Rights and Agency for Babies, Toddlers and Young Children

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Contents

Introduction and context

This paper reviews how the rights of babies, toddlers and young children are conceptualised within national and international literature. Focussing specifically from birth to 6 years of age, the paper considers how rights are situated and examines how, through implementation of *Aistear: the Early Childhood* Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024a), the workforce can bridge the gap between rights-based policy and practice in early childhood education.

The most recent version of *Aistear* (GoI, 2024a; GoI, 2024b) includes a reconceptualization of childhood, embedded in a rights-based pedagogy underpinned by an awareness of cultural tensions and challenges facing the early childhood sector (O'Toole *et al.*, 2023a; 2023b). The document exemplifies a strength-based model to recalibrate value and credence in the workforce and reaffirms the connection between professional knowledge and optimising learning environments to support each child's capacity for voice.

The findings presented arise from completion of a comprehensive desk-based literature review which, like others (Horgan, 2024), included examination of Ireland's historical and political early education context and a review of developments which led to and have occurred since ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). There is not scope in this paper to present an in-depth overview of all political developments, rather, it presumes reader knowledge of the former and latter and suggests further reading of the sources shared in the reference list.

Three guiding questions provide a steer to examine how *Aistear* can support how educator understanding and appreciation for babies, toddlers and young children's rights can be fulfilled in everyday practices in early childhood education. The findings presented herein is not an exhaustive examination of all sources but an overview of core literature that elevates the principles and vision of *Aistear* (GoI, 2024a) to build upon established knowledge of early childhood rights.

1. How is the UNCRC understood in early childhood, with consideration of rights from birth through to age 6 years of age?
2. What does 'agency' look like for babies, toddlers and young children in the early years learning environment?
3. What is the role of the educator in facilitating the voice of the baby, toddler and young child?

How is the UNCRC understood in early childhood, with consideration of rights from birth through to age 6 years of age?

Since its inception, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, (OHCHR) 1989) has been a guiding lens for political, societal and educational developments across all State Parties. The Convention sets out 54 articles identifying the rights to which every child is entitled (UN, 1989). Four guiding principles are identified within Article 2 (Non-discrimination); Article 3 (Best interests of the child); Article 6 (Right to life, survival and development) and Article 12 (Right to be heard) and are positioned as universal, interwoven and interconnected (UN, 2003; NCCA, 2025).

Specifically, Article 12 enshrines a child's right to be 'heard' and conditions,

> *State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
> (UN, 1989)

Giving weight in accordance with age and maturity is reliant upon an advantageous image of the child and their views being 'heard' by persons who have appreciation for the 'full recognition of, and respect for, nonverbal forms of communication' (UN, 1989, para 21) in environments that empower and facilitate expression of voice (Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne, 2011). As such, other articles including Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 16 (a child's right to privacy), Article 14, (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) (UN, 1989) are essential in realising the potential for every child's right to be heard. Viewing articles together, and not in isolation (Lundy, 2007) therefore, elevates children's participation rights assuring all children's views and voices are given due weight, no matter their 'age or maturity' (UN, 1989).

Children's rights in Ireland

Hayes (2010) and Forde and Kilkenny (2021) offer a comprehensive critique of Ireland's implementation of rights since ratifying the treaty in 1992. However, they note that whilst there have been significant inroads made in safeguarding and political discourse, children have been overlooked for too long in decisions concerning their rights in early education policy and practice. Lundy *et al.*, (2012) emphasise admirable progression in Irish policy development but highlight legislation advancements fall short. Wider appreciation for children's rights and the contexts that enrich potential for agency has been made possible by Lundy's Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007) which revolutionised application of the UNCRC locally (GoI, 2018; 2021) and internationally (European Union, 2024). Ward and Lundy (2024) however, observe slowing and

stagnating advancements and suggest there is still work to do to enact the treaty fully (Murray, Swadener and Smith, 2020; CRAE, 2022; OECD, 2024; NCCA, 2025).

