

CLIMATE INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract: This Perspectives article addresses an aspect of development education practice focussed on climate change. The article will serve as a blueprint upon which a workshop offering will be developed for early childhood care and education (ECCE) students. The aim of the workshop is to support students to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality experienced by children. It also aims to empower students to view themselves as advocates for young children's climate and environmental rights. The issues of climate injustice and inequality in early childhood were chosen for this workshop offering for two important reasons. Firstly, General Comment No. 26 of UNCRC (OHCHR, 2023) outlines that all children have rights in relation to the environment and climate, but due to the devastating impacts of climate change in many global contexts, these rights are not being upheld. Secondly, climate injustice and inequality are also areas of focus in Trócaire's climate and environmental justice strategy (2024-2028) (Trócaire, 2024), which emphasises that certain social groups which include children, are more susceptible to the risks posed by climate change than others.

There are five key points that I wish to explore in the article and build into the workshop offering and they are as follows: exploring the links between development education (IDEA, 2017) and Aistear (NCCA, 2024), the early childhood curriculum framework; engaging students in learning about children's rights in relation to climate and the environment by introducing General Comment 26; exploring how a lack of realisation of children's rights is an example of inequality; introducing students to the concept of intergenerational climate justice; and directing students' attention to the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, n.d.1).

Key words: Development Education; Aistear; Children’s Rights; Climate; Environment.

Development education and Aistear

As Trócaire’s Development Education Officer for the Early Years, my role is focused on raising awareness of and engaging 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; NCCA, 2024) along with other professional practice frameworks, guidance, regulation, initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) are integral parts of this practice, however for the purposes of my workshop and this Perspectives article, Aistear will be the focus. Early childhood has been described as ‘marking the beginning of the ... young child’s learning journey’, therefore the framework was called ‘Aistear’ which is the Irish word for journey. Young children embark upon this learning journey with support and guidance from early childhood professionals who view them as agentic, competent and confident learners (NCCA, 2009: 6; NCCA, 2024: 9). The workshop offering, which is underpinned by this Perspectives article, will also take the early childhood professional on a learning journey of their own where they will encounter the ‘educational process’ associated with development education.

Development education has been described by the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) as ‘an educational process which seeks to increase awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live ...’ (IDEA, 2017: 7). The workshop introduces students to the core concepts which comprise development education, listed below. This introduction is then followed by creating links to their professional practice and identifying strategies to use when applying this new knowledge in a professional context. Research undertaken by Ruane et al (2010) established that effective strategies to use with young children to support their engagement with global issues were photographs, storytelling, participatory activities and discussion (Ruane et al., 2010: 43-69). It was noted also that ‘the synergy between the content with which children were engaging and the approach used [by educators]

to engage children in critical thinking of the content was an important consideration' (Ibid.: 73).

To support students in the approach they use, the development education concepts are mapped to the relevant principles and themes of Aistear and strategies are shared which incorporate the use of Trócaire's early childhood resources. For example, the 'Early Childhood Global Goals Photo Pack' (Trócaire, n.d.), the interactive and participatory 'Early Childhood Tree of Water Justice' resource (Trócaire n.d.1), and the recently published children's story book *Julio and Grandfather Wind* (Saunders, 2025). The mapping and the practical application of the strategies subsequently feed into discussions related to the core concepts that develop during the workshops. The core concepts are: exploring inequalities at local and global levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; recognising diverse perspectives related to development; 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; Trócaire, 2018; IDEA, 2017: 7; Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25). For the workshop, two of the nine Aistear principles are identified as resonating most clearly with the development education core concepts, these principles are 'Agentic Global Citizens' and 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' (NCCA, 2024:16).

The first Aistear principle 'Agentic Global Citizens', states that:

"Babies, toddlers and young children are agentic, competent and confident global citizens. Being agentic means they have voice and influence and that they can make choices about and in their learning. Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be cared for, nurtured and supported to grow and develop. They can experience democracy by having their voice heard and respected by educators who support active participation. Listening to and learning to respect others and their views is a key part of this. As citizens of the world, babies, toddlers and young children have deep connections with people and the environment, valuing justice and human rights" (NCCA, 2024: 16).

In the workshop setting and using small working groups, parallels are drawn between the Aistear principle ‘Agentic Global Citizens’ described above and the development education concepts ‘considering the everyday reality for people experiencing poverty; and valuing our unique identity and encouraging us to respect the unique identity of others’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25).

