From Rhetoric to Reality:

Investigating Irish Traveller children's
experiences of belonging in
Early Childhood Education settings

**Early
Childhood
Ireland**

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About the Author

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. We advocate for an effective and inclusive system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services. This research was undertaken by Dr Carmel Ward, lead author of this report, and Aoife Horgan.

Early Childhood Ireland acknowledge that settled positionalities convey privilege. The organisation does not currently employ any members of the Traveller community; therefore, it is important to recognise our limitations in understanding Travellers' lived experience, including racism, marginalisation, and the accompanying entrenched disadvantages.

Acknowledgements

As a 'minority within a minority' in Ireland (Murray, 2012), toddlers and young children of the Traveller community are among the most marginalised in Irish society. We hope that this project not only illuminates the participating children's views but that they have a positive influence for Traveller children across Ireland's Early Years sector.

Glossary

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines definitions (DCEDIY, 2016, pp. 82–84)	
Bias	Having a preferred point of view, attitude or feeling about a person or group. Can be positive or negative.
Discrimination	Policy, practice or behaviour that leads to unfair treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their identity or perceived identity. It can be intentional or unintentional, and may be direct or indirect.
Ethnic group	'An involuntary group which shares a common ancestry, culture, history, tradition, and sense of belonging or peoplehood and that is a political and economic interest group. Ethnicity is a way of categorising people on the basis of self-identification and ascription by other' (Platform against Racism: Glossary of terms). The term 'ethnic group' may refer to those from minority or majority groups in society.
Equality	The importance of recognising different individual needs and ensuring equity in terms of access, participation, and outcomes for all children and their families. It is not about treating all children the same.
Equity	Refers to fairness both institutionally and individually. In the Irish context, the term 'equality' is usually used.
Inclusion	'Refers to a process involving a programme, curriculum or educational environment where each child is welcomed and included on equal terms, can feel they belong, and can progress to his/her full potential in all areas of development' (National Childcare Strategy 2006–2010).
Race	A socio-political concept which categorises people into biologically distinct, superior or inferior species or races, and has been used to justify cruelty, exploitation, and discrimination, but in fact has no scientific basis.

Racism	'Any theory which involves the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others presumed to be inferior, or which bases value judgements on racial differentiation, has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the moral and ethical principles of humanity' (UNESCO General Conference, 27 November 1978, Declaration on race and racial prejudice).
Stereotype	An oversimplified generalisation about a particular group, based on widely held assumptions, presenting a rigid view that can be difficult to change.

Table 1: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines definitions

Definitions taken from Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024, pp. 30–33)	
Ethnicity	*Ethnicity* refers to a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, or language. Ethnicity includes babies', toddlers', and young children's identification with a group having some or all of the following shared characteristics: culture, food, language, forms of dress, religion, lifestyle, traditions, customs, and nationality. An ethnic group is a group that sees itself or is regarded by others as a distinct community by virtue of certain characteristics that help distinguish it from other groups.
Funds of knowledge	*Funds of knowledge* refers to the valuable skills, knowledge, and interests that babies, toddlers, and young children learn from their families and communities. This can include things like cooking, gardening, shopping, farming, storytelling, and cultural traditions. Educators use this information to nurture and extend early learning and development through providing meaningful learning experiences and provocations that connect with the everyday lives of babies, toddlers, and young children.
Pedagogy	This refers to all the educator's actions or work in supporting babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful, and reflective learning experience for all involved.
Rights-based	An understanding of babies, toddlers, and young children as rights-holders who are provided with meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about their lives.
Slow relational pedagogy	This involves taking time and being present to nurture supportive, stable, warm relationships that promote secure attachments with caregivers, healthy and safe environments, and meaningful learning experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children.
Social justice	Social justice is the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to basic needs and opportunities.

Table 2: Definitions taken from Aistear, Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Acronyms	
AIM	The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) consists of seven levels of progressive support, designed to ensure that children with disabilities can fully participate in the ECCE programme.
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Often used in this report in reference to Ireland's DEI Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCEDIY, 2016).
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education programme. Nationally, all children aged 3–5 years are entitled to two years of ECE for 15 hours per week.
ECE	Early childhood education (ECE) is used to distinguish between Early Years settings and the national Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This reflects the terms used in the research cited and also reflects a holistic view of education, meaning that it 'does not preclude the notion of care or caring relationships' (Urban, 2009, p. 14).
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Table 3: Acronyms

1   Introduction

1.1   Background and Research Overview

Since Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, Traveller children's human rights have continued to be routinely violated, despite repeated national and international recommendations to address persistent discrimination and inequity issues (Murray, 2020; UN, 2023; Children's Rights Alliance, 2024). Research strongly demonstrates that systemic and societal anti-Traveller racism persists in Ireland, preventing the development of inclusive environments for Traveller children at all levels of the education system (Quinlan, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2022). Existing research also evidences a strong connection between inclusion, identity, and children's sense of belonging (Erwin et al., 2022), which is reflected in Ireland's Early Childhood Education (ECE) frameworks. While research in primary and secondary schools has highlighted how societal racism and discrimination undermine Traveller children's sense of belonging (Quinlan, 2021), little is known about toddlers' and young Traveller children's (ages 2 to 5 years) perspectives or experiences in formal ECE settings. This 'paradoxically' suggests that their perspectives 'do not belong' (Erwin et al., 2022, p. 6) in ECE policy decision-making, which reinforces the non-recognition of the youngest members of the Traveller community.

This research aimed to investigate the inclusiveness of Irish ECE settings for members of the Traveller community, focusing on illuminating young Traveller children's views and experiences of inclusion, identity, and belonging in their preschools. The overarching research question asks, 'To what extent are Irish frameworks – Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024) and the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCEDIY, 2016) – working for Traveller children in practice in their preschools?' The sub-question explores, '(How) do children of the Irish Traveller community experience a sense of belonging in their Early Years settings?'

1.2   Purpose and Audience

This report is intended for professionals and stakeholders in the early childhood sector, and those committed to upholding the human rights of Traveller children. This research sought to explore what is working well for 23 Traveller children in their ECE settings, while also

exploring barriers that may hinder their inclusion. The purpose of the research was to learn from and with participants, and in turn to identify practice-based actions from the findings that can support inclusive experiences for Traveller children and families in all ECE settings across Ireland.

1.3 Overview of the Report

The report starts by situating the research in the national policy context. It establishes the rationale for a focus on young Traveller children's experiences, outlining the historical and structural barriers, including racism and discrimination, to inclusion in ECE settings in Ireland. The report then reflects on Ireland's key ECE frameworks – the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024) and the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016) – and existing research on inclusion, identity, and belonging. The conceptual framework is presented, then the methodology is outlined. A summary of the key findings follows, separated into two sections: (1) the children's views and experiences, and (2) the managers' perspectives. These findings are then discussed to address the research questions. The report concludes with a series of implications based on the research findings.

2   Context and Rationale

2.1   National and Policy Context

All children of the Traveller community have the right to non-discrimination, to enjoy and express their culture, and to education that develops respect for their ethnic identity (UN, 1989), extending to their experiences in early childhood settings (UN, 2005).

Irish Traveller/Mincéir children are 'a minority within a minority' in Irish society, belonging to a small, indigenous ethnic group that makes up less than 1% of the population (Murray, 2012). Traditionally a nomadic group, the Traveller community share a distinct history, grat'i gradum (culture), values, and language that are preserved through family life and oral traditions (Government of Ireland, 2000; Ó hAodha, 2020). Acknowledging heterogeneity within the community and understanding the cultural identities and lived experiences of Traveller families in their historical and social context, including systemic oppression, are essential for developing inclusive ECE practices (Murray, 2023).

Systemic anti-Traveller racism in Ireland continues to shape societal attitudes (Boyle et al., 2018). Historical State policies, notably the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy, aimed at the settlement and assimilation of Irish Travellers and ultimately entrenched exclusion and stigmatisation at systemic levels such as education, health, accommodation, and employment (Crowley, 2006). Following decades of lobbying by Traveller NGOs (non-governmental organisations), formal recognition of Irish Traveller ethnicity in 2017 marked a historical milestone which had the potential to provide the momentum to redress the persistence and denial of anti-Traveller racism, oppression, and marginalisation in Ireland (Fanning, 2012; Kavanagh and Dupont, 2021).

Many members of the Traveller community, however, perceive ethnic recognition as being largely symbolic, rather than bringing about substantive structural or societal changes (Haynes, Joyce, and Schweppe, 2021). Despite recognition and national strategies aimed at improving equity for the Irish Traveller community, persistent discrimination remains entrenched systemically, across sectors, and against minority children, including Traveller and Roma children (UN, 2023, para. 15(d); Children's Rights Alliance, 2024), suggesting that in reality little appears to have changed (Joint Committee of the Oireachtas, 2021; Murray and Reilly, 2021). Shaped by the society in which they operate, the existence of both structural and interpersonal racism in Irish Early Years contexts has been reported (e.g.,

Kenny, 2024), as have findings of invisibility or 'Traveller-blindness', the systemic non-recognition of Traveller children, which remains an ongoing concern (Murray and Urban, 2012; Murray, 2017, p. 32).

Young Traveller children's rights are routinely denied, and the children continue to experience persistent inequality across all levels of education (Murray, 2020; Murray and Reilly, 2021; UN, 2023). While all children aged 3–5 years are entitled to two years of ECE for 15 hours per week under the ECCE programme, participation rates remain lower among Traveller children (77.1%) than their settled peers (95.7%) (Curristan et al., 2023; Government of Ireland, 2025). Renewed efforts to address discrimination and reduce participation gaps are evidenced in the 2024 national Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES), which aims to ensure that all Traveller children experience 'an inclusive system' where they feel respected and their cultures and ethnic identities are 'visible and valued' (Department of Education [DoE], 2024b, p. 25).

Under the TRES Plan for implementation and action 2024–2026, one of the strategic actions for Early Years settings is to 'work towards equivalent rates of young Traveller and Roma children participating in inclusive, quality Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services to the same level as the general population through the Equal Start funding model' (DoE, 2024b, p. 25). The Equal Start funding model represents a shift towards more equitable access for Traveller children and families, with the potential to support settings to strengthen inclusive practices. A further action identified is to 'use the already established ethnic identifier and other related data systems to track and report on levels of participation in the ECCE programme of Traveller and Roma children' (DoE, 2024b, p. 25). Previous reports have highlighted the importance of collecting disaggregated data, including by ethnic origin, to support the delivery of and equal access to quality education (e.g., UN, 2023).

At practice level, Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024), and the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016), articulate commitments to inclusion within services in Ireland and provide guidance for embedding rights-based and anti-bias educational practice, laying the foundation for inclusive environments, culture, practice, and pedagogy. To support implementation, DEI training is provided through the City and County Childcare Committees. However, multiple reports have called for the training to be mandatory and extended in duration, and have highlighted the need for anti-racist and

cultural competency training focused on Traveller children for early childhood professionals (e.g., Joint Committee of the Oireachtas, 2021; Murray and Reilly, 2021). It is worth noting that, at the time of writing this report, work had commenced on reviewing the DEI Charter and Guidelines and on updating supports for implementation.

2.2   Irish ECCE Frameworks: Inclusion, Identity, and Belonging

Against this backdrop, this research study focused – as suggested by Murray and Reilly (2021) – on determining whether Irish ECCE frameworks and guidelines, Aistear (NCCA, 2024) and the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016), are working for Traveller children in practice. These two key frameworks foreground the significance of identity and belonging in early childhood as foundational, interconnected constructs for inclusive learning environments. In the latter, 'inclusion' refers to a process through which every child is welcomed and feels that they belong (DCEDIY, 2016). The DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear encourage educators to critically reflect on their own values, attitudes, and practices to ensure that all babies, toddlers, and young children have equitable experiences and can participate meaningfully.

The DEI Charter and Guidelines adopt an anti-bias educational approach with four goals for educators and children, including supporting children's individual and group identities and sense of belonging. Similarly, Aistear dedicates one of its four thematic pillars to *Identity and Belonging*, centring on children developing a 'positive sense of who they are', feeling 'respected as part of their family and community', and experiencing *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together) (NCCA, 2024, p. 24). Empowering children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations and respond proactively to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are shared aims across both frameworks.

Goals for adults	Goals for children
1. To be conscious of one's own culture, attitudes, and values, and how they influence practice. **2.** To be comfortable with difference, have empathy, and engage effectively with families. **3.** To think critically about diversity, bias, and discrimination. **4.** To engage confidently in dialogue about issues of diversity, bias, and discrimination. Work to	**1.** To support each child's identity (individual and group) and their sense of belonging. **2.** To foster children's empathy and support them to be comfortable with difference. **3.** To encourage each child to think critically about diversity and bias.

challenge individual and institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.	**4.** To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations

Table 4: DEI Charter and Guidelines goals

Aistear aims under the Identity and Belonging theme			
1. Babies, toddlers, and young children will have strong self-identities and will be respected and celebrated as unique individuals with their own life stories.	2. Babies, toddlers, and young children will have a sense of group identity with cairde (friends), peers, educators, their family, and community.	3. Babies, toddlers, and young children will express their rights and will be supported to develop an understanding and regard for the identity, rights, and views of others.	4. Babies, toddlers, and young children will see themselves as agentic, competent, and confident learners.

Table 5: Aistear aims under the Identity and Belonging theme

In both frameworks, identity principally concerns how children see themselves, both individually and collectively as members of multiple groups (e.g., Traveller ethnicity). Emphasis is placed on nurturing children's strong sense of self and cultural *bród* (pride) in relation to their families and the communities to which they belong. These frameworks are grounded in the understanding that identity formation is relational and dynamic, occurring within sociocultural contexts and shaped through children's relationships, interactions, play preferences, and engagement with their environments (French and McKenna, 2022). This relational understanding underscores the pivotal role of educators in supporting children's evolving identities.

Culture plays a role in defining personal identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and the groups they belong to (NCCA, 2023). Acknowledging that there are multiple definitions of culture, in this report the term refers to a group's beliefs, norms, and values, as well as shared attitudes to work and family (NCCA, 2023). It is important to note the danger of fixed narratives about cultures and cultural identities (Ashcroft et al., 2007) and essentialist views of Traveller identity (Brandi, 2013). Essentialism refers to the practice of assigning uniform, static or stereotypical characteristics to groups or cultures, disregarding differences within groups and the changeable nature of cultures (Ashcroft et al., 2007). In summary, the complexity of identity work in early childhood lies in how individuals perceive, categorise, and label others (Erwin et al., 2022), which points to the

need to critically examine personal and organisational assumptions about the Traveller community (Murray, 2023).

Returning to Aistear and the DEI Charter and Guidelines, both emphasise the importance of fostering children's sense of belonging in early childhood settings – as individuals and as members of a community. Belonging is broadly defined in both Aistear and the DEI Charter and Guidelines, perhaps reflecting its complexity and inherently relational, emotional, and context-dependent nature, which is discussed further below. Aistear frames belonging as relational and emphasises the emotional dimension, defining it as being 'about babies, toddlers and young children having a secure relationship, a feeling of *aoibhneas croí* (gladness of heart) with people in their life' (NCCA, 2024, p. 24). The DEI Charter and Guidelines advocate for inclusive environments that actively cultivate belonging and specifically address issues of exclusion through an anti-bias educational lens.

Notable distinctions between the frameworks include Aistear's emphasis on a rights-based approach, which advocates for children to express their rights and to respect the identities and rights of others, and the DEI Charter and Guidelines' overt recognition of the Traveller community, which offers culturally specific practice guidance to support inclusion and explicitly address racism and discrimination.

In summary, identity is about who a child is, and is affirmed through recognition and respect, while belonging is about where and with whom they feel safe, valued, and connected, which is cultivated through relationships and environments. The DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear work in tandem to support both of these elements to strengthen inclusive environments (DCEDIY, 2016). However, the implementation and impact of inclusive, anti-bias educational practice in ECE for Traveller children has not yet been investigated (Murray and Reilly, 2021; Kenny, 2024).

2.3   Existing Research: Inclusion, Identity, and Belonging

Research shows a strong connection between inclusion and the interwoven concepts of identity and belonging in ECE (Nutbrown and Clough, 2009; Erwin et al., 2022). Belonging in early childhood is a complex and multi-layered concept, encompassing different but intersecting and dynamic dimensions: emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, spiritual, moral/ethical, political, and legal (Sumsion and Wong, 2011; Erwin et al., 2022). Belonging becomes politicised when it is threatened; for example, when children are

perceived as 'other' and positioned as outsiders, their sense of belonging is undermined (Erwin et al., 2022).

Several studies and a consultation have highlighted the ongoing 'othering' of Traveller children and the societal discrimination that persists in Irish primary and secondary schools, preventing inclusive environments and undermining Traveller children's sense of belonging (Quinlan, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2022; Sandra Roe Research, 2024). However, little is known about young Traveller children's experiences in formal ECE settings, particularly from the perspectives of children themselves. Additionally, national efforts have promoted babies', toddlers', and young children's participation in decision making (e.g., O'Toole et al., 2023, 2024), but the youngest members of the Traveller community remain relatively invisible in research and consultations. This gap in existing research led to this study's research sub-question: *(How) do children of the Irish Traveller community experience a sense of belonging in their Early Years settings?*

3   Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework foregrounded conceptualisations of belonging and children's human rights legalisation, explained below. It was also informed by national ECE frameworks, specifically the principles, aims, and goals of the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear, discussed above (also see Tables 4 and 5) to create an anti-bias basis. In addition, to avoid reproducing dominant perspectives of racism, the framework was reinforced by concepts that could ground the researchers and research process in anti-racist practices (Escayg, 2018).

Concerning anti-racism in early childhood, Escayg argues that racist discourses, whiteness, privilege, and power relations shape children's perceptions of racial identities; therefore, pedagogical practices and materials should 'actively challenge racial inequities rather than reinforce them' (2018, p. 17). Drawing from the work of Escayg (2018; 2019), which is grounded in Critical Race Theory and framed through systemic rather than individual understandings of racism, the present work's conceptual framework centres on four concepts: anti-Traveller racism, power, settled privilege, and intersectionality. These are described below in Table 6.

Anti-Traveller racism	operates in social structures becoming increasingly entrenched and nuanced and maintaining the privileged status of the dominant group. Therefore, anti-Traveller racism involves the entrenched belief that settled ethnic groups possess inherent privilege and superiority.
Power relations	refer to asymmetrical power afforded to the dominant group, both individually and systemically.
Settled privilege	concerns long-standing legacies of social, economic, political, and cultural advantages afforded to the dominant group that are embedded in political, economic, and cultural systems, creating and reinforcing dominant narratives of inferior identities.
Intersectionality	coined by Crenshaw (1989), acknowledges diversity within and across groups, highlighting how different systems of oppression – such as race, gender, and class – interact simultaneously.

Table 6: Anti-racist concepts

The conceptual framework integrated different but intersecting dimensions of belonging to support the researchers to notice and analyse nuanced perspectives and experiences, including emotional, social, cultural, spatial, and political (Sumsion and Wong, 2011). The following definitions in Table 7 are drawn from the work of Sumsion and Wong (2011) and Johansson and Puroila (2021).

Emotional belonging	emphasises the personal and relational aspects, connecting with well-being. It refers to feelings of care, love, comfort, ease, and security, and to feeling liked, recognised, respected, accepted, and free to be themselves.
Social belonging	concerns membership and the feeling of being part of a group or community, extending beyond the emotional attachments to solidarity. It involves recognition and acceptance by the group or community, and participation in its patterns of regular doings – practices, rituals, activities, and gatherings – and shared narratives, values, and associated obligations.
Cultural belonging	refers to positioning as part of a group with shared values, ideas, knowledge, and practices, such as ethnicity or professional identities. Shaped by internal and broader societal narratives surrounding the group, cultural belonging is problematic in contexts where the legacies of oppression and displacement disrupt connections to place and identity, influencing how individuals and groups are included or excluded.
Spatial or place belonging	highlights connections with a physical space or place, often through emotional ties and familiarity. Everyday place belonging can arise through regular use and deep knowledge of a place in the local environment.
Political belonging	involves collective acceptance and being recognised as a legitimate member of a community, society, or nation, often through citizenship and the right to participate in decision-making. The politics of belonging operate at both societal and individual levels, involving power and boundaries, which determine the inclusion or exclusion of particular people.

