

## YOUNG CHILDREN AS GLOBAL CITIZENS

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### Introduction

The publication of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) provides a unique opportunity to promote the inclusion of a global and justice perspective in education programmes for young children at pre-school and junior primary school levels. The Framework highlights the importance of global citizenship and diversity issues and provides the opportunity to support educators engaged in their implementation. To facilitate the provision of such support, a partnership between Trócaire and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra has undertaken research into young children's engagement with issues of global justice. This article describes the background to the research, the methodologies used, and the research findings and dissemination.

### Background

Trócaire's engagement in the early years sector began in 2000, at a time when Ireland was becoming increasingly multi-cultural and when statutory support was available for education programmes incorporating diversity and inclusion perspectives. Trócaire's initial education work in the sector focused on developing a programme with a global focus in conjunction with representatives of the various stakeholders within the early years sector. The programme was delivered with the support of the nationwide network of Childcare Committees. Subsequently, to provide ongoing support, Trócaire began producing thematic materials for early years annually. These materials included *Dansa from Ethiopia* (Trócaire, 2005), *Pedro from Nicaragua* (2006), *Paulo from Malawi* (2007), *Maji Water Pack* (2008), *People on the Move* (2009) *Food for thought and Food for Life* (2010) (available at: <http://www.trocaire.org/Early-years>).

Recognising the challenges inherent in exploring complex development issues with young children and the opportunities presented with the publication of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), Trócaire approached St Patrick's College, Drumcondra (SPD) to explore how young children's engagement with the justice perspective of development education could be supported. SPD as a college of education for primary teachers, with its Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education, its engagement in the Development and Intercultural

Education (DICE) programme and its commitment to educational research, was well placed to respond. The Trócaire/SPD partnership which subsequently emerged from this dialogue began by undertaking research which focused on two main areas: how young children engage with issues of global justice and strategies for exploring these issues in early years settings. The research involved a literature review, small scale qualitative research, and the application of the findings and the methodologies employed to the development of an early years education programme.

## Literature review

There is a dearth of literature on young children's engagement with issues of global justice and that which exists reveals conflicting attitudes regarding children's perceived 'readiness' to deal with global justice issues (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2009; Kelly & Brooks, 2009). These attitudes are strongly interconnected with different early childhood discourses and theories of socialisation and developmentalism. Discourses of childhood innocence and the perception that children are too young and too cognitively and emotionally immature to deal with global justice issues take little account of the significant impact of globalisation on children. The proliferation of sophisticated technologies, increased worldwide interconnectedness and the targeting of young children with items of popular culture, suggest that discourses of childhood innocence and naivety may be outdated (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, cited in Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2009). Innovative ways of understanding childhood and children's learning have emerged from the new sociology of childhood, postmodern/poststructuralist theories and critical psychology (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2009; Devine, 2003; Hong, 2003).

Proponents of these new perspectives challenge conventional definitions of childhood. One conventional view is Piaget's (1932) theory of cognitive-development, which is based on the notion 'that all children reach certain cognitive development stages' (that are biologically predetermined) that 'correlate' with specific chronological ages. The process is linear, begins at birth and continues until adulthood (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2009:6). Piagetian theory ignores children's social world (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). This traditional view perceives children as passive recipients of the dominant culture and constructs children as being too young and too innocent to engage in 'adult' issues. This perspective has a significant impact on early childhood educators' perceptions of 'children's experiences and understandings of diversity, difference and social difference and social inequalities' (Robinson &

Jones Diaz, 2009:171). In contrast, the new perspectives challenge educators to identify appropriate strategies for engaging young children in global issues. Theorists such as Vygotsky (1986) and Donaldson (1978) locate children 'in a social world in which interactions are the source of mental functioning and meanings for social concepts' (Peterson & McCabe, 1994:780).

The literature review sought out research into children's conceptions of key development issues such as poverty and fairness. There is a paucity of literature pertaining to children's conceptions of poverty (Chafel, 1997). However, existing research indicates that young children think about and try to make sense of social justice issues such as poverty and its manifestations (Ramsey, 1991; 2008; 2008a; Leahy, 1983). Similarly, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to young children's constructions of fairness with existing literature focusing largely on moral dilemmas regarding interpersonal relations or financial poverty (Killeen, et al., 2001; Ramsey, 1991; Lerner, 1974). However, the research recovered indicates that children develop a sense of fairness and can identify inequalities from a young age. It also suggests that approaches aimed at promoting young children's engagement with issues of global justice should:

- allow space for children's own concerns, personal experiences and solutions (Hong, 2003; Chafel, et al., 2007);
- build on children's own experiences and background knowledge (Hong, 2003);
- address conceptions and misconceptions about global justice issues including issues relating to poverty and human rights, prejudice and discrimination (Fountain, 1990);
- encourage children to think critically (Connolly & Hosken, 2006);
- explicitly deal with young children's racial attitudes (Connolly & Hosken, 2006); and
- ensure that stereotypes are not reinforced (Ramsey, 2008b).

## **Research process**

Following on from the literature review, a research study was conducted in three settings – pre-school, junior and senior infants at primary school level – representing the most common formal educational contexts for children aged three to six in Ireland. The research was qualitative, informed by the 'mosaic' approach to research (Clark & Moss, 2001) and drew on existing classroom practices.

