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Title	A literature review on methodologies for consulting with children aged birth to 5 years
Authors	Horgan, Deirdre
Publication date	2024
Original Citation	Horgan, D. (2024) A literature review on methodologies for consulting with children aged birth to 5 years. Hub na nÓg, pp. 1-60. Available at: https://hubnanog.ie/a-literature-review-on-methodologies-for-consulting-with-children-aged-birth-to-5-years/ (Accessed: 11 February 2025)
Type of publication	Report
Link to publisher's version	https://hubnanog.ie/a-literature-review-on-methodologies-for-consulting-with-children-aged-birth-to-5-years/
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Download date	2026-11-02 06:05:09
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17023



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A LITERATURE REVIEW ON METHODOLOGIES FOR CONSULTING WITH CHILDREN AGED BIRTH TO 5 YEARS

A report commissioned by Hub na nÓg and the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth

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February 2024

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HUB na nÓg
YOUNG VOICES IN DECISION MAKING

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1. Introduction

This report considers the participation of our youngest citizens from birth to 5 years and how this can be embedded in early childhood education and care in Ireland. Limitations of existing research have been highlighted by Correia et al. (2019) who state that there was no systematic review mapping international empirical research on young children's right to participate in ECEC settings. Even that systematic review focuses on 3–6-year-olds and does not include very young children, nor did it include children with special needs. This literature review explores issues relating to what Cassidy et al (2022) describe as a complex, challenging and under researched area. It is understood that there is no such thing as children's 'voice', rather children have a multiplicity of voices and these can be accessed in a variety of ways (O'Toole and Hayes, 2020). Given this understanding, practices need to be developed to support children's participation from the earliest age. The aim of this literature review, then, is to provide policymakers and early years educators with a synthesis of the existing research in the field, allowing for a deeper understanding of current thinking with a comprehensive evidence-base on participation-related ideas, practices and outcomes in early years, highlighting state of the art and informing possible pathways to move the field forward.

It begins with a background to the report setting out the overall methodological approach to undertaking the literature review. It then moves to a concept piece on child participation practice in the early years context by setting out the broader policy and curriculum development context, defining child participation, discussing child participation in early childhood, and identifying the lack of education materials and resources. The next section is a scoping of the literature on early years participatory initiatives and provides a selection of good practice in this area. As well as documenting the thematic areas that children can participate in, the diverse methodologies being utilised to promote young children's participation are outlined and discussed. The literature review concludes with a focus on resources and toolkits developed for more marginalised or 'voiceless' groups of young children including 0–2-year-olds, migrant children, Traveller and Roma children, and children with additional needs.

The report refers to real world practical resources and reflective tools for early years practitioners. It has a strong conceptual basis in socio-cultural theories and is informed by the child rights-based Lundy model (2007). The literature review draws on Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the Literature review to inform the updating of Aistear (French and McKenna, 2022), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, along with A Consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) to ensure practitioners understand and can embed their participatory practice in the national early years curriculum and quality standards. It is underpinned by the principle that young children have not just the right but the ability to engage in participation and that facilitating this will ensure rich experiences for both practitioners and young children in early years settings. The term 'participation' is used throughout as shorthand for participation in decision-making.

1.1 Background to the literature review

This literature review is set against the background of actions set out in First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Hub na nÓg to produce innovative methodologies through pilot sites/ case studies and provide tools on the Hub website/train the trainers programme . One of the specific objectives of Hub na nÓg is to develop, document and disseminate innovative international best practice on children and young people's participation in decision-making, including with babies, toddlers and young children aged birth to 5 years. To progress this objective, the DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg established an Early Years Working Group comprised of stakeholders from the policy, academic, creative, and early-years sectors with expertise in the area. To this end the group will consider research and resources currently available on the participation of children and babies aged birth to 5 years in decision-making, identify gaps in current research/resources, and as appropriate develop and/or pilot methodologies through working group members' networks, and report on same. The DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg in November 2022 issued a request for tender for a literature review to be undertaken seeking the services of a report writer to complete a review of the key literature on methodologies and mechanisms for consulting with children and babies aged birth to 5 years and submit to the Early Years Working Group as a guide to planning for the development and/or piloting of methodologies. The author was appointed and began work on this literature review in January 2023.

1.2 Approach to the literature review

The Literature Review aims to identify, explore, and map contemporary research on early childhood participation and identify potential areas for the development of a toolkit aligned with contemporary literature. The search strategy used key terms and concepts from the request for tender to search databases (ERIC International, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) for scholarly work published in English from 2000-2023. Studies meeting the inclusion criteria – addressing children's right to participate in ECEC settings (later broadened to settings in which young children engage) and studies focusing on children under 6 – were considered for review. A hand search based on known authors, reference lists of previous reviews of literature, and already known papers was also performed to include relevant empirical papers meeting the search criteria that had not been captured by the electronic search. Furthermore, literature recommended by nationally and internationally recognised experts in early childhood including the Early Years Working Group at the DCEDIY was included. Search procedures were conducted over a four-month period between January and April 2023. The search identified peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters and grey literature including policy and research reports, conference proceedings and theses that considered children's participation in early childhood contexts which were analysed, synthesised, and considered. The findings of the review highlight significant gaps in the literature in relation to preverbal children and what are sometimes referred to as more marginalised cohorts of children including migrant children, Traveller and Roma children and children with disabilities.

1.3 The literature review context – identifying, documenting and addressing gaps.

While much has been written about children's voice and supporting children to air their views, little has been written focusing specifically on the practices aimed at eliciting the voices of babies, toddlers and young children as an end in itself (Clark 2005; Wall 2017; Cassidy et al. 2022) rather than in pursuit of research or other adult agendas. Limited research (Sturges, 2015) and a limited response in terms of practices of early childhood education has been noted (Burr and Degotardi, 2021; Theobald et al, 2011; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). Correia et al. (2019) in their systematic review found that qualitative studies dominate with a clear emphasis on concepts about participation, rather than on practical methods to promote participation in significant ways. Deep knowledge and understanding of how to encourage children's meaningful participation in early childhood settings have not been fully realised (Correia et al., 2019). Wall (2017) similarly, proposes that there is little research which focuses on seeking and supporting the voices of very young children. Furthermore, research examining attempts to support participation rights in education settings have found that interventions tend to be isolated, inconsistent and narrowly focused on children in mainstream primary and post-primary settings (Rouvali & Riga, 2019). This implies that rights are supported intermittently, with younger children, minorities and those with disabilities not featuring prominently in empirical studies. In the Irish context, Long (2021) points out that more children's rights education, resources and practice guidance are available for primary and secondary school teachers in Ireland to support them in their role than for the educators of the youngest rights holders.

Furthermore, many participation toolkits to date have been developed for children in middle and older childhood and government consultations have also tended to engage with older children with some notable exceptions of an exploration of school age childcare which included children aged 5 (Horgan et al., 2016) and a consultation process with children aged 3-5 years to inform the development of *First-5, a Whole-of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* using a participatory arts-based mosaic approach (Government of Ireland, 2016). Also, the Ombudsman for Children's Office, for the first time, included early years children in its Children's Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (OCO, 2022). Overall, there is a lack of materials and resources for early years students, specifically in the Irish context (Long, 2021; Horgan, 2022). This may partly explain why the review of the first year of the education-focused inspections in early years most frequently identified 'providing a better balance between adult-led and child-initiated activity' as aspects of practice for improvement (DES Inspectorate, 2018).

The NCCA report on consultations with young children (O'Toole et al., 2023) has identified further areas for consideration in an updated Aistear as - to explore babies, toddlers and young children's rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens and to continue and extend the focus on modes of communication beyond language, with support for educators to document this. Other findings recommend foregrounding children's freedom of movement and choice.

2. Concept piece on child participation practice in early years.

2.1 Child Participation

Participation is defined as children's influence in all matters affecting them, it is multi-dimensional and can be exercised in different ways (Clark, 2005; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 2002). Participation is variously referred to as 'voice' or decision-making and routinely based on Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). In its narrowest sense, participation for young children in decision-making processes can be defined as adults taking into account the interests and needs of young children (Venninen and Leinonen, 2013). However, participation is increasingly recognised as an ongoing relational process carried out by individuals in their everyday lives (Horgan et al, 2017; Horgan and Kennan, 2021). The notion of the autonomous individual has been replaced by an understanding that everybody, not just children, are dependent and incomplete (Lee, 2001). The importance of considering infants participation, specifically, has been noted since the vulnerability and relationality of infants is a particularly stark expression of the interdependence of all human beings (Holt, 2013 cited in Hultgren and Johansson, 2019).

Models of child participation have been developed including Hart (1997) Shier (2001) and Lundy (2007), many of which build on hierarchically ordered 'ladders' of children's involvement starting with passive involvement and increasing gradually to highly active engagement. They visualize participation in terms of the degree to which children and young people can influence a given project or activity. The Lundy model is a conceptualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC requiring the key elements of space, voice, audience and influence. The NCCA (O'Toole et al., 2023) has, helpfully, applied this to early years as outlined in the figure below.



The benefits and outcomes of children exerting the right to participate are now well documented. Children are empowered to be active citizens, learn to problem-solve and negotiate, develop leadership skills, increase in confidence, self-esteem, and well-being (Correia et al., 2019). Active participation in learning experiences enables children to participate competently and with confidence in their groups and communities (Clark, 2005; Hedges et al., 2011), thus enhancing their sense of identity and belonging (Hedges et al., 2011; Hedges, 2022). Children's participation ensures that their needs can be better met by their carers and educators and policymakers through better government decisions and policies (Hart, 1997; UN CRC, 2009; Correia et al., 2019). Eurochild (2021: 5) captures this in its Child Participation Strategy vision, 'Participation improves the quality of decision-making and contributes to children's holistic development. It is the foundation for healthy democracies and responsible citizenship'.

2.2 Policy and curriculum development context

This literature review to inform the development of an early years participation toolkit sits against the backdrop of the international policy context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), where the right of all children to be heard and have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity is laid down[1]. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD (UN, 2006), the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021), and the Eurochild Child Participation Strategy (2021) all highlight children's participation rights. The European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2014, EC: 149) contains as one of its key quality statements: 'Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity'. These are key principles that strongly resonate with participation policy and practice and with early years policy and practice. The framework foregrounds ideas of the child as co-creator of knowledge with people of all ages, as well as the importance of providing a social, cultural and physical space in preparing children for life and citizenship in society (European Commission, 2014). The European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/8/4b) recommends 'promoting participation, initiative, autonomy, problem-solving and creativity and encouraging learning dispositions to reason, investigate and collaborate'. The enactment of children's rights in ECEC have been found to differ from country to country, influenced by national training, policy agendas and legislation (Wensierska, 2017).

The Irish national context in the past two decades has seen the publication of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCYA, 2015) and subsequent *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCEDIY, 2021), along with current policy drivers including First Five (DCEDIY, 2019) and an impending updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum framework, by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. However, O'Neill (2021) argues that International, European and Irish policy has often come under some scrutiny for not sufficiently delineating

[1] as supported by General Comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard and General Comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood

participation rights for babies, toddlers and young children. This is problematic for those working in ECEC, as the articles of the Convention have to be translated and contextualised to be meaningfully realised in early childhood practice (Bae, 2010).