Translation into early childhood education

Mahony, McLoed, Salamon and Dwyer (2024) refer to the UNCRC as 'the most significant and binding international document' for protecting the rights of children. In parallel with contemporary research advancements corroborating the significance of early childhood (e.g. The Center on the Developing Child, 2020), the Convention has permanently altered the political landscape for children. Though many maintain that very young children remain the most vulnerable, disenfranchised and least visible stakeholder in international policy development (Long ,2019; Wall *et al.*, 2019; Cassidy *et al.*, 2022). Too often a 'passive bystander' (Shaik, Martin, Moodley, 2021, p. 258), they are rarely involved in political consultations or decisions that matter to them (Blaisdell *et al.*, 2019). Guard (2023b) argues this political blindness ripples into early childhood settings and implicates how young children's rights are realised in everyday practices, which is where *Aistear* provides real potential to alleviate these concerns. Early childhood education remains an 'implied' right, rather than duty bound requirement (UNCRC, 2006a; Coady and Tobin, 2020, p.42). Lundy (2020) points out that whilst early childhood education is not specifically mentioned in the treaty, reviews of state party implementation have guided subsequent revisions which have been pivotal in endorsing '...children's earliest years are the foundation for their physical and mental health, emotional security, cultural and personal identity, and developing competencies' (GC no. 1, UN, 2005, para 6e).

Sheppard (2022) argues that morally, the creation of a new optional protocol could 'add important substance' (p.114) to children's right to early education. An assumed recommendation to provide access to early education emerges in the UNCRC General Comment No. 7 (UN, 2005) stating education has potential to, 'empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence' and that this must be achieved in ways that are child-centred, child-friendly and reflect the rights and inherent dignity of the child (GC No. 1, para. 2. UN 2001). How State Parties apply this guidance remains open to interpretation.

There has justifiably been significant interest in the expansion of children's participation rights, with substantial advancements in advocacy for very, young children in the last decade (Arnott and Wall, 2022; Ward and Lundy, 2024). Examination of rights through notions of decision making (Hudson, 2021), giving voice (MacFadyn *et al.*, 2023), listening climates (Rinaldi, 2005; 2021), wellbeing (Brogaard-Clausen *et al.*, 2022) and belonging (Sumison and Wong, 2011; Guo and Dalli, 2016) emerged. Which, whilst welcomed, resulted in uncertainty around how all these dimensions interconnected with the rights agenda (Bae, 2009) leading to professional ambiguity and

translation between policy and rights-based practice falling short. Here, the role of the educator becomes an essential mediator (Cole-Alback, Pascal and Bertram, 2024).

Aistear seeks to unify policy and practice by supporting educators to embed a 'rights-based, emergent and inquiry-based' (GoI, 2024a, p.13) pedagogy. Framing educators as ethically accountable for children's rights as duty bearers, *Aistear* pivots its core principles around the belief that respectful, responsive and relational care empower agency in early childhood. It draws on several dimensions of agency to inform how babies, toddlers and young children's participation can be regarded.

- **Right as Agency** – Griffin (2001) posits that human rights can only be realised on account of agency of the individual. Individuals possess qualities including autonomy, liberty and dignity which direct how rights are actioned and realised. The pursuit of rights e.g. *to play; to express oneself,* are agentic actions, which demonstrate capabilities to one's rights and flourish in life. Agency, like rights needs protection.

- **Right as Participation** – Participation is characterised by a child's right to be heard and have their view considered (Lundy, 2007). Meaningful participation arises from young children being viewed as individuals with something valuable to contribute. Correia and Aguiar (2022, p.374) suggest participation is most meaningful when rooted in children's everyday lives and anchored in multiple interactions. Herbots and Put, (2015) point out that achieving true participation in early childhood education is a complex and multilayered due to individual, environmental and political variations. Interestingly, Shier (2001) identifies that individuals and organisations will likely have varying levels of commitment to and for children's participation which play out in practice and policy making decisions implicating the agency of the individual. Opportunities and openings (Shier 2001, p.110) to exercise participation should be varied, developmentally appropriate and be received by interested and respectful adults.

