in other aspects of social relations this signifies a crucial moment when he could be acknowledged by educators and children in the school as an 'expert'. Dancing has been identified as a skill many children value highly (possibly having watched Tik Tok videos). Respecting and celebrating Migel's individual identity as a competent dancer enhances his social status amongst the group and builds resilience and self-belief.



### Technology as a relational space for learning and development

Tanya documented how central technology is to his learning and development, and experiences of Aistear and early learning and development. In the educator focus group she described how difficult this was for her to acknowledge as she does not really approve of young children spending much time with technology, but realised on reflection that Robbie was very clearly communicating how valuable technology is to him, regardless of his parents' opinions on that. Some examples of these communications from Robbie are shared here:

*"Can I send Dad a message?"*





*“Ok Google, play Ghostbusters/Paw Patrol. No, I don’t like this one, play the one that I like Google”.*



*“I’m following the instructions Mam”.*



*“This is the remote control. You can go 10 or 90 and then it falls off the track...”*

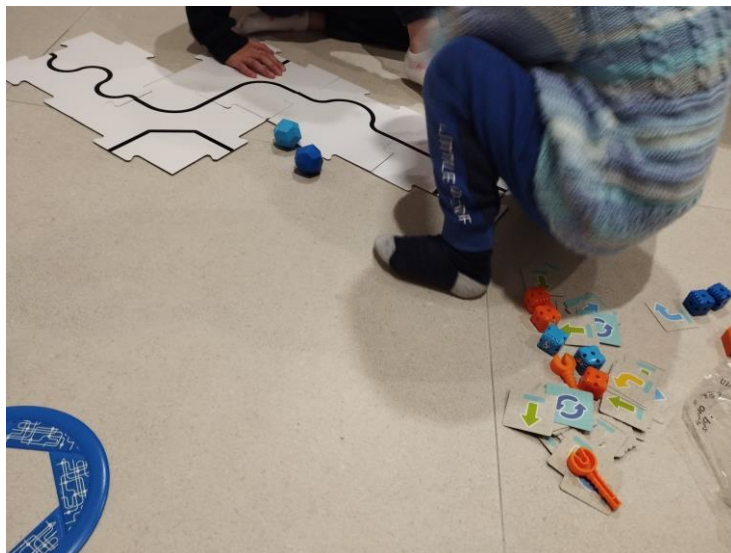


Robbie highlighted how his engagement with technology can support his agency and sense of competency:

*“I can do this! I know what steps.”*

His sister, sighing- *“You are in the wrong mode. It’s not a code, it’s the follow the line one. Turn it upside down and change it”.*

*“No! I know how to put in a code. Watch!”*



### Children’s desire for participation and consultation

The importance children place on their right to be heard and have their ideas ‘influence’ actions is evident throughout the data, as illustrated by Hailey in the Early Start setting:

*Hailey has been watching the building of the new play park with a keen eye – we visited at the first opportunity, and she was impressed with what climbing and balancing opportunities there were. She **expressed some dissatisfaction** with what was on offer in our garden (unfortunately some old stepping stones had been disposed of by a landscape contractor) and noted ‘there’s nothing to jump over on’. Soon after, a local tree was cut down and we were offered the trunks and Hailey was **delighted** – ‘now we have our own [play park]!’ It demonstrates that consulting children is very important when changes are being made to the school environment – one small action led to quite considerable annoyance on Hailey’s behalf. Too easily opinions are either not sought or ignored – consultation, even briefly, would have enabled Hailey to request the stepping stones were kept as they were obviously an important part of her play infrastructure.*



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**In summary**, additional areas highlighted by the babies, toddlers and young children that fall outside of the ‘key changes’ identified by NCCA relate to areas that are proposed to be retained, such as Identity and Belonging, or further developed, such as technology and digital learning. The one additional area for consideration in an updated Aistear may be to incorporate

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<sup>23</sup> Pixelation of faces a condition of ethical approval.



mechanisms for children to be consulted with and to participate in decision-making within their early childhood settings.

### 3.8 How the proposed changes resonated with babies, toddlers and young children

The number of data items educators gathered on each of the themes varied, with similar trends evident across both age groups and across all settings: while babies', toddlers' and young children's day-to-day communications provided substantial data on the principles of 'Relationships and Interactions' and 'Play and Hands-on Experiences', less data were accessible on 'Citizenship', 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', and 'Transitions'.

The educator focus group confirmed this finding, with educators stating that the themes of Relationships and Interactions and Play and Hands-on Experiences resonated most strongly with the participating children, and that these themes were intertwined.

*Researcher: Which strands do you feel resonated with the children most?*

*Bernie: I felt it was relationships.*

*Ger: But I'll say it was hands on play... the opportunities to explore open ended materials, you know resources or workshop approach. All of that, the aspects of play definitely resonated for them, yeah.*

*Bernie: But it just went back to [relationships] every time. So, with the hands-on experiences, say for example, it was always something that happened with somebody at home. Their relationships were always brought into it in some way. And then the interactions with other children as well, that there is just so important to other children, they just... in every aspect of their play. It was being accepted as part of the groups and playing with other children and yeah, I just felt relationships and interactions just seemed to [resonate].*

*Ger: A quiet companionship was so important to them, they didn't need to necessarily be talking to each other, or even kind of physically interacting, but that, just that quiet companionship together seemed to me that that's what they were revealing as something that they valued.*

On the other hand, some themes like Citizenship seemed to resonate less according to the educators:

*Researcher: In terms of those new strands and that NCCA have identified, is there any you felt weren't relevant to the children in your setting or maybe ones that you found it difficult to get any evidence on?*

*Ger: The citizenship strand. Just I think because the nature of the age of the children that we have, you know, it was more difficult to identify what they were saying to you about their own personal responsibilities and how they can make a positive impact on their environments. I mean, I kind of deconstructed it. We looked at feeding the birds, so it was, you know, at their level, but that was probably the one I found most difficult, I think.*

In particular, the data were limited with regards to citizenship of babies and toddlers, and initial interpretation of data related to young children did not always recognise its relevance to citizenship. Initial interpretation of children's voices by the co-researcher educators highlighted that the term 'citizenship' was harder for adults to apply to very young children. Nevertheless, in drilling down into the question of what is meant by citizenship, the focus group discussion raised a range of associations in relation to children's decision-making, problem-solving, taking responsibility (e.g. for wildlife or the environment, including very strong communication from children on their commitment to sustainability) and developing a sense of belonging within a group. Educators had perhaps not initially identified many of these areas as examples of the children communicating their citizenship, but on reflection in the focus group they recognised that these elements may be significant aspects of citizenship through the eyes of babies, toddlers and young children, even if they might not always be spoken about in such terms by adults:

*Tanya: It's a little bit of a kind of a convoluted concept for a child of under six... we would have a different interpretation of what citizenship means to what children at that age would think about it. But I suppose if you think of a group situation in early years, like even things like, I can refer to Bernie's example there signing in when they come in. So kind of making their name prominent to the group as such and kind of having choices throughout the day, like choice is a huge aspect of Aistear. So, I think when you, as Ger said, when you break it down, really there's a lot, a lot of democracy and a lot of citizenship within early years. But it's just maybe not called that.*

From the perspective of babies, toddlers and young children rather than from the adult perspective, in fact citizenship was evident in the data as an important concept to include in

Aistear, and the examples provided above are drawn from both the layer of data analysis conducted by the co-researcher educators and that conducted by the core research team. On reflection, educators in the focus group questioned whether the sector as a whole had “work to do” to become more democratic. It was suggested that a more accessible terminology, combined with practical training, could help break down barriers and encourage educators to engage with the concept of citizenship in ways that resonate more closely with young children’s perspective:

*‘How can I [baby, toddler or young child] be facilitated to have ... a positive impact on my wider community, on the school, my local environment, etcetera’. ... Something like that ... [might be] an easier concept perhaps for people to understand, rather than citizenship.*

In the data provided, Janet also wondered about the need for support for educators in understanding and documenting the perspectives of babies and toddlers particularly: “I find that when I’m doing observations on the babies that the aims and goals are not catered towards babies. I find that I often have to try to simplify the aims and goals as they are too advanced for the development of the babies”.