A literature review commissioned by the NCCA to support the updating of Aistear has commented on the need to foreground and make explicit child participation in the curriculum framework aligned with contemporary literature and scholarly discourse that recognises and respects children's capacity, agency, and proficiency in the social construction of their worlds (French and McKenna, 2022). In an updated Aistear, additional emphasis could be placed on children's agency, their rights to make decisions, initiate learning, and influence change (French and McKenna, 2022: 106). This lack of emphasis on participation is a feature evident across international early years learning frameworks and curriculum approaches (Barblett et al., 2021). Síolta (CECDE, 2006), the national quality framework for early childhood education, however, is explicit that early years settings ensure that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

ECEC has undergone rapid and radical change in the past 20 years culminating in the publication of the Early Years Strategy - *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2019) and a new funding model for the sector - Together for Better. The policy, regulatory and training landscape of early years has changed significantly (Hayes and Walsh, 2022) with inspection systems in TUSLA, the Department of Education Inspectorate and Pobal, who evaluate compliance with government regulation (Duignan and McDonnell, 2022; Early Childhood Ireland, 2023). The European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019) recommends the development of early years curricula which promote children's participation, initiative, and autonomy. Paradoxically, the reality of multiple inspection systems has led to less time for practitioners to engage with children directly. This trend of increased regulation is not unique to Ireland and studies elsewhere have documented providers and practitioners spending large amounts of time on record keeping and other compliance-based tasks and decreasing the amount of quality time practitioners can spend with the children in their care diverts focus away from children's rights and needs (Rogers et al., 2020). Workforce development has also been a key focus of government in recent years with the introduction of the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education Degree programmes for the ELC Sector in Ireland (DES, 2019) where Higher Education Institutions have received guidance on essential programme content, and the establishment of the Qualifications Advisory Board providing national oversight around the structure and content of programmes at Bachelor Degree level. Both have clear requirements on knowledge of communication with children and participation and the key practices and values required by staff to ensure its promotion in ELC settings. Furthermore, Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Aged Childcare (DCEDIY, 2021) sets out that ethical, rights-based, inclusive and participatory practice ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon as central to the role profiles of all those working in the ELC sector.

2.3 Principles and theories of child participation emerging within the literature.

Much of the literature reviewed is underpinned by the principle that young children have not just the right but the ability to engage in participation. Hultgren and Johansson (2019) claim that the ontological level of participation or world view comprises a range of theories. Similarly, Correia et al (2019) in their systematic review of literature point out that authors rely on different theoretical tools and paradigms in defining the right to participate: to have a voice and to be listened to, to have competence and agency, to be involved, and to experience democratic citizenship. The four theoretical frameworks identified are based on a legal paradigm emanating from the UNCRC, a sociological paradigm based on children as competent actors and active agents, a democratic paradigm defining the right to participate as a key concept of democratic cultures and pedagogies, and a philosophy of education paradigm based on education as the way individuals experience participation.

The literature consulted for this review draws on human rights theory, theories emanating from childhood studies including the social construction of childhood and children as social agents (James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Corsaro, 1997), theories of social materiality and embodiment (Holt, 2017) which recognize that human existence is both material and social, as well as educational theories including Reggio Emilia with early years practitioners positioned as interpreters of the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1998; Edwards et al., 2011).

According to Giamminuti and See (2017), the image of childhood has changed substantially over the years and has had a direct impact on how children and their rights are conceptualized. In particular, the literature reviewed documents the implications of this for pedagogy and practice in early years. Central to this are participatory pedagogies which promote children's agency and voice in educational settings (Mascadri et al., 2021). One of the premises for participating in the life of the educational services, for both children and adults, is the recognition of every person as a constructor of knowledge, a bearer of culture, a competent subject. This accreditation of competence, understood as every human being's capacity for intervening in the contexts they are part of and bringing their own original contribution, is a condition believed to be indispensable for the participatory process, a competency that grows in the process of participating itself (Lanzi - Pedagogista, 2022). Children as co-creators of knowledge draw on Bruner's (1996: 84) broad definition of human learning as 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them'. Socio-cultural theories of learning, which contend that development and learning are embedded in the context of social relationships in children's social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Rogoff 1990).

2.4 Child Participation in early years

This section discusses why participation in early years is fundamental, the policy and practice divide in this space, as well as challenges in implementing participation in early years practice. Research continues to illuminate the challenges, tensions, and rich opportunities for

participatory practices with babies and young children (Ree, Alvestad & Johansson, 2019). Khazova (2021) argues that for children to be rights holders in educational settings they need to be given opportunities to express their opinion on all matters that concern them and, crucially, that age should not be a barrier. A model of participation must first be equally applicable to all children, regardless of age or other differences. Hultgren and Johansson (2019) contend that the difference – in age, gender, origin, ability – is the point of departure and enriches the possibilities of the affordances of the place. We often think the other way around; we presuppose a specific child when we think of participation, for example a child that is verbal, social, and cooperative. Applied in the context of Early Years provision this means an effort by everyone to engage in a pedagogy of mutuality and use a range of play-based methods to seek children's views of the types of provision they experience (Patton and Winter, 2022).

Why participation in early years is important.

Within the early childhood education field there is general consensus regarding the importance of considering children's perspectives (Clark & Moss, 2008) with a growing appreciation that this can happen from the earliest period in children's lives. Infant participation means "having an influence on infants' lifeworld, and on decisions that have bearing on infants both as individuals and as a (vulnerable) group in society" (Våpenstad and Bakkenget, 2021: 2).

Murray (2019) discusses the importance of hearing young children in order to optimise children's well-being, development and learning in their early childhood settings, and enhance their chances of experiencing positive lifetime outcomes, and how practitioners must find ways to listen actively to young children's views, and to understand and respond to them, however they may be expressed. Given that children have to share time and space with others, and have little control over their lives, it is really important they are listened to by the people who care for and educate them (Hart, 2005). Early years participation leads to a deeper understanding of children's capabilities and lives to promote better educator decision-making (Berthelsen et al., 2009; Woodhead, 2006). Fostering citizenship interest and skills in children from an early age is evident in much of the literature. Wall et al. (2019) point out, if we are to foster democratic skills and understanding in children and young people, we need to develop practices that support this from the earliest age, even from birth. UNESCO (2015) identifies the need for citizenship education to begin in early childhood, for children to become agentic thinkers and active citizens who participate in societal decisions. Children's awareness of social justice issues is critical (Benavides et al., 2020; Lalvani and Bacon, 2019; Murray and Urban, 2012) as prioritised in the sustainable development goals (UN, 2015) and their active participation is central to this (French and McKenna, 2022).

Participation in early years: the practice and policy divide

The UNCRC enshrines the right to participate and be heard in situations that affect their lives to all children. Infants however pose a challenge to the ethos and formulations of the Convention, particularly Article 12 which outlines the right for children to express their views in accordance with their age and maturity, which can in turn represent a challenge for educators (Boardman,

2022). This challenge is related to babies condition as individuals who do not speak and to a bias, in the text of the Convention, that human beings are autonomous and rational. The child, as it appears in the text of the UNCRC, is primarily a speaking child (von Bonsdorff, 2021). In 2005, however, the CRC Committee stated that infants have the rights to participate and be heard and recommended high priority be given to the study and development of specific methods for infant participation (Våpenstad and Bakkenget, 2021). Despite this, babies and toddlers rights specifically have been neglected (French and McKenna, 2022). Bakkenget and Vapenstadt (2023: 1) point out that 'infants are often denied the right to participate because they don't possess verbal language'. Yet, views are not only voiced verbally but also in non-verbal forms in accordance with Article 13 UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989). Research from various disciplines shows that children are able to form their views and express themselves long before verbal expression is possible (Langston et al., 2004; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Lansdown, 2011). The age of a child is thus seen as a very limited indicator for a child's maturity or capacity to express him- or herself.

Participation with the youngest age groups of children tends to be less well developed in research, policy, and curriculum development, despite advancements in conceptions of young children and evidence of positive early years practice (Theobald et al., 2011; Blaisdell, 2019; Clark and Moss, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2022). For example, as Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is currently structured, there is a weighting towards verbal, language-based communication, with two Aims focused on language and two others for all other modes of communication. The NCCA consultation suggests that a redeveloped Aistear might consider building on the existing emphasis on multiple modalities of communication to somewhat strengthen this point (O'Toole et al., 2023). Research about infants' cognitive and communicative capacities has brought about a recognition of the infant and emphasises infant's intersubjectivity, embodiment, (pro-) active behaviour, creative imagination, and multimodal communication (von Bonsdorff, 2021). The last 50 years of infant research has shown how infants powerfully communicate their intentions in quite refined ways (Bakkenget and Vapenstadt, 2023). Infants are 'immensely intentional and meaning making creatures, wanting to have their view heard and legitimised' (Bakkenget and Vapenstadt, 2023: 3).

Children, even from the earliest age, can form and express views and participate in issues relating to their immediate family, school, local community, and natural environment (Lansdown 2011). Current research (Hultgren and Johansson, 2019) focuses on the young age of children in an attempt to support the claim that they are capable of participating as equal partners and problem-solvers by taking decisions on issues that concern them, such as the management of their immediate environment. The crux of the matter, then, is to develop methods to find the voice of pre-verbal and verbal young children i.e., 'to register their impact on us and decode their influence into common language and practical action' (Bakkenget and Vapenstadt, 2023: 1). The responsibility lies with adults to interpret the 'voice' of the young child.

Hultgren and Johansson (2019: 376) oppose the view of 'participation as something that concerns decision-making, and that children's participation is an issue of the degree to which they can share in decision-making' and they take issue with the rationalistic or positivistic view of participation as an activity carried out by competent, responsible, adult-like individuals'. Von Bonsdorff (2021) further argues that the modern discourse on pre-verbal children and human rights, has one major inadequacy, namely the primary relational foundation of the human condition is fundamentally ignored. She suggests that 'we need a more holistic approach, which does justice to infants' playful, interactive and affectionate initiatives' (von Bonsdorff, 2021: 37).

In early childhood care and education, the issue of children's participation is often seen from quite a narrow view, as if it means simply listening to children voices (Clark, 2005). Recently, there has been more promising work to comprehend how the youngest children could be included in participation and involvement. Hultgren and Johansson (2019), on the basis of two ethnographic studies conducted in children's libraries, propose a new model of participation that includes even the youngest children and regards participation, not as decision-making, but as an ongoing process which is not dependent on age, maturity or competence and is constantly redefined during the process of every specific activity or situation to counterbalance inequality experienced from the age of infancy based on power relations.

Challenges in implementing participation in early years settings.

The gap between the principles underpinning children's rights as articulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC and the enactment of this in practice is evident in the literature (Robinson, et al., 2020). There are many challenges for practitioners in implementing participation in early years outlined in the literature ranging from adult attitudes to structural limitations, tensions between best practice and biological realities of caring for young children, training deficits, and absence of appropriate guidance and toolkits. Bae (2021) refers to conditions relating to group organisation, physical environment and staff composition and competence as relevant in promoting young children's participation.

As with all child participation, **adult attitudes** and interpretations of participation have a significant bearing on young children's opportunities. Children's right to participate and the extent of their participation in their social and economic world remains dependent on adults' "perception of their ability to participate" (Theobald et al., 2011: 651). 'Trying to implement a holistic and relational understanding of children's right to participation in early childhood institutions means… that the staff are challenged to reflect on their own roles and to question views of relations and of children which they might otherwise take for granted' (Bae, 2010: 207). Turnsek's (2016) study of over 800 Slovenian preschool teachers' views on the implementation of the idea of the competent child and child participation in preschools found two clusters of beliefs - those who support the traditional notion of childhood as a state of immaturity and lack of competence, and those supporting the postmodern concept of the competent child. The first is associated with the concept of participation through a mediator and the latter with the concept of autonomous participation. Other research has found educators underestimating

children's ability or capacity to meaningfully participate (Frödén and Tellgren, 2020). The varied interpretation of the meaning of the term 'participation'; and the tendency to focus on an understanding of individual children's rights and neglect the collective rights of the group are other challenges (Frödén and Tellgren, 2020). The traditional developmental perspective has also tended to construct 'child' as inferior to 'adult' (Lim, 2015) and may result in attention to risk avoidance and protection overshadowing children's play experiences and limiting their agency and choice in play. This belief by adults that children need to be protected from risk is well documented (Clark, 2010; Kay, 2018; Kernan and Devine, 2010). Patton and Winter (2022) also identified practitioner fear of external stakeholders, for example parents, as a possible barrier to the promotion of child voice and inhibiting staff from being child rights advocates in their daily practice.