Table 7: Dimensions of Belonging

Finally, the study's conceptual framework was strengthened through the inclusion of an explicit and holistic rights-based lens. This approach sought to consider a broad spectrum

of children's human rights, rather than focusing solely on participation rights. Articles of the UNCRC included, but were not limited to, the following:

Figure 1: Children's human rights (UNICEF–Child Rights Connect, 2019)

Together, these combined lenses created a conceptual framework that could facilitate a human rights-based, anti-bias study with members of an indigenous and marginalised ethnic minority. This framework shaped the methodology, discussed next, and the overall findings of the study.

4   Methodology

Underpinned by the transformative paradigm, this study adopted a qualitative, transformative action-research approach which shaped the social justice agenda and aspirations for change (Mertens, 2021). It aimed for Traveller children to influence transformations within their settings and for insights to ignite wider systemic or practice changes in ECCE settings across Ireland, beyond the immediate sites of study.

As the study involved children, a children's human rights–informed methodology was also employed, which recognises children as rights-holders who are entitled to participate in meaning-making processes and contribute to transformations in their lives and the lives of others, including in shaping policies and practices (Lundy and McEvoy, 2011). The Lundy model (2007) was chosen to guide the process because it provides a holistic, children's human rights framing that activates children's meaningful participation through the implementation of four interrelated concepts: space, voice, audience, and influence.

Figure 2: The Lundy model (Lundy, 2007)

4.1   Research Questions

This research sought to investigate the inclusiveness of Irish ECE settings for members of the Traveller community, focusing on illuminating young Traveller children's perspectives and experiences of inclusion in their preschools. The overarching research question enquired: *To what extent are Irish ECE frameworks – Aistear (NCCA, 2024) and the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016) – working for Traveller children in practice in their preschools?* The sub-question, specifically relating to the children, asked: *(How) do children of the Irish Traveller community experience a sense of belonging in their Early Years settings?*

4.2   Participants

In total, 23 children of the Traveller community and 10 of their settled peers participated across four preschools in four different counties, including Clare, Cork and Longford. Three children were receiving, or the setting was in the process of applying for, additional support via AIM, including two who were described as non-speaking. All names cited in this report are pseudonyms to preserve participant anonymity.
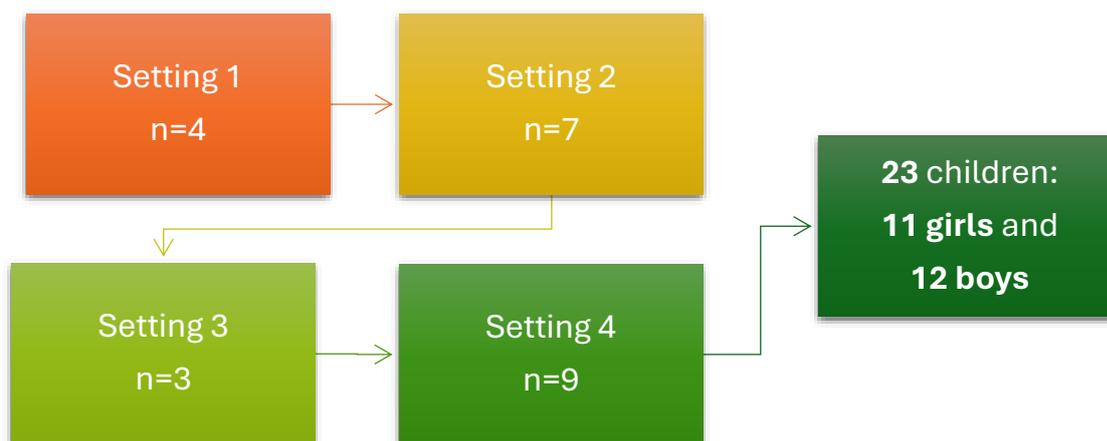
Figure 3: Number of Traveller child participants across ECE settings

Adult participants included six managers who volunteered themselves and their service to be part of the study. Though they were not the central focus of the research, due to time constraints within settings, educators became participants during the child-led tours and observations.

4.3   Sample

Rather than providing a statistically representative sample, the sampling strategy primarily aimed to involve Traveller children. A combination of purposive, convenience, and targeted sampling was employed to select a sample of ECE settings that serve children of the Traveller community.

Firstly, a call was issued to representatives from Traveller organisations, and an open call for expressions of interest to participate was sent to Early Childhood Ireland members, with the aim of ensuring a diverse sample of settings across the country in which children from the Traveller community are in both the majority and the minority. Three respondents progressed to the initial phase of the research. However, various challenges were

encountered in obtaining parental consent, leading to two managers and their settings withdrawing from the study.

Secondly, a targeted approach was taken to ensure the involvement of Traveller children. This meant that the research team, with support from research advisors, selected and directly contacted ECE settings that had long-standing relationships with Traveller families, resulting in a further three ECE settings participating in the research. The participating ECE settings are described in Table 8.

	Operation type	Service(s)	Child age	No. of Traveller children enrolled	Equal Start	Location[1]
1	Community	Sessional	2–6	7	Yes (Tier 1)	Independent urban town
2	Private	Sessional	2–6	16	No	Independent urban town
3	Private	Sessional	2–6	9	No	Rural area with high urban influence
4	Community	Sessional, part-time	0–6	13	No	Independent urban town

Table 8: ECE setting characteristics

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[1] Central Statistics Office (2019). *Urban and rural life in Ireland 2019*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrurallifeinireland2019/introduction/

4.4   Research Methods and Process

To answer the research questions, this study employed qualitative research methods with children and managers, in the following sequence:

Figure 4: Research methods

The research with children took place in four settings, across six sessions. Research visits were conducted towards the end of the academic year in three settings and at the beginning of the following academic cycle in one setting.

Methods with children

The research methods with children share similarities with the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011). The primary methods were walking tours incorporating visual methods and participatory observations. Children led tours of their preschool (Clark and Moss, 2011) using optional sticky labels featuring emoticon faces and symbols to identify aspects they associated with feeling happy and sad, along with aspects they loved or wished to change. Existing research suggests that happiness is closely linked to well-being and emotional belonging; thus, it can serve as a meaningful indicator of a child's sense of inclusion in early childhood contexts (Urbina-Garcia, 2024). Moreover, it was anticipated that 'feeling' questions that focused on emotions would be easier for researchers to articulate and more accessible for young children than the abstract notion of belonging - although questions about belonging were not excluded entirely.

The labels were introduced one by one either before or alongside the guiding question to explore children's understanding. Most of the children indicated their understanding of the emoticon symbols. For example, Sean pretended to cry using gestures, while Jimmy pointed to the sad face and said, *'My baby does it.'* Some children did not respond to the butterfly symbol or the question about change, and two children with additional needs did

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not engage with the images or questions at all; therefore, the researcher relied on observations to understand their experiences.

Participatory observations were an important method to understand children's experiences and unspoken views. Building on the Significant Events Approach (Cole-Albäck, 2020, p. 117), recorded observations focused on events that involved children's strong emotions (positive or negative) and provided insight into understanding their experiences. Observations were used during and following the child-led tours as a way to facilitate children's views in multiple modes. The time spent in settings and the duration of observations varied across sessions, between 90 minutes and three hours. The researchers' settled lens undoubtedly affected the observations, which is discussed as an ethical consideration below.

Methods with adult participants

Managers participated in a 'contextual' interview (n = 5) before the research with children, followed by a reflective interview (n = 4) after the children's research activities had concluded. The reflective interviews were semi-structured using a form of pedagogical documentation to share children's views and experiences. In the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical documentation serves to make the learning processes and everyday lives of children and adults in early childhood settings visible, providing a foundation for reflection and informed decision-making (Carlsen and Clark, 2022). Therefore, using pedagogical documentation in this transformative study intended to activate audience and influence elements of the Lundy model (2007). This method facilitated managers to notice what is working well and to identify opportunities for change – supporting transformative actions in their settings or individual practices that could enhance Traveller children's experiences of inclusion and belonging.

4.5   Data Analysis

The conceptual framework was applied to a form of thematic data analysis – a widely used method for analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clark, 2022). The children's views and experiences and the managers' perspectives were examined both semantically and implicitly. The children's data was analysed first, and separately from the data produced with managers, to avoid the tendency to privilege adult perspectives. Themes were created

from the data iteratively, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) recursive six-phase approach to thematic analysis.

4.6   Ethics

Ethically, this research strived to actively promote social justice and responsibility and embody deep respect towards the communities involved (Bertram et al., 2024). An ethics review was undertaken using guidelines by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) (Bertram et al., 2024) and Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) before commencing the research, and a reflexive process was also required as the project unfolded (Child Ethics, 2024).

Researcher positionality has a substantial influence on research design, interpretation of results, and the construction of representations of the 'other' (Chilisa, 2011). In line with a rights-informed and anti-bias approach, the researchers reflected on their own settled positionality and privilege, which influence their involvement in the research process, to avoid reinforcing the power imbalances that human rights and anti-racist frameworks seek to disrupt (Bertram et al., 2024). To mitigate risks and strengthen the research, the researchers engaged with a research advisory group throughout the project.

4.6.1   Research advisors and process

This research was supported by a group of research advisors to enact social responsibility and address limitations caused by the researchers' settled positionalities. This collaboration helped ensure that the research was conducted ethically and respectfully, with a strong emphasis on upholding Travellers' human rights. The following advisors (Table 9) provided ethical and quality assurance, ensuring that the study would benefit the Traveller community:

Name	Role and Organisation
Dr Hannagh McGinley	Associate Professor in Education at Mary Immaculate College, Thurles, Limerick
Dr Colette Murray	Lecturer (ECE), Technological University Dublin. Founder of the Irish Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (EDeNn). Board member of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
Patrick Nevin	Manager, Tallaght Travellers Community Development Project, Co Dublin

Eileen O'Shea	Director of Operations, Traveller Visibility Group. Co Cork

Table 9: Research advisory group

The advisors provided guidance on ethical and methodological considerations throughout the research. Informal meetings and conversations were held during the planning and implementation phases, particularly in relation to ongoing reflexivity and ethical considerations. Prior to the completion stages of the research, preliminary findings were shared with the advisors for their review. Two meetings were held with the group to discuss their feedback and the development of recommendations. A final draft report incorporating feedback from the review was shared with the research advisors for further review.

4.6.2 Consent

The ethical approach prioritised respectful engagement and transparent consent processes. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants and gatekeepers (parents/carers) before starting the research. All participants, including children, were provided with information about the content, purpose, and process of the research. The information was shared through written and video formats, facilitating a multimodal and child-friendly approach to communication. Participants' right to withdraw before and during the research without any consequence, and respect for non-participation, were emphasised.

Child participants

Early Childhood Ireland has committed to upholding the principles of the International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children: https://childethics.com/ethical-standards/.

To support informed consent and information-sharing, a research pack was distributed to the setting managers to introduce the study to children and educators. The pack included two children's books, one of which focused on human rights to support conversations with children about their right to be heard and participate in research. An optional activity invited children to create a self-portrait and share important information about themselves to help the research team get to know them. In addition, managers were asked to share information about each child's identity, including communication preferences and additional needs, to support their full participation.

Obtaining informed consent from all children proved challenging due to several factors, including their deep engagement in play, varying levels of understanding about the research,

and limitations in researchers' abilities to ensure that children were fully informed. Informed consent was obtained from children where possible, and assent was continuously revisited and renegotiated throughout, recognised through spoken and unspoken communication, including facial expressions, gestures, physicality, actions, and silences. Researchers remained attuned to children's multimodal cues that indicated dissent, refusal, or withdrawal, which guided responsive, in-the-moment ethical decisions, including decisions about audio recording and photography (Bertram et al., 2025).

Gatekeepers

Garnering informed consent from parents and guardians also presented challenges. While efforts were made to engage directly with families, negotiating consent was mostly facilitated by participating managers. In the context of historical and ongoing exclusion, parental resistance to participation was interpreted as a form of activism and agency (Young, 2011). It highlighted underlying mistrust towards settled-led research and fragile relationships with services – an important insight which, on reflection with a research advisor, was deemed a significant finding in itself. The challenge of obtaining consent was approached with respect for the right to non-participation; however, this led to reduced child participation and highlighted ethical concerns about children's right to be heard.

4.7   Strengths and Limitations

While the research offered valuable insights into the experiences of Traveller children in ECCE services in Ireland, it faced several limitations and challenges that shaped its scope, boundaries, and findings.

This is an in-depth, small-scale study rather than a statistically representative one. The voluntary nature of the sampling strategy means that the managers who participated in this study were deeply committed to Traveller children's and their families' inclusion. In two settings where observations were undertaken, managers had intensive DEI training, and an anti-bias approach guided their work. Additionally, while the study aimed to include a diverse sample of ECE settings, participation was contingent on gaining consent from children and their 'guardian gatekeepers' (parents/carers and managers). In cases where obtaining parental consent was challenging, settings withdrew, limiting the diversity of the sample. It is significant to note, therefore, that children's involvement in the four settings

was dependent on the managers, who negotiated with gatekeepers (parents/carers and children) to secure consent. This shaped the findings.

Of the six managers, three shared insights – gleaned from children and their parents – that the child participants did not explicitly identify themselves by their Traveller ethnicity. Several managers also expressed concerns about the research singling children out. One of the researchers had informal conversations with several parents about the research and consent. One parent agreed to consent on the basis that the research focused on children's ECE experiences, not their home or family life. These concerns were acknowledged and respected, meaning that the researchers did not directly talk to the children about their Traveller identity or personal life – although, as the data shows, children spontaneously shared insights into both.

While the researchers did focus on the group of Traveller children, specifically regarding the walking tours, they also interacted with the wider group of children present during research visits. Although consent was sought from settled children and their parents in one setting, extending this approach across all would have added further perspectives and insights and perhaps is an area for further research in the future. Similarly, time and budgetary limitations (on the part of the settings) restricted the involvement of educators' perspectives, which would have added depth to the findings and provided valuable insights into inclusive practices in ECE settings.

5 Children's Views and Experiences

Three themes were constructed through the thematic data analysis: (1) materiality and environmental connections; (2) relational (dis)connectedness; and (3) coming together and signs of social belonging. Threads of intersecting identities became a cross-cutting theme, as children engaged with and expressed their multiple and intersecting identities.

5.1 Theme 1: Materiality and Environmental Connections

The findings presented in this theme highlight the value of materials, the environment, and play for this group of Traveller children.

Before presenting the themes drawn from the children's perspectives and experiences, it is significant to note that across the four settings, encounters and observations overwhelmingly show that this group of children appeared to be at ease, comfortable, and confident within their settings, reflecting a sense of emotional belonging. While the environments and the rhythm of the day varied across settings, the children moved freely and purposefully into and within the settings, indicating their familiarity with the physical space and daily rhythm, which in turn indicated place-based belonging.

Children expressed indications of a sense of emotional and place belonging. For example, at the beginning of the day, Willow was asked how she was feeling. Moving the arrow on her 'feelings board' to the symbol for 'happy', Willow said *'Happy'* and smiled. Gracie said she loves *'Everything'* about her preschool. When asked if there was anything he wanted to change, Finn responded: *'No. I like it the way it is.'*

5.1.1 Materiality

Materiality refers to the physical or tangible features of the environment and the interactions between children and materials, which play a significant role in shaping children's experiences of belonging, identity, and rights.

Children's responses to direct questions about aspects of their preschool they associated with feeling happy or sad, and those they loved or wished to change, highlight the centrality of materials. Specifically, when asked what makes them feel happy, it was striking that most children mentioned or guided the researchers to material things, including sensory materials (water, sand, playdough), small-world resources (animals, such as dinosaurs and

horses; and vehicles, such as trains, trucks, and cars), soft toys, dolls, and creative materials (paints and colours).

Children expressed their preferences in multimodal ways. For example, Doireann led the way and placed a happy face on the kitchen. John's embodied joy was observed when he was deeply immersed in water play alongside their dedicated key worker.

In response to the question of happiness, some children expressed love towards materials and 'toys':

> Charlie: A Lamborghini . . . I love it.

> Tommie: I love my toys.

Jimmy placed a smiley face next to the trucks, then continued to play with them. Later, he looked for the heart sticker and placed it beside them. Quinlan placed the smiley face next to two crocodiles, then placed one crocodile on top of the heart.

Similarly, some children chose materials and 'toys' when asked what they love in their setting. Aurora said the *'big house'*, which was outside, while Johnjo pointed to the trains. At the same time, materials featured in children's responses to the questions of what makes them feel sad (e.g., slide, seesaw, sandpit, and wipe-board). Jimmy said that the blocks make him feel sad because *'they're going to fall'* after *'piling'* them up.

Again, materials featured in children's suggestions about what they would like to change. For example, Doireann pointed out a chair, while Charlie suggested changing *'the paper'* by the sink *''cause it's too snappy'* and he preferred the *'really warm'* paper in the bathroom. Without words, Johnjo pointed to the counting cubes and shook his head. Philomena pointed to the playdough she was playing with, said, *'It's not working'*, and placed the butterfly on it. When asked if there was anything that would make preschool better, Bernie suggested *'more sand'*, and PJ answered, *'more water for the sand'*. Cherese suggested adding *'a kitchen in the playground'*.

Familial and Cultural Connections Though Materials

Observations of children's play and interactions with materials revealed culturally and socially influenced expressions of familial connections and cultural identities. In response to direct questions, Rose said that her *'family book'* makes her happy. In Rosaleen and

Saoirse's setting, the children had access to books about their 'name stories' (see managers' explanation on page 54). Saoirse flicked through a book looking for pictures of her and her family:

> *Rosaleen: Look, that's me. That's me! [excitedly]*

> *Saoirse: That's me . . .*

For many children, joy was sparked by encounters with photographs of themselves and their families displayed on family walls and in books. Their embodied happiness was expressed when pointing out family members in the photographs (mammy, daddy, siblings), suggesting a strong sense of pride in their family and who they are. Family walls are an (inter)active feature in settings that contribute to identity support and should be built into everyday practice and evolve as children and families add to it over time (DCEDIY, 2016).

Across settings where Traveller girls were present, many were observed engaging deeply with dolls and home-based imaginative play resources, particularly kitchens, which also featured in responses to direct questions, perhaps reflecting family life. In one setting, for example, Poppy was engaged in solitary play but instigated play interactions with the researcher: *'Baby go asleep. Where the baby's pram? I need a bottle . . .'*. In another setting, Philomena was playing in the kitchen and intermittently offered the researcher food as she was making it. A further example follows:

> **Observation:** Nancy, Cherese and Fiona [settled child] are by the kitchen playing with dolls, food items and a shopping basket. Nancy called out, 'Your baby is crying, Cherese' and started to make food to feed her and Cherese's baby. Cherese and Fiona were taking turns walking to the back of the room with a shopping basket and then bringing it back again.

Some children indicated a preference for materials they had at home, implicitly indicating the significance of culturally and personally relevant resources. For instance, Cherese preferred her pram at home, and Doireann favoured her chair at home, over the pram and chairs in their preschools. Some children also pointed out personal items to the researchers. In Shauna's case, her mother's connection to her shoes appears to be important:

Shauna [pointing at her shoes, which are pink and have unicorns]: Look. My mam bought them for me.