Other topics like Diversity, Equity and Inclusion may not have always been explicitly addressed in the data, but this topic was very visible implicitly. In Phase 1, the inclusion element of the experiences of children similar to Zhi and Elaine were hidden by the inclusive practice of the educators, and the inability of the methodology to fully link children’s profiles with their data. The co-development of the child profile form was very successful in ensuring this diversity was visible for Phase 2.

### 3.9 Summary and Conclusion

The data provided a much more detailed view of Relationships and Interactions and Play and Hands-On experiences from the perspective of babies, toddlers and young children, than they did for other themes. It is thus possible that this imbalance indicates that children value certain areas more than others, and are telling us that Relationships and Interactions, and Play and Hands-on Experiences are what matter most to them. This interpretation would certainly resonate with the findings of Phase 1 of the consultation. However, we must be tentative in making this claim as it is possible that educators found it easier to identify and document the

value children place on relationships, interactions, and play than some of the more potentially abstract topics like Citizenship or Diversity.

As well as these identified changes, in a consultation participants must also of course have the opportunity to dissent, or to identify areas that have not been highlighted in the proposals. The additional areas highlighted by the babies, toddlers and young children that fall outside of the ‘key changes’ identified by NCCA relate to areas that are proposed to be retained, such as Identity and Belonging, or further developed, such as technology and digital learning. The one additional area for consideration in an updated Aistear may be to incorporate mechanisms for children to be consulted with and to participate in decision-making within their early childhood settings, although this in itself could conceivably also be considered a form citizenship.

In conclusion, the key areas of change proposed for updating Aistear are broadly in line with the preferences expressed by the babies, toddlers and young children who took part in this consultation. Relationships and Interactions and Play and Hands-on Experiences appear to be particularly important to them. Citizenship and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion were less prominent in quantitative terms and particularly from the documented perspective and experiences of babies and toddlers. However, the rich data collected on these topics suggest that these are nevertheless very important principles in the eyes of babies, toddlers, and young children. Within the topic of Transitions, it was clear from the data provided by babies, toddlers and young children that supporting children’s transitions into ECEC settings at the beginning, throughout the day, and on to primary school is key to a high-quality learning experience.

## Chapter 4: Implications for Curriculum Development

### 4.1 Insights and Implications

Phase 2 of this consultation is centred around seeking babies', toddlers,' and young children's perspectives on the proposed changes to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, developed by NCCA with the purpose of informing the potential updates.

Taking the analysis of the findings as a starting point, implications and recommendations have been identified from insights into children's views and experiences concerning the proposed changes, together with educators' interpretations. The findings show that in terms of proposed changes, from the perspective of babies, toddler and young children, there are many aspects that they appear to support, and these should be implemented, such as the planned reinforcement of the pivotal role of relationships across and between the domains of home and setting. The findings also show how interpretations of the babies', toddlers' and young children's views or experiences provide insights into how proposed updates to Aistear might be enhanced. The implications that follow present the elements of the changes that the babies, toddlers and young children appear to support first, followed by addressing the elements of dissent or uncertainty. Insights and implications are structured according to five separate principles of Aistear in the following order: Relationships and Interactions; Play and Hands-on Experiences; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Transitions; and Agentic Global Citizenship.

The reader should note that what follows in this chapter constitutes an adult interpretation of the implications of what the babies, toddlers and young children expressed rather than making any claim at this point to be the direct communication of the children, as in the previous chapter.

### 4.2 Relationships and interactions

Babies, toddlers, and young children expressed, in multi-modal ways, that 'Relationships and Interactions' were important to them. This was one of the most salient themes in the data. The consultation repeatedly shows the value that babies, toddlers, and young children place on trusting relationships with adults (parents and educators). Relationships with families also came to the fore through the data. Children brought pieces of home into their settings, suggesting that relationships between homes and settings are paramount to babies, toddlers, and young children. Recognition of the importance of relationships between homes and settings for babies, toddlers and young children is emphasised in Aistear's 'Wellbeing' and 'Identity

and Belonging’ Themes and could be further included in the Principle of ‘Relationships and Interactions’ in the updated Aistear.

The importance young children attach to friendships and connections with peers was also a recurring theme. Findings illustrate many examples of peer interactions and friendships where babies, toddlers and young children actively seek connections or being with others and respond joyfully to these encounters. Like in Phase 1, the babies, toddlers, and young children in Phase 2 strongly communicated the value of their friendships, and so again this supports the inclusion of friends or peers in the conceptualisation of the ‘Relationships and Interactions’ Principle in the updated Aistear.

Not only do these findings reaffirm the centrality of relationships identified in Phase 1, but they also suggest that the babies, toddlers, and young children support the proposals to update ‘Relationships and Interactions’ in relation to the increased emphasis on slow, relational pedagogy, friendships, and supporting ‘connections between the child’s social worlds’, which correlate with aspects of the ‘Family and Community’ Principle and the Themes of ‘Wellbeing’ and ‘Identity and Belonging’.

### 4.3 Play and hands-on experiences

A variety of play and hands-on learning permeated babies, toddlers, and young children’s experiences. Many babies, toddlers and young children expressed ‘smiles’, ‘joy’, ‘delight’ and ‘concentration’ particularly when engaging in outdoor, including adventurous, play and exploring their own interests (e.g. ‘squiggly wiggly’ worms and mushrooms). Many of the observations also highlight the importance children place on being agentic, pointing to the value of their own space, freedom to make choices and access to resources and the outdoors, and time to explore their interests. These insights mirror how the importance of play is expressed in the Principles and offer support to the idea that play should continue to be foregrounded in Aistear. Babies, toddlers, and young children’s interest in the outdoors permeated a lot of the data and so outdoor play should be strongly emphasised in the updated Aistear with outdoor play integrated throughout. In fact, the importance of outdoor play was one of the strongest, most clearly articulated messages in the consultation. These findings also amplify the significance of agency, which interconnects with the following findings.

### 4.4 Diversity, equity and inclusion

Regarding ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ on the part of children this Principle was firmly embedded in their immediate and shared experiences, relationships, and interactions. Findings



show children's curiosity in exploring their own and others' cultures and languages through experiential encounters. Several showed pride in their own culture when meaningful opportunities were provided to do so (e.g. Diwali). Young children themselves enacted equitable and inclusive behaviours; respect and care for the needs, rights and languages of others. An example from one setting shows deep engagement and interactions between children with different communication patterns, including Elaine who is of Croatian heritage and has a diagnosed speech delay.

These findings contrast somewhat to Phase 1 by demonstrating young children's multiple modes of communication and capturing multiple identities (cultures, abilities, and backgrounds) in the data. Insights from this group of children convey the significance of not only recognising but valuing children's individual identities, families, cultures, and languages. Children's perspectives and experiences convey a sense of belonging and respect for others, which are interconnected with other Principles (e.g. Relationships and Interactions /Agentic Global Citizens) and Themes (e.g. Identity and Belonging).