The principle strategy used was adult-child interaction through dialogue. It involved observation and recording of children's engagement with materials presented by the teacher and small group work undertaken by the researcher. Story was the main stimulus employed. The story chosen - *Mama Panya's Pancakes* (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2005) tells of a trip to market by Adika, a young Kenyan boy and his mother, Mama Panya. Along the way, Adika meets his friends and invites them to evening dinner. As each character is invited, Mama Panya pleads that she can only afford to buy food for themselves. The story ends positively as each character brings something and everyone has enough to eat. The story and powerful illustrations positively reflect the Kenyan landscape, culture and family values but there are underlying themes of hunger and poverty which offer rich opportunities for exploration.

Additional research methodologies included thinking/circle time, drama and exploring real life photographs. The photographs were selected to prompt discussion on themes of the wider world, food and poverty, enable children to identify similarities and differences between their lives and those depicted, appeal to children's sense of the familiar, offer positive images of the developing world and allow children to explore local and global dimensions of justice issues.

## **Research findings**

The research findings will contribute to an understanding of how young children engage with issues of global justice. Children in the study appeared to be able to identify people's needs and on some occasions made direct links with poverty. Mama Panya's dilemma of having just enough food for herself and Adika seemed to have been understood by at least some of the children. The children drew on their previous learning and experience to identify why food and water were important. The youngest children could use the words 'hunger' and 'thirst' in relation to themselves and others.

The study suggests that the children's understanding of food and water as needs and their own familiarity with the concepts of hunger and thirst enabled them to engage with and recognise the central worry for Mama Panya, i.e. not having enough food for everyone. This concurs with the contention of Chafel, et al. (2007) that children are more actively engaged when they have the opportunity to incorporate their own personal experiences into discussions.

Although a connection between poverty and money was not always apparent in the children's responses, there were indications in discussions on Mama Panya's Pancakes and certain photographs that children in each setting could see the link between poverty and the lack of basic needs. It was notable that only in the senior infant setting did children use the language of poverty and wealth. Younger children appear to have a conceptual understanding of people not having enough but using terms such as 'poor' and 'rich' develops later. While this observation supports the findings of Ramsey (1990) that children have a limited understanding of the causes of poverty, it also suggests that theirs is an emergent understanding. Even the youngest children showed an emergent conceptualisation of poverty. Poverty was more consistently understood by all children as the denial, or lack of, basic needs such as food and water rather than of money.

Throughout the research settings there was expression of feelings and emotions, concern and empathy for those in need. In general, the capacity of the children to empathise was most evident in their ability to describe how those in the story and photographs might be thinking or feeling. The extent to which children recognised emotions depended on the context and the photograph used, but many were able to recognise that Mama Panya was worried and speculate how individuals in the photographs were feeling. This was grounded in the children's personal experiences and based on familiar contexts rather than on a sense of global justice and fairness.

Using stories with familiar objects or routines helps children see links between their own lives and those of others in different places (Bates & Pickering, 2010). Consequently, children are better placed to investigate things that are different from their own experiences. Mama Panya's Pancakes featured enough content which was appealing and relevant to the children's own experiences. The research also identified a number of significant starting points to develop children's thinking in relation to global justice including, children can: explore consequences if basic needs are not met; demonstrate altruistic tendencies; see another's perspective; and identify possible solutions to problems. They are familiar with charity campaigns, the power of negative imagery and the need to address the commonly held association of all African people with poverty through exposure to varied depictions of the wider world.

## A programme for early years

These findings argue for developing strategies for engaging young children in global justice issues and are providing the basis for the development of a programme by the Trócaire/SPD partnership. The programme will engage with students and lecturers in initial teacher education, pre-school educators and teachers in early years' classrooms and those engaged in curriculum development. It will use some of the tools and methodologies employed successfully during the research process and will go towards addressing the issues raised by the research.

In addition, clusters of pre-schools and primary schools have been introduced to the research findings and are developing a classroom resource by applying skills, such as story-telling and puppetry, to develop methodologies to engage young children in exploring issues like those introduced in Mama Panya's Pancakes such as the causes of food insecurity. The resource will also explore the consequences and possible strategies for addressing these issues and will be rolled out at pre-service and in-service level by building on the opportunity presented by Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

In keeping with the Partnership's commitment to evidence-based research, the impact of the programme will be measured in conjunction with three education colleges. This will further contribute to the overall picture of how young children engage with issues of global justice.

## Conclusion

The research indicates that young children are capable of engaging with global and justice issues provided the strategies are appropriate to their age and cognitive development. The research points to the opportunity which exists to engage children at an early age with issues which have been previously viewed as beyond their world and level of understanding. It also points to the opportunity to expand the prevailing emphasis on aspects related to culture when introducing young children to the wider world. However, it is more than an opportunity. As global citizens in their own right, children should be allowed to participate 'on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become' (Moss, 2002, cited in Nicholas, 2001:119). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) seeking to develop active citizens as agents for change in our global society have a unique opportunity to re-orient their focus of engagement to include younger children. It is envisaged that the research findings and

resultant education programme will be of interest to those engaged in development education and in early years education whether in curriculum development, delivering education programmes or providing continuing professional development and support services for early years educators within the primary and pre-school sectors.

The full report, *How Young Children Engage with Issues of Global Justice* (SPD/Trócaire, 2010) is available on [www.trócaire.org/primary](http://www.trócaire.org/primary).

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