These preferences suggest that familiar, family-related items can play a significant role in fostering familiarity, identity, and belonging.

Further encounters show how children expressed their cultural identities and funds of knowledge through interacting with small-world materials. Observations show Aidan's recurring interactions with small-world toys, including a dog with a kennel. Reflections with an educator indicated that Aidan had recently lost his pet dog. In two settings where horses were accessible during free play, children were observed engaged in play with them. Jimmy and Charlie both said that they liked *'the animals'* but were observed to be playing specifically with the horses.

> *Researcher: What makes you happy in the garden?*
>
> *Charlie: Playing with the animals.*

Nancy was observed sitting on the floor playing with a horse from the animal basket. On several occasions, Charlie showed a fleeting interest in the small-world trailers that were integrated into the preschool environment. The following significant event suggests that Charlie was implicitly connecting with his cultural identity through play with materials such as horses and trailers, which reflect Traveller heritage:

> **Observation:** Charlie was playing alone in the garden, where a variety of animals and vehicles, including horses and trailers, were displayed. He confidently explained the ages of the horses, constructed an obstacle course, and invited the researcher into his play, offering clear guidance. Charlie remained deeply immersed in play for an extended period.

Charlie's interactions with and ease in involving an adult researcher in his play world reflected a strong sense of agency and place belonging, possibly a cultural indicator.

These encounters show how children expressed their cultural and familial identities and funds of knowledge through making connections between materials and their lived experiences in subtle, meaningful ways. Encounters with materials were often spontaneous and embedded in everyday (free) play, although interactions with family walls were often prompted by educators.

While children may not explicitly identify themselves ethnically – as one manager put it, *'I have not come across any child that has said, "I am a Traveller" '* – observations and interactions demonstrate that children do recognise or connect with materials that represent their culture, heritage, and family, indicating a sense of identity and self-recognition. These findings suggest that children's interactions with materials played a central role in how they expressed and experienced familial connections and cultural identities.

Identity-based interests and preferences of materials

It is important to note that children expressed heterogeneous feelings, preferences, and interests, and that materials caused mixed emotions for and between the children. For example, exploring colours and colouring was a source of happiness for Rosaleen and of sadness for Rose, who disliked colouring. Children's responses to questions also highlight distinct variations between the interests and preferences of play materials expressed by girls and boys. For example, Sean expressed a desire to change the pink car, implicitly indicating possible discomfort with the symbolic association of pinkness. While many girls associated happiness with houses, dolls, and kitchens, none of the boys did. At times, play choices also challenged gender stereotypes. Notably, Aurora attached a happy face to the red car that she was driving at the time, and Cherese pointed out *'choo-choo trains'*.

These findings also highlight the children's intersectional identities and the influence of gender on their preferences and choices in relation to materials, which is not unique to children of the Traveller community. Overall, there were many instances of children's parallel play, where children interacted with materials alongside peers, illuminating shared as well as individual interests and identities.

The Significance of Play

The centrality of materials and the environment for children reflects the value they placed on play. In fact, play was seen by children as the primary purpose of preschool. This view was aptly captured in Charlie's response to the question, 'Do you feel you belong here?'

> *Charlie: Yep, I don't sleep here.*
>
> *Researcher: You don't sleep here. . . . What do you do here?*
>
> *Charlie: Play.*

Researcher: You play.

Charlie: My dad picks me. . . . Where do you sleep?

Charlie's response demonstrates the centrality of play for him in his preschool, which may explain why children place such emphasis on materials and places. Similarly, in response to the question 'What do you love about coming to school?', Rosaleen chose *'Playing with toys'*.

5.1.2 Environmental connectedness

The outdoor environment featured strongly in children's responses to direct questions, across three of the settings. Rosaleen and Saoirse immediately exclaimed *'Outside!'* when asked to lead a walking tour around their room to show what makes them happy. Observations show children's embodied happiness during transitions from indoor to outdoor spaces. Extending this framing, some children expressed a preference for being outdoors, both in response to direct questions and through their actions. Finn said he loves *'going outside'* and would rather be outside because he does not like sitting. Charlie also preferred being outside: *'I like the garden . . . because it's very quiet outside'*.

Outdoor environments across settings varied, particularly in terms of size, access, and availability of green spaces or gardens. In three out of four settings, the architecture meant that free movement between indoors and outdoors was constrained. In one setting there was free flow between the indoor and outdoor spaces, but no garden. Observations also show children's connectedness to the outdoor environment, particularly through their physical choices and expressions:

> **Observation:** Sean was barefoot. He looked down at his feet and smiled while nodding when asked if he liked having bare feet, indicating a sense of comfort and joy.

> **Observation:** Doireann had also removed her sandals, which she said she loved, and placed them on the table, indicating a similar sense of ease and freedom.

These observations demonstrate children's security, sensory engagement, and connectedness to their natural world, reinforcing a sense of emotional and place-based belonging.

Outdoor environments, in particular, offered opportunities for children's freedom of expression in the research, where movement was a meaningful form of communication and social connection with the researcher. For example, Aurora led the way *'driving'* a play car, Charlie rode a bicycle, and Sean and Doireann skipped joyfully, leading the researcher through the outdoor area.

These research encounters reflected children's ritualised use of space, where they demonstrated familiarity and confidence in navigating these spaces; joy was visibly embodied through their purposeful movement, which in turn revealed their agency and sense of belonging. Together, these findings suggest that children's happiness towards, preference for, and joyful use of outdoor environments reflect a sense of place attachment in their ECE settings.

5.2   Theme 2: Relational (Dis)connectedness

This theme was constructed with data that centred on the children's views and experiences of relationships and interactions. The findings are presented as two subthemes: (1) loving connections, and (2) peer (dis)connections.

5.2.1   Loving connections

Relationships with adults were a source of happiness and featured strongly in children's responses to the question 'What do you love in your preschool?' Many children expressed love for their family, siblings, and teachers:

> *Rosaleen: My mammy.*
>
> *Doireann: A teacher.*
>
> *Aurora: Brother.*

Some children saved or attached the heart sticky notes to photographs of their family members. Aidan glued a heart onto a piece of paper for his mother.

Charlie placed a heart sticky note on a photograph of his mother, saying: *'My mom, she's going to be proud. . . . She's going to do like this'* [*making a kissing sound and expression*]. This observation exemplifies how many children expressed embodied happiness when talking about family members (parents, siblings, and dogs). While looking at photographs, Rose exclaimed, *'My daddy loves me!'* Additionally, when drawing self-portraits and asked what was important for the researcher to know about them, the children's attention turned to family:

> *Nancy: That's my dad. . . . This is my mother's eyes. . . . That's me and my mommy.*
>
> *Bernie: My mam is there. . . . My mam is silly.*
>
> *Cherese: My daddy.*
>
> *Jimmy: My brother is in the baby room, right there [pointing to the creche door].*

Family connectedness was further evident in a dialogue with Cherese, who said, *'I love dolls'*, and when asked, 'Do you like playing with them?', she responded, *'I like to play with my family.'* When asked if she had any brothers or sisters, Cherese responded, *'Yes, they're the best.'* She then named all her siblings and her mother, father, and grandmother and shared her surname.

As highlighted in the previous theme, children remain interconnected with their families while in preschool, bringing and expressing their familial love and experiences with them. For these children, the importance of family involvement, as emphasised in Aistear, extends to the ongoing significance of their family's presence in the setting, made visible through images and everyday dialogue with others.

Across the settings, children (e.g., Charlie, Doireann, Sean, and Rose) also gave or attached the heart sticky notes to their teachers:

> **Observation:** Bernie pointed to the heart sticker and then pointed to his teacher.
>
> **Observation:** Tommie and Johnjo went together and placed the heart on the teacher.

On another occasion:

> **Observation:** Tommie was playing with another child. He stopped and ran over to the researcher and asked for a heart sticky note. Tommie then started running to give it to an educator.

Jimmy spontaneously articulated his love towards a teacher:

> **Observation:** Jimmy was in the bathroom looking for a light switch. He was having trouble finding it. An educator noticed, went over and turned on the light for him. Jimmy said, 'Thank you!' He went into the toilet but popped his head back out, looked at the educator, then said, 'I love you!'

From observations, connections between children and educators appeared to be a source of happiness. Observations and encounters with the children also highlight recurring and often spontaneous moments (rather than in response to a research question) where children shared their personal, familial, or life stories with managers, educators, and the researchers which reflect their lived experiences and cultural identities. The following findings evidence interactions, albeit fleeting, where children expressed their identities and made their cultural 'funds of knowledge' visible through interactions with adults.

> **Observation:** While he was playing with some horses, PJ said, 'Have two horses at home', then started singing and said, 'I kiss mommy and daddy.'

In the following encounter, Aidan initiated a conversation with the manager, revealing aspects of his cultural and familial life:

> *Aidan: I saw you . . .*
>
> *Manager Caoimhe: Where did you see me? At the chipper when you were getting chips? You were getting chips – where were you going to eat the chips?*
>
> *Finn: I saw Aidan at the shop.*
>
> *Aidan: At the mobile.*

Jimmy initiated a conversation about his family members, while his educator elaborated on his life story:

> *Jimmy: My dad is my grandma's [unclear] and my mom's dad too.*
>
> *Researcher: His grandad?*
>
> *Educator: He calls him dad, he passed away. It's all he is talking about.*

In these exchanges, the children initiated 'connection conversations' with educators, showing their confidence in communicating with adults. Similarly, many of the children confidently communicated with researchers, initiating dialogue, interactions, and play. The

following seemingly insignificant exchanges and moments reveal how children, in addition to sharing their family stories about their siblings, fathers, and correlative family circumstances, make meaning and express their identities in informal, relational ways.

> **Observation:** Rosaleen, Doireann, and Gracie spontaneously and proudly showed the researcher their earrings.
>
> **Observation:** When asked about her name, Rosaleen responded in full, showing that she was aware of her family name.
>
> **Observation:** Poppy repeatedly corrected one of the researcher's pronunciations of her name.

This interest in names was reciprocal, as several children repeatedly asked the researchers their names. Children's comments highlight the importance of names as part of children's identity rights. Incidental conversations with children revealed that together with names, ages and siblings were expressed as important indicators of identity, playing a significant role in their identities.

5.2.2 Peer (dis)connections

Together, the findings in this subtheme, 'peer (dis)connections', highlight the complexity of peer relationships, including struggles, friendships, and identity-based (and identity-biased) connections.

In response to direct questions, some children associated feeling sad with experiences of social conflict, indicating fear of physical harm. Saoirse responded *'Bully'*, defining what they do as to *'hit'*. Charlie explained, *'When somebody knocks me down, then I cry.'* In response to the question 'What would you like to change in your preschool?', Charlie said, *'No punching . . . like this [doing an action to demonstrate punching his face].'*

Observations highlighted children's emotional responses, including sadness and anger, caused by peer struggles over materials, particularly shared resources and toys being taken or perceived as unfairly shared. Significant events included many material-based conflicts between children of the Traveller community, possibly due to their tendency to play in close proximity to one another. For example, Rose returned the pen to Rosaleen when she cried, *'Nooooo, I want that one.'* Aidan interrupted Poppy's play. Aurora exclaimed, *'Give it . . .'*,

pulling the till from Sean, while Johnjo and Jimmy grabbed trains from each other and JP pulled the doll that Nancy was holding.

Relational and material- and space-related emotional responses were also evident, such as visible unhappiness, frustration, or anger when Gracie got splashed during water play and when JP's sandcastle was knocked over. Aidan and Doireann also indicated fear of being pushed when peers got too close, particularly near large outdoor resources:

> *Researcher: What makes you sad?*
>
> *Doireann [skipping to the seesaw]: Seesaw.*
>
> *Researcher: Why does the seesaw make you sad?*
>
> *Doireann: 'Cause.*
>
> *Doireann climbs onto the seesaw, smiling.*
>
> *Researcher: You're getting on it. Oh, why does it make you sad?*
>
> *Doireann shrugs, smiling. She looks happy on the seesaw. Other children join, it moves fast, and for a moment she looks scared or surprised by the fast movement.*
>
> *Researcher: Is it scary?*
>
> *Doireann: Yeah [nods].*

Interestingly, in Charlie's preschool, conflicts were rarely observed by the researchers. On one occasion when there was a minor dispute over an item of dressing-up clothes, the children resolved the issue amicably without adult intervention. Conflicts over materials also occurred between Traveller and settled children, although fewer significant incidents were observed and recorded due to the researchers' focus on specific children. For instance, Poppy cried when another child attempted to take the doctor's kit from her and said, *'That's for all of us.'*

Although observed incidents beyond material or spatial conflict were rare, social tension involving negative or hurtful labelling was observed during one encounter. After overhearing a conversation, Sean responded to a settled child by sticking out his tongue, which may have been an expression of emotional discomfort, defensiveness, frustration, or an agentic act of self-protection. The data is limited because consent was not sought from the settled child, restricting elaboration on what was said and further exploration of their perspective. Nonetheless, in this interaction, intangible power and privilege were sensed through the

children's emotions, tone, and positioning, which is difficult to convey (Warren, 2018). When asked about their relationship, Sean was adamant that they were not friends, but he did not articulate a reason.

> Researcher: Are you not friends?
>
> Sean: No.
>
> Researcher: Why aren't you friends?
>
> Sean: 'Cause. No.

In this incident, relational power dynamics between the children were evident, with Sean's embodied emotions appearing to influence his behaviour and reaction. Given the strong, albeit intangible, sense of power and inferiority in this observation, one (implicit) interpretation is that Sean was being subjected to bias-based judgements, possibly indicating a subtle form of racism, stereotyping or discrimination stemming from beyond the boundaries of the preschool, meaning shaped by parental or wider structural racism. Another, semantic explanation is that Sean was responding to a judgement solely based on his behaviour. The interpretative complexity of this significant event highlights that young Traveller children's experiences of identity discrimination may manifest in subtle ways and be difficult to distinguish, from a settled perspective.

Continuing the theme of friends, this group of children did not explicitly identify friendships as a source of happiness. Apart from Doireann, who named a friend (from the settled community) and gave her a sticky-note heart, friendship was not visible across the children's responses to the research questions. In another setting, a (settled) child drew a picture for Cherese; it was a picture of them playing together. Cherese said, *'[Name] made me one [a picture]'*, but notably the language of friends was not used.

Dialogue with the children suggests that they recognised the language of friendship, though they may hold their own social and emotional meanings of friendship that are shaped by sociocultural experiences and contexts and may differ from adult definitions. For example, when one child requested a *'sad face'*, Charlie said, *'I want to be a kind friend'* and proceeded to share one of the sticky notes, showing empathy and a sense of fairness. In another encounter, following a long period when Charlie was playing alone, the researcher asked him directly about friends and playmates:

Researcher: Who else could wear the Spider-Man [costume], so you can play together? Have you got a friend who might play with it?

Charlie: No.

Researcher: No. I would like to know who your friends are.

Charlie: You [directed at the researcher].

. . .

Researcher: Who do you play with?

Charlie: Not them. . . . Only myself.

Researcher: Why?

Charlie: Hmmm . . .

It was unclear who *'them'* referred to, as there was no one nearby. Charlie's narrative could imply experiences of peer exclusion or self-determined social isolation. Similarly, in response to the question 'What do you love about coming to school?', Rosaleen chose *'Playing with toys'* rather than playing with friends when given these options, implying that object-based play was more important to her than friends. Rosaleen also dismissed the idea of being friends with Saoirse:

[Looking at a photograph of Rosaleen and Saoirse together]

Researcher: Are you friends?

Rosaleen: No.

Researcher: Why are you in the same picture then?

Rosaleen laughs.

Interestingly, as noted earlier, when engaged in doll play and asked, 'Do you like playing with dolls?', Cherese responded, *'I like to play with my family.'* These excerpts point, again, to the significance of family and kinship relationships, and may also suggest that these children hold their own sociocultural understandings and expectations of friendship. During the reflective interviews, when asked to consider the absence of friends, in the children's views, the manager from the Traveller-affiliated preschool raised the question, 'I don't know what it could be, is like the fact that, like, they know each other already, a lot of them are family?'

Further analysis of play encounters found that different forms of play took place and often involved pairs or groups of Traveller children. The findings above and below indicate social connections between Traveller children, and implicitly a sense of cultural, or perhaps political, group identity and belonging. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, since the duration of observations varied across settings, and the child-led tours which focused on specific children may have influenced the nature of interactions.

Observations where the majority of the children were of the Traveller community are not included here. Significant-event observations presented previously show many instances of conflict, which generally occurred during parallel play, where Traveller children played 'side by side . . . with similar materials' but were generally not interacting playfully (NCCA, 2009, p. 55). Finn and Aidan appeared to have a particularly strong connection, while Gracie and Poppy were frequently observed together.

Observations during children's free play also found many incidents of solitary play. Liam and John preferred solitary play experiences (e.g., water play) but accompanied by their dedicated key person. Similarly, Sean, Charlie, and Quinlan predominantly engaged in extended episodes of solitary play. Of interest here is that Sean and Quinlan (2 years 9 months) were the only Traveller boys in their group, while Charlie's Traveller peers were boys with additional needs, which may have impacted his opportunities for culturally and gendered identity-based interaction. It is noteworthy that Charlie also explicitly expressed a preference for playing alone.

What is also interesting about the observations is how children's play evolved from solitary or parallel to cooperative play when they invited researchers into their imaginative worlds and leading playful interactions. Although parallel play was most commonly observed in three settings, this data demonstrates the children's desire and capacities for cooperative play, when they 'interact, take turns, share and decide how and what to play' (NCCA, 2009, p. 55). Examples include:

> *Sean [holding a toy till]: Give me the sunglasses and I gonna pay ya.*
>
> *Charlie [playing with the horses]: You go next. [laughs] It's your turn.*
>
> *Finn: Can you play with these [wooden blocks]?*

5.3 Theme 3: Coming Together and Signs of Social Belonging

The theme 'Coming together and signs of social belonging' was constructed mostly from observation data and encompasses two subthemes: (1) peer cultural belonging, and (2) coming-together rituals and responsibilities. This theme is significant because the findings contrast with observations that implied disconnections between peers as described in the previous theme.

5.3.1 Peer cultural belonging

In contrast with the findings above, collaborative play was also evident among Traveller and settled children. Two of the three examples that follow were observed in the setting affiliated with a Traveller organisation. The following encounters provide some evidence of 'children's peer culture' across diversity.

A significant-event observation captured an encounter between Finn, Aidan, and another boy of a different ethnicity engaged in pillow fighting and playful wrestling. This physical interaction appeared to be playful, accompanied by laughter and a sense of joy. The presence of play fighting across ethnic groups suggests a shared, gendered peer culture of play and group identity.

This encounter, together with others threaded throughout the findings, suggests that gender appears to strongly influence some of the children's peer interactions and play choices. This was clearly expressed by Finn, who said he wanted to *'sit by the boys'*, and in the following encounter, where he decided that a pot plant named 'Mario' on the lunch table was *'a boy'*.

> Caoimhe: If it was a girl, would you play with it?
>
> Finn: No.
>
> Caoimhe: Why?
>
> Finn: I don't know.

Finn's reasoning, though not fully articulated verbally, reflects an internalised framework of gendered social play preferences. There was also a tendency for the Traveller girls to play alongside or with other girls, most often – but not always – their Traveller peers, for example, when Nancy, Cherese, and Fiona (settled child) were playing with dolls, the

food from the kitchen, and a shopping basket. This could be attributed to a shared interest in kitchens, evident in the children's responses highlighted previously. A notable exception was evident in an encounter between Philomena and a settled boy, who engaged in collaborative humour accompanied by laughter and a sense of joy. It is interesting to note that Philomena was the only Traveller girl in her group.