These young children's views and experiences align with the idea that the Principles should be 'embedded in the Theme descriptors, and the Aims and Learning Goals of the Framework'. An implication for consideration in updating the framework in response to children's views is the need to acknowledge the interwoven nature of 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' throughout, rather than solely as a specific Principle. This would mirror the lived experience of the babies, toddlers, and young children in this data set.

#### **4.5 Transitions: Continuity of experience and progression in learning**

'Continuity of experience and progression in learning' was most evident in narratives about transitions into settings, for example, Robbie cried when his mother left. However, observations capture babies', toddlers' and young children's curiosity, joy and excitement when encountering new or different resources and experiences, for example, when the toddler Nathan experiences clay for the first time. Likewise, toddlers and young children also expressed interest and joy in coming back to playing with familiar resources and experiences, as in the example of Zhi, and in being able to move on from an activity when they are ready, and as in the example of Gabriel. These iterative transitions between old and new need further analysis to draw more precisely on whether this supports or has implications for proposals.

In line with the proposed Aistear Principle of Transitions, babies, toddlers and young children expressed how they valued time and interactions with educators and friends throughout the

flow of their day. However, babies', toddlers' and young children's views and experiences of smaller transitions that occur as part of everyday learning and routines (e.g. including caring and feeding routines) were less well documented in the data or were not captured or interpreted as 'transitions' by educators; perhaps they were seen by the educators as insignificant in comparison with 'big' transitions (e.g. between home and to primary school) by educators. If 'all transitions are important' and 'these moments need to be acknowledged as opportunities for holistic learning and development', as Aistear suggests, then further research and guidance drawing attention to small but significant transitions in daily routines and flow might be needed.

One of the strongest messages from the babies, toddlers, and young children in relation to transitions was how much they value connections between the settings and people who matter most to them. This resonates with the increased emphasis on connections with families, neighbourhoods, and communities in the updated Aistear generally, and specifically in the new Transitions Principle.

## 4.6 Agentic Global Citizens

### Interpretation of the term 'citizenship' by educators

The views of babies, toddlers and young children was particularly difficult to disentangle from the interpretations of adults in the context of the key proposed change around 'global' citizenship. However, babies, toddlers, and young children demonstrated that they are agentic citizens. Acknowledging the absence of indigenous Irish languages (Gaeilge/Cant) and cultures in this consultation that are identified in Aistear, insights from this group of children convey their understanding and respect for different identities (families, cultures, ethnicities and languages) that they directly encountered. Children's active interest in the world around them, particularly in taking care of the environment they inhabit is very strongly evident in the data. Several of the young children expressed intentional interest in and care for the natural environment (e.g. worms, mushrooms, and birds); demonstrating agency, respect, and emerging responsibilities, which interconnects with and supports Aistear's commitment to sustainability evident in the 'Wellbeing' Theme and other Principles such as 'Learning Environments'.

The data amplify the importance babies, toddlers and young children placed on being heard and responded to - rights (UNCRC Articles 12 and 13) that are embedded in these settings and Aistear. Although Aistear is founded on a rights-based approach, the findings draw attention

to the limited observations of or references to children's rights, beyond participation, by educators. However, analysing the data through a rights-based lens, draws attention, for example, to children's expressions of the right to non-discrimination and the right to be protected. Their communication of their experiences contributes to evidencing that children encounter a rights-based approach through the practice of educators that is framed by Aistear. An area of consideration for practice, however, is the need for educators to notice the nuanced ways babies, toddlers and young children express and experience a broader spectrum of indivisible rights, not only participation, that are expressed in the updated framework. In terms of materials to support understanding the Principle of 'Agentic Global Citizens' and a rights-based approach more broadly, there is a need for deeper knowledge about the UNCRC and pedagogical guidance to support educators.

Given the near invisibility of rights and responsibilities in educators' documentation and their comments that understanding citizenship was challenging, a key recommendation is the need to clarify these concepts so educators can gain a better understanding of the pedagogical implications of 'Global Citizens'. Educators' reflections raise questions concerning potential misunderstandings of concepts. From a rights-based perspective, therefore, clarification is needed to ensure that citizenship is not considered to be synonymous with children's rights, and inalienable, legal rights do not come with correlative responsibilities (Waldron and Oberman, 2016; Shier, 2018). Further professional development opportunities may be needed for educators to understand how they can develop this with babies, toddlers, and young children, making global citizenship and sustainability fit for very young children.

#### 4.7 Additional findings

The additional ideas highlighted by the babies, toddlers and young children supported the proposals to retain Identity and Belonging as one of Aistear's four themes, and to deepen the understanding of the potential of technology and digital play for learning and development. The findings also suggest a deeper engagement in the updated Aistear with the concept of consultation with and participation of young children.

In terms of views that support proposals, it is important to highlight that the consultation produced insights into the integrated, holistic nature of learning and development from the perspectives and experiences of babies, toddlers and young children, reflecting the Aistear Principle of 'Holistic Learning and Development' and shedding light on how these Principles are all entangled with each other. Notably, most extracts from the data are relevant to and

intertwined with multiple areas. This entanglement has important implications for framing Aistear in a holistic way and indicates or affirms the need for a nuanced/integrated approach to themes and principles.

**The following findings demonstrate dissenting views of participating** babies, toddlers and young children.

The findings concerning “Citizenship” and “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” are less substantial than other Principles, most noticeably there were particularly limited contributions from babies and toddlers. This may suggest that the principles of ‘Relationships and Interactions’ and ‘Play and Hands-on Experiences’ resonated most strongly with the participating children, particularly babies and toddlers; possibly indicating that these children value certain principles more than others. On the other hand, however, it is also possible that educators found it easier to identify and document children’s views and experiences connected to relationships and play more so than elements that capture “citizenship” or “diversity”.

Notwithstanding the adults’ lens and the possibility that adults overlooked experiences relating to ‘global citizens’ and ‘diversity’, the absence of babies’ and toddlers’ views and experiences draws attention to how Principles might view babies as ‘becomings’ rather than beings. Some educators expressed the difficulties they experienced finding resonance for the youngest children in their care in the Aims and Learning Goals in the original version of Aistear. In turn, this raises questions about the relevance of conceptualisations, specifically for babies’ and toddlers’ lived realities.

Aistear’s Principles are conceptually framed for all children from birth to six but the babies’ and toddlers’ silences in the findings suggest that they may not be the same for babies and toddlers. There lies a particular challenge in the principle of Agentic Global Citizens: what do the conceptualisations of citizenship, emerging responsibilities, and sustainability mean for babies and toddlers, and how do they play out in reality? For example, whilst rights were expressed and enacted in different ways, drawing from Aistear, how do babies express ‘responsibilities, for themselves, for others and for the environment’, and what does this look like for babies in practice?

The intention is not to cast doubts on babies’ and toddlers’ entitlements, agency, and capacities to hold/express rights, this was evident in the data, but to acknowledge that specific goals or competencies in relation to emerging responsibilities and global citizenship might not be a primary consideration or at least may look different for babies.

An implication arising from this consultation, is there may be a need to revisit the image of babies, toddlers and young children as rights-holders and beings as well as ‘becomings’ who ‘learn and develop in their own time’ (Aistear). This presents opportunities for development of support for educators to understand and enact how Aistear applies to children from birth to three. Building on from the Phase 1 NCCA report, a further area for consideration is to explore what babies’, toddlers,’ and young children’s responsibilities as global citizens and in terms of diversity might look like in practice and to continue conversations about multiple modes of communication beyond language that convey these concepts, with support for educators to document this.