- **Right as a Voice** - Affording young children agency and positioning them as an individual with a voice has a contentious discourse. To give voice to a baby without *speaking on their behalf* (Bradley *et al.*, 2012; Elwick *et al.*, 2014a, 2014b) requires reflective engagement of early communication patterns (Guard, 2024) and necessitates the development of deeply attuned relationships between adult and child (Trevarthen, Delafield-Butt and Dunlop, 2018). It is not enough to have a voice, the voice must be valued and appreciated. Wall *et al.*, (2019) reiterate how voice is context specific, aligning to Herbots and Put (2015) who imply potential for power imbalance and complexities to arise.

- **Right as a Listening Culture** – Possibly the most widely recognised concept in early childhood education, a pedagogy of listening affords potential for children to be respected, valued and heard (Lundy, 2007; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Emerging from the Reggio Emilia approach, listening to children has been highly theorised (Clark and Moss, 2005, Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Lundy, 2007, Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Moore, 2021) resulting in various paradigms advocating for the creation of open listening spaces (NCCA, 2007; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; Moore, 2021) between children and adults. Young children possess the capabilities to 'express a view' (Lundy, 2007, p.935) but these views must be listened to authentically and taken seriously by adults.

- **Right as a Sense of Belonging** – Advancing on the concept of listening, Keaton, Bodie, and Keteyian, (2015) theorise 'relational listening' as advancing the right to belong. Guo and Dalli (2016) argue that agency is motivated by a child's desire 'to belong' in early childhood spaces and it is this desire that drives their agentic actions. Achieving a sense of belonging is a basic right and should be prioritised through validating children's contributions in the social world through responsive and reciprocal listening. This has the potential to elevate children's sense of belonging and contribute to overall wellbeing (Pinazza, 2012).

What does 'agency' look like for babies, toddlers and young children in the early years learning environment?

Aistear (GoI, 2024a, p.30) makes a distinction between *having* agency and *being* agentic, which assists in understanding how both can be realised for babies, toddlers and young children in practice.

> *Agency for babies, toddlers and young children is being able to make choices about and in their learning. Their agency is evident in the way they practically and emotionally transform the lives of those around them. They influence relationships, decisions and the working of their social worlds.*
>
> *Agentic is when a baby, toddler or young child is empowered and makes choices and decisions for themselves. Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning.*

Aistear seeks to reframe how babies, toddlers and young children are conceptualised across the curriculum advocating for voice, autonomy, freedom and wellbeing to sit at the heart of practice (GoI, 2024a; GoI, 2024b). Literature reviewed defines agency differently, with some offering explicit definitions whilst others engaging broader discussions to suggest agency arises from individual motivations (Griffin, 2001) and the interactions between environmental contexts and

dynamic inter relationship experiences (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Stetsenko, 2019; Jerome and Starkey, 2022). Most contributions agree agency is a complicated construct (Benson-McMullen, 2022), its definition diverse and subjective in nature (Varpanen, 2019). Historic and contemporary literature define agency as the individual's capacity to 'act', often intentionally in the social world (Prout and James, 1990; Esser, Baader, Betz and Hungerland, 2017). Classification of 'childhood agency' (James, Jenks and Prout,1998) aided a shift in discourse to appreciate the individual capacity of children to act intentionally and make decisions. Paris and Lung's (2008) study of child centred practices define agency as a 'willingness to act, to take initiative, and to do so mindfully and intentionally' (2008, p.255). Familiar in early childhood literature is James and James's (2012) conception of children as 'independent social actors', who are active in the construction of their own social lives (James and Prout, 2015, p. 8; Esser, Baader, Betz and Hungerland, 2017, p.3).

Other scholars have advanced research through studies depicting agency and rights through varying perspectives. Those included below are considered to inform educator understanding of agency and its emergence in early childhood.