Some barriers relate to **structural limitations** on enacting children's participation in early years. Children's participation is impeded by the existence of educational structures characterized by traditional interaction patterns based on teacher power and child subordination (Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012), combined with challenging adult-child ratios and management work (Venninen and Leinonen, 2013; Correia, 2019) and an increasing focus on school-readiness which can be at odds with child 'voice' (Brooks and Murray (2018). One barrier is an emphasis on rules and procedures in early childhood settings which can work to further limit children's 'free choice' and autonomy, and stifle children's capacity to act as interactional beings. (Nyland et al., 2008; Bae 2010; Shaik and Ebrahim, 2015; Colliver and Doel-Mackaway, 2021). Another problem lies with the outcomes and progress focus in early years. It is important to acknowledge the pressures under which education professionals are working, in an age when accountability and formal assessments are prime foci. However, Cassidy et al., (2022) argue that establishments' formal and informal structures must allow space and time for 'voice' if it is to be taken seriously. For example, Boardman (2022) presents data suggesting that there is no space for young children's voices to be included in the context of early reading for under-threes, alongside the wider neoliberal reading attainment agenda in England. The **school readiness agenda**, focused on attainment and accountability, outlined by Moss (2017), Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017), and Moss and Cameron (2020), frequently stresses the pressure to prepare young children for school. Multiple barriers to children's exercise of agency are noted including contexts dominated by governance, targets and school readiness (Roberts-Holmes, 2020), The emphasis on a narrow 'school readiness' including all children attaining a prescribed and homogeneous set of early learning goals, is noted in wider literature (Hedges and Cooper, 2016; Kozan and Sahin-Zeteroglu, 2021) is evident to a lesser extent in Irish research (Mhic Mhathuna et al., 2017).

While much of the literature aims to support the development of agency in the very young, it is often pointed out that there are **biological realities** which can necessitate adults taking charge. "However, despite the efforts to blur the adult/child binary, age and life experience did remain a troublesome area for practitioners and children. Care practices, such as nappy changing and sleep routines, seemed to particularly create barriers and tensions to the project of 'undoing' generational hierarchy"(Blaisdell, 2019). Even implementing the simplest daily routines using a

rights-based lens has been referred to as a 'tricky business' when, for example, balancing sleep-rest routines required to allow for staff breaks with responsive practice that reacts to children's expressed preferences (Thorpe et al., 2020).

Another set of challenges for implementing participatory practice in early years settings includes **capacity-building and the absence of appropriate tools**. A lack of awareness by educators on how to support children's verbal and non-verbal language so that they can ascertain their views has been documented (Clark, 2010; Kay, 2018). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) recommends that the Irish state should strengthen its efforts to 'ensure that teachers, childcare professionals and other professionals working with and for children systematically receive training on the right of the child to be heard, including on the implementation of recent legislative and policy reforms such as the child and youth participation strategy' (CRC/C/IRL/5-6). This follows their 2016 recommendation of adequate, systematic training and sensitisation of professionals working with and for children, in order to ensure a more holistic understanding of this right (O'Neill, 2021). Yet, the 'majority of third level students receive limited education on working within a child rights framework' (Ombudsman for Children, 2020: 7). Some training has been developed in this space by organisations such as Barnardos and Early Childhood Ireland (Appendix 1). Educator attitudes and commitment to children's rights are key elements. Although many early years practitioners report an acceptance of the child as a subject of rights, research by Etchebehere and De León (2020) found they fail to recognise that guaranteeing these rights is part of their role, and their actions in practice rarely reflect these rights. Banko-Bal and Guler-Yildiz (2021), similarly, found a disconnect between positive educator attitudes toward the rights of the child and educators' enacted behaviours.

Babies and young children in early childhood contexts need rights-informed and resourced educators. As future educators of babies and young children, and future duty-bearers, early childhood students require an intentional, interdisciplinary education (Long, 2021; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018) in the children's rights framework. Long (2021) argues that the most appropriate way for early childhood education students to learn about child participation in everyday spaces and places in early childhood is through comprehensive, systematic child rights education. She sets out the eight features of a systematic children's rights education to provide clarity on what should be taught (curriculum), how it should be taught (pedagogy) and why it should be taught (purpose) (Long, 2019 & 2021). They include 1. An explicit education about the international children's rights framework and other relevant treaties including the United Nations Convention on Persons with Disabilities (UNCPD), 2. A tailored approach for early childhood students, 3. A focus on resourcing relational processes and practice-based learning sites, 4. An established curricular entitlement for children's rights education, 5. Participatory, experiential, democratic and critically reflective pedagogies and practices, 6. A critical orientation, 7. Positioning early childhood education students as future duty-bearers and stakeholders in their own education, and 8. Consultation and capacity-building of decision-makers (Long, 2021).

There are several additional and specific challenges to overcome when trying to support meaningful participation of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These include: lack of access to specific groups of vulnerable children (e.g. migrant children, children in contact with the justice system, Traveller children and Roma children); lack of accessibility for children to participate (language, disability, poor connection/network, etc.); lack of experience in working with younger children and a lack of awareness amongst children of existing opportunities for them to participate; children not trusting adults looking to work with them; and a lack of expertise on the needs of specific groups of children to enable organisations to work with them (Eurochild, 2021).

3. Literature on early years participatory initiatives in Ireland and internationally

Literature on participatory work with children in early years settings ranges from the key principles and approaches to supporting child participation to practical guidance on the how and where young children's involvement can be facilitated to the methods which can promote inclusion and 'voice' of all children from birth in early years. Key principles for eliciting voice with young children are outlined in the Look Who's Talking project on eliciting the voices of children from birth to seven which defined eight: Definition; Power; Inclusivity; Listening; Time and Space; Approaches; Processes; and Purposes (Wall, 2017; Wall et al., 2019; Arnott and Wall, 2022) (Appendix 2). Hultgren and Johansson (2019) argue that the idea of participation can be operationalized at practical levels to include the babies and toddlers, but practitioners first need to recognise the potential of engaging with productive approaches to eliciting voice and then must work to develop the skills, language, and dispositions of voice.

There is some practical guidance on young children's involvement in organisational aspects including planning, rules staff recruitment, transitions, redesigning indoor and outdoor spaces early years settings as well as equipment, routines and activities, food, and clothes (Miller, 1997; Mainstone-Cotton, 2019). The literature provides examples of innovative consultative and participative methods with young children that use creative forms of expression. The recently published literature review to support the updating of Aistear documents a range of methods for engagement with babies, toddler, and young children (French and McKenna, 2022) as does the Consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children (O'Toole et al., 2023). Much of the literature in this area discusses approaches to participatory work with children in early years settings which can be refined down to relational, slow, holistic processes and practices with play-based curriculum approaches (Barblett et al., 2021) central to participation. A self-assessment tool for early years practitioners as part of the professional development resources produced by the PARTICIPA EU project (Wysłowska et al., 2021) uses the Lundy model of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence with the additional element of contextual support for participation. Practitioners are supported to consider their practice and the degree to which they support children's participation in their settings (Appendix 3).

3.1 Themes – what can children participate in and how they can benefit from this participation?

There is now much literature and research on young children's views and experiences of their early years' provision outlining key areas where they can participate. Huser, Dockett and Perry (2022) propose a model of three ethical spaces – physical, social-emotional, and creative – and consider the role of each of these spaces when facilitating voice with young children. Another framework is provided by O'Neill (2021) who argues that children can participate in what they do, how they do it, and the environment they do it in within early years settings. Miller (1997) and Clark, Moss and Kjørholt (2005) identify key issues which young children can participate and

provide new insights into, ranging from children's individual decisions to influence over the culture, organisation and content of the setting, children's contribution to the development and planning in the service, and children's involvement in monitoring and evaluation in the service. Sandseter and Seland (2016) argue that the opportunity to have an influence on where to move, what to do and with whom are of crucial importance for children's well-being in ECEC institutions. This also includes children's opportunity to oppose the staff and negotiate and choose activities that differ from those that the staff select. The NCCA (O'Toole et al., 2023) provide an example of the promotion of children's rights balanced with their responsibilities as citizens through real life daily tasks and opportunities for leadership as a 'star helper' through calling the roll, checking that everyone has signed in on the sign-in board, setting up and clearing away the snack area, watering plants, picking songs, and signing out and leading the group to meet families at the front door. Some key decision-making areas that emerged from the literature in conducting this review include care needs, friendships, curriculum design and content, transitions, physical space, staffing, and documentation.

Care needs – contemporary ECEC curricula and literature emphasise responsive pedagogical practice that includes children in decision-making and respects each child's developmental and socio-cultural context as appropriate pedagogical practice. These assert the rights of a child to be an active participant in their care and learning experiences (Thorpe et al., 2020). As such, there is a need for processes to elicit and support children's voices in everyday spaces and contexts where children are eating, sleeping, changing, and toileting with key roles for practitioners in supporting young children to make choices and be independent. Clark (2003) states that giving young children increasing control over their personal care is important. The participatory nature of learning in the child care setting, particularly with regard to everyday activities such as toileting and handwashing, is highlighted by early years practitioners in toddler programmes in research by Berthelsen and Brownlee (2005). Food regularly emerges as an important area in the research – both the quality of food and drink available and their access to these facilities. The 'Look who's Talking' project provides examples of early years settings providing opportunities for children to express their voice in this aspect of their care needs. One participating early years setting established 'Marvellous Mealtimes' where children were encouraged to be involved in choosing foods, evaluating their experiences, and providing safe and creative spaces where children's many voices shaped the decisions and practice demonstrated by practitioners. The Centre, in creating clear processes for children's voices to be facilitated, had the ultimate goal of building the children's capacities 'to confidently make choices and make their voice heard' (Cassidy et al. 2022). Menu planning and flexible snack times have been identified elsewhere as important facilitators of children's 'voice' (Gibbons, n.d.). The NCCA (O'Toole and McKenna, 2023) in its consultation document for updating Aistear provides an example of the recognition of children's rights to choice and autonomy within a setting which occurs during snack times. The educator discusses this period of the day, and how the rules were agreed upon and implemented through child consultation.

Provision for sleep or restful alternatives is another significant aspect of an early years care programme. Thorpe et al. (2020) contend that that sleep not only supports behavioural regulation by providing rest and recuperation during the busy ECEC day but that it directly affords a learning opportunity to identify tiredness and regulate behaviour by choosing to sleep or engage in alternative restful or relaxing activities is a significant lifetime skill. However, it is one of the most challenging aspects of early years practice with Nothard et al. (2015), in an Australian study, reporting that preschool children describe loss of autonomy and sense of constraint in response to mandated naptime. Key among the effective solutions identified by Thorpe et al. (2020) were conceptualising rest and relaxation as distinct alternatives to sleep, holistic leadership in management of space, and modification of the expectations on educators to perform other duties at this time.

