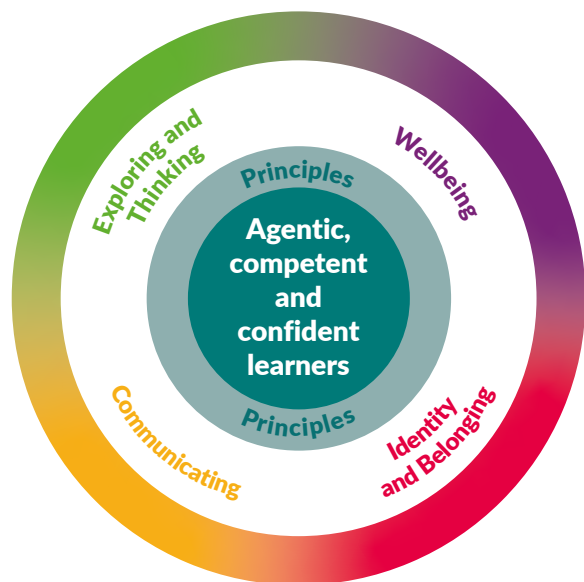


Exploring Aistear's Theme of **Identity and Belonging** (2024)

*Research Foundations and
Sample Learning Experiences*





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Introduction

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, originally published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009, was updated by the NCCA in 2024. As part of the updating process a team of researchers from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, conducted a literature review entitled **Literature Review to Support the Updating of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*** (French and McKenna, 2022) to provide a research base to inform the updating of *Aistear*'s Themes (2009) of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. Chapters on *Setting the Context* (French and McKenna, 2022) and *Addressing the invisibility of Babies and Toddlers in the Literature* (French in French and McKenna, 2022) were also included. The review provided key trends for consideration to enhance the four interconnected Themes of *Aistear* (2009) which describe important types of learning for babies, toddlers and young children, including dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understandings.

This booklet presents key findings from the Literature Review related to the Theme of Identity and Belonging for young children (ages 2.5 to 6 years), (Farrell and McKenna in French and McKenna, 2022) and the additional emphasis on the focus on Identity and Belonging in Chapter 3 Addressing the invisibility of Babies and Toddlers in the Literature (French in French and McKenna, 2022). In alignment with the structure of the literature review, the booklet is presented under the four Aims of the Identity and Belonging Theme of *Aistear* (2009). It includes:

- a summary of the findings from the literature review in relation to the Theme of Identity and Belonging
- an update on the changes made to the Theme of Identity and Belonging in *Aistear* (2009) to that in *Aistear* (2024)
- sample learning experiences that illustrate what the updated Theme of Identity and Belonging might look like in the everyday lives of babies, toddlers and young children.

References

Please note that the booklet does not include individual references of the empirical evidence that informed the Literature Review by Farrell and McKenna in French and McKenna (2022) or French in French and McKenna (2022). For detailed source information, readers are encouraged to consult the original **literature review**, where all references are comprehensively documented.

Identity and Belonging

The review reaffirms the relevance of *Aistear*'s Theme of Identity and Belonging, while identifying areas for enhancement. It underscores the importance of supporting babies, toddlers and young children to have a positive sense of who they are, ensuring they feel valued and respected within their families and communities. Babies, toddlers and young children learn to respect their own identity and that of others through experiencing intimate, responsive, and trusting relationships.

Babies, toddlers and young children learn to respect their own identity and that of others through experiencing intimate, responsive, and trusting relationships.

Aim 1: Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories

Identity formation and sense of self

The review acknowledges that *Aistear* (2009) highlighted the importance of responsive, respectful relationships in supporting a sense of self-worth and identity. It emphasises the importance of positive attachment relationships and of relational, responsive listening and encouraging pedagogies to promote and support a strong sense of identity and belonging. Acquiring a sense of identity as someone who is lovable, respected, and open to new experiences requires consistent experiences of love, respect, attunement, support, and positive responses to the initiatives of babies, toddlers and young children by those around them. Listening carefully, paying attention and interpreting interests, ideas, and preferences are powerful pedagogical strategies. The review stresses that early childhood curriculum can guide responsive pedagogies and practices that provide babies, toddlers and young children with time, space, and opportunities to know themselves well, to take pride in their bodies, abilities, cultural identities, values, and languages. Social and cultural identity emerged as an area of importance as babies, toddlers and young children come to understand, navigate, and adjust to differences between themselves and others. The review explains that a sense of self and connectedness to people and place depends on welcoming environments, responsive and reciprocal relationships, and learning experiences that respond to unique developmental and sociocultural contexts.

Belonging

The review outlines that *Aistear* (2009) defined belonging as having a secure relationship with a particular group of people. It notes that in the last eighty years belonging has been established as a basic human need, driven by an innate need for warm, responsive relationships and deep human connections especially with peers. The review underscores the enduring influence of positive relationships on personal development, cognitive function, social-emotional wellbeing, and health—while also drawing attention to the detrimental effects that the absence of such connections can have across these domains. A sense of belonging is embedded as a core principle across multiple early learning frameworks and curricula, including *Aistear* (2009). This principle encompasses an awareness of self, connection to others, and a feeling of comfort and safety within the learning environment—facilitated through deliberate choices, practices, and approaches. The importance of the environment and how cultures, languages, and attributes are represented within the physical space, books, and play materials is vital to how a sense of connection and belonging is developed. The review highlights the importance of building relationships in infancy and early childhood. Babies, toddlers and young children should be offered opportunities to recognise, respect, and celebrate differences and educators play a critical role in creating conditions where they can develop a deep, connected sense of belonging. This can be achieved through practices of listening, noticing, and responding to babies, toddlers and young children’s perspectives, nurturing a sense of belonging and collective group membership.

