



Aistear and Síolta: Exploring childminders' perspectives and application



**Early
Childhood
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About the Author

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Childminder	The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (DCEDIY, 2021a) defines ‘childminder’ as someone who cares for children in the childminder’s home.
Childminding	The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (DCEDIY, 2021a) defines ‘Childminding’ to mean paid, non-relative care of children aged from birth to 14 (including both early learning and care and school-age childcare), in which children are cared for singlehandedly within the childminder’s family setting.
Competence	Being and becoming ‘competent’ is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional ECEC [early childhood education and care] knowledge and practice and develop and show professional values. Practitioners and teams need reflective competencies, as they work in highly complex, unpredictable, and diverse contexts (Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care [CoRe] study, 2011, p. 21).
Tacit knowledge	Tacit knowledge is learned through everyday experiences and learning by doing. In organisations, tacit knowledge is used by members to perform their work. It includes ‘mental models, perceptions, insights, assumptions, personal beliefs, subjective insights, intuitions, instinct, and values’ (Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016, p. 90; see also Claxton, 1990).
Explicit knowledge	Explicit knowledge is expressed formally and systematically using a system of symbols and can be easily retrieved, communicated, and shared through print, electronic, and other formal means. It is codified and digitised in books, documents, reports, white papers, memos, training courses, etc. (Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016, p. 90).
Formal learning	Formal learning takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, e.g., certificate or diploma (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2024).
Informal learning	Informal learning covers learning resulting from daily activities relating to work, family, or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time, or learning support. Informal learning may be unintentional from the learner’s perspective. Examples of informal learning outcomes are skills acquired through life and work experiences, e.g., childcare (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2024).
Non-formal learning	Non-formal learning takes place through planned activities where some form of learning support is present. Examples include in-company training, structured online educational resources, and courses organised by civil society organisations (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2024).

1 Introduction

1.1 Research overview

Practitioners in Early Years centres and childminders' homes are central to the quality of children's experiences in Early Years settings through the style and content of their day-to-day education and care practices (Hayes, 2014, pp. 1–2). *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education, 2017), and *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024), provide a common frame for pedagogy and practice in childminders' homes and Early Years centres.

The extent to which *Síolta* and *Aistear* were originally developed with the specific ecocultural niche of a childminder's home and family in mind, and the frameworks' appropriateness to Childminding, have been questioned (O'Regan, 2020; O'Regan, Halpenny, and Hayes, 2022). Accounts of both *Síolta*'s and *Aistear*'s development (NCCA, 2009; Dunphy and Mhic Mhathúna, 2022, p. 16) indicate that childminders and Childminding representatives were consulted. Despite decades of national policy engagement, Childminding has been an invisible and unregulated element of the Irish Early Years and School Age Care system (DCEDIY, 2021a, p. 21).

Until very recently, the only concerted governmental effort to regularise and support Childminding was the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI), established by the Office of the Minister for Children in 2002. The NCMI provided local and national support for Childminding: voluntary service notification and staffed quality development through City and County Childcare Committees and the Health Service Executive; financial support for childminders through grants and income tax relief; and funding for the national representative body of childminders (Daly, 2010; Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018). While the NCMI was not evaluated nationally, a county-level evaluation suggests that the initiative successfully supported Childminding (Daly, 2010). However, the NCMI ended in 2010 due to national budget constraints; relative to centre-based Early Years services, Childminding was never financially prioritised (Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018, p. 15).

The informal and unsupported nature of Irish Childminding might lead to an assumption that childminders lack knowledge of the content of the national practice frameworks and that their practice may not align with them. Turning implicit assumptions about childminders' practice knowledge into research questions for exploration was the motivation for the research study reported here.

Indeed, the extent to which childminders are familiar with and intentionally use the national practice frameworks has been questioned in O'Regan's 2020 research. However, in a survey of 143 childminders in the same research, just over 60 per cent claimed to know Aistear very or reasonably well, 57 per cent made the same claim for Síolta, and 66 per cent found both frameworks very or somewhat helpful. These are significant proportions of childminders who believe that they understand and have working knowledge of the frameworks.

Internationally, Childminding and childminders' practice are under-researched and invisible in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Aaronicks (2023, p. 2), in research with childminders in England, found that the 'features that distinguish and characterise their approach to ECEC are not widely visible'. Revealing the invisible, the implicit, is central to this research, which explores if and how (possibly unintentionally) the principles of Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) are reflected in dimensions of childminders' practice, in ways particular to Childminding.

At this significant juncture for children, their families, and childminders with the implementation of Ireland's first National Childminding Action Plan (DCEDIY, 2021a), policymakers, stakeholders, and quality development agencies may benefit from having home-grown research about childminders' practice and the extent to which their practice may intentionally or unintentionally align with the national practice frameworks, in the specific context for children that is childminders' homes.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

The research aimed to explore childminders' knowledge and application of the Irish early childhood practice frameworks. The overarching research question sought to

explore whether the principles of Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) are reflected in dimensions of childminders' practice, in ways that may be intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, and particular to Childminding. To address this overarching research question, the following sub-questions were posed:

What knowledge and understanding do childminders have of the principles underpinning Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017), and how is this knowledge acquired?

In what ways, if any, are the principles of Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) reflected in dimensions of childminders' practice?

If these principles of the Irish early childhood practice frameworks are evident in practice, are they applied intentionally or unintentionally by childminders?

1.3 Purpose and audience

This report is intended for professionals and stakeholders in the Early Years and School Age Care sector, including childminders. The purpose of this research was to explore whether the Irish national practice frameworks' principles were observable in Childminding practice, to explore whether childminders are aware of whether their praxis is explicitly shaped by their knowledge of the frameworks, and to use the insights gained to create and advocate for appropriate professional development and learning opportunities for childminders.

1.4 Report structure

The section that follows establishes the context of this work and its relationship with existing research. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Key findings are presented in section 4, and the discussion follows in section 5, both set out in a way that addresses the research questions. The report concludes with a series of implications for childminders, policymakers, and quality development organisations, based on the research findings.

2 Context and Frameworks

2.1 National context

Childminding in Ireland has historically operated in the informal economy, unregulated, and largely unsupported by state agencies, a situation enabled by legislative exemptions from registration and regulation (DCEDIY, 2021a). A major shift is underway in Ireland for approximately 13,000 Childminding services and almost 53,000 (QualFDC, 2024) children participating in their services, driven by the implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (DCEDIY, 2021a). The plan commits to regulating all Childminding services, providing training and quality development supports, and quality assurance. By the end of October 2025, there were 150 Childminding services registered with Tusla, the national Early Years regulator (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2025).

The context for Childminding reform is that it is possible for a childminder working in Ireland to spend her career working in isolation, without seeing any supportive or oversight agency to enable self-reflection and provide support to pedagogical enhancement (QualFDC, 2024). The National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI), operating since 2015, provides a coordinated approach to the implementation and development of Síolta and Aistear (Roe and O’Neill, 2018), including a national mentoring support model through the Better Start National Early Years Quality Development agency (DCEDIY, 2021a), but it has not been extended to childminders.

However, a locally staffed support infrastructure is again emerging through City and County Childcare Committees with the implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding. The initial priority is to engage with childminders in advance of the 2027 deadline for the registration and regulation of all Childminding services. Public investment to provide quality supports on an ‘equitable footing’ to Childminding and centre-based settings (DCEDIY, 2021a, p. 56) is a commitment in the final implementation phase of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028. Public investment in infrastructure to support practice has been identified as a necessary precondition for quality in Childminding in a previous Early Childhood Ireland transnational learning project (QualFDC, 2024).

2.2 Irish Early Years practice frameworks

This research explores whether the principles of Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) are reflected in dimensions of childminders' practice, in ways that may be intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, and particular to Childminding. The principles were used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data gained because they articulate a shared vision and frame for consistency of quality in Childminding.

Recent revisions to Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2017), and updates to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2024), mark important progress in Ireland's early childhood landscape. These frameworks play a vital role in supporting high-quality learning and developmental experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children.

While Síolta provides a comprehensive quality framework for all aspects of Early Years practice, Aistear focuses specifically on the learning and development of babies, toddlers, and young children. Their alignment through the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide¹ strengthens the connection between curriculum and quality, enhancing the overall standard of Early Years provision (NCCA, 2024). Together, and with the right supports, these frameworks offer strong guidance for enhancing practice among all early childhood educators in Ireland (NCCA, 2024).

Nine principles of early learning and development form the foundation of Aistear and help to realise its overall vision (NCCA, 2024, p. 15). Similarly, Síolta sets out 12 principles of quality that closely align with those of Aistear and articulate the vision that shapes and supports high-quality practice in early childhood education and care in Ireland. A recent audit (NCCA, 2025) examined the two frameworks, identifying the similarities and differences between them, which resulted in the following alignment of the principles:

¹ <https://www.nurturingskills.ie/aistear-siolta-practice-guide/>

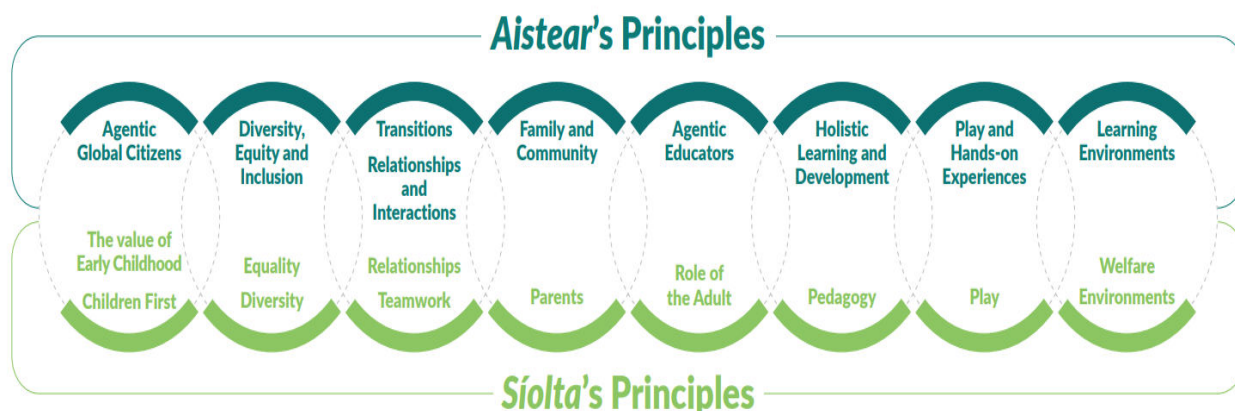


Figure 1: Updated Audit: Similarities and Differences (NCCA, 2025)

Reflection and reflective practice are central to Aistear and Síolta. In centres, Early Years educators generally have other educators and their manager with whom they can potentially engage in professional dialogue and reflection. This is not the case for most childminders in Ireland. Childminders' isolation from colleagues is a feature of home-based provision in Ireland and internationally (Early Childhood Ireland, 2014), and countries like Belgium and Denmark continue to innovate to provide childminders with home-based and collaborative opportunities for professional learning (QualFDC, 2024).

2.3 Conceptual framework: knowledge(s)

This exploratory research on childminders' knowledge of Aistear and Síolta and the extent of these frameworks' evidence in their practice is located within a series of complex, interconnected subjects that are beyond the competence and scope of this small-scale qualitative study. This section describes the concepts that the researchers found useful, as might the reader, in interpreting the research findings.

Philosophies and theories of knowledge – how humans 'know', sources of knowledge, types of knowledge – are foundational to the areas touched on in this research: teaching, learning, professional practice and its enhancement, and research. However, the typological distinction often made between *tacit/implicit knowledge* and *explicit knowledge* was useful to consider the types and characteristics of knowledge that childminders may hold that may unconsciously or consciously shape their professional practice.

Tacit or implicit knowledge, related to *'know-how'*, can resemble intuition, is challenging to articulate and often taken for granted, can be acquired experientially, and includes the cognitive dimensions of beliefs, values, emotions, and implicit mental models we use for decision-making (Claxton, 1990; Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016, p. 91). Explicit knowledge, sometimes called *'know-that'*, is formal, systematic, easily retrieved, and communicated and arranged in curriculum, publications, and education courses (Claxton, 1990; Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016, p. 91). For example, knowledge of Aistear provides the foundation for knowing what effective, rights-based learning assessment practice looks like and its role in early learning (know-what), while professional learning and experiential learning support curriculum *'know-how'* in assessing early learning and using the information to plan for learning extension. Both types of knowledge are required for quality ECEC practice. The distinction is relevant to this research, because childminders will hold explicit and tacit/implicit knowledge, which may be consciously and unconsciously reflected in their practice.

In the real world of professional practice in centres and homes, knowledges are not discrete – they overlap, with a blurring between the tacit and explicit. There have been calls for greater consideration of the multiple knowledges that inform pedagogical practice in centres (Campbell-Barr, 2019) and home-based settings (Aaronicks, 2023). This research study was framed using Campbell-Barr's (2019) understanding that a *plurality of knowledges* is required for quality early childhood education and care practice – which is why the plural *knowledges* is used here.

Campbell-Barr (2019) uses the tacit–explicit knowledge distinction, ways of knowing, to reconceptualise the plurality of knowledges required for ECEC professionalism. Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 138) describes scientific and skill knowledges, which are easily articulated and the focus of professional development and standardised ideas of quality, and introduces the concept of *practical wisdom*. Practical wisdom is a *'way of knowing'* that she suggests is rarely referred to in the ECEC literature:

. . . variable terms are used to describe this additional form of knowledge (e.g., ethos, ethic, attitude, disposition), with an even more varied language to describe the various attributes of this form of knowledge (e.g., love, patience,

sensitivity, empathy, awareness, respect for others, people who want to make a difference, passion, warmth, being emotionally accessible, reflexivity). (Campbell-Barr, 2019, p. 136)

Practical wisdom is a family of skills that aim in an intelligent, perceptive way to find the correct and beneficial course of action in the moment in an Early Years setting (Campbell-Barr, 2019, pp. 139–141). This way of knowing guides the relationship between an educator and a child and *how* to respond to a child with empathy, sensitivity, and warmth. This practical wisdom is acquired through experience and is learned, not innate (Campbell-Barr, 2019, pp. 139–141).