Links to the relevant Aistear themes are then explored. These themes are provided within the early childhood curriculum framework to ‘describe what ... young children will learn in order to support the development of important dispositions, attitudes and values, along with bringing these skills, knowledge and understanding to life’ (NCCA, 2024: 21). When considering the themes in this context, connections become evident between the Aistear themes of Identity and Belonging, and Wellbeing (Ibid.: 22-25) and the development education concepts of ‘everyday realit[ies] for people experiencing poverty’ ... alongside [the significance of] ‘valuing our unique identity [and that] of others’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25).

The second Aistear principle ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ states that:

“All ... young children have the right to equality of opportunity, to be treated fairly and without discrimination. They have the right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences to fulfil their potential as unique individuals. Equity in early childhood is about fairness in addressing any challenges that a ... young child might experience because of their background or ability. Diversity of self, family, baile (the Irish word for home) and community are respected and celebrated while also noticing and valuing ... similarities and connectedness. Inclusion means each ...young child is supported, empowered and enabled to participate and progress in meaningful early childhood experiences” (NCCA, 2024: 16).

In this instance too, and using small working groups, parallels are drawn between the Aistear principle ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ described previously, and the development education concepts ‘exploring inequalities at local and global

levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; and recognising diverse perspectives related to development’ (Cenker et al., 2016: 11-25). Links between these core concepts and the relevant Aistear themes are considered too and once again connections are seen as extending to the Aistear themes of Wellbeing and Identity and Belonging (Ibid.: 22-25).

As the students work through the connections between the Aistear principles, themes and the development education concepts, they are presented with learning provocations. They are asked to: consider what a lack of support for children’s learning and development might look like; consider a more restricted understanding of the child which does not view them as agentic, competent and confident; and reflect on what *not* upholding children’s rights might result in. The learning provocations are then directed into a more critical space and further questions are posed such as: ‘Have children’s rights been upheld in the context of the concept being considered? Who stands to gain and who loses out by maintaining the current status quo? What needs to change? And how can such change be effected so that all children in any global context are afforded learning and development opportunities on a par with others?’

How lack of realisation of children’s rights in relation to General Comment 26 is an example of inequality

At this point in the workshop, attention shifts towards the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, n.d.). The UNCRC is introduced in its thematic areas of survival rights, development rights, protection rights and participation rights (Freeman, 1996 cited by Barnardos, 2018: 1-2). The development education concepts are then explored through the lens of children’s rights. For example, students are asked to consider the concept ‘exploring inequalities at local and global levels’ and reflect on how these inequalities may manifest if survival rights, development rights, protection rights and participation rights are not upheld by countries and governments who have ratified the UNCRC (United Nations, n.d.). Exploring inequalities at local and global levels is then teased out by drawing attention to General Comment 26 of the UNCRC. General Comment 26 was written by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to explain how children’s rights are related to the environment and climate change, and what governments must do to protect them (OHCHR, 2023).

How equality is defined in the early childhood context is outlined initially and it is the definition outlined in the Charter that is shared with students. Equality has been defined in the Diversity, Inclusion and Equality Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education as:

“the importance of recognising, respecting, and accepting the diversity of individuals and group needs, and of ensuring equality in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families ... Equality of participation is particularly relevant when working with children ...” (DCYA, 2016: vi).

Inequality, therefore, may be inferred from this definition as a lack of recognition, respect and acceptance of individual and group needs, and a lack of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families. Ongoing inequality such as this has been described by UNICEF as needing to be approached from within a rights-based perspective (UNICEF, n.d.1).

Children and climate injustice

To help students understand the concept of climate injustice and how it relates to children, firstly climate justice and what it means is considered by referring to two important reports published in the last three years. These reports are UNICEF’s ‘Innocenti Report’ and the IPCC’s (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) ‘6th Assessment Report’. Key takeaways published in the 2022 UNICEF ‘Innocenti Report’ defined climate justice as follows: i) climate justice means linking human rights with development and climate action [across and within low, middle and high income countries] (Metreau, Young and Eapen, 2024); ii) climate justice means having a people-centred approach to climate action; iii) achieving climate justice means understanding that not everyone has contributed to climate change in the same way; iv) pursuing climate justice means combatting social injustice, gender injustice, economic injustice, intergenerational injustice and environmental injustice; and lastly, v) climate justice requires a systems transformation (UNICEF, 2022).

