



An Leanbh Óg

The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies

Volume 16 • (Issue 1) 2023



Edited by Dr Mary Moloney, Dr Mary Daly,
Dr Annie Cummins, Dr Shirley Martin,
Dr Sinead McNally and Dr Jennifer Pope

OMEP

L'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire
World Organisation for Early Childhood Education and Care
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An t-Eagraíocht Dhomhanda um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige
OMEP Ireland/ OMEP Éireann: An t-Eagraíocht um Oideachas agus Chúram
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ISBN: 978-1-7396189-5-7

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Published by OMEP Ireland, c/o The Editors, Department of Reflective Pedagogy
and Early Childhood Studies, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

Website: www.omepireland.ie

Email: alosubmissions@outlook.com

Printed by Book Hub Publishing Ireland (2023)

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Acknowledgements

OMEPIreland would like to thank its patrons, Professor Francis Douglas, Professor Nóirín Hayes, and Dr Mary Horgan for their support and encouragement over the years. They also want to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Rosaleen Murphy, Honorary member of OMEPIreland and, first ever editor of *An Leabhbh Óg*.

OMEPIreland would also like to thank the Editorial Committee and the Editorial Associates, without whom this publication would not be possible. We would particularly like to thank our reviewers, and all those who made this special edition of *An Leabhbh Óg* possible.

About OMEP

OMEP is an international, non-governmental, and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care. OMEP defends and promotes the rights of the child to education and care worldwide and, supports activities which improve accessibility to high quality education and care. OMEP is currently established in over 60 countries and is represented at meetings of UNESCO, UNICEF, and other international organisations with similar aims. For further details on OMEP's history and its activities worldwide, see the World OMEP organisation website <http://www.worldomep.org/>

OMEP Ireland

OMEP is represented in Ireland by OMEP Ireland, a registered charity dedicated to Early Education and Care (Charity No. 14213). The objective of OMEP Ireland is to use every means to promote the optimum conditions for the wellbeing of all children, their development, and happiness within their families, institutions, and society. OMEP assists any undertaking to improve Early Childhood Education and Care and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

Mission Statement

The mission of OMEP Ireland is to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood experiences, because every child has a right to a high-quality childhood and because of the effect of early childhood experiences on children's future life chances. To further this mission, OMEP Ireland holds an annual research conference and publishes its journal, *An Leanbh Óg*, with the aim of supporting early childhood research and, disseminating it to the wider public. Its publications can be accessed through the OMEP Ireland website:

<https://omepireland.ie/>

Dedication



It is with great pride and gratitude that OMEP Ireland dedicates this volume of *An Leanbh Óg* to Professor Emeritus Francis Douglas, a pioneer and champion of all things related to early childhood. In 1995, alongside Dr. Mary Horgan, Prof Douglas initiated the ground-breaking Early Childhood Studies Degree at University College Cork. This was the first such degree in Ireland and was a significant milestone for the sector. He has been a long-time supporter of OMEP Ireland and he was instrumental in establishing its peer-reviewed journal, *An Leanbh Óg: The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*. He together with Professor Nóirín Hayes and Dr Mary Horgan are the three patrons of OMEP Ireland.

Although retired for some time now, Francis continues to serve as a mentor and source of guidance for many of his former students, who still turn to him for advice in navigating the increasingly complex landscape of the vital area of early childhood education and care in Ireland.

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Editorial

Mary Moloney, Mary Daly and Annie Cummins

As OMEP celebrates its 75th anniversary, we are delighted to introduce this Special Edition of *An Leanbh Óg*, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies. This Special Edition places a spotlight on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015.

It is now widely acknowledged that changes to the Earth's climate is causing extreme weather across the planet. We are witnessing record-breaking heat waves on land and in the ocean, monsoon like rains, severe floods, lengthy droughts, and extreme wildfires. These extremes are increasing in frequency and intensity. Indeed, as we write this editorial, Storm Agnes rages outside, serving as a stark reminder of our planet's ongoing crisis. Weather is not the only concern. Poverty, inequality and discrimination loom all around us too. However, the SDGs, as outlined by the United Nations, 2015, provide a guiding beacon towards global peace, prosperity and sustainability, for the planet and its inhabitants, both now and, into the future. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an urgent call for action by all countries, including Ireland, to collaborate in a worldwide partnership to preserve the earth and, its people. The SDGs focus on three pillars of sustainability: Economic, Social and Environmental. Akin to OMEP, they recognise the necessity of concurrently addressing poverty and other forms of deprivation, while improving health and education. In particular, they highlight the critical role of early childhood education and care. While striving to address all these areas, we must at the same time, confront the challenges of climate change and, work diligently to safeguard our planet.



Figure 1: SDGs United Nations, 2015

With these considerations in mind, and against the backdrop of OMEP Ireland's ongoing work with Kristianstad University, OMEP Europe and edChild to develop an online programme for early childhood educators, 'Sustainability from the Start,' OMEP Ireland made a timely and, prudent decision to produce a special edition of *An Leanbh Óg*. This special edition focuses on the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Amidst the prevailing worry and concerns, the SDGs offer a roadmap to stall, and even reverse current trends. The most critical place for this endeavour is in early childhood, as this is the generation that stands to bear the greatest consequences if we fail to address the calls to save our planet and its peoples. Similar to the SDGs at both national and international levels, OMEP passionately advocates for every child to have an equitable start in life, and also, highlights the potential of early childhood education and care in realising this aim.

This online edition of *An Leanbh Óg* was launched at our annual conference in Limerick on November 11th 2023, a gathering that placed significant emphasis on the SDGs, and celebrated the endeavours of early childhood educators, academics and

researchers in raising awareness of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in early childhood.

All articles have undergone a double-blind peer review process, where neither the author nor the reviewer are known to each other. The review process, is therefore, entirely anonymous. OMEP Ireland would like to thank the Editorial Committee and the Editorial Associates, without whom, this publication would not be possible. On behalf of OMEP Ireland, we are delighted to introduce this special edition of *An Leabhbh Óg*, Volume 16. The articles in this volume emphasise the significance of focusing on realising the SDGs (UN 2015) during early childhood. The publication showcases some of the work being done in Ireland and elsewhere to raise awareness of, and progress in ESD with babies, toddlers and, young children.

Many articles in this special edition make specific reference to *Aistear*, Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). The Framework includes principles, themes and guidelines for good practice. It views babies, toddlers and young children as competent and confident and, as citizens with rights and responsibilities. In Ireland, *Aistear* has helped educators to realise the SDGs in their settings. The Framework is being updated at present (NCCA, 2023) and, it is hoped that it will place ever greater focus on the SDGs and on ESD going forward, as the future of our country and its children depend on it.

The first article in this edition, '***Looking back as we look forward: Realising the Sustainable Development Goals through Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework***,' focusses on the Framework. Lorraine Farrell and Mary Daly remind us of the connections between *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the SDGs. The article, which offers a comprehensive exploration of the development and evolution of *Aistear*, up to the present day, investigates how the framework contributes to achieving the

United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, it focuses on Goal 4: 'Quality Education' (United Nations, 2015). It sets out the foundation for the Framework, and highlights the influence of three significant international educational philosophies and curricular approaches – Froebel; the *Reggio Emilia Approach*, and *Te Whāriki* in shaping the development of *Aistear*, as well as their relevance to the SDGs. Overall, this first article underscores the critical role of high-quality early childhood educational curricula in establishing a robust basis for sustainable living and, advancing the objectives of the SDGs.

In the second article, Sharon Skehill and Lisa Flaherty report on an action research project investigating understandings and experiences of education for sustainable development (ESD) with educators, babies, toddlers and young children in an outdoor early years and school-aged childcare setting. Findings from this article, ***'Empowering babies, toddlers, young children and educators as global citizens: Action research as a means to facilitate education for sustainable development (ESD) in the early years setting,'*** illustrate the centrality of the role of the early childhood educator in embedding ESD in *Aistear*. They also point to the benefits of outdoor-based pedagogy in this process, bringing the SDGs and the curriculum framework to life for babies, toddlers and young children. Informed proposals pertaining to provocations, invitations and activities linked to the SDGs are discussed, as well as reference to the hidden curriculum in realising how one's image of the child permeates all elements of practice.

In the third article ***'Attaining Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Target 4.2: Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland,'*** Mary Moloney focuses on quality early childhood education and care and, inclusion. In this article, Mary references the UNESCO (2021) stance; that Universal Early

Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) fosters inclusion by creating an expectation that all children regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, disability should have access to a minimum level of service. As such, the article argues that the Universal two-year ECCE programme, in Ireland, is critical to attaining SDG 4, as it relates to early childhood education and care. While, 95% of eligible children avail of at least one year of the ECCE programme (Pobal, 2022), Mary suggests that access alone is insufficient. Rather, high quality ECEC is essential. This article therefore, explores a range of policy initiatives and measures directed towards enhancing the quality of ECEC in Ireland including *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). The article also focuses on policies to ensure equal opportunity for children availing of the ECCE programme such as the *Access and Inclusion Model* (Ireland, 2016) and the *Equal Participation Model* (Ireland, 2023)). It also discusses the vital role of early childhood educators, and the need for an appropriately skilled and sustainable workforce. As discussed throughout the article, these various initiatives support the attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2 in Ireland. Although there is much to celebrate, it is important to remain vigilant. To ensure continued attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2, and to maintain current progress, the government must continue to invest in the ECEC profession. Pia Britto (2015), senior advisor on Early Childhood Development (ECD) at UNICEF, says that investing in ECEC is “fiscally smart, scientifically credible and morally correct” for children, early childhood educators and for society. The article ends by reminding us that ECEC is the foundation of sustainable development.

The fourth article, ***Teaching Trócaire’s Development Education concepts related to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) to Early Childhood Students using a workshop approach*** by Colette Saunders introduces the work undertaken by Trócaire in early childhood. This work focuses on raising awareness

and engaging learners with important Development Education concepts, namely justice, equality and global citizenship, related to the SDGs. The article begins by considering what development education is, why it is important and, the role of the Trócaire Early Years Development Education Officer. It then explores the work of Trócaire, and the practice of teaching about Trócaire's Development Education to early childhood students, using a workshop approach, which incorporates the SDGs. The article explains how these connect with *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and considers some theoretical perspectives on professional knowledge, which inform the content and, the delivery of the workshops. It concludes with a quote shared during a Lenten Lecture in St. Patricks College, Maynooth, which highlights the importance of ensuring our young people are 'maladjusted to injustice' so that justice, equality and global citizenship are given the opportunity to come to the fore, such as when early childhood students incorporate development education concepts into their professional practice.

The fifth article, '***A Snapshot in Time: Early Numeracy Experiences and the Perspectives of Pre-school Practitioners,***' by Treasa Quigley and Arlene Mannion, looks at early years educators' perspectives on their engagement with numeracy in pre-school settings. Highlighting how the Irish early childhood education and care field is considered one of rapid change (Wolf et al. 2013) in regard to policy, curriculum, legislation, and funding strategies, the article provides a snapshot in time on numeracy. The article investigates the perceptions of early childhood educators with regards to their role in numeracy development; how educators use the language of numeracy within the pre-school, and the impact of the environment on children's numeracy experiences. The relationship with SDG 4: Quality Education, which is about ensuring

inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, permeates the article.

In the sixth article, Sinéad Moran, Miriam Twomey, Conor McGuckin, and Aoife M. Lynam examine ***‘The Effectiveness of Supports Available for Promoting Inclusion in three Early Childhood Education and Care Settings in Ireland’***. The article, based on an M. Ed undertaken in 2019 reiterates how, in recent years, while significant attention has been directed towards ensuring the inclusion of all children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Ireland, some areas still need addressing. To help identify some of these the authors undertook a small-scale research study, which explored the lived experiences of a group of those supporting three children’s access to the ECCE scheme. Each of the research participants were direct partners within the microsystem of the children who were accessing the ECCE scheme, and required additional supports for full participation in the scheme. Thus, this article adds to our knowledge and understanding of how SDG 4 and 10 can be achieved in the Irish context.

The seventh article, ***‘Embedding Aistear into Action Lesotho’s Children’s Programme, an Irish/Basotho Leeto: Nurturing Sustainable Practice,’*** by Marcella Towler, Jacqui O’Riordan, Eileen Coates, Mats’ireletso Kanetsi, Mmabataung Mokhehi, Moselantja Mafale look at a unique project that brings *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) to life for children in an area of Southern Africa. Action Lesotho is an Irish Non-Government Agency (NGO) working on humanitarian and development projects in Northern Lesotho, Southern Africa. The article details the origins and development of Action Lesotho’s Childhood Education and Wellbeing Programme (CEWP), from its initial stages to its current form wherein *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) has become embedded in the pedagogical approach and, ethos of the

programme. The article argues that *Aistear* has been an agent of transformation that has simultaneously nurtured sustainable practice, and, illustrates, how, despite being published many years in advance of the SDGs, *Aistear* has been influential in helping meet many of the SDGs, in this particular project. The article demonstrates a transformation in the ways of learning and teaching in the CEWP by using *Aistear's* Principles and Themes as a conduit for the realisation of the SDGs, in a place very far away from where the framework was developed.

The eighth article by Muireann Ranta, stems from a PhD thesis that explored how young children (2-5 years old) define their own education and participatory rights to education for sustainable development (ESD) under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The article, ***'Positioning the young child as a rights holder within ESD curricula-making under Article 29 1 (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child'*** responds to the latest recommendations from the Committee of the CRC, to assess national policy from a child rights impact perspective (UNCRC, 2023). Muireann's article demonstrates how early childhood education and care (ECEC) is uniquely placed to promote education for sustainable development (ESD) owing to the ECEC practitioner's pedagogical skillset. It indicates that in spite of this pedagogical advantage and increased uptake towards developing ESD for young learners within education policy, there is still more to do. Muireann argues that any approach to ESD must be underpinned by a child rights perspective. Providing children with an education that supports respect for Nature is a legal curriculum entitlement, specified under Article 29 1 (e) of the UNCRC. However, for ECEC practitioners to fulfil these duty-bearing responsibilities, this article argues that the ECEC sector requires much more support (via investment, resources, and leadership).

The ninth and final article takes us back to where we started with a focus on *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). As highlighted throughout many of the articles, *Aistear* is critical to quality ECEC in Ireland, and indeed, further afield. Bringing it to life for babies, toddlers and young children helps to realise many of the SDGs. Going forward, this Early Childhood Curriculum Framework will hopefully go even further in supporting a sustainable world. In this final article, ***'Embedding sustainability in an updated Aistear,'*** the authors, Sharon Skehill and Mary Daly illustrate how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered and embedded in the proposed draft Updated *Aistear* (NCCA, 2023b). In addition to highlighting the literature review pertaining to the themes of *Aistear* (French and McKenna, 2022) undertaken on behalf of the NCCA, the article highlights key learning from the Phase 1 consultation (NCCA, 2023a) processes, as well as contemporary policy and research, which inform and guide the updating process. As discussed in the article, Phase 1 involved a broad range of data collection methods to ensure that the voices of all stakeholders were considered, including online questionnaires, focus groups, written submissions, and very importantly the article details the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins, Doherty, et al., 2023). This article draws together the findings from Phase 1 of updating *Aistear* in relation to ESD and, provides information on the proposals for an updated *Aistear*, which will form Phase 2 of the consultation process. Sharon and Mary draw attention to the importance of embedding concepts and understandings of sustainability from early childhood onwards, and of the role of babies, toddlers and young children as agents of, and for change.

The concluding sentence above provides a fitting end to this editorial as OMEP's core mission has always revolved around fostering respect for the confidence and competence of our

youngest citizens. This mission is rooted in promoting well-being for babies, toddlers and young children, underpinned by the right to access to high quality Early Childhood Education and Care. *An Leanbh Óg*, Ireland's first-ever peer reviewed journal, focusing on early childhood, continues to be a key instrument for the promotion, publication and dissemination of research in relation to ECEC in Ireland. OMEP Ireland also aims to promote discussion, debate and positive change in relation to our work with and, on half of babies, toddlers and young children and in trying to promote a more sustainable planet. Here, we are reminded of the old American-Indian proverb:

***We do not inherit the planet from our ancestors
but borrow it from our children!***

We continue to encourage beginner and established researchers to submit a paper for consideration in future editions of *An Leanbh Óg*. The guidelines for authors are available on the OMEP Ireland website: <http://www.omepireland.ie>. Special categories of article, such as for this special edition focussed on Sustainability are sometimes requested. Please note also, that we share regular updates on our social media platforms and can be found on X @LeanbhAn and Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/OMEPireland>.

Once again, many thanks to all our readers, supporters, contributing authors and external reviewers of *An Leanbh Óg*. Finally, sincere thanks to Co-Editors Dr Jennifer Pope, Dr Shirley Martin and Dr Sinéad McNally, for their commitment, advice, encouragement, passion for ECEC, good humour and eternal optimism.

Mary M, Mary D and Annie

September, 2023

Looking back as we look forward: Realising the Sustainable Development Goals through *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*



Lorraine Farrell and Mary Daly

Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive exploration of the development and evolution of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) in Ireland, up to the present day. Its primary objective is to investigate the role of *Aistear* in contributing to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs), specifically Goal 4: 'Quality Education' (United Nations, 2015). The research foundation for the Framework is set forth, and the paper highlights the influence of three significant international educational philosophies and curricular approaches - Froebel (Lilley, 1967), the *Reggio Emilia Approach* (Malaguzzi, 1993), and *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) in shaping the development of *Aistear*. These philosophies and approaches are examined in relation to their relevance to the SDGs and their impact on the formation of *Aistear*. Overall, the article underscores the critical role of high-quality early childhood educational curricula in establishing a robust basis for sustainable living and advancing the

objectives of the SDGs (UN, 2015). In the subsequent sections of this article, the contents of *Aistear* are outlined, and some of the supports for implementing the Framework are explored. The article concludes by alerting readers to the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015), which offers support to practitioners¹ in embarking on a journey towards realising the SDGs through the implementation of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum centred on play and relationships.

Introduction

Aistear published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009, serves as Ireland's curriculum framework for children aged from birth to six years. Its development involved an extensive process of consultation, research, and collaboration with various stakeholders, including children, parents², and practitioners (Daly and Forster, 2009). This article explores the development of *Aistear* and its role in advancing the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, 'Quality Education', (UN, 2015) within the broader framework of Education for Sustainable Development.

Aistear, the Irish word for journey, reflects the influence of research and international perspectives that informed its formulation, placing a strong emphasis on the prioritisation of high-quality early childhood learning experiences. These experiences are designed to support holistic learning and development and, to foster environmental sustainability, fairness, equality, diversity, well-being, and a sense of identity and belonging for all children (NCCA, 2009). The Framework recognises the pivotal role played by enriching learning environments, creative engagement, and play in nurturing the developmental potential of babies, toddlers, and young children as set out in the SDGs (2015). Moreover, the

¹ Practitioner is the term used in *Aistear* to describe those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. (NCCA, 2009, p.56)

² Parent is the term used in *Aistear* to refer to the child's primary caregiver and educators (NCCA, 2009, p.56).

Framework underscores the cultivation of knowledge and dispositions that promote sustainable development. *Aistear* also aims to cultivate in babies, toddlers and young children a sense of global citizenship and their responsibility as stewards of the planet and, its diverse communities. *Aistear* incorporates foundational principles of learning and development, which closely resonate with the interconnected dimensions of economic, social, and environmental sustainability as set out in the SDGs (UN, 2015).

Subsequent sections of this article provide an overview of the SDGs (UN 2015) and then delve deeper into the genesis and content of *Aistear*. The examination reveals how the research findings and international curricula and philosophies that influenced *Aistear* converge on the shared recognition of the paramount importance of providing high-quality early childhood education and, promoting sustainable educational practices in early childhood contexts. The article concludes by alerting readers to the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, which offers support to practitioners in embarking on a journey towards realising the SDGs (UN, 2015) through the implementation of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum centred on play and relationships.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as depicted in Figure 1, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015. They represent a universal call to action aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and promoting peace, equality, and prosperity for all people by 2030 (UN, 2015). These goals emphasise our global citizenship and responsibility as stewards of the planet and its inhabitants. The achievement of the SDGs holds great significance for the world and, offers a crucial opportunity for babies, toddlers, and young children to develop an understanding of and, to contribute to sustainable living during early childhood. The SDGs are interconnected, recognising that actions taken in one area have ripple effects on others, and that sustainable development necessitates a balance between social, economic, and environmental aspects (UN, 2015).

Goal 4, 'Quality Education' (2015), is relevant across all stages of education, and this article specifically focuses on its realisation in the early education and care experiences of babies, toddlers, and young children from birth to six years, through experiences supported by *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Goal 4 acknowledges that inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning opportunities. It recognises that the quality of early childhood education experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children is influential and has long-term effects on their development, including brain development (UN, 2015). Providing these young learners with access to high-quality early childhood education establishes a solid foundation that enables them to reach their full potential. Moreover, it nurtures their understanding of and commitment to their responsibilities as caretakers of the planet. Through children's direct life experiences together with their funds of knowledge, they become cognisant of, and begin to understand, the interconnected pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (UN, 2015). This awareness empowers them to embrace their role in fostering a sustainable future for all. With this context in mind, the article now shifts its focus to the development of *Aistear* and how it supports the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care.



Figure 1. SDGs (U.N, 2015).

Developing *Aistear*

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland, was the result of an extensive collaborative effort between the NCCA and various stakeholders within the early childhood sector. This partnership involved children from birth to six years, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, as well as relevant agencies, organisations, and government departments (Daly and Forster, 2009). Over the course of eight years, *Aistear* was carefully developed to meet the needs and interests of our youngest learners. To ensure a robust foundation for the Framework, the NCCA commissioned four research papers that informed its development (Hayes, 2007; Kernan, 2007; French, 2007; Dunphy, 2008). These research papers provided valuable insights and evidence-based recommendations that helped shape the content and structure of *Aistear*.

In addition to the research papers, a significant aspect of *Aistear's* development was the inclusion of direct input from babies, toddlers, and young children themselves. The Framework incorporated a portraiture study that actively engaged these young learners as partners in the development process (NCCA, 2007; Daly et al., 2007; Daly et al., 2008). This approach ensured that their perspectives and experiences were considered and integrated into the Framework, making it more relevant and responsive to their unique needs, rights and interests.

The Framework recognises the crucial role of early learning in establishing the foundation for present and future learning. Its development was guided by four partnership pillars, as outlined by Daly and Forster (2009). These pillars encompassed the expertise and support of the Technical Working Group and the Early Childhood Committee, the findings from extensive consultations conducted by the NCCA in 2005, the insights gained from the Portraiture Study (NCCA, 2007), and the research provided by the four background papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; Dunphy, 2008).

In the following section, two of these pillars are explored in more detail, namely the Portraiture Study and the four background research papers.

Portraiture

The development of *Aistear* was greatly influenced by a portraiture study that involved the active participation of babies, toddlers, and young children. This innovative approach, which was ground-breaking at the time, allowed for the consultation and engagement of children from birth to six years in the development process. The portraits provided detailed descriptions of individual babies' toddlers' and young children's experiences and reflections on their time in a range of early childhood settings around the country. It served as an important benchmark for the NCCA in developing a national framework for early learning and development that was grounded in an Irish context (NCCA, 2007; Daly et al., 2007, Daly et al. 2008). Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 was influential in the inclusion of the voice of the child in the development of *Aistear*. The Convention highlighted the importance of meaningfully listening to children from birth, and of taking their views seriously and, ensuring they have influence (Lundy, 2007). The Portraiture study conveyed significant messages regarding holistic learning and development through play and active exploration indoors and outdoors, the vital role of relationships, particularly the involvement of parents, the effectiveness of diverse communication methods, the significance of fostering a sense of identity and belonging, and the benefits of observing and listening to children (NCCA, 2007; Daly et al., 2008). This wealth of information served as valuable data for the NCCA in the development of Ireland's first early childhood curriculum framework.

Research Papers

The development of *Aistear* was informed by the commissioning of four research papers by the NCCA. These papers aimed to synthesise national and international research on essential aspects

of learning and development during early childhood. The four research papers commissioned were:

1. *Perspectives on the Relationship Between Education and Care in Early Childhood* (Hayes, 2007)
2. *Children's Early Learning and Development* (French, 2007)
3. *Play as a Context for Early Learning and Development* (Kernan, 2007)
4. *Supporting Children's Early Learning and Development Through Formative Assessment* (Dunphy, 2008).

The papers culminated in some very important messages for the NCCA in developing *Aistear* and included:

- Children are competent, confident and capable learners, able to make choices and decisions.
- They love learning about their world—why things happen and how things happen the way they do. Children do this by interacting with people and things in different places.
- Children learn through their senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling and by ‘doing things’ through playing, through using language, in interesting and challenging indoor and outdoor environments, and when they feel secure and loved.
- Early childhood is an important time for developing children’s ability to persevere, to take risks and solve problems, to empathise, to develop confidence and independence, to use their natural curiosity, and to develop their identities as learners (NCCA, 2009).

The papers also emphasised the essential factors in creating positive learning experiences for children during early childhood, including quality interactions, language-rich environments, a balance between adult and child-initiated activities, play and first-hand experiences, observant and supportive adults, recognition of

learning progression, and supportive relationships between parents and educational settings (NCCA, 2009). The research papers also emphasised that for these factors to be effectively implemented, practitioners needed to respect children as learners, possess confidence and knowledge about child development, be mindful of their own beliefs and how they impact children, respect diversity, and have access to ongoing professional development and support. These considerations were instrumental in shaping the development of *Aistear* and its approach to early childhood education. In addition, valuable insights from international influences and philosophies were incorporated into the Framework. Attention now turns to these.

International Influences

The development of *Aistear* drew inspiration from international influences and educational philosophies, as detailed by French (2007). These influences encompassed a wide range of approaches and educational philosophies, including Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Dewey, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Bowlby, Elkind, Piaget, Maslow, Goldschmeid, Weikart, Rogoff, Dahlberg, Prout, Traverthen, and Laevers, among others. Furthermore, *Aistear's* development was also informed by specific approaches such as *Te Whāriki* in New Zealand and, the *Reggio Emilia Approach* in Italy (French, 2007). In the context of these various influences, this article focuses on three of them in particular: Froebel (Lilley, 1967), the *Reggio Emilia Approach* (Malaguzzi, 1993), and *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). These three approaches are selected for further examination due to their connections to the SDGs and their impact on the development of the Framework in this regard.

Froebel

The *Froebel* philosophy of education, as outlined by Lilley (1967), recognises that babies, toddlers and young children possess knowledge and skills from birth. This philosophy is based on several key principles that underpin its approach. The principles include the concepts of unity and connectedness, recognising children as

autonomous learners, valuing early childhood in its own right, emphasising the significance of relationships, fostering creativity and the power of symbols, highlighting the central role of play, promoting engagement with nature and emphasising the important role of knowledgeable and nurturing adults.

When examining *Aistear*, the influence of Froebel's philosophy is evident in various aspects of the Framework. This is particularly evident in the emphasis placed on play as a fundamental aspect of learning, the recognition of holistic development encompassing multiple domains, the role of the adult in supporting children's learning and development, and the importance of incorporating nature and outdoor learning experiences into early childhood education (NCCA, 2009).

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The *Reggio Emilia Approach* was developed in Italy following World War II. It is grounded in a strengths-based perspective of the child and, places great importance on recognising the rights of babies, toddlers, and young children. At its core, this approach also values democratic processes within the educational context (Malaguzzi 1993). It identifies quality early education as a fundamental aspect of lifelong learning. The *Reggio Emilia Approach* embraces the 100 languages of babies, toddlers and young children. The 100 languages are a metaphor for the extraordinary potentials of babies', toddlers' and young children's learning and development through the different languages of thinking, expressing, understanding and communicating. Following children's emerging interests, long-term projects and documenting are key features. It is clear to see the impact of the *Reggio Emilia Approach* on *Aistear*, with particular reference to the image of the child, the principle of Children as citizens, the Theme of Communicating, and the Guidelines on Partnership with Parents, and on Assessment (2009).

Te Whāriki

The *Te Whāriki* curriculum framework, published by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand in 1996, had a significant impact on the development of *Aistear*. It is designed for children from birth until they transition to primary school. It aims to support children “to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (*Te Whāriki*, 1996, p.3). *Te Whāriki* places a strong emphasis on the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes that children bring to their early learning experiences. It acknowledges that children's learning journeys commence in the home environment. It highlights the need for formative assessment and introduces the concept of ‘learning stories’ (Carr and Lee, 2001). *Te Whāriki* includes principles, strands and goals and was updated in 2017. Its impact on *Aistear* is notable in its focus on play, outdoor learning, dispositions, and formative assessment. These influences contributed to the development of a comprehensive and child-centred approach to early childhood education within the *Aistear* framework.

Bringing it all together – *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

Learning from other educational philosophers and approaches, the research papers (French 2007, Kernan, 2007, Hayes 2007, Dunphy, 2008), consultation findings (NCCA, 2005), and findings from the portraiture study (NCCA, 2007) all contributed to the development of *Aistear*. What emerged was a national early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to six years that views babies, toddlers and young children as competent and confident. It acknowledged that children are naturally curious, with an innate sense of wonder and awe. It highlighted the importance of nurturing relationships. It viewed children from birth to six years as capable of embracing sustainable living through their experience of the world around them. *Aistear* acknowledged the period of early childhood as

important in its own right. It viewed babies, toddlers and young children as active learners and citizens and acknowledged that they can contribute to their world by making the environment a safe, sustainable and beautiful place to live and learn in (NCCA, 2009). As it is a Framework, *Aistear* supports adults to co-construct a responsive curriculum that is emergent and child-led, building on the interests and inquiries of the child, and is facilitated by a range of interaction strategies within a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all, so that babies, toddlers and young children from birth to six can be agents of change in a sustainable world. The next section looks at the contents of the Framework, which brings all the elements mentioned above to life.

Aistear's Principles

Aistear's view of children as “*confident and competent learners*” (NCCA, 2009, p.10) recognises that they are capable of embracing sustainable living through their experience of the world around them. It views them as citizens with rights and responsibilities and is premised on an understanding of babies, toddlers, and young children as being active in shaping and creating their own lives. The Framework supports the inclusion of babies, toddlers, and young children’s voices in decisions that affect them (UNCRC, 1989, Lundy 2007). *Aistear* acknowledges this period of early childhood as an important time of opportunity to foster positive learning dispositions, values, attitudes and skills laying the foundations for how babies, toddlers, and young children come to know and understand the world around them. The Framework provides guidance on supporting babies, toddlers, and young children’s holistic learning and development through play and relationships through four sets of guidelines, which focus on partnerships with parents, interactions, play and assessment. *Aistear* is underpinned by 12 Principles, which are presented in three groups (see Table 1).

Group 1: Children and their lives in early childhood	Group 2: Children's connections with others	Group 3: How children learn and develop
• the child's uniqueness • equality and diversity • children as citizens	• relationships • parents, family and community • the adult's role	• holistic learning and development • active learning • play and hands-on experiences • relevant and meaningful experiences • communication and language • the learning environment

Table 1: Aistear's Principles

Each Principle begins with a short statement, which is followed by an interpretation of the principle from a child's perspective. Of the 12 Principles, many speak to the SDGs. One has particular relevance, as it highlights babies, toddlers, and young children as citizens. The Principle states that:

Children are citizens with rights and responsibilities. They have opinions that are worth listening to and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy. From this experience they learn that, as well as having rights, they also have a responsibility to respect and help others, and to care for their environment (NCCA, 2009, p. 8).

When considering the interpretation of this Principle from the child's perspective, ideas such as rights and responsibilities, voice, fairness, environmental sustainability and social justice are central. Through these experiences, along with appropriate and consistent adult nurturance, support and modelling, babies, toddlers and young children develop the dispositions, skills, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and values that will help them to grow as confident and competent learners. The Principle on the Learning Environments tells us that the learning environment both inside and

outside influences what and how babies, toddlers and young children learn. Focusing on sustainability within these environments is key. Finally, *Aistear*'s Principle on Parents, Families and Communities states that:

Parents are the most important people in children's lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play (NCCA, 2009, p.9).