This concept of practical wisdom as a way of knowing provided an analytic lens for this study to interpret the research findings. The concept provides a more holistic understanding of practitioner knowledge than the tacit–explicit categorisation, uniting multiple forms of knowledge in a way that is ‘situated awareness of ethical values in action that is not separate from other forms of knowing’ (Campbell-Barr, 2019, p. 136).

2.4 Theoretical framework: building on existing Childminding research

A systematic review of international research on Childminding, commissioned by Early Childhood Ireland (2024), highlights a paucity of research on pedagogical practice in home-based Childminding settings. In Ireland, however, there is rich research on documenting the praxis and pedagogy of childminders, conducted by O’Regan and colleagues (e.g., O’Regan, 2020; O’Regan et al., 2022; O’Regan et al., 2021). A study by O’Regan, Halpenny, and Hayes (2019) found that many childminders were well-qualified, held a strong sense of professional identity, and sought ways to both support and further develop their profession. O’Regan et al. (2022) indicate that childminders seek public recognition of their unique contributions and value but favour a collaborative approach to professional development rather than enforced professionalism.

Much of the literature consulted on Childminding practice is captured within an ecological framework, providing valuable insights into the culture and nature of home-based education and care (Ang et al., 2017). In the Irish context, O’Regan

(2020) frames Childminding within an *ecocultural perspective*, conceptualising it as a *home-based ecological niche* where multiple families – the childminder’s household, minded children, and their families – collaboratively support child-rearing (Tonyan and Nuttall, 2014). The ecocultural construct integrates *ecology*, referring to the physical setting and its social networks, and *culture*, encompassing shared practices and meanings (Nsamenang, 2015, cited in O’Regan, 2020). Within this framework, the ecological dimension highlights contextual factors shaping children’s daily experiences and development, including the home environment, family, and community structures, and broader economic and institutional conditions (Tonyan and Nuttall, 2014; Nsamenang, 2015, cited in O’Regan, 2020).

O’Regan (2020) highlighted two distinctive approaches that are evident in childminders’ practice and narratives: a ‘Close Relationship’ model of praxis and a ‘Real-Life Learning’ model of pedagogy. The Close Relationship model is characterised by love, fun, and lasting, close relationships in a nurturing home environment. O’Regan, Halpenny, and Hayes (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study of pedagogy in Irish Childminding settings, using semi-structured interviews, a survey, photography, and field notes. The authors found that participating childminders subscribed to a Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy, where the ‘primary goal is to explore learning opportunities presented by real-life experiences as they arise’ (p. 907). In this model, childminders ‘prioritise relationship-driven, child-led learning mediated through everyday experiences both in an enriched home environment and out in the community’ (p. 907).

These models are highly relevant to home-based Childminding, where practices, routines, and relationships are deeply embedded in the cultural and ecological realities of family homes and local communities. Therefore, the Real-Life Learning model (O’Regan et al., 2021) provided a lens for this research through which to consider the specificity of practice observed and reflected on in the home- and family-based ecosystem:

Relationship-driven learning	where childminders get to know each child 'inside-out', which fosters child-led activities and allows children to benefit from the caregiver's particular interests.
Learning from everyday experiences	provides a rich array of experiences that cater for children's individual needs, interests, preferences, and capabilities.
Mixed-age groups	facilitate peer learning between children of different ages, in particular empathy and responsibility towards younger children, translating and explaining knowledge, and copying older children's activities.
Enriched home learning environments	provide everyday tools as well as educational materials and outdoor spaces that provide rich sensorial experiences, including opportunities for physically active, unstructured outdoor play, gardening, and exploration of the natural environment.
Outings in the community	are a routine feature of Childminding that fosters belonging, familiarity, and identification with the wider community.
The home-from-home environment	is a relaxing space, which also offers plentiful opportunities for expanding and enhancing children's learning through cooking and baking, household chores, as well as afterschool activities, such as swimming, football, or dancing

Figure 2: Real-Life Learning model (O'Regan, Halpenny, and Hayes, 2021)

3 Methodology

3.1 Paradigm and approach

The approach taken in this qualitative study sits within an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences in specific social, cultural, and relational contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). Understanding how childminders engage with the principles of Aistear and Síolta requires attention to the everyday environments in which their practices occur. The study, therefore, adopted a form of ethnography to gain a holistic understanding of the pedagogical practices and experiences of childminders in their naturalistic contexts, in this case, home-based settings.

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology, rooted in anthropological traditions, that entails sustained immersion in a community to systematically observe and document social interactions, behavioural patterns, and cultural practices (McGranahan, 2018; Imilan and Marquez, 2019). The ethnographer seeks to immerse themselves in the social world being studied by going into the research field, to participate in and observe natural settings and the contexts in which group life would happen regardless of the ethnographer's presence (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In the context of this research, the focus is on the childminders' *practices, customs, behaviours, and social interactions* that align with the principles of Aistear and Síolta.

The process of ethnography generally entails prolonged fieldwork, incorporating data collection through observations and interviews, followed by systematic analysis to identify patterns and derive meaningful interpretations (Hammersley, 2005; Dewilde, 2019). However, due to time constraints, a long-term ethnographic approach was not feasible. As a result, this study employed focused ethnography, a form of rapid ethnography, which allows for in-depth exploration in a shorter timeframe. Focused ethnography offers a practical approach for researchers who have limited time available for field engagement (Shannon et al., 2023).

Rapid ethnography is designed to gather deep insights in a shorter timeframe than traditional ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013; Vindrola-Padros, 2021). It encompasses various methods undertaken by lone researchers, such as quick, focused, rapid, and short-term ethnographies, which all concentrate on producing actionable findings effectively and prioritise relevance and efficiency (Kumpunen et al., 2014; Vindrola-Padros, 2021). This method differs from traditional ethnography in that it focuses on more concentrated research questions, has a limited scope, and is oriented towards producing applied, actionable results (Trundle and Philips, 2023). This balance between efficiency and depth offers a valuable opportunity for generating insights into the childminders' perspectives and their (un)intentional application of Aistear and Síolta in practice.

3.2 Participants

Purposeful voluntary sampling was used to identify childminders throughout Ireland who were interested in participating in this research. Recruitment efforts included issuing an expression-of-interest invitation through Early Childhood Ireland, firstly to current members and secondly to County Childcare Committees nationwide. Childminders who responded to this invitation were then contacted by email and invited to take part in the study.

The study included four childminders based in three counties across Ireland: Dublin (× 2), Carlow, and Cork. Participants were active childminders working in home-based settings. Their participation reflects the assumption that meaningful insights emerge from observing real-world practices.

Childminder	Qualifications	Experience (years)	Child age range	No. of children	Location
Helen	BA in ECEC	7	18 months – 6 years	5	Carlow
Lily	No ECEC	16	2–6 years	8	Dublin
Joy	QQI levels 5 & 6 in ECEC Montessori Enrolled in level 7 ECEC	18	1–5 years	6	Dublin
Martha	No ECEC	7	3–6 years	4	Cork

Figure 3: Research participants demographics

The inclusion criteria required that all participants be working actively and regularly as childminders. Whether they were registered or unregistered with Tusla was not considered a factor for inclusion or exclusion.

3.3 Research methods and process



Figure 4: Methods and process

Observations

To address the question of whether the principles of Aistear (2024) and Siolta (2017) are reflected in dimensions of childminders' practice required evidence of these frameworks which could only be observed in childminders' everyday practice with

children. Making explicit the implicit was central conceptually and methodologically to this early exploration of childminders' practice. Guevara's (2023) research in Argentina to illuminate the transmission of experiential knowledges in ECEC centres during student practicum placements adopted this method, based on the understanding that experiential knowledge is situated learning.

This research utilised observations to gain insights into childminders' practice framed by Aistear and aligned with Síolta in their everyday interactions with the children in their care. The researcher spent one full working day observing in each of the home-based settings. The researcher utilised a strengths-based approach during observations to identify evidence of the principles and standards of the Aistear and Síolta frameworks in the childminders' practice.

Overt naturalistic observations are a research method that entails observing and documenting behaviour in real-life environments, offering ecological validity and yielding detailed, nuanced data (Angrosino, 2007). The method involves observing and recording small segments or episodes of a childminder's daily life and is restricted to a particular place and participants (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). To address some of the critiques of naturalistic observations and to align with the research foci, a structured observation guide was created to focus observations on practices (customs, behaviours, and social interactions) that link with Aistear and Síolta. This approach was designed to address challenges in what information to record and in what level of detail (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). This observation guide also served as the basis for an overarching analytical framework based on the Aistear and Síolta principles, which was created and used to organise and code the observation dataset for data analysis (Klingberg et al., 2022).

Reflective interviews

Consistent with the research paradigm and methodological approach, reflective interviewing was adopted with childminders in this study. While the semi-structured interview is a standard qualitative research method, Nardon et al. (2021) suggest that reflective interviewing aims to directly impact the thinking and behaviour of the

research participants by creating space which allows for the articulation of their experiences and perspective in addition to their examination and reconsideration.

The one-to-one reflective interview offers the potential of 'gaining insight into people's perceptions, understandings and experiences of a given phenomenon' (Ryan et al. 2009, p. 309), whilst also allowing for flexibility and reflection and maintaining the focus on specific themes or topics through a combination of predetermined and spontaneous questions (Patton, 2015).

The focus of these interviews centred on the researchers' observations of childminders' practice and provided participants with an opportunity to hear and reflect on those observations. An interview guide was used by the researcher to guide the discussion and allow for a flexible approach in probing for further information and elaboration where needed. The reflective interviews explored multiple avenues of childminders' current practice, including their experience and previous qualification attainment and other informal and non-formal learning regarding Childminding, the influences, guidance, and support for their current Childminding practice, further training and courses undertaken, and multiple discourses of evidence of Aistear and Síolta in their practice relating to transitions, relationships, settling children in, communication, play, supporting children's learning and development, the agentic educator, and the challenges of being a childminder.

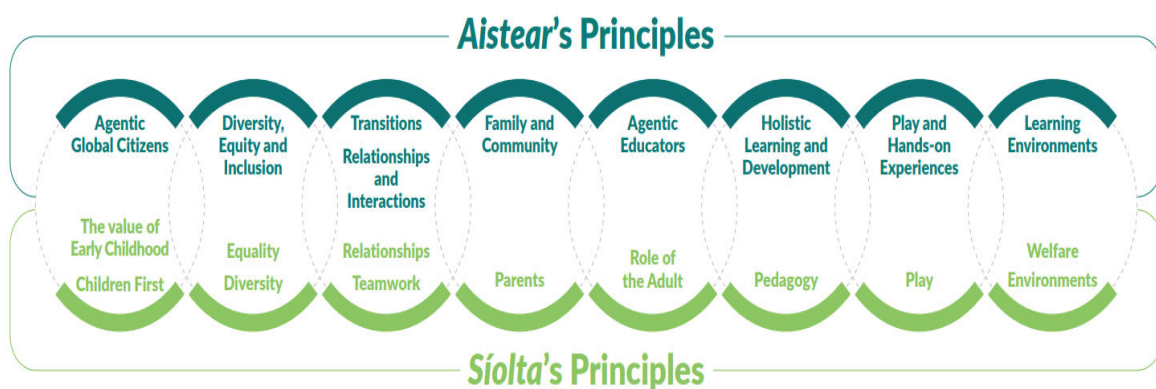
Before the reflective interviews took place, vignettes were crafted by the researcher to highlight significant moments, practices, or interactions observed during data collection and were used as a combined reflective and reporting tool (rather than a research method). Vignettes are brief, scenario-based descriptions used in research to prompt responses and examine participants' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Hughes and Huby, 2012; Erfanian et al., 2020). The vignettes were designed to encourage open-ended responses, allowing participants to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The childminders' participation in the reflective interviews helped to understand whether practice was intentionally aligned with the frameworks. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Feedback focus group

At the end of the research, an online focus group was facilitated by the researcher via Microsoft Teams to provide feedback to participants. The focus group was designed to provide space for collective reflection and to shape research implications. Focus group discussions can provide insight into participants' diverse viewpoints and contrasting perspectives as well as shared understandings of topics (Gibbs, 1997). All participating childminders attended the focus group and participated actively.

3.4 Data analysis

Data was analysed using a framework analysis. An overarching analytical framework based on the Aistear and Síolta principles was created and used to organise and code the observation dataset (Klingberg et al., 2022). The framework was based on the updated audit explained previously and was organised under distinct headings that combine the principles as follows:



Observations were read several times by the lead researcher, and key data was then summarised, organised, and systematically mapped against the framework matrix. Using a framework matrix helped to analyse the qualitative data systematically and subsequently compare themes or patterns across different participants (Klingsberg et al., 2024). Interview data was also mapped and analysed for evidence of learning, intentional application, and tacit knowledges. Reflexivity was embedded throughout, acknowledging the researcher's influence in co-constructing meaning. The purpose of the framework matrix was to facilitate cross-case comparison and to identify patterns, differences, and relationships across the dataset, particularly

dimensions of Aistear and Síolta that were visible or lacking, and to support transparent, rigorous, and auditable analysis.

3.5 Ethics

Ethics in this Childminding research refers to the principles and safeguards that ensure the study is conducted responsibly, respectfully, and in line with legal and professional standards. Before commencing the research, an internal ethics review was undertaken using Early Childhood Ireland's Research Ethics Policy and Framework, which is based on guidelines from the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (Bertram et al., 2024) and Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (Child Ethics, 2024). However, because research ethics includes but is more than procedural compliance, a reflexive process was required as the project unfolded (Child Ethics, 2024).

All participants were given clear and comprehensive information about the purpose, content, and process of the research, and were offered the opportunity to either consent to or decline participation. Invitation letters, information sheets, and consent forms were sent to childminders. Childminders were invited to attend an online evening information session before the research began, where further details about the study were provided and any questions were answered.