The importance of the environment and how cultures, languages, and attributes are represented within the physical space, books, and play materials is vital to how a sense of connection and belonging is developed.

Becoming

The review asserts that *Aistear's* Theme of Identity and Belonging (2009) emphasised the provision of environments, relationships, and learning experiences that respected and affirmed each baby, toddler and young child's unique identity and life story. It details that the concept of identity and belonging is not static; rather it evolves in response to cultural and social worlds and is in a state of both being and becoming. The review suggests that, in updating *Aistear* (2009), NCCA should consider the concept of 'becoming'—recognising and encouraging babies, toddlers and young children as they shape their unique pathways, life stories, and identities. This perspective acknowledges how early experiences contribute to the development of both personal and social identity. Becoming in this context is not about achievement (for example, becoming a good communicator) which detracts from babies, toddlers and young children's present. A sense of self is built from experiences and interactions with people and places. It goes on to suggest that early childhood curricula can support the development of environments and experiences that reflect the characteristics, sociocultural contexts, home languages, strengths, needs, and preferences of babies, toddlers and young children. Through these experiences babies, toddlers and young children are more likely to feel valued as they see themselves, their families, and their interests reflected in the environment and experiences provided.

*A sense of self
is built from
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and places.*

Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended

Equal recognition, participation, and inclusion

The review highlights that awareness of diversity begins early in childhood, and it also warns that prejudice towards minority groups can start in these early years. Babies, toddlers and young children are not only aware of differences but can also experience rejection, discrimination, and bullying. The review stresses the importance of helping them express views on fairness and building a sense of community through play, discussions, and sharing. These experiences can foster fairness, acceptance, respect, and empathy. The curriculum can guide experiences that nurture curiosity and connections with others. It also points out that some groups—such as children with special needs, cultural diversity, or lower socio-economic status—are at higher risk of exclusion. The review advocates for *Aistear's* (2009) learning goals to be informed by an anti-bias approach, promoting identity, belonging, and equity for all. Ideally, professional practices should reflect diverse family values while prioritising the best interests of children.

Gendered values and identity

The review underscores the importance of addressing gender identity in early childhood policies and practices. It suggests that early childhood settings can embed societal gender norms either implicitly or explicitly. It goes on to stress that educators should support gender-neutrality by encouraging babies, toddlers and young children to make choices based on their preferences, not gender. However, this can be challenging as they often gravitate toward gendered toys and games. The review advocates for addressing gender imbalances and inequalities through pro-diversity practices, recognising that play and the learning environment are key areas for exploring gender.

Additional learning, development, and care needs

The review stresses that high-quality early childhood environments can enhance outcomes, especially for babies, toddlers and young children with additional learning or care needs. These environments should be inclusive, with accessible resources and responsive educators. The curriculum should view diverse learning needs as a form of diversity, promoting understanding and acceptance of differences. The review also notes ongoing challenges, such as educators' confidence, skills, and lack of support and training. The review notes the development of curricula and learning frameworks present an opportunity to complement and support the design and implementation of practice that acknowledges and embraces different ways of being, knowing, and doing.

High-quality early childhood environments can enhance outcomes, especially for babies, toddlers and young children with additional learning or care needs.

Migration, globalisation, and 'superdiversity'

The review highlights that over the past two decades, Ireland and other European countries have experienced increasing social, cultural, and economic diversity—often referred to as superdiversity. It notes that this enriches Irish society and offers babies, toddlers and young children greater exposure to difference. The review suggests that early childhood curricula can nurture children's natural curiosity about diversity, supporting their participation in multi-ethnic and multicultural communities. Educators are encouraged to adopt anti-bias approaches to promote inclusion and challenge racism and prejudice. Culturally responsive settings that value linguistic, social, and cultural differences help foster individual and group identity. This involves rethinking relationships, learning experiences, materials, and institutional practices to expand *Aistear's* (2009) focus. The review cautions against limiting diversity to celebrations of customs and festivals, advocating instead for regular engagement with literature, folklore, music, and dance that reflect families' and communities' socio-cultural contexts.

Culturally responsive settings that value linguistic, social, and cultural differences help foster individual and group identity.

Indigenous groups, Roma, and Traveller children

The review highlights a growing body of literature raising awareness of identities from diverse cultural and ethnic groups. It calls for greater attention to non-dominant indigenous communities, including Travellers, in Ireland's early childhood curricula. Children from these groups often face poorer outcomes due to systemic factors. The review emphasises the potential of high-quality early education to promote indigenous culture, language, and identity, while addressing discrimination. It advocates for collaboration with families and communities to help babies, toddlers and young children explore and express their identity through oral traditions, storytelling, song, and dance. While some evidence-based initiatives with Travellers in Ireland exist, the review urges mainstreaming these efforts to ensure babies, toddlers and young children from the Traveller community are positively recognised and welcomed in early childhood settings.

