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Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth



Report of Two Pilot Studies Exploring Approaches and Methods to Involve Babies, Toddlers, and Young Children in Participation in Decision-making

Prepared by Anne O'Donnell, (Training, Facilitation, Child and Youth Rights Consultant)

Hub na nÓg, and The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Thank you to the Early Learning and Care services; Kilcloon Early Years Pre-school, Childworld, and Nursery Times and to Limerick-Clare Local Creative Youth Partnership for your collaboration on the pilots in your services.

Thank you to our Early Years Working Group (EYWG) for your input, collaboration, and supporting the work on the pilots. The EYWG is made up of stakeholders from the policy, academic, creative, and early years sector.

Contact:

Hub na nÓg
+353 86 103 3205
info@hubnanog.ie

Report of two pilot studies that explored approaches and methods to involve babies, toddlers, and young children in participation in decision-making.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Hub na nÓg established an Early Years Working Group (EYWG) during 2021 to develop guidance for consulting with children and babies aged birth to 5 years. The EYWG was comprised of stakeholders from the policy, academic, creative, and early learning, and care sectors with expertise in the area. The remit of the EYWG was to consider existing research and resources on the participation of children and babies aged birth to 5 years in participation in decision-making and identify gaps in addition to piloting methodologies that enable the participation of young children in decision-making.

In late 2022, the DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg contracted a report writer to:

- Attend EYWG and sub-committee meetings and keep a written record of discussions and decisions.
- Report on six good practice case studies.
- Report on one or two pilot studies to explore methodologies that can be used in early learning and care services.
- Develop a practitioner's toolkit as a practical resource and reflective tool for staff and volunteers working with children in early learning and care services with activities and methods that can be adapted for different services.

The EYWG agreed that two pilots would be conducted in early learning and care (ELC) services. The EYWG proposed that one of the pilots would explore the use of a multiple methods approach to involving children in participation in decision-making based on the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) and the Reggio Emilia approach which positions early learning and care educators as interpreters of the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1996; Edwards et al., 2013). In partnership with a member of the working group, Hub na nÓg identified Kilcloon Early Years Pre-school as a suitable service for a pilot of this kind.

The Co-ordinator of Limerick-Clare Local Creative Youth Partnership (LCYP) was a member of the EYWG and suggested piloting an initiative, already at planning stage, on involving babies, toddlers, and young children in decision-making on the development and delivery of a dance curriculum with a dance facilitator. This suggestion was welcomed by the EYWG as the second pilot and an opportunity to explore an experimental methodology focussed on an individual, autonomous child approach and an external facilitator. The EYWG noted that this approach is in keeping with guidance from Aistear on "using observation to tell the story of the involvement of an individual child or a group of children in a particular activity, task or

play scenario” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009, p.87.) Hub na nÓg collaborated with Limerick-Clare LCYP to identify the aim of this pilot study.

Hub na nÓg provided guidance and support to both Kilcloon Early Years Pre-school and Limerick-Clare LCYP to ensure that the pilots were grounded in the National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making [National Participation Framework] (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021), that the children would have meaningful involvement in participation in decision making, and that the pilot methods could be used and applied in other decision-making contexts in early learning and care services.

Pilot 1. The use of multiple methods to involve children in participation in decision-making on a fair and safe approach to enabling risky and adventurous play.

Introduction

Kilcloon Early Years Preschool is in County Meath. There were twenty-two children in the pre-school room in which the pilot study was conducted (fifteen boys and seven girls). The children were aged 2 years and 8 months to 3 years and 6 months.

The educators in Kilcloon Early Years Preschool prioritise the voice of the child in their daily practice. They follow a play based emergent curriculum and ensure that learning experiences are based on the children's interests, voice, strengths and needs through a play-based approach. Their curriculum board is on the wall of the preschool room. They describe their approach as similar to the High Scope philosophy, in that observing, listening to the children and daily reflection guide them to support children's learning and development.

How the pilot came about

Some children were playing in a risky and adventurous way in the cosy corner inside the preschool. One of the educators explained to the children that the cosy corner is an area where children come to rest and look through books and that there is not enough space inside to play this way. This conversation led to one of the boys asking: “Can we play roughly when we are outside (words of the child)?” The preschool staff decided to act on the little boy’s wishes and pilot the use of multiple methodologies to get the views of children on a fair and safe approach to enabling risky and adventurous play.