Physical space – The physical environment in an early years setting impacts directly on the quality of practice, making environment a critically important component that practitioners need to plan for and review regularly (Manning – Morton, 2006). Much literature particularly highlights the importance of the physical setting in the context of children's participation (French and McKenna, 2022). Knauf (2019: 2) states that the environment provides 'young children (ages 3–6) with social and spatial contexts, in which their needs and interests are respected and in which they can make their own decisions about their actions'. She provides a qualitative method for the systematic investigation of the efficacy of children's physical early education environments, comprising six features - (1) Transparency: the openness of the environment for children (e.g., small items of furniture that children can see over enhances participation) (2) Structure: the arrangement of the materials that respond to children's interests and furniture in the indoor environment and exhibition areas (3) Flexibility and responsivity: access to materials with multiple purposes (e.g., pedestals that could be used as benches or walls) (4) Accessibility: open shelving and storage boxes available for children (5) Functional diversity: a range of thematic possibilities and potential functions offered within the setting (e.g., fine motor skill development through construction, drawing and art materials, scientific/ technological development through scales and measures) and (6) Representation: children see themselves in mirrors, photographs (e.g., on portfolios, wall displays, birthday calendars), and artefacts made by the children. Alterable environments which can be influenced by educators and children can positively affect cognitive, behavioural, and affective child outcomes (Barrable, 2020). In a study on young children's involvement in kindergarten design Bakr et al. (2018) discuss how ideally a child's play space should never be finished, it should be in a constant state of change, because children rapidly grow in their early years, they have the greatest range of dimensions, developing needs and aesthetic preferences. Studies have looked at the outdoors specifically as an important participatory space for young children. The natural environment provides affordances including a great variety of flexible and open-ended play items, such as naturally occurring loose parts, offer an ideal space for child-led exploration and play, as well as enhanced opportunities for deep adult–child interactions that are child-initiated and responsive to the child's own interests (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019). Barrable (2020) examines autonomy support in outdoor and forest kindergartens in Scotland and suggests a model for shaping the environment to support autonomy.

The improvement in children's physical early years environments including access to the outdoor environment, and in particular, use of favourite equipment has been noted by Clark (2007). Similarly, Bakr et al. (2018), note that kindergarten design has witnessed several changes due to the transformation of both architecture and pedagogy. There is now much more evidence of children's environments not just becoming more participatory spaces but of children's direct input into the design and use of playgrounds, museums, and libraries (Yates and Oates, 2019; Yates et al, 2022). This is also with case for early years settings. Tsverni et al. (2022) outline a participatory action research project using children's drawings and creations, brainstorming, and recorded democratic dialogues in which 15 Greek nursery school children aged 4 years old were involved in an environmental education program that focused on the transformation of their school grounds. Ghirotto and Mazzoni (2013) document children in a Reggio Emilia centre designing a vegetable garden project. Bakr et al. (2018) use virtual reality as a tool for children's participation in a kindergarten design process and conclude that children can successfully participate in the designing phase of a project. Muela et al. (2019) in Spain utilise the mosaic approach to evidence how the quality of preschool indoor and outdoor environments can be improved through a participatory intervention involving young children, parents and educators.

Curriculum content and design – Children can and should make decisions about their learning – what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. There are lots of references to concepts of child-led learning, inquiry based learning and individual curricula in the literature reviewed (Maynard et al., 2013; French and McKenna, 2022; Collins et al. 2022). An environmental education programme in Greece highlights the ability of young children aged four to express their ideas and practice critical thinking, problem-solving and collaboration skills in designing and caring for its own school environment (Tsevreni et al., 2022). An Irish study on improving quality in an early years setting used visual participatory research methods (Martin, 2019). The authors conclude that adding children's voices to the programme evaluation can help us to understand children's experiences and to interrogate the adult-centric quantitative data and adult perspectives generated in the ongoing project evaluation. The NCCA consultation with young children for updating Aistear is a clear and powerful example of young 'voices' influencing curriculum in early years. Key messages from the babies, toddlers and young children consulted for updating Aistear are 'to focus more on their friendships; to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like and empower them to implement it; to focus on wider aspects of identity beyond family and local culture, while still maintaining these important elements; to further explore their rights *and* responsibilities as democratic citizens; to continue and extend the focus on modes of communication beyond language, and support educators to document this; to foreground children's freedom of movement and choice regardless of the specific setting in which they are accessing Aistear; to continue the emphasis on play, and extend the focus on inclusive materials; and finally to reconsider the role of ICT in Early Childhood Education and Care' (O'Toole et al., 2023: 212).

Much literature engages with the topic of co-inquiry, child-led learning, and slow knowledge as participatory processes – here the early years practitioners assume the role of facilitators of children's curiosity and so provide open-ended learning processes. For example, in the *Look Who's Talking: Eliciting the voices of children from birth to seven* project, co-inquiry is seen as means of flattening power. The practitioner here acts as a co-inquirer, sharing power with the children, responding positively to the child, initiating and directing the activity (Wall & Robinson, 2022). One example of child-led learning is the vignette of 'the wasp' presented by Carlsen and Clark (2022) which shows how children in an early years setting engage in the experience of finding a dead wasp between pillows and how they bring the blocks from former play, into the encounter with the wasp, reorganizing the meaning of their building activity into a house for the wasp. The account shows how the teacher and the co-researcher catch the moment, observing the wasp, the children's interest and excitement, and the need for tools such as clay to go deeper into this moment of wonder. In addition, it shows that the children's observations and actions affect and change the plan for the workshop. The responsiveness and mutual influence of all those involved in the episode makes a vibrating oscillation between the participants: children, wasp, teacher, magnifying glass, wooden blocks, clay, and researchers. Taguci (2010) describes the need for engaging in such processes of collaborative invention and creation together with the child through an intra-active pedagogy with other matter, such as things and artefacts, spaces and places that we occupy and use in our daily practices.

Policies and Staffing – Young children can be involved in policy development and staffing decisions in early years settings. Cassidy et al., (2022) provide an example of an early years centre which 'invited children to voice their thoughts on the school's behavioural policy' through a survey and class discussion 'and then chang[ed] the policy to include parents, as they [the children] had suggested'. Boardman (2022) examines how children's voices and their choices are included in educational settings' early reading policies and when (if at all) children's choices are considered in the development of early reading provision within educational settings in England. Staffing decisions is another area where young children can participate, for example, Barnardos highlights instances where a child may attach to a person other than the key person that has been assigned to them. Its guidance indicates that services should try to adjust and adapt to natural preference that the child has made (McDermott, 2016). This is further acknowledged and supported in Síolta Standard 1 - a preference that a child indicates must be respected as the right of the child to make choices about who they want to build a relationship with (CECDE, 2006).

Transitions Children make numerous transitions in early years, both horizontal (coming and going to the setting, moving between activities and spaces within the setting and outside) and vertical (joining the early years setting for the first time and moving from preschool to school). Children themselves have highlighted difficulties arising from transitions to new settings (Clark, 2007). Babies and toddlers experience many transitions in the course of their day which demand individualised support (OECD, 2020). Their involvement in daily planning including planning for everyday horizontal transitions between home and EY settings and within the day in the setting

is highlighted in the Scottish Parliament's rights-based practice in EY settings checklist (Appendix 4).

Information, choices, and decisions around vertical transitions to primary school can be encouraged and promoted through a range of methods including photos of 'big school' and visits (O'Toole et al., 2023). Importantly, tools have been developed to support the transitions from early years settings to primary school. The NCCA worked with preschools and primary schools to develop the Mo *Scéal*: *Moving from Preschool to Primary* templates. *Mo* Scéal means 'my story' and the templates help to tell the story of the child's learning and development. This information is shared with parents and, with their consent, with the primary school. The resource can be used by preschools and schools as they collaborate in supporting young children and their families at this key transition. As transition to primary school is a process over many months, ideas for fun and engaging activities are also available. As part of this the child is given the option to take part in an activity about going to school, for example a drawing or photo, and to share this with their new primary school (Appendix 5).

The theme of giving children a voice and enabling their active participation in early years to primary school transition processes runs through a number of articles in a Children's Research Digest special issue on transitions in childhood (Horgan and Haals Brosnan, 2016). Ring and O'Sullivan (2016) presents the findings from a National Evaluation of Concepts of School Readiness in Ireland. These indicate that children perceived primary school in terms of the size of the buildings; the limited availability for play; the centrality of homework and the importance of making friends. The authors emphasise the importance of children being adequately informed and consulted in relation to the transition process and conclude that it should be reflective of the process quality embedded in the principles of Aistear. Reilly (2016), utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, looks at the role of play in preparing children for 'big school'. She describes a piece of action research in one preschool which included walking trips to the primary school, visits to the school during breaktime, taking photos, drawings, and dressing up in school uniform to give children a more comprehensive experience of what to expect and to support their transitions to primary school. McCormack and Cullen (2016) offer an examination of transitions to primary school as they explore a learning story of children helping to close their preschool experience and resituate themselves as 'big school' learners. They look at reflective journaling with children as a means of acknowledging their growth and acquired skills in preschool and empowering them as confident learners as they prepare for their transition to primary school.

Friendships and relationships - Encouraging belonging and participation through friendships with peers and relationships with staff and children's choices in this area is another theme running through the literature on child participation in early years settings. Among the key factors which young children themselves have identified as important to their enjoyment of their early years' provision is forming and maintaining relationships with peers and key adults (Clark, 2007). Their knowledge and understandings of friendships sometimes need to be inferred from their behaviours, interactions, and play. The NCCA literature review to support the

updating of Aistear point to studies suggesting that educators must attend to grouping and pairing children within the daily routines, transitional times, breaks, and lunchtime (French and McKenna, 2022). Such considerations of how the setting can accommodate children's friendships and preferred playmates are pivotal in supporting well-being during transitions (Brogaard-Clausen & Robson, 2019). Making friends not only aids adaptability to the environment, but also allows the child to be an active agent in his/her development and identity.

Young children's drive to make friends can be facilitated by enabling environments that offer children the 'space', both physical, temporal, and psychological, to relate to others, and to select the environments that are suitable for them (Papadopoulou, 2016). Carter (2023) reports specifically on young children's friendship choices and an original process of friendship selection as told by children aged five and six. Practice that tunes into children can support children to navigate their friendship choices. The data revealed the challenges of navigating friendships including time for pre-selection, applying the criteria for selection and the emotional time and space needed for putting selection into action. Children themselves did not ask for adult support. The implications for practice include permitting children to go out promptly at playtimes and to avoid encroaching on children's allocated free time, being instrumental in sharing and publicly celebrating interests to raise status and opportunities for friendship selection and allowing time for targeted teaching on specific areas and for spontaneous bespoke support of individuals and groups. Choice of friends in a Greek reception class of 4–5-year-old children was investigated by Papadopoulou (2016). It was purposeful and reflected the friends' common interests in a particular activity, or object, or even theme of a story. The authors conclude that to promote their activities as social agents, children should be given the opportunities to exercise agency and choice, to meet peers, spend time with them and select the types of activities and resources they want to share with their friends.

Documentation - Murray (2019) argues that given the complex nature of children's voice, it is often forgotten or a more cursory approach taken. This is particularly the case in relation to engaging children in documentation, with Knauf (2015) concluding that there was relatively little child involvement in the work of documentation across 40 German ECEC settings in Germany. This is despite the fact that pedagogical documentation is seen as a means of strengthening participation and democracy in educational institutions (Picchio et al., 2014). The question, then, is - how can we achieve a pedagogy which involves children in documentation? Documentation, aligned with the Reggio Emilia approach, is seen as a tool for listening attentively to the children in order to understand them better and help them understand themselves better (Thornton and Brunton, 2014). The 'Look Who's Talking' project highlights an example of such an approach where a nursery use an electronic journaling application on iPads that families can access (Wall et al., 2019). The child enjoys helping practitioners to select which images to upload and which to exclude in her journal which is shared with family. Many such apps for early years are now available allowing practitioners to upload images, narratives, and videos of the children's play. Parents receive a notification when something new is uploaded and can reply with comments and questions.