Being sustainable is more meaningful for babies, toddlers and young children when it is supported by partnerships with families and communities.

Aistear's Themes



Figure 2: *Aistear*'s Themes

The information gleaned through the various sources helped shape the Framework, including the identification of its four themes (See Figure 2). Together, the themes offer a way to plan for and, support children's learning and development. The four interconnected Themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking describe learning and

development through dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding. When the broad Aims of each of *Aistear*'s Themes are viewed through the lens of the SDGs, it is evident that *Aistear* provides opportunities for babies, toddlers, and young children to learn about living sustainably in age-appropriate ways (NCCA, 2018). Through the Themes, *Aistear* draws attention to babies, toddlers, and young children's potential to engage in learning about and being proactively sustainable across all three pillars of social, economic, and environmental sustainability (UN, 2015). The Themes of *Aistear* are identified below with some of the relationships between the Themes and that of living sustainably extrapolated.

Well-being is about being confident, happy, and healthy. It focuses on babies, toddlers and young children respecting themselves, others and the environment and draws attention to their role as active citizens. The Theme of Identity and Belonging is about babies, toddlers and young children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community. It notes that they should develop a sense of place and a responsibility to care for that place too. Communicating is about babies, toddlers and young children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence, in a variety of ways and, for a variety of purposes. The Theme of Exploring and Thinking is about babies, toddlers and young children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas. This theme presents the most opportunity for engagement in sustainable living and education for sustainable development (ESD) (NCCA, 2018).

Aistear provides practical ideas of what ESD and sustainable living might look like in practice through sample learning opportunities (SLOs) in each of the Themes. For example, it highlights babies, toddler and young children's responsibility as citizens - looking after their environment, keeping their things tidy, having responsibility for a particular area such as tidying up the

dress-up clothes, gathering up recyclables, planting and caring for flowers, growing vegetables, turning off taps and lights, picking up litter, making art with natural and recycled materials. It also provides ideas on the importance of opportunities to be independent, to experience nature and to learn about the natural environment and about biodiversity through learning about its features, materials, animals, and plants. Very importantly, it shows babies', toddlers' and young children's responsibility as carers in action. The SLOs also highlight the importance of using their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems, and to learn to live sustainably. The SLOs also include examples to ensure different cultures and backgrounds are reflected in the toys, books and resources provided. They also provide ideas on how to approach conflict situations through problem-solving approaches, and promote the concept of social justice, including through discussing important issues, and by involving babies, toddlers and young children in decision and rule-making. By embedding the Framework in practice in the range of settings for children under the age of six years, babies, toddlers and young children are presented with opportunities to develop important dispositions, knowledge and understanding to embed sustainable living in their lives (Farrell and Daly, 2023).

Guidelines for Good Practice and User Guide

Aistear includes four sets of guidelines on partnerships, interactions, play and assessment (NCCA, 2009). These describe how the adult can support quality learning and development experiences across *Aistear's* principles and themes. Learning experiences are also provided to exemplify what this might look like in practice. A User Guide explains *Aistear's* contents and answers some frequently asked questions about the Framework. It also gives ideas on how to plan when using *Aistear*. Following the publication of *Aistear*, the NCCA were involved in a number of supports to realise *Aistear* in practice. The next section discusses some of these in a little more detail.

Supports for realising *Aistear* in Practice

Aistear in Action and the Aistear Toolkit

The *Aistear in Action* Initiative occurred from 2011-2013 (NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), 2013). This was a collaboration between the NCCA and ECI in an initiative designed to bring *Aistear* to life for children in the pre-school year following the introduction of the ECCE³ scheme in 2009 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)). The project took place in seven pre-school settings, and the learnings from it were recorded and, subsequently, this experience was shared with the wider sector through the final report (NCCA and ECI, 2013), and through a number of face-to-face events. Examples and ideas from practice gained through the initiative were shared with the sector through the NCCA's *Aistear* Toolkit, which was an online resource to support engagement with *Aistear* across a range of early childhood settings. The Toolkit was decommissioned in 2015 when all the material on it was moved to the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015).

Aistear Tutor Initiative

The *Aistear* Tutor Initiative, a collaboration between the NCCA and the Association of Teachers' Education Centres Ireland (ATECI) involved the running of a series of continuous professional development (CPD) workshops and summer courses for teachers of infant classes in primary schools. The purpose was to introduce them to *Aistear* and to support play-based pedagogies in Junior and Senior Infants over a number of years from 2010 onwards. *Aistear* was strongly promoted during this period as a mechanism to support playful pedagogies in bringing the Primary School

³ Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range in Ireland. It is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year. Settings taking part must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of *Aistear* (2009) *Síolta* (2006) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2459ee-early-childhood-care-and-education-programme-ecce>

Curriculum (PSC) (1999) to life. It is important to note that the PSC has been redeveloped as outlined in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, published in 2023. It states that ‘*The framework builds on the principles and themes of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*’ (DE, 2023, p.3). This continuity in curricula was advocated for by the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020* (DES, 2011) and was a finding of the consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2022). The redeveloped Primary Framework states that:

While Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and the Primary Curriculum Framework are for different sectors, they are now aligned to support continuity and progression for all children as they make the transition from pre-school to primary and special schools. This alignment is particularly evident in the focus in both frameworks on a pedagogy of play. The Primary Curriculum Framework provides clarity and certainty on the appropriateness and centrality of play and playful approaches in primary and special schools, where they are key elements of learning and teaching (DE, 2023, p.25).

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide

The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (ASPG) (NCCA, 2015) is an online tool to support practitioners in using *Aistear* and *Síolta*⁴ together to develop the quality of their curriculum, and in doing so, to better support babies, toddlers and young children’s learning and development. The ASPG promotes critical reflection on aspects of quality education including adults’ view of babies, toddlers and

⁴ *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. in 2006. It is designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings that children aged birth to six years are attend. It includes principles, standards and components (CECDE, 2006)

young children, partnerships with parents, the learning environment, play, interactions, planning and assessing, transitions. It promotes the notion that a child-led and emergent curriculum is about the totality of babies, toddlers and young children's experiences—the broad goals for their learning and development, the routines, activities and experiences, through which, they can learn and develop, the approaches and strategies adults use to support and empower them to achieve their goals. Similar to the SDGs it recognises that the environment in which all of this takes place is also highly important. In supporting Goal 4 of the SDGs, the ASPG offers suggestions, ideas, and examples of how to develop a quality early childhood curriculum based on *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Siolta* (2006). The ASPG is intended to help practitioners to build, reflect on and extend their curriculum to support babies, toddlers and young children's holistic learning and development. The resources can help them to identify priorities for development, and to plan actions for positive change. In this way, the ASPG can be used to begin to realise Goal 4 of the SDGs through on-going review, development and improvement. The resources on the ASPG include exemplars of practice, information leaflets and expert inputs, on topics which helps realise the view of early childhood as the optimum time to support sustainable living, and building social competence. Some of the resources that might be useful for ESD are listed below in Appendix 1.

Progress to date

Since its initial publication, there have been notable advancements in engagement with *Aistear* (Brennan and Forster, 2022). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the implementation of the Framework has faced challenges, including insufficient support for implementing *Aistear* in early childhood settings, and limited projects aimed at equipping practitioners with the necessary skills to effectively engage with it (French, 2013; Farrell, 2016; Walsh, 2016; DES, 2018). As a result, many practitioners struggle to incorporate its Principles, Themes and Guidelines into their practice, and in particular, into their planning

and review processes (DES, 2018). Nevertheless, many have engaged with the Framework over the years both on their own and as part of Government funded projects, and there is also a very positive development in the form of a commitment outlined in 'First 5' (2019), which proposes a national plan for the development and implementation of *Aistear* in all settings for babies, toddlers, and young children. This commitment includes "making the application of these frameworks a contractual requirement of ... funding schemes and give consideration to, over time, making adherence to the frameworks a statutory requirement" (GoI, 2019, p.157). This commitment, coupled with the planned update of *Aistear*, has the potential to reignite interest and engagement with the framework.

The aim of updating *Aistear* is to continue to support the delivery of a child-led, emergent, and meaningful play-based curriculum that places children's rights, needs and interests at the core (French and McKenna, 2022). By doing so, it will empower babies, toddlers and young children to become even greater agents of change in promoting sustainable living. For more information, please refer to the NCCA's second paper entitled *Embedding sustainability in an updated Aistear* (Skehill and Daly) which provides insights into Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Updating *Aistear* process.

Conclusion

Since its publication in 2009, *Aistear* has emphasised the significant role of early childhood in supporting quality education for babies, toddlers, and young children. It has laid the foundation for realising Goal 4 of the SDGs and in promoting positive learning dispositions related to sustainable living as set out in the 17 SDGs (UN, 2015). Recognising babies, toddlers, and young children as competent and confident agents of change is crucial for effectively achieving the SDGs. This article explored the realisation of the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education), through the lens of *Aistear*. It serves as a reflection on the journey of *Aistear* thus far, before moving forward with the introduction of an updated version for the early childhood sector in Ireland in 2024.

The article highlights the innovative aspects of *Aistear*'s contents, which establish educational foundations enabling the achievement of Goal 4 of the SDGs through enriching and rewarding learning experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children. It concludes by alerting readers to resources in the ASPG that can support various aspects of practice related to sustainable living.

The Framework and all those who have engaged with it to date, have played a vital role in advancing the realisation of the SDGs (UN, 2015) through empowering babies, toddlers, and young children to be global citizens and agents of, and for, change in promoting sustainable living.

Appendix 1: Resources from the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide

Using open-ended materials

Prioritising outdoor play for toddlers (Birth – 3 years)

Building a curriculum in the outdoor learning environment (Birth- 3 years)

Creating and Using the Outdoor Learning Environment (Birth - 3 years)

Creating and Using the Outdoor Learning Environment (3 - 6 years)

Helping babies and toddlers to develop positive learning dispositions

Helping young children to develop positive learning dispositions

Promoting the development of positive learning dispositions through caring for animals

Open-ended play resources (Birth-6years)

The power of play in building empathy and social competence

What is cultural pedagogy

The role of the educator in cultural pedagogy

Resources for Play

The visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth - 6 years)

Provocations and the learning environment in the visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth - 6 years).

Three ideas for supporting visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth - 6 years)

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Empowering babies, toddlers, young children and educators as global citizens: Action research as a means to facilitate education for sustainable development (ESD) in the early years setting



Sharon Skehill and Lisa Flaherty

Abstract

This article focuses on an action research project investigating understandings and experiences of education for sustainable development (ESD) with educators, babies, toddlers and children in an outdoor early years and school-aged childcare (SAC) setting. Using an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological lens, the findings illustrate the centrality of the role of the educator in embedding ESD in the established curriculum framework, and the benefits of outdoor-based pedagogy in this process. Informed proposals pertaining to provocations, invitations and activities linked to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are discussed, as well as reference to the hidden curriculum in realising how one's image of the child permeates all elements of practice.

Introduction

This article is presented as part of an action research project designed as a continuous professional development (CPD) opportunity for our staff team working in a full daycare setting in rural Galway. As educators working in a registered outdoor early years and school aged childcare (SAC) setting, there is an easy assumption that we are attuned to education for sustainable development (ESD). We are immersed in nature and our curriculum is embedded in serendipity, seasonal changes and happenings. ESD is often understood as connecting children to nature in this way, thereby increasing their environmental literacy and empowering them to create a more sustainable future (United Nations (UN), 2015; UNESCO, 2020; Spiteri, 2022). However, we also recognise that sustainability as a concept is one that is difficult to define and understand in the early years sector and is, as presented by Ranta (2023), an ever-evolving and value-laden concept, which can have different meanings in different contexts. Anecdotally, we know that there has been an emphasis on ESD from an environmental perspective in the education system in Ireland, but there is a developing awareness of the need for a more explicit focus on learning around compassion, respect, equity and fairness in our world (UNESCO, 2008). This is encapsulated in the “7 Rs for ESD” which includes, not only our familiar “reduce; reuse and recycle”, but also “respect; repair; reflect and refuse” (ibid, 2008, p.12). The aim of this action research project was to consider what sustainability looks like in our learning environments from the perspective of the staff team, and the children, and to identify ways in which we could engage with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to develop our practice. Engdahl (2015) sees the purpose of ESD as re-orientating education to contribute to a sustainable future by re-thinking and re-framing educational programmes and pedagogies to support cultural and social transformations.

Aligned with such thinking is the concept of social leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC) which O’Sullivan and Sakr (2022) describe as those who lead with a social purpose,

explaining that “social leadership is not exclusive to those occupying formal leadership and management positions within ECEC organisations” (p.6). This model of social leadership is one that resonates within our setting with a culture of collaborative innovation whereby we invest in each other’s leadership, and this is made possible by “facilitating powerful conversations” (ibid, p.14), which supports reflection and change (Skehill, 2021; 2022). In keeping with the principles of O’Sullivan’s and Sakr’s (2022) understanding of social leadership, this action research project created the space for conversation around sowing the seeds of sustainability. The cultural context of the setting will be discussed as a foundation for understanding the perspectives of educators and children relating to ESD. This societal backdrop is an important element of interpreting the lived experiences within our setting, which will be described within the theoretical framework and methodology of the project. The findings will be discussed in relation to key messages developed from the data relating to the role of the educator in ESD; the value of our outdoor ethos; provocations and activities to support learning about sustainability; the hidden curriculum, and finally, to outline actions planned and reflections on our work in supporting ESD with babies, toddlers and children.

Context of the study

Our full daycare setting caters for babies, toddlers and children up to the age of 13 years with the vast majority of time spent in the outdoor environment, including opportunity for sleep, rest and meal times in the outdoors. All age groups have open access to the sensory gardens; vegetable patches; wildflower and grassy areas; mud kitchens; trees for climbing and for shelter; water; mud piles and bug hotels. The play-based curriculum is guided by the *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009) and takes influence from educational pioneers such as Froebel (1903), Steiner (1909), Montessori (1909) and Malaguzzi (1993) in developing our nature-based pedagogy. The *Aistear* themes of Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking provide the basis for the early years programme, which incorporates a blend of free-play;

guided play opportunities; and structured, intentional playful learning opportunities within the routines of the day. There is an emphasis on a slow, relational pedagogical approach, which creates time and space for babies, toddlers and children to experience the natural joy of learning in the outdoor environment. Crucially, our work is embedded in the image of each child as competent and capable, as rights-holders and global citizens. This understanding of citizenship is informed by a deep connection and belonging to place, family and community. Ryzhova (2016) recognises the importance of close links such as these in drawing together and involving many people in coming to learn about sustainability. However, this also draws attention to limitations of this study in the constructs of childhood and perceptions of ESD on this global stage.

Ellyatt (2020) presents seven core human development needs, which she has linked to the SDGs to support understanding of these concepts in early childhood, which align with the social pedagogy of our setting. She describes our need for *security*- to have safe, healthy and secure environments; to develop positive *relationships* with ourselves, others and the natural world; to feel strong and have *independence*; *engagement* – to be able to explore and take risks; *fulfilment* – to test our skills and express our thoughts; to be able to *contribute* to something greater than ourselves; and to have the opportunity to *grow* in who we are, and what we know (See Flourishing Project, 2019). The key message here to understand global citizenship in early childhood and beyond is Ellyatt's assertion that "no matter where we live in the world, these needs are the same" (2020, p. 7). The early years setting creates this child-centred space, for meeting these needs and subsequently shaping values, beliefs and behaviours as a result of children's experiences, which can have a profound effect on sustainability. An understanding of ESD is highlighted by Dean and Elliott (2022) as that which goes beyond the impact of environmental issues but also includes substantial issues concerning social justice, and human rights, which are evidenced in the principles and themes of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009).

Research design

Action research is an empowering cyclical process of professional development whereby educators are responsible for identifying the areas of practice they want to develop or improve, and taking steps to collaborate, and make changes to their practice (Mertler, 2019). Similarly, McNiff (2017) presents an understanding of action research as commitment to reflection, knowledge generation, participative working, and commitment to change and development. This qualitative study is guided by the philosophy of Heidegger's (1929) interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology, which emphasises the importance of acknowledging the context and the perceptions of those involved, which aligns with the reflexive nature of action research.

Gibbs (2013) presents an interesting discussion around efforts to consider curriculum from the perspective of the workplace, and how a phenomenological analysis of practice, creates space for questioning notions of knowledge and routine. The involvement of babies, toddlers and children at the centre of this 'workplace' means that those who know them best in the setting, namely their key workers and other educators, notice and observe what is important to the children, naming and interpreting experiences in the routines and environment. This type of participatory research is embedded in a child-led curriculum, which is similarly based on "the notion of an agentic child who is offered 'space' to be heard for his or her views and will have these respected and acted upon" (Palaialogou, 2019).

In the complexity of this shared lived experience, data collection involved a mosaic of methods including initial semi-structured questionnaires, which were shared with the staff team (17) with the aim of identifying their knowledge and attitudes towards sustainability, and what ideas they have for change. The educators are considered co-researchers in facilitating meaningful communication of the voices of babies, toddlers and young children in their key groups. These experiences are documented through child-conversations; observations; anecdotal notes; learning stories;

as well as reflective dialogue between the staff team regarding their key groups of children. Team meetings and informal conversations during the working day served as focus groups to discuss ideas and plans. As researchers and educators within the setting, there is ongoing reflection on assumptions and preconceived understandings of practice (Brookfield, 2017; Musgrave, 2019). A culture of conversation has created capacity for open dialogue about the different lenses through which, we view life experiences. Our ethical practice is underpinned by the principles of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) as well as informed by Lundy's (2007) model of participation, and this guides practitioner research in terms of our respectful view of each child in our setting. There are no formal ethical processes in place, but child assent is embedded in relational pedagogy, and parental consent for non-identifiable practitioner research has been formally attained.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach guided the analysis of the findings in considering what ESD looked like in our practice with babies, toddlers and young children, noting the latent and semantic themes that developed from the reflective process of interpreting the data.

In this case, interpretative phenomenology is not only about describing the phenomenon from the educator and child perspective, but also to interpret and find meaning within these life-world experiences. The analysis of data in IHP always begins with the researcher, as the interpreter, reflecting on one's pre-understandings of knowledge and our assumptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Heidegger, 1929; Gadamer, 2004). McManus-Holroyd (2007) describes this as "an art of understanding", that necessitates the continual reflexivity within the hermeneutic cycle throughout the research process.

Findings and discussion

The themes developed from the data are necessarily interwoven with literature and researcher interpretation, to elicit the “essence of meaning within the holistic context” (Groenewald 2004, p. 50) to provide a depth of understanding of ESD in our setting. The findings and discussion in this study are not necessarily about filling a gap in research but instead are about “contributing to a rich tapestry of understanding...in different places, spaces and times” (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 120) in relation to ESD in early childhood.

The role of the educator

The findings from this study are similar to those from Spiteri’s (2022) phenomenological investigation in relation to educators’ perceptions of environmental sustainability, which identify key messages pertaining to environmental concerns, responsibility and protection. Educators here discuss their “important role” (P1) “to model” (P3; 9) sustainability for the children, to take a “protective stance” (P8), noting that “young children learn from example and mimic the actions of those around them” (P7). There is explicit reference in the questionnaires to examples of strategies and actions to address the environmental pillars of the SDGs, which reflect the perspective of the educators, and the traditional practices embedded in a rural community, which anecdotally is more attuned to the rhythm of the environment. The emergent curriculum (Jones, 2012) draws upon such traditions through connections with home, and the environment and which is advocated within international ESD policy (UNESCO, 2008) in valuing the wisdom of such traditions. Educators identified the importance of our practices relating to water conservation; saving energy; growing our own vegetables, flowers and herbs; reducing use of plastic; re-purposing materials and resources; caring for animals, birds, bees, bugs and plants; minimising food waste and other practical strategies, which align with similar case studies (Davis, 2008; Didonet, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2014; Bonnett, 2021).

However, the findings from this study also illustrate latent codes pertaining to other key issues, which align with Dean and Elliott's (2022) international study relating to "urgency, equity and agency" in early childhood education for sustainability (p. 58). The respectful image of the child, which informs our pedagogical practice, underpins responses which note educators' responsibility to "nurture children's sense of wonder and awe and encourage them to take an active part in caring for the environment" (P10), speaking of "their responsibility" as babies, toddlers and young children "to care for their local community and other communities" (P15), indicating actualisation of the concept of the competent and agentic child (Malaguzzi, 1993; Sorin, 2005; NCCA, 2009). As key educators interpreting the voices of babies, toddlers and children in their care, follow-up conversations pertaining to actualisation of the SDGs in practice as the project progressed, prompted reflection on our role in responding to needs of the group (Ellyatt, 2020). The ethos of the setting rests on a concept of relational pedagogy, which Ljungblad (2019, p. 6) identifies as that "in-between space" between educator and child where trust and respect promote positive relationships, where the child can flourish and grow. In learning to "take care of each other", the staff team took action to ensure fresh fruit, drinks and snacks are freely available to all children throughout the day (SDGs 1,2,3,6); that personal care and daily routines are moments for togetherness and making connections (SDGs 3,4,10); that the curriculum and the learning environment are responsive to the diversity of needs, wants and interests of children and families (SDGs 1,2,3,4,5,10,16).

Embedding ESD in this holistic way aligns with Ellyatt's (2021) compassionate perspective, which acknowledges that "in order to feel secure and that they belong, young children model and adopt the values of the adults in their worlds" (p. 6), which emphasises the centrality of the role of the educator in this regard. Wang *et al.* (2011) acknowledge the importance of education in equipping children with skills and knowledge for a capitalist workforce, but simultaneously consider this element of social justice, fairness and human rights as a priority across school curriculum. Findings from this action research project indicated the importance of the ethos of

the setting underpinning practice, but also draws attention to the need for a more focused intentionality in addressing issues of poverty, diversity, justice, fairness and rights in the social pedagogy of the setting. This understanding flows on to the next theme regarding the value of our outdoor provision, and the role of the educator in leading with a social purpose within this space.

The value of our outdoor ethos

The European Commission (2022) recognises that education and care for the earth begins in early childhood, and this is clearly illustrated in educator responses and observations of the children's interactions with nature in the outdoor environments here. Learning stories illustrate countless moments and experiences in the outdoors where babies, toddlers and young children are immersed in nature, coming to "develop a good relationship with the natural environment" (p.17); "to appreciate and respect nature" (p.12) and "to care for all living things" (p.3). Educators also report on how our youngest citizens, the babies and toddlers at the nursery, "learn responsibility in caring for the environment and a sense of wonder and awe as they engage with it" (p.7). This reality is evidenced in the gardens of the setting where a rich ecosystem of plants, wildflowers, native trees and grasses are enjoyed by babies and toddlers. Educators "encourage them to be very careful not to pull flowers and to take care of them instead, through watering, weeding and being gentle" (p.13), and discuss the value of bug hotels with this young cohort, which "teaches them to be kind to all creatures and hopefully this will stay with them when they outgrow the service" (p.5). Hagglund and Johansson (2014) see such connectedness as that which will prompt concern and consideration for future others in creating this understanding of belonging and responsibility as global citizens. We know that hands-on and meaningful experiences of learning and engagement need to be rooted in concrete reality for young children (NCCA, 2009; UNESCO, 2008), which attributes real value to exploratory play in the outdoor environment. Furthermore, Dean and Elliott (2022) specify the need to distinguish between children engaged *in* outdoor play rather than

with the environment and empower children to have agency in their explorations. The children presented a novel example of such engagement with the environment in considering how to address a flooding issue in the back garden. Together, we had tried to figure out how to deal with the huge puddles and muckiness which sat just outside our outdoor classroom. Through ongoing observation of the rainfall, and investigation of how the water appeared and disappeared, a project began, to build a water feature and redirect the rainfall.

The planning processes illustrated in Figure 1 provide example of the voice of the child in the curriculum here, and the shared workload illustrates their competency and our respect for their participation in the engineering project. Such meaningful involvement and participation are identified by Engdahl (2015) as essential elements of ESD through this emphasis on empowerment and agency for active citizenship.

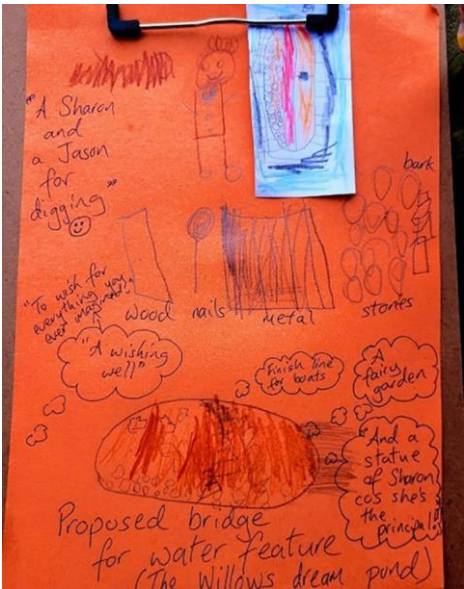


Figure 1: Children's planning

Kemple *et al.* (2016) discuss the eco-psychological self, asserting that owing to our evolution within the natural world, we are genetically predisposed and instinctively inclined towards empathy and affiliation with nature. This view is evidenced in the findings from this study where the perspective of the educator notes how the outdoor environment “encourages both staff and children to build positive relationships, improve self-awareness and understanding of others and the world around them” (P2). Being outdoors all year round connects children to the seasons and helps them “to relate to the different types of weather” (P9) and to notice the changes throughout the year. A hearty relational response from one educator notes the value of outdoor play and learning in “contributing to the wellbeing of our children and enables them to become resilient, responsible and successful lifelong learners, who value our culture and contribute effectively to our local and global community” (P8). These findings from our study pertaining to outdoor learning challenges findings from Engdahl’s (2015) study involving 19 countries, who found that adults often underestimate the competencies of young children. In thinking about what our curriculum in the outdoors looks like, the next theme presents provocations and activities, which support ESD for babies, toddlers and children.

Provocations, invitations and activities to support ESD

ESD is founded on broad pedagogical principles including “a holistic, interdisciplinary and multi-method approach; experiential learning; values-driven and creativity; inquiry-based learning; critical thinking and problem solving; story-telling; locally-relevant, authentic and applicable” (UNESCO, 2005; p.350). These principles have a resounding connection with those of *Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework* (NCCA, 2009) with its emphasis on holistic, inquiry-based learning, and its view of children as competent citizens, as well as aligning with the values of Froebel (1903), Steiner (1909), Malaguzzi (1993) and Montessori (1909) in early childhood. In considering what ESD and the SDGs look like in

the outdoor learning, the findings from the educators and children's perspectives communicate a myriad of playful opportunities, which take inspiration from the fore-mentioned pedagogical perspectives. Several educators commented on the importance of connections with the community, with one response noting the value of "nature walks where they notice and learn to appreciate the wonders of nature" (P7). The babies and toddlers eagerly anticipate walks around the rural community where they can visit local farms, see animals and birds, and come to develop a sense of belonging by being visible, and recognised in the locality. Trips to local heritage and historical sites, woodlands and rivers are reported by the children as exciting adventures, and also create opportunities for learning about nature, history and culture. Such experiences align with an understanding of ESD as having relevance and purpose for young children (UNESCO, 2008).

While there are considerations of tensions between a more formal adult-led instructions and child-centred pedagogies in early childhood (Wang *et al.*, 2011; Dean and Elliott, 2022), the findings from this study, illustrate the flexibility of the learning goals of *Aistear* in developing a curriculum that works in context, rather than attempting to engage with abstract concepts imposed from the outside.

Some examples shared by the educators and the children, via conversations and observations, include provocations set out and set up for children's exploration and discovery relating to planting flowers, herbs and fruits, which have the dual purpose of learning about biodiversity and food production. Learning about the lifecycles of bugs, animals and plants in the multitude of ways that children explore, creates an awareness of the balance of nature and our role in protecting the environment. Art and craft invitations are set out for the children using recyclable materials to inspire creativity in communicating, engineering and imagination. Parents are invited to donate fancy hats, scarfs, handbags, costume jewellery and shoes, to give a new lease of life to these items in dress-up areas for all the age-groups. Rainwater is gathered to fill water tables, with solar fountains used to enhance the space and prevent wastage.

Froebel's idea of 'happenstance' or serendipity is a central feature of the emergent curriculum at our setting. These are the wonderful and unexpected moments that nature gives us, and enables us to go on a journey of discovery with the children. Learning stories and observations of such experiences illustrate the joy of coming to know about rainbows that appear in the sky; frost that creates magical patterns overnight; strawberries being eaten by a mysterious creature in the garden; pumpkin seeds that start to grow; a family of bees on purple flowers; stormy wind that blows down the hazelnuts.

The daily routines, influenced by Steiner's rhythms of the day, are noted in the findings as key moments to embed practices of sustainability. Babies, toddlers and young children are encouraged to prepare food together; to self-serve at meal times, guided by educators who model minimising food waste with scraps saved for feeding time at a local farm. Real dishes and cutlery are used to minimise use of plastic, and any recyclable containers are washed by the children, and put in separate bins.

In considering the broader context of the SDGs, the findings from our action research project again highlighted the need to be more explicit in educators' intentions to support diversity, equity and fairness in everyday practice. While these concepts are embedded in the pedagogical principles guiding our work, reflection on this process illustrates opportunities for more informed actions to engage with ESD. The final theme from the data however, illustrates examples of the hidden curriculum, which reverts back to our image of the child and our role in supporting them to reach their potential.

The hidden curriculum

The hidden curriculum refers to the social rules, attitudes and values practiced and modelled in the environment, which Brock et al. (2009) describe as the unplanned learning experiences for children. This is an important theme as a point of reflection on our professional roles in the setting. Some key messages from the life

world of the educators validate social leadership in empowering all staff members in their role promoting ESD. Ellyatt (2021) explains that “understanding why we are the way we are, that our values and personalities are a reflection of what has happened to us in our lives, and that others have experienced the world differently, starts us on the path to compassion” (p. 5). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach aligns with this view in recognising and respecting the views and experiences of others to provide different perspectives on shared phenomenon (Gadamer, 2004). One such ‘gem’ in the data (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022) is the ease of connection with the natural world and the value of loose parts in the children’s play. Conversations document a chat between a 6-year-old and an educator discussing whether they should avoid the long grassy area on a rainy morning with the response being that “It’s fine - I just want to be in nature”. Another child is depicted in a photo proudly presenting “a helicopter” (a sycamore seed) with three wings, knowing the treasure he has found amidst a garden of one and two-winged helicopters. A photo of a 1-year-old finding raspberries in the garden shows the delight of discovery, while another shows a small group of toddlers going for a walk on the green, gathering daisies to put in their mudpies. An easy engagement with nature is illustrated in a learning story from a group of 2 to 3-year olds, which depicts a child’s drawing of a bee, with their story captured in words by their key educator:

“This is the bee we were taking care of. The bee’s wing was broken. We gave him water” (A).

“We feed him dandelions” (G).

“Me and H, we was teaching him how to fly and we was jumping and flapping our arms” (Ao).

Educators’ responses illustrate similar mindsets regarding this respect for nature, noting the importance of “picking resources that have fallen onto the ground not pull them from the trees” (P14), communicated with an ease of assumption of busy explorations that need to be monitored.

The questionnaires illustrate repetition of compassionate phrases depicting real attunement to the babies, toddlers and children such as “I notice”; “to actively listen and seek opportunities to support”; “to include the children’s thoughts and ideas”; “our responsibility to take care of each other”; “our children”. These views indicate an implicit understanding of social and political values of ESD by virtue of an empathic respect for babies, toddlers and young children, underpinned by the simple virtues of kindness and fairness. While the actions from this project, which will be outlined in the concluding section, provide scope for developing our knowledge and practice, the findings illustrate how our setting has an existing foundation and “an enormous potential in fostering values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that support sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2008). Children model what they see and experience – learning to be compassionate, to respect selves, others and the environment, to respect differences, equity and fairness. This is evidenced in the interactions and friendships of babies, toddlers and children here validating Nodding’s (2012) care theory, which argues that those who are cared for by others in a genuine and sensitive manner, will in turn, develop this empathy and such caring virtues.

