

Aistear and Development Education: Insights from Trócaire

Applying sustainability in the early years

As an early years development educator with Trócaire, my role is focused on raising awareness of and engaging in-service and pre-service early childhood professionals in learning about development education concepts in a way that is meaningful to their professional practice. *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is an integral part of this professional practice.

The development education concepts I refer to when creating links to Aistear are: exploring inequalities at local and global levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; recognising diverse perspectives on development in the context of global citizenship; considering the everyday reality for people experiencing poverty; and valuing our unique identity and encouraging us to respect the unique identity of others (Trócaire, 2009, 2018; IDEA, 2017).

Aistear is currently being updated (Fallon et al., 2021). The updated framework will support me as a development educator to continue to create meaningful connections, because the links to the development education concepts are more explicit. Among the nine updated Aistear principles are two of particular significance: the principle that regards babies, toddlers, and young children as 'agentic global citizens', and the principle 'diversity, equity and inclusion', which highlights their right to have access to and opportunities to participate meaningfully in experiences that help to fulfil their potential as unique individuals (NCCA, 2023, p.12; see Figure 1).



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The article briefly explores the interrelatedness of Trócaire's development education concepts and the proposed updated *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. It considers Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, in the context of the transformative power of education. It concludes with a short reflection on the author's role and how it may be understood within the framework of early childhood practice.

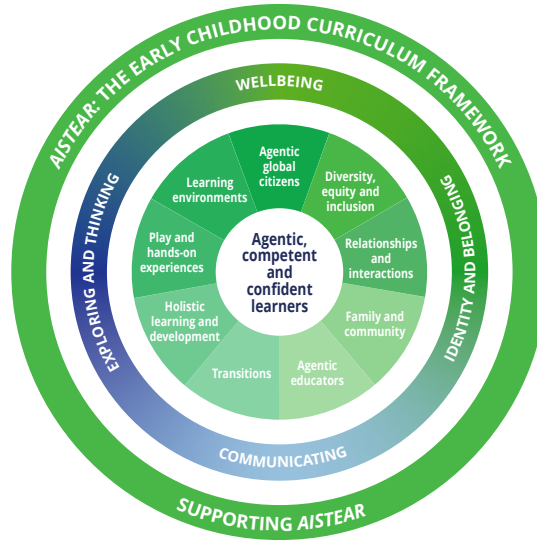


Figure 1: Proposed updated Aistear (NCCA, 2023)

Giving children time to reflect and equipping them with skills to do so is hugely important.

Reflection (Lindon & Trodd, 2016) in the early childhood context is significant when building awareness of development education, because it is understood to support critical thinking which involves active engagement with 'big ideas' (Roche, 2015, p.15). Giving children time to reflect and equipping them with skills to do so is hugely important. When they engage with society as active citizens (ibid., p.14) in a way that is meaningful to them, it supports their developing sense of who they are and their place in the world.

In the early years setting, this may be achieved when skilful professionals recognise opportunities for sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and teachable moments (Ephgrave, 2018) in order to introduce and develop awareness of these big ideas. Van Oudenhoven and van Oudenhoven (2019) suggest, 'it is in these informal [early childhood] spaces that the attitudes and dispositions related to global citizenship education are most successfully cultivated' (p.39). They suggest a 'culturization' of early childhood development, meaning that early childhood education programmes seek to focus on supporting children as they participate in, contribute to, and give direction to cultural activities. In this way, 'if we "let children be children", then the foundation for global citizenship will be laid, without specifically aiming for it' (ibid., p.41).

An important question is how can we achieve 'development', as proposed by the development education concepts, which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs?' (WCED, 1987). The answer for me will always be through education. It is in everyday interactions with children that early childhood professionals may

support children in their role to 'address issues relating to the active role of citizens' (Bamber, 2020, p.xxiv); for example, drawing on perceptive teaching skills (Dolan, 2014) when identifying opportunities to introduce ideas of social justice, such as sharing, listening to each other, and ensuring that every voice is heard.

This insight relates to Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, which commits to ensuring a more inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (UNESCO, n.d.; see Figure 2). A line from the United Nations, which touches on this transformative nature of education, is the focus of SDG4: 'Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies' (United Nations, n.d.). From my own learning experiences, I will add that individuals also need a certain willingness to 'embrace ambiguity' (Feldman, 2023) to help them to engage in co-creating the learning experience (Freire, 2017).



Figure 2: SDG4 (United Nations)

My background in early childhood education and care is very much to the fore when I introduce development education concepts during outreach. Recognising opportunities to engage children in this learning will continue to be a key skill for those working with young children because, as Maria Montessori, wrote, 'children have an absorbent mind. They absorb knowledge from the environment without fatigue. . . . This is the moment in the life of man when we can do something for the betterment of humanity and further brotherhood' (Association Montessori Internationale, 2024).

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