3.2 Methods – how can young children participate in early years settings?

This section explores how young children's participation can be operationalised in early years settings beginning with the broader lens of approaches. Relational, holistic and slow processes emerge as important facilitators of young children's participation. The approaches to participatory practice in early years settings evident throughout the literature are rights-based and respectful, recognising the funds of knowledge which children bring to the setting. Spaces, both indoor and outdoor, as affordances of child participation are then explored, before moving to a review of creative, arts-based and visual methods and the use of different media, for example cameras for young children to record their own perspectives, drawing, movement, and photography which feature as important facilitators of child 'voice'.

A key theme in the literature is the opportunity for and value of participation in children's everyday experiences and encounters in early years settings, and, as such, play, circle time and storytelling feature strongly. Also, the everyday practices of staff in the settings provide opportunities for facilitating participation by the young children they work with – these include inquiry-led teaching, observation, listening, and documentation. In much of the recent literature the potential offered by technology for enabling and promoting child participation is evident and particularly for those children who are non-verbal or preverbal and children with additional needs. Important considerations in any participatory engagement with children include the children's age, specific interests, specific learning needs, and available resources. The literature presents and considers the multiple ways in which young children express themselves. Methodologies are inclusive of a greater range of communication strategies beyond words, such as behaviour, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, play choices and artistic expression (Wall et al. 2019). This is both in recognition of the diversity in young children but also the importance of choice of methods for children.

Relational, holistic and slow methodologies in early years

Children's early years are critical for development and a strong, responsive relationship between child and carer is important in facilitating children's communication development (Brebner et al., 2015). Warmth, connectedness, and touch are key to children's participation (French and McKenna, 2022). This is recognised in the Key Person approach2 (McDermott, 2016; French and McKenna, 2022) which is mandated in the UK. In the Irish context significant resources are provided through The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* to support the use of the key person approach within early years practice. It is also recognised in the Workforce Plan for the sector in Ireland which commits to developing a national policy on the Key Person approach across ELC and SAC settings, and to developing training and resources for its initial roll-out (DCEDIY, 2021).

[2] Tusla's Quality and Regulatory Framework for ELC settings defines a Key Person approach as 'A method of care approach where each child is assigned a particular educator who will act as their "go to person". This person builds up a friendly attachment with the child, so the child feels connected, confident and familiar with that person. The key person will be the main communicator with the parent or guardian.' Similarly, the National Quality Guidelines for SAC (DCEDIY, 2020) recommend the approach as good practice in SAC, noting that 'The key person builds a unique relationship with each child/young person for whom they are responsible, supporting transitions, and is a link between the service, the child/young person and their parents/guardians.'

The NCCA report on consultations with young children similarly found that 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. Babies, toddlers, and young children told the researchers that their relationships are of the utmost importance to them. The authors identify some areas to consider for updating Aistear are to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like and to empower them to implement it (O'Toole et al., 2023). Children's participation is supported by adults that listen carefully, recognise children's competence and actively engage them in decision-making (Correia et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020). The importance of enabling a participation environment characterized by pedagogical sensitivity and respect for children's will to participate is emphasised in the systematic literature review of children's right to participate in early childhood education settings undertaken by Correia et al (2019). Carlsen and Clark (2022) propose a listening ECEC system, valuing slow pedagogy and slow knowledge building on earlier work by Clark (2007) who highlighted the importance for children in early years settings of having time to finish their 'projects'. The authors point to the importance of early childhood teachers being able to 'catch the moments' in young children's explorations and the value of 'stretched time' that can be supported and recorded through the process of pedagogical documentation (Carlsen and Clark, 2022). This pedagogical movement is in response to growing concerns about the 'hurried child' (Elkind, 2001) which runs counter to an implicit valuing of unhurriedness across early childhood traditions and the centrality of play. Findings of a study by Katsiada et al. (2018) validate evidence that even very young children have an active role in starting, extending, or redirecting play with their caregivers. The importance of collaboration and adult mediation in children's experiences in a slow pedagogy, then, is critical. Adults' adaptive capacity and their responsiveness to these invitations are considered crucial for sustaining and extending communication.

The simplest and most comprehensive way to ensure children's participation is to position rights in the context of relationships and responsive practice (O'Neill, 2021). Recognition of children as people with histories and lives, interests, and knowledge outside of the early years setting then is critical. A 'funds of knowledge' approach based on children's interests and experiences provides a coherent analytic framework for teachers to recognize children's interests and extend the curriculum planning focus beyond that of a child-centred play-based learning environment (Hedges et al., 2011). It is rooted in a respect for young children and seeks to model principles of democracy (French and McKenna, 2022). Democratic dialogue embedded within a commitment and culture of listening to children is the basis of participatory approaches adopted in early years settings. Menning (2019) contends that, in a rights-based early years settings, curiosity is a tool to support young children's learning. Furthermore, choice is evident within this right-based participatory approach. When teachers provide choices, children's interest in learning and self-determination skills are both enhanced (Jolivette et al., 2002). Choice is a powerful antecedent strategy, linked with increases in children's motivation for participation and willingness to follow teacher requests (Blair et al., 2010; Jolivette et al., 2002). Choice also provides opportunities for children to advocate for their needs (Katz and Assor, 2007).

Many of the methods of participatory engagement with young children evident in the literature draw strongly on the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008; Clark, 2011; Clark, 2017) which developed a creative multi-layered framework for listening to young children's perspectives comprising observations and learning stories, photography, and child conferences. In recent years, participatory and flexible yet rigorous methodologies have emerged in the form of visual approaches that rely less strongly on language skills that could exclude the voices of pre-verbal children (Wall et al., 2013; Blaisdell, 2019). Reggio Emilia is another influential approach in terms of the 'one hundred languages of children' adopted by its preschools where children are encouraged to express themselves in multiple ways (Edwards et al, 2011). The 100 languages are a metaphor for the extraordinary potentials of babies', toddlers' and young children's learning and development through the different languages of thinking, expressing, understanding and communicating. It is clear to see the impact of the Reggio Emilia Approach on the positioning of the child in Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Central to Reggio Emilia is an educational intentionality that attunes children and educators' participation in co-constructing learning journeys. It develops a participatory praxis for both children and educators. Both adult and child are reconceptualized as being competent, having agency, enjoying collaboration, as leading figures and co-authors of learning. (Oliveiria-Formosinho and de Sousa 2019, 35). It supports democratic negotiation of multiple realities. Experiences are supported through engagement, participation, and discourse with educators acting as facilitators, asking open-ended questions, and supporting children's exploration as they work collaboratively (Linder et al., 2013).

Space and places as affordances of children's participation

Affordances of different **spaces,** both outdoors and indoors, for young children's participation are an important consideration as the dynamics between children 'change when they play together at the preschool and when they are on a trip' (Cassidy et al., 2022). This theme of children interacting differently away from the adult gaze emerges frequently in the literature (Gallacher, 2016; Smith and Barker 2000). Such knowledge of how young children can enact their right to participation in different environmental and educational contexts, then, is important for improving and facilitating pedagogical practices. Hultgren and Johansson (2019) based on two ethnographic studies conducted in children's libraries, suggest a framework for operationalizing participation at practical levels to include the very youngest children comprising - inspiration, inclusion, involvement, and challenge. For example, inspiration - spaces for young children should be a place that invites exploring, exciting experiences, creative activities, stimulation of all senses and opportunities to extend the body's possibilities, where children can make their mark, with possibilities for altering. Inclusion is manifested in physical arrangements – small children should be able to see and reach materials by themselves. Involvement refers to active participation in creating the activity or place. Challenge means that the environment

includes not-yet defined in-between spaces; that the room is ambiguous, there are more things to explore, understand and define.

A review by Kuo and Jordan (2019) of the relationship between nature experiences and possibilities for learning and personal development among children concludes that nature-based learning facilitates a range of skills needed in the twenty-first century, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, communication skills, and pro-environmental behaviour. However, it points out that there is a lack of knowledge of how the environmental and educational context influences children's possibilities for participation specifically. Results from a study of nature kindergartens in Norway (Alme and Reime, 2021) show that the open and fluid character of nature creates a dynamic space for children's play, stimulates creativity and social inclusion, promotes responsibility, and facilitates generational interdependency. Staff promote and participate in children's initiatives but refrain from introducing and controlling activities. It concludes that the environmental and educational contexts in nature-kindergartens offer a range of participative situations while questioning whether all children have the capabilities for required active engagement (Alme and Reime, 2021). The study shows that the natural environment combined with relational practices affords a space for play and everyday life that is constitutive for a range of participatory situations. Staff, rather than designing participatory spaces, promote and participated in the children's own initiatives in utilising the affordances of the natural environment. In addition to the spaces and places offering participatory opportunities, a range of methods facilitating young children's participation rooted in the creative arts recur in the literature.

Creative, arts-based, and visual methods

Early years experiences should give due attention to the arts because young children's response to the world is primarily sensorial and aesthetic (Garvis, 2012; Nutbrown et al., 2013). The arts are recognised as 'one of the most powerful forms of expression and communication' (Kassan et al., 2020: 294). Arts based techniques offer variety, have playful attributes and are a recognised means for young children to express themselves through creativity (Biffi et al., 2021; Drury and Ruckert, 2022). There are recently developed working principles for engaging with the arts in early learning and care, acknowledging that children are creative, children's creative expression must be nurtured, children develop as creative thinkers, and that creativity is a process (gov.ie - Working Principles for Engaging with the Arts in Early Learning and Care (www.gov.ie)). There are also many examples of creative skills resources for arts and creative experiences within an early years rights context (see for example, Appendix 6). However, despite the Irish government's focus of attention on the early years sector, early childhood arts programmes have been largely neglected in terms of resourcing, with the majority of funding directed towards the creation of childcare spaces as a response to a labour activation agenda (Wolfe et al., 2013). The NCCA (O'Toole et al., 2023) in their consultation with babies and young children used interaction with puppets (Epstein et al., 2008), analysis of play episodes, role play particularly with microphones whereby children could tell their stories or make statements (Wall et al., 2019), drama, story-telling, literacy-based activities with books as prompts and other narrative approaches (Lewis,

2021). O' Farrelly and Tatlow-Golden (2022) give examples of practice to support decision-making in children aged two to five years, demonstrating the importance of visually appealing methods to inform and include young children. Some of the approaches identified with young children's participation are outlined briefly below including dance and movement, drawing and painting, and photography.

Dance is both a physical activity and a vehicle for self-expression. It offers the rich experience of exploring and creating, with the added benefits of lively movement (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021). Deans (2016) found that dance in enabling children to engage in embodied thinking, playful, imaginative problem solving, and active decision making while developing a strong sense of individual and group agency. These findings resulted from an interest-based socio-constructivist dance curriculum where children's voices were expressed in multiple ways. Similarly, the intrinsic desire to share emotions, experiences and activities appears very early in human ontogeny and enables children to participate in cooperative activities involving joint intentions and joint attention from early infancy onwards music (Tomasello et al., 2005). Joint music making among 4-year-old children using a 'frogs in the pond' scenario was found to increase subsequent spontaneous cooperative and helpful behaviour (Kirschner and Tomasello, 2010). There was limited reference in the data set of the three to six years cohort from the NCCA consultations to musical instruments (O'Toole et al., 2023). Dalli and colleagues (2011: 8) recommend "an environment rich in things to explore, opportunities for physical movement, dance, song, rhyme, storytelling, and creative activities". However, the quality of the attention young children receive may be more important than providing educational tools (Trevarthen and Malloch, 2002; French and McKenna, 2022).