Actions to support ESD in the setting

First and foremost, action research is a commitment to educational improvement with the most immediate and useful purpose being its contribution to transformation of one’s own practice (McNiff, 2016, 2017; Mertler, 2019; Glenn *et al.* 2023). In realising the existing understanding of ESD from the perspectives of the educators, and the lived experiences of babies, toddlers and young children in our outdoor early years setting, specific actions have been identified to implement the SDGs in our curriculum.

Crucially, there is a need to extend our knowledge of ESD in relation to environmental, social/cultural, economic and political dimensions and, in response to the findings, consider how we can embed and make explicit our commitment to justice, equity, democracy and fairness in our setting. Research notes the urgency

of supporting educators to understand how to embed ESD in the curriculum (Bonnett, 2021; Spiteri, 2022; Ranta, 2023). Actions have already taken place within the team pertaining to in-house training on the rights of babies, toddlers and young children; job-shadowing experiences with educators from Denmark and Lithuania; online webinars and lectures pertaining to pedagogical practice; and some of our educators who have completed the Leadership for Inclusion in the early years (LINC) programme have engaged with the subsequent CPD pertaining to sustainability (Skehill, 2023). In responding to research and policy recommendations for developing competencies around sustainability, it would be beneficial to open up the LINC CPD programme for all educators in a collaborative effort to address issues pertaining to ESD.

While the cyclical nature of action research creates space for reflective professional dialogue on proposed changes to practice, this article concludes by sharing some of the suggested actions from the findings, with the intention of supporting awareness of how SDGs can be implemented in the early years setting. This list (Table 1) is not exhaustive but simply illustrates possible beginnings:

Table 1 Proposed actions from the findings

SDG	Sustainable development goal	SDGs in Action
1	No poverty	Developing dispositions of kindness and sharing
2	Zero hunger	Fresh fruit and snacks freely available in the setting; growing fruit, herbs and vegetables
3	Good health and wellbeing	Outdoor play and learning with friends and other key people
4	Quality education	Nurturing curiosity and a love of learning
5	Gender equality	Learning about families and challenging role stereotypes
6	Clean water and sanitation	Water conservation in play; handwashing practices

7	Affordable, clean electricity	Reduce energy consumption by being outdoors
8	Meaningful work and economic wellbeing	Ensuring a fair wage and conditions for educators with opportunities for professional development; providing affordable childcare and support for families
9	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Audit on what things we need and what things we can share so we can learn to be activists
10	Reduced inequalities	Ensuring all children can participate in a meaningful way in the curriculum and know that they matter
11	Sustainable cities and communities	Learning what is special about our neighbourhood and our responsibility in caring for the community
12	Responsible consumption and production	Growing our own food; minimising waste; sourcing local produce; providing nutritious meals.
13	Climate action	Learning about the weather and changes in nature throughout the seasons
14	Life below water	Reduce and refuse use of plastic which can harm our oceans
15	Life on land	Plant wildflowers for the bees and learn all about the plant and animal kingdom; create storybooks of nature
16	Peace, justice and strong institutions	Ensuring our setting is a safe place for children and learning to care for each other
17	Partnerships for the goals	Creating links with home and the community to remember how things were and use shared wisdom to change.

An important consideration in understanding the interpretation of these goals in practice relates back to the child-centred ethos of the setting whereby babies, toddlers and young children are invited, and facilitated to participate in playful activities and provocations, to support their learning and development. A respectful regard for their wants, interests and needs guides the planning and

implementation of and for SDGs in the daily routines of the setting, and sets in motion again, the cyclical process of action research.

Action research projects such as this create space for reflection on values while simultaneously empowering those who experience challenges or who want to act to make change. O’Sullivan and Sakr (2022) discuss the importance of social purpose in ECEC, and argue for leaders to “reject the deficit narrative associated with disadvantage and reframe it both positively and creatively” (p. 23). Notwithstanding the challenges associated with the ECEC sector pertaining to professional role and identity (Oberhuemen, 2015; Moloney and French, 2022; Urban *et al.*, 2017; Oke *et al.*, 2021), research from practice provides opportunity for professional learning, responsibility and autonomy to motivate and inspire practice (Sexton, 2007; Wall *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

This article presents part of our learning journey in coming to understand our role as early years educators as social leaders in supporting the implementation of the SDGs in ECEC. The topic of ESD is broad and complex, and no doubt will take different forms and interpretations as we continue to develop our professional knowledge and pedagogical practice in this regard. This small study is part of our story, unique in our context, yet our experiences might serve to inform those on a similar path. Each action noted above is a springboard for change, creating a cycle of reflection and development, which motivates and inspires us in our work with babies, toddlers and children opening another world of possibilities.

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Attaining Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Target 4.2: Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland



Mary Moloney

Abstract

According to UNESCO (2021) Universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) fosters inclusion by creating an expectation that all children regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, disability and so on, can access a minimum level of service. In the Irish context therefore, the Universal ECCE programme is critical to attaining SDG 4, as it relates to Early Childhood Education and Care. Currently, 95% of eligible children avail of at least one year of universal free pre-primary education and care in Ireland (Pobal, 2022). However, access alone is insufficient. ECEC must be of high quality. To this end, the present article explores a range of policy initiatives and measures directed toward enhancing the quality of ECEC including *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). It also looks at those focused on ensuring equal opportunity for children availing of the ECCE programme such as the *Access and Inclusion Model* (Ireland, 2016) and the *Equal Participation Model* (Ireland, 2023). The vital role of early childhood educators cannot be overlooked, and the need for an appropriately skilled and sustainable workforce has received considerable

attention in recent years (Ireland, 2018; 2022). As discussed throughout the article, these various initiatives support the attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2 in Ireland. Although there is much to celebrate, it is important to remain vigilant. To ensure continued attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2, and to maintain current progress, the government must continue to invest in the ECEC profession. In the words of Pia Britto (2015), senior advisor on Early Childhood Development (ECD) at UNICEF, investing in ECEC is “fiscally smart, scientifically credible and morally correct” for children, early childhood educators and for society (www.unicef.cn). Let us not forget, early childhood education and care is the foundation of sustainable development.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations published the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comprising 17 interlinked and interrelated Sustainable Development Goals. These Goals, which are a call to action, aim by 2030, to eradicate poverty and hunger, restore human dignity and equality, protect the planet, manage natural resources, promote economic prosperity, and foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies (UN, 2015). As illustrated in figure 1, the 17 SDGs, associated 169 targets and 230 indicators focus on five key elements.

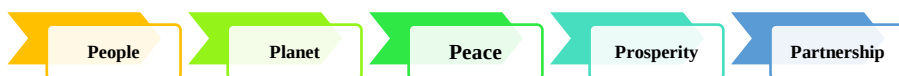


Figure 1. Primary Focus of the Sustainable Development Goals

Source: <https://www.cso.ie/en/unsdgs/>

Although the SDGs are universal, they are not accompanied by any legal obligation. However, Janoušková, Hák and Moldan (2018) note that all countries are expected to take responsibility, and create structures to attain all 17 goals. Clearly, the SDGs are to the forefront of Government initiatives nationally, and indeed, worldwide. To this end, the Irish State has developed two *Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plans* to provide a whole-of-

government approach to implementing the SDGs. The first, covered the period 2018-2022 (Ireland, 2018a), while the second implementation plan, relates to the period from 2022-2024 (Ireland, 2022). In addition, the State has established an SDG data-hub, a collaborative online platform for reporting on progress toward the goals and sharing information on related activities (Government of Ireland and Tailte Eireann, 2023).

This article, which is concerned with SGD 4: Quality Education, focuses upon the attainment of Target 4.2 in the Irish context. Specifically, Target 4.2 urges countries, “by 2030, [to] assure that all boys and girls have access to high-quality early care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” (UN, 2015, 4.2).

The article therefore, explores a range of policy initiatives concerning access to, quality of, and equality of opportunity in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland. It begins with a brief discussion of the importance of ECEC, moving on to explore how SDG4: Target 4.2 is being progressed in Ireland, through a range of initiatives, including the universal free Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme; the *Access and Inclusion Model*, consideration of universal and targeted supports to address socio-economic disadvantage, Early Years Education Inspections, and Early childhood educator qualifications. While these various initiatives support the attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2 in Ireland, as discussed later in the article, it is important not to become complacent. While there is much to celebrate, attainment of Target 4.2 may potentially be stymied by issues of recruitment and retention within the ECEC profession in Ireland.

The Importance of Early Childhood Education and Care

In 2017, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the Juncker Commission declared the European Pillar of Social Rights. This Pillar of Social Rights is underpinned by 20 principles, of which, Principle 11: Childcare and Support to Children, establishes that all children have the right to:

- Affordable quality Early Childhood Education and Care, and
- Protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities (European Commission, 2018)

According to the European Commission (EC, 2023), ECEC is now a priority area under the European Education Area. The Council of the European Union has therefore, set a target, that by 2030, at least 96% of children aged between three years old and compulsory school starting age will participate in ECEC (EC, 2023). This aim is not surprising given the role of ECEC in supporting, facilitating and enhancing early childhood development and learning.

It is widely acknowledged that during early childhood, from birth to five years, a child's brain develops more rapidly than at any other time in the lifespan (Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2023; First Five Years Fund (FFYF), 2023). Consequently, the first five years is a critical period for learning and growth (Ireland, 2018b; FFYF, 2023), "setting children up for lifelong success" (An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, 2023, Foreword to *First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2021-22*, p.5).

Concerning SDG 4 in particular, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon references the critical importance of early childhood development (ECD). He notes that the Sustainable Development Goals "recognize that early childhood development can help drive the transformation we hope to achieve over the next 15 years." (UN Secretary General, 2015). He further notes that

“nutrition, stimulation, protection and loving care are essential to the healthy development of children’s brains”, helping them to ‘grow and learn, to be more resilient in adversity and to be better able to embrace opportunity’ (Ibid.).

Adding to the discourse around the importance of ECD, Pia Britto, senior advisor on early childhood development at UNICEF (2015), argues that it is the foundation of sustainable development. She points to the multiplier effect of ECD on many of the SDGs. Drawing from Britto’s stance, Table 1, provides an overview of the relationship between ECD and several Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), highlighting its role in eradicating poverty, ending hunger, ensuring lifelong learning, achieving gender equality, and so on.

Table 1. Relationship between Early Childhood Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

<i>Goal</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Relationship with Early Childhood Development</i>
1	Eradicate Poverty	ECD has been documented to be one of the most cost-effective strategies for alleviating poverty. During early childhood, when the brain has the maximum capacity to develop in the fullness of its complexity, children learn the skills that will help them flourish in a 21st-century world.
2	End Hunger and Improve Nutrition	Children who receive early stimulation with nutrition supplements have better outcomes than children who only receive nutrition supplements, thereby amplifying the impact of nutrition. Furthermore, ECD interventions buffer the negative effect of stress thereby improving absorption of nutritional intake
3	Ensure Healthy Lives	ECD interventions early in life set a trajectory for good lifelong health. It can lead to lower incidence of cardiovascular and non-communicable diseases and can increase well-being. With ECD, not only do children survive, they thrive.

4	Ensure Lifelong Learning	Learning begins at birth. ECD interventions have proven to be the foundation for later learning, academic success and productivity. A study on increasing pre-school enrolment in 73 countries found higher future wages of US\$6 to US\$17 per dollar invested. This points to potential long-term benefits ranging from US\$11 to US\$34 billion.
5	Achieve Gender Equality	The relationship between early childhood development and women's economic empowerment is clear. Greater investment in high-quality and affordable childcare is linked to greater opportunities for women's economic advancement and empowerment.
8	Promote Decent Work for All	Adequate early childhood care and education is a critical element of the decent work agenda. Investments in professionalization of the early childhood workforce contribute to full and productive employment, especially for women.
10	Reduce Inequality within and among Countries	Inequality often begins before birth. ECD is a powerful equalizer. The first five years of a child's life provides a window of opportunity to provide interventions that can close the inequality gap between children born into disadvantage and those born with many advantages. Disadvantaged children who receive ECD services earn up to 25 per cent more as adults compared with children who did not receive the services. Consequently, they almost catch up in earnings to their non-disadvantaged peers.
11	Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable	ECD requires safe spaces that have sustainable, natural, and biophilic features, thereby providing the entry point for cities and human settlements.
12	Ensure Sustainable Consumption	ECD programmes establish patterns of consumption, attitudes towards conservation and behavioural practices

		that will preserve the environment. What children learn early lasts a lifetime.
16	Promote Peaceful Societies	Early childhood interventions have the potential to promote healthy neurobiology, foster resilience in children and instil values and behaviours that can reduce violence and promote peace. ECD interventions have been shown to lead to lower rates of violence in the home and greater social cohesion in communities.
17	Strengthen the Means of Implementation	Measurement of ECD at global, regional and national levels can serve as a powerful tool to revitalize global partnerships.

Source: Pia Britto, 2015

Clearly, SDG 4: Target 4.2, which centres on high-quality ECEC is fundamental to achieving the SDGs relating to poverty, inequality, gender and social inclusion, health and well-being, and the promotion of a sustainable future for all. Quality ECEC is therefore essential from an early age, laying the foundations for lifelong learning. In the context of the 2030 Agenda ECEC can potentially establish patterns of consumption, attitudes towards conservation and behavioural practices that will help to preserve the environment. Given the multiplier effect of ECD across several SDGs, as illustrated in Table 1, Pia Britto describes investment in ECD as “fiscally smart...[and] scientifically credible and morally correct.” (www.unicef.cn). As such, investing in ECEC benefits children and societies (Ireland, 2018b; FFYF, 2023; OECD, n.d). Indeed, UNESCO (2021, p.2) suggests that the absence of ECEC “can lock children into deprivation and marginalization,” the antithesis of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Progressing Sustainable Development Goal 4: Target 4.2 in Ireland

As mentioned earlier, Target 4.2 urges countries to assure that by 2030, “all boys and girls have access to high-quality early care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” (UN 2015, 4.2). Predating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)⁵, introduced a universal free Pre-school Year scheme in 2010. This scheme gave children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme based-activities in the year before commencing primary school. Consistent with a commitment in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* (Ireland, 2016), the scheme was expanded from one year to two years’ provision in 2018. Since September 2018 then, the universal ECCE programme, as it is now known, has been available to all children within the eligible age cohort, providing them with their first experience of formal early learning prior to commencing primary school (www.gov.ie). To be eligible for the 2023/2024 programme year, currently, a child must have turned 2 years and 8 months on or before 31st August 2023, and not be older than 5 years and 6 months on or before 30th June 2024. Under this revised iteration, children can avail of the programme for up to 2 years before commencing primary school.

The ECCE programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week, over 38 weeks per year from September to June in line with the school year. In addition, the programme aims to promote optimal development for all children, narrowing the attainment gap between more and less advantaged children (www.first5fundingmodel.gov.ie). In turn, narrowing the attainment gap between more and less advantaged children helps to address

⁵ The DCYA held responsibility for ECEC between 2011 and 2020. Currently, the ECEC profession operates under the aegis of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

other SDGs, including, SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, and SDG 10: Reduce Inequality.

With regards to the ECCE programme, the State pays a capitation fee to participating settings, who in turn, provide a pre-school programme free of charge to all eligible children. Moloney (2014), suggests that because the programme is universal, and available to all children in the eligible age cohort, irrespective of their parents' financial circumstances, or the location of the setting, it marks a watershed in the development of ECEC in Ireland. Moreover, UNESCO (2021) suggests that universal ECEC can foster inclusion by establishing an expectation that all children regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, disability etc., can access a minimum level of service. Not only does the ECCE programme in Ireland support parents with the cost of ECEC in the two years prior to their child starting school, it helps the Irish State attain Target 4.2 in relation to children accessing ECEC. Furthermore, it helps Ireland to achieve the goal set by the Council of the European Union that by 2030, at least 96% of children aged between three years old and compulsory school starting age will participate in ECEC (European Commission, 2023).

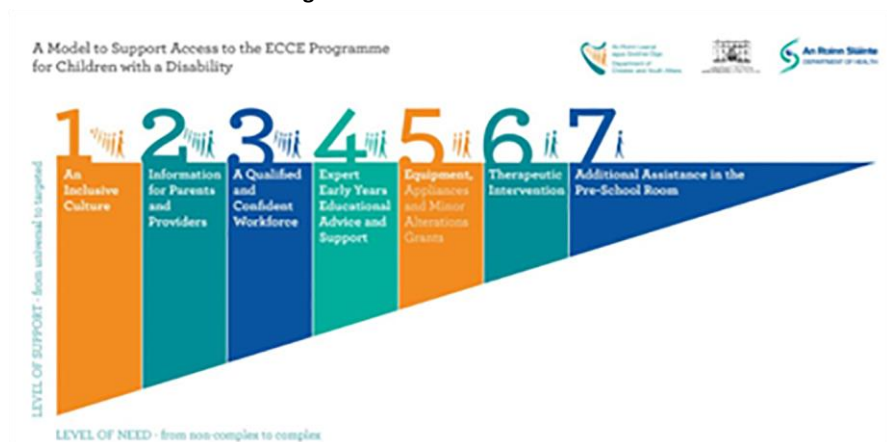
Ireland is on the cusp of reaching this European target, for as indicated through the most up-to-date available figures, 104,612 children benefited from the ECCE programme in 2021-2022 (Pobal, 2022), with 95% of the eligible cohort availing of at least one year of the programme (www.first5fundingmodel.gov.ie). In terms of the diversity of children attending ECEC and School Age Childcare, Pobal (2022) reports that 65% of ECEC/SAC settings provided for 12, 883 children with neither English nor Irish as their first language; 17% provided for 1,866 Traveller children, 7% of settings provided for 507 Roma children, with 75% of settings providing for at least one child with a disability and/or additional needs in 2021-22.

Equal Access to and Participation in the ECCE Programme

While SDG 4: Target 4.2 assures all children have access to high-quality ECEC, as previously mentioned, the European Commission (2018) establishes that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. Access and physical presence are not enough (Moloney and McCarthy, 2018; Moloney and O’Leary, in press). Accordingly, equal opportunities are central to the *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM, 2016); designed to support children with a disability and/or additional needs to access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the *Access and Inclusion Model* involves seven levels of progressive support, moving from universal (Levels 1 to 4) to highly targeted (Levels 5 to 7) based on the strengths and needs of both the child and the early childhood setting.

Figure 2. Access and Inclusion Model



Source: DCYA and Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016.

Pobal (2022) reports that in 2021, 4,244 children across 2,045 settings were supported under the *Access and Inclusion Model*. Of these, 67% of children (n=2,855) accessed AIM Level 7 support, which provides funding for staff to work an additional 10 or 15 hours per week to enable settings reduce the educator-child ratios in an ECCE room.

A qualified and competent workforce is critical to the *Access and Inclusion Model* (Level 3). Accordingly, a new one-year Level 6⁶ Special Purpose Award: Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) commenced in September 2016. Overall, LINC seeks to:

- Equip participants with the knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies to support the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or special needs in ECEC settings
- Prepare participants to adopt a leadership role, that of inclusion coordinator, within settings that enables them to support and supervise other staff in the setting to plan for, implement and review inclusive practice (www.lincprogramme.ie)

According to Moloney and McCarthy (2018), the LINC programme incorporates all the elements associated with effective in-service training – offering a suite of topic specific modules (e.g., child development, inclusion, concepts and strategies, curriculum for inclusion, leadership for inclusion, collaborative practice). It enables participants to apply their knowledge to practice, and provide follow-up support by means of a mentoring visit to the participants’ setting.

The Irish State is also concerned with ameliorating the challenges associated with socio-economic disadvantage for young children. As such, plans are also underway to address socio-economic disadvantage in the context of ECEC. Building on experience of the universal elements of the *Access and Inclusion*

⁶ Ireland uses a National Framework of Qualifications, a 10-level system used to describe qualification in the Irish education and training system.

Model, the programme for a partnership Government: *Partnership for the Public Good* (Ireland, 2021), proposes a system of universal supports, as well as the introduction of additional targeted funding. The proposed *Equal Participation Model* is an element of the recently introduced Together for Better funding model for ECEC, and will focus on settings dealing with the highest levels of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage (Ireland, 2021; Together for Better, 2023). The purpose of the additional funding through the *Equal Participation Model* is to allow eligible settings to provide more consistent and higher-quality interactions with children and their families, through for example, lower educator/child ratios; extra training and/or CPD; retaining higher-quality staff, and the provision of food. In relation to the latter, on November 22nd 2022, Minister for Children, Roderic O’Gorman, announced €150,000 in funding to pilot the provision of hot meals to children in ECEC settings. This pilot scheme is one of a suite of measures within *First 5*, a 10-year whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families to address early childhood poverty, and to support children’s health, early development and education (Ireland, 2018b).

Supporting High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care

As mentioned previously, Target 4.2 references the need for *high-quality* ECEC. Early Childhood Educators and the early childhood curriculum are critical aspects of quality ECEC (Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). The matter of educator qualifications features later in this article. With regards to curriculum in the context of the ECCE programme specifically, participating settings must provide an appropriate pre-school programme that adheres to the principles and standards the national practice frameworks for ECEC in Ireland,

namely *Siolta*⁷ (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) 2006) and *Aistear*⁸ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009). Both frameworks, which cover the period from birth to six years perceive children as confident and competent learners from birth, and celebrate early childhood “as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold” (NCCA, 2009, p. 6). Both frameworks value and promote a nurturing, playful and relational pedagogy (Moloney, in press).

Although the present article focuses upon access to ECEC in keeping with SDG 4: Target 4.2, it is none-the-less pertinent to mention here, the value of *Aistear* in providing opportunities for children to gain key competencies for sustainability, an aspect of quality ECEC. *Aistear* is organised around four interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking. These themes are used to describe learning and development. It includes 12 principles and the *Aistear* Principle: Children as Citizens, which upholds children as citizens with rights and responsibilities (NCCA, 2009) is especially salient. In keeping with the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), and the renowned Lundy (2007), model of participation, the NCCA (2009) recognises that children have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in decisions about matters affecting them. In this way, children have a right to experience democracy, from which, they learn, that, as well as having rights, they also have a responsibility to respect and help others, and to care for their environment (NCCA, 2009). The NCCA (2018) indicate that *Aistear* provides opportunities for young children to gain all the key competencies for sustainability. In particular, the NCCA identifies the theme of

⁷ *Siolta*, the Irish word for seed, refers to the National Quality Framework for children aged from birth to six years.

⁸ *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey, refers to the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged from birth to six years.

Exploring and Thinking as presenting the most opportunities to gain these key competencies.

To support early childhood educators in using the national practice frameworks, the NCCA (2015) developed the *Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide* an online toolkit that helps educators to use *Síolta* and *Aistear* together. This guide includes a range of resources to help educators to critically reflect on their curriculum, to identify what works well, to identify priorities for development and to plan actions for positive change (NCCA, 2015, p.1). Early childhood specialists working with Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Development Service use the *Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide* to provide mentoring and coaching to ECEC settings so they “are of high quality and deliver positive outcomes for children” (Better Start, 2023).

As part of a quality assurance mechanism, and in keeping with the terms of their funding agreement with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), settings participating in the ECCE programme, are required to facilitate inspection of their educational provision by the Department of Education and Skills⁹.

Assuring the Quality of the ECCE Programme

In 2016, at the request of the DCYA, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) commenced Early Years Education Inspections (EYEI) of settings participating in the ECCE programme. The DES (2016; 2018) specify the aim of these inspections in terms of evaluating the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE Programme¹⁰. The main activity of an EYEI, involves an inspector observing the processes and practices relating to children’s learning in the ECEC setting (Department of Education

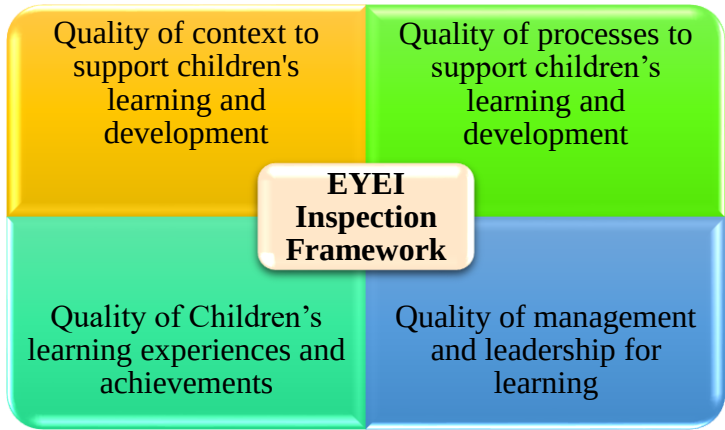
⁹ Now known as the Department of Education

¹⁰ EYEIs been expanded since 2022 to take account of settings providing care and education to children aged from birth to three years also.

(DE) 2022). The overall focus is upon the quality of pedagogy, the opportunities for learning, and children’s educational experiences and achievements (DE, 2022).

The EYEI model of inspection is based on a quality framework informed by the principles of both *Síolta* and *Aistear* (DES, 2016; 2018; 2022), as well as national and international research related to early childhood education and inspection. It incorporates key elements of best practice in early childhood education and categorises practice under four broad areas (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Categories of Practice: Early Years Education Inspection Framework



Source: DES, 2016;2018; DE, 2022.

Clearly, the EYE inspection framework calls for the highest standards of care and education for children availing of the ECCE programme. The DE (2022, p.10) highlight the many benefits of external inspection, noting that they “aid improvement and change in early educational experiences in settings.” They provide an external perspective on the work undertaken by all those working in the setting, and “complement, challenge and validate internal evaluation processes” (p.10). Furthermore, inspection reports provide “objective, evidence-based judgements about the quality of early education provision and affirm aspects of practice that are working well” (p.10).

The outcomes of inspection also inform the judgements of staff about the strengths and priorities for improvement in both provision and pedagogy in the setting. The actions advised by inspectors in the written inspection reports provide important direction for the professional staff in the early learning and care setting to assist with the ongoing development and implementation of plans for quality improvement (DE, 2022, p.10)

In terms of quality assurance, the DES (2018) suggest that the EYEI model has:

- Strengthened the commitment to providing every child with positive early childhood experiences that provide a great start for young children on their educational journey
- Provided robust, authentic information to parents and policymakers about what has been achieved and what still needs to be addressed in the delivery of high-quality early education

It is evident that early childhood educators and managers are expected to make professional judgements about the quality of provision, about how to enhance provision, and to engage in ongoing development, implementation and review of quality improvement plans. Without doubt, early childhood educator “skills and competencies [...] crucially contribute to ECE quality as well as to children’s outcomes” (Vandenbroeck, Lenaerts and Beblavý, 2018, p. 12). As discussed in the following section, Early childhood educator qualifications matter. In fact, the relationship between early childhood educator qualifications and quality ECEC features prominently in policy initiatives in Ireland.

Early Childhood Educator Qualifications

All staff working directly with children in an ECEC setting must hold at least a Level 5 major award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or equivalent as deemed by the DCEDIY

(Ireland, 2016b). Pobal (2022), indicates that 97% of staff working directly with children hold a Level 5 award, while 70% hold a Level 6 award on the NFQ.

The need for ‘an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families’ underpins Building Block 3: Skilled and Sustainable Workforce in *First 5* (Ireland, 2018). This 10-year strategy for babies, young children and their families, recognises that those caring for, and educating young children must be equipped to support early childhood development. Thus, early childhood educators must be appropriately qualified (Ireland, 2018).

The *First 5* strategy therefore sets a target for a graduate-led ECEC profession by 2028. This means that by 2028, it is expected that 50% of staff working directly with children in centre-based ECEC settings will hold an appropriate degree-level qualification (Level 7 or Level 8 on the NFQ). An initial target of 30% by 2021 was exceeded earlier than expected. Accordingly, in 2021, 34% of staff working directly with children in center-based settings already held a degree level qualification (Pobal, 2022); with this figure increasing to 37% in 2022 (Ireland, 2023).

To achieve the workforce commitments set out in the *First 5* strategy, the Government published *Nurturing Skills*, the Workforce Plan for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care, 2022-2028 (Ireland, 2021). This workforce plan is underpinned by a vision of achieving

A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children’s rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and continues to advance its professional development (Ireland, 2021, p.8).

Consequently, *Nurturing Skills* sets out actions for a graduated workforce (as proposed in *First 5*) and strengthened career pathways, including:

- Financial supports to assist early childhood educators to study (upskill) while continuing to work in the ECEC profession
- Developing a career framework and strengthening career pathways
- Building a national infrastructure for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for the ECEC profession, and
- Supporting staff recruitment, retention and diversity in the workforce.

With regards to the latter action point, issues of recruitment and retention are endemic within the ECEC profession in Ireland. In 2021 for instance, staff turnover stood at 19% (Pobal, 2022). More recently, SIPTU, the union for Early Childhood Educators and Managers undertook an online Early Years staffing survey. Of the 1,670 early childhood educators, lead educators and deputy managers that responded to the survey, a staggering 81.31% (n=1,358) reported that staff shortages are a problem in their workplace, with 36% (n=601) reporting they are actively seeking employment in another sector (SIPTU, 2023). The impact of turnover is well documented. For example, Markowitz (2019), Kwon, Malek, Horm and Castle (2022) indicate that turnover negatively affects educator morale, programme quality, educator-child relationships, and children's academic and social-emotional outcomes. Similarly, SIPTU (2023) documents challenges with maintaining educator/child ratios, increased workload, stress and pressure, and ultimately, lower quality for children. Evidently, educator turn-over compromises the quality of ECEC, and in turn, the quality of children's early educational experiences.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how SGD 4: Quality Education, Target 4.2 is being attained in Ireland. Against the backdrop of the Universal ECCE programme, which enables children to avail of two years of free pre-school before commencing primary school, the article shows that Ireland is well on the way to attaining SDG 4, Target 4.2 as it relates to accessing ECEC.

Currently, 95% of eligible children avail of at least one year of universal free pre-primary education and care. Furthermore, the ECCE programme supports Ireland to achieve the Council of Europe goal that by 2030, at least 96% of children aged between 3 years old and compulsory school starting age will participate in ECEC (European Commission, 2023). According to UNESCO (2021) Universal ECEC fosters inclusion by creating an expectation that all children regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, disability and so on, can access a minimum level of service.

In keeping with Target 4.2 as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights which establishes that all children have the right to quality ECEC, and affords protection to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, Ireland has introduced measures to ensure equal opportunity for all children availing of the ECCE programme. The *Access and Inclusion Model*, which supports children with a disability and/or additional needs to access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme, is a case in point.

As discussed, building on experience of the universal elements of the *Access and Inclusion Model*, a system of universal supports, as well as the introduction of additional targeted funding is under consideration. The proposed *Equal Participation Model* will focus on settings dealing with the highest levels of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage. Already, as part of measures within *First 5* to alleviate child poverty, and support children's health, early development and education, the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman has announced €150,000 to pilot the provision of hot meals to children in ECEC settings.

High-quality ECEC is central to Target 4.2. Key aspects of high quality include the early childhood curriculum and the early childhood educators. In this regard, all settings participating in the ECCE programme must provide an appropriate pre-school programme that adheres to the principles and standards of the national practice frameworks *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Furthermore, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education undertake Early Years Education Inspections to evaluate the nature, range and appropriateness of the the early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE Programme.

Of course, the vital role of early childhood educators cannot be overlooked. The need for an appropriately skilled and sustainable workforce features prominently in *First 5* (Ireland, 2018), which recognises that those caring for, and educating young children must be equipped to support early childhood development. In recognition of their pre-eminent role in supporting ECD, the *First 5* strategy proposes that early childhood educators must be appropriately qualified, setting a target for a graduate-led ECEC profession by 2028. At present, 37% of those working directly with children in center-based ECEC settings hold a degree level qualification (Ireland, 2023).