Reporting on the pilot

The report of the pilot is based on interviews with the preschool educators, observations and notes of the educators, observations noted by the report writer during a site visit to the

preschool and photographs of some of the methods used to involve children in decision-making. [Pilot methods](#)

In this pilot, the educators used a multiple methods approach to consult children on how risky and adventurous play could become an option for those children who want this form of play. They wanted to hear all children's views because some children enjoyed this form of play and others did not.

The educators used a range of interconnected methods to give children a voice on risky and adventurous play and ensure that their views were acted on. The variety of methods allowed children to have a voice in decision-making based on individual preferences and is outlined below:

1. Group conference (discussions with all children in the room)
2. Documentation in pictures (photos taken by children and educators)
3. Facial and body awareness emoji game
4. Children's drawings
5. One to one discussion
6. Observations of educators

Throughout the pilot, the educators used these methods with children on a regular basis to check back with the children and make sure that they were happy with their own decisions about risky and adventurous play.

1. [Group conference about the idea of the pilot](#)

- At the start of the pilot, the educators held a discussion with the children about the request for risky and adventurous play.
- The discussion included the views of those who like risky and adventurous play and those who do not like this form of play.
- Some children do not like risky and adventurous play and some children do not like noise. These children had their views heard and acted on through the availability of quiet areas both in their indoor room (cosy corner) and in the garden (fairy garden). In these areas, the children agreed that there would be no risky and adventurous play.
- The children suggested that there should be rules and made up their own initial rules for the risky and adventurous play.
- The children agreed that risky and adventurous play should only happen on the grass area of the outdoor space.

2. [Documentation in pictures](#)

- The children and educators took photos of real time risky and adventurous play activity.
- New photos were taken on a regular basis, as children's games and how they like interact changed all the time.



3. Facial and body awareness emoji game

- All the photos were printed.
- The children were given smiley, blank and sad face stickers and invited to stick whatever emoji they wanted on each photo. 😊 😐 😞
- The children divided the photos into happy, sad, and unsure bundles.
- Some photos had a variety of emojis on them and the children made a bundle of photos that didn't fit in the happy, sad, and unsure bundles.
- The photos with emojis were stuck onto a big photo board.
- The children looked at the photos and accompanying emojis, and the educator's facilitated discussion by asking questions such as:
 - What's happening in the photos?
 - What do you see in the children's faces in the photos?
 - What are children doing with their bodies in the photos?
 - What do you think children are feeling in the photos?
- These questions generated discussions about how children can play in a safe and inclusive way.
- The educator wrote the exact views of each child beside the emojis they stuck on each photo on the board.
- The educators allowed this to be a daily evolving process that enabled children to take photos off the board at any time and change their emoji if they had changed their minds about a particular form of play.
- Children were invited to take new photos on a regular basis to ensure that they were always able to express their views about risky and adventurous play.
- Copies of the photos were left in a box that was available to children all the time so they could continuously give their views about the kind of play they like and don't like





"I don't like punching"
- Alex

"We're punching our friends"
- Jay



"I don't like when people look sad"
- Morcan

"I was angry, I'm making an angry face"
- Nathan

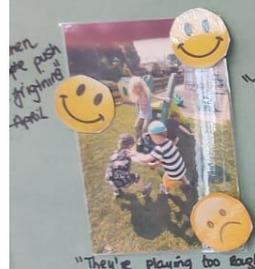


"They're pulling each other"
- Luca R.