Drawing one of the most important means by which children express themselves and is recognised as a valuable participatory tool with young children (Horgan, 2016) democratically involving them as 'producers of knowledge' (Elden, 2012). Its value relates to the fact that it is a natural activity that they engage with and so is common in children's lives (O'Toole et al., 2023 forthcoming), and that it is often successful in mediating conversations with them (Wall et al, 2019) removing the 'adult gaze'. It is widely used in consultations with children (Horgan, 2017). Drawing as a participatory technique is suitable not only for children who do not have language fluency to express themselves but for all children since drawing is, in itself, considered to be an alternative language for children of all ages (Hamama and Ronen, 2009). The difficulty of analysing children's drawings and imaginative data is well recognised (Bland, 2012) and so accompanying data including recordings of what children are saying with annotated drawings for non-verbal children along with the facilitators explanatory notes/interpretation are essential.

Photography- there are lots of examples in recent literature of photo-voice or photo-elicitation with young children with more research with babies and toddlers using this as a research tool to access children's voices (Martin, 2019; O'Toole and Hayes, 2020). These have been helpful for babies, toddlers, and young children to explore both positive and negative experiences (Kleine, Pearsons and Poveda, 2016) and issues of interest to them. Often children take photos of things

that they like or dislike in their setting (Martin, 2019). In other cases, photos and video recordings of babies and toddlers are analysed along with narratives of the educators indicating what was happening in the photos (O'Toole et al., 2023). Additionally, participatory photography can be an effective method for studying the lived experiences of young children with physical and intellectual disabilities, and particularly those with communication impairments (Eisen et al., 2019). Cassidy et al. (2022) describe how space was created for Frankie, a four-year-old who had great difficulty in communicating verbally, to find and exercise his voice through a range of media, notably through using a camera. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) demonstrate how children identified things they would like to change in an early years setting and contributed to actions taken by making the outdoor space more inclusive through creating zones tailored for the different preferences of children and also changing the toilet area so children could feel more at ease there through the décor, smell and lighting as well as the introduction of playing of music. This was facilitated through the children s use of disposable cameras.

Visual – Visual methods to support children's participation from the literature include an emphasis on the visual and tactile including child-friendly surveys adapted to meet the needs and requirements of young children e.g. using emoji faces (Fane et al., 2018). Visuals such as posters displaying agreed 'golden rules' (Leinonen and Sintonen, 2014). Concrete objects e.g. familiar figures such as puppets and other small play figures used in everyday play contexts provide a means for children to describe people and events and engage in more active participation (Clark and Moss, 2008; Clark, 2011; Mercer, 2014). Voting activities such as 'Beans in the pot' - an interactive activity where children are given a number of beans which they can distribute among pre-labelled pots according to how strongly they feel about, or agree with, something. Young children might be asked how they feel at the end of their first day in nursery - series of pots labelled with pictures to depict happy, sad, frightened, tired. Each child can be given one bean to place in the pot of their choice when trying to engage in democratic decision-making e.g. which game to play or which storybook the teacher might read (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999). Photograph boards displaying special activities and events which can be a useful tool in reviewing events and experiences (Grunewald, 2014). Map-do-review, an innovative practice that facilitates children's involvement in planning their own learning has been used as an effective tool to ensure each child's voice is heard in our setting, irrespective of their language ability or developmental stage. Children are empowered to express ideas about play and learning using their own method of communication – verbal or non-verbal – resulting in experiences that are meaningful to them. Using a cycle of engagement, children communicate intent for play, develop ideas during play and reflect afterwards (Cassidy et al 2022).

Promoting participation through children's everyday experiences in early years settings

Finding ways to promote participation through children's everyday experiences in early years settings is another feature of the literature. It documents utilising methods which children

enjoy, are part of their daily routine, and so, are comfortable with, to facilitate their participation. These methods include play, circle time and storytelling.

Play - Children spend much of their young lives in play. It is how they learn about themselves, learn new skills, and build their self-confidence and their sense of what they are capable of (Gill, 2018), as well as building relationships. Play can act as a release valve that allows children to feel a sense of their own agency, and to make some kind of sense of their experiences on their own terms, with adult concerns fading into the background (Brussoni et al., 2015). As such, then, play is a major aspect of children's communication and means by which they can participate. Murray (2021) identifies the central role of established frameworks for play in realising children's right to be heard by helping us to better understand children's motives, intentions and capabilities. Seeing children as citizens with a right to active participation is central to the play-based curriculum approaches practiced in early years settings. How adults conceptualise children's rights to democratic participation influences the play choices made available to children in their services (Elvstrand and Närvänen, 2016; Bell and Cartmel, 2014). Educators' aversion to risk can limit the range of play choices available to children (Bell and Cartmel, 2014, van Rooijen and Newstead, 2017). Colliver and Doel-Mackaway (2021) examine the implementation of Article 31 of the UNCRC and argue for the application of a large body of recent research with the group most qualified to determine whether activities are play or not: young children. The research demonstrates that choice and autonomy are two universal and essential indicia for an activity to be experienced as play. The chosen play themes and dialogue in social dramatic play can reveal the voices – the choices – the interests and concerns of the players (Cassidy et al, 2022).

Child conferences/circle time – Circle time comprises another significant part of the preschool day; research on this routine demonstrates that it typically takes 15 to 20 min, adding up to 45 to 60 hours across a 180-day school year (Stipek, 2018). It is clear then, that this everyday routine is an important component in early childhood classrooms. only suitable for verbal children but can showcase a range of views while also giving a picture of a shared cultural understanding (Wall et al., 2019). Its value is in tackling some of the power differentials in the setting, ensuring children's comfort in expressing views with the support of peers and friends, and familiarity for children through frequent experiences of 'circle time'. Kulset (2016) examined the possibly contradictory relationship between children's right to participate and ritualized circle time. It presents an analysis from an arts-based research inquiry, conducted during circle times in multicultural kindergartens with children aged three to six. Results found that a structured and ritualized song circle time enhanced children's participation in a multicultural kindergarten. Gauvreau et al. (2023) suggest choices at circle time can provide ways for all learners to assert autonomy. When children arrive at circle time, they can be given the choice of where or how to sit (e.g., a choice of sitting, kneeling or lying on their stomachs, or using adaptive seating options such as cube chairs or bean bags), or how they might participate in a song (such as the example of musical instruments in the lesson plan) or counting activity (counting the days in the calendar by clapping, tapping their feet, tugging their ears, etc.).

Storytelling, books, and nursery rhymes - Boardman (2022: 133) suggests that real-life experiences and collaborative opportunities are required for interpretation and meaning making, which positions early reading as a holistic (social, emotional, cultural, physical, linguistic, cognitive) and consequential activity. Backman-Nord et al. (2023) in their systematic review of the literature discuss how the Finnish storycrafting method was developed to give children extended tools for participative and democratic dialogue with adults. Through it, staff gain a deeper understanding of children's lives and enables learning from others. Lastikka and Karlsson (2022) in discussing the storycrafting method highlight elements that are important for achieving reciprocal participation and listening. These include children narrating freely, with elements of creativity, imagination, learning, and play added to the process, active, reciprocal and dialogical listening. The authors conclude that being genuinely interested in listening gives children a voice and lets them decide the topic, how, and when they want to tell their story. The strong democratic tradition of giving children a voice (Alasuutari, 2014; Council of Europe, 2012) combined with the tradition of valuing storytelling for children might serve as a foundation for the development of storycrafting as a method. Books can facilitate children's participation as demonstrated in the NCCA consultations which highlights the use of books as prompts for discussion, for example igniting a conversation about change, or as a way to allow children enact choice and pursue their interests, and as another means to express themselves (O'Toole et al., forthcoming 2023). Additionally, Mullen (2017) advocates the versatility of nursery rhymes in supporting multiple domains of child development including the skills required to communicate needs and wants in socially appropriate ways, symbolic use of language and storytelling.

Promoting children's participation through everyday staff practices in early years settings

The everyday practices of staff in early years settings provide opportunities for facilitating participation by the young children they work with – these include inquiry-led teaching, listening, observation and documentation.

Inquiry led teaching and the role of questioning – the literature review for updating Aistear (French and McKenna, 2022) consistently highlights children's natural curiosity and sense of wonder and the value and importance of playful experiences to encourage these dispositions, deep-thinking, and inquiry-based learning. Young children's questions in their early childhood education settings can act as a leverage to express their views on matters affecting them (Murray, 2022). Pedagogic spaces where more equal relationships are promoted tend to rely on words (Alexander, 2020) but questioning is a fundamental act and young children use multiple diverse communication modes, many of which are non-verbal (Malaguzzi 1998; Bae 2010). Murray (2022) argues for opportunities for children to use questioning to pursue their curiosity to learn and realise their 'right to express…views freely in all matters affecting' them. Questioning is a form of expression and children's voices include questioning in various modes from birth (UN CRC/C/GC/12 2009; Engel 2015; Lansdown, 2005) with oral questioning starting at around two years (Bae, 2010). In a study with 2-4-year-old children in England, Murray (2022) used artefacts as tools for their questioning in their early childhood settings. These artefacts included a chair, medicine syrup in a plastic bag, coats, a slide, salt, dinner, cake, Mummy and

Daddy. As found elsewhere (Clark, 2010) objects can act as conceptual resources to support young children's questioning. The children used more than one mode of questioning e.g. voice accompanied by gesture or touch. However, Murray (2022) concludes that the nature and extent of children's questioning in this pilot study are limited. While children demonstrated some capacity and agency through using information-seeking questioning to form and express their views about matters they considered important in their ECE settings, and they formulated eclectic questions positioning themselves in relation to the world and others. Nonetheless, there was evidence that the questions asked by children may not have been give due weight commensurate with agency. The findings indicate that adults in ECE settings need high-level skills and sensitivity to recognise and respond to the diverse modes young children may use for questioning in order to realise their right to be social agents who express their views freely.

Listening - Rinaldi (2006,12) refers to the multi-layered approach of listening, valuing and actively seeking the views of young children as 'the pedagogy of listening'. The notions of listening to under-threes with their developing language skills demands a different approach and one that is also culturally relevant (Boardman, 2022). Shaik et al.'s (2021) South African study of ECEC frames 'listening' as relational and responsive, where encouraging agency is viewed as a tool to support participation and belonging. 'Relational listening provides feelings of comfort and acceptance and encourages young children to want to engage further' (2021, p. 7). The findings suggest that educators are 'keenly aware' of the benefits of listening to young children and this lays the foundation for a stronger connectedness between children and adults thereby democratising spaces and validating children's opinions and right to participate. Clark et al. (2003) provides some strategies for everyday listening to young children.

- Prioritising time to listen to children talking, in groups and individually
- Using children's Learning Stories as a daily listening tool
- 'Tuning in' routines to young children's rhythms, interests and developing skills
- Giving young children increasing control over their personal care
- Explaining, discussing and negotiating rules
- Seeking young children's opinions and solutions to problems which arise
- Developing ways of listening to and involving young children which open up more channels of communication with parents
- Designing personal 'passports' to listen to and empower young children with additional needs
- Bringing in older children as 'consultants'

'Silence as a form of voice' is another important theme emerging, recognising children's right to privacy and silence but also seeing it as a way for the child to exert power in a situation (Cassidy et al, 2022). Being inclusive allows children the option of being silent, of opting out or of having 'silence as a form of voice'. A listening culture and disposition must be cultivated in those working with young children if their 'voices' loud or silent are to be taken seriously.