As discussed throughout the article, all of the initiatives outlined here support the attainment of SDG 4: Target 4.2 in Ireland. Taking the multiplier effect into account, while Ireland is well on track in terms of Target 4.2, the various measures and initiatives associated with this target, also support attainment of other SDGs, in terms of eradicating poverty (SDG 1); ending hunger and improving nutrition (SDG 2); ensuring healthy lives (SDG 3); ensuring lifelong learning (SDG 4); achieving gender equality (SDG 5); promoting decent work for all (SDG 8); reducing inequality in Ireland (SDG 10). Through *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), the multiplier effect extends to Goals 12 and 16, namely ensuring sustainable consumption and promoting peaceful societies.

Although there is much to celebrate, it is important to remain vigilant. The Irish government is keenly aware of the need to stem attrition within the ECEC profession. In addition to the actions

within *Nurturing Skills*, a new Core Funding model introduced in 2022 seeks to support quality of provision, as well as improved pay and conditions for staff on foot of an Employment Regulation Order: SI No 458 of 2022.

To ensure attainment of target 4.2, and to maintain current progress, the government must continue to invest in the ECEC profession. In the words of Pia Britto, investing in ECEC is “fiscally smart, scientifically credible and morally correct” for children, early childhood educators and for society. Let us not forget, early childhood education and care is the foundation of sustainable development.

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Teaching Trócaire's Development Education concepts related to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) to Early Childhood Students using a workshop approach



Colette Saunders

Abstract

This article introduces the work undertaken by Trócaire to raise awareness and engage learners with important Development Education concepts, namely justice, equality and global citizenship, related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations (UN), 2015). The article begins by considering what development education is, why it is important, and my role as an Early Years Development Education Officer with Trócaire. Following this, the work of Trócaire is briefly explored to provide some additional contextual information. The practice of teaching Trócaire's Development Education to early childhood students, using a workshop approach, which incorporates the SDGs, is outlined alongside introducing how the development education concepts mentioned previously may be seen to be reflected in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

Some theoretical perspectives on professional knowledge, which inform the content and the delivery of the workshops are also considered. The article concludes with an insightful quote shared during a Lenten Lecture in St. Patricks College, Maynooth. The quote highlights the importance of ensuring our young people are 'maladjusted to injustice'. This quote infers for me, that justice, equality and global citizenship are given the opportunity to come to the fore when early childhood students incorporate development education concepts into their professional practice.

Development Education: What is Development Education and why it is Important?

An Irish Aid commissioned study in 2011 'Mapping the Past, Charting the Future' and the Global Education Network Europe (GENE) report published in 2015, amongst other publications, highlighted the relatively long history of Development Education in Ireland, which has spanned more than five decades. They also highlight the strategic partnerships, which contributed to its success, and those which continue to do so (Irish Development Education Association (IDEA), 2017; Irish Aid, 2015). Development Education has been described as "a lifelong educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding [among learners] of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live" (Irish Aid Development Education Strategy (IADES), 2017-2023, p. 6). The importance of Development Education is evident in how it seeks to increase levels of awareness and understanding, by encouraging learners to critically explore "how global justice issues interlink with [peoples'] everyday lives" ... so that they are better equipped 'to analyse, reflect on and challenge at a local and global level, the root causes and consequences of global hunger, poverty, injustice, inequality and climate change' (IADES, 2017-2023, p. 6). This increase in awareness and understanding brought about through a process of critical exploration, subsequently positions the learner as a global citizen by supporting them to fully realise their rights, alongside their responsibilities (IADES, 2017). Realisation of citizen rights and associated responsibilities, a concept associated

with global citizenship (Dower, 2003, p.7 cited in Lister, 2010, p 200), is one important aspect of Development Education. Another important aspect is how Development Education supports the emergence of “values, knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to become active global citizens and advocates for change” (IADES, 2017, p. 6).

Figure 1: Components and Characteristics of Development Education

	Contributes to Knowledge and Understanding	Explores cultural, environmental, economic, political and social relationships and challenges local and global power inequalities, including those caused by patterns of production, distribution and consumption
	Strengthens Values and Attitudes	Seeks to bring about positive change, informed by values of equality, diversity, sustainability, democracy and human rights and responsibilities
	Enhances Skills and Competencies	Equips people to explore multiple perspectives and to engage critically with links between local and global issues, using participative and creative approaches
	Promotes Action	Enables people to make connections between their own lives and global justice issues, and empowers them to make a positive difference in the world

Developed by IDEA, 2015

Adapted from: IADES (2017-2023), p. 6

Trócaire

One of many strategic partnerships to emerge, as Development Education evolved in the Irish context, was that between Irish Aid (the Irish Governments Official Aid Programme administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and Trócaire, an agency of the Irish Catholic Church, and a non-government organisation (NGO) with charitable status (IADES, 2017; Trócaire, 2023; Irish Aid, 2015). Trócaire (2023), by virtue of its dual mandate, outlined in the pastoral letter written by Irish bishops to the people of Ireland, which established Trócaire in 1973, seeks to:

1. respond to injustice and poverty, offering support in a spirit of solidarity, regardless of race, gender, religion or politics at a global level and raise awareness of the root causes of poverty and inequality;
2. to empower people in Ireland to act for a more just and sustainable world at a local level (Trócaire, 2023).

It is within the wording of the dual mandate, and its consideration of both the global and local context where the greatest opportunities to engage with Development Education to raise awareness of justice, equality and global citizenship arise. Trócaire believes that all people, including children are born equal, and that poverty is more than the absence of basic needs. Poverty manifests in many ways, such as the absence of opportunity, a lack of power, a lack of voice and a lack of agency or control over ones' life (Trócaire, 2023). For Trócaire, real and lasting change happens when people secure their basic human rights. It is through partnerships with individuals, communities and organisations that Trócaire helps to bring about the change people want to see in their lives. Trócaire's Development Education work is rooted in the SDG's (UN, 2015), which means that individuals and communities at local and global levels, develop or are supported to develop in a way which will not harm the lives or ignore the rights of future generations to come (Trócaire, 2023).

Development Education, *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum* (NCCA, 2009) the Equality and Diversity Charter (DCYA, 2016), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 and the SDG's (UN, 2015)

Development Education takes place across a wide variety of formal, non-formal and informal settings, and involves a wide range of actors, activities and learners of all ages (IDEA, 2017). A goal outlined in the 2017 Development Education Strategy (IADES, 2017-

2023) is to further the integration and mainstreaming of development education within formal education curricula, programmes and structures. As the Early Years Development Education Officer with Trócaire, my role is focussed on raising awareness of, and engaging early childhood students with learning about development education concepts by incorporating the SDG's (UN, 2015). Along with this, how these “big ideas” (Roche, 2015, p.3) may be introduced by early childhood students to young children in a way that is meaningful to them is also explored. This exploration takes place during the workshops, which highlight aspects of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), which are relevant to Trócaire's Development Education work.

Before exploring what, these aspects are understood to be, some contextual information will be presented in relation to *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. *Aistear* was originally published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). It is a curriculum framework for young children from birth to 6 years in the Republic of Ireland. Its purpose is to provide information for adults to help them to plan for children's learning and development experiences, so that children become competent and confident learners. It is currently based on 12 principles and presents children's learning and development under four thematic areas, and is accompanied by four sets of guidelines on partnership with parents, interactions, play and assessment (NCCA, 2009). Currently *Aistear* is being updated (NCCA, 2023).

The aspects of the original *Aistear* framework, which are found to resonate with the development education are the first group of principles 'Children and Their Lives in Early Childhood' and the thematic areas of 'Well-being- Aim 4' and 'Exploring and Thinking- Aim 1'. I currently work with the original *Aistear* 2009 publication during the workshops, it is these areas I refer to, and tease out to make the workshops as meaningful as possible for the early childhood students. Once *Aistear* is updated, I will be ensuring those changes are reflected in my workshops.

Guidance from *the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (Department of

Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016), hereinafter referred to as ‘the Charter’ is considered during the workshops, to further illustrate how development education concepts are reflected within it. The Charter statement highlights amongst many significant areas the importance of supporting children to celebrate diversity, and feel comfortable with difference; supporting children to enjoy their early childhood service in an environment free from bias, stereotypes and discrimination; and empowering children to stand up for themselves (DCYA, 2016). Children’s rights feature during the workshops too in how early childhood students are reminded when they engage children in activities that are meaningful to them, they are supporting the Rights of the Child. Specifically, development rights in the context of learning and development, and participation rights, such as freedom to express opinions and participate in [a global] society (Childrens Rights Alliance, 2023).

Integrating the relevant SDG’s into the workshop is the next step. The SDGs, which reflect aspects of the areas considered above are introduced. Rather than work with all 17 SDGs in a relatively short space of time, I opt to work with the child friendly SDG’s which condense the 17 SDG’s into 3 child friendly SDG’s. These are: A Happy and Healthy Life, A Clean and Green Planet, and A Peaceful and Equal World (see Figure 4 below). Early childhood students are made aware that these insights may be used to support sustained shared thinking with young children when the opportunities arise, during teachable moments.

Figure 2 child friendly global goals



Adapted from: https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Education-EarlyChildhood_Guide-for-Educators-Lent-2021-1.pdf?type=edu

Figure 3 presents all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These are described as an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership, and came about as a result of the United Nations member states coming together in 2015, and drafting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda has been described as “serving as a blueprint for peace and prosperity, for people and the planet, now and into the future” (UN, 2015 - <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). These underpin the workshops I present.

Figure 3: Sustainable Development Goals poster



Adapted from United Nations 2015: [Communications materials - United Nations Sustainable Development](#)

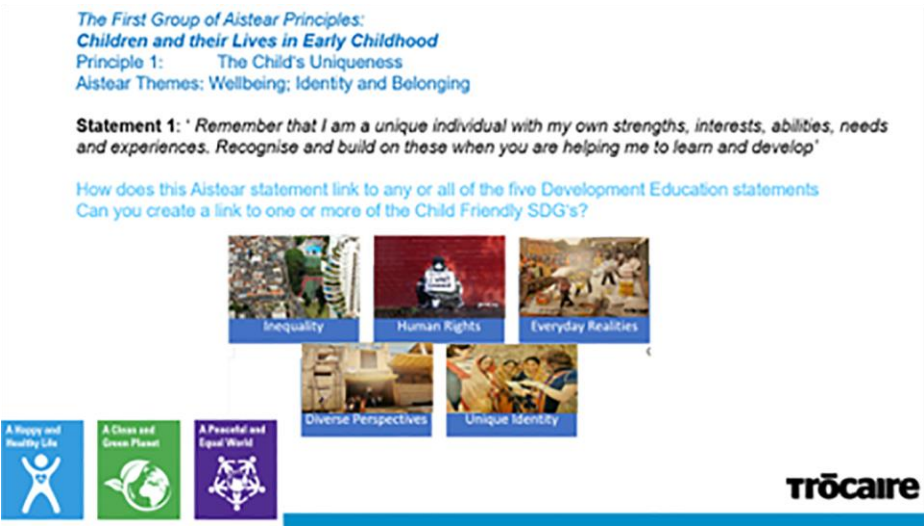
How the workshops are structured

During the workshops, early childhood students are introduced to the five core concepts of development education, which are:

1. exploring inequalities at local and global levels;
2. a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach;
3. diverse perspectives on development;
4. everyday reality for those experiencing poverty;
5. valuing unique identities and respecting the unique identity of others.

Following this, the learners are then divided into smaller groups and given a workshop pack, see Figure 4 below. Each workshop pack contains an A4 photo card, five cut outs of the core concepts, a cut out of an *Aistear* principle, and an aim from an *Aistear* theme and, three child friendly SDG cut outs.

Figure 4 workshop pack components



For the first practical element of the workshop, early childhood students are encouraged in their small groups to discuss links as they see them between the five core concepts of development education, the *Aistear* principles and themes and related SDGs (UN, 2015). They are then asked to present the findings from their discussions to the larger group.

Once each of the smaller groups has had a chance to present their interpretation of the links to the larger group, the photo card (see Figure 5) then becomes the focus of the second practical element of the workshop, which is the role play. The early childhood students remain in the same small groups and role play a possible scenario in an early years setting. The scenario focusses on a discussion about what the young children see when they look at the photo card, or what they hear, if the image needs to be described to

them. Each photo card focusses on the lives of children and their families from developing nations around the globe. The early childhood student holds the photo card up to the young children and then, using the prompts on the reverse (see Figure 6) engages the children in a conversation about what they see. Tips about how to engage the children and use the photocards as part of the wider curriculum are detailed on the reverse side of the photo card.

Figure 5 A4 size photo card- front



Source: <https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Photocards-Early-Childhood.pdf?type=edu>

Figure 6 A4 size photo card – back

WE WANT EVERYONE TO BE WELL AND TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES

About the Photo
This photo is from the Ada Camp, Bethlehem, in Palestine, which is in the Middle East. Do you remember that we marked Palestine on our globe? Can we find it now?

Suggested Activities
Music and Movement
Play music and invite the children to explore and develop their own movements, including balancing, hopping and jumping. You can extend this by working in pairs and asking children to mirror their partners' movements, bearing in mind the different physical abilities within the group.
Cooperative Games
Try some non-competitive, cooperative games such as parachute games, Ireland's Professional

Curriculum Links
Artwork: (2018/2019, 2020) Children will be an healthy and fit as they can be. Learning Goal 3: Children will discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills.
Healthcare Ireland Pre-School: Physical Development and Movement.

Talk About
Talk about what Layla is doing in the photo. How do you think she feels?
What sports and activities do you like to do? How do you feel when you are doing your favourite sport/activity?

Development Service for Teachers (PGST) has a good selection of cooperative games.
Body Check-in
After completing a lively activity, invite the children to lie down quietly and check-in to how their bodies feel. Do they feel warm? Do they feel thirsty? Can they hear themselves breathing louder than usual?

Layla (11) doing gymnastics at her local community centre in Ada Camp, Bethlehem. Photo credit: Alimul Islam.

Source: <https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Photocards-Early-Childhood.pdf?type=edu>

The first part of the workshop is geared towards presenting information about Trócaire's Development Education and the associated core concepts. The latter half of the workshop is focussed on professional practice and how Development Education, *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), and some of the other areas of the vast body of professional knowledge briefly mentioned above, may be used together to support learning about justice, equality and global citizenship. During the workshops I seek to "create a learning ... space which takes participants on a learning journey which aims to be supportive [and] encouraging", while enabling the 'safe exploration of new ideas [in a] respectful ... affirming, trusting, questioning and critical' [way] (Glenn, Roche, McDonagh and Sullivan, 2017, p. 35).

Theoretical perspectives which inform the delivery of the workshop

During the workshops, Schön's theoretical perspective on reflective practice is highlighted. To create links to this theory, I draw on my previous experience as a lecturer on early childhood programmes of study. For example, often when engaging with young children, early childhood students need to be able to think on their feet. This requires some awareness of reflective practice, and being able to engage not only with "reflection-on-action" (after the experience) but also "reflection-in-action" (while the experience is ongoing) (Schön, cited in Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, pp. 8-9). Research studies (Ruane et al., 2010), which have identified strategies to support young children's learning in respect of the "big ideas" (Roche, 2015, p.3) associated with the SDG's are presented also during the workshops. These strategies, namely stories, images and participatory activities are considered, and early childhood students are introduced to the idea that an effective way to promote critical thinking in young children, about the SDG's for example, is to engage them with picture books (Roche, 2015), exploring topics related to justice, equality and global citizenship.

The workshops also emphasise the importance of "sustained shared thinking" in early years settings during child/adult/child interactions where both the adult and the child think and elaborate on equal terms. Sustained shared thinking is described as being most effective when used together with reflective practice (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell 2002 cited in Lindon and Trodd, 2016, p. 18). Dolan (2014) suggests that early childhood students need to tune into young children, and engage with perceptive teaching methods like following the children's lead, being aware of when to step in, offer support and step back, letting the children explore the ideas presented based on the information they have. During the flow of adult/child/adult interactions, there may be teachable moments that emerge, which often are not planned for. In these instances, the educator is tasked with planning in the moment (Ephgrave, 2018), a skill, which relies on a combination of the early

childhood student's ability to recognise learning opportunities when they arise, follow young children's cues, and work with whatever learning resources are to hand.

The transformative nature of education, teaching for understanding and the values underpinning my professional practice

An important goal of Trócaire's development education workshops is to equip early childhood students with knowledge and skills, which will enable them to engage young children's interest in learning about the wider world. Transformative education is regarded as an element of quality education, and a crucial enabler for sustainable development, which empowers learners of all ages with not only knowledge and skills but values and attitudes too, to address challenges in the wider world, such as poverty, inequality and climate change (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2022).

The workshops seek to address learning aims such as: respecting diversity; empathising with others; challenging stereotypes; thinking critically; understanding basic human rights; and becoming a global citizen. There is also a flip side to this. For these learning aims to be addressed, the educator as described by Freire, which in the context of this article refers to the early childhood student, must be willing to co-create [and commit to] the learning experience (Freire, 1970 reprint 2017, p.54) if they are to successfully engage children. Early childhood students ideally should engage with the workshops in a way, which enables them to co-create the learning experience with young children when opportunities for sustained shared thinking emerge.

When I prepare for, deliver and reflect upon the SDG workshops, I draw upon the concept of teaching for understanding (TfU) to support my professional practice. TfU is described as a "reflective research approach to learning" (McCarthy, 2008, p.6). I like this idea because I feel it gives me permission not to get things right 100 per

cent of the time when trying to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners, when exploring the SDGs, and development education concepts. At the same time, there is a fund of knowledge available, in a wider learning community (Glenn, Roche, McDonagh, Sullivan, 2017), which I can tap into, to support me along the way, as we learn together. My values of empowerment and representation as discussed by Saunders (2020), guide my practice day-to-day and, recognise the positive aspects of their contributions so that we can gain a greater understanding of the possibilities that lie ahead for them when engaging young children in learning related to the SDGs (UN, 2015), and being open to learning about new ways of doing is grounded in an “ethic of care” (Beatty, Leigh and Lund Dean, 2020, p. 548).

Conclusion

This article introduced the work that Trócaire undertakes to raise awareness and engage learners with important Development Education concepts, namely justice, equality and global citizenship, related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015). It began by considering what development education is, why it is important and, my role as an Early Years Development Education Officer with Trócaire. Following this, the work of Trócaire was briefly explored before going on to discuss Trócaire’s Development Education to early childhood students, using a workshop approach grounded in an “ethic of care” (Beatty, Leigh and Lund Dean, 2020, p. 548). The workshops, I feel, enable early childhood students to reflect on, and “respond in more practical ways on the root causes of global challenges” (Trócaire Maynooth Lecture 2023- Rev. Prof. Michael Mullaney, SPPU). In the decade preceding the letter written by Irish bishops establishing Trócaire in 1973, Martin Luther King, a Civil Rights Leader and Baptist Preacher, expressed the idea of not becoming accustomed, through the use of the term *maladjusted*, to all forms of injustice (Trócaire Maynooth Lecture 2023 Dr. Ethna Regan, DCU). It is my hope that Trócaire’s Development Education resources will help to correct this ‘maladjustment’ by promoting what has been described as a shift in understanding precipitating

young people's participation in civil society (Trócaire Maynooth Lecture 2023 Dr. Ethna Regan, DCU), so that important development education concepts, such as justice, equality and global citizenship are explored in the day-to-day professional practices in early years settings and, contribute to the wider Sustainable Development Goals agenda (UN, 2015).

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A Snapshot in Time: Early Numeracy Experiences and the Perspectives of pre- school practitioners



Treasa Quigley and Arlene Mannion

Abstract

The Irish early childhood education and care field is considered one of 'rapid change (Wolf et al. 2013) in regard to policy, curriculum, legislation, and funding strategies. The study reported through this article explored early years practitioners' perspectives on their engagement with numeracy in pre-school settings. It offers a snapshot in time, within this evolving field. The article refers to the benefits of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. The overall objectives of the study were: to investigate the perceptions of pre-school practitioners on their role in numeracy development; to explore how the language of numeracy is used within the pre-school by the pre-school practitioner; and finally, to explore the impact of the environment on children's numeracy experiences. The qualitative research study adopted a purposeful sample, including nine practitioners working in pre-school settings. Data was collected through semi structured interviews. The main themes that emerged were an eclectic approach to the use of the *Aistear* Framework; the practitioners'

interactions with children; a mixed approach to numeracy language and, the environment and its potential to impact on children's learning. There are several recommendations arising from the study, including embedding the *Aistear* framework further into practice, and the need for continuous professional development. Additional support in the area of numeracy development, and further research into the area of numeracy and pre-school is warranted.

Introduction

Traditionally, in Ireland there was a laissez-faire attitude to Early Childhood Education and Care and Education (ECEC) and pedagogy (Hayes, 2007). This allowed a diverse provision of ECEC within the sector, with different settings operating within different philosophies such as High/Scope, Montessori, and play-based philosophies. With the introduction of public funding into the sector mainly through the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) pre-school scheme, more emphasis is being placed on the sector, and there are more opportunities to embed quality early experiences for all children. The ECCE scheme is designed to ensure all children have access to a universal pre-school experience of appropriate programme-based activities from three years of age until they start primary school (Department of Children and Youth Affairs/DCYA, 2016). Ensuring that the learning in the ECCE is standardised and inclusive of numeracy ensures an equitable quality education, and a sustainable grounding for learning as outlined in the UN sustainable development goals.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) were introduced to support improved practice, and enhance experiences for children in early years settings. The *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009) is an overarching guide for all practitioners in the ECEC sector for children ages 0-6 years of age. It aims to 'identify what and how children should learn and describes the experiences children should have' (NCCA, 2009, p.6). The Literacy and Numeracy for Learning

and Life Strategy (DES, 2011) outlines the role of all educational sectors from the ECEC sector to adult education in improving numeracy levels for all. The Strategy (DES, 2011) states that there are challenges for numeracy in the early years including ‘a lack of clarity on the diversity of curriculum practice that currently takes place’ and ensuring that the ‘key ideas and messages contained within *Aistear* are reflected in children’s experiences’ (p.48).

There is now more emphasis on a graduate-led ECEC sector with a minimum QQI Level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Practice (a one-year vocational award) for all practitioners being legislated for in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. Funding criteria for the universal pre-school scheme means that pre-school leaders must have a minimum of a QQI Level 6 in Early Childhood Care and Practice (a second year of vocational training) and there are financial incentives to have the pre-school leader qualified to a QQI level 7 major award (i.e., ordinary degree level) or higher. This has led to increased qualification levels within the sector. Additional supports that were already in place, include the County Childcare Committee’s (CCC), which are the local agent for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Pobal’s ‘Better Start’ mentoring service. This article shares findings from a small-scale study, based in the Northeast of Ireland that sought to capture the practitioners’ perspectives of children’s experiences, related to the promotion of, and engagement with numeracy, as part of the early learning curriculum in their various settings.

Benefits of numeracy in pre-schools settings

Failure to have strong literacy and numeracy skills means that children are more likely to ‘leave school early and in later life to be unemployed or in low skilled jobs, to have poorer emotional and physical health, to have limited earning power, and are more likely to be imprisoned’ (DES, 2011, p.9). The OECD PISA Report (2009) showed that one in five children in Ireland did not have the mathematical concepts required for life (DES, 2011). However, recent research shows an increase in educational attainment and that, in part, can be attributed to the funded provision of pre-school,

and high rate of attendance in the Irish context (OECD, 2016). International research has shown that those that attend higher quality pre-school as opposed to those who had not, had better attainment in numeracy concepts (Barnett & Lamy, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010; Taggart et al., 2015). Therefore, pre-school services have a role in supporting the development of children's numeracy concepts, contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, *to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*.

'Active learning' is an approach to early learning pedagogy that is promoted by the *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009), and may be found in pre-schools. It is an ideal method to support early engagement with, and exposure to numeracy concepts and language. Active learning is a process whereby children are not taught but actively participate in their own learning, they have real concrete experiences (Boyd & Bee, 2010), and meaningful interactions with the environment, which helps them to make sense of the world (Holt, 2011).

Other methods of learning numeracy skills and concepts include pathways or trajectories (Daro, 2011), and use of problem-solving techniques (Epstein, 2003). Sarama (2009) states that learning pathways or trajectories, are the key to supporting children's teaching, and Epstein (2003) suggests that problem solving is one of the key strategies that should be used in learning numeracy. Children can become problem solvers if they are supported with the right environment and materials, and with the adult supporting them (Epstein, 2003). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) constructs the child as a confident agent in her/his own learning, stressing the ability and capacity of the child to lead in their own early mathematical literacy.

Pedagogy is a philosophical position, which describes one's beliefs in relation to the processes of children's learning, whereas the curriculum describes how that philosophy is 'actioned' or what the child is exposed to in concrete learning experiences. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) defines pedagogy as 'all the practitioner's actions or work in supporting children's learning and development' (p. 56). Curriculum is defined 'as all the experiences, formal and informal,

planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children's learning and development' (NCCA, 2009, p.54). The development of the process, the 'how' children learn mathematical proficiency in early years, is key to supporting children's learning experiences (NCCA, 2014). Play is how children learn (Kiernan, 2007) and is central to a pedagogy that promotes active, hands-on learning.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is an overarching curriculum framework for children aged 0-6 years in Ireland. Play is one of the key principles of how children learn within the framework. *Aistear* presents children's early learning and development under four main themes: Communicating; Identity and Belonging; Exploring and Thinking, Well-being. Further, *Aistear* suggests a set of twelve principles organised into three groups, including the group most relevant to this study: how children learn and develop. These principles include ideas such as the importance of holistic, active, play based and hands-on learning, the role of the environment and meaningful experiences, and communication and language. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) advocates that the role of the adult is particularly significant in three key stages: planning for play, supporting play, and reviewing play. Despite this being a progressive and contemporary framework, there is a lack of a prescribed numeracy pedagogy, which Knowles (2016) suggests affords many opportunities for delivering numeracy programmes in early years. Equally, however, this presents challenges in that *Aistear* lacks clear standardised learning paths and direction (NCCA, 2014).

Play is an activity in which everything that a child knows and can do is practised or used to make sense of what is new (Bruce, 2012). Much early mathematical learning occurs in the context of children's play (Seo & Ginsburg, 2004). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) illustrates that there are different types of play including creative, games with rules, pretend play, language, and physical play and all can include numeracy concepts (Seo & Ginsburg, 2004). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) states that numeracy will occur in all types of play, however it maintains that pretend, dramatic, make-believe, role, and fantasy play particularly supports children's numeracy experiences.

Such experiences may include a range of the following: making lists and menus, setting places for the dinner, picnics, sorting clothes and matching, paying for tickets, and using information and communications technology such as mobile phones and calculators.

Planning for Play

Research states that planning for play is necessary to support children's learning. This includes the circumstances in which the children are learning, and includes organising for the activity, whether the activity is inside or outside, ensuring it is stimulating and enjoyable, and that the environment has all necessary requirements to make it content rich (NCCA, 2009; Bruce 1987; Hendricks 2001; Rinaldi 1998). Graham (2014) acknowledges that pre-schools require all the areas to have a content-rich curriculum to support play. The outdoor area should include sand, construction, water, climbing, digging, investigation, growing and planting, imaginative, creative and a quiet/story area (Graham 2014).

Practitioners may plan for play through devising a mathematics area, and French (2012) suggests that within this area there could be materials for counting, measuring, comparing such as beads, shells, calculators, play cards, money, weighing scales, tapes, clocks, timers, nesting blocks, stacking rings, measuring cups etc. Knowles (2016) states that the environment does not need to alter to support maths in a pre-school setting, but that awareness by the adult is required to ensure that the activity can reach its potential in the already existing areas. Therefore, if the environment is content-rich for play then this should suffice for learning numeracy through play.

All children have the ability to learn mathematical concepts (Mighton, 2009), and this thinking alters the goals to concentrate more on the process of learning, rather than on the content (NCCA, 2014). The role of the adult in supporting young children in maths is key. Hufferd-Ackles (2004) stated that the adult must support the child to go through the developmental trajectories. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Holt, 2011) informs us when, as Bruner (1966) acknowledges, a competent peer or adult can support the

child to learn a concept (Pound 2014). Children spend much of their time and activities in this 'zone' (Wood, 1976), and one of the challenges for the adult is to identify when this is occurring, and what types of strategies of support are required (French, 2007; Wood, 1976). Supporting play can be done through various mediums including scaffolding, co-constructing, modelling, questioning, encouraging, and praising and problem solving (Donegal CCC, 2012).

Mathematical language can be included in all types of play (Kiernan, 2007). Pound (1999) suggests that maths is a language in itself. The amount, number of times and richness of the numeracy vocabulary used by all those interacting with children is linked to children's understanding of numeracy (Gentner 2003; Kilbanoff, 2006; Levine et al., 2012). Mathematical literacy or learning and applying mathematical concepts can be supported through everyday experiences in pre-school settings (NCCA, 2014). The language of numeracy should underpin the curriculum; use of relevant vocabulary should be an integral part of any curriculum (NCCA, 2014). Knowledgeable and competent practitioners enable children's learning by modelling mathematical language in an age-appropriate manner, and this supports children's emerging literacy in this area (Anthony, 2007).

The practitioners' views, past history and experiences in mathematics greatly influence their pedagogical practices (Earnest, 1989). The practitioner must have knowledge of the subject to recognise the possibilities of numeracy within learning experiences (Anthony, 2007). The CoRe Report (Urban et al., 2012) states that being competent is a two-way process within a multi-levelled system; firstly, it is a continuous process of 'building on knowledge, practices and values' and secondly, it requires "reflective competencies' (Urban et al., 2012; p21). It is important that consideration is given to the Code of Professional Responsibilities and Code of Ethics for Early Years Educators (Professionalisation Sub-Group of the Early Years Forum, 2020). The practitioner must have the knowledge, competence, and the confidence to support children to be able to reason, argue, justify, generalise, represent, problem-solve, and connect as these are the strategies the adult

must use to support numeracy (National Research Council; NRC, 2001). *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) reinforces these processes with the adult supporting the child through investigating, problem solving, connecting, and prompting, among other provocations.

An emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

Play is natural, inbuilt, and instinctive for children. However, for play to 'truly flourish' (Kiernan, 2007, p.12), adult support is required with either direct or indirect involvement. The *Aistear* framework promotes the development of a curriculum that takes account of both children's and adult's interests, questions, and experiences, which the adult can then use for planning the learning experiences. Sometimes activities are adult-led, and others are child-led, and it should be a joint and equal approach to planning the curriculum (NCCA, 2009) leading to an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. If children are constantly adult-directed, learning is limited as the activities lack relevance and meaning for the child (Bruce, 2004). According to Moyles (2001), prescribed activities such as worksheets, 'filling in the blanks', and 'colouring in' are frequently of no meaning to the child, and therefore makes the process of learning more difficult (Moyles, 2001, p.14). Children learn when they are engaged and engrossed in areas that matter, therefore incorporating children's interests should enhance their engagement (Rich & Drummond, 2006). The DES (2011) state that using the child's interests and real learning experiences are emphasised as the way forward for learning in the early years. *Aistear* advocates for an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, stating that learning should include planned and unplanned activities. Numeracy learning occurs throughout the day in all activities whether primary or secondary activities (Tucker, 2014). Therefore, adults should have confidence in their own numeracy literacy, and the skills to know how and when to bring numeracy concepts into the play space. If using children's interests and practitioners' skills and knowledge, are key to promoting numeracy through an inquiry-based curriculum, then children's interests should be captured by the adult and used in planning for numeracy

learning. Understanding children's knowledge in numeracy topics allows the adult to scaffold the learning in both the planning of the curriculum, and through spontaneous opportunities that arise during the day.