> *Philomena: Poop. Poop. Wee. Wee.*

> *Settled boy: I'm a poo poop man.*

The children repeated this playful pattern multiple times, giggling, leaning on each other, and then moving their hands up and down, like robots. The presence of laughter and a sense of joy across gender and cultural differences implies a form of social belonging and peer connection. These encounters suggest that these children are producing their own peer cultures in relation to the preschool group identity, within their settings, centred on shared ideas about play and humour (see e.g., Corsaro, 2003). Engagement in play and humour highlights peer connectedness and serves as a form of social belonging.

While it was not possible to fully determine from the above play encounters how children chose their playmates, observations suggest that both cultural identity and gender played a significant role. In the excerpts above, connections between Traveller children were frequently observed, and few free-play encounters involved collaboration between mixed-gender pairs or groups. These patterns indicate that peer interactions and play choices are shaped by intersecting identities, with culture and gender strongly influencing how children engage socially.

5.3.2 Coming-together rituals

While routines offer predictable, practical sequences, rituals are considered emotionally resonant or symbolic practices that foster identity, connection, belonging, and inclusion.

Observations of a morning circle in one setting, where a strong anti-bias approach and identity focus were evident, show that children freely shared life stories using personal and family photographs as prompts and conveyed joy in both being recognised and being alongside others. This finding supports the managers' narratives that these were ritualistic gatherings that respect individual identities, shape group identity, and contribute to fostering belonging and collaboration.

Children's joy and deep engagement were also evident in multiple observations of coming together with others through small-group experiences (shared stories, rhymes, and songs accompanied by movement). Finn and Gracie (happily or excitedly) chose to join a small, teacher-led group, which was gathering amidst the ongoing free play. During the action rhyme activity led by an educator, Gracie expressed her desire to participate, asking twice, *'Can I play?'* and jumping while saying, *'Me, me!'* when the group was invited to take on the role of the princess in the song. This moment reflected emotional engagement in group rituals in the setting. It is interesting to note that Poppy challenged gender stereotypes, expressing her wish to be the prince.

Intersectional aspects of children's identities – including their unique needs and preferred ways of communicating, which shape their experiences of belonging and inclusion – became visible during communal rituals and group activities. For Liam and John, two children with additional needs who were non-speaking, their joy and engagement were evident during shared rituals involving rhymes and songs accompanied by movement. For example, Liam reacted and ran immediately to position himself as the wolf when the educator began to chant *'What's the time, Mr Wolf?'*, while John appeared happy, jumping and smiling alongside the group of children engaged in singing and moving.

While shared stories, rhymes, and songs created joyful, inclusive experiences, sadness caused by unintentional, temporary exclusions was also observed (e.g., no room at the lunch table, or being on the periphery of a group). Children and educators responded quickly and sensitively in these specific events.

> **Observation:** Liam's key person quickly noticed that he was on the outer edge of the group, quietly making crying sounds. She gently approached him and draped a large, transparent piece of fabric over Liam. He reached up, guiding the fabric to fall around him, but away from his face. His key person continued to hold the fabric, following him while he began to walk and sway a little in the centre of the singing and dancing group. His movement and body language appeared calm and relaxed, conveying a sense of happiness.

This observation highlights how Liam's individual identity was affirmed within a group context, particularly through the educators' responsive, individualised practice, which facilitated participation and supported a sense of social belonging.

Evidence of children's capacity for peer empathy and emotional awareness also became visible through participation in group rituals and experiences. For example, empathetic encounters between Traveller children were also observed, illustrating compassion for others. When Finn was looking for a space to sit at lunch time, Aidan overheard and called, *'Sit by me, Finn'*, then, as he tried to make room, *'Sit by here.'* In another setting, the children were a bit squashed at one lunch table, so the educator brought in a second table to create more room. Johnjo sat at the second table, and the educator asked, *'Who wants to sit with Johnjo?'* Cherese immediately said, *'I do'*, and then Nancy said, *'Me too.'*

Meaningful moments where Traveller children expressed empathy and compassion for settled children were also observed in everyday routines and transitions:

> **Observation:** Fiona (settled girl) went to the toilet. To get to the toilet, she had to go through the creche room. When Fiona came back from the toilet, Jimmy was holding her hand. They had run back into the preschool room. Smiling, Fiona said, *'He helped me not to be scared!'* The preschool manager explained that she had seen Fiona standing near the toilet looking unhappy and that Fiona had said, *'I'm scared of the babies.'* The manager described how Jimmy was coming out from the toilets and had overheard Fiona, he took her hand and said, *'Come on'* and led her back to the preschool room.

In contrast to transitioning to outdoor environments, lunchtime transitions revealed mixed emotional responses. Some children did not want to stop playing to have their lunch, while others expressed happiness because they were hungry. Poppy said that her brother Finn telling her *'We have to tidy up'* made her feel *'sad'*.

> *Researcher: You were playing.*
>
> *Poppy: Yeah.*
>
> *Researcher: You said you didn't want lunch. I thought maybe you didn't want to stop playing. Do you like your lunches?*
>
> *Poppy: I don't like it.*
>
> *Researcher: You don't like it?*
>
> *Poppy: No.*
>
> *Gracie: I like it!*

In another example, Liam did not join the lunch table immediately. Instead, he appeared to take time to pause and adjust, and joined when he was ready, demonstrating a form of agency. From a lens of belonging, lunchtime appears to be a ritual that creates both emotionally significant transition tensions for children and opportunities for coming together. Flexible and responsive approaches to rituals enabled children to adjust to changes and supported a sense of emotional belonging.

In settings where the children had opportunities to take on daily roles and responsibilities, not only did some children express happiness in 'having jobs' (e.g., being the line leader or line ender), but these roles appeared to support transition tensions.

> *Charlie: I'm the ender.*
>
> *Researcher: You're the line ender – is that your job today?*
>
> *Charlie: Yeah.*
>
> *Researcher: How does that make you feel, having a job?*
>
> *Charlie: Happy.*

In three settings, transitions from indoors to outdoors required navigating other rooms or corridors. In these environments, some children expressed a wish to be the line leader. For instance, Poppy went to the front of the gate when it was time to go inside from the playground, and the educator explained, *'She wants to be leader.'* Gracie asked to be the leader at lunchtime. However, most children appeared to accept when it was not their turn and to understand the meaning of fairness in terms of job allocation, reflecting shared cultural and social understandings of this daily ritual. In one setting, the observed ritual of allocating jobs to ensure fairness appeared to reinforce children's individual recognition in their community and recognition within the group, thereby enhancing their belonging.

As noted earlier, the environments and rhythm of the day varied across settings. In one setting, the use of pictures was observed as an inclusive practice for creating shared understanding of the daily rhythm and routines without spoken language. The children's confidence and joy on arrival suggest a sense of ease, safety, security, and, therefore, emotional belonging. Where arrival rituals were observed, the children moved freely and purposefully into and within the settings, indicating their familiarity with the daily rhythm and their roles within it. In one setting, the children confidently placed their bags on hooks

marked with their photos, a ritual supported by both parents and educators. Soon after Willow's dad left the preschool room, Willow was offered her feelings board and asked how she was feeling in preschool that day. Moving the arrow to 'happy', Willow said *'happy'*, smiling. There was also a sense that these unhurried and shared rituals with parents contributed to a warm, inclusive atmosphere, reinforcing children's emotional and place-based belonging.

Overall, significant-event observations suggest that routines and transitions are emotionally significant rituals through which these children expressed security, familiarity, and empathy in multiple ways, indicating a sense of emotional, place-based, and social belonging.

6   Managers' Perspectives

Key findings have been drawn from three out of four themes that were constructed through the thematic data analysis related to the managers' interviews: (1) building belongingness and empowerment; (2) universal inclusion, uniqueness, and (in)visible identities; and (3) powerful positionalities and commitment to inclusion. A fourth theme, (4) barriers and relational inclusion solutions, stretches beyond the scope of this research and will be presented in a forthcoming supplementary paper. Respectful relationships is an overarching and cross-cutting theme that interconnects the themes.

Before presenting the themes below, it is worth noting that the managers' experience in working with the Traveller community ranged from 2 to 19 years. All had participated in DEI professional development at various points during their careers and to differing degrees, with the length and depth of training varying significantly.

6.1   Theme 1: Building Belongingness and Empowerment

This theme interconnects with the children's perspectives and experiences presented previously. Together, the data that follows highlights how building the social dimension of belonging is prioritised by participating managers, where children are supported to live and learn together and are empowered to stand up for themselves, through respectful and responsive approaches that prioritise relationships, shared values, and inclusive practices. Findings are presented under three subthemes: (1) living together, (2) noticing and responding to signs of racism and discrimination, and (3) empowerment strategies.

For context, researcher observations show, and managers described, a strong commitment to child-centred learning environments and pedagogy, shaped by children's choices, interests, and experiences. Interview responses highlight how free-flow classrooms and emergent curricula enabled children to express themselves freely and *'be who they are'*, suggesting that these conditions contribute to child-centred experiences of belongingness. For example: *'We have a free flow classroom . . . a very child-emergent pedagogy . . . it's built around the child. So, I think they can be who they are very easily . . .'*.

Some managers described unhurried, relational practices and routines, including transitions involving warm greetings, as a way to support deeper relationships with children and create space for informal engagement and trust-building with families. This approach was seen as

particularly important in working with families experiencing marginalisation, as exemplified by one participant:

> . . . how we build on our relationships on arrival in the morning, it's always a warm greeting. There's no, there's no hurry [pause]. . . . And then again at pick-up, we'd encourage whoever's picking up to come in . . . so it's slow. The children and the families, or whoever's picking up, can pop in, you know, for finishing a bite to eat, they can sit down.

Another manager echoed this view, saying, *'We are looking to slow things down more'*.

Existing approaches to support children's inclusion and participation as they learn to live together in a safe environment were also evident, highlighting a strong emphasis on shared social values, friendships, and expression of emotions.

6.1.1 Living together and shared social values

Interview responses emphasised the importance of learning to live together, particularly through emphasising respect for others and nurturing respectful, caring, and helpful relationships among children. Shared social values, including respect, and correlative respectful behaviours were described as *'deeply embedded'* in the ethos of the settings and *'instilled'* within children, with *'respectful adults'* acting as role models. For example, one manager said, *'The adults are all very respectful here and are role models to the children . . . it's deeply embedded.'* Another manager emphasised that in preschool the children *'learn respect, . . . boundaries'* and *'how to treat each other'*. In two settings, shared values were revisited and reinforced with the children through daily routines and rituals, such as morning agreements and circle times.

Although there were similarities, differences were evident in the emphasis placed on specific shared values across the four settings. Interview and observation data show, for example, how one setting prioritised nurturing kindness: *'we work a lot on our morning agreement about being kind'*. In other settings there was a strong focus on sharing, captured through a series of observations where educators intervened in the conflicts presented earlier. For instance, when an educator noticed a conflict occurring over a doll between JP and Nancy, she reminded them about the importance of sharing, then turned her back and asked, *'Are you sharing?'* JP let go of the doll, and Nancy hugged it. While the educator was *'delighted that they had shared'*, and returned to where she had been before the incident unfolded, JP's embodied emotions, particularly his facial expression, conveyed

unhappiness, possibly anger. In another encounter, where Johnjo and Jimmy grabbed the trains from each other, the educator repeatedly reminded them to share. In contrast, to resolve a struggle between Sean and Aurora over a till, the educator intervened by finding another one, allowing Sean to continue his play while supporting Aurora's desire to engage. This encounter highlights the educator's role in mediating conflict, and at the same time it aligns with the children's perspectives on the importance of materials and experiences, where access to shared resources influence their sense of social belonging.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was that children are encouraged to see each other as friends, which is significant given the children's responses.

> There is a way that we instil it in them that we are all here as friends. . . . Everybody is your friend. . . . As time goes on, they get to know we are all one. We have to be friends with one another.

> We empower them as a child in the service . . . who is respected and who has . . . friendships and who is learning to manage those friendships.

In one observation, an educator reminded the children, *'We keep our hands to ourselves. We don't touch our friends with our hands.'*

As explored above, emotional literacy and reciprocity were also encouraged through discussions about how actions affect others, including how to *'make friends happy'. 'Kind'* and *'helpful'* behaviours towards friends and peers were emphasised, affirmed, and actively reinforced with the children. The following comments illustrate this practice. Talking about *'kind hands'*, one manager explained:

> We work a lot on our morning agreement about being kind and using our hands in a positive light rather than in a negative . . . like, helping hands are not hurting . . .

Another manager explained that when educators say, *'Thank you for helping'*, it encourages other children to want to help, creating a ripple effect where *'we're all helping'*.

Returning to the children's perspectives on friends, during the reflective interviews, two managers were asked to consider the absence of friends, given that a pattern was emerging in the data across settings. While both initially insisted that the children did have friends, both were interested in revisiting the idea with the children to reach a deeper understanding. On reflection, one manager reconsidered the idea that Traveller children use the language of friendship, suggesting, *'there's more of an awareness of friendship when it*

comes to like Traveller children and non-Traveller children', meaning that *'they can state it more . . . like recently now with Cherese, she is a Traveller girl and it's very kind of like, oh, Fiona [settled child] is my best friend, and do you know like, I've never seen her do it with another Traveller child.'*

6.1.2 Noticing and responding to signs of racism and discrimination

As explored further in a subsequent theme, there were no reports of significant barriers to children's belonging within the preschool environment. Managers consistently noted the absence of signs of anti-Traveller racism or discrimination between children, which demonstrated perceptions of developmental (non-)discrimination. This was mostly attributed to perceptions that children lack awareness of Traveller identity at this developmental stage. Many managers commented that young Traveller children in preschool settings do not yet recognise their own identities, and this perception extended (implicitly) to children's recognition of others' Traveller ethnicity or culture.

Most managers also acknowledged *'conflict between children'* but explained that this was often *'because of a toy'*, which largely echoes the children's views and experiences. One manager semantically stated that conflict does not occur based on identity, *'because you're from the Traveller community – never anything like that'*. The absence of anti-Traveller bias and discrimination was interpreted by managers as evidence of developmental non-discrimination.

> *They're not recognising cultural differences . . . they're not recognising that the children are Travellers. So, within the preschool . . . at that age . . . I can't see that they're discriminating against each other in any way . . . . We don't get discussions around the Traveller children in terms of bias within the room with the [settled] kids – it doesn't happen, because . . . they're probably too young to identify that the children are Travellers. Give them another year or two, you know, of course they will, like when they're six or seven. But at the moment, they're not . . . because here [preschool] the children really don't recognise that level of difference.*

While some managers observed that *'children of that age are very understanding'* and *'open'*, several participants described the children as *'innocent'*, emphasising their lack of discriminatory intent or awareness of difference. As one interviewee put it:

> *I don't think the children are aware, not between the children . . . . We have a very innocent little bunch this year as well.*

When reflecting on racism and the role of parents in children's responses to difference, one manager commented:

> *I think that would be individualistic, isn't it, depending on the parent . . . the realistic part of it is [pause] can only be brought about with maturity, because at the end of the day, all I see is innocence and consent in play.*

These comments suggest that innocence was perceived as a protective factor against bias or exclusion, reflecting the perspective that racism and discrimination are not innate but develop over time through socialisation, including via parental influences (Hamilton & Showunmi, 2023). However, from a human rights-based (Lundy et al., 2024) and anti-racist (Escayg, 2018) perspective, it is important to question assumptions that young children are too innocent to notice difference or discriminate against others. This framing of innocence and ideas about developmental non-discrimination, therefore, raises questions about whether biases or signs of racism towards children of the Traveller community may go unnoticed or unrecognised.

In contrast to the absence of bias and discrimination towards children of the Traveller community and despite perceptions of innocence, most managers reported instances of anti-Black racist or discriminatory behaviours among children and shared examples of children's comments, behaviours or interactions in preschool. For example, one manager reported, *'I've seen a [white] child that would not want to play with a Black child, like maybe when we are out…. I don't want to play with you because you're Black'.* Another manager aptly captured the common view that children *'recognise difference in skin colour, and we might have discussions about that. But they won't recognise maybe cultural differences'.* These findings indicate that while cultural differences may go unnoticed, visible differences (e.g., skin colour) were recognised as a basis for exclusion or bias in early childhood.

Other findings show that managers also acknowledged children's recognition of tangible differences between peers: physical, gender-based, and linguistic. For example, one manager described how some children perceive others for whom English isn't their first language as, *'Oh, he's only a baby'*, and it is necessary to explain, *'No, he's not a baby. He just speaks a different language.'* In a similar vein, another manager reflected:

> *The only thing you would kind of see is that they're more curious than anything . . . if they haven't been around, you know, children that don't look like them, or don't speak the same language or anything like that, they are curious. It's never kind of negative.*

Together, these findings show that managers perceive that settled children at the preschool level are largely unaware of ethnic or cultural distinctions regarding the Traveller community, which contributes to an environment perceived as free from peer-based discrimination.

Managers described proactively responding to racist and discriminatory comments or behaviours in the moment, using *'teachable moments'* to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding. *'Role-play'* and *'circle time'* with props (e.g., *'dolls'* or *'puppets'*) were also used to facilitate inclusive conversations and learning. Managers described responses that were sensitive to both the child expressing the behaviour and the child affected by it. For instance, one manager recalled, *'I didn't force him to hold that child, but instead of me leaving the identity until maybe the end of the month, I did it the next day. I'm like, we need to talk about our colour . . .'.* Another manager described how parents were informed when a child made a racist comment towards a Black child, and *'both parents brought the two children out on a play date'.*

Managers shared examples of supporting children in understanding and accepting differences, particularly behavioural and linguistic difference related to peers with additional needs or who were new to the setting. In one setting, gender stereotypes were also actively challenged through adapted storytelling and everyday conversations. Overall, the data shows how children's assumptions were responsively and gently addressed to foster awareness and inclusivity. Additionally, managers expressed confidence in addressing such sensitive issues, while also recognising the need for ongoing reflection, further research, or seeking guidance when unfamiliar topics arose.

6.1.3 Empowerment strategies

Managers were directly asked how they empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations, which is a goal set out in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear. Responses related to this question revealed how managers perceived empowerment and how empowerment was supported through structured and relational practices, including circle time, stories, and the presence of trusted teachers. For example, one manager said: *'If anyone does anything or sees anything that is not right, make sure you report to the teacher.'* Another explained:

Let us know why you're sad, why you're not happy. . . . We hear a lot from them at [circle] time, whatever is happening at home, or if anyone took their toy, or if anyone pushed them. They will be ready to say it at that time, and in that way, you give them the words to use for next time.

The data highlighted the importance of creating emotionally safe environments where children could express their feelings and concerns and are supported or empowered to navigate conflict. Several managers emphasised the importance of ongoing support for children to recognise and empathise with others' emotions. In practice examples given, children were encouraged to articulate their emotions through incidental events and regular rituals such as *'morning greetings'* and *'feelings board[s]'*, which were seen as ways to build the language and confidence needed to stand up for themselves. Opportunities for coming together in groups (e.g., circle times) were used as an opportunity to encourage emotional expression, process feelings, and address concerns involving peer conflict resolution.

In one preschool, where the High Scope Approach to conflict resolution was used, articulating feelings was also prioritised. In another setting, a significant observation of JP, Nancy, and the doll shows that while the educator noticed and provided space for the children to resolve their own conflicts, the emotional dimension appeared to be unnoticed.

Returning to the question of how children are empowered to stand up for themselves and others, one manager referred to a rights-based approach:

We support children here to stand up for themselves . . . . We'd really support a children's rights approach here and very much kind of just listening to the child and letting the child voice how they feel.