In summary, these implications/recommendations drawn from insights into babies’, toddlers; and young children’s perspectives and experiences can potentially influence improvements in the Aistear framework and practice.

#### 4.8 Participation/methodology

Finally, the findings in the consultation highlight several challenges for participation and methodology.

Firstly, consulting with babies and toddlers on issues that are conceptual rather experiential adds a layer of complexity to the aims and methodology. This necessitated being mindful against overstressing claims about what babies, toddlers and young children can, should and want to do in terms of participating in the consultation (Lundy et al., 2024).

Secondly, the findings draw attention to the subjective nature of interpretation and the lens through which views are being sought (for example, rights were a particular example of this), which is always the case in interpretive or qualitative research.

Undoubtedly, involving educators as co-researchers enhanced the participatory consultation by harnessing their extensive experience and expertise about individual children and their multiple ways of communicating and interpreting the ‘hundred languages’ of children, and building on their established, trusting relationships with children and families. These educators’ expertise in noticing and interpreting children’s views were crucial to the success of this research; ensuring that the right of these youngest citizens from birth to be heard and influence decisions on curriculum development was enacted meaningfully. However, it was important that the expertise of all participants was genuinely embraced at multiple points in the process, and that a reflective, iterative approach was taken. For example, Phase 2 began by actively reflecting

on the methodologies used for Phase 1, and these were adapted based on input from co-researcher educators, the core research team, and NCCA. It was also important to create space for contributions to multiple elements of methodology that might not fit neatly into a participant role. For example, one might expect that the design of methodological tools might be the role of the core research team, but across the two phases of the consultation and particularly for the design of the child profile form in Phase 2, the input of the co-researcher educators was a key ingredient of their success. On the other hand, while the educators were conceptualised as the ‘interpreters of the hundred languages of children’, it was also important that the researchers also interpreted the documented findings for triangulation, bringing another lens to the data and ensuring audience and influence for the babies, toddlers and young children. This was particularly relevant to the citizenship area, as aforementioned. The experience of the consultation showed that in participative research, all partners have an important role to play.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, Phase 2 of this consultation sought the views of babies, toddlers and young children on the proposed updates to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. While it is challenging to elicit the views of very young children on conceptual ideas rather than lived experiences, and we acknowledge the importance of not over-stretching our claims, the consultation allowed for tentative understanding of the views of babies, toddlers and young children on the proposed updates. We found that while some topics (Relationships and Interactions, and Play and Hands-on Experiences) may have resonated more with the babies toddlers and young children than others (particularly Citizenship), their views are largely in line with and support the proposed changes.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Key proposed changes to Aistear following Phase 1 consultation

### Key Messages: Phase 2 consultation proposals for updating *Aistear*

Purpose: To capture the high-level proposals, the ‘headlines’ for the updated Framework. They are not intended as a synopsis of the full suite of proposals.

#### The proposals for updating *Aistear*

**Embed: Inclusion, diversity, rights, voice, wellbeing, nurturing relationships, play, connections, continuity and progression of learning and sustainability throughout the Framework**

**View the baby, toddler and young child as: agentic, competent and confident**

**View the educator<sup>24</sup> as: competent, confident, agentic and reflective**

**Keep the structure of *Aistear* but update individual sections**

- **Retain, update and give increased visibility to the Principles**
- **Retain and update the Themes while also interweaving the Principles through them**
- **Retain but update the Guidelines for Good Practice**

#### Key changes

**Draw greater attention to the importance of interactions and relationships**

- Focuses on building trusting relationship with babies, toddlers and young children through a slow relational pedagogy
- Re-affirms the importance of a key person approach
- Fosters enhanced connections with friends, communities and neighbourhoods.

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<sup>24</sup> Reflects the professional role of those working in the early childhood setting but can also be understood as a reference to other adults who engage with the Framework with the intention of supporting learning and development of the baby, toddler or young child in their care.



**Further emphasise babies, toddlers and young children as citizens with rights**

- Enhanced focus on the right to due consideration for their views including the right to meaningfully participate and exercise influence on the decisions that affect them. Replaces the term 'children' with the overlapping age ranges of babies' (birth to 18 months), 'toddlers' (12 months to 3 years) and 'young children' (2.5 to 6 years) to recognise the importance of each distinct stage in its own right.
- Greater acknowledgement of different and various voices/languages of babies, toddlers and young children.
- Promotes the importance of both rights and emerging responsibilities including exploring and identifying their place in the world and; learning to live sustainably.

**Further embed the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion**

- Gives greater awareness of and appreciation for diverse contemporary Irish society including diversity of age, gender, family status, religion, worldview, ethnicity including membership of the Traveller community.

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- Focuses on respecting and celebrating diversity while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness.
  - Focuses on Irish cultural and linguistic history and story.

**Emphasise and reaffirm the centrality of learning through play and hands-on experiences**

- Encourages a wide variety of types of play and hands-on experiences indoors and outdoors.
- Highlights the importance of time, space, freedom, choice and resources.
- Emphasises outdoor play and learning, highlights the benefits of enjoyable, challenging, adventurous play.

**Support greater continuity of experience and progression in learning**

- Further highlights the learning that takes place in the first three years of life.
- Indicates more clearly the importance of supporting all transitions – into and out of settings, during the day, room-to-room and preschool to primary and special school. Focuses on curriculum alignment between *Aistear* and the *Primary Curriculum Framework (2023)*
- Reaffirms the importance of noticing, observing, documenting, planning and assessing holistic learning and development including positive learning dispositions.

## Appendix 2: Co-educator researcher co-construction sessions

### **A Consultation with Babies, Toddlers and Young Children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009): Phase 2**

#### **Co-researcher Educator Sessions**

**16<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October**

#### **Agenda**

#### **16<sup>th</sup> October 2023: Reflecting on Phase 1 and understanding the draft updated Aistear**

- 6:45 – 6:55      Welcome, reconnect and introduction of new team members
- 6:55 – 7:15      Summary of the key findings from Phase 1 (Leah O’Toole)
- 7:15 – 7:30      Key changes in the draft Updated Aistear (to include reference to how it responds to the findings from Phase 1 of this research) (Sharon Skehill, NCCA)
- 7:30 – 7:40      Break
- 7:40 – 8:20      Workshops on what changes to practice might support the implementation of the Updated Aistear (micro-presentations on some of the key changes (e.g. slow relational pedagogy), researcher educators can select one to attend for half an hour. (NCCA staff leading micro-presentation workshops in breakout rooms)
- 8:20 – 8:45      Suggestions on what worked well and what was challenging in Phase 1, suggestions for Phase 2, opportunity for new (and experienced) team members to ask questions.

#### **19<sup>th</sup> October 2023: Planning for Phase 2**

- 6.45-7.00:      Timeline for Phase 2. Ethics and guidelines for photographic data (Leah O’Toole)

- 7.00-7.40: Framework and child profile form to guide data collection for Phase 2 (Triona Stokes and Fiona Kelleher)
- 7.40-7.50: Break
- 7.50-8.45: Workshopping data collection tools and approaches (All)

**25<sup>th</sup> October 2023: Catch-up**

- 6.45-8.45 Catch up opportunity for anyone who was not able to attend the previous sessions. There is no need to attend this session if you were able to attend on 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>

## Appendix 3: Child profile form

TYPE OF SETTING:

NO. OF CHILDREN:

CO-RESEARCHER EDUCATOR NAME:

### CHILD PROFILE:

If there is more than one child involved in the evidence provided, please include a child profile for each individual.