In relation to the key takeaways in ‘iii’ and ‘iv’ above which comprise the definition of climate justice, the Working Group II (WGII) contribution to

the ‘Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 6th Assessment Report’ (IPCC, 2023: 4), presented a series of frequently asked questions (FAQ’s) one of which, FAQ 3, resonated with key takeaways ‘iii’ and ‘iv’. FAQ 3 asked ‘How will climate change affect the lives of today’s children tomorrow, if *no* immediate action is taken?’ The response highlighted that today's children and future generations are more likely to be exposed and vulnerable to climate change and related risks such as flooding, heat stress, water scarcity, poverty and hunger than current generations. An example shared by the WGII publication illustrated that children aged ten or younger in 2020, are predicted to experience a fourfold increase in extreme events due to climate change if temperatures increase up to 1.5°C by 2100, with this prediction rising fivefold, if temperatures increase up to 3°C. The publication also emphasised how a person aged fifty-five in 2020 would not experience the same increases in exposure to extreme events caused by climate change in their lifetime as children aged ten or younger in the same year (IPCC, 2023: 4). The extreme events, such as flooding, heat stress, water scarcity, poverty and hunger, experienced by children living in low-income countries (Metreau, Young and Eapen, 2024), have been described as ‘disproportionately affect[ing] children’ (Gibbons, 2014: 23) for reasons which, for the most part, are outside of their control. These circumstances have led to an urgency in seeking intergenerational climate justice (UNICEF, n.d.2; Stone and Lofts, 2009; Rogers, 2023; and Arnot et al., 2024).

Intergenerational climate justice

The workshop discussion then moves in the direction of seeking to determine the level of knowledge in the room relating to the term intergenerational and how this term relates to the impacts of climate change on young children. An anonymous Mentimeter is shared with students so they can share their thoughts (Mentimeter, 2025) and this is followed by sharing the definition itself. The word ‘intergenerational’ refers to something which exists or occurs between generations (Merriam-Webster, 2025). This definition is then supported with reference to Gibbons (2014) who provides an insightful discussion on climate change, children's rights, and the pursuit of intergenerational climate justice which will underpin the learning related to this area. Gibbons (2014: 20) explains how the ‘lifestyles and decisions of today’s adults, and those of the past two generations, have inalterably changed the life prospects’ for those yet to be born.

Gibbons also argues that climate justice not only extends across time and generations, but geographic space. Another significant point draws attention to the fact that children today, and future generations, have a claim to climate justice within and among their own countries as outlined in the UNCRC (Ibid.: 20). The significance of every child's right to climate justice has been further elucidated upon by General Comment 26, implemented by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in May 2023, which seeks the enforcement of their right to climate justice to the maximum extent (OHCHR, 2023: 2). But as highlighted in publications such as the 'Innocenti report' (UNICEF, 2022) and the IPCC (2023) assessment report, these rights are not being fully realised in certain contexts and are leading to ongoing challenges related to climate injustice and inequality in early childhood.

SDGs and sustainability

The last part of the workshop asks the students to consider how they might support children to have their rights in relation to climate and equality met so that their needs in the present are addressed without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987: 16). At this point, students' attention is directed towards the SDG's or Global Goals. In total there are 17 SDG's that comprise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which was agreed in 2015 and built on over four decades of work by United Nations and its member states. The goals are described as:

“an urgent call to action by all countries, developed and developing, in global partnership. [The goals] recognise ending poverty and deprivations must go hand in hand with strategies that improve health, education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth, all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests” (United Nations, n.d.1).

As a development education officer working for an NGO which recognises the SDGs as a helpful framework to use when engaging students with development education concepts, it is important to highlight that the SDGs are not without their challenges. The United Nations Human Rights Council

published a Special Rapporteur report in 2020 which spoke to these challenges (Alston, 2020). The report describes the SDGs as especially valuable in contexts, such as my workshops, in which they provide an entry point for discussions on contentious issues, but [country] results in relation to meeting the targets and indicators associated with the SDGs have been described as deeply disappointing (Ibid.: 10). A concluding point to the report suggests that supporters of the SDGs should acknowledge that there is a ‘deep deficit of political motivation’ which is constraining the progress of key goals in the areas of, among others, inequality and climate change. However, the report calls for ‘new strategies, genuine mobilisation empowerment and accountability’ to avoid Governments and international organisations ‘sleepwalking towards assured failure’ (Ibid.: 20).