- The most influential in *Aistear's* creation and Irish literature, is The Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007). The aim of the model was to draw political attention to children's capacity of voice and agency and reinforcing the duty of wider political and societal systems to aid participation rights. Lundy (2007; 2012) interconnects four principles of Voice, Space, Audience and Influence to exemplify how voice is realised. This will be unique and different for every child and requires inclusive and responsive systems to ensure children's contributions are acted upon.

- Alderson and Yoshida (2016;2020) characterise six visible elements of agency in early childhood. They describe babies, toddlers and young children as unique embodied agents who are physically and verbally active (1), demonstrating conscious, purposeful motives and decision making (2) through their social engagement with others (3). Like definitions of adult agency, they suggest young children have a moral awareness of their own needs, desires and the impact of self (4) and cause and *affect* on others (6). Crucially positioned within the dimensions are the components of time, space and opportunity for agency to be realised (5). Without such, they claim human agency can be restricted.

- Esser (2016) believes agency can be understood as a social construction emerging through the interplay between networks and 'nodes' in which children exist (Fuchs, 2001). The different ties and connections formed throughout childhood, and the quality of those relational connections are essential to agency development. This is a view supported by

others, for example, Sugarman and Sokol, (2012) who suggest agency can be moulded through the child's interactions with others and the environment.

- Sairanen and Kumpulainen (2014) explored the modalities of preschool children's agency, informed by Archer (2000), when they state agency is constructed as interaction between the individual and the social context within temporal and cultural spaces (Sairanen and Kumpulainen, 2014, p. 145). Their study in Finland considered the resources required to mediate the development of agency via a range of modalities including 'being able to do something, knowing they can do something and feeling, experiencing and appreciating doing something' (2014, p.145). They concluded how agency is mediated through meaningful interaction with and in response to artefacts including photographs, relationships with others, including peers, cultural beliefs, time and activity in settings and the interactions that emerge between them all.

- Stetsenko (2019, p. 9) foregrounds the term 'radical-transformative agency'. Her argument arises from the view that engaging in relationships with others does not sufficiently explain agency. Rather she claims, agency is deeply entangled with our 'present realities', which are unique to our 'historical time and place, highly conflictual, turbulent…' (2019, p.11). Individual children seek to contribute to a community, transform the world around them and co-create with others collectively. Their ability to 'give' themselves' to establish identity uniquely in the world explains agency.

- Benson-McMullen's (2022) distinction between autonomy and agency is helpful to position agency as 'acting on freedom' acquired through the development of autonomy, particularly when considering babies. This implies the gradual progression toward independence, and essential competency required for lifelong learning. For young children it is essential that they are afforded the opportunity to explore and have control over their learning environment and be able to make their own choices and become 'agents' of their own learning.

- Von-Bonsdorff (2018) describes 'aesthetic agency' which connects agency with play, creativity and imagination. In her studies, von-Bonsdorff (2018) aligns to familiar constructs from early childhood education, suggesting that agency be identifiable through children's imagination and co-creation in the social world. She argues positioning children as 'actors' and 'agents' illuminate different constructs, though both have importance for children's play and imagination. Only viewing 'agency' may limited the imagination and improvisation 'actors' portray in play scenarios. Furthermore, she advances thinking in the arena of lying as a

characteristic of agency illuminating the significance of storytelling, secrets and morality in early childhood.

- Shengjergji (2024) understands agency through a socio-cultural lens, defining it as a 'continuous and dynamic process, where children co-construct, contest, and negotiate agency in dialogic interactions with others' (p.835). Her study explores the role of digital literacies in storytelling encounters in Swedish preschools and offers an advantageous view of children's agentic behaviours as they engage in co-constructing interactions with responsive teachers. The study upholds the pivotal role teachers play in 'fostering and facilitating' (p.848) expressions of agency.