PSEUDONYM:

AGE RANGE:

SOME IMPORTANT DETAILS I WOULD LIKE YOU TO KNOW ABOUT ME:

MY FAMILY (Members of family, culture, language, etc):

*Type here. Box will expand as you type.*

MY STRENGTHS, LIKES, INTERESTS and ABILITIES:

MY INDIVIDUAL NEEDS ARE:

PLEASE ADD ANY OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION:

## Dear Educator

- The sections below are structured to provide space for you to enter evidence of the opinions/experiences/perspectives of this child related to each of the key changes in the updated Aistear. There is also a section to allow you to record items of significance to the baby, toddler or young child that do not fit within the key themes identified by NCCA for the updated Aistear. This is to give children the opportunity to either agree or disagree with the updates if they choose to.
- You do not have to include something for all sections if not relevant, and you can include multiple entries for some sections that seem very relevant – boxes will expand as you enter your data.
- You are initially asked for what you saw without interpretation e.g. photograph, observation, etc. (Here is what I saw, here is what the child said, here is what the child drew, etc).
- You are then asked for your interpretation of why the item you have shared is significant for the theme you have chosen, or if in the ‘other’ section, what you think the significance of this item is.
- Please keep in mind your role as ‘interpreter of the hundred languages of children’ rather than giving your own perspective i.e. ‘why do you believe the child thinks this is important?’ rather than ‘why do you think this is important?’
- The ‘guiding document’ will give you some ideas on the types of things to include.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us about their relationships and interactions** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)



**As ‘interpreter of the hundred languages’, why did you (educator) include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding relationships and interactions?**

## **CITIZENSHIP: MY RIGHTS AND EMERGING RESPONSIBILITIES**

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us about their citizenship, rights and emerging responsibilities** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)

**As ‘interpreter of the hundred languages’, why did you include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding citizenship, rights and emerging responsibilities?**

## **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us about diversity, equity and inclusion** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)

**As ‘interpreter of the hundred languages’, why did you include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding diversity, equity and inclusion?**

## PLAY AND HANDS-ON EXPERIENCES

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us about the importance of play and hands-on experiences** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)

**As ‘interpreter of the hundred languages’, why did you include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding play and hands-on experiences?**

## TRANSITIONS: CONTINUITY OF EXPERIENCE AND PROGRESSION IN LEARNING

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us about their transitions, continuity and progression in learning** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)

**As 'interpreter of the hundred languages', why did you include this in this section? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important regarding transitions, continuity and progression in learning?**

## OTHER OPINIONS / EXPERIENCES / PERSPECTIVES OF SIGNIFICANCE TO THE BABY, TODDLER OR YOUNG CHILD

**What the baby, toddler or young child told us** (Here is what I saw the child do, here is what the child communicated, here is what the child drew, etc)

**As 'interpreter of the hundred languages', what do you think was the significance of this from the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child? Why do you believe the baby, toddler or young child thinks this is important?**

## Appendix 5: Guiding document for data collection

Setting:	<i>(insert co-researcher educator name here)</i>
<p>Key Areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationships and Interactions</li> <li>▪ Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion</li> <li>▪ Play and hands on experiences.</li> <li>▪ Citizens with rights</li> <li>▪ Transitions: Continuity of experience and progression in learning</li> <li>▪ Other</li> </ul>	<p>Some Potential Tools <i>(This is not an exhaustive list)</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>videos</i></li> <li>- <i>learning episodes</i></li> <li>- <i>learning stories</i></li> <li>- <i>puppets</i></li> <li>- <i>photographs, whiteboard where photos are displayed and reviewed / reflected upon with children</i></li> <li>- <i>poster on the door outside showing what the children have been doing –</i></li> <li>- <i>a floor book where children enter their theories about things that happen e. g. mind maps.</i></li> <li>- <i>children's work products, particularly artwork and stories about the artwork</i></li> <li>- <i>observation of play episodes</i></li> <li>- <i>observation of interactions</i></li> <li>- <i>apps like class dojo, whatsapp, instagram, seesaw,</i></li> <li>- <i>Aistear book (portfolio style scrapbook with selections made by children)</i></li> <li>- <i>mindful chat every day between the parent, child and educator ('will we tell mammy about...')</i></li> <li>- <i>conversations</i></li> <li>- <i>reading stories and discussing them</i></li> </ul> <p><i>*Please feel free to name other tools that you may have used in the gathering of your data with the babies, toddlers, and young children in your care.</i></p>



## RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS

**Aistear (2023)** *'Relationships and interactions contribute significantly to the wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children. Family, educators, friends and community members all play a role in enhancing babies' toddlers' and young children's sense of wellbeing, attachment and meitheal (community spirit of coming-together). Knowing the value of a slow, nurturing pedagogy by taking the time to value moments throughout the routines of the day, creates space for these interactions and enhances wellbeing.'*

### **Draw greater attention to the importance of interactions and relationships by:**

Focusing on building trusting relationship with babies, toddlers and young children through a slow relational pedagogy.

Re-affirming the importance of a key person approach.

Fostering enhanced connections with friends, communities and neighbourhoods.

<b>Research Question</b> <i>(designed to focus our attention on the children)</i>	<b>The Learning Experience</b> <i>From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child:                      The views, experiences and feelings of the child:                      what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</i>	<b>Tools</b> <i>Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</i>
How do you support me to learn and develop within loving relationships?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How is my individual life story acknowledged with kindness and consideration?</li> <li>▪ How do I show you if I feel supported to be with others?</li> <li>▪ How do I react when I have time and space to be with others – family, friends, peers, and others in my local community?</li> <li>▪ How do I show you if I enjoy celebrating friendships with other babies, toddlers, and young children?</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do you know if I value a slow relational and respectful pedagogy?</li> <li>▪ How do you ensure my relationships are embedded in caring connections and pedagogical practice?</li> <li>▪ How do I react when interactions are responsive and loving?</li> <li>▪ How do you foster and support connections with me and my social world?</li> <li>▪ Do I spend time with familiar groups of children and practitioners so that I can build strong, consistent, nurturing relationships?</li> <li>▪ How do you model positive learning dispositions such as kindness, empathy, inclusion, perseverance, curiosity, leadership, and enthusiasm?</li> <li>▪ How do I tell you if I feel supported through a key person approach?</li> <li>▪ How do you know if I feel safe and secure in the environment that you have created for me? How do you know about my attachments?</li> <li>▪ How do you slow things down, to be present and to notice my identity and capabilities while also seeing my potential?</li> <li>▪ By which means do you notice, listen and respond to me and show me how to be a good citizen by modelling equity, fairness, justice and respect?</li> <li>▪ How do you facilitate my demonstration of agency and expression of choice, preference and making decisions for myself and my community?</li> <li>▪ How am I supported to co-regulate and self-regulate?</li> </ul> <p><i>*This is not an exhaustive list of questions please feel free to add as you deem necessary</i></p>	
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## Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Aistear (2023) '*All babies, toddlers and young children have a right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences to fulfil their potential as unique individuals. Meaningful participation is informed by an awareness of age, gender, family status, ethnicity, religion, worldview, and membership of the Traveller community. Diversity of family, home and community are respected and celebrated while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness. Diversity, equity and inclusion are about creating a fair society where barriers are identified and addressed within empowering and inclusive environments.*'

Giving greater awareness of and appreciation for diverse contemporary Irish society including diversity of age, gender, family status, religion, worldview, ethnicity including membership of the Traveller community.

Focusing on respecting and celebrating diversity while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness.

Focusing on Irish cultural and linguistic history and story.