Hickel (2018: 873-874) discusses what he argues to be a significant contradiction within the SDGs which resonates with the points presented above by Alston (2020) described as ‘the two sides of the SDGs’. One side intimates a ‘call for humanity to achieve harmony with nature and to protect the planet from degradation’ with specific targets identified in SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) (United Nations, n.d.6). This call echoes a point made in the Foreword to the Brundtland Report titled *Our Common Future*, which describes ‘the *environment* as where we all live; and *development* as what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode’ (Brundtland, 1987: 7, author’s emphasis). The other side of the contradiction draws attention to ‘continued global economic growth equivalent to 3% per year’, as outlined in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). SDG 8 proposes that such growth is required to ‘promote sustained, inclusive and economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’ (United Nations, n.d.7). However, empirical data strongly indicates that such growth will negate the carbon budget of 2°C rendering SDG 8 incompatible with sustainability objectives (Hickel, 2018: 875-879). This contradiction is also at odds with the guiding principles of the Brundtland Report which described sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Brundtland, 1987 :15). Therefore, it is necessary to be mindful that until the SDGs are recalibrated in the manner suggested by Alston (2020), Hickel (2018)

and others, a caveat must apply to the interpretation and application of the Global Goals 2030 Agenda. To this end, the challenge for now is to reflect on ways in which the overall package for 2030, including targets and indicators, can be reshaped and supplemented if it is to be effective (Alston, 2020: 14).

This workshop and Perspectives article have come about to a certain extent because of such reflection. For the purposes of this workshop SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG13 (Climate Action) are the primary focus because of their clear links to the workshop content. Students are asked to consider how they may promote and address the rights of young children (SDG 4, Target 4.7) so that their needs today are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987: 15). They are asked to contemplate how they might empower and promote the social, economic and inclusion of all [including children] irrespective of status (SDG 10, Target 10.2) and lastly they are asked to reflect upon what they could do to improve education and raise awareness around climate change (SDG 13, Target 13.3) (United Nations n.d.2; United Nations n.d.3; United Nations n.d.4). For this reflexivity (Bolton, 2009: 13) to emerge, the educator as described by Freire, which in the context of this Perspectives article refers to the students participating in the workshop, must be willing to co-create [and commit to] the learning experience (Freire, 2017: 54) if they are to successfully encourage the participation of children. ECCE students ideally should engage with the workshop in a way which enables them to ‘question their own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions ... how [they] relate to others ... and begin critically tak[ing] circumstances and relationships [with young children] into consideration ... (Cunliffe, 2009 cited in Bolton, 2009: 13).

An important question to consider at this point is how students may be supported to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality alongside their roles as advocates for young children’s climate and environmental rights. The answer for me will always be through education. It is in everyday interactions with children, for example, storytelling, imagery, small group activities and circle time that early childhood professionals may support children in their role to ‘address issues relating to their active role as citizens’

(Bamber, 2020: xxiv). In professional practice this may take the form of drawing on ‘perceptive teaching skills’ as described by Dolan (2014: 1) and ‘teachable moments’ as explored by Ephgrave (2018: 1-7) when encountering opportunities to introduce ideas about children’s rights in relation to equality, the environment and climate change. A helpful quote from the United Nations which touches on this transformative nature of education is as follows: ‘Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies’ (United Nations, n.d.5). From my own learning experiences, I will also add that students also need a certain willingness to ‘embrace ambiguity’ (Feldman, 2023) to help them engage in co-creating the learning experiences as described by Freire above.

Conclusion

This Perspectives article and subsequent workshop were written with specific intentions in mind. Firstly, to support students to engage with climate injustice and to recognise it as a form of inequality experienced by young children. And secondly, for ECCE students to view themselves as advocates for young children’s climate and environmental rights, so that young children become equipped to embrace their custodianship of the planet for their own generation and for the generations yet to come (Brundtland, 1987: 15). To enable me to do this, my background in ECCE was very much to the fore. I drew on this knowledge initially, when I introduced the development education concepts to students by enabling them to draw parallels between the concepts and Aistear, and later through exploring the links to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child.

This Perspectives article has hopefully demonstrated how I intend to engage ECCE students in learning about development education concepts in a way that is meaningful to their professional practice. Recognising opportunities to bring children along on this learning journey will continue to be a key skill for those working with young children because, as 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’ (Association Montessori Internationale, 2025). I will finish with a quote I came across while studying for my global citizenship

education certificate. The quote serves as a helpful reminder to me when compassion fatigue sets in and I question why climate injustice and inequality need to be challenged, and governments taken to task for their reticence in certain global contexts regarding these issues:

“Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents,
it was loaned to you by your children.
We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors,
we borrow it from our Children” (#53 Proverb, 2024).

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book also resonates with Trócaire's climate and environmental justice strategy (2024-2028) which highlights that certain social groups which include children, are more susceptible to the risks posed by climate change than others. Colette has continued to develop her own professional knowledge in relation to her role as a development education practitioner by completing a Post Graduate Certificate in Global Citizenship Education. The certificate was awarded by NUI Maynooth in 2025. E-mail: colette.saunders@trocaire.org.