"Jay is laughing at the boys"
- Ziyad

"They're getting on each other to play angry"
- Ziyad



"They're pushing fighting"
- April

"I like playing on the slide"
- Amelia

"They're playing too rough"
- Rosie



"They're having fun"
- Annabel

"They're rolling on the ground"
- Isabel



"I'm happy to roll in the grass"
- Nathan

"He's playing & says stop"
- Jay



"They're having fun & happy"
- April



"They're talking about the rules of the game"
- Tadhg Mc



"I don't like wrestling"
- Shauna

"We're pushing cos he get to show how strong he are"
- Tadhg Sean



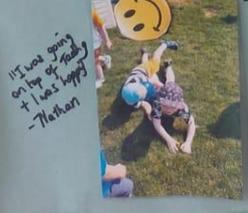
"They're pulling each other, Nathan is smiling"
- Dan Luca B



"He's trying to kick him"
- Odhran



"They're missing together"
- Holly Mae



"I was going on top of Nathan & I was happy"
- Nathan

"I like playing catch"
- Donal

"Nathan was saying no"
- Nathan



"They're fighting"
- Caoimh



4. Using children's drawings to make the rules for risky and adventurous play

- From the beginning, the children had suggested that there should be rules for risky and adventurous play.
- They made up their own rules for risky and adventurous play and changed them on a regular basis, based on the views they expressed on the photo board.
- They did drawings of the rules they agreed, and the educators wrote the children's exact words on each drawing.
- The drawings with the rules for risky and adventurous play were stuck on the walls.



5. One to one informal conversation

- Some children didn't like to talk in the big group when they were playing the emoji game, although all children shared their views by using emojis on the photos.
- The educators found moments throughout the day to discuss the photos and emojis with those children and give them the opportunity to have their views heard. Individual children often said things like, 'I liked it when we played roughly today' (words of a child) or, 'I never like playing rough' (words of a child).
- Other children often joined in these informal conversations and took part in problem solving.

6. Observations of educators

- The educators observed the children during outdoor play time.
- At different times during the day and at the end of the day, the educators reflected on and kept notes and observations on what was working well and what needed problem solving.
- The educators positively reinforced the rules and gave consistent feedback to children to support and encourage their social and emotional development, problem solving and conflict resolution skills.
- Such discussions often led to children suggesting some change in the rules.
- The children needed the opportunity to change the rules regularly because they couldn't envisage what works and does not work unless it is live, happening and concrete.

Observations from the pilot

The observations from this pilot demonstrate a highly effective and good practice approach to involving young children in participation in decision-making. The pilot honoured the concept of evolving capacities, which is introduced in Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (The United Nations, 1989) and refers to processes of maturing and learning as children gradually acquire knowledge, competencies and understanding, including understanding their rights and how they can be realised. The multiple methods approach used by the pilot educators enabled the children to use their agency and evolving capacities in a variety of different ways, including group discussion, one-on-one informal conversation, drawing, selecting photos, playing the emoji game, sharing their feelings, and making their own rules. The methods also complied with guidance from General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on implementing child rights in early childhood, which advises State Parties to take account of individual variations in the capacities of children of the same age and of their ways of reacting to situations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p.8.). The range of consultation methods and the fact that the process of decision-making was regularly repeated ensured that children could safely share their different individual experiences and views and change their minds at any time. This approach is consistent with General Comment No. 7, which recommends

“adopting a child-centred attitude, listening to young children and respecting their dignity and their individual points of view” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p7.)

The variety of methods used in the pilot ensured that the children could participate in decision-making in accordance with their individual stage of development, personality, interests, and preferred style of communication. Using a range of methods is in keeping with good practice from the National Participation Framework (DCEDIY, 2021), which notes the importance of ensuring that children have a choice about ways to express themselves. The Framework also advises against placing adult interpretations on children’s views during the process of seeking their opinions (DCEDIY, 2021). The pilot demonstrated several methods that were faithful to this guidance, such as educators writing children’s own words about their views and feelings beside the photos and educators writing the rules and changing the rules in children’s own words.

The pilot is an excellent example of educators collaborating with children as equal rights holders and giving them a voice in decisions about a practice that is often challenging (risky and adventurous play), in a safe and inclusive way. This approach is consistent with the Aistear Guidelines (NCCA, 2009), which identify a range of interaction strategies and methods that adults can use to enhance children’s learning and development. These interactions include adults building fair and respectful relationships with children and encouraging them to take an active role in decisions about their learning based on their age and stage of development.

This project is alive and constantly evolving through repeated cycles of implementing the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007; DCEDIY, 2021, p.15) by giving children space, voice, audience, and influence on decisions regarding risky and adventurous play, as outlined below.