Assessing Numeracy

The Department of Education and Skills (2011) definition of numeracy encompasses:

'the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day to day living in complex social settings. To have this ability, a young person needs to be able to think and communicate quantitatively, to make sense of data, to have spatial awareness, to understand patterns and sequence, and to recognise situations where mathematical reasoning can be applied to solve problems' (DES, 2011, p.8).

Curriculum assessment within pre-school settings tends to follow either formal instruction or informal instruction. The former is mainly through goal setting and assessing progress of children academically, for example the Early Years Foundations Stage (Ang, 2014) in the UK, which has specific goals. The latter, the informal approach, is generally play based and focuses on children's holistic development 'rather than on specific goal setting objectives' (OECD, 2001, p.109).

The DES (2011) recommends a curriculum in the pre-school that is not formalised. This is supported by research within the Irish context demonstrating that the use of a play-based approach to learning numeracy was effective in increasing children's understanding of numeracy concepts within participating pre-school services (ELI 2017). Whereas *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), follows the informal approach, and the numeracy concepts are not prescriptive, the curriculum domains for the first year of school in the Primary School Mathematics Curriculum (PSMC) of learning are

formalised and include number, measurement, geometry and spatial thinking, algebraic thinking, and data and chance (NCCA, 2014). These discrepancies between formal versus informal approaches to numeracy can lead to dilemmas and tensions for early years practitioners in order to best prepare children for the transition from a pre-school setting to a primary school setting. The NCCA (2014) recommended the content of a new maths curriculum should link the PSMC and the *Aistear* framework.

This article discusses how children learn, and the role our curriculum has in that learning. It stresses that inevitability, play is key to learning. The development of an inquiry-based curriculum allows for numeracy to be further supported, and the learning experiences for children to be richer. However, the role of a knowledgeable and confident adult is central to this. The *Aistear* framework states that numeracy should be learned through an informal approach, however, this can often lead to a lack of clarity in terms of the role of the adult. Research findings, shared below, highlight some gaps to promoting numeracy in ECEC, including limited adult-initiated activities, in contrast to their central role in an inquiry-based curriculum; clear understanding that formal goals should not be required in the ECCE setting; and, support in understanding how problem solving and learning pathways within the *Aistear* framework could enhance children's learning in numeracy. In keeping with best practice, it would be beneficial to explore how numeracy is taught across various pre-school settings.

Research Methodology

Objectives

The overall aim of the research was to explore practitioners' perspectives of children's experiences in relation to numeracy in pre-school settings. Due to the rapid development of the ECEC sector, this article offers a snapshot in time, rather than an in-depth report on ongoing practices. The objectives of this research are three-fold:

- 1) To investigate the perceptions of pre-school practitioners on their role in numeracy development.
- 2) To explore how the language of numeracy is used within the pre-school by the pre-school practitioner.
- 3) To explore the impact of the environment on children's numeracy experiences.

Procedure

The research population of interest to this study were early years practitioners working in pre-school settings offering the universal ECCE scheme in the Irish context. The researcher emailed 58-60 ECEC managers in a north-eastern county in Ireland as the gate keepers of this study, to invite their centres participation in this study. Agreeable service managers invited the staff working in pre-school rooms to participate in this study. As there was a dearth of knowledge regarding this topic within this region, an exploratory, interpretivist research design was adapted. This approach allowed for an open examination of this phenomenon, to gather emerging understandings, on which, a more in-depth study may build (Creswell 2003). Although the participating sample was small, and the possibility of generalising from these findings is limited, nonetheless it is beneficial in obtaining insight, and to start the conversation regarding this topic and guiding future research.

In line with an interpretivist, exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, during a one-month time period in January 2017. In total, nine participants were involved in the study. Table 1 provides information on participants including their current role, amount of experience, previous experience in other early years settings, education, and type of setting.

Table 1. *Participant Information*

Participant Information	Number
<i>Current Role:</i>	
Manager	7
Pre-School Assistants	2
<i>Amount of Experience:</i>	
Longest Amount	16 years
Shortest Amount	5 years
<i>Experience in Previous Early Years Setting:</i>	
Worked in previous early years setting prior to current setting:	7
Had not worked in previous early years setting prior to current setting:	2
<i>Education:</i>	
Childcare Qualification of a QQI Level or Higher	9
Currently Undertaking Further Study	3
<i>Type of Setting:</i>	
Play-based Setting:	5
Play-based with Montessori or Play-based with High Scope:	3
Montessori:	1

Ethical Issues

This project was approved by the university in which the researchers were based ensuring ethical rigor. As such, written information, including a proposed schedule of interview questions, an information sheet and informed consent sheet, was provided in advance through the gatekeepers, to ensure that participants had sufficient information to allow for voluntary participation, and informed consent for this study.

These aspects, along with assurances of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw ensured all ethical social research requirements were met (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

The researchers were guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) stages of thematic data analysis which are: familiarisation, coding, collating codes, reviewing themes, labelling themes and producing the report. Table 2 sets out the main themes that emerged following the analysis process.

Table 2. Four key Themes and Sub-Themes

Name of Theme	Sub-themes
1. Eclectic approach in utilising the <i>Aistear</i> Framework	• Following children’s interests • Non-formal learning
2. Practitioners’ interactions with children	• Practitioners’ interactions with children
3. Mixed approach to numeracy language	• Mathematical vocabulary
4. Exploring the environment, and its potential impact on children’s numeracy experiences	• Impact of the environment

Eclectic approach in utilising the *Aistear* Curriculum Framework

Of the four themes to emerge from the study, the first to be presented herein concerns practitioners’ beliefs that they took an eclectic approach in utilising the *Aistear* framework, as a guide for curriculum development. This is divided into two sub-themes, which are following the child’s interests/active learning, and goal setting.

Following Childrens’ Interests and Active Learning.

All practitioners emphasised that they followed the child’s interest in developing their curriculum plans, and each practitioner believed that using this method was vital for children’s learning and specifically for children’s learning in numeracy, as reflected in the literature (Bruce, 2004; Malaguzzi, 2009). Self-initiated experiences are essential for active learning (Bodwell & Eison, 1991), as when

children are interested, they are more engaged, and are more focused on the learning, they have a personal interest in the activity, and they experience activities through engaging with objects, peers and adults, within the pre-school setting.

‘we try to facilitate activities that they’re interested in and bring numeracy into it. So, if a child is into cars and stuff we’d count the cars or we’d sort them into colours or just go through how many wheels’. (Participant 3)

When asked to reflect on how the adult supports children’s learning in numeracy, practitioners were more inclined to discuss the materials, and the environment, rather than their interactions and support with the children in learning concepts. Of those that discussed their methods, encouragement and scaffolding were the methods used most. In supporting children, one participant stated the importance of *‘the practitioner aiding them along so you give them the encouragement, you give them the material, the knowledge’* (Participant 1). A further participant discussed the concept of scaffolding: *‘I think that our role as adults, you need to be able to listen to the children and support them, supply the materials and the ideas and maybe scaffold what we’re doing with them’* (Participant 2).

The findings demonstrate that the practitioners adopted a child-led approach to the development of their curriculum, and this is in keeping with the literature (French 2007; NCCA 2009). Following a child’s interests is key within the active learning process, as when children enjoy what they are doing they are more engaged (French, 2007). However, the findings indicated that there was little or no adult-initiated activities occurring in relation to numeracy, in contrast to *Aistear’s* (NCCA, 2009) recommendation to balance adult-led and child-led activities within curriculum plans.

There appeared to be consensus within the sample that children learn through doing, through play and through hands-on, concrete experiences. The following quote reflects one participant’s view in relation to how children learn.

I think a lot comes through play, we are play based here...I think for them (the children) to develop and to grasp their own understanding, it's through their own concepts and stuff. I think play allows them to understand it a bit more and at their own level and understanding and to build on it then with new experiences (Participant 3)

Non-formal learning

Supporting the child at their own level was an approach discussed by most participants, with many saying that they did not have a formal goal or a target that all children should reach in relation to pre-numeracy development; but they took each child at their own level. This is in keeping with the *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009), which takes a holistic view of the child rather than a goal setting approach.

what I would do it would vary and also how I would do it with each child varies because you have to do it at the child's level so it would be very different. No two children would leave knowing the same thing or doing it the same way probably (Participant 6)

What goals children achieved were at each individual child's level. However, contrary to this, the findings showed that one practitioner did set formal generic goals for all children in numeracy as follows: *'So we do one to nine and then we do zero so we don't do 10. I think that's too advanced for them for a pre-school setting'* (Participant 6). Another participant reiterates having formal goals within the pre-school by saying: *'Primary shapes, you would want them (the children) to know them'* (Participant 1).

The findings show the approach to numeracy targets was mixed among practitioners, with the majority not setting formal goals, taking each child at their own individual level. However, this was not standardised across all practitioners, as the data revealed. The findings illustrated that the majority of practitioners did not have

any formal expectations or goal setting regarding numeracy for the children, however, there were some who set formal goals for all children. These goals included being able to count to nine, knowing all colours and primary shapes, and being able to write numbers. Hirsh-Pasek (1991) advises that formal learning for children at this age as having little benefit and can have adverse negative effects on children through creating anxiety and stifling creativity. The *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009) is focused on learning through play and the holistic child rather than setting specific goals. Many of the play-based curricula focus on children's overall development 'rather than on narrow literacy and numeracy objectives' (OECD, 2001, p.109). One of the key goals of the *Aistear* (2009) framework is to ensure that the ECEC should be less formal in nature, offering, instead, a more child-led, and skills-based approach to learning. The DES (2011) emphasises the need for a strengths-based approach to learning numeracy in ECEC settings which should be implemented through a non-formalised, age-appropriate curriculum.

While most practitioners did not have formal goals set for children, neither did they use the *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009) learning goals. In summary, there were a small number of participants who used formal learning goals, which is not an advocated approach (OECD, 2001), while others had no formal goals; however, there was no evidence that early learning plans were linked to the *Aistear* learning outcomes in relation to numeracy.

Using newer methods of learning numeracy, such as learning pathways and problem-solving interactions with pre-school children will support children's learning in numeracy. These skills could be highlighted through the *Aistear* framework, and through continuous professional development of the sector. In relation to the learning goals and the current mixed approach between formal goal setting and non-formal goal setting to numeracy, the *Aistear* learning goals were not being implemented in the participating pre-school settings. Therefore, as a starting point, the *Aistear* learning goals for numeracy need to be embedded into practice; this could be completed through support/mentoring.

Practitioners' Interactions with Children

The second theme to emerge was practitioners' interactions with children, and the limitations within this. The findings showed that the practitioners used the environment to support children's learning, rather than the more purposeful process in which, the adult engages and interacts with the child in numeracy related activities, as advocated by research (NCCA, 2014):

The children mainly learn through the environment and the materials, through letting them explore the materials and figuring them out, we are there to observe the child and to set up their environment (Participant 8)

When asked to reflect on how the adult supports children's learning in numeracy, practitioners were more inclined to discuss the materials and the environment rather than their interactions and support with the children in learning concepts. As noted previously, those that discussed their methods reported encouragement and scaffolding as the most common. In supporting children, one participant stated the importance of scaffolding: *'I think that our role as adults you need to be able to listen to the children and support them supply the materials and the ideas and maybe scaffold what we're doing with them'* (Participant 2).

The findings showed that practitioners' emphasis was not on the learning process with regard to early numeracy experiences for young children, (NCCA, 2014), and that the strategies used to support children were limited. Children spend much of their time in what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development (Wood, 1998). In this regard, knowing when to intervene and how to support the child reflects the skills and knowledge of practitioners. Adult-led approaches such as communicating, reasoning, argumentation, justifying, generalising, representing, problem-solving, and connecting support learning processes (NRC, 2001) appear to be limited in the participant sample. Other strategies include encouragement, scaffolding, questioning, co-construction,

modelling and praise (Donegal CCC, 2012). As demonstrated by the findings of the current study, practitioners are using these strategies in a child-centred manner. Recognising the zone of proximal development is a key skill of practitioners and is complex in its understanding. Therefore, using these approaches to support children's learning, through developing critical thinking skills and problems solving techniques will potentially increase their numeracy skills.

For practitioners to support optimum knowledge and skill development for the children, they need to understand the different interaction strategies. Practitioners must not be complacent: they should intentionally support children in their learning to understand numeracy vocabulary and concepts; they must value their own potential to support children through interactions involving various maths concepts. Further support is needed to encourage practitioners in these interaction approaches.

Mixed approach to numeracy language

The data shows a diverse range of mathematical vocabulary was used within the pre-school settings. The conversations with participants revealed that mathematical vocabulary was used by all practitioners, with examples from three participants as follows: '*we provide the language and the knowledge of different terms*' (Participant 3). The practitioners are aware that maths' language is important in relation to children's learning as this quote demonstrates: '*the language ties in with the numeracy*' (Participant 6)

The most common terminologies used are number and counting language, which was used by all practitioners. Opposites such as long/short, big/small was commonplace as was measurement (e.g., long/short, wide/ thin, full/half full/empty, tall/short) and terms related to volume such as full, empty and half full: '*we talk in the sand tray about full/ empty we talk at the playdough table about can we halve? how many pieces do we need? that's half, that's quarter*' (Participant 4)

Pound (1999) states that maths is a language in itself. Practitioners are all using maths language within the pre-school setting to support numeracy understanding for the child, however, the findings did show that there was a disparity around what language and vocabulary should be used. Some practitioners advocated the real language such as spheres and tetrahedron, cubes, prism and spheres, and others said they would only use understandable language. Further research into the types of numeracy language used to meet the *Aistear* learning outcomes is required.

While there was a difference in the type of vocabulary used within the pre-school settings, all were using maths vocabulary. The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) Programme “Let them talk” (French 2014) showed that a language enrichment programme increased learning in numeracy. Further research on all numeracy language used with pre-school settings needs to be completed to give a full overview of all the common and most used vocabulary, and to see if there is a need for a national standardised programme. Further emphasis and support on understanding the frameworks needs to be embedded into practice.

Exploring the environment and its potential impact on children’s numeracy experiences

The final theme to emerge from the data was how the environment impacts on children’s numeracy experiences within the pre-school. The most common way that the practitioners believe that children learn is through the environment and materials used. One participant stated the adult’s role was to *‘have a good knowledge of what needed to go into the environment to support the child’s learning’* (Participant 3).

The learning of numeracy occurs throughout the day in all activities whether the activity was primarily music, storytelling or painting etc. One participant stated that it was the role of the adult to bring numeracy into all activities: *‘The adult consciously bringing it into everyday activities...We would sometimes add a dice to the*

game and bring in the maths learning that way' (Participant 3). This is supported by literature that states that learning occurs through secondary learning (Griffin 2001; Tucker 2014). The NCCA (2014) advocates for a curriculum to include activities, which are planned and unplanned, such as storytelling, story and rhymes where the numeracy learning may occur, but not as the primary focus or goal.

The areas and activities that were most discussed in relation to children's learning was playdough, the home corner/kitchen, books, storytelling and the sand and water areas, with one participant stating '*the whole room transforms with playdough*' (Participant 2). This view is supported by French (2012), who states that learning occurs in all areas of the pre-school, however areas/activities such as playdough, the home corner, block play and sand and water are essential. French (2012), illustrates that a numeracy area is beneficial but not essential. None of the practitioners in this study had a dedicated numeracy area for children. The findings show that the outdoor area was discussed only once as an area for children's learning, and it can be inferred from these findings that these practitioners do not link numeracy learning to the outdoors. This would contrast with the significant and growing literature highlighting the benefit of outdoor play for early learning (Bruce, 2008).

The findings showed a large amount of early mathematical learning occurs in the context of children's play in all areas of the environment within the pre-school setting, and this is in keeping with previous research (Bruce, 2012; Pound, 1999; 2014; Seo & Ginsburg, 2004). None of the practitioners had specific numeracy areas in their settings, as advocated by French (2012), however they all recognised that numeracy occurs in all areas within the environment. The findings showed that the majority of practitioners did not discuss the outdoor area but focused mainly on the indoor activities to support children's numeracy learning. Considering the benefits of outdoor play (Kemple et al., 2016; Sandseter et al., 2020), it is surprising that outdoor play was not evident within the findings of the study. Practitioners should continue to use the environment to support children's learning in numeracy, and further research

needs to be completed in relation to numeracy, and the outdoor environment.

Limitations and other possible research areas

As this is a qualitative study with a small sample, generalising the findings was never the intent, however the study does provide a footing for further research. The researchers acknowledge that more in-depth observational studies may uncover areas previously untouched, and also provide a richer understanding of current practice approaches in this area. For example, further research to examine the use of mathematical vocabulary, and the capacity for practitioners to link children's emergent interests to numerical concepts within pre-school settings would be beneficial. In addition, examining the methods and occurrences of adult-initiated experiences in numeracy is required. Establishing a base line related to practitioners' knowledge, skills, and practice in early numeracy, is needed to build towards a standardised and inclusive numeracy curriculum, as advocated by the UN sustainability goals.

Conclusion

This study was completed to give a snapshot in time of practitioners' perspectives and practices related to children's numeracy experiences in Irish pre-school settings. The article outlined the benefits of pre-schools in learning numeracy, the role of pedagogy and curriculum in an Irish context. The main themes that emerged were: (1) an eclectic approach to the use of the Aistear Framework; (2) practitioners' interactions; (3) a mixed approach to numeracy language; and (4) the environment and its potential to impact on children's learning. There are a number of recommendations including embedding numeracy into the *Aistear* framework. This could be achieved in a number of ways including providing numeracy examples of adult led activities through the online *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide. Such examples could demonstrate scaffolding children in numeracy through using the many approaches such as communicating, reasoning,

argumentation, justifying, generalising, representing, problem-solving, and connecting their practice.

Continuous professional development in areas such as a standardised understanding of numeracy and linking numeracy to the *Aistear* learning goals could address inconsistencies in professional practice and strengthen numeracy literacy, including a standardised vocabulary, among practitioners. If the learning in numeracy is standardised as advocated by the UN sustainable development goal, then it is equitable for all children.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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The Effectiveness of the Supports Available for Promoting Inclusion in Three Early Childhood Education and Care Settings in Ireland



Sinéad Moran, Miriam Twomey, Conor Mc Guckin
and Aoife M. Lynam

Abstract

This article, based on an M. Ed undertaken in 2019 reiterates how, in recent years, while significant attention has been directed towards ensuring the inclusion of all children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Ireland, some areas may still need addressing. To help identify some of these areas, the authors undertook a small-scale research study, which explored the lived experiences of a group of those supporting three children's access to the ECCE scheme. Each of the research participants were direct partners within the microsystem of the children who were accessing the ECCE scheme, and required additional supports for full participation in the scheme. Thus, this article adds to our knowledge and understanding of how SDG 4 and 10 can be achieved in the Irish context. Overall, the study aligns with the objectives of *United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4* which aspires to ensure equitable access to ECEC for all children by 2030 (UNESCO, 2023). In

this context, this small-scale study offers further insights into Ireland's progress toward achieving this goal. (For more information on Ireland's attainment of SDG4, as it relates to ECEC, see article 3, this volume, by Mary Moloney).

Introduction

As mentioned, the current research explored the perspectives of the research participants concerning the supports provided to promote inclusion within ECEC settings. This is an area which has remained relatively unexplored (Walsh, 2017). The *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*, which were introduced in 2016, placed a spotlight on the importance of inclusive environments in ECEC in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016) as do *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Following on from this study in 2019, there has, however, been more focus placed on this area of research. O' Leary and Moloney (2020) for example, explored the lived experiences of autistic children and their families as they navigate the Irish Early Years Education system (both pre-school and primary school). In 2015, the DCYA, estimated that between 3-5% of children aged 3-5 years had a disability, with approximately one-third of these children having complex needs requiring supplementary assistance (DCYA, 2015).

Current government policy and legislation for inclusion

Ireland is consistently improving its standards in relation to inclusive ECEC provision. Inclusion of all children has become more evident in ECEC in Ireland (Walsh, 2018). Inclusion is also the main objective in government policy and legislation, both on a national and international level (*Salamanca Statement*, 1994; *Education for Persons with Special Needs Act* (EPSEN), 2004; *The Disability Act* 2005; the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), 2016).

There are many contextual factors, which must be considered for inclusive ECEC provision. Rather than focusing solely on access, the ultimate goal should be the full participation of all children in ECEC programmes (Murray, 2013; Moloney and McCarthy, 2018; O’Leary and Moloney, 2020). Creating an inclusive environment is key for ensuring full participation for all children in ECEC, and requires thoughtful preparation (Frankel, Gold *et. al*, 2010; Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). As well as providing inclusive environments for all children, Early Childhood Educators must also consider local and global factors impacting the lives of young children (e.g. immigration, war, poverty) as set out in the agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2015). Thus, Early Childhood Educators must have a broad knowledge and understanding of ECEC, from a national and global perspective (Urban, Scacchi *et. al*, 2017).

Available Supports in Early Childhood Care and Education

There are many supports available for children and families engaged in ECEC settings in Ireland. These include the *National Childcare Scheme* (Government of Ireland, 2019), along with the *Access and Inclusion Model* (Government of Ireland, 2016). Specialist provision from voluntary organisations is also available for families. Furthermore, voluntary organisations offer specialist provision, and provide many services for children, and their families ranging from assessment, therapy, education, training, residential respite, and family support (Enable Ireland, 2015). There is a strong argument in favour of all children participating in the *ECCE scheme*, regardless of their individual needs. However, as noted by the *National Disability Authority* (2011), the correct supports must be in place.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF), the *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 to 2020*, aimed to make Ireland one of the best countries for children to grow up in (DCEIDY, 2019). In 2015, the government established an Inter-departmental Group (IDG, 2015) connected to *BOBF*. The primary objective was to outline strategies for optimising the best outcomes

for children in Ireland. Subsequently, the *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM) (DCYA, 2016) followed, and encompasses a variety of supports designed to ensure equal opportunities for all children, to access the ECCE scheme in ECEC settings. The AIM sets out to “...empower preschool providers to deliver an inclusive preschool experience” (DCYA, 2016).

Inclusion Training Opportunities

Educators play a critical role within multi-disciplinary teams (Coughlan and Lerario, 2013), and therefore, inclusive education (IE) training is necessary to improve confidence levels for those working as part of a multi-disciplinary team (Broomhead, 2013). EI Teams in Ireland have recognised the willingness of Early Childhood Educators to learn more about the children in their care (Health Service Executive [HSE], 2017), and this is evident from the uptake of *Leadership for Inclusion (LINC)* Training. LINC training falls under level 1 of the AIM, which relates to developing an inclusive culture within ECEC settings offering the *ECCE Scheme* (Pobal, 2016). In 2017, it was estimated that 850 ECEC professionals (ECEs and owner-managers) had completed the LINC programme at that time (LINC, 2017). However, it has been highlighted that staff turnover in ECEC in Ireland has impacted support for inclusion, due to funding being allocated to a staff member, and then the staff member leaving the ECEC setting and further funding not being available to another staff member (HSE, 2017). Therefore, unless investment in ECEC in Ireland improves, full inclusion of all children will remain a challenge (Finuchan, 2017).

Methodology

The present study, an M. Ed, undertaken in 2019 was underpinned by three comprehensive case studies. The case studies were based around three children who required additional supports, and who were attending three different ECEC settings. The children’s parents (three); three early childhood educators working with the children, and the three managers from the children’s settings participated.

Semi-structured interviews provided participants the latitude to elaborate on their responses when necessary (Bell, 2005). Interviews facilitated the collection of information grounded in initial inquiries, offering the possibility to extend those ideas as required (Banks and Shevlin, 2019). This study was undertaken through a social constructivist lens as it included elements of understanding, and describing human nature (Chilisa, 2011).

Notably, two of the participating ECEC settings were situated in an urban location marked by socioeconomic disadvantage. The third setting was based on the outskirts of a large town characterised by greater affluence. Yin (1994, p.1) states that case studies possess certain characteristics, which can include the use of “... many variables of interest, multiple sources of evidence; theoretical prepositions that guide the collection and analysis of data”.

Participants

Rather than studying a larger, more generalised cohort, as indicated, this research focuses on a small group of nine participants (comprising three parents, three ECEs, and three ECEC owner-managers). Braddock and Parish (2001, p.54) emphasise the importance of focusing on individuals with lived experiences in the analysis, a perspective also echoed by Petriwsky (2010) in his work on disability. In this study, we aim to amplify the voices of Educators in diverse learning settings, shedding light on everyday issues and approaches in inclusive learning environments. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants. Two case studies involved participants familiar with the researcher, while the third case study featured participants with no prior acquaintance. The study encompassed two small sessional services (22 children each) and one larger setting (58 children). Table 1 illustrates the educator and owner-manager cohorts.

Table 1. Educator, Owner and Manager Cohorts

Role within the setting	Educational Attainment	Years of Experience
ECEC Manager	QQI Level 6 in ECEC or equivalent	10 + years
ECEC Owner	QQI Level 6 in ECEC or equivalent	10 + years
ECEC Manager	QQI Level 8 in ECEC or equivalent	2 years
Early Childhood Educator	QQI Level 8 in ECEC or equivalent	1.5 years
Early Childhood Educator	QQI Level 6 in ECEC or equivalent	10+ years
Early Childhood Educator	QQI Level 5 in ECEC or equivalent	13 years

The third cohort of participants for this study were three parents. Each parent had a child who was attending one of the three ECEC settings. Two of the children had received a formal diagnosis of ASD, and the other had a formal diagnosis of Global Developmental delay.

Data analysis

This research examined if the supports available to ensure the inclusion of the children in the ECEC settings are viewed as effective by the research participants. A Thematic Analysis approach was used in this study for the analysis of the data. Boyatzis (1998) claims that a thematic approach to data analysis can achieve anything from basic data analysis, to unveiling characteristics of something more substantial. A six-step Thematic Analysis approach was used for the current research as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), who describe the approach as a flexible method for organising data and identifying themes, which can be beneficial for qualitative researchers who are early in their career. The six steps of the Thematic Analysis used in this study are as follows: (i) Familiarising yourself with the data (ii) Generating initial codes (iii) Search for

themes (iv) Review potential themes (v) Define and name themes (vi) Produce the report.

Ethical Considerations

Participants received clear information sheets and consent forms, in person, and with the option to return them via a stamped addressed envelope, or in person. The research, part of an M.Ed. study at Trinity College Dublin, received ethical approval in 2018. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured to participants (Harrison, 2010). Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw. Participants could also delete their contributions up until coding and anonymisation or publication stages. Data collection occurred in a secure, participant-friendly location known only to the researcher, their supervisor, and the participant.

Limitations of the current research

Firstly, the researcher acknowledges that this is a small-scale study with a small sample size of nine participants. Furthermore, six of the participants had time restrictions in place due to work commitments. In addition, it is important to remember that the study was conducted in 2019, prior to the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. It is important also, to reemphasise that ECEC in Ireland has encountered many changes in a short time frame since 2019, which include a global pandemic and changes to both ECEC and EI policy and practice. The study therefore, does not encompass the subsequent recent changes to policy and practice, which have occurred in ECEC and Early Intervention (EI) in Ireland. Despite these limitations, this small-scale study provides a platform for the many important voices of those involved in the accessibility of the *ECCE Scheme*.

Findings

Three main themes were identified from the data and these focused on the supports accessed, inclusion, and training. Below, the findings related to each theme are presented.

Theme 1: Agencies/ Supports accessed

To provide equal opportunities for all children to access the *ECCE Scheme*, supports are necessary. There were many supports, including formal and informal accessed by the participants of this study.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme

The *ECCE Scheme* recognises that additional support is sometimes needed for children to fully participate in the scheme (DCYA, 2016). Therefore, the option for children to access an extra free preschool year, following the two free years, is available (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2016). Opinions within the parent cohort of this study (n=3) were conflicted, as to the necessity of the extra year. One of the parents was positive about accessing another year, while two of the parents did not feel it was required, with one parent stating that it would be “... too much”.

Voluntary Disability Organisations

Twomey and Shevlin (2016), describe the “...infinite quest” by parents to access supports for their children. However, the three parent participants highlighted the support given by a voluntary organisation, with whom they had contact and worked collaboratively. They explained that it is the ethos of the voluntary organisation in question, to provide holistic family support as well as individual support to the child. Parents found the organisation to be helpful to their own needs as well as their child’s, with one parent stating, “I can say the first appointment was more for me.” Russell

(2005) found that parents can feel pressure when accessing supports for their children. Voluntary organisations have been highlighted within this study as alleviating some of the pressure for families.

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

All study participants had accessed support through the *AIM* and eight of the nine participants spoke positively about their experience. However, one ECE described how they were “... finding the lack of support really, really challenging”. One participant owner-manager stated that the *AIM* specialist had “... gone above and beyond for us this year. We didn’t have all of the knowledge and they really did try to help us.” However, the three participating parents felt that there was a lack of communication between them and the specialist team and that the agencies were more matched to the ECEC setting rather than for them and their family’s needs. One parent stated that “... they are more for my child’s extra teacher.” Walsh (2017) described the inevitability of problems arising in the early stages of the model being introduced. However, at the time of the study in 2019, there were still problems such as lack of communication with parents, and with the handover when a new specialist is assigned to an ECEC setting and on the transition to primary school. One of the Early Childhood Educators described how accessing supports was “... sometimes a bit of a nightmare.”

Informal supports

Informal supports were deemed an important factor in this study. The three parent participants had accessed supports from other parents. One of the parents placed a high value on this type of support acknowledging “... they’ve been there. Anything your child is going to do, they have already been there before.” Carlhead, Grunlund *et al.* (2003) acknowledge the importance of support from other parents. However, Hodge and Runswick Cole (2008, p. 645) claim that this type of relationship should not “...compensate for deficits in the professional-parent model”. The UN SDG 17 which represents the importance of partnerships for achieving SDGs,

describes professional-parent relationships as invaluable for sharing knowledge (UN,2015).

Factors impacting the Effectiveness of the Supports

The study uncovered four main factors affecting support effectiveness: waiting times for therapies, multi-disciplinary team issues, staff turnover, and conflicting agency support. The three participating parents expressed concern about lengthy therapy wait times, citing month-long gaps due to high demand. When the *AIM* was introduced in 2016, it outlined that Level 6 of the model would be dedicated to the area of Therapeutic Intervention (Pobal, 2019). Level 6 “...provides for access to therapeutic services where they are critical to enable a child to be enrolled, and fully participate, in the ECCE programme” (Pobal, 2019). However, parent participants highlighted the lengthy waiting times for therapies. Agreeing with the parents, one educator indicated they would prefer if therapies could be accessed straight away, stating that the delay in accessing support was having an impact on the children, “It’s just...everything is slow. They need support straight away.”

Participants had a positive experience with two key supporting agencies, but noted varied advice on children’s learning experiences. One agency emphasised social development, while another, prioritised academic learning. One agency required that the educators focused on the social development of the child. However, contrasting advice was offered by the specialist voluntary organisation who would rather that the educators focused on academic learning (e.g. table top activities). This underscores the importance of clear communication among early intervention partners when deciding on children's educational experiences.

The study revealed poor communication within multi-disciplinary teams, leaving educators feeling excluded and uninformed, with vital information often missing. According to one educator, “...you don’t actually know what’s going on behind the scenes.” It is important that educators feel included in the consultation process regarding the children in their care as it has

been acknowledged that it could take many years for them to feel confident that they could support children with additional and complex needs (IDG, 2015). The educators in this study felt intimidated by and, unequal due to a lack of communication with their managers and outside agencies. One educator described the situation as pressured within their workplace as “... you feel like you are being watched.” While another, described the communication within the ECEC setting as “... messy” also stating that “... the employer should be more informative of things.”

Both parents and professionals in this study expressed concerns at the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining staff. Two of the educators had only taken up their role in the middle of the term, while one of the owner-managers described finding staff under the *AIM* as “... very difficult.” The *National Disability Authority* claim that “...a teacher factor can be considered as an important variable influencing the quality of intervention programmes” (2012, pg. 2). One parent highlighted the detrimental impact that his educator leaving the ECEC setting had on her son stating, “He doesn’t really like to come [to ECEC] anymore”.