Children were not the focus of this research, and their direct participation was not sought, because the primary focus of the research was on childminders and their practice. However, childminders informed both the children and parents involved about how the research would take place, and the researcher was available for any questions they had. Parents of the children attending the childminder's home were provided with a detailed information leaflet. Childminders acted as gatekeepers on the day of data collection, ensuring that children's well-being was protected and that the research activities did not disrupt or negatively affect their experience within the setting.

At the beginning of each observation session and reflective interview, the researcher restated the study's anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality protocols and obtained verbal consent from all participants before recording the session.

3.6 Limitations

This research report provides valuable insights into Irish Childminding practice. However, the research had limitations that shaped its findings and scope.

As identified previously, the research is located in the interrelated and complex areas of knowledges, learning, and using knowledges for professional practice. This qualitative research study employed a rapid ethnographic approach and observational and reflective interview methods, which are best suited to the research aim. However, traditional, long-term ethnography would likely have yielded richer, more detailed, and more comprehensive insights.

In ethnography, opt-in participation is common because the methodology relies on trust and long-term relationships; however, this introduces a self-selection bias to this research (Ritchie, 2019). As participation was voluntary, the childminders who chose to take part in this research may differ from those who did not. For example, they may be more engaged with reflexive or reflective practice or professional development.

Effective professional learning requires the learner to have metacognitive skills, which learning providers foster in courses. It can be challenging for anyone to identify what they do and do not know, how their knowledge was achieved, and how it influences practice – particularly if they have never had a chance to identify this, which is often the case for childminders. Because of this, reflective interviews and focus group methods were chosen as the most appropriate to assist them in thinking about their knowledges and practice.

It became apparent during reporting of the findings that excluding children as direct participants was, in fact, a limitation. This was especially evident in relation to the depth and context of the observational data, which had to focus solely on the childminder and could not include important details about the children, such as their

ages, their interactions with the childminder, or their verbal contributions during observations.

4 Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. Firstly, the childminders' perspectives, experiences, and knowledges are highlighted to provide contextual findings. Secondly, findings that evidence the Aistear and Síolta principles in practice are presented.

4.1 Childminders' perspectives, experiences, and knowledges

The following contextual findings suggest that childminders' knowledges, understanding, and everyday practices are informed by multiple influences. These range from personal and life experiences to education and professional training, the availability of local support networks, and relevant information, as well as childminders' own self-interest and motivation to improve their practice and engage in further training and professional development.

This section moves on to present participating childminders' perspectives on Aistear and Síolta. It considers their knowledges and understanding of both frameworks, the various factors that inform and influence their professional practice, their views on the adequacy and accessibility of training and support, and their perceptions of the extent to which their practice aligns with the standards and principles set out in Aistear and Síolta.

Pathways to Childminding and professional learning

The following stories are drawn from the reflective interviews with the childminders to begin to establish the context for the subsequent findings. The stories shed light on the participants' pathways to Childminding and experiences of professional learning.

Helen's story

Helen holds an undergraduate degree in ECEC and has operated a Childminding service in her own home for the past seven years. She worked in and managed a centre-based Early Years setting for many years, before taking up Childminding.

Helen provides education and care daily for five children aged from 18 months to six years, and for one child who comes for three afternoons per week after attending primary school. Helen is familiar with Aistear and Síolta, having participated in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme during her time working in a centre. While she shared that she has '*not opened either manual*' since becoming a childminder, Helen believes that her current practice aligns with both frameworks:

Well, I was in a crèche for a long, long time before taking up Childminding, and I was managing, and I was getting a bit fed up with paperwork and doing all of that kind of thing. And I missed being on the floor with children. So I said, You know what, let's just try out Childminding and see. And, yeah, it worked out.

Helen spoke of how she regularly engages with her local childcare committee, from which she receives regular information and updates. She participates in a monthly meet-up with other childminders, organised through the childcare committee. Helen commented on the usefulness of these meet-ups for engaging with other childminders and discussing a range of topics, including upcoming plans, challenges encountered, equipment or activities that work well, and recommendations for places to visit and those that may be less suitable.

Helen also spoke about how she engages in ongoing professional development through a range of training providers, having completed courses focused on outdoor play, first aid, and supporting children with additional needs.

Lily's story

Lily has been a childminder for almost 16 years, providing education and care for eight children in total across the week, with up to six attending on any given day. Lily shared that she '*kind of fell into Childminding*', due to changing life circumstances at the time, when it was practical for her to care for her own child alongside other children at home while earning an income:

Well, it's kind of a little bit personal . . . and it just kind of fell into my lap at the time. And it meant that I could be with my own child as well and not have to put him in somewhere to be minded.

Although Lily has no formal ECEC qualifications, she completed a special needs course around the time she began Childminding. She has not received any training in

Aistear or Síolta and has no prior experience with these frameworks. Lily engages with her local childcare committee and another provider to undertake fire safety and first aid training. She attends a local parent and toddler group run by a state body and also brings the children to the local parks.

Joy's story

Joy has been working as a childminder for almost 18 years. She currently provides education and care for six children throughout the week, with four children attending most days and all six attending one day. The children are aged one to five years. She does not provide care for school-aged children.

Joy's decision to begin Childminding was influenced by her desire to stay at home with her own children, while also maintaining an income stream by providing care for others in her home. Before starting Childminding, Joy worked in a small, privately owned centre-based setting for five years, and in a larger, purpose-built centre for three years. During that time, she completed basic training in childcare in Early Years Practice, followed by Montessori and crèche management training, though this training predated the introduction of Aistear and Síolta. Joy then completed a level 6 course and is currently completing a level 7 degree in ECEC. She reflected on attending the Aistear conference and was hopeful that the principles were reflected in her practice:

Having attended the Aistear conference, I hope it would be reflected in a lot of my work with the children. . . . Now I'm aware of Aistear. You know, I've got the handbook and everything, but I haven't gone and done an Aistear course.

Joy engages with her local childcare committee for information and updates whilst also attending their training sessions in the evenings. She also listens to a podcast about the Early Years sector.

Martha's story

Martha has been Childminding for almost seven years and currently provides education and care for the same group of four children each day. She said her reason for starting a Childminding service is that she '*really loves children*' and desires to stay at home to care for her own children. Martha said that being present

for her own children at home was very important to her, and she finds combining parenting with Childminding very satisfying and fulfilling:

So I really love kids. I've always, as a teenager. . . . So I just, yeah, always love kids. And then I just want to be at home with my own kids as well. That's important to me. And yeah, it's just very, very . . . satisfying, very fulfilling kind of work for me.

Martha has no formal training in ECEC but has completed courses through her local County Childcare Committee and another training provider, including courses on supporting children with special needs, play therapy, anxiety management, and sensory play. She uses the internet to find ideas for working with children. Martha has not undertaken any continuous professional development in Aistear or Síolta but has explored Aistear online and believes that much of her current practice aligns with its principles: *'it seemed to me like that's what I'm doing anyway, I guess'*.

These stories highlight that the autonomy and flexibility that Childminding provides was highly valued. The stories and perspectives also offer insight into the childminders' varying levels of experience and engagement with the national Early Years frameworks, Aistear and Síolta, highlighting both informal learning approaches and gaps in formal training. Significantly, the childminders had limited, outdated, or no formal training in Aistear and Síolta.

Knowledge and experiences of Aistear and Síolta

The reflective interviews highlighted nuanced and varied responses. Two childminders who participated in this research had no familiarity with, training in, or support in Aistear or Síolta. One childminder had experienced Síolta through the Quality Assurance Programme many years previously while working in a centre. Another had independently looked at Aistear online.

Childminders' knowledge of and experience with Aistear and Síolta therefore varied, ranging from having qualifications directly related to the Early Years:

*I've done my level 6 and I'm doing my level 7 in Early Years education at the moment.
(Joy)*

*I have a degree in early education and care. I've done a few, I've done a few with
[training provider], Síolta workshops, Aistear Awareness. (Helen)*

to simply being aware of Aistear and Síolta and seeking out information on their own initiative:

No, I looked at it myself, but I've never done any official training. (Martha)

No, I heard of them, but no, I never did any training in them. I just do with [training provider] or, you know, do the childcare committee. (Lily)

Among childminders with qualifications directly related to the Early Years, there was an acknowledgement that, over time, their direct recall of course content had faded. One childminder with formal ECEC qualifications and experience of managing an Early Years setting had some familiarity with Síolta, but her knowledge of Aistear and how it could be implemented into a Childminding setting was limited. She reflected on how much of her knowledge from earlier training had faded over time, and how she was unable to recount much of the learning from that period.

I would like to get back into knowing the frameworks. I have the books from when I was in a crèche. But other than that, I've never opened a leaf out of a book around Aistear or Síolta or know how we'd even go about it. I can't remember a quarter of either of them [Aistear and Síolta frameworks]. (Helen)

Speaking about her participation in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, Helen further said that she does not remember the specific standards or many details. Her main recollection is of the importance of art and letting children take the lead and be creative:

And when I was doing that Síolta Quality Assurance Programme in the past, we were very busy at the time. I don't remember too much. The only thing that I keep referring to is art, because that's the only thing that really stuck with me. Yeah, about letting the children do their own thing, create what they want and all of that? I know there's loads more in it, but I just can't remember. (Helen)

Another childminder highlighted that despite having a qualification directly related to Early Years, she did not have specific training in Aistear and Síolta:

. . . but I've never done any training solely on Aistear. Now I'm aware of Aistear . . . but I haven't gone and done an Aistear course. (Joy)

Factors influencing childminders' practice

When asked what influences their Childminding practice, the childminders provided a range of responses. One explained that she uses a child-led approach, focusing on the children's interests:

Oh, by what the children want, really. We take it a day at a time and do what they like and what they want, you know. Yeah, the children's interests and just it is very child-led. (Helen)

Another childminder described using a child-led approach and referenced the Montessori method, while clarifying that she does not subscribe to any philosophy; instead, she follows what she considers a natural and intuitive approach to her Childminding practice:

So [I] suppose some of it is like Montessori kind of approach, where kids are free to choose. What they want to do when I just offer them different, like play opportunities that they can then explore themselves, but I think it's mainly just my own approach to kids. It's more just intuitive. I don't think I'm like strict. I don't subscribe to any like programmes or anything, it's just like how I approach kids naturally, so. Yeah. I've never trained in Montessori, but I've, like, watched videos about it or read books and stuff like that. (Martha)

One childminder referenced her personal values and the importance of working collaboratively with the children's families, emphasising connection and relationships as the main influences on her Childminding practice. She described these factors as impacting every aspect of her work:

I would like to think that it's my values and the value of working together with the families, like the value of just connecting and relationships, that's what sort of drives me in my day-to-day with the kids. So to make sure that I have a nice relationship with them will then help – that impacts everything, I think. (Joy)

The fourth childminder said her Childminding practice is guided by a mothering approach. She explained that she treats the children as she would her own at home while creating a home-like environment to support this approach:

Well, I'd be kind of minding them on a kind of a mother type of way. Like if you know they come to you if they have a problem, and you're kind of treating them like the way you treat your own at home, and you're doing things with them in your own home. So it's a home environment. (Lily)

Professional identity

The childminders in this research expressed a variety of views on their perception of their role. Most considered their role as an extension of parenting rather than emphasising their professional identity:

But I think my main role is to provide a safe and engaging environment for them away from home, when their parents can't care for them. But I do as well find that I get fulfilment from believing that I do have a positive impact on their lives. . . . Yeah, I think it's . . . like, raising children is not just like looking after them, so they don't put their fingers into electricity, it's, like, raising them to be good people and to be confident, and to be happy. (Martha)

Well, first of all, I am a mother and a childminder, and I just classed myself as a childminder like in a motherly type of way, and that's how I class myself, yeah. So, it's a home environment. (Lily)

When asked if some of her descriptions of practice could be described as part of being a teacher, Lily did not think that this was the case:

Well, not really, because I still think it's a motherly thing. Like you'd still say it's, like, say it to my own child, like you're just still teaching them in a motherly way, like so. (Lily)

When asked why she considered that being motherly and being a teacher differ, Lily responded that she perceives being a teacher as more structured:

Maybe a little bit. And, well, the teacher is more structured and where it's not here [Childminding]. Like you're only saying it in passing. (Lily)

It is interesting to note that only one childminder had an image of herself as being a professional in her Childminding role. Significantly, this childminder reflected on how she had no training related to the Early Years when she began working in a setting many years before moving into Childminding, but she decided after a few months to enrol on a course and continued that learning journey:

So I had no training coming into childcare. But then just quickly realised that I need it, I knew that I wanted to get some, you know, training and then continued it on. (Joy)

Support and training

When asked about the support or guidance they use to inform their Childminding practice, childminders provided varied responses. One described the childcare

committees as an excellent source of support in sending information and organising monthly meet-ups:

The childcare committees are brilliant. I work a lot with [name removed] Childcare Committee now. They send on loads of information, and we have monthly meet-ups with other childminders in the area. (Helen)

Another childminder referenced her current undertaking of a level 7 degree in ECEC as being a source of guidance, in addition to her previous experience of working in a crèche and being a mother:

I'm doing my level 7 in Early Years education at the moment, and before that I relied on my experience as a mom, and the experience I had in the crèche over those years. (Joy)

Childminder Lily described her role as a mother as a key source of guidance for her Childminding practice, in addition to undertaking further training offered by the local childcare committee:

My role as a mother, really, and a few courses with the childcare committee. (Lily)

Childminder Martha uses the internet, including YouTube, as a source of guidance and support, in addition to drawing on her personal experience of parenting an autistic child and attending related courses:

But I think I would look at YouTube, let's say for food. I have a cookbook, and I look at the stuff like healthy foods for kids, and then I think I have a lot of knowledge I have from parenting an autistic child, and I did courses to do with that. So let's say when it comes to food, different ways to encourage them to explore different textures, and, you know, how I present food and how I offer it to them sometimes comes from there. And then let's say their activities – it's nothing formal, but I just go on to YouTube, let's say, and say fun activities for kids or fun activities in the autumn. If there's specific like problems with a child, I don't know, a child might . . . when a problem comes or a situation arises, I would go to the internet and then see what I think is reasonable or can be applied to that situation. (Martha)

Outside of courses focused on ECEC, most childminders had not undertaken any training specifically dedicated to Aistear or Síolta. As noted earlier, one childminder, Helen, had participated in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme and workshops on Aistear and Síolta while working in a crèche.