Space:

- The children were heard in a safe and familiar space (the preschool).
- Educators listened to their views through a variety of consultation methods throughout each day.
- Educators made sure that all children were heard by having a variety of ways for them to communicate, including one-on-one informal conversations.

Voice:

- Educators provided support for children to be heard.
- Children could raise their views on risky and adventurous play at any time they liked and could change their minds about how they liked to play.
- Educators provided a range of methods for children to give their views and share their feelings.

Audience:

- The practice of the educators was to tell and show children how they were ready and willing to always listen to them.
- The children were an 'audience' with a key role in decision-making about risky and adventurous play in addition to the educators being the 'audience' who ensured that decisions taken were in the best interests of all the children.

Influence:

- The children knew that they made the rules about risky and adventurous play in their own words and could change the rules at any time. The observations of the educators noted that the children needed the opportunity to change the rules regularly because they couldn't envisage what works and does not work unless it was live, happening and concrete.
- The children gave feedback to each other on their views and feelings during the process of documenting risky and adventurous play in photographs, playing the emoji game and making the rules.
- Educators showed children the impact of their decisions by enabling them to make their own rules, writing the rules in children's own words and regularly offering them the opportunity to revisit the rules.
- Children explained to each other the reasons they were taking certain decisions through the process of group conferencing, the emoji game, making the rules and changing the rules. Educators also explained the reasons for some decisions that were taken.

Pilot 2. How babies, toddlers and young children had voice in decision-making in the design and delivery of a dance curriculum.

Introduction

The aim of this pilot was to explore how babies, toddlers, and young children can have a voice in decision-making in the design and delivery of the curriculum for a 6-week dance curriculum in two ELC services in Limerick city (Childworld and Nursery Times). In Childworld, there were fourteen babies and toddlers in the room (aged 6 months – 24 months) and eight educators. In Nursery Times, there were seven babies and toddlers in the room (aged 12 months to 14 months) and four educators.

The dance curriculum was delivered by a professional dance artist and facilitator, who was contracted to undertake the pilot by Limerick-Clare Local Creative Youth Partnership.

Reporting on the pilot

This report illustrates how preverbal and early verbal children have the capacity to have a voice in decision-making and influence the content and delivery of a dance curriculum. It is based on individual and focus group interviews conducted by the report writer with the dance facilitator, educators and the Co-ordinator of Limerick Clare LCYP, notes recorded by the dance facilitator and observations noted by the report writer during site visits. Babies, toddlers, and young children are collectively referred to as 'children' throughout this report.

How the dance facilitator created the conditions for babies, toddlers, and young children to have a voice in decision-making

In both ELC services, the dance facilitator led each dance session. The educators took part in the dancing and movements with the children throughout each session when possible. Both settings had toys and play equipment around the room which gave the children the opportunity to use their agency and choose to do other activities during the dance sessions.

The dance facilitator planned the first dance session in each setting by seeking feedback from educators on the music and songs that the children like. She also used her own experience of facilitating dance with older children. After the first session, the dance facilitator planned the content of each subsequent session through:

- a. planning and preparation before each dance session.
- b. using a range of methods to listen to, observe and act on the voice of children during each dance session.
- c. discussions with educators and recording observations after each dance session.

a. Planning and preparation before each dance session

The dance facilitator developed the curriculum, movement patterns and music for each weekly dance session, based on her own observations of how the children participated in decision-making and what they enjoyed from the previous dance session; the notes she completed after each dance session using the National Participation Framework Everyday Spaces Checklist (DCEDIY, 2021); and the feedback from educators on their observations and translation of the children's views. With the use of the above material:

- She added movements into the next session that she observed the children enjoying during the previous week.
- She selected music that the children had enjoyed or had been listening to throughout the previous week.
- She changed the order of the curriculum for each session so the children could experience movements and music that they liked at the start of the session.
- She planned familiar music for every session like 'the wheels on the bus' because she observed that familiar music relaxed the children and was a great icebreaker at the start of a session.