All managers conveyed the importance of listening to children's perspectives and feelings, suggesting that this contributes to children *'being seen'* and *'heard'* in their settings. This was seen as a form of empowerment and a way to stand up for themselves. Listening to children, particularly their emotional expressions, was prioritised and seen not only to validate children's views and experiences but also to empower the children. The language of feelings was seen as an empowering tool for children, and children's capacities to express emotions were connected with their capacities to stand up for themselves.

What is largely absent across the interviews is the language of children's human rights. While managers spoke passionately about children's voices, referring to how children *'are given'* or *'have a voice'*, highlighting a strong commitment to fostering children's meaningful participation within their preschools, there was no reference to children's participatory

rights. Although there were many implicit references to a range of rights (identity, culture, non-discrimination, education, and play) and an isolated reference to a *'children's rights approach'* noted above, overall, references to children's human rights were rare, suggesting that a rights-based approach was not explicitly invoked as a framework for practice.

Empowering children to stand up for themselves and others was also supported through structured approaches to conflict resolution such as the High Scope Six Steps and morning agreements, which were described as significant strategies that helped children feel heard and valued. Interestingly, the following comments illustrate a correlation between conflict negotiation and children's right to be heard, explicitly and implicitly. One manager described how her *'service is committed to making children feel safe and valued'*, using *'our morning agreement and the High Scope Six Steps'* to resolve conflict and make children aware that they are heard in the service. Another manager stated, *'You've given that child a voice, so in the next if, if anything happens, maybe tomorrow he can go, "I had it first. Can I play with it a little bit and I'll give it back to you?"'*

Reflective interviews showed, again, that managers consistently returned to morning agreements as a reference point and were attentive to children's emotions and concerns, including fears around peer behaviours and conflict. For example, reflecting on a children's reference to *'the bullying and conflict'*, one manager said, *'It's interesting to see what their worries are . . . we do have a morning agreement that we go back to.'*

6.2 Theme 2: Universal Inclusion, Uniqueness, and (In)visible Identities

> *I guess they feel welcome. Whether they feel . . . comfortable with their Traveller heritage being welcome, I don't know. . . . Are they comfortable?*

This theme is constructed of two subthemes. The first is universal inclusion and unique identities, which includes intersectionality. The second subtheme, (in)visible identities, spans silent, hesitant, and intentional identity recognition and visibility, extending to responsive practice that demonstrates cultural and family connectedness.

6.2.1 Universal inclusion and unique identities

All participating managers characterised their respective settings' communities as diverse and stressed their commitment to universal inclusion. This was particularly clear in the interview responses, where managers emphasised or referred to *'all children'*, *'every child'*, and *'not just Traveller children'* are *'included in the service'*. One manager described a

specific example of this: *'We're a big melting pot of lots of different backgrounds . . . all of them are viewed with importance'*. Recognition of shared humanity was also articulated semantically through comments such as *'we are all human'* and *'meeting people at a human level'*, and in narratives that highlighted *'equal rights'* and *'similarities'*. For example, one manager referred to *'connection sharing'*, meaning *'connecting'* with parents through commonalities (e.g., having children), which recognised shared personal or familial experiences across cultures.

Play was seen by managers as a universal language for connection and a common purpose for children attending preschool:

> *[Children] see themselves as someone who comes to the school and plays with everyone.*

> *They all want the same things – they want to play.*

This view echoes the significance of play highlighted in the children's data. These comments implicitly suggest that play is seen as a vehicle for inclusion that supports belonging while reducing perceived differences among children. However, as the children's experiences show, nuanced forms of play have implications for the different dimensions of belonging.

While universal inclusion was emphasised across manager interviews, this was often accompanied by explicit recognition of the uniqueness of Traveller culture. One participant commented, *'a lot of the things . . . will be across all the families . . . but then there are some differences when it comes to the Traveller families too'*. All managers articulated awareness of, and respect for, the distinct cultural identity, traditions, and experiences of the Traveller community. This recognition was grounded in specific cultural references, including the significance of *'extended families'*, *'language'*, and *'horses'*. Some managers described a connection between children's fluctuating attendance and familial travel, which was framed in terms of acceptance through phrases such as *'appreciate'* and *'accept'*. Acknowledging that patterns of movement have been prohibited due to social and policy constraints, this framing implicitly acknowledges the cultural significance of nomadism in the Traveller community (NCCA, 2023). By invoking this connection, these managers imply respect for cultural difference rather than simply tolerance, which aligns with the goals of the DEI Charter and Guidelines. Additionally, several managers acknowledged historical and intergenerational trauma experienced by Traveller communities. Overall, cultural awareness

had been learned through the managers' experiences of working with Traveller families over the years.

> So like, for me what I find a lot of time is that they're very family-orientated. . . . They come from large families . . . and they're very, very close, and they love talking about their family, and their grandparents are very involved, and, you know, there's great respect.

At the same time, managers stressed the uniqueness of individuals, and the multiple identities present among children and families of the Traveller community in their settings, extending beyond ethnic identity to include children's developmental needs, gender, interests-based identities, and families' socio-economic circumstances. Managers also highlighted the importance of responding to each child and family's unique needs, interests, and situations (see Theme 3). A common view amongst interviewees was that values, needs, and preferences can differ significantly among Traveller families. This was evident in variations in the perceived value that different (Traveller) parents placed on ECE; as one manager articulated:

> Parents are different, and you can't just paint all of them with one brush . . . some value for educations and there are some of them that really don't care – and that's human.

Across the data, managers expressed a deep commitment to inclusion and equity in practice. This commitment was not only evident in their interview responses but experienced as a sense and ethos in the preschools. In one setting, the commitment was visible on the walls, where a code of ethics was prominently displayed, outlining expectations grounded in the anti-bias approach and emphasising the importance of identity and belonging.

Overall, managers perceived that children and families feel welcome in their settings, although one manager demonstrated an awareness of the limitations in their assumptions of the lived experiences of being welcome for Traveller families:

> Whether they feel . . . comfortable with their Traveller heritage being welcome, I don't know. . . . Are they comfortable?

Regarding barriers to belonging, one manager stated:

> I don't think we kind of face many barriers, to be honest, because we are a Traveller organisation.

It is important to note that while managers' perceptions of barriers to parental access to ECE services were prevalent across the interview data, the focus of these findings is on barriers to belonging and inclusion within the settings. Interestingly, all managers reported no significant barriers, or struggled to articulate barriers, to children's inclusion and belonging within their preschool environments. This suggests that, at least within the settings, children are generally perceived as being included and experiencing a sense of belonging. It also raises the question of whether this perspective overlooks the interconnectedness of children and their parents. This is because, collectively, the managers' narratives suggest a strong sense of cultural or political belonging on the part of parents, which is particularly evident in interview responses concerning family involvement.

Managers' observations that *'families might come, but they would stick together'*, *'they all sit close to one another'*, and *'[they] tend to just all stand together'* suggest a form of silent resistance to systemic exclusion. Managers also expressed elements of understanding of, or empathy with, the tendency for members of the Traveller community to 'stick together' as a protective strategy. One manager noted, *'I think they prefer leaning on each other. . . . I know if one person is missing, I know who is not going to come in.'* Similarly, another manager empathised, *'If they're nervous in the environment, your natural reaction is to stand next to someone that you feel more comfortable with.'* These observed behaviours were interpreted by managers as protective mechanisms in unfamiliar or potentially unwelcoming environments, and in response to perceived or potential exclusion.

Similarly, solidarity was evident in narratives regarding children. As one manager aptly explained, while pointing out that this was not always the case:

> *'[A] lot of the parents would want their children to come into the classroom that has their cousins or their relations in it. . . . And then you'd find as the year goes on, they'll start to play with other children. But at the beginning they'll be very much with their own family.*

These narratives suggest a form of political as well as cultural belonging observed among Traveller children and their families. These observations shared by managers may, in part, explain or help to understand the absence of friends and the limited sense of social belonging that was suggested in the children's findings.

6.2.2 (In)visible identities

(In)visible identities became a subtheme which captures a conflicting discourse across the data, wherein Traveller identity was simultaneously visible and invisible in these ECE settings. While several managers speculated that the children may not be aware of or do not know their Traveller identity because they do not self-identify as 'a Traveller' through spoken words, there was consensus across the narratives that, as one manager aptly stated: *'I feel like our families kind of know who they are. And we know who they are.'*

However, interview data highlighted nuanced perceptions of the possibility that parents actively conceal their Traveller identity. One manager described how parents sometimes withhold their family name when enquiring about preschool places until a place has been confirmed. Mistrust was semantically and implicitly present across the interview. Speculations were also evident that parental concealment of Traveller identity was attributed to mistrust, fear, and shame, shaped by the systemic discrimination and marginalisation of the Traveller community. The following comments illustrate this:

> *If they've had a bad experience themselves at school, that will hugely impact how they feel . . . like it's not that long ago that Traveller children would have been segregated in different classrooms.*

> *They were afraid to be excluded. The parents are afraid. . . . It's so complicated. It's so deep.*

Managers expressed varied views on the issue of hidden Traveller identities. One expressed a hopeful form of denial of concealment:

> *I would hope it's not an issue, but like, it could be, I suppose, yeah, I mean. You know, I don't think anyone's trying to hide anything. I don't think it's a case of anyone's trying to hide an identity.*

In stark contrast, another manager stated that Traveller parents are *'not ashamed . . . they are proud of who they are and where they come from'*. This manager had *'never'* encountered parents saying, *'I don't want you teaching my child about . . . Traveller culture'* or preventing children from being aware of their identity.

The interview data also revealed a silent or unspoken recognition of Traveller identity. For managers that were not connected to a Traveller organisation, comments suggest that although Traveller identity is known, it is rarely spoken about. When asked what they had

learned about working with Traveller families over the years, the managers' responses included:

> *So, I suppose they're no different to any other families than their children. . . . We don't dwell on too much that . . . rightly or wrongly . . . on a day-to-day basis . . . we don't identify as, like, flagging it, it's just more, it's just known, and we were aware of it.*

> *I thought that Traveller families would be much more comfortable with discussing their heritage. . . . They don't want other people to know they're Travellers.*

Narratives such as this suggest that managers made a deliberate choice not to highlight identities, which is (implicitly) attributed to the Traveller parents' reluctance about overt self-recognition or absence of explicit self-identification. This approach was seen by managers as a way to symbolise respect for families' agency and foster trust or inclusion, allowing children to participate without being singled out or defined solely by their ethnicity. This resonates with Murray's (2017) work, where Traveller children's (positive) invisibility in ECCE settings is rationalised as protection against anti-Traveller bias. From a researcher advisors' perspective, this could also be explained as a way to avoid essentialism, where settled educators (and researchers) impose fixed assumptions of identity on Travellers (e.g., horses and trailers), which are not reflective of the contemporary context or lived realities for most, due to historical oppression.

Managers also expressed varying and dynamic degrees of comfort when engaging with ethnic and cultural diversity in practice, which often evolved over time (see Theme 3). When asked whether they had engaged with Traveller parents about supporting their children's identity and belonging, one manager appeared confident, explaining that such engagement provides a *'better understanding of the culture and tradition'*. They emphasised the importance of *'talking about Traveller culture and then . . . bringing that back into the service'*. This manager was based in a setting that was part of a wider Traveller organisation. Most managers, however, expressed hesitation, uncertainty, and caution about when and how to initiate conversations about cultural identity. As one participant noted, *'celebrating culture is welcomed'* but not actively pursued unless initiated by families: *'Are we going to, you know, go digging for it if it's kind of not naturally there'*. Another manager's reflections suggest an awareness that more could be done to celebrate uniqueness:

> *It's not something we speak of. . . . We have conversations about maybe their situation, or different challenges they have, and that's I think what really kind of interested me in the*

research. . . . Is there a little facet of this that we're missing in like celebrating their uniqueness?

These narratives reflect a tension between respecting parental privacy and agency, and recognising that this may lead to missing opportunities for meaningful cultural engagement, highlighting the complexity of identity work in early childhood settings.

Intentional recognition and visibility

In contrast, the data also reveals moments of intentional recognition, where managers (and educators) sensitively engage with identity, particularly when families signal openness. Two managers commented on the use of persona dolls that represented Traveller children. One participant provided several rich examples of culturally responsive recognition and experiences, including:

> *Creating a personalised storybook, designed to reflect a child's family tradition whose father sold periwinkles at the beach. The father visited the preschool, bringing periwinkles for the children to try. Some children recognised the beach stall, connecting the story to their real-world experiences.*

This activity evolved from a Traveller child's exclusion from a party that her preschool peers were invited to. It was described by this manager as a meaningful way to reflect the child's culture *'without, you know, it didn't identify every part of her'*. The manager's account of speaking with a Traveller father illustrates how her initial hesitation gave way to a meaningful exchange that resulted in pride and connection for the child and family through shared storytelling and visual representation.

Another intentional, intercultural example included *'name stories'*, which arose from one of the children explaining how they got their name, and from the recognition that names in the Traveller community are often passed down through generations. In collaboration with parents, children shared the stories behind their names:

> *We got beautiful stories about grandparents and relatives and pictures of the families. . . . We made it into a book, and then we had a picture of the child when they were a baby and then a picture of them now with their name across there, and then if they were named after somebody, or where the parents got the name from. . . . They love looking at it, and it is good for their identity and belonging and without putting the parents under any pressure.*

Across the interviews, all managers mentioned a range of family events (e.g., a *'picnic'*, *'sports day'*, *'culture day'*, and *'day trips'*). While one manager described relatively strong

parental involvement in such events, they also noted limited involvement in general culture days, implying that there was a reluctance to share their cultural characteristics, specifically *'food'* and *'clothing'*. Only one participant explicitly referenced events related to Traveller culture:

> We have an event every year, for a week, as part of Traveller Pride. And we celebrate that with children inside the service – explain[ing] about Traveller culture and letting children speak about their ways of life . . . in different art activities.

The limited engagement with culture days on the part of parents, and with Traveller Pride on the part of managers, perhaps reflects the uncertainty and hesitation over hidden or silent identities, as highlighted earlier in the findings. The latter may also indicate limited awareness or a form of settled privilege, which is discussed below.

Managers consistently emphasised the importance of children being and feeling visible in the preschool environment. Referring to the DEI Charter and Guidelines, one manager said:

> So she's not a stranger . . . making sure that every child is included and can see themselves in the setting . . . making sure that the child's identity is not lost in the setting.

Observation and interview data show that children's identity visibility and representation were achieved using familial photographs (e.g., on *'family walls'* and *'in journals'*) and culturally relevant materials such as small-world *'horses'*, *'caravans'*, *'persona dolls'*, and *'books'*. One manager noted:

> We have a book that has their [Traveller community] identity, like their homes, caravan, and things like that, where they can just flip through and see who they are.

Some managers described actively incorporating children's cultural backgrounds into the learning environment (see previous findings) and experiences, aimed at connecting to children's funds of knowledge and fostering their positive sense of identity through play, language, and meaningful interactions with materials that connect with their own family stories and heritage; this was visible in children's data (see Theme 1). Referring to *'the home corner'*, one manager explained:

> A lot of the children, they wouldn't call them like plates and cups or wear, they would call them delf. So, we would say like 'the delf', 'washing the delf', or things like that.

Despite speculations about unknown or unspoken identities on the part of children, managers also described children's self-recognition of their Traveller identities through

materials and images – how they recognise and relate to cultural symbols, indicating a sense of identity. One participant said, *'they see it, and I do'*, recalling moments when children explored books and images related to their community and history:

> *But when they're looking through the pictures, they might identify themselves with some clothes, some shoes that they've put on, or they can tell you, 'Oh, Grandma has these'.*

These moments illustrate how visual materials can evoke personal, family, and cultural connections for children. It is also worth noting here that the children's data sheds light on their expressions of self-identity. However, sourcing materials that accurately reflect the contemporary lived experiences of Traveller children was noted as a challenge:

> *. . . and you know they're not, they're not living maybe a traditional Traveller lifestyle that you get if you look at books or if you get Jigsaw that depict Traveller life. So they're, so it's very hard then to reflect that.*

While visual representation was valued, a comment was made about the risk of tokenism. One manager highlighted that genuine inclusion stems from strong, respectful relationships with families, rather than surface-level displays. However, children's views emphasised the importance of materials and environments, and most managers articulated meaningful examples of children engaging with their own family stories and heritage.

It is worth noting here that almost all managers reported that there were no staff from the Traveller community, with one exception. Several managers pointed out that the lack of Traveller representation contributed to a sense of exclusion and expressed empathy towards the parental tendency to *'stick together'* as a protective strategy when attending the setting. This finding is further elaborated in a supplementary paper.

Responsive recognition

Across observation and interview data, a strong theme of respect for children's cultural and family connectedness was evident through educators' responsive practices. Observations show that Traveller children's identities are noticed, recognised, and deeply respected through everyday encounters and interactions with adults in their settings. While managers described actively noticing and being responsive to children's expressions of ethnicities and cultural identities through everyday conversations about *'ear piercing'*, *'family members'*, *'homes'*, *pet dogs'*, and *'ponies'*:

You see a lot more when you just watch. . . . We'd have children coming in . . . with Traveller family they have ponies. So, they'd be like, I've got a new pony, and you're kind of like, OK, lovely to know, tell me about the pony. What's his name?

These unhurried, everyday conversations contribute to making children's experiences visible and valued. Observations also show how educators show interest, encourage elaboration, and respond to these cultural expressions with respect, reinforcing the value of children's identities even when not explicitly named. When educators notice and respond to these moments, they validate children's cultural identities and support inclusive practice.

6.3   Theme 3: Powerful Positionalities and Commitment to Inclusion

This theme is comprised of three subthemes: (1) DEI embeddedness, (2) personal values and dispositions; and (3) time and transformative training.

6.3.1   DEI Charter and Guidelines embeddedness

The data demonstrates how managers promote the values of diversity, equality, and inclusion intentionally through their use and application of the DEI Charter and Guidelines, extending from explicit to implicit embeddedness.

As noted in the previous theme, the DEI Charter and Guidelines in practice were evident as a sense and ethos in the preschools. For example, one setting prominently displayed a 'code of ethics', outlining expectations grounded in the anti-bias approach and emphasising the importance of identity and belonging.

The DEI Charter and Guidelines were seen by most managers not just as a reference document but as a living framework – *'something that we try to live by'* – deeply embedded principles reflected in practice and shaping everyday decisions. Notably, one manager described how the DEI Charter and Guidelines inform policies and every aspect of practice, including:

> *. . . your planning, how you communicate with parents, your environment, your interactions with the parents, and the anti-bias goals – recognising your teachable moments and how to challenge stereotypes.*

One manager described actively referring to the DEI Charter and Guidelines when needed, especially when staff *'haven't tackled [an issue] before'*. While the DEI Charter and Guidelines were described as a *'regularly thumbed book'* and a *'bible'*, particularly to support

staff who haven't accessed formal training, several managers said they had not recently referred to it.

Across the data, narratives such as the following also suggest that the DEI Charter and Guidelines are enacted implicitly:

> *But I would hope that it is just like ingrained in our practice . . . because we work with such diverse families, it really should be embedded in our practice and that . . . we're not afraid to embrace difference and explore it.*

> *It's just something that we do without knowing we're doing it.*

Managers also noted the value of Aistear and described combining it with the DEI Charter and Guidelines to establish an inclusive pedagogical approach, *'so they can all tie in together really just to make it more inclusive for everyone'*.