Theme 2: Inclusion

The findings suggest, that at the time of the study in 2019, there were barriers to inclusion within the three ECEC settings in the study. These include access to ECCE places, the suitability of the learning environment, and the ethos of inclusion within ECEC settings. These issues are discussed next.

Access/ provision of school places

Two of the three participating parents, described enrolling their child in the *ECCE Scheme* as a negative experience. This is, despite having an early diagnosis, and bringing their own supports to the ECEC setting. They described a change in attitude, and even a withdrawal of an *ECCE Scheme* place once their child’s disability had been revealed. “... you’re left hanging or they decide they don’t have

a place for you anymore!” Purdue (2009), acknowledged this change in attitude as a barrier to facilitating inclusion.

One manager felt that she had a welcoming attitude towards enrolling children who required additional supports. However, she felt nervous about inclusion, and whether their ECEC setting could facilitate the needs of the child: “Being honest, it was a little scary at first.” The formative review of the *AIM* outlines similar viewpoints from other owner-managers who offer the *ECCE Scheme* (DCYA, 2019).

The learning environment

In the current research, two of the participating educators, and two of the owner-managers reflected on their own learning environments. One educator expressed that they would like a sensory area in their ECEC setting so that the children could “... regulate themselves if they needed a bit of time out.” This would be complemented by *The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*, which contain guidelines on the importance of “...sensory exploration” for promoting inclusion within ECEC settings (DCYA, 2016).

Level 4 of the *Access and Inclusion Model*, provides ECEC settings with access to a *Better Start Early Years Specialist (BSEYS)* (County Childcare Committee, 2016). A *BSEYS* is a part of the *Better Start Quality Development Service*, which aims to provide a range of state supports for children aged birth-6 years who attend ECEC settings in Ireland (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021). In this study, support was provided in an advisory capacity, guiding on many areas including the learning environment. Two of the educators had accessed the specialist service and carried out their recommendations. However, the owner of the ECEC setting disagreed with the recommendations and advised staff to change the classroom back to its original design. They state that “... they’d be looking to see if things had changed, and you’d have to explain that the owner didn’t like it.” This is an example of the importance of collaboration among all partners within ECEC settings (Pinkus,

2003). It is evident from this study, that at the time of data collection, there was a lack of communication among some partners. This is a area that needs significant improvement as the ideas of all partners need to be considered in order to ensure the wellbeing and learning goals for all children (DES, 2010).

Ethos of inclusion within the service

All nine participants had a positive experience of inclusion. There were, however, issues in relation to inclusion within ECEC settings that had caused concern among the educators. One of these areas was a negative experience concerning inclusion policies. Two of the three participating educators had not been introduced to the inclusion policy of the ECEC setting where they worked. One stated that their policy was "...just words ...". The DCYA (2016) has outlined how the inclusion policy of a service sets the standards for "...high-quality inclusive practice..." (DCYA, 2016:73).

The three - participating owner-managers acknowledged that, on occasion, they felt there was not enough time available within their setting to promote inclusion. One of the owner-managers participants claimed that "if you've a family at home, it's tough to get to these courses." Naudeau, Kataoka et al. (2011) outline the importance of investment in ECEC, and it may be beneficial to provide funding for in-house training during the summer months for ECEC staff who provide the ECCE Scheme. One owner-manager recommended that "I think when you are doing ECCE, there should be certain hours over the summer that you should be allowed to do these courses." Time is also required for the implementation of recommended room changes, and administration demands, to create an inclusive environment. Again, an owner-manager highlighted that the room layout may need to be changed regularly "... sometimes the room layout may not always suit the individual needs of the other children with other learning difficulties."

Theme 3: Training

All participants, apart from one educator, had engaged in inclusion training. Although there was a strong uptake of training, it is concerning that an educator who was funded through the *AIM* has received no inclusion awareness training. A lack of training leaves educators ill-equipped, and lacking in the knowledge necessary to complete their role (Broomhead, 2013)

Training accessed

Training opportunities for parents was a prominent topic of discussion within the current research. Sameroff and Fiese (2000 p. 154) discuss how “... the parent has been identified as being deficient in certain skills and knowledge” in their new role post diagnosis. The voluntary organisation highlighted in the current research, had offered the parents strategies to use while interacting with their children, as well as specialised courses. Courses accessed included *LAMH*, *Hanen*, and the *Early Bird* course. Mahony et al. (1999) recognise that these types of courses are essential for parents to acquire the knowledge to connect with their children. Parents also accessed training informally online, and through support groups. One of the parent participants found the support received from parents in similar situations within the support groups to be “...invaluable.” Arakelyan, et al. (2019), recognise that being part of a support network allows families to become empowered while improving their health and wellbeing.

There are approximately 4,400 ECEC settings in Ireland (Pobal, 2023). However, despite 1,468 educators and owner-managers participating in *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion* (DEI) training nationally in 2017, only one of the educators in this study, had accessed training. *DEI* training offers 15 hours of inclusion training, free of charge, to professionals working in ECEC in Ireland. Two of the educators in this study had accessed or were hoping to access *Leadership for Inclusion training (LINC)* in the coming year (i.e., 2019). However, one of the participants expressed their concern at not being able to access the *LINC* training due to a limit of one

participant per setting. Outside of the *LINC* training, participants in this study also highlighted that much of the CPD promoting inclusion that they attend, occurs in their own time, during term time. It was strongly advised by some of the participants that training should be attended at night or during holiday periods.

Continuous Professional Development

Overall, the participants had a positive outlook on training and CPD. Parents and professionals showed an eagerness to learn as much as possible for the benefit of the children in their care. One of the educators stated, “Yeah! I’d love to do more training and I’m mad to do that LAMH, the Hanen and just anything really.” Members of multi-disciplinary teams have previously acknowledged this eagerness in previous studies (HSE, 2017). However, despite the desires of the participants to increase their knowledge, they spoke of the inaccessibility of some of the training on offer. The findings indicate that although training is available, the three educator participants had to search for it themselves, in their own time, and the cost of training can be prohibitive.

ECEC services participating in the current research, claim that more funding is required for training. The owner-manager participants expressed the desire to be able to provide CPD opportunities for their staff. One stated that more training would provide a “...confidence boost” for their staff, and that when they attend training courses “... their voice becomes clearer. They bring ideas.” However, they admitted that this was not possible due to their current financial situations.

The three participating parents welcomed the opportunity for training and education. They enjoyed the courses they had attended, and were eager to learn more. However, one parent stated that they did not want to “...overload...” themselves with “... too much information...” as the diagnosis of their son was recent and everything was very new. Adelman, et al. (2017:186), reflect on the way a parent can feel during this time as “...emotional, confusing or even jolting”.

Participating educators and owner managers felt less confident in their abilities to support the children in their care, and believed that they did not have the knowledge and skills to carry out their role, despite some of the participants being educated to graduate level. This coincides with the acknowledgement that the development of a qualified and confident workforce will take time and financial investment (IDG, 2015).

Factors affecting training opportunities

Three of the participants in the current research lacked free time, and this was a contributing factor in making training opportunities inaccessible. The training courses available took place during term time, or at weekends. This is the time when participants felt that their workload was at its heaviest and during family time. The additional administration for promoting inclusion, added to the general administration requirements in ECEC settings did not leave much free time for educators and owner-managers to attend further CPD opportunities. Beckman, *et al.* (2004) have highlighted that planning and the administration involved in catering for inclusive learning environments can be time consuming. The three-participating owner-managers felt that there were not enough non-contact hours allocated, with one owner-manager participant claiming that they could “...not accommodate...” more training courses.

Another factor highlighted by participants in this 2019 small-scale study, which has affected access to CPD opportunities, is the lack of government investment in the area. The IDG (2015) estimated that by 2019, the annual cost of the *AIM* would come to 24 million euro. Despite this cost, participants in this study felt that the area of training is still being severely underfunded. One owner-manager spoke of subsidising CPD for educators, stating, “We’re stretched to our limit now and I don’t think the funding should be coming from our own pot ...”

Concluding Thoughts

The findings in this small-scale study, highlight certain barriers for children who require support while accessing the *ECCE Scheme*. Barriers include accessing a space in an ECEC setting and accessing relevant therapeutic supports. Moreover, educators and owner-managers voiced concerns regarding inclusion training, working conditions, staff turnover rates, and a lack of self-confidence in conducting their role in inclusion. Insufficient communication between partners was highlighted throughout the study, with educators feeling that their voices were excluded from consultation and decision-making processes concerning the children in their care.

Participants in this study, driven by a desire for learning, often resorted to self-funded courses to enhance their inclusion knowledge; however, some faced funding constraints. While 74% of ECEC provision in Ireland is private (Pobal, 2022), most providers rely on government funding. Nevertheless, the three owner-managers in this study felt financially strained, and recommended increased investment in inclusion training, and supports for creating inclusive ECEC environments. This is in line with the UNICEF target spend of 1% of GDP (Early Childhood Ireland, 2023). The participants in this study, experienced the daily realities of building inclusive learning environments, complementing recent research by O'Leary et al. (2020). These challenges need to be addressed. Future research should include the voices of parents, ECEs, owner-managers and children themselves, so that Ireland realises Goal 4 and Goal 10 of the SDGs (UN, 2015).

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Embedding *Aistear* into Action Lesotho's Children's Programme, an Irish/Basotho *Leeto*¹¹: Nurturing Sustainable Practice



Marcella Towler, Jacqui O’Riordan, Eileen Coates,
Mats’ireletso Kanetsi, Mmabataung Mokhethi,
Moselantja Mafale

Abstract

Action Lesotho is an Irish NGO working on humanitarian and development projects in Northern Lesotho, Southern Africa. This article details the origins and development of Action Lesotho’s Childhood Education and Wellbeing Programme (CEWP)¹², from its initial stages to its current form wherein *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009a) has become embedded in the pedagogical approach, and ethos of the programme. The article argues that *Aistear* has been an agent of transformation that has simultaneously nurtured sustainable practice. The publication of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a), precedes that of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). The

¹¹ Leeto is the Basotho word for Journey and used in this article to emphasise the Irish/Basotho connection and journey involved in Action Lesotho’s Children’s programme. In the Irish language, *Aistear* is the Irish word for journey.

¹² CEWP will be used to refer to the Childhood Education and Wellbeing Programme hereafter.

narration of this unique *leeto* demonstrates a transformation in ways of teaching, learning, and working in the CEWP, in addition to emphasizing the potential of *Aistear's* Principles and Themes as a conduit for the realisation of the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

In 2015, following decades of work, the 2030 agenda for sustainable development was adopted by member states of the United Nations. 'At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹³, which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing (<https://sdgs.un.org/goalsHistory>'). The complexities of describing the concept of sustainability and sustainable development have been noted by many authors, including Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga (2008), Croft (2017), Justice (2019), Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2019). The interpretation of sustainability in this paper combines the content of the SDGs and the descriptions by OMEP World (Siraj- Blatchford *et al.*, 2010) and those outlined by OMEP Ireland (2023).

This paper adopts the position that the work of the CEWP represents a microcosm of sustainability through its' engagement with *Aistear*, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009a). The narrative review is an exposition of how the work of the CEWP has incorporated *Aistear's* Principles and Themes (NCCA, 2009a), and fostered sustainable practice in the process, rather than an analysis of a definitive research project. The discussion includes contributions from six authors/participants¹⁴ in total, three from

¹³ SDGs will be used to refer to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals hereafter.

¹⁴ These are Eileen Coates, Action Lesotho Director with expertise in craft work, Jacqui O'Riordan Action Lesotho Director with expertise in international development and sociology, Marcella Tower, mentor to the programme and lecturer in Early Years Care and Education, Mats'ireletso Kanetsi, Action Lesotho Children's Programme Manager, Mmabataung Mokheti, Assistant Manager on the

Ireland, and three from Lesotho. The process of reflection and appraisal of the CEWP in relation to *Aistear* and sustainable practice, draws from: reflections of those involved in its development; extracts and examples from online/WhatsApp discussions; discussions and examples of pedagogical activities; materials and observations from community performances when two of the Irish Team visited Lesotho¹⁵. Additionally, the three Educators in Lesotho were asked to make a short video about their experiences of working with *Aistear*, extracts from which, are also included in the discussion. 'All of the principles and themes in *Aistear* reflect the interconnectedness of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and three pillars of sustainability, which are economic, socio-cultural, and environmental (Boyd, 2023, p.7). Given the connections between *Aistear*, the SDGs and pillars of sustainability, the appraisal of the CEWP merges these components. The pillars of sustainability will be used to assemble the examples from practice with links to *Aistear* and the SDGs provided therein. The account demonstrates a whole centre approach (Henderson and Tilbury, 2004), to initiating changes in sustainable education. Such approaches encompass curriculum and pedagogy, environmental changes (physical and social) and partnerships and community connections (Davis, 2010).

Context for Action Lesotho's CEWP

Lesotho is a small mountainous, landlocked country located in southern Africa. It is surrounded by its larger neighbour, South Africa, bordering South Africa's Orange Free State, Cape Colony and Natal Colony. Poverty rates in the country remain consistently high even in the context of some reduction in poverty rates, especially in urban centres, in more recent years. Current estimates place 33.9% of the population as living below the international poverty line¹⁶

Children's Programme, Moselantja Mafale, Facilitator on the Children's Programme.

¹⁵ Consent for using these materials, the extracts from the reflections, video recordings and WhatsApp discussions is authorised through Action Lesotho.

¹⁶ US\$2,15 per day.

and up to 40% living below multi-dimensional poverty measures in 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

Lesotho's Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development (IECCD) Sector

The early years sector in Lesotho has a layered and vibrant structure, benefiting from Lesotho's international obligations as signatories to the UNCRC, and with strong internal advocates (O'Riordan et al, 2014), and focused on ensuring increased participation of poorer and vulnerable children (Government of Lesotho, 2013). However, while participation of children in early years centres is generally high, especially in urban centres, children from rural areas, and from poorer families are less likely to attend. Early years centres comprise community-based centres, those attached to primary schools, privately-run centres, and home-based ones; the latter run on part-time bases and generally, by parents. Support structures are organised at regional levels, with dedicated Early Years Officers providing regular workshops (O'Riordan et al, 2014).

Lesotho's first early year's curriculum dates from 1998, although participation remains uneven across the country. The curriculum *Learn as you Play* encompasses a 'holistic framework and include experiences and interactions that promote and enhance child's interests ... [focusing] on the whole child, including areas of physical, cognitive, linguistic, creative, social, moral and emotional development. It also emphasises nurturing 'mind and spirit ... in an interactive exchange with caregivers and peers, promoting the fulfillment of children rights and their participation' (Ilanos 1999, p.46).

The process of registering the CEWP preschool is a difficult one as Action Lesotho's children come from poorer families, and while it is run by qualified staff who have teaching diplomas at primary and secondary levels, it is not attached to a primary school it is not considered to be a private centre. However, Action Lesotho staff are now included in activities organised at regional level and have

access to local pre-school support structures and CPD, while the registration process continues.

Origins and development of Action Lesotho's CEWP

Action Lesotho is an Irish NGO that has been working with communities in Lesotho since 2005, mainly in and around Maputsoe on the northwest of the country. Its involvement crosses development and humanitarian projects aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty. These projects currently include childhood education and wellbeing, horticultural projects, training for employment as well as health and nutrition support¹⁷. While Action Lesotho is an Irish registered NGO, its work is guided by the reflections and priorities identified by staff working in Lesotho, and includes a pre-school, breakfast club, homework club, weekend and holiday programmes as well as a home care, and a high school support programme. The CEWP supports the education and wellbeing of up to 90 children, from pre-school level through to high school.

The CEWP as it is currently constituted began its development in 2015. At this time, the Children's Programme was focused on supporting mostly older children after school, and providing food and some ad hoc activities for them at weekends. Meals were provided and it included a very small-scale and informal facility for pre-school children. Through discussions at this time about the nature and direction of the programme - a process initiated by our in-country Director and facilitated by a visiting Board member, Action Lesotho's project worker Mats'ireletso Kanetsi, expressed a wish to extend the early years facility. The ambition was for it to become a fully operational pre-school, and for the programme to enhance the support for older children.

¹⁷ More information on Action Lesotho's work is available on its website: <https://www.actionlesotho.ie/>

On reflection, Mats'ireletso observed that:

As staff we noticed that giving food to children was not enough. That is why we initiated informal activities to be held at the centre during the week as there are a lot of children coming to the centre every day, some of which cannot afford to go to the school due to financial problems. We therefore suggested a morning programme for preschool children, a homework club and a holiday programme (Mats'ireletso Kanetsi, Project Manager in Action Lesotho Children's Programme, extract from video recording).

These suggestions were brought to the Board in Ireland, who after some deliberations, accepted the direction proposed.

Introducing *Aistear*

Meanwhile, *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009a) for children aged from birth to six years had been recently developed in Ireland. *Aistear* can be adapted for use in a range of settings within this age group (NCCA, 2009a; French and McKenna, 2022). Corresponding with the development of the framework, a wealth of material was available online to support its roll-out across Ireland. It was thought that this innovative and child-focused framework could work well in embedding a culture of discussion, learning and validating education in the programme in Lesotho. The materials were readily available online and could be drawn upon to help develop insights, ways of working with children, active child-focused learning. Introducing the *Aistear* materials to the CEWP was always cognizant of the Early Childhood Curriculum in Lesotho. *Aistear's* focus aligned with Lesotho's existing early years curriculum, as well as more recent education strategies that both emphasise the importance of early years education, and which are increasingly focused on the power of play in education (Government of Lesotho, 2013; Ministry of Education and Training 2005, 2016, 2021). Engaging with the *Aistear* online materials was at all times intended to support the *Learn as You Play* curriculum, rather than to

supplant it. Moreover, sensitivity was needed in relation to ensuring that *Aistear*, a curriculum from another part of the world was introduced to, but not imposed on the CEWP. The intention was to support the CEWP Team as they devised their own curricular approach relevant to the local context as ‘curricula designed and implemented in the West are based on the understandings of the development and lifestyles of young children who are growing up in the ‘West’ (Gupta, 2015, p.262). Combining hybrid education approaches has been referred to as ‘pedagogy of third space’ (Gupta, 2013, p. 9, 2015, p.262). Hence, *Aistear* was the nexus between the *Learn as you Play* curriculum, and the pedagogy and ethos developed in the CEWP.

Additional resource support was provided by a student from the UCC International Development programme who undertook a programme placement at the CEWP in Lesotho. Work on developing the CEWP incorporated staff visits to pre-schools in Lesotho, and in neighbouring South Africa. *Aistear* materials were identified to introduce the staff to its guiding principles and initiate discussions on its potential to be incorporated into teaching and learning practices. Consultations with early years practitioners and settings were arranged for the In-country Director’s and the then Community Project Manager’s visit to Ireland. Thereafter, a Board member visited Lesotho in April 2015. During this time, in collaboration with the in-country Director, both experienced facilitators, facilitated introductory workshops based on *Aistear*’s Principles and Themes (NCCA, 2009a).

The role-play workshop activities incorporated ideas from *Aistear*’s 12 Principles and 4 Themes (NCCA, 2009a) with the aim of understanding the different positionalities of learner and educator through active learning experiences. Reciprocal relationships between adults and children as emphasised in the *Aistear* Principle of ‘The adult’s role’ (NCCA, 2009a, pp.9-10), initiated exercises on communication and interactions. This exploration highlighted the significance of adults as role models during their interactions, with both verbal and non-verbal communication considered during the workshop activities. By assuming the roles of both educator and

learner, the bidirectionality of communication noted in the *Aistear* Theme of 'Communicating' (NCCA, 2009a, p.34) and the messages potentially given through actions and expressions were emphasised. The playful workshop activities reflected the following statement from the child's perspective within the *Aistear* principle of 'The adult's role' (NCCA, 2009a, p. 10): 'Be a good role model for me, and think about your own beliefs and attitudes and how you interact with me. What you say, do and suggest through your words and actions influences me'. Hence, the team in Lesotho began to reflect in more detail on their role in modelling 'language, behaviours, values and attitudes portrayed as children imitate what they see and hear' (NCCA, 2009b, p.30). While initially slow to start, following the workshops and role-playing exercises, interest gained momentum and the potential of constructing a welcoming, open learning and working environment for all, began to take shape.

From reading, reflection, and discussion of the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA, 2009a), one of the first things staff wished to work on was the immediate environment of the community centre: to improve it aesthetically¹⁸ and transform it into an environment conducive to wellbeing, where everyone became responsible for its upkeep and maintenance. Bright colours and activity/learning spaces for children, and working spaces for staff, that met their expressed needs were introduced. Rich discussions on connections between wellbeing and environment flowed, reaching out to wider environmental considerations and making very clear connections between daily practices, experiences, attentiveness to environment through to more local, regional, national and international environmental concerns. The improvements to the environment exemplified the importance of engaging with the *Aistear* principle of 'The learning environment' (NCCA, 2009a, p.12) as by making both the indoor and outdoor environment more inviting, the children took more interest in attending the centre. The potential of *Aistear's* framework was beginning to make itself clear as was its alignment to key themes in Lesotho's early years curriculum which

¹⁸ Photographs of the environment are included in Appendix A

emphasises, connections to ‘real world of cultural experiences, norms, values, qualities, hopes and dreams, as well as expectations from children, families and communities’ (Llanos 1999, p.46). The impact of the changes to the CEWP are encapsulated in the words of the Project manager:

When we were introduced to the framework, we did not have interest. I remember very well we had to attend workshops for it. We were bored having a lot of it to think through, seeing a lot of papers to read. Unfortunately, we had to sit and co-operate to bring change to the centre. I say this because our centre was not welcoming at all. The colours outside, the colours painted outside were dull. There were no people coming for the services, no activities for children which led them to not having interest to the centre and they were not listening to what we were trying to say to them. It was really empty. It was a stressful situation but as time goes by there comes a light. We understood what we had been taught, reading, searching, understanding the framework helped us a lot because we were able to come up with beautiful programmes mentioned above. The centre is now safe and welcoming to everyone (Mats’ireletso Kanetsi, extract from video recording).

The leeto continues: weekly dialogue and visit to Lesotho

As the team in Lesotho continued to engage with the *Aistear* Curriculum Framework and online support materials, weekly online reflective conversations with the team in Ireland through Skype calls were introduced. Through the weekly dialogue and reflections, it became clear that working with *Aistear’s* Principles and Themes could not be confined to the preschool curriculum and activities only but would permeate all the activities for children in the centre: *‘What is interesting is that framework is used by or supposed to be used by early childhood but here we use it for all the children and it is*

working magic I can tell you' (Mats'ireletso Kanetsi, extract from video recording). It was agreed that any suggestions from Ireland needed to be relevant and meaningful to the social and cultural context in Lesotho. The *Aistear* Principle of 'The child's uniqueness' was hence brought to the fore: 'He/she is an active learner growing up as a member of a family and community with particular traditions and ways of life' (NCCA, 2009, p.7). Henceforth, the activities discussed became more emergent, reflecting the needs and interests in Lesotho, at a particular time. One of the early discussions related to activities to help children become familiar with the names of the days of the week in Sesotho, the home language, and then in English. Mats'ireletso Kanetsi and Marethabile Lelane made a poster with drawings representing Basotho activities that are typical on days of the week¹⁹. The learning therefore became more meaningful and relevant to the children and their Basotho culture, mirroring the sentiments in the *Aistear* Principle 'Equality and diversity' (NCCA, 2009a, p.8).

Jacqui O' Riordan and Marcella Towler visited the CEWP in Lesotho in 2017. The visit was not a research visit, it provided the opportunity for further appreciation of the context of the activities that we were discussing online, in addition to building relationships with the team in Lesotho. Through observing the activities of the CEWP, and engaging in reflective discussions, our insights on the activities of the CEWP were confirmed, challenged, and broadened. Jacqui noticed a significant change since the previous visit and the initial role-play workshops. The CEWP staff were actively listening to children, and encouraging children in the different programmes for ideas for activities. *'We did not have an idea that listening to the children would bring such a big change in their lives or to their lives and also ours as well'* (Mats'ireletso Kanetsi, extract from video recording).

Following this visit, Eileen Coates, one of Action Lesotho's Directors joined the discussions. Eileen recently noted that 'communication and mutual support are at the heart of the success

¹⁹ An example of the poster is included in Appendix B

of *Aistear* in Action Lesotho's Children's Programme' (extract from reflection on *Aistear* in the CEWP). Due to connectivity issues, these discussions now take place over WhatsApp.

We were devastated when our colleague Marethabile Lelane passed away in 2019. Her work with Mats'ireletso Kanetsi was significant in the establishment of the Children's Programme and her absence was acutely felt by all, however her enthusiasm and engagement continue to inspire the team.

The continued online discussions explored the potential for enhancing play and hands on experiences even further in the CEWP, and traditional teaching practices were altered with the benefits of *Aistear's* approach becoming even more apparent.

I think Aistear is very important to us and the children. On my side, it makes my work easy because I have never and I will never stand in front of the children teaching. Children learn easily through play. At first it was very difficult for me to understand that children learn through play (Mmabataung Mokhethi, Assistant Manager on the Children's Programme, extract from video recording)

Through reflection, dialogue and engaging with *Aistear* online materials in addition to sector guidelines in Lesotho, the 'pedagogy of third space' incorporated an amplified playful approach to teaching. Within this pedagogy, and its accompanying ethos, sustainable practice was fostered.

Nurturing sustainable practice: *Aistear* and the activities of the CEWP

Economic pillar of sustainability

'Economical sustainability relates to ensuring access to affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care services addressing the needs of families from diverse economic backgrounds' (OMEPIreland, 2023, n.p.). The work of the CEWP

relates to this pillar through its provision of early childhood and services for orphaned and vulnerable children and their caregivers. The work also links directly to SDG4: Quality Education.

Environmental pillar of sustainability: Climatic challenges

'We had rain this week' (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions)

The statement above may not seem unusual from an Irish perspective but from a Basotho perspective, much needed rain can be significant. The focus on weather and its impact on respective environments in Ireland and Lesotho features regularly in the weekly discussions. While the scarcity of water has been challenging, it has made the discussion and activities relating to the water cycle meaningful to the children, with a story relating to the water cycle devised, and rhymes about the importance of water researched and introduced. 'Relevant and meaningful experiences' (NCCA, 2009a, p.11) is one of the principles of *Aistear*. Goal 6 of the SDG's: Clean water and sanitation aims to 'ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' (United Nations, 2015, p.14). The scarcity of water in Lesotho is particularly salient in relation to this goal. Learning about the natural environment as suggested in the *Aistear* Theme of 'Exploring and Thinking' (NCCA, 2009a, p.44) is therefore at the forefront of the children's daily lives through the realities of the often-limited water supply.

Conserving water through the water tank outside the centre has alleviated some of the challenges. A safe borehole was found in 2023, and a water pump has been installed. The commitment to community relationships is evident when water is shared with the community when needed.

Although water can often be limited, when it does rain, the difficulties can cause further problems with flooding. This can impact the children's access to education and to the CEWP as some of the children: *'cross culverts and when is raining a lot it is not*

possible to cross over...They stop going to school even coming to the centre' (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions). There can be additional impacts on the children's families: *The small bridges are flushed away and it's difficult for people to access services* (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions).

The pre-school pedagogy has included further environmentally relevant activities about the uses and functions of plants with the children exploring plants outside the centre. Further hands-on activities related to the topic of animals. *'We discussed domestic animal and wild animals. So, we went out to see animals to nearby houses. They were so happy. They wanted to touch them. They were allowed to touch puppies'* (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions). Learning about the process of planting and growing vegetables has also featured in pre-school activities as described in the planning: *'A vegetable from the start. Meaning from a seed to a seedling then ready for consumption'* (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions). Teaching children about nature is a feature of environmental sustainability (OMEP Ireland, 2023), and it also echoes learning about the natural environment in the Aistear Theme of 'Exploring and Thinking' (NCCA, 2009a, p.44).

Social and cultural pillar of sustainability: Fostering relationships: children, caregivers and community

'The preschools parents are happy that their children wore new uniforms and they were like other children when they went to (names location). They wrote a thank you letter to us.' (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions)

Through observations, discussions, and reflections on the work of CEWP, fostering relationships with the children, caregivers and community has emerged as a central component of the work. The decision on whether the pre-school children would wear uniforms or not was considered in depth, and it was clear that ensuring that

the children would feel included when there were gatherings with children from other pre-schools was implicit in the decision. Within the *Aistear* Principle of 'Equality and diversity' (NCCA, 2009a, p.8), the explanation from the child's perspective refers to supporting children in feeling equal, and not being excluded for reasons which include physical appearance. This focus on enabling the children to feel included links directly to SDG4: Quality education.

The support for children and caregivers throughout the levels of education is evident in the advice provided for caregivers as they navigate the administration demands necessary for their children in enabling them to continue in education. For example, advice has been provided for caregivers when applying for grants that would assist with schoolbooks and fees. Additionally, assistance has been provided when caregivers have been compiling the necessary documentation when applying for scholarships for the children. This reflects respect for the significant role of 'Parents, family and community' (NCCA, 2009a, p.9), an *Aistear* Principle. Target 4.1 of the SDG's aims to 'by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes' (United Nations, 2015, p.17). By assisting and advising on grants and scholarships, the work is contributing to the children completing their education. Furthermore, the encouraging home visits that are provided when children are not attending school and/or the CEWP contribute to this SDG target.

Community engagement is also included in the activities with the children. On many occasions, the children have participated in household and garden chores, helping those less able in the community. The suggestion of helping others and encouraging care for own and others' belongings is included in the *Aistear* Principle of 'Children as citizens' (NCCA, 2009a, p.9) 'In the context of Education for Sustainable Development, the principle of 'children as citizens' is particularly important' (NCCA, 2018, p.16). The description of the changes in the children through the words of those who work with them echo the elements of citizenship noted in this *Aistear* Principle.

Moselantja Mafale, Facilitator on the Children's Programme, has noted that Aistear helps children:

...to work out problems for themselves. Nowadays, they learn how to share toys and equipment in a good way... and also, they are able to share their ideas and listen to other children's ideas. They also developed confidence. For Aistear, they can stand firm in front of others reading story books and telling stories without any fear. It also creates a chance to work collaboratively with other children on different tasks (extract from video recording).

In addition to elements of citizenship, the work demonstrates an 'ethos of compassion' that is necessary for sustainable development (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, Pramling Samuelsson, 2010, p. 18).

The ongoing relationships which were cultivated with businesses who on occasion make donations for the children, demonstrate the dedication to the children's well-being, and contribute to alleviating some of the constraints associated with their vulnerabilities. During the holiday programme, the older children chose to practice their skills in hairdressing and manicures, and the caregivers were invited to the 'beauty salon'. The appreciation of the caregivers for the work of the CEWP was evident when they offered to contribute to the programme: '*they said we can invite them so that they share some of the things they know about Basotho culture*' (Children's Programme Educators, WhatsApp discussions). Promoting cultural awareness is an element of social and cultural sustainability (OMEP Ireland, 2023).

Most importantly, the relationships developed with the children are the foundation for the CEWP, and fostering positive relationships contributes to social and cultural sustainability (OMEP Ireland, 2023, n.p.). Within those relationships, the children's contributions and suggestions are welcomed. The relationships with children have become particularly salient during difficult life events such as when the children's caregivers pass away or are absent. The devastation of losing Marethabile Lelane in December 2019 was felt

by all involved in the CEWP both in Lesotho and Ireland. Nevertheless, the programme continued in January 2020, thus providing a sense of continuity for the children, and an outlet for processing grief through the activities that were devised for the children. The openness to exploring feelings has extended to the children's activities whereby space and opportunity has been provided for them, to explore feelings around difficult topics which are not always openly discussed. For instance, a drama performance during Jacqui and Marcella's visit to Lesotho challenged the practice of corporal punishment. The choice of lyrics for the song used as a soundtrack for the acting proposed alternative teaching approaches²⁰. Another example would be when the older children devised a drama about child marriage. Recognising and challenging injustice, as the children did through drama is expressed in the statements from the child's perspective in *Aistear* Principle 'Equality and diversity' (NCCA, 2009a, p.8). Enabling children to understand the rights of others and having 'a sense of social justice' is noted in the *Aistear* Theme of Identity and Belonging (NCCA, 2009a, p.26), and creative expression through drama is part of the *Aistear* theme of Communicating. Target 5.3 SDG5: Gender Equality refers to eliminating harmful practices such as child marriage. The commitment to gender equality was further exhibited in the reflections on stories for the pre-school children. In the reflections on the story of Cinderella, it was felt that females relying on males to 'rescue' them may not be the message that we want to give young girls, and that the message of being kind, unlike some characters in the story, could be emphasized.