All four childminders had engaged in training or information sessions offered by their local County Childcare Committee or other Childminding or training providers. However, these sessions were not explicitly linked to the Aistear or Síolta frameworks:

So you'd do your first aid and your fire safety and all that kind of thing. Quality awareness and safety first, yeah. (Lily)

So I'd say I did a few courses through either [training provider] or a childcare committee, but that was just like small little courses, one a couple of days or couple of hours. So I did like play therapy, anxiety management. And then I did some, like, courses for kids on the spectrum, and otherwise it was nothing to do with the kids. It was more to do with the business side of things. (Martha)

I've done a few with [training provider], and I've done some with the childcare committee as well. So, you know, outdoor play in different activities and first aid. Special needs – incorporating children with additional needs into your service. (Helen)

Many of the childminders in this study expressed positive, though varied, views of undertaking further training on the Aistear and Síolta frameworks. Joy expressed an interest in learning more about both frameworks. She had recently volunteered to attend a conference on updating Aistear, through her County Childcare Committee:

Yes, I would be very interested in finding out more about Aistear and Síolta. I find it so interesting, like the conference, the Aistear conference was brilliant, and they talked so much about just slowing down. There has been so much research and development put into the frameworks, I feel all Early Years educators/childminders would greatly benefit from the insight, support, and guidance they both provide. (Joy)

Helen discussed her interest in participating in further training on Aistear and Síolta; however, she maintained that any course should be focused specifically on Childminding, as she perceived a disconnect between the current Aistear and Síolta frameworks and the Childminding setting. She said she would like to see both frameworks adapted specifically for childminders:

Yes, definitely. I would like to see a tailored version suitable for childminders. A tailored version of both frameworks suitable for childminders, as it seems that the current frameworks are more about daycare providers. I would be interested in doing a slimmed-down version of that for childminders – that would be lovely. (Helen)

Additionally, Helen noted that her familiarity with Aistear and Síolta comes primarily from her experience working in a crèche, and she questioned whether other childminders might have limited awareness of these frameworks. She also pointed out that childcare committees place relatively little emphasis on them:

I know about it [Aistear and Síolta] because I was in the crèche. But I don't think that many others [childminders] would know about it. You know that kind of a way. So, like, unless you're engaging with childcare committees, and even at that, they don't really do huge amounts on Aistear and Síolta, and it's more [training provider] and people like that that seem to push it more, I think. (Helen)

A common view among most of the participating childminders was that more information is needed on how they can access relevant training, particularly training that would accommodate their schedules, such as evening sessions or online webinars:

The support I would like are refresher webinars, in-person evening information classes, tip sheets, or a quick-glance guide. (Joy)

So, you know, more information would be wonderful. I could go about looking online myself, but sometimes we need a little push to do that. (Helen)

I think it would be nice if there were courses that would be either evening, online courses, or something that's very accessible to everyone. . . . That would give us more like concrete education. I think it's important that it's not something that is mandated – that is optional. But it would be wonderful if we got opportunities to get more education . . . but I think it should be more like how to play with children, how to resolve conflicts, how to cook for them, how to like deal with different developmental problems, these kinds of things, yeah. (Martha)

The benefit of a childminder mentorship programme was also highlighted by one of the childminders:

Like the mentor, I think like somebody coming in and saying, Yeah, this is right, or, You could just do another little bit here, or, you know, I'd like that. Yeah, I would. Yeah. Certainly would. (Helen)

Childminders' perspectives on how their practice aligns with Aistear and Síolta

Childminders' views on their use of Aistear varied considerably. Some reported awareness of the frameworks without explicitly connecting them to their practice:

I would be aware of it, but I wouldn't necessarily, you know, pull out the book or think, Right, we need to do this to link in with Aistear. I wouldn't do that. But, you know, it would be there in the background of my mind. (Helen)

Others expressed uncertainty about whether they engaged with them in any meaningful way:

Not really aware if I do. (Lily)

I would hope so. (Joy)

Another childminder used examples from her daily practice to identify and establish links with the Aistear framework:

I tried most of our toys to be kind of open play toys, where they get to choose how they want to. Like different kids might do different things with the same elements for play. (Martha)

The childminders' reflections on their practice, and its alignment with Aistear and Síolta, highlight the aspects of their work that align with the principles of these frameworks, even though they are not deeply familiar with them. They emphasised the importance of children's choices and interests, along with nurturing relationships and creating warm, responsive environments that support children's freedom to play and explore. However, despite foregrounding these areas, the childminders noted that this was not the result of an explicit or intentional link to Aistear or Síolta, but rather what they thought of as an extension of their everyday practice.

The childminders were asked to reflect further on whether Aistear and Síolta underpin their everyday practice, and whether they are aware of how their work aligns with the frameworks. Childminder Helen explained that she had not previously made those connections, and that it was only through participating in this research and engaging in reflective dialogue with the researcher that she began to recognise these links. She noted that she had never consciously labelled many of her everyday practices as part of Aistear or Síolta; rather, she had primarily associated the frameworks with child-led activities. She had not fully considered broader elements such as relationships, interactions, and the wider learning environment as also being integral components of both frameworks:

Yeah, well, not really, because the things you've pointed out are things that we do all the time, and there wouldn't be anything I would have thought about, you know, as being Aistear or Síolta. Just be kind of like more what I just associate Aistear and Síolta as being child-led activities and child-led as opposed to the whole relationships and the wider circle of it all. It's all Aistear and Síolta, isn't it? (Helen)

Another childminder reflected on how she was not conscious of the alignment of aspects of her practice with the two frameworks:

I am not conscious of it. (Lily)

Joy reflected on the Aistear conference and said, 'I hope it would be reflected in a lot of my work with the children.'

These responses from the childminders suggest that while aspects of the underlying principles of both Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) are reflected in dimensions of their practice, it appears that this is an implicit form of knowledge and therefore an unintentional application of aspects of the frameworks in their day-to-day practice.

After engaging in reflective practice with the researcher in reflective interviews, the childminders' narratives suggest that their day-to-day practice that aligns with the Aistear and Síolta frameworks is unintentional. This further informs the context for the findings on mapping practice against the principles, outlined in the next section.

4.2 Mapping principles in practice

The following findings are drawn from both observation and reflective interview data. The data was initially organised under distinct headings that combine the principles of Aistear and Síolta as follows:

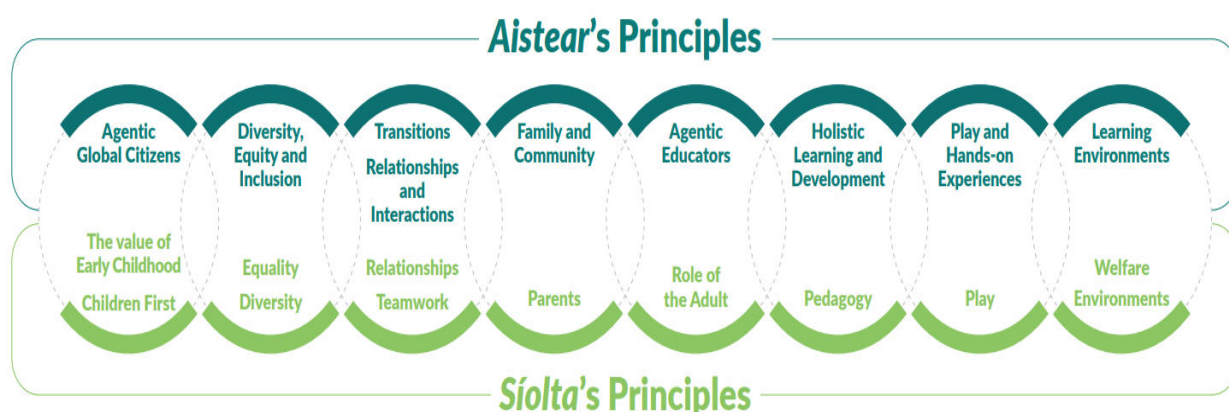


Figure 5: Updated audit: similarities and differences (NCCA, 2025)

The observations and reflective interviews generated a rich and complex dataset, making it difficult to map findings neatly onto individual framework components. Instead, many practices observed cut across multiple principles simultaneously. For example, a single observation could reflect the principles of Play and Hands-on Learning, Relationships and Interactions, and Agentic Global Citizens. This overlap highlights the integrated nature of ECEC and Childminding practice, where principles are enacted holistically rather than in isolation.

Therefore, the following findings are set out to reflect this saliency and complexity. For clarity, the researcher's observations of the principles in practice and childminders' perspectives are separated under each theme, consecutively. At the start of each theme, the relevant principles from both Aistear and Síolta are outlined to provide clear context for the research findings. For brevity and to reflect the saliency, the findings are organised under three distinct headings that combine the principles of Aistear and Síolta as follows:

Overarching organising principle	Aistear	Síolta
Relationships and Interactions	Relationships and Interactions	Relationships
	Learning environments	Welfare; Environments
	Family and Community	Parents
	Transitions	Teamwork
Play, hands-on experiences and Holistic Learning	Diversity, Equality and Inclusion	Equality; Diversity
	Play and hands-on experiences	Play
Agentic Global Citizens and Educators	Holistic Learning and Development	Pedagogy
	Agentic Global Citizens	Children First; The value of early childhood
	Agentic educators	Role of the adult

4.2.1 Relationships and interactions

Aistear	Síolta
<i>Relationships and Interactions</i>	<i>Relationships Principle</i>
<p>Babies, toddlers and young children’s fundamental need to be with others is embedded in caring connections within loving and responsive relationships. A slow relational pedagogy affords time and space to be with the baby, toddler and young child to build a secure attachment. Reciprocal relationships can have a profound impact on learning and development, and the key person approach is central to this. Early friendships with other babies, toddlers and young children are noticed, nurtured and celebrated. Great care and time are taken to foster and support connections within and between the baby, toddler and young child’s social worlds. The importance of sustained one-to-one interactions, especially for babies, through daily rituals and care-giving moments are valued and nurtured. (NCCA, 2024, p. 17)</p>	<p>Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child. The relationships that the child forms within her/his immediate and extended environment from birth will significantly influence her/his well-being, development and learning. These relationships are two way and include adults, peers, family and the extended community. Positive relationships, which are secure, responsive and respectful and which provide consistency and continuity over time, are the cornerstone of the child’s well-being. (Department of Education, 2017, p. 7)</p>

Relationships were observed as being at the heart of childminders’ practice. Strong connections with children were a predominant feature in these childminders’ observed practices, where caring connections, warm and responsive interactions, and opportunities to foster emotional security were observed.

Across the Childminding settings, observations of childminders’ practice highlighted interactions where childminders greeted children warmly and engaged in caring routines that involved physical closeness and responsiveness. In an example where a child was upset after being dropped off by his mother, one childminder’s warm, responsive approach in practice was evident:

Childminder Helen was playful with the child, tickling his toes, commenting on his new shoes, talking to the child about today’s weather. Helen greeted all the children with a hug as they arrived at her home and was often observed sitting on the floor with the children, communicating at their level.

Another childminder displayed warm, engaging behaviour during a nappy-changing routine for one of the children:

Childminder Lily talks nicely to the child, asking her where her friend is as she changes the child's nappy. When Childminder Lily finishes changing the child's nappy, she is a bit playful with her as she dresses her, puts one foot in, then the next foot.

Warm and responsive customs were observed in many of the childminders' homes, where childminders responded sensitively to the children's cues, using a gentle tone of voice, eye contact, and physical closeness. This was demonstrated in one instance where Childminder Joy was observed building strong connections with one child and fostering emotional security during a moment of cleaning a child's face:

Childminder Joy playfully washes the child's face; checking is that OK as she cleans the child's face. Child smiles.

In another observation of emotional warmth and responsiveness, Joy comforts a child:

One child walked across the room and stumbled and fell, this child got upset. Childminder Joy immediately went to the child and lifted the child up and cuddled the child.

The approaches that childminders employed in their practice with the children appear to be relationship-focused and rooted in everyday experiences where these dimensions of their practice align with Aistear, Síolta, and the Close Relationship model (O'Regan, 2020). This was further evident in the following example where Martha responded immediately to an upset child, providing warmth and affection while explaining what had happened in an age-appropriate manner and co-regulating emotions:

Martha comforts one boy child who gets a little bump from the swing, she picks him up, cuddles him and kissed his forehead. Child is OK. Martha explains to child that the other child pushed the swing but did not see him and that it was an accident. Martha explains really well to the children when they ask her anything.

This responsive, warm, and caring connection with children was observed in another example with Childminder Joy:

Joy was responsive and sensitive to a child. During an observation, she explained to the researcher that 'The last day when they were baking, the bowl moved a little when the child was using the whisk and she got a fright.' So today, Childminder Joy says, 'We don't need to use the mixer, we are going to use our own muscles to mix.'

The childminders in this research built strong emotional bonds with children, often likened to extended family relationships. This strong emotional connection between Childminder Joy and a child was further illustrated during a conversation at the kitchen table:

A story is shared by a child about how Joy used to provide comfort and care in the past – wrapping the child in a blanket when the child was little, cuddling them, and giving them their milk. Joy responds warmly, acknowledging the memory and saying, 'Oh yes, I remember.'

These observations suggest that childminders in this research focused on fostering children's emotional security, which aligns with elements of the principles of Aistear and Síolta.

Observations of playful interactions with the children were also evident, where childminders engaged in building connections with children, for example, by Helen '*tickling his toes*'. The researcher repeatedly described interactions during everyday routines as '*playful*', evident in several of the examples presented above.