6.3.2 Personal values and dispositions

Managers' reflections during interviews revealed that their commitment, attitudes, and approaches to inclusion are deeply influenced by their personal values and dispositions. For example, respect emerged as a core value that guided respectful relationships with children and families. As with families, respect was a core value guiding interactions with children, reflected in this manager's comment: *'I believe children should be treated with respect.'* All managers stressed that *'relationships are crucial'*. Across the data, building respectful relationships over time was evident, as one manager explained:

> *We've built relationships, you know, over years. . . . It's just a great sense of kind of community between us all, between the staff here and the Traveller community, in and around the area.*

The interviews highlighted a range of relational strategies used by managers to promote inclusion and full participation for families – further evidence that these managers are deeply committed to equity in action and non-discrimination. Managers described proactive and responsive supports to ensure that children could access wider early childhood services as well as their setting by *'being responsive to'* families through relational and empathetic approaches. Micro-level adjustments were made to improve inclusion, including replacing group induction sessions with one-on-one meetings to establish a relationship from the beginning and efforts to access outreach support. Overall, managers expressed a clear emphasis on meeting families *'where they are'*, offering practical and emotional support without judgement.

Non-judgemental: When talking about an anti-bias approach, managers stressed the importance of withholding judgement, which was seen as essential for building trust and inclusiveness. One manager said, *'Anti-bias is promoted to make sure everybody is accepted . . . you are not being judgemental'.* Another manager said, *'It's about being comfortable with ourselves . . . checking in on our own bias . . . looking at them without our own opinions or judgements.'*

The importance of relationships was often interconnected with *'building up the trust'.* Trust was a recurring value across the interviews, emerging as one of the most significant factors in familial inclusion and belonging. Returning to the issue of mistrust, managers described initial fear or apprehension from some families, acknowledging that this is often shaped by experiences of exclusion (including from other preschools and primary schools), and emphasised the importance of establishing trust in the early stages of relationships. For one manager, trust was also a *'long-term investment'* leading to *'two-way'* reciprocal trust over the years.

Managers viewed **trusting relationships** as foundational for working with new and returning families. Over time, and through fostering respectful and trusting relationships, managers – acknowledging that this was their perception – perceived that families felt welcome and reassured that they wouldn't be turned away:

> *I know they feel welcomed, or at least they feel like they can approach the setting, because they do, and it's often through word of mouth that the other children will come in. So they definitely know that they're going to be welcomed in that sense that . . . I'm not going to say, Oh no, we're full. They know that's not going to happen.*

Mangers attributed new enrolments from members of the Traveller community to informal recommendations within family and community networks, with *'word of mouth'* or *'spreading the word'* acting as a crucial channel for communicating the settings' trustworthiness and accessibility. In all cases, managers reported that families return over multiple generations and are often connected through extended kinship networks, with cousins, siblings, nephews, nieces, and the children of former attendees accessing the settings. This continuity suggests enduring community ties and trust that has been cultivated over time.

A strong disposition towards **being open** was evident; as one manager explained, *'We're very much open-door . . . with all of our families.'* Being open extended to listening to staff

perspectives in the preschool, as this manager also emphasised: *'Everyone feels safe . . . there's no bad repercussions if they express discomfort.'* Openness was characterised by humility and curiosity in learning about others' experiences, cultures, and perspectives, as another manager's comment illustrates: *'It's ultimately about . . . being open. . . . It's OK to explore things.'*

All participating managers were open to learning and *'doing more'*. The following comments, somewhat in contrast with findings presented earlier, reflect a recognition of the value of working in partnership with parents and children to co-construct knowledge and understanding about how to support children's identities and Traveller culture and traditions:

> *The best thing to do is ask. . . . What I always say to them is, well, you know more about this than me now. So, you tell me.*

> *You get an understanding from parents. . . . We're trying to get Traveller parents more involved and feel [a sense of] belonging . . . we do recognise their cultural background and that we are aware of it, [but] what more can we do? And they might suggest things, you know, try this, try that.*

These comments imply cultural humility and a commitment to co-constructing knowledge through dialogue with parents and engaging in training. Openness and co-constructing knowledge extended to accessing support from Traveller organisations:

> *If there's anything that we need to know, we can speak to the Traveller women and men that work upstairs . . . and we do training with them as well.*

Importantly, this manager, who was affiliated with a Traveller organisation, highlighted the benefits of close proximity and collaboration with members of the Traveller community in fostering greater *'understanding'* of *'culture, traditions, and things like that'*.

Managers showed **self-awareness**, including awareness of their position of power and privilege in their role and a commitment to ongoing personal reflection and learning – particularly in response to questions about comfort levels in working with difference and cultural awareness, challenging bias, and responding to children's views that were highlighted through the research.

> *It's ultimately about us being comfortable with ourselves before we can support the children and the families.*

If anything like that happened, I want to name it because I want to learn from it.

Being open to learning from children was also strongly evident in the managers' narratives. For instance, one manager said:

You get an understanding from the children, because the children would tell you what they celebrate and what they enjoy doing.

Beyond listening, the data shows the managers' commitment to not only hear children's views but also act upon them in tangible and transformative ways. This was particularly evident in reflective interview responses, where managers indicated how children's views and preferences (e.g., dislike of the slide) would lead to changes in their preschool environments. These interviews also highlight a strong emphasis on reflective practice in relation to how children's views would be responded to. Two managers said they would revisit suggested changes with the children themselves for a deeper understanding, including issues about conflict and friendships.

Despite concerns that children may not *'understand their power to change things'* and given their variable response to the question about changes in their preschool, ranging from silence to immediate suggestions, the managers' responses illuminate the element of influence (Lundy, 2007), whereby children's views informed future decision-making about their lives in preschool.

Peer (dis)connections

Early childhood is an influential period when children begin to understand themselves and the world around them (Chapman, 2016). In response to direct questions, some children shared that conflict with peers in preschool made them feel sad, with some expressing fear of physical harm (*'bully'*, *'no punching'*). Unsurprisingly, but not insignificantly, observations captured emotional and social struggles in peer interactions, predominantly caused by material and spatial disputes. While these findings reinforce the importance of materiality for children, as previously identified, they also show that children's simultaneous interactions with materials and peers shaped how they experienced a fluctuating sense of emotional and social belonging, as they navigated encounters with conflict. Previous research has shown that conflicts over materials among young children are common and more often driven by a motivation to explore than by a desire to possess (Pic and Han, 2021), which was evident in this study. Moreover, materiality serves as a source of both

social connection and contention, influencing how children experience a sense of inclusion and belonging within the group. It is important to note that instances of children's parallel play, where children interacted with materials alongside peers, indicated shared interests which also may have contributed to fostering a sense of being part of a group.

While peer conflict beyond struggles over materials or space was rare, there was a strong sense that at least one child experienced othering where, through an anti-racist lens, power, prejudice, and privilege appeared to shape this social interaction with their settled peer, indicating subtle signs of racism or discrimination. Notably, the observed exchange involving Sean suggests that he was experiencing deficit, bias-based judgements. Although there are limitations in the data presented, and explicit discrimination was difficult to determine, perhaps influenced by the researchers' settled perspective, the encounter points to a blurring between children's behaviour-based and identity-based judgements or labelling of their Traveller peers. This is discussed further below. This ambiguity may reflect broader social influences, including cultural assumptions and internalised biases shaped by the context of family or societal racism. The findings highlight the nuanced and often ambiguous nature of peer interactions in early childhood settings, where young Traveller children's experiences of identity-based discrimination can be difficult to distinguish through a settled lens.

Overall, these findings highlight the co-constructed nature of belonging within ECE settings and suggest that children's sense of belonging is not static but fluctuates through everyday interactions involving materials and peers. Children's articulations and experiences emphasise the importance of safe personal and social spaces for play and exploration to support inclusion and a sense of social belonging. These insights from children draw attention to the need to focus on social justice and fairness as set out in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear, and the educator's role in supporting children 'to learn to be with others' and resolve conflicts (NCCA, 2024, p. 25).

Power and privilege

Managers acknowledged the influence of power and privilege explicitly and implicitly in their role, relationships, and perceptions of the lived experiences of Traveller families (e.g., feeling comfortable and their 'heritage being welcome'), particularly where managers

acknowledged the legacy of institutional or systemic marginalisation experienced by families.

The findings also illustrate implicit privilege (albeit uncommon), including moments of othering, where broad generalisations or deficit-based assumptions were made. Adult privilege was visible in a manager's description of children as *'boundaryless'*, meaning, *'They don't know what is right from what is wrong.'* Settled privilege was evident in another manager's generalisation that *'There's no such thing as reading for pleasure'*, referring to parents of the Traveller community. Such statements risk essentialising and reinforcing stereotypes both about children and about the Traveller community.

Implicit privilege also surfaced in assumptions and speculations between managers and researchers about Traveller children's limited awareness of their ethnic identity. Acknowledging how the social risks and stigma associated with disclosing identity may limit a family's willingness to do so, one manager talked about the importance of early conversations with Travellers about their ethnicity and identity:

> *I'd imagine like the point will come where somebody will say they're a Traveller and then it will be a shock to them, and they'll think it's something that you need to be ashamed of. If you're open about it from the beginning and it's just the same as somebody having a different religion or somebody having a different skin, it wouldn't be such a big thing.*

While this narrative implies respect for Traveller children's cultural rights, it also suggests an expectation that their identity should be overtly articulated based on personal assumptions. These assumptions include, firstly, that learning about ethnic identity is developmentally and culturally appropriate for young children, and secondly that openly expressing their identity is universally safe. Such recommendations, albeit well intentioned, reflect ethnic and cultural privilege afforded to managers and researchers from the settled community, which risks overlooking a range of children's rights and the social disadvantages that some families navigate.

Lastly, the limited engagement with Traveller Pride noted earlier may reflect the uncertainty and hesitation in recognising hidden or silent identities highlighted earlier in the findings, but perhaps suggests that settled perceptions of Traveller identity are shaped by assumptions of shame rather than expressions of pride, indicating a form of settled privilege.

6.3.3 Time and transformative training

The interview data highlights time and transformative training as a catalyst for equity-oriented practice. Managers indicated, implicitly and explicitly, various personal and professional transformations in engaging with ethnic and cultural diversity in practice, often evolving over time through experiences and subsequent reflections. Across the data, time recurred as a powerful element in the managers' comfortableness and capacities to respond meaningfully to diversity and to challenge stereotypes or bias. For example:

> *Initially, it was my kind of slight discomfort, you know; it was a bit uncomfortable at first. It was like, oh, OK, well, what do I do?*

> *So that's how we kind of challenge stuff like that throughout our day. . . . I feel comfortable, more, as time goes on and the more you reflect and you talk to parents, you get more comfortable.*

One manager's narrative illustrates a powerful transformation from holding a perspective of universal *'sameness'* – *'I was very focused on them having equal rights and being just the same'* – to a deeper understanding that *'not recognising that they come from a minority is doing them a disfavour'*. She described how she later embraced a more equity-driven, trauma-informed approach that acknowledged difference, identity, and systemic marginalisation:

> *In the last five years I've done a lot of training and trauma-sensitive awareness, and not recognising that they come from a minority is doing them a disfavour as well. So it is to recognise that they have these unique dispositions and culture and that it is important to recognise that and not in a tokenistic way. . . . The nub of it is actually the relationships between us and the families and their children. I think it's all relationships.*

These findings suggest that training led to profound shifts in attitudes and pedagogical approaches. Managers also highlighted the value of the DEI Charter and Guidelines and training, particularly the significant impact of long-term, group-based programmes. Several noted that training undertaken over time created a safe and trusting space, where they could *'talk openly'* and have *'honest conversations and express uncertainty without judgement'*. As one manager described:

> *. . . realising that other people were kind of in the same boat as myself, you know, we didn't know at all, and there wasn't an onus on us to know it all . . . it was OK to be unsure and hesitant or fearful about things.*

Further comments highlighted the value of peer learning across difference, where sharing diverse lived experiences within the group enriched discussions and helped ground theory in practice:

> *People really shared things . . . from their own experiences, that we were able to bring into our ideas for the preschool.*

Another manager described extended engagement with DEI training as transformative for her professional practice: *'It changed my whole practice. It was amazing.'* She argued that for DEI training to be successful, *'it has to be done over a long period . . . because you have to look at your own bias, and you can't look at that in a couple of sessions. It's deeper than that.'*

All managers, however, reported variations in training among staff members in their preschools, noting that not all have completed the 15-hour in-person training course delivered by City and County Childcare Committees [CCCCs] on behalf of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Managers' comments across the interviews indicate that recently recruited educators *'have not done the DEI training'*. Some managers felt that this created a disparity in educators' understanding and engagement with anti-bias goals. Two described a process of *'snowballing'* and *'feeding down'*, through which trained staff attempt to share knowledge informally with colleagues who haven't been through the training. This *'snowballing'* of knowledge was noted to be both challenging and lacking the depth described by managers who had accessed the training, specifically in understanding the anti-bias goals and personal reflexivity that occurred through direct participation.

Several managers expressed concern over the limited training around DEI that is available and limitations in access to the training, because *'you don't really find that training anywhere else'*:

> *The only kind of DEI training really is from [name of the] County Childcare Committee, and you're waiting on that then as well.*

One manager called for stronger prioritisation, particularly for students who are undertaking their level 5 and 6 early childhood qualifications, emphasising that educators' attitudes at the outset can have lasting impacts on children's experiences. While two managers referred to accessing the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme and trauma-informed training, managers noted limitations in training opportunities beyond the 15-hour

DEI training course delivered by the County Childcare Committees for both themselves and their staff teams. Several participants highlighted how ongoing support is an important factor in responding to issues that create uncertainty, as well as planning experiences that extend *'understanding of Traveller identities, culture, and traditions'* in their settings. One manager expressed the value of working in a Traveller organisation: *'We have great support here as well because of the Traveller organisation.'*

7   Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to directly address the research questions. This research aimed to investigate the inclusiveness of Irish ECE settings for members of the Traveller community, focusing on young children's perspectives and experiences of inclusion in their preschools. The discussion begins by addressing the research question relating to the children, which asked: (How) do children of the Irish Traveller community experience a sense of belonging in their Early Years settings?

7.1   Traveller children's sense of belonging in ECE settings

Under the *Identity and Belonging* theme, Aistear aims to ensure that children 'know that they have a place and a right to be part of their preschool, and this is a space where they can be at ease and feel confident' (NCCA, 2024, p. 25). The research strongly shows that this group of Traveller children were experiencing emotional dimensions of belonging, appearing to be at ease, comfortable, and confident in their environments.

Materiality and environmental dimensions of belonging

Overwhelmingly, for these children, happiness and love in preschool were linked to their familiarity, interactions, connections, and play experiences with materials and specific places in the environment. This finding is consistent with children's perspectives in previous studies (e.g., Hong et al., 2016). In this study, play was seen by children as the primary purpose of preschool, which may explain the emphasis on materials and places. Many children expressed happiness towards, preference for, and joyful explorations in their outdoor environments. Observations captured children's ritualised use of space, where they showed familiarity, confidence, and embodied joy in navigating their physical worlds, making visible their agency and sense of everyday, place-based belonging within their settings. These findings correlate with conceptualisations of everyday place-belonging, where children feel that they belong in the world through connectedness with their physical environment (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021), which occurs through 'ritualised use' and familiarity with their surroundings (Sumsion and Wong, 2011).

Children's views illuminated heterogeneous interests and preferences that were influenced by their intersectional identities, including gender and additional needs. Observations show that many children connected with materials that represent their familial and cultural lived

experiences in subtle, meaningful ways. These encounters with materials were most often spontaneous and embedded in everyday (free) play. In contrast, when prompted by educators, the children also expressed a strong sense of pride in their family and who they are. This was particularly evident in children's embodied happiness when pointing out family members in photographs and name books, which appeared to be a powerful way to show that individual identities are valued and belong in the preschool. Moreover, interactions with these materials created social connections between children and their teachers, peers, and the researchers. These findings show that children experienced and expressed emotional, place, cultural and social belonging, supporting the idea that children's relations with materials and their environment significantly shape how they experience belonging dimensions (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021).

Reflecting the DEI Charter and Guidelines, managers consistently emphasised the importance of children being and feeling visible (so they *'can see themselves'* and are *'not lost in the setting'*). Many described actively incorporating children's cultural backgrounds into the learning environment (e.g., books, materials such as trailers and horses) and experiences through play, language, and meaningful interactions that connect with their own family stories and heritage. However, several managers expressed concerns about tokenism and the challenges of resourcing materials related to contemporary Traveller life stories. Overall, the findings highlight that when play materials and environments reflect children's interests and familial identities, they affirm that their ways of being are recognised and valued. This contributed to creating inclusive ECE environments where children experience a strong sense of self and belongingness.

The children's views and experiences resonate with and reinforce the strong emphasis on the environment and materials outlined in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and young children's right to play in Aistear, through which they experience both belonging and meaning-making about their identities. These insights have resourcing implications linked to both frameworks. This research supports the idea, set out in the Aistear Guidance for Good Practice, that a 'well-resourced, inclusive environment' that 'reflects the rights, needs, interests, and identities of babies, toddlers and young children' (NCCA, 2024a, p. 23) is essential for fostering their sense of belonging and identity in ECE practice.

Loving relationships

Previous research suggests that cultivating children's sense of belonging involves dynamic processes across multiple relationships (Einarsdottir et al., 2022), and that social interactions beyond the family, with peers and adults, play a fundamental role and contribute to the formation of both individual and collective identities (Erwin et al., 2022). In this research, adult relationships, with both family members and teachers, were a source of joy and featured strongly in children's responses to the question 'What do you love in your preschool?' (*'My mommy'*, *'Brother'*, *'Teacher'*). Children repeatedly expressed their familial love and experiences, illustrating how they remain interconnected with their families while in their settings. For these children, the importance of family involvement, as emphasised in Aistear, extends to the ongoing significance of their family's presence in the setting, made visible through images and everyday dialogue with others. These findings highlight the interconnectedness of children and their families and the importance of making families visible or bringing families into the setting in different ways.

A finding that stands out from the children's views and experiences is how their emotional and social belonging is strongly related to their connections with educators within the preschool. The emotional dimensions of belonging were evident in children's expressed feelings of love towards their 'teacher[s]', as well as their observed, experienced sense of comfort, ease, and security. Children appeared to experience social belonging through recognition and acceptance by the educators as valued members of the ECE community, which fostered a sense of being seen, respected, and valued. Observations evidence spontaneous encounters and interactions with managers, educators, and researchers where children expressed their 'funds of knowledge', making their lived experiences and cultural identities visible.

Firstly, these findings highlight how confidently these Traveller children communicate with adults, as indicated in the DEI Charter and Guidelines. Secondly, they show that children express their identities through everyday relational encounters with particular, trusted adults, knowing that they will be listened to and respected. This was evident in observations of interactions and reflections where educators showed active listening to the children, showed respect for and knowing the children (families, siblings, pets, and life situations), and prioritised active listening to the children, which supported 'casual conversations' centred on children's funds of knowledge (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 27).

As indicated in Aistear (NCCA, 2024, p. 17), funds of knowledge-sharing supported children's positive sense of identity and experiences of multiple belonging dimensions – emotional, social, cultural, and place – in the setting. This research suggests that relational connectedness between children and adults creates space that enables these Traveller children to share their funds of knowledge and make their identities become visible, while simultaneously supporting their identity and sense of belonging in the setting.

The question of friends

One of the most significant findings from an adult perspective was that friends were not strongly visible as a source of happiness or love in their preschools across the children's responses to the research questions. A body of research highlights the significance of friends for toddlers and young children, demonstrating how they develop friendships, show empathy, and play together (Corsaro, 2003; Carter and Nutbrown, 2016; Theobald et al. 2017). Indeed, the 2024 Aistear update has raised the profile of friendships, following a consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children that highlighted the significance of friendship for young children from 2 years and their capacities to form and maintain them (e.g., O'Toole et al., 2024).

This differs from the findings presented here. Although children showed empathy, they did not articulate friends or friendships as a source of happiness or love in their settings. Indeed, in several encounters children adamantly expressed that others were not their friends. One explanation might be that children are recognising differences among peers and choosing play mates or relationships on that basis, and that Traveller children are therefore experiencing exclusion, which in turn illuminates experiences of both cultural and political belonging, which contradicts the managers' perceptions. For marginalised groups, political belonging intersects with issues of power and exclusion, in this case influencing children's inclusion and participation in their ECE environments.