<b>Research Question</b> <i>(designed to focus our attention on the baby, toddler or young child)</i>	<b>The Learning Experience</b> <i>From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child:                      The views, experiences and feelings of the baby, toddler or young child:                      what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</i>	<b>Tools</b> <i>Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</i>
To what extent are you, your family and community respected and valued?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ (How) do you know if feel valued and respected?</li> <li>▪ (How) do I show you if I am experiencing an inclusive environment?</li> <li>▪ (Where) do I see my interests and identities reflected in the environment?</li> <li>▪ (How) do I react if I notice my interests and identities reflected in the environment?</li> <li>▪ What if, I am not there?</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ (How) are my ideas, preferences, needs and rights, and those of my peers, noticed and responded to?</li> <li>▪ What emotions/ non-verbal communication do I express or experience when adults notice me/us and respond appropriately?</li> <li>▪ (How) do I experience respect for my family, community, culture, and home-language(s)?</li> <li>▪ How do I feel / react when educators or peers value or celebrate my family, community, culture, or home-language(s)?</li> <li>▪ Do you recognise the role of parents as my primary educator?</li> <li>▪ How do you build relationships with my parents?</li> <li>▪ Do you make time and create space to have meaningful conversations and interactions with my parents and my family?</li> <li>▪ How do you show me that you know and understand me and my uniqueness?</li> <li>▪ How do you know if I enjoy being in a positive, inclusive, and responsive environment that you have created for me?</li> <li>▪ How do I respond if you show me that you know my parents are the most important people in my life?</li> <li>▪ (How) do my educator(s) work with my family? Am I present in encounters between my family and educator(s)? If so, what is my experience.</li> <li>▪ (How) do I tell you if I feel supported because my educators' respect and value my family's opinions and expertise?</li> </ul>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ (How) do I share my own culture and celebrations and experience other languages, song, music, dance and story? If so, how do I react to these experiences?</li> <li>▪ Do I experience connections between my educators and my extended family or my community. How do I respond when I notice or experience these connections?</li> <li>▪ How am I enabled to develop holistically and show a sense of mastery and belief in my own abilities while developing empathy and respecting diversity and inclusion?</li> </ul>	
<p>Who or what supports (or constrains) you to participate and contribute in a meaningful way?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Am I visible? Is my voice heard?</li> <li>• Do I express myself freely or confidently?</li> <li>• How do I react when my view is heard?</li> <li>• Do I trust that I will be heard and responded to regarding all matters that affect me?</li> <li>• How do I experience or respond to changes in routines and spaces?</li> <li>• How do you support me to celebrate the languages, histories and cultures of Ireland, where I live?</li> <li>• How do you help me to understand and respect views, opinions, cultures, languages and experiences that are different from mine?</li> </ul> <p>*This is not an exhaustive list of questions please feel free to add as you deem necessary</p>	

## PLAY AND HANDS ON EXPERIENCES

### Aistear 2023:

*'Babies, toddlers and young children also enjoy and benefit from expressing themselves creatively and imaginatively. Experiencing an inclusive and rich communicative environment empowers them to be agentic, competent and confident communicators.'* (Communicating)

*'Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances babies', toddlers' and young children's wellbeing. It provides opportunities for them to enhance their sense of ionadh (wonder), awe, ritual, gratitude and taitneamh a bhaint as an saol (to get enjoyment from life).'* (Wellbeing)

### Emphasise and reaffirm the centrality of learning through play and hands-on experiences by:

Encouraging a wide variety of types of play and hands-on experiences indoors and outdoors.

Highlighting the importance of time, space, freedom, choice and resources.

Emphasising outdoor play and learning, highlighting the benefits of enjoyable, challenging, adventurous play.

<b>Research Question</b> <i>(designed to focus our attention on the baby, toddler or young child)</i>	<b>The Learning Experience</b> <i>From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child:                      The views, experiences and feelings of the baby, toddler or young child:                      what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</i>	<b>Tools</b> <i>Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</i>
How am I afforded opportunities to engage in creative play and processes, on my own and with others? And to have ample opportunity to create and have that which I create	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By which means am I supported to develop socially and creatively through play and hands-on learning experiences?</li> <li>• (How) have I been encouraged to share my feelings, thoughts and ideas through different types of play, and through playful, inclusive and creative experiences?                      [including, but not limited to, dance, digital technologies, drama, music, song, story, and visual arts].</li> </ul>	

<p>valued? And how are my creative impulses, thinking and exploring, my capacity to take risks, and to follow my imagination and instincts for creative expression, nurtured and developed?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through playing and interacting with others in playful inquiry-based learning experiences, (how) have I been empowered to be creative, to take risks, and to make discoveries, learning thinking and metacognitive skills?</li> <li>• (How) am I supported to be creative and take the initiative to explore, try, imagine and express myself in a variety of ways?</li> <li>• Which resources or provocations can stimulate or nurture me as I learn by being active, and using my senses to explore and learn about the world?</li> <li>• (How) am I supported to gain access to open-ended and natural materials to help me explore, be creative and use my imagination?</li> <li>• (In which ways) are my own creative thoughts, ideas and imaginings noticed, heard and/or responded to?</li> <li>• (How) have I been supported to communicate and develop early literacy experiences through creative expression using skills [such as mark-making, cutting, drawing, transient art, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, threading, sewing, and weaving, emphasising the process over product.</li> </ul> <p>*This is not an exhaustive list of questions please feel free to add as you deem necessary</p>	
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## Citizens with Rights

Aistear (2023):

*‘Aistear considers how sustainability might be understood through the three pillars of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. As global citizens, each baby, toddler and young child has emerging responsibility for sustainability. Seeing beyond the gates of their immediate vicinity to the different services, settings, places, people and their roles within the community, creates an awareness of babies’, toddlers’ and young children’s belonging within this space. Nurturing their sense of ionadh (wonder) and awe in local history, folklore and storytelling, and awakening an interest in nature and native trees, plants and wildlife establishes a mindful awareness of place and their role in that story.*

*Educating babies, toddlers and young children about sustainability focuses attention on the wonders of our world and creates a cultural gaze of respect and responsibility, in not only coming to know about climate action and biodiversity, but also in learning about issues such as inequity, poverty and discrimination. This can include showing compassion for the planet and the people that live on it, supporting collective wellbeing, and developing a sense of social justice and equity to promote a fairer, healthier and more sustainable world.’*

*‘Babies, toddlers and young children are competent, confident and agentic global citizens with rights. As unique individuals, they communicate their opinions, choices and needs in many different ways. They have a right to be heard and to be empowered to experience democracy. From their experiences as citizens, they learn that as well as having rights they also have emerging responsibilities, for themselves, for others and for the environment.*

Enhancing the focus on the right to due consideration for their views including the right to meaningfully participate and exercise influence on the decisions that affect them.

Providing greater acknowledgement of different and various voices/languages of babies, toddlers and young children.

Promoting the importance of both rights and emerging responsibilities including exploring and identifying their place in the world and learning to live sustainably.