An activity on 'when I grow up, I want to be' emerged from these reflections and was considered as a way to introduce discussions on the idea that females can earn a living independently. The discussion noted that this may motivate the children to focus on schoolwork. The opportunities that education can provide in terms of equality and life opportunities are evident from the words of the children themselves in the celebratory community performance during

²⁰ Some of the lyrics of the song are provided in Appendix C

Jacqui and Marcella's visit to Lesotho. The show included both traditional Basotho and Western music, dance and singing. The older children authored and performed the following two poems:

Education for all,
education for all,
the key to our destiny...
can't you see the change,
now we can read and write.

I *AM* somebody,
I *WAS* somebody when I came,
I *WILL* be a better somebody when I leave,
I *AM* powerful and strong,
I *DESERVE* education...
There is a lot of hope for students,
people to impress and places to go.

The poems illustrate an appreciation of education as a right and its value for life and employment. These ideas are included in the learning objectives for SDG4 within *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning Objectives* (UNESCO, 2017). The empowering aspect of lifelong learning noted in SDG 4 is likewise evident in the changing practices of the Educators in Lesotho.

Mats'ireletso continues to teach her team about Aistear, which was not the approach any of them would have experienced in their own schooldays'... The Aistear framework is articulated in the weekly reports, reviewing the activities at the Centre and providing a record for us all to share (Eileen Coates, extract from reflection on Aistear in the CEWP).

The examples of the work of the CEWP outlined above demonstrate how elements of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Pillars of Sustainability are inherent in the activities of the CEWP through engagement with *Aistear*. Partnerships have been created in addition to changes in the environment and curriculum and pedagogy, thus reflective of a whole centre approach to sustainability (Henderson and Tilbury, 2004). Sterling (2003, p.344) proposes that sustainable institutions are those that attempt to reflect ‘a microcosm of a sustainable society’. Embedding *Aistear* in activities of the CEWP has prompted a small-scale representation of sustainable practice.

It is acknowledged that in the process of updating *Aistear*, the priority of environmental sustainability needs to ‘strengthened’ (Farrell and Daly, 2023, p.31). By aligning the unique work of the CEWP with *Aistear*’s Principles and Themes (NCCA, 2009a) and highlighting the connections to sustainability, it is clear that there is already a strong foundation to build on in Ireland’s Curriculum Framework. The elements of education for sustainability outlined below are evident in the work of the CEWP:

Education for sustainability is about creating changes in how we think, teach and learn; early childhood education has much to contribute to society’s transformations towards sustainability. The starting point is our fundamental values, focusing in on children’s rights, human rights and justice (Davis, 2014, p.22).

Conclusion

The evolving story of the CEWP continues. It is an embodiment of engagement with *Aistear*’s orientation and potential to embed confidence, and a love of learning in children and adults alike, while cultivating sustainable practice. The influence of *Aistear* is seen throughout the CEWP, not just the Early Childhood phase, demonstrating a whole centre approach to education for sustainable development. The CEWP exemplifies a microcosm of sustainability

through its caring learning environment where discussion and openness are encouraged, and children are listened to, responded to, and supported in developing knowledge. This continues to be a unique *leeto*: a journey in exploring ways in tackling poverty and meeting international educational goals and targets; a journey in enacting open cross-cultural communication; a journey which has nurtured sustainable practice. Commitment to this programme is an empowering learning experience for all involved, the significance of which is encapsulated by Mats'ireletso Kanetsi:

'What we are doing will bring the biggest change inside this village... the children are really enjoying ... and I enjoy every moment' (extract from video recording).

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Appendix A

Outdoor environment

Changes to the outdoor environment were intended to make the centre more welcoming. For safety reasons, tyres were placed around the perimeter wire surrounding the outside play area. These tyres were painted in bright colours to make them more appealing and had letters of the alphabet painted on them.



Indoor environment

Changes to the indoor environment included adding a weather chart and colourful posters linked to topics being discussed.



Appendix B

Days of the week poster. Close up shows that on Monday children go to school.



Following Jacqui and Marcella's visit in 2017, there was a reconfiguration of the activities conducted in the large room in the centre. The pre-school is now located in the larger room and this enabled setting up interest areas as shown below.



Appendix C

(Lyrics of John Legend and the Roots's song, *Wake up Everybody*, chosen by the children for their drama production).

*Wake up all the teachers time to teach a new way
Maybe then they'll listen to whatcha have to say
Cause they're the ones who's coming up
And the world is in their hands
When you teach the children
Teach 'em the very best you can
The world won't get no better
If we just let it be
The world won't get no better
We gotta' change it yeah,
Just you and me*

Positioning the young child as a rights holder within ESD curricula making under Article 29 1 (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child



Muireann Ranta

Abstract

There are three aims to this article. Firstly, to demonstrate how early childhood education and care (ECEC) is uniquely placed to promote education for sustainable development (ESD) owing to the ECEC practitioner's pedagogical skillset. Secondly, to highlight that despite this pedagogical advantage and increased uptake towards developing ESD for young learners within education policy, there is still more to do. Any approach to ESD must be underpinned by a child rights perspective. Providing children with an education that supports respect for Nature is a legal curriculum entitlement, specified under Article 29 1 (e) of the UNCRC as follows,

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

e) The development of respect for the natural environment
(UNCRC, 1989, p.9).

However, for ECEC practitioners to fulfil these duty-bearing responsibilities, my third and final aim is to argue that the ECEC sector requires much more support (via investment, resources, and leadership). I substantiate these claims by means of an analysis of literature which shows that,

a) Nature has always been a part of ECEC theory, but environmental education alone is insufficient for authentic contextualised ESD today.

b) There has been a wealth of growth in the promotion of ESD in ECEC in recent years,

c) By using children's rights literature and results from my PhD study, I illustrate that young children should and can be partners in creating authentic sustainability learning. This is further substantiated by contributions from ECEC practitioners on the possibilities and barriers towards developing a transformative rights-based ESD approach for the educational sector.

Introduction

Providing children with an education that supports a respect for nature is a legal curriculum entitlement, specified under Article 29 1 (e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as follows:

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

e) The development of respect for the natural environment (UNCRC, 1989, p.9).

This article aims to demonstrate how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as an educational sector, is uniquely placed to promote a child rights-based approach to education for

sustainable development (ESD). I draw on a combination of ECEC and ESD literature, and child rights-based research to substantiate these claims. During my PhD research, I worked with children and ECEC practitioners to explore their perspectives and views under Article 29 1 (e) to demonstrate how these could contribute to developing a 'bottoms-up' transformative child rights-based ESD approach. However, for ECEC practitioners to fulfil these duty-bearing responsibilities, much more must be done regarding leadership and resources to promote effective ESD in the sector. I begin by discussing the relationship between ESD and ECEC pedagogy. I will also examine sustainability as a concept with multiple dimensions and ECEC's role in promoting ESD. This is continued with an analysis of the current position of ECEC as an educational sector in national ESD policy in Ireland. The rest of the article is used to share the contributions of my research participants.

Locating ESD synergies and the positioning of young children in ECEC theory

Educational literature suggests that early childhood is crucial to cultivating a harmonious connection with nature (Carson, 1956; Chawla, 1998). Chawla and Rivkin (2014) build upon this idea, asserting that positive nature experiences during childhood can lead to a lifelong interest in environmental conservation. The revered role of nature as a learning companion for young children has long featured in ECEC practice. While early education itself stemmed from the desire to teach children the value of hard work and strong moral character back in the sixteenth century, learning in nature also played its part in fostering children's growth. Active learning and first-hand experiences in the natural environment were concepts echoed amongst many of the earliest childhood theorists, with Froebel describing young children as tender seedlings, and the ECEC practitioner as a careful gardener who nurtures an environment of harmonious learning, rather than academic instruction (Follari, 2011). Montessori also advocated for the young

child's connection with nature, emphasising an 'unhurried approach' without milestones or undue assessments (Boyd, 2018). The garden was an integral part of Montessori's prepared learning environment, and experiences in nature were recognised as feeding 'the absorbent mind' of the young child (Montessori, 2013). Steiner (1924) also recognised the spirituality of connecting with nature, and described the child as a whole or as one, and that for a child, everything is one, including their surroundings, and that they too, are part of nature.

However, while learning in and through nature is foundational for developing sensitivity towards the natural world, scholars such as Moore et al. (2014), Elliott (2014), and Ernst et al. (2021) recognise that it is not enough to merely develop conceptions of the environment and understanding of sustainability issues. For that matter, Sundberg and Ottander (2014) propose intentional science teaching as also foundational for empowering young children to engage with ESD principles. They advocate for a change in views on science, nature, and pedagogy, calling for a shift towards science inquiry in ECEC. This intentional inquiry-based approach to teaching science can help cultivate a deeper connection with nature, and foster a sense of agency and responsibility in young learners towards environmental and sustainability issues. In addition, Davies (2009; 2015) highlights that ESD is also founded on principles of *critical inquiry, empowerment, participation, democratic decision making and acting to support sustainability*.

Supporting the development of young children as independent critical thinkers and actors is not new in ECEC thinking (Pramling Samuelsson, 2011; Duhn, 2012; Boyd, 2018). Five key elements of ESD - *experiential learning, curiosity and critical thinking, experience in nature, democracy and participation and the classroom as a community* - can also be identified in Deweyan theory from the late nineteenth century (Luff, 2018). Dewey also placed great attention on growth, and on a learning space that supported the young child to reconstruct and apply their own theory. His definition of reflective thought as a process of meaning-making also echoes the ESD principle of critical inquiry as an enabler for learners to discuss

issues and act. It can, therefore, be argued that how the young child is positioned within their educational system and by society at large impacts their capacity to develop into contributing rights holders (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, Smith & Pramling Samuelsson, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson, 2011; Davies & Elliot, 2014).

Sustainability: A concept with interrelated dimensions

Sustainability is a complex idea understood differently by governments, researchers, and the public, as well as between regions and nations (Inoue, O’Gorman & Davies, 2016). It is an ever-evolving value-laden concept with many different meanings. UNESCO²¹ (2010) describes interdependent pillars or systems of sustainability: natural, social and cultural, economic and political (also referred to as good governance) (Grindheim, Bakken, Hiis Hauge & Presthus Heggen, 2019). Phillips (2014) explains how the earth has an ecosystem, a natural system of resources, which supports life. To manage this existence or coexistence, humans constructed the social, cultural and economic systems required to control or divide labour, property ownership, and trading. In turn, political systems were developed to legislate policies and decisions on how the social and cultural and economic systems use the natural system of resources. Therefore, we, as human inhabitants, are embedded in these interrelated systems. Sustainability issues are connected to society, human action, and a shared environmental, social, economic, and political responsibility (Phillips, 2014; Grindheim et al., 2019).

Accordingly, for young children to be fully engaged in ESD, Ji and Stuhmcke (2014) argue that they must have opportunities to

²¹ UNESCO - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN) aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture.

participate in transformative education, that is, in education, which fosters their capacities to understand, and act across all these systems. Alongside protecting the environment, being empowered with social capabilities such as engaging in critical thinking, and participating in democratic decision-making processes, offers a more profound definition of sustainability by integrating broader issues of community life and citizenship into our learning spaces (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011; Duhn, 2012; Mackey, 2012; Sundberg & Ottander, 2014). Furthermore, ESD can be considered a learning process rather than one final product (Tilbury, 1995; Bergsten, in Chalmers Annual Report, 2006; Croft, 2017) as clearly illustrated in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009).

The role of ECEC in ESD promotion

Given the vast range of existential sustainability concerns in the developing and developed world, it is vital to acknowledge the contextual nature of ESD. For example, Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga (2008), describe ESD in developing countries as primarily focused on supporting and empowering families and communities, to ensure adequate sanitation, nutrition, healthcare and protection. On the other hand, developed countries focus more on ESD regarding curricular content, teacher/educator education and ensuring best practices in educational settings. However, this could also be considered a rather blinkered view, given that poverty remains persistent within developed countries, where the same human rights are not enjoyed equally among every person living there (CRA, 2019, 2021). The Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future* (1987) - commissioned by the United Nations to examine issues relating to economic development, labour practices and environmental protection - describes sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. The United Nations

Millennium Declaration (UNMD)²² (2000) underlines prudence on our part, and while we satisfy the basic human needs of this generation, we do not damage the life-sustaining systems of the planet for our children or grandchildren. The common message is that sustainability encompasses many generations, has local and global perspectives, and requires individual involvement and responsibility (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008; Crowell, 2017).

The UNESCO report *Educating for a Sustainable Future* (1997) describes education as humanity's best hope and most effective means of achieving sustainable development. This has been echoed in The United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD)²³ (2005-2014). Furthermore, the United Nations' current Sustainable Development Agenda ²⁴ (2015-2030) outlines this commitment to education for sustainable development as follows under the *Education Goal Target 4.7*,

By 2030, ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence,

²² The United Nations Millennium Declaration (UNMD) is the main document of the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, which contained a statement of values, principles and objectives for the international agenda for the twenty-first century. It also set deadlines for many collective actions.

²³ The United Nation's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) was an *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)* initiative of the *United Nations*.

²⁴ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was launched by a UN Summit in New York on 25-27 September 2015 and aims to end poverty in all its forms. The UN 2030 Agenda envisages "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality, and non-discrimination.

⁶ OMEP - The World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) is an NGO founded in 1948 operating in more than 60 countries that works to defend Human Rights of girls and boys since they are born until they are eight years of age (Early childhood).

global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (UNDP, 2015, p.17).

The integral position of ECEC to promote ESD was initially stated in *The Contribution of Early Childhood Education to a Sustainable Society* (UNESCO, 2008), and subsequently, in the OMEP²⁵ *Education for Sustainable Development in the Early Years* reports (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010). The reports emphasise the importance of recognising young children as rights holders in their education spaces, and implementing the CRC. They also define sustainability as an evolving concept, considering various sustainability concerns experienced by children worldwide. A deep understanding of local cultural contexts is essential for practical and respectful ESD application. In addition, Davies and Elliot (2014) also emphasise that translating ESD to early childhood praxis is challenging, and requires responsive, sensitive pedagogy. They stress that ESD is not just environmental education, nor is ESD just a case of bringing young children outdoors to discover the beauty of nature. Instead, it requires a 'bottoms up' approach that starts by listening to children's perspectives, and including them in making an ESD curriculum that is authentic, and has meaning to their everyday lives (Ferreria et al., 2015).

In recent years, a growing body of literature has examined how ECEC, in general, can be transformed to ensure it is more child rights-based (Moody & Darbellay, 2019; Zanatta & Long, 2021). From a pedagogical perspective, Lyndon et al. (2019), Wall et al. (2019), and Clark (2020), illustrate how relational, responsive, and slowing down approaches within learning spaces could also support this child rights-based approach. Regarding ESD promotion, Hirst (2019) and Spiteri (2020; 2021), argue that the assumed complexities of climate action can be mitigated through intergenerational learning between children, practitioners, and families. Luff (2018), Boyd (2018) and Boardman (2022) connect

synergies with early education theory in making a more democratic learning environment. These authors recommend creating learning opportunities encompassing young children's participation and perspectives to embed democratic values into early childhood spaces.

ESD policy and early childhood in Ireland

Although the Irish government considered it “our national opportunity” to be “in the forefront” of promoting ESD in ECEC (DES, 2014, p.12), and despite recent increases in funding, ECEC as an educational sector in Ireland remains underdeveloped and under-resourced (CRA, 2019; 2021; ECI, 2021). Furthermore, Ireland's approach to ESD is that it has been promoted more in primary, secondary and third-level educational settings than in ECEC. From a child rights perspective, this is problematic under Article 2, which stipulates that rights must be observed “without discrimination of any kind” (UNCRC, 1989, p.2). This omission also raises questions under Article 4, which directs State Parties to “undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of rights recognised in the present Convention” (UNCRC, 1989, p.2).

That said, as part of a national *Climate Action Plan (2021)*, the government is now developing a national dialogue strategy for ESD promotion that ensures “all voices will be heard in a fair and equal manner”. The *Participation Framework* from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2021, p.17) also commits to “listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making”. Furthermore, the second national strategy *ESD to 2030*, published in 2022, also emphasises children's participatory rights and highlights “a need for mechanisms to ensure the voices of children ... are heard clearly and consistently” in furthering the ESD agenda (GOI, 2022, p.16). It acknowledges that the commitment to collaborate with children in the original national ESD strategy did not progress for “a number of reasons” and, reaffirms this as an impending action (DES, 2014, p.18).

The importance of child participation in national policy, provides much of the rationale for my research that examines how we can include our youngest contributing rights holders within ESD discourse. The research study found that collaborating with young children to explore their own perspectives of nature advances an ESD approach that respects children's education and participatory rights under Article 29 1 (e). This is particularly relevant given the complex nature of sustainability described above and the argument that an ESD curriculum needs to be authentic to the everyday diverse realities of young children. My research consisted of two separate iterations. Iteration one was a child rights-based participatory study over nine months in an early childhood setting in Southeast Ireland in 2019. Iteration two was a participatory action research (PAR) approach with ECEC practitioners conducted online in 2022. As described above, one of the overall research aims was to consider contributions from both iterations for developing a 'bottoms-up' transformative ESD approach for the ECEC sector.

Methodology for iteration one

Following a child rights-based research approach (Ranta, 2023), iteration one was guided by the *Lundy model*, a child rights-based model of research participation (Lundy, 2007). Lundy illustrates four core features: *space*, *voice*, *audience*, and *influence* as essential for a fuller realisation of participatory rights. The same model was also used to underpin the principles of participation within *The Participation Framework* (DCEDIY, 2021) mentioned above. A distinctive feature of this approach is using a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011,2012; Lundy et al., 2011; Collins et al., 2020; Lundy et al., 2021). CRAG members are invited to take an advisory role to inform the thinking of the adult researcher through their input on each research stage, and participants were invited to take part in each of the stages, and comprised two groups:

1. The Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) (3–5-year-olds) (n=7)

Recruitment criteria for this group included their closeness in age (3-5 years) to that of the research participants (2-3 years) and that they had already spent a year in pre-school. That and their own approaches to nature learning positioned them as experts in an advisory role to support the project.

2. Young research participant group (2–3-year-olds) (n=9)

This group consisted of younger children (2-3 years) who had just started the pre-school year for the first time. They were invited to engage in interactive, participatory methods during the data collection phase, to share their perspectives on nature.

The Research Ethics Committee, Southeast Technological University gave ethical approval.

Findings from the children

The findings indicate that given the right resources (access to nature, time, flexibility, and a familiar listening adult), children define their own relationship with nature and make connections with it. This ranges from how they engage with natural artefacts to choosing their play, to sharing knowledge and ideas. Figure 1 provides examples of some of the children's knowledge about insects.

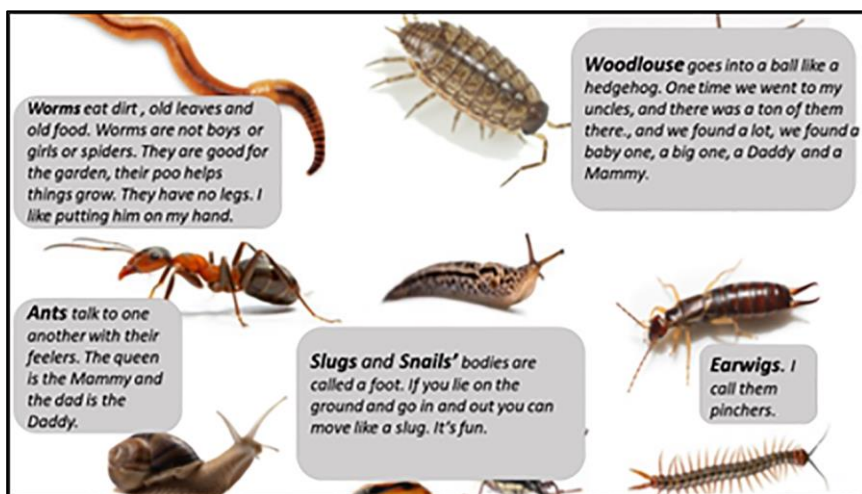


Figure 1: Extracts from participants' self-published *The Children's Nature Book*²⁶ sharing their perspectives on insects.

The findings show that taking the time to listen to these nature connections, and using them to influence the learning in the research space meant that the participants themselves could contribute competently to developing an ESD approach that had meaning to them. For example, a keen interest in animals could be identified among the participants, which promoted learning activities such as insect hunts and making bird feeders. Furthermore, as children made these connections, they helped shape a series of definitions of participation that supported my responsibility of ensuring their participatory rights were being authentically enjoyed. The study identified various modes of participating, e.g., *verbal, or non-verbal participation, free-flowing participation, relational participation, children's engagement with research tools and cultural participation.*

²⁶ *The Children's Nature Book* was conceptualised with the CRAG as a book that could be shared by children with other children from children for them to learn about nature. It was published as a dissemination tool for each participant to share their contributions to the research process in an authentic manner to how they enjoyed their participatory rights.

Verbal/nonverbal participation: Group discussions can be intimidating, with some voices being more dominant, making it less inclusive for all children (Lundy et al., 2011; Green, 2015). In addition, the children did not always communicate verbally, and instead, expressed enjoying their participatory rights through non-verbal means. This type of participation often comprised quietly observing and listening, gross motor movements such as wiggling, crawling or pointing, smiling, or giggling and voice expressions including gasping, whispering, or using their own terminology.

Relational participation: One aspect that supported eliciting quieter participation was engaging with ECEC practitioners as more familiar adults with a deeper understanding of how individual children communicated. There were moments between a young child and me as a researcher that required this understanding and support from a second adult in enabling their participation that may have otherwise been left unheard (Fane et al., 2018; Mukherji et al., 2018). This was a central aspect of this research space, and highlighted the significance of the practitioners’ skillset in supporting young children’s participatory rights. Figure 2 is an example of this, demonstrating the participation of one quieter child:

ECEC Practitioner walks up to AR holding (B3)’s hand and a motorbike

AR – what is it?

EP – XXX fell off the bike and then when he stood up this was on the seat of the bike

AR – what is it XXX?

a slug (CMB2)

EP what is it XXX?

a slug (B3)

AR – you’re right

EP– you know what that is?

AR – you guys are AMAZING

Figure 2: Participation elicited with the support of an ECEC practitioner.

This moment took place during our insect hunt, which was in a large group. It was hectic, with many voices wanting to be heard. As with a group scenario in research, there is always the chance that the quieter voice can go unheard. This happened in this scenario, but as it transpired, the participant approached their more familiar adult, who gave the child the space needed to express their view.

Free-flowing participation: The culture of the ECEC setting, where children freely moved in and outdoors, also supported them in deciding whether to participate in the research activity in a respectful, organic manner. Negotiations before the sessions often included exploring research tools (i.e., art materials, magnifying glasses, gardening tools) before deciding to take part. Other aspects of negotiation included returning after first playing with friends, having a familiar adult present, wearing dress-up costumes, and choosing their own seating arrangements.

Children's own engagement with research tools: In the research workshops, we used various nature-based or storytelling methods that evolved from the CRAG's advice, and the participants' interests. Hands-on activities included research tools such as art materials, magnifying glasses, natural artefacts, books and photographs, gardening tools, apples, peanut butter, bird seeds, and waste bins, which the participants were invited to explore. Prescribed activities were helpful in terms of giving a direction to the research time, making it more effective; however, also, having the flexibility to support the child to engage with the tools as they chose was necessary for both building capacities to form and express ideas (Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011, 2012), and creating a rights-respecting culture (Bessell, 2017; Horgan et al., 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2018; Gillet-Swan & Sargent, 2019).

Cultural participation: There were also elements featured in conversations throughout the research that could be described as commonly placed within an early childhood culture. Who owned what idea/game or colour were important topics of conversation. Time to tell stories, deciding on what colour to use, struggling with turn-taking, and wanting to bring things home could all be considered regular aspects of early childhood culture and, therefore,

needed respect in this research space. Recognising real-life matters that were of importance to each participant and the group, gave me an understanding of how better to adapt my research approach to be more reflective and respectful of their culture and world, while also furthering their participation in a non-invasive, and meaningful way (Wall, 2012; Horgan et al., 2017).

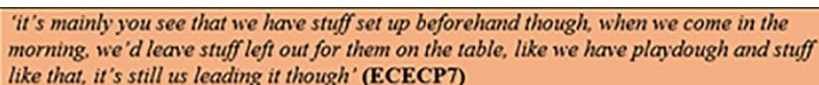
By taking these definitions of participation, alongside the participants' own nature connections, I could establish how young children can be supported as partners in creating authentic ESD curricula. However, establishing that level of participation required a lot of time, which, when presented to the ECEC practitioners in iteration two, was problematic, which I will discuss further below.

Methodology for iteration two

Sharing the children's contributions with ECEC practitioners created aspects of Lundy's *audience* and *influence* for the rights-based methodology used thus far. In keeping with the concept of a 'bottoms up' education approach (Ferreria et al., 2015), it was necessary to create a research space like a 'community of practice' (CoP) to work directly with ECEC practitioners to gain their professional insight. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a CoP as a group of people who 'share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. Arguably, learning how to do ESD better could imply that there are not already excellent sustainability practices in place, and this was not the tone from which I wanted to frame this second iteration. Instead, I wanted the space to be for practitioners with a common interest to collaborate and reflect together through a process of sharing knowledge (including the young participants' insights), experiences from their own practices, and theory from ESD research. A participatory action research (PAR) approach was established, which consisted of 6 online research workshop sessions. There were eight participants from five early childhood settings, although it is important to note that a number of these withdrew (four participants and three settings) at later dates but consented to their contributions to be included.

Findings with the ECEC practitioners

Findings indicate several interesting areas that can be considered as either possibilities or barriers for a child rights ESD approach. First is an area I have called *existing knowledge*, which includes an analysis of practitioners' knowledge relating to ESD and children's rights. The analysis identifies clear examples of varying learning degrees for sustainability and child rights approaches in different settings. The most common forms of sustainable practices included recycling and composting, reusing materials for art, water management, and learning about nature. Child rights approaches were described as listening to young children's interests to organise activities, giving opportunities to make choices, and having flexibility within an activity to change direction to follow the children's lead. Some barriers also identified were the limited access to nature that some settings had, and a lack of training or knowledge for practitioners in sustainability. Furthermore, I could also detect examples of contradictory language being used to describe a rights-based approach, for example, *giving a choice, allowing or letting* a child do something, as opposed to supporting or enabling a child. That said, a discussion on *choice* provided further insight from the ECEC practitioners' perspective for a fuller realising of young children's participatory rights as follows:



'it's mainly you see that we have stuff set up beforehand though, when we come in the morning, we'd leave stuff left out for them on the table, like we have playdough and stuff like that, it's still us leading it though' (ECECP7)

Figure 3: Contradictory practice to support child rights.

The extract above indicates that the participant recognises the contradiction of adults leaving activities ready for the children to choose from when they arrive. However, as the conversation progresses, the following point is also made by another participant: *'I know for us for the very start of the morning, we would have something on the tables just to help the children settle'* (ECECP2). Therefore, while contention surrounds the term *choice* or specifically, who decides children's choices, other rights

considerations are highlighted. For example, transitioning from the home environment to the early childhood setting can be difficult, and having activities ready from which to choose, can support the right to feel safe (NCCA, 2015). This highlights the recognition of other expert knowledge, namely from the more familiar adults, in this case, the ECEC practitioners on: *'the balancing act'* (ECECP3) or mediating child rights in practice (Martínez-Sainz, 2018).

The second theme is *practitioners' capacity to enact change*, as the possibilities to make the changes necessary in everyday practice for more sustainable behaviours, varied within the group. Sageidet (2014) argues that an educator's attitude, and the value they place on the importance of sustainability, plays a role in effective ESD. However, Ferreira et al. (2015) maintain that without support from management or colleagues, the capacity to change to more pro-environmental behaviours at a whole system or, in this case, the whole setting level is also a barrier. Moody and Dahlberg (2019) further this by underlining that to effect change across a complex system such as ECEC practitioner training, change is required amongst a wide range of training institutes, universities, government agencies, statutory authorities, and early years settings. Within this study, actually having the capacity and/or support to make changes to practice differed between participants. One participant reported: *'We are very fragmented in the place where we are'* (ECECP8) or: *'I know even people like who I work with don't care about recycling, and it's not something that bothers them at all'* (ECECP8). This will evidently undermine the quality of effective ESD that individual children will receive. In contrast, the following extract paints a more positive picture:

all the staff are degree qualified, the administrator is degree qualified, we are on board with everything, it's altogether, recycling composting, we meet twice a week we chat about everything you know (ECECP1).

Figure 4: Whole setting support for sustainability practices.

In addition, as described above, the level of participation I identified with the children took a lot of time to establish and

support. In the following extract, the participant discusses how the limitation of time impedes supporting child participation in their context:

Yeah, I get the science ²⁷behind it, but it's just hard to put it into practice because you know we are only with them for the morning (ECECP7)

Figure 5: The science of implementing child rights.

When asked to provide an example of this, the participant describes how that morning, one child had wanted to create an underground sea monster, and, in that case, they (the practitioner) could support this play as it was a one-on-one scenario. However, the participant continues to describe how other children in the room: *'were looking for other things as well, but they were coming to me, and then I felt like, I couldn't move from him, because he still needed my attention'* (ECECP7). A similar example was given by another participant who described that while children were encouraged to go outdoors when they wished: *'That's again, you know, depending on the number of staff, 'cause there's always 11 and a number of staff that needs to be outside'* (ECECP4).

From analysis, I was not clear on whether the issue was time or lack of it, or was it instead a lack of support in terms of more practitioners being present? Possibly both, but notably, something of which I needed to be respectful. The fact is; that during iteration one when collaborating with the children, my sole role was to listen. Designing the rights-based participatory methodology requires a tremendous amount of time to listen. It also requires flexibility and a more hands-on deck to support participation authentic to the local context. Clark (2020) readily talks about the lack of time and working within a contradicting culture in ECEC that promotes child rights as listening to children, and following their interests, while simultaneously maintaining quality practice standards through

²⁷ To note, when discussing the theory behind a rights-based approach we often referred to it in our workshop sessions as 'the science'.

completing inspections, and paperwork. This contradiction has been readily identified as a barrier to promoting a child rights-based education approach (Clark, 2020). No time or extra hands featured repeatedly in the workshop sessions as the main barrier to engaging in a rights-based education approach: *'I only have one hour with the children outside'* (ECECP4) or: *it's just a big barrier, you know you'd love to do more and let them lead everything we do* (ECECP7). Therefore, insufficient time or physical support to engage with every child's idea efficiently is another aspect that requires examination regarding practitioners' capacity to enact change in practice.