Observation as part of the on-going assessment of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development. Aistear (NCCA 2009) is of particular importance in reviewing the experiences of pre-verbal children and this appears frequently in the literature regarding young children (see Hart, 2005). According to Malaguzzi (2012), observation means immersing in the topic the child is exploring and in the child itself, without objectifying either of them. The observation presupposes a belief that children can act on their own. This is part of a much greater process of **Pedagogical Documentation** - In Norway, regulations on a framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens developed in 2017 include 'observation, documentation, reflection and systematic assessment' as a base for planning and development of the work. Carlsen and Clark (2022) describe how the three moments in pedagogical documentation - observation, documentation, and interpretation - are the teachers' contributions to the process. The children's contributions are their explorations, ideas, interests, and actions. To observe how children develop their ideas and constructions, a rich environment is needed. The teacher's organization of the physical environment – 'an invitation' – gives children the opportunity to explore. The teachers observe and document how children use or do not use the invitations, explore, and transform materials and express their ideas. Teachers interpret and discuss what they have seen and thought with the children and make new invitations in the physical environment leading to new actions by the children in a process which 'unfolds like waves' (Carlsen and Clark, 2022). In this intentional suspension, the educator sees children's signals and listens to their voices (notices), realizes what she saw and listened to (becomes aware) and records it (Oliveiria-Formosinho and de Sousa 2019). In using pedagogical documentation, time is stretched, which may mean breaking away from a strict clock-based, timetabled sense of time. Kind, Shayan, and Cameron (2019) refer to this slow practice as 'lingering'.

Observations have been used extensively to inform the development of Aistear – the early years curriculum framework, highlighting their central role in accessing the 'voice' of children and promoting children's agency in curriculum development. The NCCA used portraiture studies of children to support the development of Aistear (NCCA, 2007) while the consultations in the development of the updated Aistear use anecdotal, narrative observations and learning stories (French and McKenna, 2022). Technology is increasingly used in observations, for example, the TeachMeAsIAm project involved children wearing a small portable camera during activities in the setting. The video-data were uploaded and analysed using video-analysis software, and then discussed with the child (Ring and O'Sullivan, 2019).

Technology as a facilitator of children's participation in early years settings

The NCCA literature review to support the updating of Aistear points to children's increasing interest in and use of digital technology to represent ideas, feelings, and understanding through drawing, painting, photography, and video recording apps (French and McKenna, 2022). Integrating technology such as tablets, smart phones, computers, interactive whiteboards, and audio/video recordings engages children, can increase motivation and is a recommended

strategy in early childhood classrooms (Gauvrau et al., 2023). Its value in supporting children's language, expression and engagement is highlighted in a study by Flewitt et al. (2015) with staff commenting on the value of iPads in stimulating and enhancing language and communication with young children. Nursery staff, in particular, noted how children with English as an additional language were able to name things on apps, and shy children started talking more. Apps have been developed for the creation of children's e-storybooks which present children's activities, learning and development through learning stories, videos and pictures (https://mosaicearlyed.com/services/mosaic-educator-family-apps/). Other examples include using the built-in camera on a tablet, learners can create videos of themselves leading songs and activities and show these during circle time or using websites such as Story Bird© or Flip Grid© to create and share visual stories with their classmates, demonstrating their knowledge. Decat et al.'s (2019) study explored how touch technology provided a new modality of representation for young children in the pre-kindergarten classroom. In addition, teachers could explore digital storytelling and provide opportunities for children to create stories of their own to be shared at circle time. Finally, for children with additional needs, using assistive technology (AT) devices offers a natural opportunity for participation and demonstration of their knowledge and skills during circle time (Gauvreau et al., 2023). The literature highlights the need for a re-conceptualisation of young children's learning in early years pedagogy and early childhood settings as children under five are engaging with digital technologies in playing and learning at home and this cannot be overlooked by early years education along with a re-examination of the way in which the early years workforce organise their learning environments in response (Palaiologou, 2016; Arnott et al, 2018).

4. The 'voiceless' and marginalised voices in early years.

This literature review now moves to supporting the participation of specific cohorts of children with early years settings in order to acknowledge the 'diverse range of babies, toddlers and children, regarding language, culture, age, disability/neurodiversity, gender, family structure, social and economic (dis)advantage attend early years setting' (O'Toole et al., 2023: 8). It includes a short section on specific cohorts of children often marginalised in participatory practice including very young children, migrant children, Traveller and Roma children, and children with disabilities. Inclusion is a precondition for participation – the child that is not included can neither participate nor influence. Children can be excluded on a number of grounds: physical, linguistic, or cognitive ability, age, or social and economic factors. As argued by Murray and Urban (2012), equality of access and participation as a value asserts that early childhood services need to be inclusive. There should be no barriers to access and participation in ECEC services for any child on any grounds. Equal participation includes planning and monitoring of programme activities and ensures that all children receive adequate support to participate fully. Ultimately, as argued by Nutbrown and Clough (2009) if objectives in early years policy in relation to inclusion and citizenship are to be realised; identity and self-esteem are the two most important issues to be addressed. If children are successfully to experience a sense of inclusivity and belonging in their early years, curriculum and pedagogy must attend to aspects of practice that make all children feel valued by enabling them to contribute their ideas and know that their contributions matter.

The NCCA consultation with babies and young children for the updating of Aistear indicates one area that could be further developed is to support educators to incorporate more inclusive materials for learning and development (O' Toole et al., 2023). In its current form, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) shows how play in all its forms should be accessible to all children, but the recent consultation suggests an update might foreground materials that represent multiple identities and ways of experiencing the world. The researchers found little mention of race, gender, cultural or ethnic materials or of toys, books, or other resources with identifiable medical or social needs, disabilities in the dataset. One possible explanation put forward is that the educators in question are practising in such inclusive ways (e.g. using a universal design for learning approach) that potential points of 'difference' are not immediately obvious.

The introduction of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for ECCE (DCYA, 2016) in Ireland sought to embrace, promote, and embed principles of inclusion in policies and everyday practice across the sector with a particular focus on children from diverse backgrounds and cultures and children with disabilities. It aims to support staff in the sector 'to explore, understand and develop practices and approaches that embrace diversity, equality and inclusion and, through this, to create an inclusive culture where all children can flourish and realise their potential' (2016: 10). More recently, the EU Toolkit for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2021) includes examples of good practice in ECEC settings and identifies useful ideas

and resources to inspire leaders and staff across Europe to progress towards practice that is more inclusive.

4.1 0–2-year-old children

The literature notes a lack of tools for consulting with very young children (Hart, 2005) with calls to undertake a reflexive re-examination of the ways in which we conceptualise and gauge capacity in very young children (Cassidy et al., 2022). Voice 'includes, but is not limited to, words; behaviour; actions; pauses in action; silences; body language; glances; movement; and artistic expression' (Wall et al. 2019). And so, in acknowledging and supporting such embodied communication observation, baby signing, and music methodologies are important.

Baby sign language is advocated to improve children's communication development, yet in their systematic review of the literature, Fitzpatrick et al. (2014) conclude that there is no reason to advocate for or discourage policies to include baby sign in early childhood education programs. Some research lends support to the reciprocal benefits of gestures in terms of facilitating parent–child interaction and early communication development. Olson and Masur (2013) found that mothers responded more frequently and used more verbal responses when infants' communicative attempts involved gestures. While parents' positive responses to their infants' gestures have been shown to increase infants' attempts at communication through both gestures and vocalizations (Miller and Lossia, 2013). There are now a wide variety of programmes, books, videos, and classes of baby signs have been made available to parents and caregivers. Baby signing combining signs, symbols and speech is gaining momentum and is now quite common as a form of early childhood non-verbal communication or for children who have English as an additional language (Mueller and Sepulveda 2014). Indeed, the approach taken allows for, and actively promotes, that very young children initiate activity in response to their needs and emotions. For example, in the Look Who's Talking project the aim was for infants, as they became familiar with the signs, to also be able to initiate their own requests and emotions using signs alongside vocalisations (Wall et al., 2019)

There is now a much more explicit recognition of prelinguistic children's participation (Palaiologou, 2016) and how infants powerfully communicate their intentions in quite refined ways. Trevarthen and Aitken (2001) highlight the behaviours selected to define the infant's intersubjectivity – the ways the infant look, express their feelings in face and voice, how they gesture and move in rhythmic cycles to accept or reject contact. Bakkenget and Vapenstad (2023) identify two approaches to infant participation - the grown up speaks on behalf of the infant or the voice of the infant is embedded in the voice of the adult. The first approach bases its interpretations on (a sometimes detached) observation of signs. The second approach emphasises the fact that human interaction is understood as embodied participation and mutual meaning making, what De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) call 'participatory sense-making'. The 'Look Who's Talking' project discusses babies embodied communication within a setting catering for children from birth to three, where the practitioners clearly saw voice as something more than spoken words. They wrote about reading cues, unspoken communication and facial

expression, paying attention to children's 'gaze', and communication through body language and eye contact, such as in the example they offer of 'a child grabbing my hand and taking me to the fridge' (Cassidy et al, 2022), built on relationships and understanding and interpreting a child's actions.

The limited literature in this area essentially endorses already existing methods for promoting very young children's engagement, communication and participation discussed earlier in this review. Hart (2005) discusses, from a research perspective, the notion that the younger the children the more indirect the consultation tool should be. With this in mind, observation is a tool for learning about very young children that is well respected among practitioners as it is used everyday to help evaluate all aspects of children's lives. Observing children is extremely worthwhile and helps practitioners to look more closely at what may be underneath. Through the observational tool, interpretation was made as to what the children might be saying. Through pointing with their eyes as well as their finger, choosing, handling and learning about various materials, what they might be saying about their surroundings, using their voices and other forms of communication – verbal and nonverbal – to convey messages to their key worker and other children. Not being easily distracted by other children is a must and could be problematic for a key worker with a number of children to care and educate.

Music as a participatory methodology for very young children is documented in the literature. Young and Ilari (2018) drawing on Rogoffs (2003) concept of children's learning and development occurring though participation, argue that participation as an orienting concept fits well with the idea of music as fundamentally about different forms of communication in culturally meaningful forms of activity. For young children it is about joining a social activity where learning is meaningful because it is embedded in the social and physical context (Young and Ilari, 2018). Early exposure to music, and music instruction has started to play a significant role in the early childhood curriculum as noted in (Chau-Ying Leu, 2008). Furthermore, early childhood curricula emphasise the centrality of music (NCCA, 2009; Barblett et al., 2021) and at university level, music educators are training early childhood teachers to use music with young children and establishing community programs to offer music instructions to young children. Starcatcher's music methodology for communication with preverbal and non-verbal children. Trevarthon and Malloch (2002) emphasise the capacities to generate and participate in communicative musicality allow us to spend time meaningfully with another person. Applying Eraut's (2000) levels of intention learning to the early years, Young and Ilari (2018) present three levels of intention in music in early years education comprising implicit (embedded music) reactive (self-initiated music play and adult-responsive co-play) and deliberative (structured music sessions led by staff). Gerry et al. (2012) found that infants assigned to the active musical experience from 6 months showed superior development of prelinguistic communicative gestures and social behaviour compared to infants assigned to the passive musical experience. These results indicate that infants can engage in meaningful musical training when appropriate pedagogical approaches are used, active musical participation in infancy enhances culture-specific musical acquisition, and that active musical participation in infancy impacts social and communication development.