Culturally responsive approaches, pedagogies, and practice

The review notes that *Aistear's* Theme of Identity and Belonging (2009) highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging and group identity, including respect for difference and diversity. The review highlights the need to focus on babies, toddlers and young children at risk of marginalisation and exclusion. It notes they can form and hold negative attitudes and prejudice based on race but can also develop positive feelings and pride in their own identities, as well as those of others, when their environments, relationships, and experiences address and challenge bias. Understanding is influenced by what babies, toddlers and young children see, hear, and experience including by curriculum approaches that recognise bias, affirm diversity and respond to different contexts.

The review highlights the need to focus on babies, toddlers and young children at risk of marginalisation and exclusion.

Places, spaces, and learning materials

The review suggests that in high-quality early childhood settings, there is evidence of cultural recognition and responsiveness in displays, toys, books, learning materials. The review provides examples of policies that encourage and, in some cases, mandate the provision of culturally diverse play and learning materials. It goes on to note that meaningful recognition of the right to belong requires displays and play materials that reflect and celebrate home languages and cultural customs and provide affirmation so that all families and communities are positively recognised. However, it warns that a sense of group identity and belonging cannot be fully realised through the provision of physical objects and displays, as merely being surrounded by diverse materials is unlikely to result in learning experiences and discussions that explore diversity. True learning experiences must explore diversity and foster meaningful discussions, not just surface-level representations.

Interpersonal connections and relational pedagogies

Babies, toddlers and young children can be supported to challenge unfairness and exclusionary behaviours through opportunities to interact with educators and peers to develop their ideas about belonging, identity, and diversity and by challenging misinformation or inaccurate stereotypes. The review highlights the importance of early childhood educators paying attention to and showing genuine interest in each individual so that everyone feels noticed and valued to support their sense of self. The review emphasises the importance of relational pedagogies in developing a sense of group belonging, building relationships that are responsive to the lived experiences of babies, toddlers and young children. Strong connections between families, educators, peers, and community members support a sense of safety, wellbeing, and group belonging, fostering kindness, respect, affection, equality, comfort and belonging in early childhood settings. A caring and loving approach to babies, toddlers and young children and their families promotes enriched practice.

The review details how *Aistear* (2009) recognised that group and cultural identity forms within the family and, from there, extends and evolves as babies, toddlers and young children engage with others. The review highlights the importance of diverse play experiences through which babies, toddlers and young children can explore differences, cultural practices, daily routines, and celebrations to build knowledge, friendships, and relational connections. The review suggests tuning in to interests, identities, funds of knowledge, and working theories to help ensure respect for difference is part of everyday practice, planning, and reflection. In building group identity, the review emphasises the importance of relationships that pay attention to lived experiences of each baby, toddler and young child and the shared knowledge of all community members. The review notes that *Aistear* (2009) aimed to support a sense of belonging and group identity that was grounded in a rights-based approach that respected and recognised cultural identity, values, and languages. It asserts that a sense of group identity relies on access to people, places, and spaces that deliberately show respect for individual and group identities and encourage close, respectful partnership with families and communities. A key message emerging from the review is the need for greater awareness of, and positive responses to, non-dominant groups and those at risk of exclusion and marginalisation in the update of *Aistear* (2009) as early childhood curriculum can guide supportive environments, culturally responsive practices, and inclusive pedagogies that promote a diversity of heritages and languages.

Aim 3: Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights, and views of others

Commitment to rights-based approaches

The review notes that over the past decade, research, policy, and curricula trends have shown commitments to rights-based approaches which recognise the centrality of citizenship, participation, and rights in early childhood. However, the review signals that the right to participate and the extent of the participation of babies, toddlers and young children remains dependent on educators' perception of their ability to participate. Often their rights are not reflected meaningfully in practice despite governments obligations. Babies, toddlers and young children are experts on their own lives, and have views about what is important to them but challenges remain for educators to ensure the views of babies, toddlers and young children are sought, considered, and included in the adult world, perpetuating the construction of them as unknowing and vulnerable. Furthermore, the review notes policy and curricula must position babies, toddlers and young children as active agents in their own and each other's learning and development. The review shows that while a commitment to babies, toddlers and young children's rights is often evidenced in policy and curricula frameworks, a gap exists between policy rhetoric and the reality of their everyday experiences regarding their rights and active participation.

Children as rights-holders and active participation

The review states that all babies, toddlers and young children are rights holders. This includes participation rights, a right to a voice in all matters related to them, the right to engage in play and that their best interests be a priority. It goes on to note that curriculum and policy must place babies, toddlers and young children at the centre of decision-making. The review highlights the centrality of voice and states that babies, toddlers and young children's voices should be listened to, heard, and acted on. It states that recent Irish policy positions their

voices as a critical component of research, pedagogy and practice and that their participation is essential in democratic education. It notes this involves early childhood educators facilitating babies, toddlers and young children to participate in decision-making. The review notes that the right to participate is critical for establishing a culture of democracy, social justice, and citizenship but its application remains a challenge as it involves power-sharing. From an Irish perspective, the review notes educators' knowledge and understanding of babies, toddlers and young children's perspectives and the subsequent interpretations of these are critical. It stresses that active participation in learning experiences empowers babies, toddlers and young children to participate increasingly effectively in their groups and communities to enhance their sense of identity and belonging and to be active citizens when their funds of knowledge are recognised.

The review notes that the right to participate is critical for establishing a culture of democracy, social justice, and citizenship but its application remains a challenge as it involves power-sharing.