Observations therefore highlighted the childminders' responsive, relationship-based approach as being key to facilitating this. Observations also showed how childminders used a practical, instinctive, relationship-driven approach to guide children's behaviour, focusing on clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and consistent communication to build strong relationships. These observations demonstrate how these childminders foster caring connections through physical closeness, attentive routines, and child-led approaches, reflecting core principles of both frameworks.

Overall, observations of these childminders' daily practice reflected the emphasis on positive, reciprocal relationships in both Aistear and Síolta, despite limited formal training.

The reflective interviews with the childminders further highlighted the importance they attributed to relationships and interactions. One childminder revealed the significance of relationships for her practice:

Connecting and relationships, that's what sort of drives me in my day-to-day with the kids. So, to make sure that I have a nice relationship with them will then help; that impacts everything, I think. (Joy)

When Martha was asked how she would describe her relationship with the children, she commented on warmth:

Really, really warm, and it's almost like they're my own children. I don't differentiate . . . I just love them so much. (Martha)

Another childminder discussed the importance of relationships between the children and families that attend her setting, suggesting that they formed close bonds and friendships:

Oh yeah, and everybody knows all the children, the children know everybody else's mummy and daddy coming to the door, and, you know, and they're all chatting. Can't wait to tell everybody their news and, you know, like they're all best friends, mummies and daddies and children. (Helen)

The above examples from the childminders' reflective interviews emphasise the importance of relationships with and among children and the importance of this for other interactions, routines, and activities. These childminders' perspectives reflect the emphasis on relationships in both Aistear and Síolta, although these were not explicitly named.

Learning environments

Childminder Joy also articulated the importance of relationships and 'warmth' in connection to the learning environment:

Prepare the environment for the children, nappy changing area, being outdoors and minding the flowers, because they're for the birds and the bees. I am aware of how important relationships are, providing a nice warm environment for the children. (Joy)

Observations presented under Relationships and Interactions further evidenced that childminders were nurturing children's well-being, learning, and development through their learning environments, highlighting their apparently intuitive, relationship-based approach as being key to facilitating this. Together, these findings show elements of an inclusive learning environment based on dimensions that demonstrate a warm emotional climate.

In terms of the physical environment, observations of childminders' practice showed that children had access to materials and equipment which were accessible both indoors and outdoors. Children had access to outdoor environments throughout the day, and childminders embraced possibilities in the local environment for children to explore, like parks and libraries. For example:

Martha suggests that 'We might go out to the front play area of the house', on the common green area, and suggests that the children might like to pick out a book from the bookshelf and bring them outside.

Observations show that two of the childminders had dedicated playrooms for the children: a purpose-built playroom for the children, with the children's families displayed on the walls at child height. Two other childminders provided play equipment in their living rooms, and children had access to the outdoor spaces.

The learning environments were aesthetically pleasing, and the resources provided were reflective of the attending children's interests. One childminder purchased materials and equipment from a community second-hand shop. The other childminders had a combination of their own children's toys and specific items which were purchased through Childminding grants. Puzzles, building blocks, art and craft materials, role-play toys, books, and outdoor equipment like swings, slides, sand boxes, and ride-on toys were available in all of the childminders' homes. Overall, the learning environments provided for different types of *súgradh* (play) and hands-on experiences and interactions.

Relationships with family, community, and parents

Because of the arrival time and the ending of the research visits, there was only one observation of childminders interacting with parents. It showed that the childminder placed strong emphasis on building relationships with children's families. This was evident in an interaction with a parent during drop-off, where the childminder engaged warmly and attentively. During this observation, the childminder was supporting a young child with the transition from nappies to toileting, and the conversation between the childminder and parent was supportive, warm, and

encouraging, with both the childminder and the parent exchanging information on how the young child was progressing with this change:

Childminder Helen takes verbal information from the parents, one of the parents told Childminder Helen that her child is being potty trained, Childminder Helen reassures the mom that it takes time and checks how it is going with her.

Observations in Helen's home setting showed how children were experiencing community connections through the arrival of the postman, who engaged in a playful, friendly way with children in one setting:

The children all know the postman, the postman is playful with the children, especially with one child, he asks this child, 'Will I put you in the water tray?' playfully. The child says no. Childminder Helen tells me that the children all know the postman by now.

Members of the childminders' extended family were also present at times and interacted with the children:

One child collects the letter from the postman and brings it inside to Childminder Helen's Dad. The postman leaves, and all the children wave goodbye.

Some childminders brought the children on outings to local playgroups in the community:

So it's, you bring, we bring them to play groups. And then there is that I think it's a parent and toddler with [organisation name]. (Lily)

Aistear and Síolta emphasise communicating with parents through partnership, respect, and shared understanding of the child's learning and development. All the childminders in this research placed great emphasis on having respectful relationships with the parents of the children they care for. During the reflective interviews, childminders stressed that honest, open communication is vital. This is aptly captured by Helen's comments:

Definitely communication is vital. You know, everybody has to be on the same page, so I'd be very open, but I think it works both ways. If I'm open and they're open and then there's their child telling you things as well, so everybody's very, very open and very honest and very on the ball. You know, we all know what's going on in each other's lives all the time. So I think that's very important.

The following account provides evidence of the importance placed on communication by Childminder Joy in building relationships with children and their families and forming close bonds with the children:

On arrival, I check with the parents before they leave if any of the children had a bad sleep or if there's any need for Calpol in the morning or through the night. Or if they had their nappy or didn't have nappy, or if they were hungrier than usual and had some toast before they came to me for breakfast. So we'd have that little bit of communication at the door. (Joy)

One childminder reflected on the close relationships made possible in a Childminding setting and recognised the importance of building a close, informative, responsive relationships with parents:

I think for a lot of parents who come to childminders, they want to have like a more familiar relationship with them, between the child and them and myself. So I always like to keep them up to date with whatever is happening with their child's development, if there's any behavioural problems, whether it's like practical things like how they're eating, how they're handling things, like anything, depending on their stage of development. (Martha)

Some childminders referenced keeping parents up to date by providing regular photo updates of activities and outings in the community:

I'd have a good relationship with them, and they're all really nice. Yeah, they're quite approachable. Yeah, I send them a lot of pictures and that. (Lily)

So if we're doing anything fun or exciting, we're out and about, we'll take a photo and send them on to the parents, how they're doing, and tell them what's going on. We just have to chat at the door. If there's anything up, I might send them a text, or we could have a phone. But you know, I'm quite frequent on WhatsApp with them and they're all fine with that and [I] take photos of what we're doing during the day and send it off. (Helen)

Additionally, one childminder, Joy, described how children's families were reflected in the childminders' homes.

The children's families are reflected in my home mainly through conversation with children and communication with parents. Examples of this would be parents', grandparents', or siblings' birthdays, the children are given the opportunity to create a card, picture, or birthday treat for the occasion. The activities of the weekend are often discussed, along with holidays, visits, and day-to-day life at home. Children have the option to bring a comforter from their home to keep in their individual box

and can access this at any stage during the day. We communicate with the parents through video, conversation, and photographs. (Joy)

It is important to note that slow relational pedagogy, which is a recent development in Aistear (NCCA, 2024), was not explicitly articulated, though it was evident in practice. Therefore, supports focused on this pedagogy could chime with and enhance practice further.

Transitions

Responsive relationships were strongly present during observations of 'micro' transitions, reflecting a slow relational pedagogy or praxis. Observations indicated that the childminders understood the significance of transitions – moments of change in the children's day – such as moving between activities or routines and arriving or leaving, which are referred to here as micro transitions. There were many instances of micro transitions, and observations captured how positive transitions were supported by childminders through unhurried and respectful interactions. The following observations were captured in Helen's home:

One child is still at the dinner table finishing his snack, children are given plenty of time to eat and they are not rushed.

Helen explains that it is time for the youngest child's nap and she gets the child to say 'Night night' to the children as she brings the child indoors.

Attentive listening and negotiations were also observed:

A child negotiates with Childminder Helen to stay playing outside for a few more minutes. Helen responds, 'Two more minutes and then come in for dinner.'

Slow, respectful, and (implicitly) rights-respecting interactions during transitions were further observed, where Childminder Joy repeatedly involved children in transition decision-making by checking that they were comfortable with or ready for change:

Childminder Joy checks with a child, 'Can I put you in your highchair and you can help us with our baking?' The child nods.

Childminder Joy asks a child, 'Can I check your nappy?' and waits for a response before proceeding with changing.

Lily also sensitively listened and responded to children's needs during a nappy-changing and transition encounter:

Lily explained that the child who was upset does not like getting her nappy changed. I [researcher] hear Lily talking to the child, explaining why she has to get her nappy changed. The child stops crying and listens.

When another child arrives at Martha's home, she tells them what the other children are playing with. She sits on the floor with the children.

These examples evidence emotional support for children at times of transition within the childminders' practice.

Observations indicated that childminders had strategies in place for moving children between activities and routines. Some childminders used verbal cues when preparing the children for change; others used timings, saying, *'Five minutes left before we go to our lunch'* or *'When the song is finished playing, we will know five minutes are up and it is time for lunch.'* Another childminder facilitated transitions by offering the children knowledge of the sequence of activities:

Helen brings in boxes of toys and says, 'We can play with these after our snack', and then invites the children to the kitchen for a snack.

Lily had a system for going on outings with children in her car. She explained how she uses this same system every time so the children are aware of what will happen:

Childminder Lily has to go in the car to the shop, Childminder Lily has a system for loading the children into her car in turn: she starts with the youngest and works to the oldest child. All six children go with Childminder Lily in her car.

The reflective interviews show how childminders aimed to ensure that children felt secure and supported when settling into their homes, which involved preparation and designated times that the children had to settle in. During the reflective interviews, childminders shared examples of how they support 'big' transitions:

When I'm introducing new kids into the group, I'm going to make sure that the whole group is really welcoming to them and . . . on the first day, obviously, I'll say our names and what we like, what we don't like, I'm going to try and find like similarities between them, so they all kind of bond more. (Martha)

The children kind of come in and out for about a week, two weeks maybe, in and out. The mummies come in with the children, and they come in at different times. (Helen)

Lily takes time to meet families externally and build rapport before the child starts with her:

Sometimes I might meet them [parents and child] at the park to get to know me. And it depends on their age. (Lily)

Some childminders encourage children to bring in comfort objects to smooth the transition from home. Aside from the emotional support needed for these types of transitions, some of the childminders provided practical help for families in the physical transitions to playschool or school, as described by the following participant:

And I'm generally not in the transition to primary school, but we would talk about it. We talk about big school, and we talk about meeting new friends and the fact that they're going to different schools but are still friends. When the children are young, I'd help them in the toilet, but then coming up to going to big school, I'll ask them to wipe first because, you know, just to start to get them school-ready that way; and we won't take the buggy to preschool, we will walk to preschool, they'll have their bag on their back, and things like that. (Joy)

Interview narratives show that there was variation among childminders in how long settling-in processes took and suggest that settling-in strategies were responsive to individual children, varying with the age of the child and how well they adjusted to the childminder's home.

Environments and routines were predictable, and the low numbers of children in the childminders' homes meant that children were not waiting for long if assistance with feeding or clothing was required.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Data presented above and below demonstrate how the environments that were prepared for the children in the childminders' homes were inclusive in the sense that children were welcomed, respected, and had their basic needs met. Observations of the principle of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion were limited but evident in subtle ways, often intertwined with relational practices. In three of the childminders' homes,

children's predominantly white Irish backgrounds were reflected through food, family photographs, and celebrations such as birthdays, Christmas, and Halloween, as well as play equipment linked to farming and local community life.

Opportunities to explore similarities and differences were observed when Helen encouraged children to share toys from home:

The children have brought in toys from home and talk away to each other, showing each other what toys they brought in. (*Helen's home*)

Lily demonstrated linguistic inclusion by using Spanish words with a child:

Lily uses several Spanish words with a child, who responds with smiles.

During the reflective interview, Lily explained that she is an Irish speaker and although she is '*not sure if the children understand the Irish words*', she feels it is important for her to use her native language where she can. Meanwhile, Martha described intentional strategies for inclusion and recognising diversity:

I have a little girl that has hearing aids, and we have one book that's about senses and it explains all the different senses, and then it does explain people who have to wear glasses and people who can't hear. And we always pointed out the little girl who wears hearing aids as well. And we talk about, Oh, that's how it feels. And then I encourage further kids to, like, imagine how it feels, so they can relate to her or to have better understanding when she doesn't hear them properly.

Martha also described her inclusive approach to welcoming new children:

When I'm introducing new kids into the group, I'm going to make sure that the whole group is really welcoming to them and we're going to like, on the first day, obviously, I'll say our names and what we like, what we don't like, I'm going to try and find like similarities between them, so they all kind of bond more. . . . I just also have patience with them if they might need a bit of space or if they're shy. I'm not going to be very like forceful in that if they need a bit of space and need a bit of time, I try to provide that.

Childminders did strive to include resources and materials in their homes that would be of interest to children and often reflected children's preferences for play items. Some incorporated family photographs and activities. For example, Joy described how children's families were reflected in the environment, including by celebrating parents', grandparents', and siblings' birthdays.

There was little explicit evidence in practice that childminders actively acknowledged or reflected aspects of diversity such as age, gender, family status, ethnicity, religion, worldview, or membership of the Traveller community. However, during the reflective interview, one childminder explained that a child from a non-Irish background had just started, and that she would like to reflect this child's background through the materials and resources she provides.

Overall, observations and interview data suggest an implicit assumption that, because children from backgrounds other than white Irish were not present in most childminders' homes, there was little perceived need or opportunity to actively promote cultural or ethnic diversity. The findings under Relationships and Interactions suggest that inclusion was enacted primarily through warm, responsive relationships and everyday interactions rather than through explicitly diversity-focused resources or structured activities. Practices such as using home languages, encouraging empathy, and supporting gentle transitions reflect how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is embedded within the principle of Relationships and Interactions, highlighting the interconnected nature of Aistear's principles in Childminding contexts.