The final area of interest has been named *paradigms of pedagogy* (Hooks, 1994, 2003), and involves an examination of early childhood pedagogy with the participants. While slow pedagogy (Clark, 2020), and listening relational pedagogy (Lyndon et al., 2019), were identified as mutually reinforcing with a rights-based ESD approach, participants also highlighted a need to instil a sense of wonderment surrounding nature in practitioners themselves, or something that *'makes us see how wonderful everything is'* (ECECP8) before considering the more practical aspects of transferring sustainability knowledge to young children. Additionally, the participants considered that linking sustainability practices with funding and policy could further changes in behaviour: *'It probably should be brought in a bit, and this is going to go down to Core Funding'*²⁸ (ECECP1). *'Core Funding is reliant on engaging with Síolta and Aistear'* (ECECP1), which the participant considered *'an ideal place to bring in'* (ECECP1). The group continued with the idea that with this *'whole demand for quality and quality practice and having goals now with the new Core Funding'* (ECECP1), the opportunity was there for settings to collaborate with: *'a sustainability goal'* (ECECP1). Aside from the call for additional funding for resources, this is a significant contribution regarding how and

²⁸ Core Funding is a new strand of governmental funding for early childhood and after school settings designed to improve affordability, quality, inclusion and sustainability. It is optional and subject to an agreement of terms and conditions where settings must provide reports of evidence based high quality practice (GOI, 2022).

where investment is currently managed to further ESD promotion in the sector.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have argued how ECEC is fertile soil for embedding transformative rights-based participatory ESD approaches. An evident line of theoretical thought demonstrates the synergies between ECEC and ESD pedagogies. There is also an apparent wealth of recent research in the area. From a child rights perspective, namely under the education and participatory rights of Article 29 1 (e), I explored how the role of ECEC in ESD is being considered internationally before analysing how the sector is currently being supported at the national level. This led to discussing contributions from my research studies that provide evidence of how young children can define their education and participatory rights given the right resources (most notably a responsive listening adult). Under the CRC, young children should be supported as partners in ESD curriculum-making, and overall education, that develops a respect for the natural environment. However, ensuring that ECEC practitioners can fulfil their educational responsibilities requires more leadership (whole system buy-in at both government and local setting levels) and resources (access to nature, training, time and extra hands). Participants gave their recommendations regarding content for a transformative rights-based ESD module for the sector, and changes to the national Core Funding to further sustainable behaviours at a local level. Contributions from both iterations offer insight into what a 'bottoms up' transformative approach looks like, where the opportunity is given for all those involved in an organisation or this educational sector to contribute (Ferreria et al., 2015).

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Embedding sustainability in an updated *Aistear*



Sharon Skehill and Mary Daly

Abstract

The aim of this article is to illustrate how Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is considered and embedded in the proposed draft Updated *Aistear* (Click [here](#) to access the draft document). This article will highlight key learning from the Phase 1 consultation processes as well as contemporary policy and research which inform and guide the updating process. Phase 1 involved a broad range of data collection methods to ensure that the voices of all stakeholders were considered, including online questionnaires, focus groups, written submissions (NCCA, 2023a) as well as consultations with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins, Doherty, Forde, Kelleher, McCartney, Stafford, Stokes, Matson and Mooney, 2023). A literature review pertaining to the themes of *Aistear* (French and McKenna, 2022) was also undertaken. This article will draw together the findings from these consultation processes in relation to ESD and provide information on Phase 2 of the updating process.

It will be of particular relevance to educators, students and academics in illustrating the processes of the update of *Aistear* and

to draw attention to the importance of embedding concepts and understandings of sustainability from early childhood onwards.

***Ní fhaighimid an talamh le hoidhreacht ónár sinsear
tugaimid ar iasacht é ónár bpáistí***

(We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from
our children)

Introduction

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009²⁹) has been recognised both nationally and internationally for its innovative and progressive approach to education for children from birth to six years in Ireland (Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013; Krnjaja and Breneselovic, 2013; European Commission 2019). There have been considerable developments from policy, practice and research pertaining to the early childhood sector since the publication of *Aistear*. As a result of this, *Aistear* is being updated by the NCCA through consultation with babies, toddlers, young children, educators, parents and other stakeholders. One of the key messages developed from Phase 1 of the consultation process has been the topic of sustainability and global citizenship. Interestingly, *Aistear* had a focus on being part of a sustainable world six years before the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were published (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2015). Following its publication back in 2009, *Aistear* was seen as being very innovative in its focus on active citizenship, caring for the environment and the creation of a fairer, more socially just and sustainable environment

²⁹For the purpose of this paper, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) will be referred to as *Aistear*. Until such time as the update of the Framework is completed in 2024, the original *Aistear* (2009) remains current.

by prioritising these aspects of development in early childhood (Dolan, 2022; French and McKenna, 2022; Farrell and Daly, 2023). This article pinpoints some of the findings from Phase 1 of the consultation on Updating *Aistear* relating to sustainability and will discuss how an updated *Aistear* might further embrace the SDGs in early childhood. This paper will firstly present an overview of the role of the NCCA in curriculum development and provide some background information about *Aistear*. It will then outline NCCA's consultation process in the update of *Aistear*. This will be followed by a discussion on key concepts pertaining to ESD from the Phase 1 of the consultation: the image of the child in *Aistear*; agentic citizens; rights and wellbeing; community and local environment; and finally, the role of the educator.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and *Aistear*

The NCCA is a statutory body that works with education stakeholders to shape curriculum and assessment for children and students in Ireland. NCCA advises the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. The development of this advice is underpinned by eight principles that include a focus on respect, equality, professionalism and integrity (NCCA, 2023b, p. 7). NCCA's vision "... is to lead and sustain developments in curriculum and assessment that are sufficiently far-reaching so that all children and students can experience and benefit from enjoyable, engaging, relevant and appropriately challenging experiences to support learning, living in, contributing to, caring for, and working in a changing world" (NCCA, 2023b, p.1). In updating *Aistear*, the research design of Phase 1 of the consultation involved data collection with educators, parents, childminders and other stakeholders through focus groups, online questionnaires and written submissions. NCCA also commissioned a literature review to inform the updating of *Aistear*'s Themes (French and McKenna, 2022) and very importantly a second project was carried out on

NCCA's behalf to consult with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh and Kerrins et al, 2023).

The original *Aistear* includes Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice, which support babies', toddlers' and young children's holistic learning and development. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) is underpinned by 12 Principles set out in three groups. It presents four interconnected Themes of Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking. These describe early learning and development through dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding. Four sets of Guidelines on partnership with parents, interactions, play and assessment are also included to support engagement with the Framework.

Phase 1 of the consultation for updating *Aistear*

In the years since *Aistear*'s publication in 2009, there have been many societal and policy changes as well as new learning from research and practice. Some notable changes include the introduction of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) programme (Department of Education (DE), 2010); the Better Start Quality Development Service (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2015); the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (DCYA, 2016a); Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016b); Early years education-focused inspections (DE, 2018); First Five (Government of Ireland (GoI), 2018); and Nurturing Skills (GoI, 2022). These changes and developments, along with the experiences of children from birth to age six during this time, prompted an update of *Aistear* to ensure that it remains relevant and current to support the learning and development of all babies, toddlers and young children in the Ireland of today. Phase 1 of the consultation for updating *Aistear* included three stands:

- Engagement with stakeholders in the sector (NCCA, 2023a);
- A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) and

- A literature review focusing on the Themes of *Aistear*: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking (French and McKenna, 2022).

Data collection with educators, parents and other relevant stakeholders involved two main research questions pertaining to:

1. What is working well with *Aistear*?
2. What might be enhanced and updated in the Framework?

Engagement with stakeholders involved data gathering through questionnaires, written submissions, online focus groups, and a face-to-face event. All the data was analysed to identify the significant topics arising, with each data set analysed and reported separately ([See NCCA, 2023a](#)).

The consultation with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.* 2023) used a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach which involved early childhood educators working in practice as 'co-researchers' in the research process. Their role was conceptualised as interpreters of the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, in O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) in determining what babies, toddlers and young children perceive as working well with *Aistear* from their perspective and what might need to be changed or updated. The approach was underpinned by the Lundy model of participation (2007). The consultation used a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) similar to the original portraiture study undertaken by NCCA in 2006 (NCCA, 2007; Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, Brennan, Maxwell, O'Connor, 2007; Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, 2008).

The literature review undertaken on NCCA's behalf by French and McKenna (2022) summarises recent national and international literature through the lenses of the *Aistear's* (NCCA, 2009) four interconnected Themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging,

Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. The review focused on early childhood learning and development in the context of curricular frameworks. While the findings acknowledge the continuing relevance of *Aistear*'s existing four Themes, they also highlight a number of suggestions for NCCA to consider in the updating process. Critically, the research identifies sustainability and global citizenship as 'highly relevant' and notes early childhood experiences as having "significant potential to foster compassion for the planet and the plants, animals, and people living on it, support collective well-being and promote a more just and healthier world" (French and McKenna, 2022, p.9).

Education for Sustainable Development in an updated *Aistear*

The holistic nature of the *Aistear* framework encourages us to think about how early childhood education curricula can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While it's common to assume that the curriculum primarily focuses on SDG 4, which relates to quality education, it's important to recognise that early childhood education has a more extensive role to play in addressing the SDGs. The goals outlined in the figure below serve as a starting point for discussing how *Aistear* can support the broader spectrum of SDGs in the context of early childhood education.



Figure 1: Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2015)

ESD aims to empower learners with “knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to take informed decisions and make responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society empowering people of all genders, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity” (UNESCO, 2020, p.8). Furthermore, ESD has been recognised as a key enabler of all the SDGs and aims for societal transformation through learning content, learning outcomes, pedagogy, and the learning environment. In considering the implications for curriculum development processes in Ireland, NCCA carried out a national audit of opportunities and linkages between ESD and the curriculums and curriculum frameworks developed by the NCCA. This included an audit of *Aistear* in relation to ESD (NCCA, 2018), which drew attention to the Learning Goals under the Themes and how positive learning dispositions towards and knowledge about sustainability can be introduced across the age groupings of babies (Birth-18 months), toddlers (12-36 months) and young children (2.5 to 6 years). It noted how the theme of Exploring and Thinking provided the greatest number of learning opportunities relating to the development of skills and dispositions linked to sustainability, such as self-awareness, collaboration, critical thinking and anticipatory competencies (NCCA, 2018).

Subsequently, NCCA expanded on this study by commissioning an international audit of curricula (O'Donnell and Higginson, 2022) to consider international perspectives on sustainability and global citizenship. The audit highlighted important messages from international early years curriculum content and approaches in Denmark, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland and Sweden. These refer to the crucial beginnings of creating early connections with nature and place so babies, toddlers and young children are supported and empowered to know the importance of caring for and respecting the environment (O'Donnell and Higginson, 2022). The report also discussed key skills and competencies in ESD pertaining to “the ability to notice and respond to change, the development of a curious mind...and beginning to understand the importance of active participation in society and social responsibility and citizenship” (O'Donnell and Higginson, 2022, p. 31). Findings from the Phase 1

consultation (2023a) also remind us that the Principles of *Aistear* need to underpin a slow relational pedagogy in creating the time and space for babies, toddlers and young children to develop relationships with each other and their local environment as foundational for the implementation of the SDGs in practice. Some of the important messages from interpretation of the consultation materials viewed through a lens of sustainability are presented in the sections below, illustrating how these concepts are considered in the draft updated *Aistear*.

Image of the child

Shortly after the initial publication of *Aistear* in 2009, a UNESCO policy brief on early childhood (Moss, 2010) discussed social constructions of childhood and how one's image of the child is "socially constructed within particular contexts" (p.1). Moss (2010, p.1) laments on how such constructions of childhood are "rarely acknowledged in policymaking", advocating a need to make explicit our image of the child, to influence policy and societal change. Findings from the Phase 1 consultation indicate that *Aistear* is viewed as inspirational and aspirational (NCCA, 2023a) in establishing an image of children, from birth to six years, as 'competent and confident'. Across the consultation formats, this central image of babies, toddlers and young children was identified as a key strength in *Aistear* with real consensus that this image at the heart of the Framework should be maintained. A respectful view of babies, toddlers and young children underpins *Aistear* and lays the foundations for an emotionally safe and happy learning environment where all children from birth to age six can thrive. This image can, as Moss (2010) advocated, have a real impact on policy in practice. Embracing *Aistear's* 'image of the child' as competent, confident and having rights and emerging responsibilities from birth can influence how educators respond to the aims for ESD (UNESCO, 2020).

That being said, the consultation also recognised that more could be done to strengthen the image of the child in terms of being more explicit about presenting an empowered image of the child

through the update of the Principles and the Themes. Findings from both the online submissions and the focus groups (NCCA, 2023a) discussed how the image of the child needed to be strengthened by embedding concepts of diversity, equity, inclusion, rights, voice and interculturalism across *Aistear* in response to modern societal context, beliefs and life experiences. In considering the key messages in ESD particularly in relation to SDG 10 regarding reduced inequalities, proposals for an updated *Aistear* aims to ensure an understanding of the importance of valuing babies,' toddlers' and young children's culture, gender, family status and ethnicity. In acknowledging this diversity of family, home, socio-economic background and community, the proposed updated *Aistear* notes the value of noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness as global citizens. A renewed and more explicit expression of diversity, equity and inclusion in the proposals intend to contribute to a fair society where barriers are identified and addressed within empowering and inclusive environments.

Agentic citizens

In 2009, *Aistear*, inspired by the UNCRC included a principle on Children as Citizens. This set the tone for the view of children in the Framework as citizens with rights and responsibilities, including the right to be involved in decisions about matters related to them (see Farrell and Daly, 2023). In valuing the child as a 'competent and confident' learner and citizen, proposals for an updated *Aistear* further considers what it means to be an 'agentic citizen', particularly when thinking about babies and toddlers and how they are empowered to take responsibility for sustainability. O'Sullivan and Sakr (2022, p.133) challenge the idea that very young children are unable to understand these concepts and see early childhood as "a natural starting point and children are much more competent and thoughtful than we give them credit for."

Written submissions in Phase 1 of the consultation for updating *Aistear* included specific suggestions pertaining to the need for an enhanced focus on sustainability and ESD. One submission stated, "the focus on connection and exploration of the world around them

is an excellent opportunity for young children to develop knowledge and skills of how they look after and care for our world and each other” (NCCA, 2023a, p.12). This aligns with concepts in both the Australian (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019) and New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2017) early childhood curriculum frameworks where the idea of environmental sustainability is interlinked with civic understanding of social justice and fairness.

The findings from the focus groups conducted for Phase 1 of the consultation (NCCA, 2023a, p.13) echoed this idea with suggestions that the updated Principles of *Aistear* should recognise “that young children are ready to learn about concepts such as fairness, justice and respect...a global justice perspective [can be] be included in this work in an age-appropriate manner.” This is also evidenced in the findings from the literature review (French and McKenna, 2022) for updating *Aistear* where specific attention is drawn to the lack of research around babies and toddlers and the need to emphasise their meaningful participation in matters that affect them.

In expanding on concepts around developing proposals for updating the Themes of *Aistear*, the findings outline the “value of promoting/supporting children’s ability to negotiate, debate, philosophise and collaborate” (NCCAa, 2023, p. 15). While some of the data noted the need to create comprehensive links with the SDGs in the Framework, other submissions highlighted the need to include “Global Citizenship Education in terms of enabling children to respect themselves, care for the environment and to be active citizens” (ibid, p. 20).

In developing proposals for updating *Aistear*, there is an understanding that being an active and agentic citizen is a concept that permeates all elements of the Framework. As well as caring for the environment, consideration is given to how socio-cultural factors and the impact of political issues such as poverty, equity, democracy, and overall quality of life are highlighted in the proposed updated *Aistear*. These are big concepts but in framing ESD for babies, toddlers and young children, the emphasis is more on the underpinning pedagogical approaches that focus on relationships

and interactions with the natural world and the people in it as foundational for ESD in the updated Framework.

Rights and wellbeing

Aistear's image of the child has been informed from a rights-based perspective from the outset, with an emphasis on a strengths-based and child-led approach. The original 12 Principles were acknowledged in the Phase 1 consultation as being ground-breaking in terms of the focus on child voice but attention was drawn to the need to include more pro-active language in relation to children as "rights-holders" (NCCA, 2023, p. 15). Similarly, the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) brought this concept to the fore with a conceptual framework for data collection based around Lundy's model of participation (2007). In responding to the core research questions around 'what is working well with *Aistear*?' and 'what needs to be changed or updated?', the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were central to the research process by using Lundy's (2007) concepts of 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence'. 'Voice' means that babies, toddlers and young children are facilitated to express their views, through the use of creative methodological tools by educators who know them well. 'Space' means giving babies, toddlers and young children the opportunity to express a view in whatever multimodal way suits them. 'Audience' means that their views are listened to, and 'Influence' means that these views are acted upon. In the context of this consultation with babies, toddlers and young children, 'influence' is provided through NCCA who facilitate the concept of audience by engaging with the findings and acting upon them to ensure that the views of babies, toddlers and young children influence the updating of *Aistear* (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023).

An important message from this data (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) in relation to discussions around ESD, is the multimodality of child voice in communicating their wants, interests, needs and rights, and the role of the educator in interpreting and responding in an authentic way. A slow relational

pedagogical approach is recognised as one that will foster a fairer society for all children whereby they are empowered to have the time, space, voice, and opportunity to come to know about important things like their education, health, social justice, equity and well-being. Slowing things down and creating opportunities for the baby, toddler and young child to follow their innate curiosity, to explore and make connections with people and place is a key element of the inquiry-based emergent curriculum advocated in *Aistear*. The consultation (2023a) calls for an updated *Aistear* to clearly reflect an understanding of the concept of child voice. In practice, this means supporting those babies, toddlers and young children who may be more vulnerable to exclusion, thereby responding to the data from Phase 1 of the consultation noting that “their voice is more than just their opinions, expressions of need, accomplishments, likes and dislikes” (NCCA, 2023a, p. 20). In this way, proposals for an updated *Aistear* can link to SDGs focusing on health and well-being (3); quality education (4); equality and justice (5 and 10).

In considering the findings pertaining to rights, the Phase 1 consultation (NCCA, 2023a) draws attention to the importance of acting in the best interests of all babies, toddlers and young children. This includes a focus on aligning rights alongside well-being in early childhood. Tisdall (2015) argues that children’s rights “emphasise minimum standards (and) does not easily include important matters for children such as love and friendship” (p.808). While acknowledging the more aspirational understandings of ‘well-being’ as a concept, Lundy (2014) considers the challenges in navigating politically negotiated interpretations of children’s rights across different contexts and settings. *Aistear’s* theme of Well-being has been foundational in acknowledging the need to support children’s physical and psychological well-being and the centrality of relationships in realising this in practice. However, in line with SDG 3, the consultation (NCCA, 2023a) called for further enhancement of ideas in terms of socio-emotional well-being, inclusive well-being, recognition of the impact of adverse childhood experiences and the importance of trauma-informed practice. Acknowledging the changing context of babies’, toddlers’ and young children’s lives

since the publication of *Aistear*, there were calls for renewed reflections on concepts of care in early childhood. One submission noted “the principle of care, making the child feel cared for and valued as an individual and member of a community” (NCCA, 2023, p.12). This is reflected in the proposed vision of the child with recognition of how babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop within loving relationships where their individual life stories are acknowledged with kindness and consideration. This understanding of well-being in Ireland’s contemporary society is evidenced in a call for greater emphasis on security, nurturance, trust, advocacy, kindness, play, and relationships throughout *Aistear*. French and McKenna (2022) outline the need for curriculum content and guidance to be responsive to the context of the lives of children. Indeed, across the totality of Phase 1 outputs (French and McKenna, 2022; NCCA, 2023a; O’Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) there is a call to strengthen the link between play and well-being as well as noting the fundamental influence of play on children’s learning and development. Suggestions from stakeholder engagement in this regard (NCCA, 2023a) included expanding on the Aims and Learning Goals of *Aistear*’s Well-being Theme with a greater focus on embedding this throughout the Framework. In addition to the focus on relationships and play, other suggestions included adding strategies such as “mindfulness, yoga, music, engaging with nature” (NCCA, 2023a, p.20) to support children’s well-being. Particular attention to infant and child mental health is evidenced in comments about supporting babies, toddlers and young children to “form close relationships... to recognise and express emotions and explore and learn about the world around them” (NCCA, 2023a, p. 20). There is also reference to supporting children in “developing resilience and the foundations for a lifetime of positive mental health” (NCCA, 2023a, p. 20). Updating *Aistear* is presented from consultations as having real potential to support educators to mind and care for babies, toddlers and young children. The proposed updated *Aistear* draws attention to early friendships with other babies, toddlers and young children which are noticed and celebrated. It promotes great care and time to foster and support connections within and between the child’s social worlds.

When considering the SDGs' calls for an end to poverty, hunger (1) and inequity (10), an understanding of rights and well-being clearly goes beyond making "healthy choices" and "positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise and routine" (NCCA, 2009, p. 17). Findings across Phase 1 of the consultation (NCCA, 2023a) highlight the reality of children's life experiences which are not always positive due to circumstances beyond their control. The proposed updated *Aistear* emphasises the centrality of relationships and interactions in ensuring babies, toddlers and young children are respected, loved and cared for in early years settings with a key person who knows what they want and need to thrive, flourish and be happy. This means that each baby, toddler and young child has someone who is watching out for them and ensures they are noticed and responded to with compassion, respect and kindness. Building a trusting relationship with the key person (Goldschmeid and Jackson, 1994; Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck, 2011) means every baby, toddler and young child has support and love and have access to someone who cares enough to want the best for them and will do what is needed to support their Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking.

Community and local environment

The consultation undertaken on behalf of NCCA with babies, toddlers and young children (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023) makes specific findings in relation to the importance of the wider community in their lives. Creating this connection with place and having a sense of belonging, responsibility and ownership of that place is something that is referred to throughout the data (NCCA, 2023a), acknowledging what already exists within the Framework as well as signposting opportunities to extend learning about community and local environment. The value of play experiences in the outdoors was referenced in the findings as it "...greatly supports *Aistear* and can lead to learning about the seasons, citizenship and the role children can play in helping wildlife living in their community" (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.*, 2023, p. 136). In discussing sustainability in the literature review for updating

Aistear's Themes, French and McKenna (2022) present findings pertaining to how children... “both individually and collectively, can become agents of change for sustainability while acknowledging culture as an essential dimension to the meaning of sustainability, within early childhood settings and beyond” (p.151).

One can draw similarities between *Aistear's* Theme of Exploring and Thinking and that of Denmark's curriculum theme on *Nature, Outdoor and Life Science* (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2020), whereby there is a shared emphasis on engaging with nature. While a focus on the outdoors and on caring for the environment was included in the original Framework, particularly in reference to the theme of Exploring and Thinking (NCCA, 2018), the data from the different elements of the Phase 1 consultation (NCCA, 2023) call for a much greater focus on the outdoors, nature, risky play and on caring for people, creatures and places in the update. This responds to recent research by Pope and Moloney (2023) who highlight how inquiry-based learning in the outdoors can nurture positive learning dispositions towards sustainability in early childhood.

The theme of Identity and Belonging is referenced in the online submissions and focus groups (NCCA, 2023a) as being very important to maintain. However, there were also calls for an increased recognition of the importance of this connection to place and the need for developmentally appropriate awareness of the world beyond the community in the update. These views mirror international perspectives in providing opportunities for babies, toddlers and young children to acquire an ecological and caring approach to their community surroundings (Skolverket Sweden, 2018) and to have responsibility for active community participation (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). The proposed updated Theme of Identity and Belonging acknowledges the multiple identities of babies, toddlers and young children, recognising how their sense of who they are is shaped by their experiences, their environment as well as their understanding of themselves, their family and others. It states that “Belonging is about having a secure relationship and a feeling of

aoibhneas croí (gladness of heart) with people in your life” (NCCA, 2023b; p. 20).

Online submissions from Phase 1 (NCCA, 2023a) draw attention to the role of family and community in a baby’s, toddler’s and young child’s life and the potential for learning in this context. Findings note the importance of recognising opportunities to learn about biodiversity in their community and environmental sustainability by considering how we are nurturing their “sense of wonder and awe” in their own surroundings. Connecting with nature and seeing its grandeur and beauty (Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2016), requires time, space and understanding to develop this sense of ownership and emerging responsibility for our world. By creating time and space to connect with the sky, the birds, the weeds, fallen leaves, potted plants, bugs, stones, ‘grandeur and beauty’ can be found everywhere the baby, toddler or young child is.

Role of the early years educator

In proposals for updating *Aistear*, the term ‘practitioner’ has been replaced with the term ‘early years educator’. Across the consultation data in Phase 1, there has been a call to recognise the professional skills, autonomy and knowledge of the educator within *Aistear* aligned with contemporary policy developments (GoI, 2018; Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2022). The flexibility and adaptability of the proposed draft Framework supports the creativity of the educator and values the different lens and interpretations of those supporting early learning and development. This is an important acknowledgement of parents as primary educators and also the role of other important people in the lives of babies, toddlers and young children including childminders.

In early childhood settings embracing ESD requires intentionality from the educator in knowing how to support engagement with the SDGs in practice through appropriate pedagogical practices. In recognising the centrality of relationships

in supporting learning and development, there are calls for a particular emphasis in proposals for updating *Aistear* on the intentionality of caring for and educating babies, toddlers and young children through quality relationships including through slow relational pedagogy. The concept of slow relational pedagogy (Clark, 2022) is about being present and attuned to babies, toddlers and young children. It is about noticing their interests and creating opportunities for deep learning and co-researching, which O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins *et al.* (2023) illustrates in practice in the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children.

The proposed updated *Aistear* highlights the importance of relationships and of educators knowing the value of slowing down, being present and noticing moments that matter throughout the routines of the day. When considering the SDGs in practice, the proposed Framework acknowledges how pedagogical knowledge and nurturing care of the educator can support engagement with the environment and with each other. In learning about life on land (15); life in water (14); climate action (3); clean and sustainable energy (7); and equity for all (10), the professional knowledge and qualifications of the educator informs the provocations and opportunities for learning and development through an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum underpinned by play and hands-on experiences. However, it is vital to note that messages across the Phase 1 consultation (NCCA, 2023), highlight the importance of providing practical resources, supports, materials and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to empower educators to bring *Aistear* to life for babies, toddlers and young children.

Phase 2 of the Consultation

After thoroughly analyzing all the data and relevant literature in Phase 1, the NCCA has developed a set of [Draft proposals of an updated *Aistear*](#). Consultation on these proposals is currently underway and will conclude in November 2023. Phase 2 of this process will involve additional consultation with babies, toddlers, young children, parents/guardians, educators and other relevant stakeholders. Notably, the proposed updated *Aistear* places a

significantly greater emphasis on sustainability throughout the framework, informed by feedback from Phase 1 and insights gathered from the Literature Review.

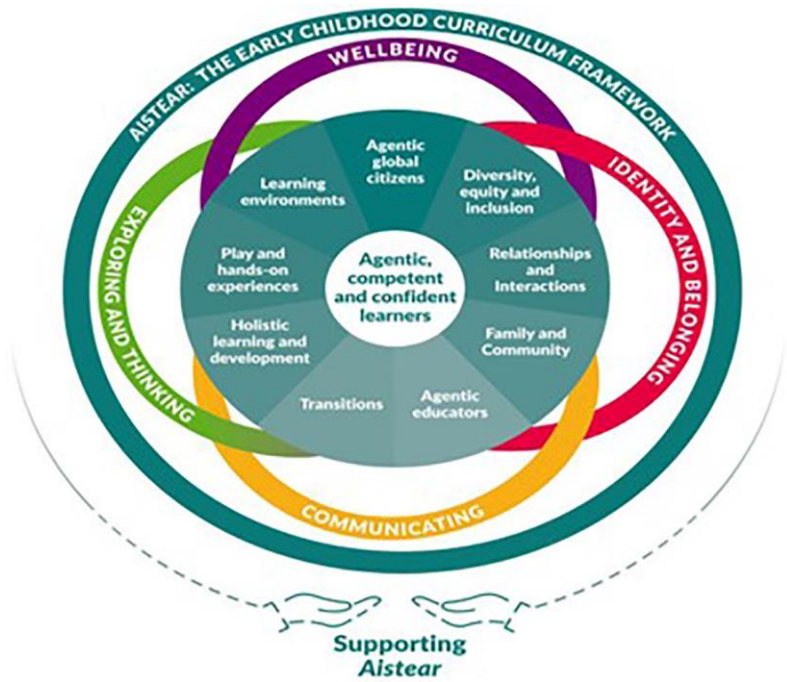


Figure 2: Updated Structure of *Aistear* for consultation in Phase 2.

While the overall structure of the Framework remains the same (see Figure 2), changes throughout the proposals embed learning relating to ESD. These changes reflect key messages from the Phase 1 consultation regarding rights, pedagogy, inclusion, outdoor learning, wellbeing and sustainability. The Framework continues to be flexible and have broad, yet observable, learning goals to support the creativity of the educator. However, there are explicit references to ESD to illustrate the importance of creating awareness of the SDGs from an early age.

Principle 1 on Agentic Global Citizens (NCCA, 2023b; p.12) has a clear focus on sustainability stating that:

Babies, toddlers and young children are competent, confident and agentic global citizens with rights. As unique individuals, they communicate their opinions, choices and needs in many different ways. They have a right to be heard and to be empowered to experience democracy. From their experiences as citizens, they learn that as well as having rights they also have emerging responsibilities, for themselves, for others and for the environment.

- *I am an agentic citizen and use my 'voice' to show you what is important to me – notice, listen and respond to me and show me how to be a good citizen by modelling equity, fairness, justice and respect.*
- *I have the right to be protected from harm and to know that you will help me when I need it.*
- *I have emerging responsibilities to care for myself, others and for the environment. Provide meaningful opportunities for me to live sustainably.*
- *I live in Ireland so the languages, histories and cultures of Ireland are important to me. Also help me to understand and respect views, opinions, cultures, languages and experiences that are different from mine.*

The Learning Environment Principle (ibid; p. 16) also includes a specific focus on sustainability. It states:

I benefit from learning in my locality. Being in and learning about nature is also important as I have a responsibility to care for myself and my environment so help me to live sustainably.

The theme of Wellbeing includes a learning goal related to sustainability (ibid; p. 19) stating:

Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, babies, toddlers and young children will explore and identify their place in the world, and be empowered to live sustainably as agentic, respectful, caring, compassionate global citizens.

The Theme of Exploring and Thinking also includes an even greater focus on living sustainably with the addition of a new aim and learning goals focusing on nature and the outdoors (NCCA, 2023b; p.26) The Guidance for Good Practice has a section on ‘Supporting sustainability’ and considers how sustainability might be understood through the three pillars of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural building on the SDGs (2015). The Guidance also includes a sample resource called ‘*Supporting Sustainability in Early Childhood*’. These proposals will be updated following Phase 2 of the consultation and a finalised updated *Aistear* Framework will be shared with the sector in 2024.

French and McKenna (2022) consider how, in its current form, *Aistear* presents an understanding of sustainability as children’s connections and interactions with their environment and a sense of place in their locality. However, in updating *Aistear*, they argue for a Framework where sustainability is interwoven throughout, emphasising babies’, toddlers’ and young children’s ability to be agents of and for change in this critical period of early childhood. This article documents the findings from the Phase 1 consultation of updating *Aistear* in relation to ESD and the SDGs in that regard. In considering how *Aistear* can contribute to a sustainable future, the proposed updated Framework aims to support babies, toddlers and young children to learn the “knowledge, skills, attitudes and values” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 8) to take responsibility and informed action relevant to their age and stage of development on local, national and global issues.

The proposed updated *Aistear* reflects the knowledge that ESD is more than environmental education; it presents a Framework for learning to be compassionate, to respect and celebrate diversity, equity, fairness and find joy in their world.

Tá an chuid is fear fós le teacht! (The best is yet to come!)

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Concluding Remarks

As we conclude this special edition, we are proud to support and progress the UN's (2015) call to action. Imagine a world devoid of poverty, hunger and war. Imagine a world where everyone lives in harmony, respecting human dignity and equality. Image a green world, abundant with natural resources and ecosystems. Imagine the world of the future, for our children, if we fail to act now.



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“Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are formed, his mind developed. To him we cannot say tomorrow, his name is today”. Gabriela Mistral

President, OMEP Ireland



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ISBN 978-1-7396189-5-7



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