Aistear (GoI, 2024a) takes influence from all, framing agency across all principles and four interconnected themes to centralise children's wellbeing, identity and belonging, positioning them as 'Agentic Global Citizens' (GoI, 2024a, p. 16). Like *Aistear*, nearly all sources agree that agency is not a fixed construct and will evolve in response to dynamic interaction with environmental influences (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). For example, Jerome and Starkey, (2022, p.449) suggest 'a sliding scale … where an individual child sits on that scale depends as much on the adults and the institutional context as it does on their own innate maturity or level of development'. Curriculum guidance, therefore, and the way in which it is enacted, and by whom, has real potential to restrict or empower agency in early childhood (Baker and Le Courtis, 2022). As such, providing a well-resourced, responsive and inclusive environment is central to learning and development. Without this, the visibility and appreciation of agency in early childhood is reduced and child centred practices weakened.

How might agency be visible in *everydayness* with babies, toddlers and young children?

Babies

Babies assert their ability to communicate and connect with others from birth (Trevarthen, 1999; Reddy, 2008, 2018). Humans are driven internally to connect with and share experiences with others and babies usually achieve this through body movements as a form of communication and expressions (Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen, 2015; 2020). Voice and agency are visible in infancy through the multimodality of communications babies enact through watching, movements, responses, vocalisation, gestures, facial expressions and silences (GC No. 7, para 14, UN, 2005; Reddy, 2018; Wall, *et al.*, 2019; Rouse, 2022; Guard, 2023a; GoI, 2024a).

Meaning making through shared encounters, particularly when bodies move in sync, enriches the baby's world and 'gives meaning to life' (Delafield-Butt, 2018, p.61). A baby's first experiences of this synchronicity is usually in the home, though extended family and friends also play a pivotal role in how they value and respond to the child's expressions. In response to positive, loving home relationships, a baby's personality and identity materialise which in turn promotes the development of self-expression. The skills cultivated through early engagement usually support babies to evolve agentic social and emotional capacities to lay the foundation for widening relationships with others, including educators (Salamon and Harrison, 2015).

Delafield-Butt (2018) provides a helpful description of agency in infancy which connects closely with Aistear's (GoI, 2024a) distinction between agency and 'being agentic'. To illustrate, he applies the following narration, 'I like to move it' to describe the self-generated and drive babies internally hold to be physically expressive. 'I like to move it with you' (Delafield-Butt, 2018, p.59) supports the understanding that to evolve capacities of agency babies need to be empowered by the responses and presence of physically and emotionally available educators, particularly in moments of transition (Guard, 2024).

Babies make determined active choices in the way in which they pay attention to things and others (Alderson, 2013; Alderson and Yoshida, 2020). They are intentional in demonstrating who they seek to connect with and demonstrate their participation in the social world explicitly through behaviours and reactions to their environment. Alderson and Yoshida's (2020) dimensions of agency are helpful to appreciate a baby's embodied physical action, and the underlying conscious and purposeful motives that drive agency. Rich social environments that promote close, responsive, ethically and morally rich connections are essential to the development of agency in infancy (Alderson and Yoshida, 2020). Guo and Dalli (2016) connect agency with developing a sense of belonging which assists in strengthening appreciation for the importance of early relationships. Babies are seeking to connect and achieve a sense of safety and belonging and they need attuned and responsive educators, such as a key person (Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck, 2012; GoI, 2024b) to facilitate this.

To ensure early learning environments are relationally focussed, *Aistear* advocates a slow pedagogical approach (Clark 2020; French, 2021; Clark, 2022) be adopted. In Australia, Bussey (2019) examined everyday interactions in daily routines, and emphasised the importance of affording children's participation during moments of care. Slowed respectful care offered within a child centred routine holds rich potential for agency to emerge, but how adults facilitate these moments is critical (Bussey, Peryman and Martinez, 2021). *Aistear* promotes the importance of warm and respectful connectedness and French (2021) reiterates evidence affirming babies (and

all children) thrive in 'low-stress-facilitating environments that support physical movement and play organised, literally, from the babies and toddler's perspective' (French, 2021, p.137). Without this, their rights will not be fully valued or realised.