The review details that in *Aistear* (2009) rights were emphasised but goes on to note that babies, toddlers and young children may need help in making sense of their experiences in order to be able to express their rights and value those of others. They need educators to support them to explore and to narrate what is happening with warmth, support, encouragement, and adequate explanations of the limits imposed upon them. It is vital that ideas, wishes, and viewpoints are treated as valid, even if educators do not agree with or cannot adhere to them. In other words, it means treating all babies and toddlers and young children with respect and with an acknowledgement of the power imbalance. The review highlights the importance of knowing each individual well to support a sense of identity and belonging and notes that embracing anti-bias approach and culturally responsive practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are as key.

Social justice and citizenship

The review explains that social justice is about recognising privilege and disadvantage and working to challenge these. It goes on to say that approaches that integrate social justice harness curiosity and ability to explore difference, diversity, and dignity, supporting understanding and attitude formation. It is about empowering diverse identities, voices, and perspectives. The review suggests that not only are babies, toddlers and young children capable of exploring diversity, but they can develop an awareness and understanding of the experiences of others. Social justice pedagogies can encourage them to express and show empathy, appreciation and sensitivity. Early childhood curriculum can provide opportunities to support awareness and understanding of identity and place within the world and that of peers, family, and wider community. For example, picture books can support discussion, exploration, and critical thinking on race, socio-economic deprivation, gender, and culture. However, these experiences require early childhood educators to support and encourage active listening and respectful engagement with different perspectives so that settings are contexts for citizenship education when babies, toddlers and young children are meaningfully involved in discussion and decision-making with caring informed educators. Babies, toddlers and young children's abilities to be citizens, agents of change, and active participants largely depend on connected relationships with others. The review stresses that it is critical to recognise the role of power dynamics within these relationships.

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Sustainability

The review notes that babies, toddlers and young children can be active participants in sustainability. However, it goes on to note there is a focus in the literature on environmental, social, and cognitive domains (particularly natural environmental aspects) with little discussion of political dimensions of sustainability. The review highlights the need for deeper articulation of agency in future policy documents, including the update of *Aistear*. The review notes that education for sustainability demonstrates that while environmental stewardship by babies, toddlers and children and educators is promoted, there is still room for improvement. The review calls for education for sustainability to become an integral part of early childhood curricula and calls for a move beyond nature and environmental stewardship to create the potential for transformative practices. Babies, toddlers and young children, both individually and collectively, can be agents of change for sustainability with a cultural dimension to respond to a culturally diverse world. It notes that while *Aistear* (2009) referred to the environment and sense of place, sustainability is more than interaction with their environment and suggests in the update of the Framework there is a recognition of babies, toddlers and young children's ability to be agents of and for change and for sustainability to be embedded within ECEC curricula frameworks including in the update of *Aistear* (2009).

Babies, toddlers and young children, both individually and collectively, can be agents of change for sustainability with a cultural dimension to respond to a culturally diverse world.

Aim 4: Children will see themselves as capable learners

Co-constructed learning experiences

The review notes that enacting a pedagogy that values identity and belonging is grounded in learning experiences that encourage babies, toddlers and young children to think, feel, respect and reflect. It goes on to say that while celebrating and representing cultural and ethnic traditions are important, this alone is insufficient and can in fact reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes. Babies, toddlers and young children, and their families and communities have rich funds of knowledge that can contribute to everyday practice through culturally responsive and inclusive learning experiences. For example, including home languages, food preparation, child-rearing practices, and relationships with extended family members in the curriculum. The review suggests that supporting babies, toddlers and young children to develop skills to thrive in a diverse world through play experiences and learning opportunities that respond to their personal experiences and identities is vital. It explores the experiences of indigenous babies, toddlers and young children and highlights the importance of drawing from their home lives and provides examples such as storytelling, dance, riddles, stone counting, and the use of traditional tools and equipment to maintain cultural values and identity. It goes on to show how early childhood educators can use family-home connections to explore learning opportunities for all. The review shows the importance of recognising and reinforcing parents' important role as primary educators in planning for inclusive learning experiences and proposes that thoughtful planning and pedagogy is likely to adapt to the needs of all by embracing natural curiosity and sense of social justice to address misinformation, negative stereotyping and bias. The review highlights the benefits of a culturally responsive curriculum that promotes nurturing environments, responsive relationships, and co-constructed learning experiences that welcome and value all babies, toddlers and young children and their families and communities.

Babies, toddlers and young children, and their families and communities have rich funds of knowledge that can contribute to everyday practice through culturally responsive and inclusive learning experiences.

Funds of knowledge, children's interests and working theories

The review notes that the idea of co-constructing curriculum in response to babies, toddlers and young children's interests, funds of knowledge, and working theories has been well established over the past decade. The concept of funds of knowledge offers a conceptual framework for informing effective practice and is centred on the belief that the best way to learn about babies, toddlers and young children's lives is through finding out about their everyday lived experiences with their family and community. Interests and funds of knowledge often unfold as babies, toddlers and young children try to make sense of the world around them and develop working theories. Working theories represent babies, toddlers and young children's evolving ideas, and understandings based on their experiences with their families and communities and as they engage with others to think, wonder, and make sense of the world.

Working theories represent babies, toddlers and young children's evolving ideas, and understandings based on their experiences with their families and communities and as they engage with others to think, wonder, and make sense of the world.