Overall, the limited observation data reveals a gap in the diversity of materials and cultural representation. While childminders demonstrated strong relational practices, explicit strategies to embed diversity and inclusion were limited, suggesting an area for professional development.

4.2.2 Play and hands-on experiences

Aistear	Síolta
Play and Hands-on Experience	Play Principle
<p>Babies, toddlers and young children have a right to play. Much of their learning and development takes place through <i>súgradh</i> (play) and hands-on experiences through which they learn about the world around them. Through free-play, guided play and educator-led playful experiences, babies, toddlers and young children can immerse themselves in deep learning and joyful explorations. Educators notice the learning when they slow things down and create time, freedom and space for <i>súgradh</i> (play) and interactions. These playful, hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences help babies, toddlers and young children to co-regulate and self-regulate their emotions. They also help them to have a sense of self, to develop as thinkers and language users, to develop socially and emotionally and to have empathy and compassion. <i>Súgradh</i> (Play) helps them to be <i>sláinte</i> (healthy) and <i>sona</i> (happy), creative and imaginative and lays the foundations for becoming effective communicators and explorers. (NCCA, 2024, p. 19)</p>	<p>Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child. Play is an important medium through which the child interacts with, explores and makes sense of the world around her/him. These interactions with, for example, other children, adults, materials, events and ideas, are key to the child's well-being, development and learning. Play is a source of joy and fulfilment for the child. It provides an important context and opportunity to enhance and optimise quality early childhood experiences. As such, play will be a primary focus in quality early childhood settings. (Department of Education, 2017, p. 9)</p>

Observations demonstrated that childminders facilitated different forms of children's play and hands-on experiences, integrating these into daily routines.

All childminders engaged in playful ways with the children.

Helen prepares to swing the children on the swings and says to the youngest child, 'I won't push you too high.' Helen checks are the children ready for a swing and in a playful way says, 'Are we all ready? Let's go to the moon.' Children shout with glee.

Childminder Helen plays music and rhymes for the children on the swings and sings along with the music. The younger children stay on the swings, singing along.

All four childminders' home environments reflected a range of materials and resources to foster different forms of children's play (free-play, guided play, and educator-led playful experiences):

Joy checks in regularly on child to see if she is doing OK as she plays with little nature items in the mud kitchen, flower petals, and cups of water.

Childminders guided children's play, developing the children's ideas and interests:

Martha suggests to the children to extend their play; will we make playdough food for the creatures in your structures. The children take the playdough and start rolling it out, making pretend food for the dinosaurs. Martha is calm and supportive of the children's play. Martha suggests to the children that they could use plates to put their pretend food on.

The childminders often connected playful activities to holistic learning and development. This included supporting the children's problem-solving, as demonstrated in the following observation:

Childminder Joy shows the children how to dip their paintbrush into the water and then into the paint to get the colour out, saying, 'Keep turning the paintbrush around until it gets dizzy'; the children laugh.

Childminders also provided opportunities for learning through hands-on, meaningful experiences. Observations showed how one childminder in particular used baking as a way to connect children's learning to scientific concepts and was skilful in extending children's thinking and reflecting on children's experiences:

Childminder Joy tells the children about the ingredients for the chocolate brownies and asks the children to name out the ingredients that go into the brownies. Childminder Joy lets the children smell the vanilla. All the children take turns stirring in the ingredients, including young child in the highchair, which is at the table alongside all the children.

Another childminder had a particular interest in ecology and used her knowledges to impart concepts of the life of bugs and insects. This childminder used real-life learning experiences to shape the children's learning, drawing the children's attention to creatures in their immediate surroundings:

Childminder Martha continues to explain what happens when the larvae grow up. 'They will grow into wiggly worms, and the worms root up the soil, which helps the plants to grow.'

This reflects the Real-Life Learning model and 'relationship-driven learning' which fosters child-led activities and allows children to benefit from the caregiver's particular interests (O'Regan, 2020).

In the reflective interviews, all childminders discussed the importance of play, showing that they valued it:

Well, I think it's important we show children how to play, and they copy us in play and then it's nice to play with them, because you learn so much from them. If you can just sit down and play and watch and see, and you learn what's very important to them. (Helen)

I always think it's lovely seeing children playing, especially out in the garden and especially the role plays, like where they're pretending, like there is lava on the ground and they have to hop over it. (Lily)

I think it's really essential at every age of childhood, and when you're an adult too, but I think for this age that I have now three-, four-, and five-year-olds, it's so important. I think it's more important than education. I mean it is a part of education really. . . . They might learn different life skills through it . . . physical and mental well-being. So I think it's all very important. (Martha)

Children can lead their own play. I know that I have to guide them in that as well and sort of scaffold them in their play. And so I think it's experience as well. But like just thinking, what can we do that's going to help children engage more in this activity, maybe and that I'm a bit of a kid too. (Joy)

When asked to give an example of how they see Aistear and Síolta reflected in their current Childminding practice, two childminders' responses centred on child-led activities and prioritising the children's interests and choices while giving them the freedom to play and explore independently:

I suppose like that child-led activities, go with the children's interests. Really. You know, I've learned through the years there's no point in me wanting everybody to sit down and paint a spider when nobody else wants to paint a spider. So you kind of just go with their interests. (Helen)

If there's like a choice, a child that has expressed some interest in a particular toy or something. I might get that for them, or if like say you're getting jigsaws or something, but, you know, if there's a child that really likes, I don't know, Dora the Explorer or something else, you'd get that, like. (Lily)

Childminder Martha echoed the above on freedom to play and explore, while also referencing the importance of having a schedule but maintaining freedom within it:

Yeah, giving them a lot of freedom to play and explore themselves, and then different kids can do like I do, give them some kind of a sense of scheduling the day so that it's not a complete chaos. And they have some, like, reassurance in the rhythm of our day.

But then within that rhythm and those like set times, there's also lots of choice and ways for them to choose themselves what they want to do with their time. (Martha)

It is interesting to note that 'hands-on' experiences were not articulated as much as play, despite being evident in observations.

Pedagogy, Holistic Learning and Development

Aistear	Síolta
<i>Holistic Learning and Development</i>	<i>Pedagogy</i>
<p>Early learning and development is holistic as babies, toddlers and young children learn many different things at the same time. What they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. On-going assessment of what babies, toddlers and young children do, make and communicate helps educators plan for a rich variety of relevant, meaningful and hands-on learning experiences. Educators develop an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum through a blend of free-play, guided play and educator-led playful experiences and provocations. This provides choice, opportunity and progression of learning and development. Through such experiences, babies, toddlers and young children develop a strong sense of wellbeing, of bród (pride) in self, family and community. They become competent and confident communicators and develop as curious and resilient explorers and thinkers. (NCCA, 2024, p. 19)</p>	<p>Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education. Pedagogy is a term that is used to refer to the whole range of interactions which support the child's development. It takes a holistic approach by embracing both care and education. It acknowledges the wide range of relationships and experiences within which development takes place and recognises the connections between them. It also supports the concept of the child as an active learner. Such pedagogy must be supported within a flexible and dynamic framework that addresses the learning potential of the 'whole child.' Furthermore, it requires that early childhood practitioners are adequately prepared and supported for its implementation. (Department of Education, 2017, p. 9)</p>

In all four childminders' homes, childhood was celebrated 'as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold' (NCCA, 2024, p. 3).

Observations show that these childminders embed learning in everyday routines and different activities, providing holistic learning in real-life contexts:

Martha sits on the floor with the children. The children talk about making noodles, and one child asks, 'What are noodles?' Martha explains, 'Noodles are a kind of pasta.'

In another example, Martha interacts with the children as they play, introducing new concepts and words to extend their thinking and vocabulary as their play unfolds:

Martha sees the playdough dinosaurs that one child has placed inside her structure and says, 'This is a real job – palaeontology – finding dinosaurs.'

Similarly, Joy extended children's learning and vocabulary while sharing a book:

Joy sits on the cushions at the children's level, showing them the pages of the book as she reads. She explains some words, such as 'foraging', and describes the flowers in the book and names them.

The children's learning and development was supported in a meaningful way through real-life learning activities: baking, gardening, and visits to places of local interest:

Joy is baking with the children and talks about the quantity of ingredients: two cups of flour, ½ cup of cocoa powder, etc. Joy asks the children does the cocoa taste sweet or bitter.

Martha finds a tiny snail on the chair; she shows it to the children, pointing out its 'tiny little eyes' and asks, 'Where will I put the snail for safety?' The children suggest the grass beside the bumblebee.

One of the children notices a bird and comments on its species. Martha goes to the window to look and says, 'I think that is a magpie – see its black and white wings and some blue on the end of its wings.'

Collectively, interviews and observations conveyed interest in what the children were engaging with, and most childminders made strong attempts to extend the children's learning through dialogue, activities, and hands-on experiences.

These findings chime with principles of Aistear and Síolta and also reflect 'relationship-driven learning', where childminders get to know each child 'inside-out', which fosters child-led activities and allows children to benefit from the caregiver's particular interests (O'Regan, 2020).

4.2.3 *Agentic Global Citizens and Educators*

Aistear	Síolta
<i>Agentic Global Citizen</i>	<i>Children First</i>
<p>Babies, toddlers and young children are competent, confident and agentic global citizens. Being agentic means they have voice and influence and that they can make choices about and in their learning. Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be cared for, nurtured and supported to grow and develop. They can experience democracy by having their voice heard and respected by educators who support active participation. Listening to and learning to respect others and their views is a key part of this. As citizens of the world, babies, toddlers and young children have deep connections with people and the environment, valuing justice and human rights. (NCCA, 2024, p. 16)</p>	<p>The child’s individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences. The child is an active agent in her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world. These interactions are motivated by the individual child’s abilities, interests, previous experiences and desire for independence. Each child is a competent learner from birth, and quality Early Years experiences can support each child to realise their full potential. Provision of these experiences must reflect and support the child’s strengths, needs and interests. Children have the right to be listened to and have their views on issues that affect them heard, valued and responded to. (Department of Education, 2017, p. 6)</p>

Both Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) emphasise the child’s rights, individuality, and agency. Aistear’s principle of Agentic Global Citizens highlights babies, toddlers, and young children as active participants in their learning, which aligns with Síolta’s Children First principle that children are active agents.

There were many episodes where childminders listened and responded to children, which are threaded throughout the findings above and those that follow.

Childminders were observed listening to the children and not only respecting but responding to their needs, interests, wishes, and choices, which supported the children’s active participation.

Opportunities for children to make choices about and in their learning were evident in the following observations. For example, Helen offered children choices:

All the children sit at a table together and Helen asks the children what fruit they would like for their snack, and who would like crackers or toast; each child calls out what they want.

Helen also noticed and responded to the children's curiosities:

One child noticed the spider on the ceiling, and Childminder Helen responded to the child: 'Oh, you saw the spider.' The children often call Helen to look at what they are playing with, and Helen responds quickly each time, noticing and commenting on what they are playing.

During a nappy-changing transition presented in the findings above, Lily listened and responded to a child who was crying by explaining why they needed to have their nappy changed. The child stopped crying. Similarly, as reported above, Childminder Joy repeatedly checked with children that they were comfortable or ready for change.

These two childminders respected and prioritised the children's views, interests, and choices. This was further evident in their interview narratives. For example, Helen emphasised how she follows children's interests. In her reflective interview, Childminder Martha explained how the principles of Aistear and Síolta are reflected in her daily practice, illustrating this by emphasising what she considers important – encouraging children to solve problems independently, with guidance offered only when needed:

Yeah, I think it's important to let the kids, like, if there's a problem, to let them try and fix it themselves. Like, if I need, I'm going to jump in and help them. But I'd rather like point out where there might be a problem. Let's see how she can fix it. (Martha)

Interview narratives also revealed the childminders' view of children as being agentic:

Oh, yeah. If she gets a little heads-up, checking with her first, that works with her, she does have a voice. Then she's much more open to being changed or to get her face washed. She doesn't like getting her face cleaned, but she's much more open to it if she has the heads-up, and if I ask her, and then she'll allow me. (Joy)

These examples suggest that these childminders implicitly viewed children as competent and agentic global citizens. This view, in turn, influenced the childminders' practice and interactions with children. However, the data does not

illustrate children themselves 'being agentic'. This is where the limitation of not involving children becomes apparent. For evidence of children's agency, see Early Childhood Ireland's research with children in home-based settings (forthcoming, 2025).

The examples above and those that follow also highlight the interdependent role of the children and childminders in opportunities for children to be agentic and to influence decision-making in a meaningful manner (DCEDIY, 2021c). There is a clear overlap with the data that is organised under other principles, particularly the role of Agentic Educator, which follows.

Role of Agentic Educators

Aistear	Síolta
<i>Agentic Educator</i>	<i>Role of the Adult</i>
<p>Agentic educators support and facilitate learning through a respectful regard for each baby, toddler and young child's uniqueness and rights, guided by a slow relational pedagogy. This respectful relationship between the baby, toddler, young child, their key person and other important people in their lives creates a circle of security and trust within and between learning environments. Being agentic means that the educator has the freedom to use their knowledge and skills to interpret Aistear to support learning and development. By creating time and space, educators notice, nurture, respond and reflect on babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. (NCCA, 2024, p. 18)</p>	<p>The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental. Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult. The competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experience of adults, in addition to their capacity to reflect upon their role, are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for each child. This demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued. (Department of Education, 2017, p. 8)</p>

Aistear views the educator as reflective and someone who makes professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs. As noted above, there were many episodes of noticing and responding which are threaded throughout the findings, and evident in the following observations:

Helen responds quickly each time, noticing and commenting on what they are playing.

When one of the children notices a bird, Martha responds and scaffolds their learning by describing its features: 'I think that is a magpie – see its black and white wings and some blue on the end of its wings.'

Joy noticed when one of the children got a fright from a moving bowl while whisking and was responsive when she decided that 'We don't need to use the mixer, we are going to use our own muscles to mix.'

The element of reflecting 'on babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development' was generally more difficult to capture through observations.