<b>Research Question</b> <i>(designed to focus our attention on the baby, toddler or young child)</i>	<b>The Learning Experience</b> <i>From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child:                      The views, experiences, and feelings of the baby, toddler or young child:                      what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</i>	<b>Tools</b> <i>Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</i>

<p>How is my contribution (verbal or otherwise), heard/seen and valued? And how is my emerging and developing awareness of my role as a global citizen in taking responsibility for the environment facilitated? How am I supported to develop my understanding of justice, to practise empathy and to respect the perspectives of others? How do I understand and celebrate my cultural identity and that of others?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (In which ways) do you acknowledge that I am an agentic citizen and use my 'voice' to show you what is important to me?</li> <li>• (By which means) do you notice, listen, and respond to me and show me how to be a good citizen by modelling equity, fairness, justice and respect?</li> <li>• (In which ways) do you facilitate my developing awareness of my emerging responsibilities to care for myself, for others and for the environment, and practices relating to these?</li> <li>• (In which ways) do you provide meaningful opportunities for me to live sustainably?</li> <li>• (How) do you support me to celebrate the languages, histories and cultures of Ireland, where I live?</li> <li>• (How) do you help me to understand and respect views, opinions, cultures, languages and experiences that are different from mine?</li> <li>• (How) do you facilitate my demonstration of agency and expression of choice, preference and making decisions for myself and my community?</li> <li>• (How) am I enabled to develop holistically and show a sense of mastery and belief in my own abilities while developing empathy and respecting diversity and inclusion?</li> <li>• (How) am I provided with opportunities to explore and identify my place in the world, and be empowered to live sustainably as an agentic, respectful, caring and compassionate global citizen?</li> <li>• (In which ways) do you acknowledge that I am an agentic citizen and use my 'voice' to show you what is important to me?</li> </ul>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (In which ways) do you facilitate my developing awareness of my emerging responsibilities to care for myself, for others and for the environment, and practices relating to these?</li> <li>• (In which ways) do you provide meaningful opportunities for me to live sustainably?</li> <li>• (How) am I provided with opportunities to explore and identify my place in the world, and be empowered to live sustainably as an agent, respectful, caring and compassionate global citizen?</li> </ul> <p>*This is not an exhaustive list of questions please feel free to add as you deem necessary</p>	
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## Transitions: Continuity of experience and progression in learning

*Aistear (2023):*  
*'Babies, toddlers and young children participate in transitions within and between the daily routines, from one room to another, from one educational setting to another, and between home and other places where they spend time. All transitions are important and are recognised as a process that takes time rather than a once-off event. Ensuring progression in learning and development and continuity of experiences requires consistent relationships with a shared responsibility between families, childminders<sup>4</sup>, educators, settings and schools in the best interests of the baby, toddler and young child'*

Further highlighting the learning that takes place in the first three years of life.

Indicating more clearly the importance of supporting all transitions – into and out of settings, during the day, room-to-room and preschool to primary and special school.

Reaffirming the importance of noticing, observing, documenting, planning and assessing holistic learning and development including positive learning dispositions.

<b>Research Question</b> <i>(designed to focus our attention on the baby, toddler or young child)</i>	<b>The Learning Experience</b> <i>From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child:  The views, experiences and feelings of the baby, toddler or young child:  what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</i>	<b>Tools</b> <i>Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</i>
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<p>How do you ensure that all my transitions and progression of learning is enjoyable, positive and effective?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) am I supported to engage in child led play that is relevant and meaningful?</li> <li>• (How) do you know that during all the different transitions that I experience throughout the day that I feel safe and that I have people who know and care about me?</li> <li>• (How) do you learn about me and know what I want and need to make my transitions as positive and effective as they can be?</li> <li>• What do you learn if you talk with my family and significant others who care for me and know me best?</li> <li>• (How) do I show you that I am an agentic, confident, and competent learner?</li> <li>• How do you notice and respond to how I am developing dispositions, attitudes and values, skills and knowledge and understanding?</li> <li>• How do you ensure that change and transitions are made better for me? Do you talk to me and to each other to plan and ensure transitions are seamless?</li> <li>• How do you help me to learn to predict and handle transitions well and be empowered to communicate my feelings and emotions so that I can make sense of life experiences and cope with challenges that may arise? How do I communicate to you whether this has been successful?</li> <li>• How do you ensure that the routines including my caring and feeding routines are embraced in a slow and nurturing way as part of my learning journey?</li> <li>• How do I show you that I value time with my friends, family, and mixed age groupings as well as social visits with my grandparents and people from my community?</li> <li>• Do you talk with me and to each other so that I can handle change? How do I communicate to you whether this has been successful?</li> </ul>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) does the cycle of noticing, planning, documenting and assessing and the emergent inquiry-based curriculum build on what I share?</li> </ul>	
<p>*This is not an exhaustive list of questions please feel free to add as you deem necessary</p>		
<p><b>OTHER OPINIONS / EXPERIENCES / PERSPECTIVES OF SIGNIFICANCE TO THE BABY, TODDLER OR YOUNG CHILD</b></p> <p>Please use this section to identify any gaps in Aistear that the baby, toddler or young child has expressed through their struggles/challenges/silences.</p>		
<p><b>Research Question</b> (designed to focus our attention on the baby, toddler or young child)</p>	<p><b>The Learning Experience</b> From the perspective of the baby, toddler or young child: The views, experiences, and feelings of the baby, toddler or young child: what happened? what am I communicating? Please provide clear examples through the tools selected.</p>	<p><b>Tools</b> Which tools did you use to capture this learning?</p>
<p>What significant experiences have I had that do not fit in the above categories?</p>		
<p>Are there any struggles or challenges that are not visible in Aistear?</p>		

## Appendix 6: Focus Group Schedule (Feb 2024)

The key areas are:

- Relationships and Interactions
- Citizenship: My Rights and Emerging Responsibilities
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Play and Hands-on Experiences
- Transitions: Continuity of Experience and Progression in Learning
- Transitions for babies
- Other experiences

### **Questions:**

1. This project used a participant action research approach, which involved you as a co-researcher. What was your experience of this type of approach?
  - a. What was valuable for you?
  - b. What challenges did it present for you?
  - c. Would you participate in this type of project again? Why/ why not?
2. If the research was repeated, what would you change/improve?
3. From your experience and observations, which strand(s) do you feel resonated with the children most? What evidence do you have to support this? Can you give examples of what they said or did?
4. From your experience and observations, which strand(s) do you feel children supported least? What evidence do you have to support this? Can you give examples of what they said or did?
5. Are there any of the strands you feel children thought were not relevant or important?
6. Are there any strands you felt were particularly challenging to evidence in terms of children's experiences and thoughts/views?
7. Were there any other areas you feel could or should be included/ developed?
8. Have you any other comments you would like to make in relation to this project?

## Appendix 7: Information sheet and consent form for educators



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
A College of Queen's University Belfast

### **A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Phase 2**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET TO EDUCATORS**

##### **Who are we?**

- We are a team of researchers from: Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education; Stranmillis University College; and Early Childhood Ireland.
- We are undertaking a research study commissioned and funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which is an agency of the Department of Education, on Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework for children, which is called Aistear.
- We all have experience of working and researching with young children and families.

The research team are:

##### **Maynooth University**

Dr Leah O' Toole

Deirdre Forde

Dr Triona Stokes

##### **Stranmillis University College**

Dr Glenda Walsh

Dr Suzanne McCarthy

Dr Andrea Doherty

##### **Early Childhood Ireland**

Dr Carmel Ward

Fiona Kelleher

##### **What is the research about?**

The purpose of this research is to capture children's views on what is working well with Aistear as they experience it and how Aistear might be enhanced or updated, and to gain their views on the proposed



updates to Aistear developed by the NCCA.

The NCCA is currently reviewing and updating Aistear, which this agency developed, and then published in 2009, and is consulting with stakeholders to hear their views on the framework. Our research, with babies, toddlers and young children, is one of these consultations. More information is available through this link: <https://ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/early-childhood-education-developments/updating-aistear/>.

The researchers are interested in exploring how children's learning and development is supported through the national curriculum framework.