They use their existing understandings to create a framework for making sense of new experiences and ideas. Building on their funds of knowledge provides a foundation for inquiring minds to thrive and for educators to meaningfully respond to interests, inquiries, and working theories to ensure more equitable and responsive learning experiences. The review notes that in the update of *Aistear* (2009) the concept of funds of knowledge, as a theoretical framework for understanding and engaging with interests, provides a positive way for early childhood educators to acknowledge the richness of babies, toddlers and young children's lives and the diversity of their experiences. They suggest this could be strengthened in the update. The review also notes that the learning goals of *Aistear* (2009) recognised babies, toddlers and young children's broad range of interests. It positions funds of knowledge and working theories as significant aspects of early childhood curricula so babies, toddlers and young children can view

themselves as capable learners and engage in co-constructed learning experiences. In the update of *Aistear* the review suggests greater consideration could be given to ensuring interests and funds of knowledge are drawn upon to develop an individualised curriculum for each baby, toddler and young child along with a greater focus on ensuring their voices are heard and have influence.

Conclusion

The review offers understandings of how babies, toddlers and young children's identities and sense of belonging are conceptualised in increasingly diverse social and cultural worlds. The review notes that curriculum frameworks reflect economic, cultural, political, and social periods, and therefore capture a moment in time. The findings of this review re-affirm the importance of the Theme of Identity and Belonging and of a sense of self, group identity, and belonging. It highlights the relevance of culturally responsive practices for Ireland's multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. The review emphasises the value of responding to babies, toddlers and young children's unique contexts and lived experiences, acknowledging their rich funds of knowledge, working theories, and interests in the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. These rights-based approaches recognise and respond to them as active citizens and rights-holders, encouraging a sense of self, others and wider society.

The review highlights the importance of enacting babies, toddlers and young children's right to feel respected and valued as embedded across *Aistear* (2009) with particular focus within the Theme of Identity and Belonging. Key trends include: identity formation, social justice, citizenship, participation, sustainability and rights-based approaches. The review offers perspectives on how identity, sense of connection and capacity to thrive as citizens of a diverse world can be strengthened in the update of *Aistear* (2009) and suggests greater consideration could be given to ensuring interests and funds of knowledge are drawn upon to develop an individualised curriculum for each baby, toddler and young child along with supporting greater participation of babies, toddlers and young children to ensure their voices are heard and have influence.

Updates to the Theme of Identity and Belonging

Like *Aistear* (2009), *Aistear* (2024) states that the Theme of Identity and Belonging is about babies, toddlers and young children developing a positive sense of self and feeling valued within their families, communities and wider society. The findings of the review re-affirmed the relevance of *Aistear*'s existing Theme and identified areas for updating, which have now been incorporated.

The update re-emphasises the importance of a sense of self, group identity and belonging. The Theme is further strengthened by introducing a clearer focus on *meitheal* (community spirit) and by embedding concepts such as rights, influence, agency, participation, and social justice into the Aims and Learning Goals. The updated Theme also embeds a stronger rights-based approach that recognises babies, toddlers and young children as active citizens and rights-holders with voices that matter. It also integrates sustainability and citizenship education, recognising babies, toddlers and young children as agents of change.

Greater consideration has also been given to acknowledging the uniqueness of each baby, toddler and young child's individual life stories and the role of the educator in recognising their need for comfort, reassurance and affection, while simultaneously affirming their competence and confidence to support their sense of identity and belonging. The updated Theme places a strengthened focus on the key person approach and on nurturing relationships to support a sense of self and group identity.

The update stresses the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive practices that reflect Ireland's increasingly diverse, multilingual and multicultural society, affirming and supporting diversity, including Irish cultural and linguistic history and *scéal* (story). Educators are encouraged to recognise and build upon babies, toddlers and young children's funds of knowledge and working theories—the ideas and understandings they bring from their families and communities—to create individualised, meaningful learning experiences. The update also places greater emphasis on environments and play experiences that promote belonging through exploring differences, cultural practices, daily routines, and celebrations to build knowledge and relational connections.

The important role educators play in planning learning experiences that challenge stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination is outlined. Attention is given in the update to the importance of recognising and including non-dominant and indigenous communities, such as Travellers, ensuring equity and participation for all. The update also includes a focus on social justice which is about recognising privilege and disadvantage and working to challenge these. The update emphasises the importance of relationships that pay attention to lived experiences of each baby, toddler and young child and reinforces the message that strong connections between families, educators, peers, and community members is central to a sense of identity and belonging. There is a clear focus on supporting empathy, co-regulation, fairness, perspective-taking, compassionate responses, kindness and equity in the update. Through play and everyday interactions, babies, toddlers and young children will develop a sense of identity and belonging by showing respect for themselves, others, and the environment—laying the foundation for an inclusive, compassionate, and sustainable society.

Transition from Early Childhood Education to Primary and Special Schools

The alignment between *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* plays an important role in ensuring continuity and progression in children's learning as they make the transition from early childhood education to primary and special schools.

This alignment is particularly evident in the Principles of Early Learning and Development in *Aistear* and the Principles of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Although developed for different sectors, both frameworks place the child at the centre of their learning and acknowledge the unique learning journey that each child is on.

The redeveloped Primary School Curriculum is intentionally grounded in the rich learning that begins in early childhood. *Aistear* provides the foundational principles, dispositions, and playful learning experiences that shape children's earliest encounters with curriculum, and these are explicitly recognised and built upon in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.

Both frameworks share a strong pedagogical focus—particularly in their emphasis on play as a central approach to learning and teaching. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* reinforces the appropriateness and centrality of play and playful approaches in primary classrooms, strengthening the connection with children's earlier play and playful experiences in *Aistear*.