Nonetheless, in the moment, reflective practice was observed. For example:

Childminder Joy takes her time when talking to the children, she paces her interactions, employing a slow relational pedagogical approach. While riding bicycles, two children become stuck in the same space; Childminder Joy helps them to problem-solve, suggesting maybe saying 'beep beep' to get around each other.

In the data presented previously, the elements of noticing and reflecting before responding were also evident:

Martha: 'Like, if I need, I'm going to jump in and help them. But I'd rather . . . see how she can fix it.'

In terms of reflecting 'upon their role', this was evident in the childminders' accounts.

For example, Helen reflected, '*Perhaps I should just leave them to work it out themselves, let them figure out their own way of playing together.*'

The element of reflecting was also evident in the following comments:

Helen: 'I've learned through the years there's no point in me wanting everybody to sit down and paint a spider when nobody else wants to paint a spider. So you kind of just go with their interests.'

Joy: 'I know that I have to guide them . . . and sort of scaffold them in their play. But like just thinking, what can we do that's going to help children engage more in this activity . . .'

These findings highlight the elements of creating time and space to notice, nurture, respond to, and reflect on children's learning, with slow relational pedagogy latently appearing as a guiding approach.

The interview responses show that the term 'agentic educators' was unfamiliar to all the childminders; they were more familiar with the concept of 'role of the adult' as used in Síolta. Aistear views the educator as competent, confident, agentic, and reflective; it further clarifies an agentic educator as someone who makes professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs.

All childminders spoke about their autonomy and flexibility, in particular to make on-the-spot decisions. For example, if they had planned to go on an outing in the community with the children and suddenly the day became very warm, they would often switch to an activity which they felt would be better for the children, like filling a paddling pool and staying at home. One childminder spoke about how they can change their plans to do various activities with the children without needing lengthy paperwork to make this change.

The extracts from both observations and interviews show the flexibility in the day or agenda for childminders to reflect, change plans, and be responsive to children, which facilitated agency and enabled reciprocal participation in decision-making.

The element of respectful regard for each child's uniqueness and rights is central to the principle of Agentic Educators. Most childminders supported and facilitated learning activities through a respectful regard for the children in their care. Many saw their role as an extension of the parents' role with the children they care for (see 'Professional identity' on pages 26–27). They were aware of the need to keep children safe and to provide an environment where relationships were central to the care provided, and of their responsibility to attend to the children's needs and interests.

The dimensions of 'being agentic' associated with this principle were clearly visible in practice. Being agentic means that the educator has the freedom to use their knowledges and skills to interpret Aistear to support learning and development. Professional agency was observed, as childminders exercised judgement and adapted routines to children's needs, creating time and space to notice, nurture, and respond to learning. These observations demonstrate how agency was enacted through everyday relational and reflective practices. However, it was unclear from

observations or discussions with childminders if there was an intentional pedagogical approach to consolidating and extending children's learning and development through a rights-based, inclusive, informed, and intentional pedagogy guided by professional knowledge and skills (NCCA, 2024).

5 Discussion

Regarding the overarching research question, the observation data shows different dimensions of the Aistear and Síolta principles in these childminders' practice and relationships with children, while the data drawn from reflective interviews shows how childminders understand those principles and their perceptions of how they are applied through their practice.

5.1 Tacit knowledge of Aistear and Síolta

The research explored the question of what knowledge and understanding childminders have of the principles underpinning Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017), and how this knowledge is acquired.

The four childminders' stories in section 4 contribute to evidencing how childminders' knowledge, understandings, and practices have been shaped through tacit or implicit (non-formal) and formal and informal learning. Across the interviews, evidence suggests that, collectively, this group of childminders' knowledge, understandings, and pedagogical practice have been predominantly shaped tacitly rather than through intentional or formal learning.

These childminders' stories illustrate the childminders' varied experiences spanning seven to eighteen years and their diverse motivations for joining the profession, including a love of working with children, a desire to care for their own children at home, and leaving formal childcare roles due to increasing administrative pressures, which took over from their direct work with children.

The stories also offer insight into their varying levels of experience and engagement with national Early Years frameworks, particularly Aistear and Síolta, highlighting both informal learning approaches and gaps in formal training. Significantly, they had limited, outdated, or no formal training in Aistear and Síolta.

Childminders' pathways to establishing Childminding services in their own homes in this research reflected pathways identified in similar research (e.g., Tonyan and Nuttall, 2014). These pathways included having their own children and wanting to

remain at home with them, dissatisfaction with working in centre-based environments, changes in personal circumstances, and simply enjoying working with children.

In the English and Welsh context, Campbell-Barr et al.'s (2020, pp. 15–19) research on Childminding identified that while the profession can be commonly assumed to be a 'starter' profession in the childcare and Early Years sector, from which people move away, their report suggests little evidence of a linear pathway. Instead, it is common for childminders in England and Wales to remain childminders, and for educators in centres to move to Childminding. A small-scale qualitative research study by Garrity and McGrath (2011), who explored the experiences of African childminders in the West of Ireland, found that, initially, many developed their services somewhat unintentionally. However, once they decided to formally establish their services, they actively sought formal support, including advice and training, to improve their services and comply with regulations.

In section 2 of this report, Figure 4 provides a profile of the four childminders participating in this research. They have considerable experience as childminders, ranging from seven to eighteen years, educating and caring for children in mixed-age groups, alongside their own children, in the childminders' homes. For two of the childminders (Joy and Martha), pathways into Childminding arose from their desire to remain at home with their own children while maintaining an income. Changing life circumstances led Lily to Childminding, while Helen moved to Childminding due to dissatisfaction with the administrative burden of working in a centre-based Early Years setting.

5.2 Elements of principles in practice

Regarding the research questions, the findings show how specific elements of the principles of Aistear (2024) and Síolta (2017) are enacted through dimensions of childminders' practice. Elements are specific components of a principle or framework, while dimensions are broader aspects or perspectives that characterise practice and are observable qualities. Drawing on the ethnographic methodology, dimensions include practices, customs, behaviours, and social interactions.

The research identified an alignment between childminders' current daily practice and aspects of Aistear and Síolta, with multiple aspects of the principles evident to varying degrees across different childminders' practices, behaviours, and interactions. Notably, the findings demonstrate that childminders' practices were strongly aligned with three principles of Aistear: Relationships and Interactions, Play and Hands-on Learning, and Agentic Global Citizens. While distinct in frameworks, these principles were deeply interconnected in childminders' practice. The following discussion is set out to reflect this.

Close relationships as central to practice

Aistear (NCCA, 2009, 2024) has long underlined the integral role of positive loving relationships in early childhood and in building babies', toddlers', and young children's identities. Evidence of the importance of relationships and interactions was threaded throughout the interviews and observations. Significantly, the elements of Relationships and Interactions interconnected all the principles in practice.

Elements within the principle of Relationships and Interactions include 'secure attachments' and 'reciprocal relationships', while the dimension of 'slow relational pedagogy' reflects how childminders operationalise elements of responsive relationships and secure attachment by affording time and space for sustained, one-to-one interactions during daily routines, encounters, and transitions.

Relationships were observed and discussed as being at the heart of childminders' practice, where warm, responsive relationships were central, and emotional security and trust were prioritised. Strong connections with children were a predominant feature in these childminders' observed practice. The childminders' daily practice reflected the emphasis on positive, reciprocal relationships in both Aistear and Síolta, despite limited formal training.

Relationships and interactions extended to parents, family, and community. Emotional security, trust, and connection with children and families were prioritised, aligning strongly with both frameworks. Childminders emphasised open, respectful

communication with parents. Relationships with families were seen as collaborative and essential to children's well-being and development. Childminders articulated how they worked closely with parents, sharing insights and supporting continuity of care of the children.

According to Aistear and Síolta, an *inclusive learning environment* is understood as both the physical space and the resources provided, as well as daily routines, transitions, and relationships, which can be considered here as the *emotional climate*. Together, these findings show elements of an inclusive learning environment based on dimensions of childminders' practices, behaviours, and interactions that contributed to establishing a warm emotional climate, aligning with both the Aistear and Síolta frameworks.

Everyday encounters and conversations with children evidenced the childminders' noticing and responding (NCCA, 2024), which contributed to a *warm relational environment*. The observations and interviews demonstrate principles in practice, particularly nurturing relationships and creating emotionally supportive environments through warm, responsive interactions. Warm, responsive relationships were consistently observed and described as foundational to childminders' work. Observations further evidenced that childminders were nurturing children's well-being, learning, and development through creating warm, emotional learning environments, highlighting their intuitive, relationship-based approach as being key to facilitating this. Childminders' relationships with the children formed the foundation for establishing a warm emotional climate and security, which is central to high-quality early childhood experiences, learning, and development.

In relation to the physical learning environments, overall, the spaces and resources provided abundant opportunities for different types of *súgradh* (play) and hands-on experiences and interactions. Mindful that the home-from-home environment is one of the key distinctive characteristics of Childminding and one of the six elements of the Real-Life Learning model (O'Regan et al., 2021), an observation made during this research was that children did not have full access to the family home and were restricted to a small number of rooms. This chimes with O'Regan et al. (2021), who

found that childminders in Ireland used at least two rooms in their home. In contrast, in Aaronrick's (2023, p. 4) action research with 17 childminders in England, the childminders indicated that the extent of the environment stretches across the entirety of the home and home life, emphasising that they 'give up their whole home . . . to give the children in their care the best possible start'.

This research suggests that rather than a fully integrated, home-from-home environment, Childminding spaces were more curated and bounded within the home. While these spaces provided rich opportunities for play and hands-on experiences, this raises questions about how the concept of home-from-home is interpreted in practice and whether spatial restrictions reduce the distinctiveness or uniqueness of home-based settings, in comparison to centre-based settings.

Aistear suggests that babies, toddlers, and young children experience many *transitions* from one space, activity, or routine to another, which was evident in the childminders' home settings. Childminders understood transitions as moments of change in the children's day, such as moving between activities or routines and arriving or leaving, which are referred to here as 'micro' transitions. Responsive relationships were strongly present during observations of micro transitions, reflecting a slow relational pedagogy or praxis. Childminders used verbal cues, predictable routines, and gentle guidance to help children anticipate and manage transitions. Notably, some childminders appeared to be attuned to the children's needs and preferences in relation to micro transitions, such as nappy changing and mealtimes. Observations of childminders attentively listening and negotiating interactions were evident, contributing to involving children in understanding decision-making processes.

Macro transitions, particularly starting and settling into the childminder's home-based setting, were also supported through individualised approaches and prioritising respectful and responsive relationships with both children and families. The strategies that the childminders used mirrored the principles of both Aistear and Síolta. Notably, one childminder's practice was observed to be underpinned by her

previous practice as an educator and how she handled transitions in her home setting.

The research findings raise the possibility that secure attachments were being nurtured through responsive relationships and interactions, which was particularly effective due to the small groups where children experienced individualised attention in the Childminding setting. This finding may point to *an enabler for the achievement of Aistear's goals* in both homes and centres: the time and space required to engage in slow relational pedagogy.

Play, Hands-On Experiences, and Holistic Learning through Real-Life Experiences

Play was highly valued by these childminders, and observations showed rich, child-led play environments and activities. All four childminders' home environments reflected a range of materials and resources to foster different forms of play, including free play, guided play, and educator-led playful experiences.

Childminders were observed using play to support children's creativity, problem-solving, and emotional development, with many opportunities for child-led play and playful explorations evident across the rhythm of the day. Play or playfulness was often integrated with hands-on experiences and real-life learning opportunities. These practices closely align Aistear and Síolta principles, as well as the Real-Life Learning model, which emphasises learning opportunities arising from everyday experiences in enriched home environments (O'Regan et al., 2021).

Aistear frames early learning and development as holistic; babies, toddlers, and young children learn many different things simultaneously, and what they learn is deeply connected to where, how, and with whom they learn. Similarly, Síolta (2017) frames pedagogy as curricula or programmes of activities that take a holistic approach, reflecting the inseparable nature of care and education. Observations showed that learning was embedded in everyday routines and activities such as baking, gardening, and storytelling. Childminders supported learning and development through meaningful, hands-on experiences rather than formal curricula, creating flexible routines that adapted to children's rhythms, interests, and needs.

These findings illustrate that play, holistic learning, and relationships are deeply interconnected in these Childminding practices. These relational dimensions enabled play and hands-on learning experiences to become a vehicle for holistic learning and development – cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically – through exploration and interaction while affirming children’s agency (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013; NCCA, 2024). Relational dimensions of play and holistic learning were also observed in childminders’ responsiveness to children’s interests, curiosities, and needs.

Observations revealed that both children’s interests and childminders’ own interests shaped the nature of play and hands-on experiences. For example, baking and gardening activities reflected childminders’ skills and preferences while responding to children’s curiosity, illustrating the co-construction of learning opportunities. This overlap reflects the ecocultural nature of Childminding pedagogy, where learning is embedded in everyday life and mediated through relationships (Tonyan, 2017; O’Regan et al., 2021). In this way, the principles of Play and Hands-On Learning, Holistic Learning and Development, and Relationships and Interactions were enacted together, illustrating the integrated nature of Childminding pedagogy.

The findings highlight the co-construction of learning experiences in Childminding practice, where both children’s interests and childminders’ skills shaped play and hands-on activities. Rather than being entirely child-led or adult-directed, learning emerged through shared decision-making and interaction. For example, baking and gardening reflected childminders’ expertise while responding to children’s curiosity, creating meaningful opportunities for exploration and learning. This dynamic process aligns with sociocultural theories of learning and ecocultural theory, which emphasises that learning is embedded in everyday routines and shaped by cultural values and relationships (Tonyan, 2017). It also, therefore, reflects O’Regan et al.’s (2021) Real-Life Learning model, where everyday experiences mediated by relationships form the basis of pedagogy. Co-construction ensures that hands-on and holistic learning opportunities are meaningful and responsive to both the children’s agency and the childminders’ professional judgement, or ‘practice wisdom’.