Toddlers

As babies move into toddlerhood, their agency will continue to evolve through demonstration of seeking independence and autonomy over decisions and actions (Mashford and Church, 2011). It is vital that adults respect the child's enthusiasm as they explore, negotiate, compromise and build resilience (Macfarlene and Cartmel, 2008). Toddlers will be motivated to make their own choices and decisions over all aspects of their life, for example during mealtimes and care routines. Therefore, fostering environments that welcome freedom, variety, curiosity, and active discovery lays the foundation for toddlers to understand the positive impact they can have on the world.

Achieving a sense of 'mastery' is important during the toddler years and is a central feature of Berthelsen and Brownlee's (2005) 'participatory learning'. Participatory learning promotes active engagement with the environment, with meaningful, reciprocal support from adults. Routines which are child centred, promote play and acknowledge the child's 'vulnerability and dependence on adults' (Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2005, p.52) is essential but should still allow for autonomy, inquiry, co-construction of knowledge and independence. As everyday routines are co-constructed with toddlers, repetitive and predictive experiences are essential to support the child's development and stimulate potential for participation.

Play is a fundamental avenue to empower agency and supports formation of a sense of identity and agency in all children (Benson-McMullen, 2022; Boyle, 2022). Baker *et al.*, (2023, p.375) argue 'it is hard to imagine genuine play without agency', asserting its significance in early childhood education. Play allows for negotiation, discovery and to move in and out of different realities where realities *could* be something different (Pramling *et al.*, 2019). Facilitating play resources and materials that can be used in multiple ways hold real potential for toddlers to evolve their capacities and engage socially and cooperatively with others. Open ended resources such as loose parts, sand and water and other sensory experiences allow for the creativity and imagination necessary for aesthetic agency (von-Bonsdorff, 2018) to materialise. Designing open ended learning environments does not exclude, rather it entitles all children to access, create and generate confidence in their pursuits, no matter their capability.

Young children

Relationships and social connection remain central to the demonstration of young children's agency (Jerome and Starkey, 2022). Play remains a leading influence in agency formation, but gradually becomes more collaborative in nature. Jerome and Starkey (2022) place emphasis on the correlation between agency evolvement and the groups children belong to. As young children develop their social skills, they will experiment with communication and play styles, often with the intention of acquiring new friends and a sense of belonging and safety. They will thrive in positive, co-operative relationships with peers and adults. As children move from toddling to preschool, they are more likely to become interested in pretend and symbolic play, with others. Play, can be viewed as an internal process where children start to make sense of their inner thoughts and desires but is 'played out' externally through actions such as dressing up, selecting resources, or joining others play encounters (Baker *et al.*, 2023). As children shift from early to later childhood, they embed structure into their play, often visible through the way in which they organise rules and orient their attention. Potter *et al.*, (2024) explored how creative play such as den building has real potential to empower agency in the way it often promotes intense social collaboration and 'creative manipulation of 'time-space'. Children retain control over the decisions they make, the design of their space and afford a level of seclusion, privacy and space from busier learning environments. This adds to the argument for open ended resources and spaces in the indoor and outdoor environments that permit children to explore and manipulate play agendas as they see fit.

Aistear (GoI, 2024a) underlines the significance of fostering a play-based environment which is inclusive, accepting and inspiring. Young children are developing as 'Agentic Global Citizens' (GoI, 2024a) and as such will show interest in the world around them and have views on issues affecting their lives, such as the weather, climate change, sustainability (Ranta, 2023) and decisions made on their behalf. World issues are a reality for young children, therefore embracing their participation through purposeful, inquiry based and open-ended play environments is a fundamental right of childhood (Pascal and Bertram, 2009).

What is the role of the educator in facilitating the voice of the baby, toddler and young child?

As explored earlier in the paper, political, cultural and societal systems, have potential to oppress or disenfranchised children's rights as stakeholders in early education (Lundy 2007; Alderson, 2016; Moss 2019; Alderson and Yushido, 2020). Educators are central in diffusing these tensions and must elevate children's agency in a way that can have transformative change for children and the wider systems they inhabit. 'Guaranteeing rights' (Etchebehere and De León, 2020) is

entangled with adults recognising the extraordinary capacity and potential of babies, toddlers and young children to contribute to society.