4.2 Migrant children

The Irish context has changed rapidly since early 2000's with much more diversity in the children attending early years settings (Garrity et al., 2017). Yet, current research suggests that wider systems, policies, and educational provisions can be slow to adapt to 'superdiverse' communities and pluralistic societies (Garrity et al., 2017; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2022; Sadownik, 2020). Some findings suggest that immigrant children struggle to participate in play and are sometimes marginalised within their preschool group. Karlsdottir and Einarsdottir (2020) in their Icelandic study discuss how the participation and agency of young boys with non-dominant cultural backgrounds were supported through their learning stories. The authors argue that preschool teachers might work against the marginalization of children from multicultural backgrounds by building on children's competencies, listening to them, and relying on their ways to interact and find solutions. Similarly, Barblett et al. (2021) in their literature review for updating the Australian National Frameworks foreground the importance of creating culturally safe spaces in early years settings and describe how, for educators, this means more deeply interrogating "social, cultural and linguistic diversity" to enact "more inclusive pedagogies" (Miller and Petriwskyj, 2013: 251). Understanding children's perspectives on what makes a place meaningful provides educators with additional insights into 'places and events of significance to children' as they navigate their daily lives in institutional spaces (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021: 80). Garrity et al., (2017) in their study of two early years settings in the West of Ireland with very diverse cohorts including migrant and refugee children, found that Aistear's themes of well-being; exploring and thinking; identity and belonging; and communicating (NCCA, 2009) are clearly reflected in the pedagogical approach; EYPs provide a balance of child-led and adult-initiated activities; they draw on children's interests to extend their learning, offering flexible daily routines that accommodate spontaneous developments. Furthermore, and echoing the literature on facilitating child participation more generally, they report that developing genuine, caring relationships was constructed as a practice imperative by early years practitioners.

Inclusive Education for Refugee and Migrant Children: A Toolkit for Early Childhood Education and Care Settings was created by the EECERA Special Interest Group in 2022. It was inspired by the international event 'The Walk' organised by the Good Chance in 2021 which presented the journey of a 9- year-old Syrian refugee girl, who walked 8,000 km from Syria to the UK, seeking to be reunited with her mother in the United Kingdom. The toolkit sets out to improve the capacity of ECEC settings to serve these children with humanity, compassion, respect and welcome. The activities in the pack are organised into themes from the 'The Walk' comprising HOME; MIGRATION; FEAR; CLIMATE; ADVENTURE; WELCOME; EMPATHY AND COMPASSION. It firstly offers an opportunity to give voice to the hopes, beliefs, and concerns of migrant and refugee children. Second, it identifies relevant and thoughtful themes for early years practitioners to share with young children in the hope that they can learn together by exploring ideas that expand their repertoire of the possible, and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Third, the toolkit models a process for ECEC staff to engage in positive and strength-based dialogues about the lives of the newly arrived young children (Appendix 7)

The EU Toolkit for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2021) over and above providing refugee, migrant and Roma children with access to early years settings recommends to member states the recruitment of staff from marginalised, migrant or minority groups as it has proven to be of advantage if the composition of staff in ECEC settings reflects diversity in the community. It further recommends creating a welcoming environment for children that values their languages, culture, and home backgrounds, hence contributing to the development of their sense of belonging, underpinned by appropriate curricula and training.

4.3 Children with additional needs

Enabling participation is considered more difficult for children with additional needs, resulting in the voices of children with a disability regularly remaining unheard (Eisen et al., 2019; Byrne and Lundy, 2019; Mallett and Runswick- Cole, 2014). A pressing issue has been the need to promote the participation of children with additional needs within early years practice. Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Development service, and The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which provides targeted supports, enables settings to cater for the individual needs of children with disabilities, promoting their active participation into the ECCE programme and ensuring each child has a voice. AIM has supported the development of inclusive environments and practices (McNally et al., 2021).

At the most basic level, physical accessibility is essential to children's ability to attend and participate in an early years setting. The UDL Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings (Corbett et al., 2019) shift the focus from access to meaningful involvement (Emilson and Eek Karlsson, 2022). It is likely that many early childhood classrooms are already utilizing some aspects of UDL, although teachers may be unaware of how their current practices align. For example, teachers may already allow children to choose their centres during free play (Lohmann et al., 2018), pair visual guides with oral instructions (Chai and Chen, 2019), or model how to complete a task before asking young learners to do it independently (Gauvreau et al., 2019), or use circle time to increase young children's participation, access, and inclusion by ensuring representation and highlighting children's interests and preferences. In short, as Gauvreau et al (2023) argue there are natural alignments between UDL and best practices in early childhood.

The Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016) promotes access and participation in early childhood education and care for children with additional needs or disabilities. The EU Toolkit for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (EC, 2021) presents inclusive practices experimented across Europe as well as resources which can help other ECEC staff and settings to enhance inclusion of children with disabilities. These include using specific pedagogies, adapted curricula, and individual learning plans in a mainstream setting; and involving specialised teachers.

Rouvali and Riga's (2019) Greek study on a child with additional needs involvement in designing her own learning process/plan uses the mosaic approach. Data relating to how the child liked to spend her time in the setting; her favourite places; and what the child, parent and educator

considered important during her time in the setting was collected. Methods included observations, intensive interaction sessions, video, and photo collection, 'I like/ I don't like' activities and a questionnaire for parents, the educator and the child. The results portrayed the child's significant sensory needs, her wish for structured routine and the use of visual aids, and her favourite places and activities, all of which were used to devise an educational programme for the child. This project demonstrated how children with additional needs can be involved in curriculum design and content by using appropriate frameworks and encouraging child participation.

4.4 Traveller and Roma children

Facing severe discrimination for centuries, the Irish Traveller community were officially recognised as an ethnic minority in Ireland in 2017 (O'Sullivan et al., 2018). The NCCA in 2019 published Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum: a curriculum audit highlighting opportunities Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum: a curriculum audit for the integration of aspects of Traveller culture and history under the key Aistear principles. A key theme within this was children as citizens with rights and responsibilities - children audit opinions that are worth listening to and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy. From this experience they learn that, as well as having rights, they also have a responsibility to respect and help others, and to care for their environment.

> • Remember that I too am a citizen. Help me to learn about my rights and responsibilities. Model fairness, justice and respect when you interact with me and others.
>
> • Create an environment for me in which I feel confident and comfortable, and have opportunities to share my experiences, stories, ideas, and feelings. Model democracy in action. Involve me in making decisions and in planning activities and doing and reflecting on them with others.
>
> • Let me share my views and opinions with you about things that matter to me. Help me to understand that others may have different views and opinions, and to respect these. As I communicate in different ways, this might mean you need to observe and interpret my facial expressions, body movements, gurgles, cries, moods, and my language(s).
>
> • I have the right to be protected from harm. Help to ensure I am not endangered or neglected. If you have concerns report them to the relevant person.
>
> • Encourage me to care for my own and others' belongings and for the environment. Help me to be open to the ideas, stories and experiences of others, and to listen and learn from these.

An ESRI report (Watson et al., 2017) identified activities such as music, drama and art as potentially contributing to greater inclusion of Traveller pupils in schools and society. This is echoed in the latest national strategy (DoJE 2017) which promises to support members of the Traveller community to develop ambitious initiatives exploring their arts traditions. The Wonder Years project (O'Sullivan et al., 2018) was a Traveller specific early years arts brief intervention

programme in Dublin. Designed to facilitate the voices of the young children and their parents the programme comprised music and art methodologies along with photo elicitation. The authors conclude that in a community with traditional values regarding child rearing, socialisation, and levels of child–parent interaction, the mothers chose to direct less and allow the child to lead more. Recent research has highlighted the importance of leadership in promoting inclusion of Travellers, as a severely disadvantaged group of children, in early years. Hanafin et al., (2018) in a qualitative study of Traveller preschools found that travellers felt included in the preschools and participated actively; inclusion was strengthened by practices such as intentional cultural representation, open-door policies and warm and supportive attitudes of school staff; and Travellers' educational experiences and lack of confidence were inhibitors to feeling included.

Conclusion

Ideological perspectives on the need to understand children's voices are well-documented in educational and sociological literature (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Clark 2005), with links to work relating to a listening culture (Mitra 2008) that are well-theorised. Yet, all agree that translating the ideology into reality is complex and fraught with challenge. This literature review has sought to draw together the literature on young children's participation and to surface and acknowledge examples of participatory practice in early years settings. Children's participation is a growing multidisciplinary field, producing theory and methodology for involving children with informed, empowering, and creative ways in decision-making for their lives and environments (Ergler 2017; Holt, Evans, and Skelton 2017).

The report reviews the key literature on methodologies and mechanisms for consulting with children and babies aged birth to 5 years. It has a strong conceptual basis in childhood studies and children's rights and is informed by the Lundy model. The literature review draws on important recent work in Ireland, comprising a literature review and report on consultations with babies and young children, informing the development of Aistear to ensure practitioners understand and can embed their participatory practice in the national early childhood curriculum and quality standards. The review draws on rich resources in Aistear (NCCA, 2009), which is currently being updated with a stronger focus on supporting young children's participation, and Síolta (CECDE, 2006), to ensure practitioners understand and can embed their participatory practice in the national early years curriculum and quality standards.

It sets out the broader theoretical, policy and curriculum landscape in relation to child participation in early years. The review scopes the literature on early years participatory initiatives, identifying the lack of practical education materials and resources while providing a selection of good practice in this area. As well as documenting the thematic areas that children can participate in from organisational and structural to curricular and everyday practices, the diverse methodologies being utilised to promote young children's participation are discussed from spaces and places, to arts and creative practice, to everyday practices engaged in by children including play, circle time and storytime, as well as practices that staff including inquiry-led teaching, listening, observation and documentation. The literature review concludes with a focus on more marginalised or 'voiceless' groups of young children including 0–2-year-olds, migrant children, Traveller and Roma children, and children with additional needs.

A key theme emerging from the literature is that supporting participation is a relational, holistic, and slow pedagogy which is happening in everyday early years settings with young children, although the literature points to increasing challenges in an ECEC sector that is time poor. Time needs to be protected to enable practitioners to experience 'stretched time' alongside the demands of increasing outcomes-driven practice given the increased regulatory environment. Nonetheless the dispositions of staff are critical - having high expectations for children and young people and viewing them as capable rather than vulnerable can contribute to ways of working that support young children's active participation and citizenship. The review highlights

significant gaps in the literature in relation to preverbal children and marginalised cohorts of children including migrant children, Traveller and Roma children and children with disabilities. However, what is revealed is that often, much good practice in participation with older children is transferable to younger children and other disadvantaged groups of children.

The report refers to real world practical resources and reflective tools for early years practitioners. It has a strong conceptual basis in socio-cultural and child rights-based theories. It is underpinned by the principle that young children have not just the right but the ability to engage in participation and that facilitating this will ensure rich experiences for both practitioners and young children in early years settings.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

An Introduction to the Rights of the Child in Early Learning and Care (Barnardos)
An Introduction to the Rights of the Child (barnardos.ie)

Appendix 2

Look Who's Talking: eliciting the voices of children from birth to seven. Developing guidelines for practice and advancing theory and understanding about facilitating the voices of young children including elements that constrain these (Wall et al, 2019). Talking point posters
https://www.voicebirthtoseven.co.uk/wp-content/themes/lookwhostalking/posters/LWT%20all.pdf

Appendix 3

EU PARTICIPA - Promoting children's participation rights in early childhood education and care: Self-assessment tool for professionals.
www.child-participation.eu

Appendix 4

Scottish Children's Parliament identifying and amplifying good practice in embedding children's rights in their earliest years and identifying good practice internationally in early years settings. Identified 5 pillars of rights-based practice in early years. Filmed 3 EY settings to discover what rights-based approach to EY looks like. Developed a Rights-based practice in EY settings checklist.
https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Early-Years-Settings-Checklist-Childrens-Parliament-2022.pdf

Appendix 5

Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. It creates performances and creative activities for babies and children from birth to 5 years and the adults who care for them.
https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/the-voice-of-the-child/lets-talk-about-the-voice-of-the-child/

Appendix 6

NCCA Mo Scéal transition resources
https://ncca.ie/media/3755/suggested-transition-activities-for-preschools.pdf
https://ncca.ie/media/3822/mo-sceal-template-2_int.pdf

Appendix 7

Inclusive Education for Refugee and Migrant Children: A Toolkit for Early Childhood Education and Care Settings (EECERA Special Interest Group, 2022).
https://www.canva.com/design/DAFSjPEIsRg/view