Two managers, on reflection, reconsidered their beliefs and understandings of the children's use of the term 'friends'. From a settled perspective, given the significance of family for the Traveller community, reflected in the children's views and experiences of persistent societal racism and exclusion, perhaps friendships beyond kinship networks are not trusted or prioritised? This finding raises questions about the meaning and significance of friendships for these Traveller children in their preschool.

Encouraging children to see each other or label everyone in the setting as friends was emphasised by many managers, yet this contradicts the children's perspectives, bringing this practice into question. Focusing on the language of friends and labelling might inadvertently overlook both children's bias-based play choices, peer culture among children, and cultural differences in how family and friendships are experienced or valued. Taking the children's views into account, perhaps focusing on respect, kindness, empathy, and coming together, also evident in practice, could be regarded as a more meaningful approach.

Cultural and social (un)belonging

The findings of this study highlight the complexity of peer relationships and interactions; analysing children's experiences of social belonging is therefore also complex. Cultural belonging refers to a child's sense of connection to a group that share values and ways of being, knowing, and understanding, such as ethnicity or family identity. Cultural belonging is distinct from social belonging, because it is shaped by internal and broader societal narratives about the group (Sumsion and Wong, 2011; Johansson and Puroila, 2021). Social belonging is associated with participation in shared practices that form part of a setting's everyday rhythm and 'patterns of regular doings', extending beyond emotional attachments to encompass feeling part of a community and experiences that involve recognition and acceptance by the group (Sumsion and Wong, 2011; Johansson and Puroila, 2021).

What also stands out in the data is that Traveller children were frequently observed together, in both parallel and collaborative play, appearing to experience strong social or cultural connections. The findings illuminate many incidents of children's solitary and parallel play occurring alongside their Traveller peers. While predominant developmental theories set out an age-based trajectory from solitary and parallel to collaborative play, research reveals a more complex picture, pointing to more fluid and context-dependent play development (Pellegrini, 2011). In this study, observations captured during free play collectively suggest limited experiences of social belonging among peers, particularly across difference. While several children (five boys) were mostly observed engaging in extended episodes of solitary play, Charlie explicitly expressed a preference for playing alone. Liam and John also preferred solitary play but accompanied by their key person.

The study also found some evidence of social connectedness through collaborative or cooperative play among Traveller and settled children in ECE sessions where Traveller

children were the minority. Significantly, two of three examples were observed in the setting affiliated with a Traveller organisation: Finn, Aidan, and another settled boy engaged in playful fighting. Nancy, Cherese, and Fiona (settled child) were evidently engaged in turn-taking and kitchen-based role-playing with dolls. Philomena and a settled boy shared a moment of collaborative humour.

While it is important to bear in mind that the duration of research visits in the settings varied and that the child-led tours may have interrupted or influenced the children's interactions, the findings illustrate strong social connections among Traveller peers, indicating a sense of cultural or perhaps political group identity and belonging. The research also highlights limited explicit experiences of social belonging among Traveller children and their settled peers, particularly during free play. Given that little evidence of interactions between Travellers and students from other groups has also been reported in primary and secondary school research in Ireland (McGinley and Keane, 2022), this research raises questions about how educators can nurture Traveller children's group membership and experiences of social inclusivity among the preschool peer group, particularly during free play.

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, nonetheless it does offer insights into the nature of inclusion and exclusion experienced by this group of children, particularly through their (choice of) solitary play and limited parallel or collaborative play across (ethnic) differences. Collectively, these findings raise important questions about relationships, interactions, and social belonging among peers, prompting considerations and implications for other settings: What relational choices are children making, particularly through play across ethnic and gender differences? Given the relational dimension and the influence of environment on belonging, evident in this research, practice-based inquiry in settings is recommended, rather than research. As described in the DEI Charter and Guidelines, further practice-based work that is contextually situated within ECCE settings is needed to listen to children and notice interactions to gain a better understanding of 'how well Traveller children are accepted as playmates' (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 29).

Coming together and signs of belonging

In contrast, while the research highlights limited experiences of social belonging among peers, particularly during free play, children's experiences of social belonging were strongly evident in encounters with and led by educators. This aligns with previous research concerning friendship and belonging theories, which emphasise that peer relationships are not automatically inclusive but require intentional efforts to foster acceptance, connection, and mutual recognition (e.g., Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021).

Another finding that stands out from the research observations is children's embodied happiness and inclusive social belonging during experiences of 'coming together', shedding light on the value that children placed on educator-led experiences. Children's participation and joy in coming together with others through rituals and shared small-group experiences (stories, rhymes, and songs accompanied by movement) suggest that planned opportunities played a meaningful role in how they experienced social connectedness and emotional belongingness in their ECE communities. Evidence of children's capacity for peer empathy and emotional awareness also became visible through participation in group experiences (e.g., Charlie's desire to be kind, and corresponding actions linked to the research activity) and rituals (e.g., making space for others at lunchtime).

Children's intersectional identities also became visible through these shared rituals and group activities, including those who were identified as having additional needs. Individual children expressed themselves freely in diverse ways, and exercised agency over how and when they participate, reinforcing their sense of identity and role in negotiating their inclusion. These findings highlight how unhurried, flexible, and responsive transitions into settings, group rituals, and activities contributed to children's experiences of being recognised as both individuals and valued members of the group, fostering a sense of social belonging. Such experiences were shaped by how each child was seen, supported, and included by educators within the setting. Shared rituals and group activities which promote peer participation across difference were found to support children's experiences of social belonging, through being and feeling connected to others as members of the preschool group.

Overall, observations of children's ease and comfortableness, familiarity with the daily rhythm, and 'ritualised use' of space, together with their embodied happiness during

experiences of 'coming together' and their expressed 'happy' views about taking on responsibilities, highlight how participation in unhurried and shared rituals contributed to fostering connection and inclusion, reinforcing children's social, emotional, and place-based belonging within their ECE communities.

Aistear highlights how 'free play' supports 'empathy and compassion' (NCCA, 2024, p. 19), yet empathy was more evident in other routines, rituals, and coming-together activities. While encounters in this research contribute to evidencing a strong group identity and social belonging, they raise questions about how to nurture experiences of social inclusivity and belonging during free play, which may have implications for balancing teacher-led and free-play opportunities. These findings therefore raise a reflective question for ECE services: What emotional, social, or cultural qualities must the rhythm of the day (routines, rituals, and opportunities to come together, including free play) embody to make social belonging possible for Traveller children, whose social belonging and connection to place and community are questioned, or erased? Addressing this question positions ECCE settings as spaces for social change and educators as active change agents who can contribute to disrupting entrenched inequalities stemming from anti-Traveller systemic racism.

Recognising intersectional identities

Threads of intersecting identities were a cross-cutting theme, which reinforces the importance of understanding how this influences children's experiences of belonging and their rights in the settings. Incidental conversations highlight the identity indicators that children considered to be important (names, ages, family connections, and gender). It is therefore important that educators notice how children engage with and express their multiple and intersecting identities in everyday encounters and experiences.

This research illustrates how children's play choices and peer interactions are shaped by their intersectional identities, gender norms, and sociocultural practices. These factors, though subtle, significantly shape peer relationships. The findings highlight the influence of gender on children's interests, preferences, and choices in relation to materials, peer interactions, and play choices. Such findings are not unique to Traveller children; they accord with other studies which show that children are beginning to recognise and adhere

to gender roles in early childhood (e.g., Chapman, 2016) and significantly underscore the importance of understanding Traveller children's intersectional identities.

Summary

In summary, this research with children suggests that they experience different dimensions of belonging in varying degrees. It found that, collectively, these children were strongly experiencing dimensions of emotional and place belonging in their preschools. Across the four preschools, interactions and observations overwhelmingly show that this group of children appeared to be at ease, comfortable, and confident in their preschool. The research also highlights limited explicit experiences of social belonging among peers, particularly across difference and during free play. Social and cultural belonging could be strengthened.

7.2   Effectiveness of ECE Frameworks for Traveller Children in Practice

The research aimed to establish the extent to which Irish ECE frameworks – Aistear (NCCA, 2024) and the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016) – are working for this group of Traveller children in these preschools. The child and adult participants provided insights and examples of what works well in their settings. Overall, the findings suggest that these frameworks are making meaningful contributions to Traveller children's experiences of belonging, particularly place, emotional, and, to an extent, social and cultural dimensions, and are fostering their positive self-identities in these preschool settings.

7.2.1   What is working well?

This research provides some evidence that not only are elements of the Irish ECE frameworks working in these preschools, but they have profound consequences whereby children experience a sense of emotional and place belonging, knowing that they have a place and implicitly a right to be part of their preschool (NCCA, 2024, p. 25).

In this study, managers articulated a dual commitment to fostering universal inclusion for all and respecting the unique ethnicity and cultural identity of Traveller families, echoing the commitments identified in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear. One interesting finding is the managers' acknowledgement of the heterogeneous and intersectional identities present among Traveller children and families in their settings and the emphasis placed on responding to each child and family's unique needs, interests, and

circumstances. This suggests that (implicitly) an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) informed their responsive approach to inclusion and family engagement.

From the managers' perspectives, a paradox developed across the interview data. On the one hand, there were speculations that the children may not be aware of, or do not know, their Traveller identity because they do not self-identify as 'a Traveller' through spoken words. On the other hand, managers' narratives and researcher observations highlight how children expressed self-recognition of their Traveller identities and strong cultural connections through interactions with materials and sharing 'funds of knowledge' in dialogue with adults. Aistear reminds us that young children communicate not only through spoken words but through diverse embodied and relational forms: silences, facial expressions, actions, song, mark-making, the arts, and play (NCCA, 2024). In this research, nuances and contradictions were evident across managers' accounts. While multiple modes of communication were noticed and valued in everyday interactions, comments about Traveller children articulating their ethnic identity verbally overlook diverse forms of identity expression, which is essential for honouring children's right to express themselves freely and safely.

Findings, discussed above, show the extent to which the DEI Charter and Guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016) and Aistear (NCCA, 2024) are being translated into practice in these settings, in terms of identity visibility in the physical environment and value being placed on children's funds of knowledge. Managers and several educators in this study, demonstrated that they respect and know the children well (families, siblings, pets, and life situations), have an awareness of and respect for aspects of Traveller culture and prioritise active listening to the children, which supported 'casual conversations' centred on children's funds of knowledge (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 27). The data also reveals rich examples of intentional recognition and opportunities for Traveller identity recognition and visibility (e.g., family photographs, persona dolls, personalised 'periwinkle' storybook, name stories, and celebrating Traveller Pride), which involved engagement with families to facilitate culturally responsive recognition and experiences. It is significant to note that these examples came from managers of three of the four participating settings, rather than across the interviews.

Participating managers – acknowledging that this is their perception – believe that families feel welcome and children experience a sense of belonging, without barriers, in their settings. At the same time, a sense of uncertainty was expressed as to whether Traveller

families feel comfortable that their culture was being welcomed. Relational (mistrust), architectural (intimidating and unwelcoming), and representational barriers (lack of Traveller representation on staff) to parental belonging were evident in managers' narratives. Learning from these participants, translating guidance in practice requires responsive and creative practices to overcome obstacles to informal familial involvement such as day-to-day encounters, open-door practices, and responsive interactions.

The research highlights the managers' positive values and dispositions, including openness, humility, curiosity, self-awareness, and a commitment to ongoing personal reflection and learning. Managers reported personal and professional growth in engaging with ethnic and cultural diversity, which developed over time. It is significant to note the confidence in engaging with Traveller families that was expressed by the manager affiliated with a Traveller organisation. This comfort in engagement stemmed from close proximity to and collaboration with members of the Traveller community, which fostered greater cultural competence.

Overall, this research suggests that experiences of working with Traveller families, along with opportunities for reflection and transformative training, are key catalysts for adopting more equity-oriented practices. Additionally, some managers' emphasised the significant impact of longer-term training over time. Despite a strong commitment and some acknowledgement of their settled privilege and power, managers recognised that ongoing self-reflection and learning are needed, which has implications for settings across Ireland.

Fostering children's belongingness and empowerment

Together, the findings suggest there was a strong focus on fostering social belonging in the participating settings, particularly through nurturing shared values, such as respect, alongside dispositions like kindness and helpfulness, and supporting children to develop respectful, kind, and helpful relationships with one another. This focus on shared social values was associated with promoting a culture of cooperation and mutual obligations, implicitly creating shared ways of being, as children are learning to navigate relationships and living together within the settings that support a sense of social belonging. Additionally, there was evidence of children showing signs of empathy and understanding towards their peers.

These findings align with research evidence of practices that focus on relationships and social skills to promote children's prosocial behaviours (voluntary acts that benefit others, such as helping, cooperating, and sharing) (Theobald et al., 2017; Spinrad and Gal, 2018), which also resonates with the emphasis on empathy for both adults and children in the DEI Charter and Guidelines. It is interesting to note that research supports the presence of empathy-related capacities from the earliest stages of life, suggesting that empathy, unlike racism, has innate foundations (Spinrad and Gal, 2018).

Empowering educators to empower children to challenge injustice and stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations in our local, national, and global communities is an aim of both Aistear and the DEI Charter and Guidelines. In terms of empowerment, the adults in this study prioritised listening to children and took their views seriously, including on seemingly micro issues, changes, and concerns. The data highlighted the importance of listening to children and creating emotionally safe environments where children could express their feelings or concerns. The language of feelings was seen as an empowering tool for children, and their capacities to express emotions were connected with their capacities to stand up for themselves. Practice examples included supporting children to articulate their emotions through incidental events and regular rituals (e.g., morning greetings, feelings board) and to explore feelings and address concerns involving peer conflict through coming together in groups (e.g., circle times or morning agreements). Empowering children to stand up for themselves and others was also supported through structured approaches to conflict resolution such as the High Scope Six Steps and morning agreements, which were described as significant strategies that helped children feel heard and valued.

7.2.2 Key challenges, limitations, and variations

Acknowledging the nuanced perspectives and practices, while participating managers demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusion, which is the overall aim of DEI, and openness to learning new ways of working with the Traveller community, the research also highlights challenges in implementing specific elements of these frameworks in practice. Evidence suggests that limitations in professional learning opportunities resulted in variations in DEI embeddedness and educators' understanding of the anti-bias approach. This has important implications for leadership.

(In)visible identities

Perhaps one of the most significant findings in this the study is the complex interplay between **silent recognition and intentional efforts** to acknowledge Traveller children's and families' identities. Managers described a form of 'Traveller-blindness' – a silent awareness that avoids overt identification (Murray, 2017), based on perceptions that Traveller families wish to hide their identities or may be ashamed. This approach appeared to be rooted in respect for children as individuals, family agency, and protection, aiming to prevent stigma or unwanted attention and enabling them to engage without feeling othered. This finding resonates with Murray's (2017) work, where Traveller children's (positive) invisibility in ECCE settings is rationalised as protection against anti-Traveller bias.

A further paradox arose from the managers' mixed perceptions of Traveller parents' pride in and concealment of their Traveller identity (perhaps evidence of settled privilege – essentialising Traveller identity with associations of shame). Ongoing issues of Traveller-blindness emerging from the findings relate specifically to silent and silenced Traveller identities, resulting in hesitation regarding overt recognition (Murray and Urban, 2012; Murray and Reilly, 2021). However, the findings also highlight recognition that this silent approach (reflected in one manager's comment about not *'digging for it'* unless it naturally arises) may lead to missed opportunities for meaningful cultural engagement. The challenge with this approach lies in creating space for identity to emerge organically to ensure visibility and reduce the risk of erasure.

The research highlights hesitation and varying degrees of (dis)comfort in celebrating Traveller culture and involving parents in supporting children's sense of identity and belongingness in their settings. Some managers appear to navigate a balancing act between silent and intentional recognition, with findings highlighting hesitation and uncertainty about when and how to recognise or celebrate Traveller identity and culture. In particular this involved parents and families in regard to *'seek[ing] the child's parents''* input about how they believe their child's culture and heritage should be represented in the early childhood service (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 45).

While silent and silenced identities need to be questioned and problematised further, arguably by members of the Traveller community, findings about children's and families' identity expressions revealed implicit privilege. Acknowledging nuanced perspectives, some

narratives suggest an expectation of open identity expression that is based on assumptions that, firstly, this is developmentally and culturally appropriate for young children, and secondly that open expression of identity is universally safe. These recommendations reflect ethnic and cultural privilege afforded to managers and researchers from the settled community, which risks overlooking a range of children's rights and the social disadvantages that families navigate.

Speculations about the reasons for the non-identification of ethnicity among Traveller children and perceptions of hidden identities on the part of parents are multi-layered and complex, and arguably can be answered only by members of the Traveller community themselves. Similarly, how to intentionally and meaningfully support Traveller children's individual and group identity in ECE settings also requires solutions from parents and family members and could be strengthened through partnerships with Traveller organisations.

In line with the DEI Charter and Guidelines, support for Traveller children's individual and group identity in practice should be informed by families. The research highlights intentional efforts but also hesitations and uncertainty in collaborating with parents, specifically to support Traveller children's individual and group identity and belonging. Although Aistear (NCCA, 2024a, p. 12) calls for 'building partnerships with families in a mindful, respectful way, with cultural sensitivity to family values and parenting practices', it does not offer practice-based guidance about navigating the tensions of silent and silenced identities highlighted by this research. While the DEI Charter and Guidelines offer clear 'pointers for communication with families' (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 45), further practice supports are needed that help educators promote meaningful collaboration with parents for intentionally and meaningfully recognising Traveller children's individual and group identity in ECE practice. Both require perspectives and solutions from Traveller parents and family members.

While environmental representation was valued by most managers, the lack of Traveller representation through employment in settings and schools was perceived as an obstacle to inclusion that contributed to a sense of exclusion. These representational limitations might help to explain the silent recognition of Traveller identity that was conveyed in interview responses.

Overall, these findings suggest that there is a gap between guidance and practice, where learning about Traveller histories, stories, and culture is either avoided or, at least, not embedded. Notwithstanding creative and intentional practices, opportunities for all children to learn about Traveller culture were rare. Furthermore, there were limited opportunities to promote positive perceptions about Traveller identities and foster empathy and comfort with difference, specifically regarding Irish Traveller identities among settled children (DCEDIY, 2016). With a focus on all children learning about Traveller 'languages, histories, stories, folklore and culture' now embedded in the revised Aistear (NCCA, 2024, p. 16), these findings indicate a gap between frameworks and practice.

Powerful positionalities

Another significant finding is that personal positionalities, values, and dispositions play a pivotal role in managers' commitment to inclusion and equity, specifically for members of the Traveller community. The research therefore raises a rudimentary question for the Early Years sector: To what extent do managers' and educators' positionalities, values, and dispositions influence their engagement with the frameworks and DEI training opportunities? A wide body of research indicates that teachers', as well as researchers', positionalities, worldviews attitudes, and assumptions shape their pedagogical practices, approaches, and relationships, and this extends to Traveller children (e.g., Kavanagh and Dupont, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2022). This literature also indicates the immense power and privilege that teachers hold in reinforcing or challenging racism. Taking the positive values and dispositions highlighted in this study as a starting point and reversing them, if a manager or educator holds racist views or lacks openness, humility, curiosity, self-awareness, or a commitment to ongoing personal reflection and learning, how likely are they to voluntarily participate in DEI training?