- She also introduced new songs and accompanying movements to get feedback from the children on music and movements they had not done before.

b. Using a range of methods to listen to, observe and act on the voice of babies, toddlers, and young children during each dance session

- The dance facilitator created a safe space and a welcoming environment and chatted with the children at the start of the session.
- She started each dance session by inviting the children into a circle.
- She then played a range of songs and did movements to accompany the music and words of the songs. She also sang along aloud to all the songs.
- Most of the educators were up on the floor following the facilitator's dance moves and singing aloud from time to time. Some were sitting with individual babies or young children who needed additional support to engage in the dance or movements.
- The facilitator and the educators frequently invited children to take part in the dancing, but children could engage in other activities if they chose to do so.
- She regularly asked children what songs they would like.
- She called out a song options and asked which one they wanted.
- She named each child individually throughout the sessions to encourage their involvement.
- She observed movements being made by individual children and copied the movements saying things like 'let's all do what Paul is doing'.
- She observed children's body language and reactions and adapted the music, movements, and flow of the session accordingly.
- She observed the position of every child in the space and how they were moving, even in subtle ways, such as standing and observing.
- She noticed that it took a few rounds of music and movements for some babies, toddlers, and young children to be comfortable.
- She observed the relationship between the educators and the children and identified that if the educators were doing the movement, the children tended to join in.
- She observed that when the educators encouraged and praised the children, they were more likely to participate.
- She observed how the children reacted to her and to the educators.
- She communicated with the educators so they could show her what was working with the children.
- One week, several children were getting over a tummy bug, so she changed the session, slowed everything down and did a lot of movements sitting down.

c. Discussions with educators after each dance session

- The facilitator asked the educators what worked best in the session.

- She asked for their observations of the children and translations of what they observed, including what parts of the session the children enjoyed and didn't enjoy.
- She asked educators which songs and music the children enjoyed.
- Educators made suggestions such as that facilitator should include movements that all children can take part in – not always on the babies or toddlers' feet.
- The facilitator worked with educators to explore movements or music that were working well or that might work better in responding to the children's reactions.
- Educators asked the facilitator for suggested music or songs they could play between sessions during the week.
- She asked the educators what to add or change for the next session.

How the babies, toddlers and young children participated in decision-making and influenced the dance curriculum

As noted above, the dance facilitator ensured that the views of the children influenced the curriculum using methods that included observations of the children, interactions with the children, and communication with educators. The children also influenced the content and delivery of each session through the variety of ways they engaged with the facilitator, the educators, the music, and the movement at different stages of each session and from session to session. For example, most children chose to be close to an educator or the dance facilitator at certain times but chose to dance on their own at other times. Only a small number of children chose to spend an entire session with an educator or spend an entire session dancing or moving on their own. Some children chose not to take part for all or part of each session. The children had their views heard and acted on by being enabled to choose how to take part or not take part in the dance sessions at different stages throughout each session and from one session to the next. Children's choices included:

- Going into the circle and participating in the movements by stamping, hopping, jumping, moving their arms, swaying, bending, stretching, lying on the floor, sitting, clapping, twirling and other movements.
- Joining in the circle for parts of the session or parts of individual songs.
- Asking the facilitator for songs that they like (verbal children).
- Responding to questions by the facilitator about which songs they like, (verbal children).
- Telling the facilitator when they didn't want to do certain things. For example, if she said: 'Will I do x?' – they often said 'No' (verbal children).
- Indicating movements, dances, or music they liked by smiling, bouncing around or getting excited.
- Watching the facilitator.
- Following the facilitator around the room.
- Looking to engage and connect with the facilitator.
- Sitting with educators, who were moving to the music.
- Dancing in the arms of educators, who were moving to the music.

- Holding educators' hands, who were following the facilitator's movement.
- Leaving the circle.
- Doing another activity.
- Sitting alone, watching the dancing, and smiling.
- Sitting on mats playing with toys.
- Walking or running around.

The educators noted some additional opportunities for the children's views to be acted on:

- The educators incorporated the songs and dance movements that children liked into the daily routine in each of the two early years settings.
- Parents started playing more music at home focussing on the songs that the children liked from the dance sessions.