Aistear (GoI, 2024a) anchors the educator as a duty bearer of children's participation rights, individuals who are agentic, competent, confident and reflective. In essence, *Aistear* positions educators with a moral and ethical obligation (Guard, 2023b) to act with and for the rights of the child, The Guidance for Good Practice (GoI 2024b) presents detailed support to inspire the workforce to fulfil their professional responsibilities, underpinned by a range of seminal and contemporary research and literature.

Much of the literature reviewed indicates an expansion of international scholarship elevating the participation rights of very young children in home and educational contexts (e.g. Wall *et al.* 2019; Bradley, *et al.*, 2012). Gratier and Trevarthen (2007) provide an illustrative depiction of the baby with voice, citing their voice joins 'family chorus' where together with parents and loved ones establish rules and rituals where voice can be valued. However, having a voice does not simply equate to having agency (Baker and Le Courtis, 2022) Rather, agency is dependent upon the responsivity of adults and the value they place on children's voice contributions (Degotardi and Han, 2022). It is essential therefore, that educators take time to reflect individually on their how they view the child and engage in reflective dialogue with others about how these conceptualisations may alter the way in which they connect with children (Arnott *et al.*, 2022). There may be times where colleagues or management view the child through a different lens, therefore achieving consistent practices that render children's rights may be challenging. Guard (2023a; 2024) argues that cultures established in early childhood settings are not always conducive to valuing voice, citing a disconnect between children's contributions and broader institutional and political systems restrict educator engagement with children.

Agentic and confident educators

As advocates, educators must be emotionally competent, and have self-awareness and self-belief (Ryan, 2017). Recurrent studies highlight that the early childhood workforce can lack such qualities due to their undervalued status in society (Henderson *et al.*, 2024; Saunders, 2021; Murphy, 2019; Moloney and Pope, 2012). Agency is closely tied to emotional capacity and a sense of efficacy, therefore the four educator dimensions (Agentic, Competent, Confident and Reflective) informing *Aistear* should be viewed as interrelated and inseparable.

Campbell-Barr (2017) calls for educators to be politically competent but recognises such competence is influenced by the cultures they work and broader cultural and political sways.

Acknowledging the unique historical and cultural context it is situated, *Aistear* (GoI, 2024a; 2024b) assumes educators hold knowledge and professional capacity to realise the evolving capacities of young children. To be 'agentic' requires educators to develop the ability to act autonomously, and collectively, with confidence (Lundy and Tobin, 2018; Long 2020), for example in developing partnerships with families and other agencies. At times, it might take more than one educator to advocate for children in early childhood systems (Archer, 2024), As such, collective action to challenge any systems in place not actively promoting agency of the workforce or the best interests of children might be required.

Optimising the conditions to uphold babies, toddlers and young children's capacity to voice requires educators to be confident to speak out and implement curriculum guidance creatively. 'Thinking and speaking for oneself' (Urban and Dalli 2011, p. 157) and feeling confident in one's own ability and positive difference they can have on children's lives are essential professional qualities. Enjoying coming to work and feeling part of a cohesive and welcoming organisation that values your knowledge, skills and contribution is known to elevate job satisfaction (Kusma *et al.*, 2012; Zhou and Nanakida, 2023). Educators offer real potential to create space for preschool children's agency (Sairanen and Kumpulainen, 2014) through the ways in which they develop relationships with children and families. In addition, creativity and innovation is necessary to create and implement an inclusive and responsive curriculum alongside children and their families (Chesworth, 2022).

Believing their knowledge, skills and presence can positively impact children's experiences of early childhood education is an essential aspect of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; 2006). Self-efficacy is different to having 'self-confidence', rather efficacy is the realisation that individuals have the ability to make a difference to another (Glen, 2023). A critical factor in the development of self-efficacy is if the individual feels trusted by others. As such, in early childhood, it is fundamental that all educators are positioned as leaders (Nutbrown, 2012) and are given opportunity to be leaders of, and feel value in the practices they foreground.