Sample Learning Experiences for Identity and Belonging

The following sample learning experiences offer a starting point of suggested ideas for educators on how to support babies, toddlers and young children’s learning and development across the Aims and Learning Goals of Identity and Belonging. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive and some sample learning experiences are adaptable across all three age groups, while others are more suitable to a specific age group or stage of development. The sample learning experiences also offer guidance on how to support and progress learning across the three age groups, at a pace that is responsive to individual needs, rights, interests, abilities and wants of babies, toddlers and young children. This helps promote an inclusive learning environment where every baby, toddler or young child can participate meaningfully and reach their individual potential.

Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, the educator:	Birth to 18 months	12 months to 3 years	2.5 to 6 years
develops a deep understanding of individual personalities, life stories and interests by implementing a key person approach through slow relational pedagogy.	<p><i>For babies, the educator:</i></p> <p>knows individual likes and dislikes. Organises a predictable but flexible daily routine, that is displayed visually, adapted to cater for individual needs, rights, interests, preferences and abilities. Responds to feelings and preferences. Works closely with families to learn about sleep cues, soothing techniques, eating preferences, familiar songs and sayings from home, incorporating these into daily care routines where appropriate. Provides favourite comfort items – teddy, blanket, soother from home as transitional objects within the setting. Marks meaningful family events – birthdays, family traditions in inclusive and respectful ways.</p>	<p><i>For toddlers, the educator:</i></p> <p>takes time to notice behaviours, feelings and emotions, providing comfort, guidance and support especially in times of need – when they are upset, jealous, frightened, or stressed. Uses information from families – favourite toys, foods, play routines to create meaningful experiences. Recognises individual preferences – likes (being outdoors, consistent routines) or dislikes (certain textures, being indoors) and makes adjustments to support comfort and participation. Facilitates flexibility in time spent on learning experiences (indoors and outdoors) and meal times based on the needs of individual group members.</p>	<p><i>For young children, the educator:</i></p> <p>learns about individual strengths and interests – family, sports, animals, cars, dancing, singing, baking, gardening, farming, dinosaurs, pets, abilities and incorporates these into learning experiences. Plans experiences that are inclusive of varying abilities ensuring everyone has opportunities for success. Embraces cultural knowledge and practices shared by them and their families so they can make meaningful contributions to the group’s learning. Involves them in making visual displays of the routine and talks with them about how it meets their needs and respects their rights.</p>

helps build a strong sense of self-identity.

has photo books and cubes featuring them and their families, including pets, available throughout the day. Uses sturdy laminated photos or small photo books they can handle. Photos are also displayed at floor level for easy visibility and access to low level mirrors is ensured. A learning journal or home-setting link book is shared to exchange photos and stories between home and the setting, supporting continuity of care and learning. Uses their name and the names of family members regularly. Knows the music and songs they like and plays these in the setting. Offers similar foods to those at home. Helps them make meaningful connections between home and the setting.

creates a 'Me and My Family' wall where photos are displayed at their eye-level. Makes personal albums that include information about them and their family – names and ages of siblings, pets, parents and grandparents, their interests. Displays key words – hello, goodbye, thank you in home languages represented in the setting. Uses these during the day. Sings songs and nursery rhymes in the diverse home languages and invites families to share favourites from home.

uses positive language about them and their families, *Your dad likes to cook with you, doesn't he? You told me you love it when Nana reads you stories about tractors.* Considers which individual and family experiences and interests are reflected in the setting and identifies those that might be missing. Then plans ways to include everyone. Invites families to share photos, recipes, songs, books or traditions that can be included in experiences or to visit the setting to share aspects of their culture or interests.

supports the development of self-awareness and a strong learner identity.

spends one-to-one time helping them distinguish themselves from others. Uses the correct pronunciation of their name, encourages looking at themselves in mirrors or photos. Helps them identify body parts and understand and use their physical capabilities – encouraging clapping, reaching, smiling, waving, pointing, and communicating and cognitive skills – gurgles, gestures and sounds, feeding themselves. Supports understanding of their individual strengths and qualities – *You love learning outside.*

helps them explore what makes them special – their unique characteristics *You have brown eye* and their differences from siblings and peers. Looks at their learning portfolios with them individually and talks about they have been doing and achieving to help them feel respected and valued. Names efforts and achievements and highlights positive learning dispositions and things they enjoy doing. *You are very independent putting on your wellingtons.*

supports them in thinking about their strengths, interests, qualities and capabilities. Displays their creations respectfully showing names and dates – photographs of constructions, their paintings and collages. Invites them to teach peers words in their home language or share their interests. Encourages them to make 'All about me' books with photographs and/or drawings of themselves, their families, homes, pets, favourite toys, creations, experiences, and talks about these.

provides meaningful, culturally responsive experiences and resources.

provides finger puppets or small world figures representing a variety of skin tones, clothing styles, abilities, family types. Ensures books and learning journals are culturally relevant and reflect different abilities, family types, interests and topics. Is familiar with some words in the home language(s) of those for whom English is an additional language.

ensures the pretend play area reflects the life experiences of those in the setting and the wider community with dress-up clothes, utensils, food, and cooking items from homes represented in the setting. Provides crayons and paints in a range of colours that represent different skin tones and cultural backgrounds. Labels regularly used objects and resources using pictures and words in different languages, relevant to the setting.