Observations from the pilot

The observations from this pilot suggest that involving babies, toddlers, and young children under the age of three in decision-making in the design and delivery of a curriculum needs to take account of their developmental stage and capacity to exercise agency. The approach adopted in the pilot demonstrates an understanding of Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (The United Nations, 1989), which introduces the concept of *evolving capacities* to refer to processes of maturing and learning as children gradually develop knowledge, competencies and understanding, including understanding their rights and how they can be realised. The pilot also took account of General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on implementing child rights in early childhood, which notes that parents (and others) have the responsibility to continually adjust the levels of support and guidance they offer to a child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p.8.). This General Comment goes on to state that these adjustments should take account of a child's interests and wishes as well as the child's capacities for autonomous decision-making, and this guidance was implemented in the pilot. The pilot is also consistent with guidance from Aistear (NCCA, 2009) which notes that adults should respect all children as individuals with rights, build on children's abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds and take account of additional needs or supports children may require to participate as fully as possible.

The observations of the educators, dance facilitator and report writer indicate that the children had some capacity to influence the way the dance artist planned the design and delivery of the curriculum. Some children whose capacities had evolved to the point where they could say what they wanted used verbal communication to influence decision-making. However, the most powerful way that even the babies and youngest children displayed their capacity to have a voice in decision-making was how they influenced the real time (here and now) content and style of delivery of the dance sessions. From moment to moment in each session, children were able to communicate how they felt, who they wanted to relate to or

engage with, what music or movement they liked or did not like, what they wanted to do in the room, where they wanted to go in the room and whether to engage in the dancing or not to engage. This approach is in keeping with guidance from the National Participation Framework Everyday Spaces Checklist (DCEDIY, 2021) on creating spaces where children feel safe to express their views and have them acted on.

Children also demonstrated their agency through the decisions they made about engaging with adults during the sessions. Most children wanted to engage with adults throughout each dance session and participated more when educators danced with them or encouraged them, which is consistent with their stage of development. Síolta Standard 5 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) notes that the early years of a child's life are a time of unique dependency and highlight the importance of children having secure relationships with adults.

As the pilot evolved, the dance artist involved these very young children in the design and delivery of the dance curriculum through the following approaches:

- the direct voice (verbal and non-verbal) of children in real time on the content and style of delivery of the curriculum.
- children's real time decisions on how to engage with adults during the delivery of the curriculum.
- the direct voice (verbal and non-verbal) of children in planning the curriculum.
- adult translation of children's voice through observation of their actions and reactions by educators and the dance artist.

This pilot ensured that the children had opportunities to share their views through the range of approaches outlined above. As with the first pilot, the children in this pilot took part in repeated cycles of space, voice, audience, and influence in keeping with the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007; DCEDIY, 2021, p.15), as outlined below.

Space:

- The children were heard in a safe and familiar space (the preschool) and their familiar and trusted educators took part in every dance session with them.
- The dance facilitator and educators listened to and always observed their views during each dance sessions.
- The dance facilitator made sure that all children were heard by having a variety of ways for them to communicate and the freedom to choose to participate or not. Educators shared their observations with the dance facilitator about how effectively children were being heard.

Voice:

- The dance facilitator provided support for children to communicate and be heard by encouraging them to share their views. The educators interacted with and connected with each child to ensure that they were supported to share their views.
- The dance facilitator regularly asked for the children's views about songs and movements. Children could also show the dance facilitator (in words, gestures, or actions) which dances and music they liked and did not like.
- The dance facilitator and educators provided a range of methods for children to give their views, share their feelings and choose if, how and when to take part in the dance sessions.

Audience:

- The practice of the dance facilitator and educators was to tell and show the children through their words and body language how they were ready and willing to always listen to them.
- The children were an 'audience' with a key role in decision-making about the dance curriculum throughout each dance session and from week to week. The dance facilitator and educators were also an 'audience' who ensured that children's views were listened to and acted on.

Influence:

- The children were given the opportunity to give their views at any time. The observations of the dance facilitator and educators on the aspects of each session that the children enjoyed and didn't enjoy were also acted on.
- The dance facilitator gave feedback to children in a variety of ways, including observing movements made by individual children and telling the children she was going to copy that child's movements.
- The impact of their views on decision-making was shared with the children through the continuous changes and adaptations made by the dance facilitator.
- The dance facilitator explained to the children in words and actions that music and movements they chose were being included in each session.