Research shows that leaders play a pivotal role in developing process quality, meaning the interactions and relationships between and among children and staff, in ECE settings (Douglass, 2019). One of the issues that emerges directly from the managers is the ad hoc and limited training for early childhood educators. There is a need, therefore, to ensure that all educators participate in DEI training, as a minimum requirement. The managers' accounts of the significant impact of longer-term training also point to the prioritisation of long-term DEI professional development opportunities for, at least, those in leadership roles. Although these findings highlight individual managers who are striving to create

inclusive, non-discriminatory services and are eager to learn more about culturally responsive practices, elements of settled power, privilege, and uncertainty in these findings – even among the most engaged – show that despite a strong commitment to inclusion and equity, ongoing self-reflection and learning are needed. Moreover, these findings, together with evidence of the persistence of settled privilege, racism, and bias in existing literature and government strategies (Murray, 2020; Quinlan, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2022; UN, 2023; DoE, 2024), highlight the need for structural change and accountability mechanisms driven by the State that support ECE leaders to ensure that Traveller children's inclusion and rights are upheld – particularly those related to non-discrimination, culture, and education.

Signs of racism and developmental non-discrimination

Previous research shows that young children can begin to 'show signs of' racism and express discriminatory ideas– learned from their social worlds – and make choices accordingly in ECE settings (see Lundy et al., 2024, p. 8). In this research, regarding racism and discrimination within settings, the application of the DEI Charter and Guidelines was strongly evident in managers' interviews through the use of 'teachable moments' to challenge signs of anti-Black racism and gender stereotypes. Managers described responses that were sensitive to both the child expressing the behaviour and the child affected by it. Overall, the data shows how children's behaviours and assumptions were gently addressed to foster awareness and inclusivity, through anti-racist and anti-bias approaches. This finding aligns with those of Brady et al. (2025, p. 576), who found that Black ECE educators 'engage with teachable moments that challenge anti-Black racism and advance anti-racism'.

While children's perceptions of tangible differences and racist comments or behaviours were recognised as a basis for exclusion, the absence of bias, discrimination or signs of racism towards children of the Traveller community was a consistent feature. Together these findings show how most managers perceived that settled children at the preschool level are unaware of ethnic or cultural distinctions regarding the Traveller community, which was interpreted by some as evidence of innocence and developmental non-discrimination. Young children's innocence and understanding towards others were seen to contribute to an environment perceived as free from peer-based anti-Traveller discrimination, bias, or exclusion. However, this absence in wider ECE contexts may not necessarily indicate

inclusion. Instead, ideas about developmental non-discrimination could risk overlooking systemic racism (Escayg, 2018).

A human 'rights-based approach means challenging arguments that children are too young or innocent to understand when they are excluding and discriminating against others' (Lundy et al., 2024, pg. 8). Moreover, from an anti-racist perspective it is important to consider the broader societal context here, particularly how racist discourses and systemic power relations shape children's perceptions of ethnic identities (Escayg, 2018). Therefore, given that children learn through interactions and experiences in their everyday worlds, this developmental framing of childhood innocence, coupled with the assumption that awareness of differences or signs of anti-Traveller racism emerge only later in development, risks influencing early education practices in ways that overlook systemic racism (Escayg, 2018). Ideas about children's innocence could reflect or reinforce a form of Traveller-blindness between children, which risks overlooking ethnic inequity and nuanced or subtle forms of racism and discrimination. As described in the DEI Charter and Guidelines, observations and interview data suggest that further **practice-based** work within ECCE settings is needed to notice and gain a better understanding of whether Traveller children are being (implicitly) labelled by peers and whether they and their peers are aware of and (un)comfortable with difference.

Although some strategies, such as conflict resolution, were noted, a strong theme arose from a sense amongst interviewees that fostering prosocial behaviours (sharing, being kind, helping) was emphasised over empowering children to stand up for themselves. This emphasis can, in part, be explained by the managers' perceptions of young children's innocence and ideas about developmental (non)discrimination highlighted earlier. Taking this finding together with the children's experiences of peer struggles, greater efforts are needed to ensure that educators are empowered across settings in Ireland, as set out in the DEI Charter and Guidelines, to empower children, in turn, to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations. This requires developing awareness of potential strategies (e.g., High Scope Approach to conflict resolution) and developing practices (morning agreements). This recommendation aligns with the educator's role as outlined in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear, which includes supporting children 'to learn to be with others' and develop conflict resolution skills (NCCA, 2024, p. 17).

The research also identifies a gap between the rhetoric of a rights-based approach and learning 'to express their rights' in practice (NCCA, 2024, p. 25). Regarding the research question, the absence of a rights discourse is relevant because Aistear is a rights-based framework (NCCA, 2024), and rights are considered a tool for empowerment (Ward, 2025). The absence may limit opportunities for children to express, claim, and defend their rights or seek redress (Lundy and Martínez Sainz, 2018), which is further supported in the findings that explored empowerment. Clarity is required on what constitutes a rights-based approach. Arguably, educators need familiarisation with children's human-rights language and education, and a deeper understanding of approaches to children's learning about, through, and for rights, to 'empower' children to express their rights, as set out in the goals of Aistear, and subsequently be in a position to claim them and stand up for themselves.

These challenges, variations, and gaps highlight the need for ongoing reflection and practice support to ensure that these frameworks fully support Traveller children's identity, cultural and education rights, and sense of belonging. This research also points to the value of, and need for, learning with and from the Traveller community, both parents and organisations, to address challenges.

Summary

Creating inclusive ECE environments that uphold dignity, equity, and justice for Traveller children requires confronting the historic and systemic nature of anti-Traveller racism embedded in Irish society and State structures. Training for educators must focus not only on inclusive practices but on repairing these entrenched inequalities, positioning ECCE settings as spaces for social change and educators as active change agents. This shift points towards social justice pedagogies, including human rights education, where understanding the historical roots of racism becomes essential for inclusion for Traveller children. Despite the potential of Aistear and the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines, which provide strong foundations to move beyond inclusive practices, legacies of anti-Traveller racism continue to influence present-day attitudes and practices in ECE settings. This highlights the need to engage with the structural and historical dimensions of exclusion and with approaches that challenge systemic bias and affirm Traveller identity.

8 Insights and Implications

8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this transformative research is to identify practice-based actions that activate meaningful transformations and enhance inclusive experiences for Traveller children and their families across all ECE settings in Ireland. The implications are drawn from insights grounded in the views and experiences of young Traveller children, placing their views and experiences at the centre of practice-based actions. As such, the research focused on inclusion within settings rather than on access to services. While some findings address barriers and solutions to access to services, these will be explored more fully in a separate paper from Early Childhood Ireland that will inform a future project.

Starting with the children, the primary recommendation from this project is to ensure that the child participants have their views heard and that these views influence practice, shaping inclusive pedagogy and culturally responsive early childhood environments. As such, insights from the children's views and experiences have feasible, practice-based implications for other ECE settings.

The aim of this project was not to produce new policy recommendations. Instead, the accompanying implications are intended to inform and guide the development of inclusive, culturally responsive environments, practice, and pedagogy. Accordingly, they focus on supporting the implementation of existing recommendations – many of which are already well established through frameworks such as Aistear and the DEI Guidelines. However, taking the wider historical and social context into account, this research also has systemic implications for identity work and inclusion, particularly in settings where Traveller culture may not yet be fully respected, represented, or even welcomed. Where practice-based implications require structural, organisational, or systemic changes, further implications have been identified that are directed at policymakers, service providers, and leadership.

8.1.2 Practice-based implications for managers and educators

The first set of implications are practical, evidence-informed actions that managers and educators can implement directly in everyday practice to foster children's identity and belonging.

➤ Intentionally incorporate culturally resonant and family-related materials in ECE environments to affirm Traveller children's heterogeneous identities and nurture their sense of belonging – emotionally, culturally, socially, and spatially.

This research supports the idea that a 'well-resourced, inclusive environment' reflective of 'the rights, needs, interests, and identities of [Traveller] babies, toddlers and young children' (NCCA, 2024a, p. 23) is essential for fostering their sense of belonging and identity in ECE practice. Learning from insights into children's views and experiences, intentionally incorporating culturally resonant and family-related materials (e.g., photographs and name books) can contribute to fostering children's sense of positive self-identity and belonging across emotional, cultural, social, and place-based dimensions. These practices require establishing, and simultaneously support building, a strong connection between home and preschool in line with inclusive, anti-bias, and rights-based practices outlined in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and Aistear. Insights also suggest that it is important to find intentional and creative ways for children to engage with such materials so that they do not become wallpaper or tokenistic. It is also important that there is adequate resourcing for culturally resonant materials and environments related to Traveller life, culture, language, and histories, including story books from Traveller folklore, to implement the national practice frameworks and further enhance children's inclusion, identity, and belonging.

➤ Prioritise strong adult−child relationships and connectedness through slow relational pedagogy and everyday interactions to support children's identities and sense of emotional, social, and cultural belonging.

Insights from these children highlight the importance of making families visible or bringing families into the setting in different ways. They also suggest that relational connectedness with educators creates a safe and inclusive space for children to express their interests and funds of knowledge, making their identities become visible. Educators can therefore support children's identities and sense of emotional, social, and cultural belonging in settings by prioritising strong adult−child relationships and connectedness through everyday interactions and slow, relational pedagogy.

➤ Integrate rights-based and anti-bias approaches that promote respect and facilitate children's empowerment to stand up for themselves and the rights of others, co-

navigate emotions, and resolve peer conflict, particularly during free play, to enhance Traveller children's experiences of emotional and social belonging among peers.

Limited social-belonging visibility, together with peer conflicts, suggest a need to ensure that consistent support is available from trusted educators during children's free play. Children's concerns and experiences regarding social conflict suggest they could benefit from pedagogical approaches that support their sense of social justice and fairness and empower them to both stand up for themselves and resolve conflict. This aligns with the educator's role as outlined in the DEI Charter and Guidelines and in Aistear, which highlights the educator's role in supporting children 'to learn to be with others' and resolve conflicts (NCCA, 2024, p. 25).

Educators need to actively nurture inclusive peer relationships, particularly supporting conflict resolution, by noticing and navigating the dynamics of young children learning to live together in preschools. Practice examples in this research offer valuable practice-based knowledge about cultivating inclusive and emotionally supportive pedagogical approaches to empowerment and conflict resolution, including listening to children, taking them seriously, and using the language of feelings. Notably, through learning from one of the participating settings, where episodes of conflict were rare, structured approaches to conflict resolution such as the High Scope Six Steps could empower children and educators.

➢ Notice children's relational choices and friendships across ethnic differences to understand and nurture Traveller children's experiences of social belonging among peers, through reflective practice and setting-based inquiries.

The research suggests that Traveller children's group membership, experiences of social inclusivity, and belonging among peers must be actively nurtured. This requires undertaking practitioner-led, practice-based inquiries in ECCE settings to notice children's relational choices regarding playmates, particularly during free play and across ethnic and gender differences, as described in the DEI Charter and Guidelines. Inquiries will help educators gain an understanding of whether Traveller children are experiencing social inclusion or exclusion among peers, and whether they and their settled peers are aware of and (un)comfortable with difference and respond proactively.

These findings bring into question the notion of encouraging children to see or label everyone in the setting as friends, and it raises questions about the significance of friendships, or its lack, for Traveller children in their preschools. There is a need, therefore, for educators to consult with children in their settings to understand their experiences and the meaning and significance of friendships, and to use insights to inform inclusive practices, actively nurture inclusive peer relationships, and foster social belonging. Learning from children's insights indicates the potential for educators to actively nurture inclusive peer relationships and foster social belonging (during free play), by noticing and extending materials that reflect children's shared interests and being there to help build connections among children across diversity.

➢ Embed unhurried and flexible routines, rituals, and opportunities to come together in groups to enhance Traveller children's group identity and membership.

The value that children placed on educator-facilitated group opportunities, which fostered a sense of social belonging, raises reflective questions for ECE services about how to nurture experiences of social inclusivity and belonging during free play, which may have implications for balancing educator-facilitated experiences and free-play opportunities and across the rhythm of the day: What emotional, social, or cultural qualities must the rhythm of the day (routines, rituals, and opportunities to come together, including free play) embody to make social belonging possible for Traveller children whose social belonging and connection to place and community are questioned or erased? For example, these findings point to opportunities for children to come together, and for ensuring that transitions are unhurried and responsive to children's individual needs, supporting both agency and inclusion.

➢ Notice how children express their multiple and intersecting identities in everyday encounters and experiences to create inclusive environments that affirm and respect identity and cultural rights, but challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive peer cultures.

The research reinforces the importance of creating inclusive environments where children's identity and cultural rights – including their name, family, gender, ethnicity, language, and abilities (e.g., communication preferences) – are recognised and respected. It is therefore important that educators notice how children engage with and express their multiple and

intersecting identities in everyday encounters and experiences. The challenge for educators lies in creating equitable environments that validate children's multiple interests and identities but challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive peer cultures.

> ➤ Intentionally make invisible Traveller identities visible.

Limitations of intentional recognition and tensions surrounding (in)visible identities highlight the need for practice-based actions in the Early Years sector in order to uphold children's cultural and education rights. While Aistear and the DEI Charter and Guidelines promote family partnerships, they offer limited practice-based guidance about navigating the tensions raised in this research regarding silent and silenced identities. Therefore, practice supports are needed to address these tensions and promote collaboration with parents regarding intentionally and meaningfully recognising Traveller children's individual and group identities in ECE practice. This requires solutions from parents/guardians and could be strengthened through partnerships with Traveller organisations. Similarly, while silent and silenced identities need to be questioned and problematised further, speculations about the non-identification among Traveller children and perceptions of hidden identities on the part of parents are multi-layered and complex, and arguably can be answered only by members of the Traveller community themselves.

This research underscores the importance of practice-focused support for settings to provide opportunities for all children to learn about and value Traveller 'languages, histories, stories, folklore and culture', as well as to foster empathy and comfort with difference, specifically regarding Irish Traveller identities among settled children, which is an expectation in existing frameworks and strategies (DCEDIY, 2016; NCCA, 2024, p. 16; Department of Education, 2024a). Notwithstanding the importance of ongoing and embedded DEI work, there may be a need for awareness raising among ECE services about Traveller Pride, which could be celebrated as one way to demonstrate welcoming spaces, increase overt recognition and visibility, and, importantly, unsettle (settled) privileged associations of shame with pride and foster a sense of belongingness. These implications require perspectives and solutions from Traveller parents, family members, and organisations.

Translating existing strategies and guidance in practice requires responsive and creative ways to overcome relational, representational, and architectural barriers to belonging and

promote informal familial involvement through day-to-day encounters. Traveller children, their families, and wider society would benefit from the presence of members of the Traveller community in early childhood settings. This requires efforts to ensure Traveller representation through employment, and partnership work with Traveller organisations (e.g., informal coffee mornings or information sessions), to support relationships and trust-building between families and ECE services, both internally and in the wider community. These implications link with actions for implementation in the TRES Plan (DoE, 2024b) but also have resourcing implications for settings.

> ➤ Embed DEI Charter and Guidelines, extending anti-bias work to noticing and responding to anti-Traveller racism and discrimination.

The findings highlight the need to address the nuanced and often ambiguous nature of peer interactions in early childhood settings where young Traveller children's experiences of identity-based discrimination can be difficult to distinguish through a settled lens. As described in the DEI Charter and Guidelines, observations and interview data suggest that further practice-based work in ECCE settings is needed to notice and gain a better understanding of whether Traveller children are being (implicitly) labelled by peers and whether they and their peers are aware of and (un)comfortable with difference. This requires researchers and educators to be trained to notice and be attuned to subtle signs of Traveller discrimination, racism, or exclusion, particularly in the dynamics of young children learning to live together in preschools and where children's judgements of behaviour, bias-based labelling, and gendered choices might be conflated. Previous reports have recommended anti-racist education and training (Quinlan, 2021; UN, 2023). This research points to the need for all providers, managers, and educators to engage with DEI training and discussions on cultivating an inclusive, anti-racist, and trauma-informed educational culture (e.g., Murray and Reilly, 2021).

> ➤ Integrate children's human rights language and education into daily practice.

Taken together with children's experiences of peer struggles and the emphasis on social values over empowerment, greater efforts are needed to ensure that educators are empowered across settings in Ireland, as set out in the DEI Charter and Guidelines, to empower children, in turn, to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations. This requires developing awareness of potential strategies. The research identified a gap

between the rhetoric of a rights-based approach and learning about rights in practice, which, if strengthened, has the potential to empower educators to realise the framework's ambitions and goals, particularly 'to empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations' (DCEDIY, 2016, p. 25) and 'to express their rights' (NCCA, 2024, p. 25). To embed frameworks, there is a need to empower educators to empower children to express their rights, as set out in the goals of Aistear, and subsequently be in a position to claim those rights and stand up for themselves. Educators need familiarisation with children's human-rights language and a deeper understanding of approaches to children's learning about, through, and for rights. Clarity is also required on what constitutes a rights-based approach.

8.1.3 System implications for achieving practice-based actions

Some of the implications above require perspectives and solutions from Traveller parents and family members, together with Traveller organisations. They also invite both providers and policymakers to consider mandatory professional learning opportunities and training (about Traveller histories, stories, and culture for educators), as set out below.

Firstly, the findings raise timely, evidence-informed insights on participation in ECE and the importance of trust. Trust established through word of mouth may be further built upon by TRES link workers and Traveller and Roma Early Years advisory specialists engaging in building relationships and trust in the community.

> ➢ All educators must engage in guided self-reflection on positionalities and transformative training (DEI, anti-racist, and cultural awareness).

While DEI is central to national frameworks, training remains optional, which constrains managers' efforts to embed inclusive practices and children's inclusive participation. Given the centrality of positionalities for inclusive attitudes and approaches, and that the majority of managers and educators across Ireland benefit from the advantages of holding settled identities, a key implication is the need to ensure that all early childhood educators participate in DEI training, as a minimum requirement to address the ad hoc engagement in training and potential resistance caused by biased dominant societal narratives. The managers' accounts of the significant impact of longer-term training also point to the prioritisation of long-term DEI professional development opportunities – for, at least, those in leadership roles. Implementing existing research and policy recommendations in

strategies at the level of ECCE staff training is also required. Echoing previous calls (Murray and Reilly, 2021), these findings strongly support mandatory DEI training, with a specific focus on understanding Traveller racism and marginalisation, as well as Traveller history and cultural awareness training, noted above, to promote historical understandings and positive perceptions about Traveller identities. This requires Traveller community–led facilitation to build knowledge and understanding – and also, importantly, respect.

➢ Strengthen effective leadership and accountability mechanisms.

Nurturing an inclusive culture requires effective leadership in process quality (interactions and relationships) in ECE settings (Douglass, 2019). Leaders should therefore have access to prolonged and sustained professional learning and opportunities for critical self-reflection, to embed inclusive cultures. Moreover, these findings, together with evidence of the persistence of settled privilege, racism, and bias in existing literature and government strategies, highlight the need for structural change and accountability mechanisms to ensure that Traveller children's inclusion and rights are upheld, particularly those related to non-discrimination, culture, and education.

8.1.4 Implications for Early Childhood Ireland

This research set out to be transformative and embody social responsibility. The findings therefore have implications and learning for Early Childhood Ireland. Firstly, Early Childhood Ireland should develop practice supports for services to implement practice-based recommendations identified above. This requires working in partnership with Traveller organisations. Where supports extend to settings' work with parents and families, partnerships with parents will also be required to co-design any guidance or tools. If Early Childhood Ireland continue to work on practice, policy, or research that concerns the Traveller community, then future work would be strengthened and made more relevant by employing a member of the Traveller community. Finally, to extend transformation beyond the immediate sites of research, Early Childhood Ireland should instigate a campaign with appropriate supports to encourage ECE services to celebrate Traveller Pride, and publicly engage with advocacy for Traveller human rights, including those that belong to babies, toddlers, and young children.

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Early Childhood Ireland

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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