Competent and reflective educators

Educators play an important role in breaking down barriers associated with integrating the rights of babies, toddlers and young children (Cole-Alback, Pascal and Bertram, 2024). Workforce education is an essential ingredient in establishing cultures and pedagogies where children are truly valued as rights holders (Long, 2019). To effectively translate this into practice, educators must hold a deep knowledge of children's development and evolving capacities for learning as

well as advocate a view of very young children as 'social actors' (James and James, 2012) who are agentic and have valuable contributions to make in the world.

Having up to date 'theoretical and practical' knowledge and understanding of children's rights and development is reiterated in the General Comment No.7 (UN, 2005) and embedded throughout several international early childhood education curricula (DfE, 2023; Ministry of Education (NZ), 2017). Guidance seeking to uplift and support the development of professional competencies, attitudes, knowledge and skills is an established feature of child centred education (Crichton et al., 2021; Skolverket, 2018) and *Aistear* is no different.

Competence goes beyond qualifications and education and needs to consider the personal qualities and dispositions one brings to the role along with their emotional maturity (Lawrence, 2022; Elfer *et al.*, 2018; Campbell-Barr, 2017). For example, Andrews (2015) suggests professional emotional capital emerges from an innate disposition which influences the evolvement of professional identity. Page and Elfer (2013) draw attention to the way in which established systems, cultures and collective practices can undermine an individual's ability to emotionally attuned. Regular access to professional reflection opportunities to work through the emotional dimensions associated with professional work with young children is thought to be essential for all, but a missed opportunity for some (Elfer, 2012).

Lawrence (2022, p.86) states,

> *Children's voices and sensibilities can contribute to current challenges if adults understand children in moments of competence and in their moments of vulnerability. This will include working with emotions in professional ways.*

Having space to share observations and reflections of children's diverse participation supports educators to develop a rich appreciation for babies, toddlers and young children's voices, but requires deep contemplation and honesty. Several reflective models have been developed to assist educators in linking emotional dimensions to professional work (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Elfer *et al.*, 2018; French, 2021; Arnott *et al.*, 2021; Guard, 2023b). Specifically in the field of rights, Cassidy *et al.*, (2022) developed eight principles to promote a rights-based discourse in the early childhood workforce, with the intention to aid the visibility and enaction of voice in young children. Emerging from 'collegial conversations' in practice, Cassidy *et al.* (2022, p.3) outline, Definition, Power, Inclusivity, Listening; Time and Space; Approaches; Processes and Purposes as a central framework to elicit dialogue and support professionals working with children under the age of eight (Cassidy, *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). *Aistear* (GoI, 2024a) alludes to all dimensions, and calls for educators to engage in professional reflection, but robust systems need to be established for this

to be attainable. Further professional development models must acknowledge the diversity and uniqueness of all children's contributions and the personal dispositions of the workforce.

Summary

This paper affords attention to national and international literature contributions that inform the emerging conceptualisation of babies, toddlers and young children's rights in *Aistear* (GoI, 2024a; 2024b). Voice and agency can be understood as situated in a dynamic, reciprocal system of relationships and by appreciating the socio-cultural origins of a child's life, valuing their family, diverse home cultures and linguistic heritage. The Principles of *Aistear* place central importance on establishing a rights-based pedagogy through respectful early relationships and participation with thoughtfully designed environments that prioritise play rich, inquiry-based learning where children can be curious, creative, co-construct with others. Responsive, agentic, competent, confident and reflective educators are an essential connection between recognising voice and agency and respecting babies, toddlers and young children as valued citizens with rights in early childhood. Advocacy for the rights of babies, toddlers and young children can be achieved through fostering a slower pedagogy and facilitating time to be emotionally present 'with' children during caregiving moments and playful interactions. Empowering babies, toddlers and young children to become Agentic Global Citizens (GoI, 2024a) foregrounds all work in early childhood and underpins pedagogies that are developmentally and culturally responsive, relational, rights-based and inclusive.

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