offers resources and materials that reflect diverse families, homes, abilities, occupations, backgrounds, and cultures; clothing – saris, kimonos, embroidered shirts; cooking utensils – woks, tortilla presses, tagines; resources for different jobs in the community. Includes props to help them explore new identities and roles. Provides dolls that have anatomically correct features in a range of skin tones and hair types, along with books and small world play figures that represent diversity.

creates a linguistically inclusive environment that represents the languages of families and educators in the setting, and integrates these into the curriculum where appropriate.

understands and responds to all the ways they communicate – vocalisations and gestures by mirroring, nurturing and extending them. Chats with families to learn key words for greetings and routines in home languages and uses these appropriately during the day. Plays or sings songs and lullabies in home languages.

helps them understand the many ways people communicate. Uses words from different home languages along with gestures and signs during play and routines. Reads picture books, sings songs, says nursery rhymes in their and/or educators' home languages, where appropriate. Invites families to share favourite rhymes, words, expressions, stories, songs and music.

helps them become more aware of the many different ways they communicate. Invites them to teach words and phrases from their different home language. Labels areas and materials using languages of the group with visuals. Has display posters showing greetings and common words in various home languages. Explore different languages through songs, stories and playful conversations. Invites families to share traditional songs or music from home.

creates a linguistically inclusive environment that includes *Gaeilge* (Irish) in English medium settings.

sings songs and lullabies in *Gaeilge* (Irish). Introduces everyday words in Irish during daily routines. Offers soft toys in Irish – *liathróid* (ball), *teidí* (teddy). Provides picture books in *Gaeilge* (Irish).

Models and repeats *Gaeilge* (Irish) words and phrases in everyday routines – greetings, daily phrases, tidy up, counting. Uses puppets, props and visual aids to help them understand *Gaeilge* (Irish) in books and in play.

Introduces more words in *Gaeilge* (Irish). Add Irish labels to areas indoors and outdoors – *cistin*, *siopa*. Encourages them to create bilingual displays (weather charts, feelings). Reads short stories in *Gaeilge* (Irish) that include pictures.

helps them to live sustainably and to know about and care for their local environment, fostering connection to the landscape, to history, and to one another, and nurturing an awareness and love of Ireland – its culture, nature and history.

helps them become familiar with their local community through regular walks, chats, and repeated sensory experiences. Points out local sights – shops, buses, parks, recycling bins, mountains, the wormery, and people in the locality. Encourages them to explore nature through touch, sound and sight – grass, leaves, rain, wind, beaches, animals, birds, clouds, rainbows. Invites them to wave to familiar people – the post person or grocery delivery van. Sings songs and tells stories about local people and places, and points out local symbols – the GAA flag when a team wins a match.

points out historical monuments, castles, churches during whole group nature walks. Tells them the names of the local river, lake or beach and introduces them to native Irish flora and fauna. Encourages them to experience and talk about the seasons, weather, and countryside. Introduces *Gaeilge* (Irish) through repeated songs, rhymes and music. Explores Irish culture through play and hands-on experiences – making soda bread, Irish dancing. Celebrates Irish events and traditions in inclusive ways – growing shamrock for St. Patrick's Day; making a cross with reeds for St. Brigid's Day.

visits local historical and geographical sites and plans project-based learning experiences focused on these sites. Reads books about native animals and nature to help them name familiar plants and animals; flora – daisies, dandelions, buttercups, moss, ivy, white/black thorn hedges, oak, ash, holly; fauna – birds (robin, pigeon, crow); minibeasts (snails, worms); animals (deer, squirrel, fox, hedgehog, badger). Builds on their interests to learn about biodiversity, conservation, eco-systems and habitats.

helps build a sense of group identity and shared sense of *meitheal* (community).

builds secure relationships with all key people in the setting. Establishes simple shared rituals (welcome song, goodbye wave) to introduce the idea of belonging to a group. Arranges spaces that allow babies to observe and safely interact with peers. Encourages early peer awareness Look, Aoife is smiling at you. Introduces gentle turn-taking games and shared experiences.

ensures they are acknowledged as part of the group daily. Names and explains familiar people in the environment to build awareness of the community. Encourages collaborative play in pairs or small groups. Supports turn-taking, problem-solving, and group tasks – handing out materials). Celebrates shared group achievements – We worked together to tidy the outdoor area. Supports group reflection through learning journals.

maintains group identity through consistent shared experiences and rituals. Organises collaborative play and project work – building a bridge together. Supports children who find group interaction difficult by scaffolding or pairing them with a peer. Encourages responsibilities that contribute to the group (clearing plates, helping with snack). Introduces group reflection at the end of the day focused on shared experiences.

fosters a sense of emotional belonging and *aobhneas croí* (gladness of heart) within the group.

greeted them warmly by using their name, familiar words from home and gestures. Creates cosy, intimate moments through storytelling and song. Supports joyful shared interactions – rolling balls or passing toys. Facilitates comforting time with siblings or cousins where possible.

encourages learning and using each other's names to deepen friendship bonds. Plans small-group experiences that promote enjoyment and connection (jigsaws, dolls, creative activities). Supports them to choose when they want to play with friends or play alone. Makes space for siblings and cousins to enjoy shared moments throughout the day where possible.

creates multiple opportunities for joyful connection through talk, shared stories, and listening. Sits with them to support the emotional skills of sharing, turn-taking, and empathic listening. Offers interesting pair and group activities that help friendships grow. Highlights caring values through stories and conversations. Provides opportunities for warm, emotionally supportive time with siblings or cousins where possible.