### **Why am I being asked to have a role in the research?**

The central principle of the NCCA's updating process is that Aistear is fundamental to children's lived experiences of early childhood education and care in Ireland, and has become the bedrock of good practice in many settings, including in early education and care services for children. Therefore, the children's experiences of what is working well with Aistear and views on any updates are vital to any changes to be made on it by the NCCA. As an educator working with children in Aistear your role and experiences are vital to the project, specifically in terms of the data collection aspect.

To be clear, this research is not an assessment or evaluation of your implementation of Aistear. This is a consultative research study which uses a Participant Action Research approach where you, the educator, and indeed the children, partner with the researchers in the three institutions through the use of research methods such as those listed below, to gain children's perspectives.

### **What will the study involve?**

This is Phase 2 of the research. The first phase involved collecting data on children's experiences of Aistear. The researchers then provided that information to the NCCA in a research report and the NCCA developed proposed amendments to Aistear. This Phase involves the researchers again engaging with you and the children to gain children's views on the proposed revisions to Aistear.

Data collection will take place in November and December 2023 in your setting.

To collect information for the research, children participating in this research may be asked to:

- take photographs and/or draw a pictures
- participate in other creative activities
- engage in focus groups
- assent to being observed by the educator to assess their engagement in playful learning activities.

We may also undertake an audit of the setting environment to understand and locate the children's perspectives in context.

As the early childhood educator, you will lead in the collection of these types of data. This research project recognises the importance of the relationship you have with the children, and we know that when children are comfortable, safe and secure they can express their views and opinions more freely.

You will receive training on data collection in general, and on a suite of data collection methods from

the researchers named previously. You will also be invited to take part in an online reflective conversation regarding cultural awareness in working with babies, toddlers and young children.

You and the children in your care will participate in the research during your daily activities while with the group of children you engage with every day in the setting/school.

Each participating setting will be given a tablet on which to record their data. In recognition of their work, the settings can keep these tablets at the end of research period, subject to deletion of all project data. You may be asked to provide personal contact details such as an email address and phone number in order to help the research team to communicate with you during the project, but you details will not be shared with anyone. They will be stored securely on a password protected device in Maynooth University only accessible to the researchers and will be deleted on completion of the project.

To summarise, participating educators in this project will be asked to:

- ✓ Support the core research team in distributing consent forms to parents / guardians for approval for their children to take part in the research and receiving the completed forms from parents / guardians. You will also be asked to monitor and respond to indicators of children's assent on an ongoing basis during data collection.
- ✓ Attend two initial 2-hour online training / development sessions with the core research team at the beginning of the research period (October 2023) that will focus on understanding the changes to Aistear that are proposed by NCCA and how these might impact on their practice, and how they might document and interpret the experiences of babies, toddlers and young children while minimising the impact of 'adult gaze'. These sessions will also focus strongly on consent / assent, the ethical use of data collection instruments (particularly photographs) and data protection requirements.
- ✓ You are invited to join a one-hour online reflective conversation on cultural awareness in working with babies, toddlers and young children.
- ✓ Over a period of 6 weeks during November and December 2023 engage in 4 data collection activities using data collection tools of their choice from the suite of tools provided. Educators will need to store materials gathered ethically and securely on the i-pad provided, ensure that they are anonymised (e. g. no names on observations, art-work, etc, no faces or other identifiable elements visible in photographs) then upload them to Teams (direction will be provided on how to do this during the training provided by the core research team).
- ✓ Attend a one hour online reflective focus group at the end of the data collection period. This focus group will be recorded to facilitate data analysis. You will be informed when recording begins and you may turn off their camera or leave the focus group at any time if you wish. The recording will be stored securely and will not be shared beyond the research team.

- ✓ Return the i-pad to the core research team for deletion of data by the project PI in accordance with data protection guidelines. Educators will then be permitted to keep the i-pad.

### **Do you have to take part?**

**No, you do not.**

Participation is voluntary, which means you can stop taking part at any time without saying why. You can also withdraw permission to use your data at any time.

We do not think there is any risk to you in taking part in this research. However, you can talk to the researcher(s) at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

The benefits of participation, however, include professional development and learning, and we hope the data collection methods developed can be used to support your everyday practice.

### **What about the consent of the parents / guardians and the children?**

Written informed consent will be sought from the parents/guardians of each participating child. The young children will be given the opportunity to verbally augment or rescind the written consent that parents / guardians had given on their behalf. Consent will be negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis with all babies, toddlers and young children, particularly those who are preverbal or have additional needs. Educators will send the materials gathered to the core research team in Maynooth University without any names or identifying information on it by January 2024. Parents / guardians and children can withdraw from the project at any time until the information collected is anonymised in this way – once the information is sent to the researchers it will be deleted from the educator's device, so there will be no way to withdraw after that point as the researchers will have no way of knowing which materials relate to which child.

### **Who has approved this research?**

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. It is not anticipated that there are any risks to you or your staff.

### **Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. All the information provided in this research will be kept private and confidential.

*'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'*

All information gathered will be treated as confidential, will be used for the purposes of the research study, report and subsequent academic publications only, and no student, school, early childhood

setting, educator, or child will be named or be identified in any research outputs.

In the focus group at the end of the data collection period, all participants will be either educators like yourself or members of the core research team. While the research team cannot control whether other educators discuss the content of the focus group outside of that forum, the importance of confidentiality will be explained, and all participants will be asked to commit to holding confidentiality for the discussion.

All the information gained through the research will be stored safely on password-protected computers for 10 years, after which it will be destroyed.

Information gathered from the research study may be used in future research about this project, for example, conferences and journal publications. The data files will be anonymised and aggregated data and be valuable for other databases after the project in line with the Open Data Directive.

The researchers are obliged to archive the anonymised data arising out of the study with a public archive, which means that other researchers can reuse the data, but all the data will be in a form which ensures you, your settings' and the child's privacy and anonymity.

Should any child disclose information while engaging in the research with you, which may impact the child's safety, the procedures outlined in your service's Child Safeguarding Statement must be followed.

### **What will happen to the information which you give?**

All the information your child provides will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you, the setting, or the child. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the researcher.

### **What will happen to the research results?**

The research will be written up and presented to the NCCA as they have commissioned the work. A copy of the research findings will be made available by the NCCA on their website [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). We may also present the findings at academic conferences, seminars for educators, in podcasts, in academic journals or magazines.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact the key researcher Dr. Leah O' Toole, Principal Investigator, Maynooth University.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have any concerns, please contact Dr. Leah O' Toole, Principal Investigator, Maynooth

University, email: [leah.otoole@mu.ie](mailto:leah.otoole@mu.ie).

However, If you have concerns about this project and wish to speak to an independent person, you should contact: Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee, John Hume Building, North Campus, Maynooth. Tel. 01 7086682. Email: [research.development@mu.ie](mailto:research.development@mu.ie). If you agree to take part in the research, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

### Consent Form for Participant Educators

I.....agree to participate in the research study titled **A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.**

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions and am happy that they have been answered.

I understand that my real name will not appear in the study.

I am participating voluntarily.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without question at any time.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data until such time as they have been anonymised.

It has been explained to me that all information will be kept securely on a password-protected

computer and destroyed after 10 years.

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access them on request until such time as they have been anonymised.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I consent to take part in data collection with children.

I consent to take part in an online, recorded focus group with other educators and the research team at the end of the period of data collection with children

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects

OR

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant

Name in block capitals .....

*I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.*

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals .....

*If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given*

*have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@mu.ie](mailto:research.ethics@mu.ie) or*  
*Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

*For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Contact information for the Data Protection Office is available here: [Data Protection | Maynooth University](#). Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.*