Agentic Global Citizens and Agentic Educators

Although the concept of 'agentic global citizens' was not used by the childminders, observations and interviews suggest that children are viewed and respected as agentic. Likewise, while the concept of the 'agentic educator' from Aistear was unfamiliar, childminders showed agency in decision-making, adapting plans and routines based on children's needs, interests, and environmental factors. Overall, the findings demonstrate how the responsive role of the childminders, combined with the flexibility in the rhythm of the day, create space and time to change plans or activities and involve children in decision-making in a meaningful manner (DCEDIY, 2021c). These findings suggest that both children's and childminders' agency are supported through informal, home-based routines that allow flexibility and choice. This resonates with research highlighting the distinctive, flexible nature of Childminding pedagogy, where agency is embedded in informal, home-based routines (O'Regan et al., 2021; Aaronricks, 2023).

The interdependent role of the childminder in supporting children to be agentic and facilitating their right to be heard was evident. While the element of children's right to have their views heard was not explicitly articulated by childminders, the dimensions associated with this principle, such as listening and responsiveness, were visible in practice. Interactions often showed listening and responsiveness, with childminders adapting routines and activities based on children's preferences. Participation was facilitated, evident through opportunities for choice, such as deciding what to play or contributing ideas during activities. Relational pedagogy underpinned these practices, as childminders built trust and respect, enabling children to feel confident in expressing their views. These observations suggest that while rights-based language was absent, the underlying intent of the principle was enacted through everyday relational and participatory practices. Nevertheless, in terms of valuing human rights and evidence of an explicit rights-based approach (NCCA, 2024, p. 16), these findings highlight a gap.

The absence of explicit rights-based language in childminders' practice can be understood in the context of the informal, relational nature of Childminding. Home-based care prioritises emotional security and practical routines over formal policy

discourse, meaning principles such as listening and participation are enacted implicitly rather than articulated as rights (Tonyan, 2017; O'Regan et al., 2021). Additionally, childminders often frame their role through a familial lens, using caring language rather than educational or rights-focused terminology (Aaronricks, 2023). While the intent of rights-based principles was evident in responsive interactions and opportunities for choice, these findings highlight a need for professional development to make implicit practices explicit and align them with a rights-based approach.

In summary, the observation and interview narratives overall show that 'Relationships and Interactions' and 'Play and Hands-on Experiences' were the most salient themes in the data. Reflective interviews confirmed this finding, with childminders stating that these two principles resonated most strongly with their practice. 'Agentic Global Citizens' was also significant in the observation data.

There was significant overlap between these principles in practice. They were not enacted in isolation but overlapped in everyday routines and interactions. This interconnectedness reflects O'Regan's (2020) and O'Regan et al.'s (2021) argument that Childminding pedagogy is holistic and relational, rather than segmented into discrete components.

While observation provided substantial data on these three principles, there was less evidence of elements of the remaining principles, particularly 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion'. Therefore, these findings point to implications for professional development. Doing training on Diversity, Equality and Inclusion would enhance childminders' practice to embed inclusive practices more explicitly and therefore enhance the quality of children's experiences and their learning and development. Furthermore, training on rights-based approaches and the concept of Agentic Global Citizens could make childminders' implicit practice intentionally aligned with the vision of *Síolta* and *Aistear* and at the same time broaden the enactment of principles in practice.

5.3 Unintentional alignment with frameworks

The findings provide valuable insights into the research sub-question: If the principles of Irish early childhood practice frameworks are evident in practice, are they applied intentionally or unintentionally by childminders?

The childminders who participated in this research engaged in practices that mirrored elements of the Síolta and Aistear principles. Reflective interviews revealed that the alignment between childminders' day-to-day practices and the principles of Aistear and Síolta was predominantly unintentional and implicit. This was acknowledged by the childminders themselves.

The childminders' practice was nuanced and shaped by different experiences of learning, both formal and non-formal. Several childminders had previous exposure to these frameworks through work in Early Years centres or informal training and conferences. One childminder had participated in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme during her time in a centre. Although she said she had forgotten this learning, it is possible that her practice continues to be shaped by implicit knowledge gained from that experience. Implicit and tacit knowledge are difficult to articulate but influence decision-making and practice (Claxton, 1990; Nazim & Mukherjee, 2016).

Overall, however, these childminders reported that their practice was responsive and intuitive, shaped by personal values, parenting experience, and relationships with children. These findings suggest that tacit knowledge, intuition, and experiences informed childminders' practice more so than formal and non-formal learning, pedagogical theories, or curricula frameworks. Tacit knowledge is acquired through everyday experiences and doing, and comprises 'personal beliefs, subjective insights, intuitions, instinct, and values' (Nazim and Mukherjee, 2016, p. 90; see also Claxton, 1990). This tacit knowledge underpinned the childminders' relational approach to supporting children's learning through child-led, interests-based, play, and hands-on experiences. This approach resonates with both Aistear's emergent curriculum and prior research which shows that childminders prioritise relationship-driven, child-led learning (O'Regan et al., 2021). While this approach enabled

flexibility and responsiveness, it also meant that intentional pedagogy and rights-based language were largely absent.

The absence of knowledge and intentional application of principles can be understood within the ecocultural and relational nature of Childminding. Research shows how home-based care prioritises emotional security and practical responsiveness over formal pedagogical language (Tonyan, 2017; O'Regan et al., 2021). Similarly, the childminders in this study often viewed their role as an extension of parenting, referring to an 'intuitive' and 'motherly' approach in their work with the children. These findings strongly resonate with O'Regan's (2020) Close Relationship model of praxis, which characterises Childminding as built on love and on lasting, close relationships in a nurturing home environment. These models may help explain why childminders' practice reflects national principles without formal articulation: their pedagogy is grounded in relational and experiential knowledge rather than less familiar frameworks.

Although elements of it were observed, Aistear's concept of the 'agentic educator' was unfamiliar to the childminders, who resonated more with Síolta's framing of the adult's role. Nonetheless, few saw themselves as professionals in the Early Years sector. Instead, their identity was more aligned with being caregivers or motherly figures than professional educators, which explains why intentional pedagogy was not clearly articulated. While the childminders did not follow the formal curriculum and quality standards, the research demonstrated the role of these childminders as key educators and nurturers in children's lives who provided rich learning experiences for children through their current Childminding practices. These findings echo research highlighting the distinctive, relational nature of Childminding pedagogy and its informal foundations (O'Regan et al., 2021; Aaronricks, 2023).

The findings also prompt reflection on Campbell-Barr's (2019) suggestion that practical wisdom in ECEC is not innate or 'natural', and that we should understand appropriate emotional responses in the relationship with the child, including physical affection and love, as types of knowledges, learned and honed, in professionals' social and cultural contexts. She argues (2019, p. 139) that such practical wisdom,

moral behaviours, and caring in ECEC are often presented as an innate, gendered ideal rather than as the result of experiential learning, deliberative excellence, and an ethics of care that incorporates multiple forms of knowledge.

Importantly, several childminders expressed a desire for support and training to build their confidence and support their professional identity as childminders. This research points to professional development that should build on childminders' relational strengths while supporting them to make implicit knowledge explicit. Training that connects everyday practice to Aistear and Síolta could enhance childminders' confidence and professional identity, enabling them to articulate their pedagogical decisions and align them intentionally with national frameworks.

Intentionality matters, because the intentional educator's practice is about the care and attention given to the child holistically 'in the now', and is considered most effective when it is practised by adults who *know what* their practice is and *why it is as it is* (Hayes, 2014, p. 3), suggesting the importance of know-what and know-how in conscious, reflective professional practice. A recent publication commissioned by the NCCA (Siraj, 2025) to support the implementation of the revised 2024 Aistear supports an analysis of the research findings that stresses the intentional and relational:

. . . pedagogy refers to the *how* of practice, to those educator practices and playroom resources which are intentionally and relationally implemented and resourced to ensure that all babies and young children achieve the goals of learning. (Siraj, 2025, p. 5)

6 Implications

This section considers the implications of the research findings and discussion for childminders, policymakers, and quality development organisations.

Build on the plurality of knowledge

The evidence in this report suggests that, collectively, this group of childminders' knowledge, understandings, and pedagogical practice have been predominantly shaped tacitly and informally rather than arising through a 'learner's conscious decision to master a particular activity, skills or area of knowledge and is thus the result of intentional effort' (CoE, n.d.) and structured learning processes. However, the childminders in this research had extensive Childminding experience and were committed to their role. They had varying levels of engagement with national Early Years frameworks, Aistear and Síolta, highlighting informal and non-formal learning approaches and gaps in formal training. Significantly, most had limited, outdated, or no training in Aistear and Síolta.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that these childminders possess multiple forms of knowledges, conceptualised as *practice wisdom*, primarily acquired tacitly through professional and personal experiences. While centre-based Early Years educators' knowledges can be conceptualised similarly (Campbell-Barr, 2019), that cohort of educators in Ireland has experienced greater professionalisation (qualification requirements, continuous professional development, competence profiles) within regulated services with access to the national quality development infrastructure. Centre-based educators' knowledge and competencies can be more visible to agencies concerned with developing and enhancing pedagogical quality.

The implication is that a strengths-based approach to recognise prior knowledge and make it visible is required for Childminding in Ireland. The research evidence in this report supports the National Action Plan for Childminding's (DCEDIY, 2021a, p. 51) commitment to build recognition of prior learning assessment into both the foundation training programme and the quality development programmes being developed by the Department of Children, Equality and Disability. No framework for

national-level recognition of prior learning for ECEC exists in Ireland, although Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY, 2021b), the national Early Years workforce plan for educators and childminders, includes a commitment to such mechanisms to achieve a graduate-led centre-based workforce. The National Action Plan for Childminding (DCEDIY, 2021a, p. 50) anticipates that the quality development programme for childminders will be accredited and contribute to a QQI level 5 qualification.

While the four childminders participating in this research displayed considerable commonality of professional motivation and experience, the evidence also shows diversity in qualification levels and education and care experience, which included moving from a centre-based educator role to Childminding. This finding reflects those of O'Regan (2020, 2023) in the Irish context. A 'one size fits all' approach to training and support in implementing the National Action Plan may not be appropriate. That approximately 13,000 childminders, each with individual strengths and knowledge gaps, may undertake foundational and quality development programmes illustrates the scale and complexity of the task ahead. Valchild,² a transnational Erasmus+ programme-funded project that included Ireland, developed a framework and toolbox specifically for Childminding that could inform a national approach.

Appropriate training and professional learning

The publication of the revised Aistear and Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, the forthcoming redeveloped Síolta, and the development of a single, national self-evaluation framework provide a renewed context for the provision of tailored training and professional learning in Childminding-appropriate modules on Aistear and Síolta.

Reflection and reflective practice are central to Aistear and Síolta. Irish childminders' professional isolation, working alone in their own homes, is a feature of this type of provision. *Supporting reflective practice is crucial to engender intentionality in practice, framed by the national practice frameworks.* Opportunities to engage in peer

2 Valchild results are: 1. Procedures of Validation of Prior Learning existing in partners' countries; 2. Qualification profile of a childminder (EQF-3); 3. The VALCHILD procedure of VPL – 5 steps; 4. Tools for Validation of Prior Learning; 5. Practical examination framework and processes; 6. Profile of the validation practitioner. For more information, see: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-ValChild-Newsletter-5-v1.0-EN-002.pdf>.

networks or communities of practice, with guided reflection opportunities, would allow childminders to surface and share learning and to deepen professional understanding.

The reflective interview approach adopted in this research, and feedback on the research findings provided to participants, successfully created space for the childminders to think about their knowledges and practice and to reflect on whether Aistear and Síolta underpin their everyday practice and how their practice aligns with the frameworks. One childminder said that she had not previously made those connections and that it was only through participating in this research and engaging in reflective dialogue with the researcher that she began to recognise these links.

Several childminders in this research expressed a desire for *support and training to build their confidence and to support their professional identity as childminders*. This research points to professional development that should build on childminders' relational strengths while supporting childminders to make implicit knowledge explicit. Relevant training that connects everyday practice to Aistear and Síolta could enhance confidence and professional identity, enabling childminders to articulate their pedagogical decisions and align them intentionally with national frameworks. Aistear requires a focus on the *intentional* educator who both supports and scaffolds children's holistic learning (Siraj, 2025, p. 2).

O'Regan's (2023, p. 9) research with Irish childminders found that as adult learners, childminders wanted professional learning that was specific to Childminding and incorporated 'just-in-time' learning approaches, where childminders would provide brief questions online before classes, which are responded to in class. Also, the development and dissemination of *Childminding-appropriate, quick-reference tools* may enhance knowledge and practice framed by Aistear and Síolta.

A range of enablers could help bridge *gaps in training* while strengthening and empowering Childminding providers.

First, the research identified the absence of explicit *rights-based language* in childminders' practice. Children's rights are central to framing practice in both Aistear and Síolta. While the intent of rights-based principles was evident in

responsive interactions and opportunities for choice, the findings highlight a need for professional development to make implicit practices explicit and align them with a rights-based approach. Second, the research found less evidence supporting the practice frameworks' principle of *diversity, equity and inclusion* than for other principles, which has implications for professional development provision specifically in childminders' homes. Enhancing diversity awareness through multilingual resources and cultural celebration resources may *enable children's identities, languages, and backgrounds* to be meaningfully included in Childminding settings.

Aaronricks (2023, p. 6) identified that the exploration and provision of professional development for childminders necessitates a deeper understanding of Childminding to be held by those involved in facilitating professional development. The researchers hope that engaging with this research – and with a related 2025 research report, also by Early Childhood Ireland, on children's and childminders' perceptions and experiences of mixed-age groups in Childminding – deepens our understanding of the specificity of Childminding.

Finally, childminders are a target audience for this research report. The researchers hope that the rich descriptions of practice in the report inspire them, provide them with content for self-reflection, and validate their own practice.

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About Early Childhood Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading national children's advocacy and membership organisation. We work in partnership with Early Years, School Age Care and Childminding settings to ensure that every child is thriving and learning.

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