Conclusion

These pilot studies illustrate that babies, toddlers and young children have the capacity to participate in decision-making. The pilots used different methods and approaches, but both demonstrated an understanding of the importance of 'participation with purpose', which is the vision of the National Participation Framework (DCEDIY, 2021). Participation with purpose means that decision-makers must 'ensure that the purpose of involving children in decision-making is to give them a voice on day-to-day activities and practice, or on the development of projects, programmes, services, or policies' (DCEDIY, p.6). The educators in these pilots ensured that children's views were listened to, taken seriously, and given due

weight with the intention that their views would influence an outcome or initiate change, which is 'at the heart of participation with purpose' (DCEDIY, p.6). Several other common themes and findings emerge from the pilots which are outlined below.

The first theme is the importance of the 'here and now' in the ways that babies, toddlers, and young children participate in decision-making. Both pilots highlighted that young children made decisions based on how they feel, what they think and what they want to do in real time on live and concrete happenings. From moment to moment and day to day, the children's decisions and choices could and did change and the pilot educators built a constantly evolving approach to including the children in participation in decision-making. The Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007; DCEDIY, 2021, p.15) and the National Participation Framework Everyday Spaces Checklist (DCEDIY, 2021) offered a pathway to the pilot educators by enabling them to continuously involve children in decision-making through repeated cycles of space, voice, audience, and influence.

The second theme is choice. Children in these pilots were enabled to choose to take part or not to take part in decision-making or in the activity. The dance pilot notes that children often left the dance circle, played elsewhere in the room, or joined in and out of the dancing at times. The risky and adventurous play pilot notes that children sometimes did not join in the group discussions and that children could and sometimes did express the wish not to be around risky and adventurous play. The opportunity to choose not to participate in decision-making is cited by Lundy et. al. (2024) as critical to a true understanding of child rights. Lundy et al. (2024) further notes that silence, lack of engagement or lack of interest should not be understood as lack of capacity. Both pilots demonstrate respect by educators for silence in addition to children using their voices, actions, or gestures to indicate a wish not to participate in decision-making or in an activity.

The third theme is the use of observation to translate the views, choices and decisions of babies, toddlers, and young children. In the risky and adventurous play pilot, the educators observed the children during outdoor play time and kept notes. They did not use observation as a standalone method, but as part of a multiple methods approach that enabled children to participate in decision-making. This approach to observation exemplifies an effective use of the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) which promotes a creative multi-layered framework for listening to young children's perspectives comprising observations and learning stories, photography, and child conferences. The pilot educators used their observational skills to translate the views of children by foregrounding the children's rules and respecting their right to make and change decisions about a safe and inclusive way to play. In the dance curriculum pilot, observation was one of the most important methods used by the dance facilitator, and educators in enabling the babies, toddlers, and young children to participate in decision-making as many of them were pre or early verbal. The dance facilitator and the educators used observation throughout each

dance session, held discussions after each session and recorded observational notes after each session. The dance facilitator used these observations in two ways: firstly, to seek children's views on, and reactions to the music and movement during each session so she could translate and act on their views by making immediate changes during that session; and secondly to make notes on the children's views after each session using the Everyday Spaces Checklist (DCEDIY, 2021) to enable her translate their views to influence the design of the next dance session. This approach fits with guidance from Aistear, which highlights the central role of observation in accessing the 'voice' of children and promoting children's agency in curriculum development (NCCA, 2007).

The final theme is about adult-child relationships as they affect children's agency and right to participate in decision-making. In the dance curriculum pilot, children demonstrated their agency through the decisions they made about engaging with and being with adults during the dance sessions. Most children chose to engage with adults and participated more when educators danced with them or encouraged them, which is consistent with their stage of development. The need for secure, adult relationships in early years is repeatedly noted in the literature (NCCA, 2009; Department of Education and Skills, 2017). In the pilot, this need influenced the babies, toddlers and young children's choices and decisions. In the risky and adventurous play pilot, educators collaborated with children as equal rights holders, but ensured that children's other rights such as safety and best interests were upheld. The approach touches on a theme raised by Lundy et al (2024) which notes the importance of viewing participation (in decision-making) as an interdependent process between ELC educators and children that requires mutual respect.

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