supports co- and self-regulation.

responds calmly to emotions – using gentle tone and touch to help them settle and feel secure. Names feelings to support recognising emotions and offers words of encouragement – *I notice you're upset because Mammy just left. Will we join your friend at the water tray? I know it helps soothe you.* Uses positive body language – nodding and smiling. Responds promptly to cries, offering comfort in ways that build trust. Supports self-regulation by first co-regulating together, helping babies learn to manage their emotions through shared calm and connection.

stays physically close, sits at their level, offers a hug or holds hands during stressful times. Supports them in naming and understanding their feelings. Offers predictable routines to help reduce overwhelm and gives adequate warnings when change coming. Gives reassurance during times of upset *I'm here. It's going to be ok.* Reads stories about how to deal with different emotions and different life experiences – getting a new baby. Models how to manage feelings, name emotions, responds with empathy and compassion.

empathises and provides positive encouragement and reinforcement. Teaches simple calming strategies – taking deep breaths, counting to ten, squeezing a ball, water play. Supports them to learn to wait – *I'll help you after I finish this.* Provides books and creates displays showing different emotions as starting points for discussion. Helps them begin to manage their behaviour by understanding what is acceptable and what is not. Provides quiet, cosy spaces to go to calm down. Offers the opportunity of a change of location – going outdoors.

supports conflict resolution.

sits with them during pair and small group play. Supports them to learn through observing, experiencing support, and having their feelings acknowledged – *I can see you want the teddy that Sasha has. That's her teddy from home, why don't we find a nice teddy in the box for you?* Stays close and ensures nobody gets hurt and uses a calm, reassuring tone when conflicts happen. Intervenes to release hair from a their grasp and models gentle touch and uses words for actions: *Gentle hands so we don't hurt anyone.* Offer duplicate toys and resources to reduce frustration.

validates feelings while guiding behaviours and model caring responses *Let's give Eamon the digger as he is really upset at his Grandad leaving.* Maintains consistent routines and avoids overstimulation – plenty of time outdoors, a quiet space indoors to get away, sponges for waterplay, small group sizes. Supports consistent boundaries to create a safe environment for all. Uses respectful communication and interactions, including the use of 'I statements' to focus on the problem rather than the person. *I see you were very cross when your sandcastle was smashed.*

points out others' emotions gently, Look, Arnie is crying. *How can we make her feel better?* Reads stories and facilitates discussions. Listens attentively as they express their frustrations, responding with warmth and respect. Supports them during difference of opinion with peers by providing calm guidance and listening respectfully to possible solutions. Uses a problem-solving approach by asking what happened or what the problem is, restating the problem, helping to find a solution and providing ongoing support, ensuring all involved are supported, comforted and reassured. Praises effort – *I can see you tried really hard not to hit out when Emily took your tractor –good work!"*

<p>promotes understanding of social rules and relationship boundaries and fosters empathy and compassion.</p>	<p>supports turn-taking and sharing during different experiences. Gently sets boundaries – <i>It hurts when you pull my hair!</i> Models kindness in tone and action – Let’s gently help the spider go outside.</p>	<p>affirms acts of kindness – when they offer their blankie to a crying peer. Supports pretend play to encourage empathy.</p>	<p>involves them in agreeing rules – <i>We are kind, We help each other.</i> Applies rules consistently, anticipates conflicts or situations that may cause upset and helps them cope with these. Discusses stories to identify characters’ actions, feelings and motivations, <i>I wonder how Alfie felt when he got lost in the shop? What did you think of what Emmanuel did when Mama said she had to go to bed?</i></p>
<p>promotes social justice and fosters understanding and respect for individual rights, and the identity, rights and views of others.</p>	<p>listens to and for their voices while keeping their best interests in mind. Responds to needs and wants quickly and respectfully, helping them feel heard and valued. Uses photos, songs and objects from their homes and cultures to affirm their identities. Models fairness and kindness during everyday routines and interactions.</p>	<p>encourages turn-taking and to begin using words and gestures to express needs and feelings. Celebrates similarities and differences among individuals, families, languages and traditions through stories, songs, conversations and play. Supports them in recognising when someone is upset and responding with care or comfort.</p>	<p>encourages non-stereotypical play and invites them to share experiences of fairness and kindness during free play, guided play and educator led playful experiences. Encourages listening to and respecting others’ ideas and opinions. Supports individual, pair and group discussions and book reading to explore stories and experiences that reflect diversity, rights and inclusion, relating these to their lives.</p>
<p>respects and values diversity and responds proactively to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.</p>	<p>helps create an atmosphere where everyone is respected and valued, and where hurtful comments about them, their families, their communities are not tolerated. Promotes kindness, respect and understanding in all interactions. Supports the development of empathy and understanding when differences arise – when one baby hurts another.</p>	<p>creates an environment where everyone has equitable access to all areas, resources, equipment and experiences. Supports them as they explore, take risks, enjoy challenges. Helps them to be kind to others, and to act with kindness and compassion.</p>	<p>reads books and discusses differences in appearances and abilities. Encourages exploration of different sensory and movement experiences – being blindfolded, identifying sounds in a listening game. Provides small world figures representing gender and diverse ethnicities. Provides challenging and risky play opportunities and promotes non-stereotypical roles. Displays posters showing sharing tasks at home and work, fostering diversity and equality.</p>

