



# Global Citizenship Education in Early Childhood Education

A Research Report on a Scoping Study of Current  
Practices and Future Possibilities

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## Research Report 2 for Global Village consortium partners and Irish Aid

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# Introduction

*Wouldn't it be amazing to have the children growing up with just all this diversity and global education ... it would just be something that they've always had from day one and educated about it. (Participant I, ECE practitioner)*

Global citizenship education is a lifelong educational process which seeks to develop an understanding of local and global injustice and to encourage appropriate action leading to a more equal and sustainable world (Bryan & Bracken, 2011). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) identify global citizenship education (GCE) as one of several educational approaches which can support the advancement of Target 4.7, and the development of inclusive and equitable quality education (UN, 2015).

GCE has made significant inroads into the Irish education system at both primary and post-primary levels (GENE, 2015; McBreen, 2020), and a small but increasing body of research has considered the potential of exploring GCE within early childhood education. Oberman, Waldron and Dillon (2012) demonstrate the need to engage young children with issues of human rights and justice, and recognise that very young children are already forming opinions and beliefs about such concerns. Other research suggests that there are significant opportunities to develop GCE in early childhood spaces, with one noted avenue being *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (Dillon & O'Shea, 2009; Dillon, Ruane & Kavanagh, 2010). Although strong connections have been identified between GCE and current iterations of the *Aistear* framework (French & McKenna, 2022), little is known about current practices, possibilities and challenges for GCE at this educational level.

This research project seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of GCE in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland and to scope the needs and possibilities for GCE in this area. It is hoped that this knowledge can inform and support further development of GCE in this field, particularly as the Irish early childhood curriculum framework is developed and implemented over the coming years. The report begins by providing an overview of ECE within the Irish context, and defining the nature of the Irish system as well as key curricular developments. The report then explains the two main aspects of the research design for this project, namely, a scoping literature review exploring academic literature on GCE in ECE, and a qualitative dimension conducting expert interviews with ECE practitioners and policymakers. The report provides an analysis of the literature gathered through the scoping study, before sharing the findings garnered from expert interviews. It finishes with a consideration of the implications of these findings and a series of recommendations for practitioners and policy makers.



## 2 Overview of ECE in Ireland

**Early childhood education can be defined as a critical period of learning and development in a child's life from birth to six years of age.**

Although this age range varies globally and is often extended to include children up to age eight (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015), Ireland defines ECE as including all children from birth to six years, as evidenced by policy and practice in *Síolta: The National Quality Framework (2006)* and *Aistear: The National Curriculum Framework (2009)*. These frameworks are directed at educators to help support children's learning and development from birth to six years of age, with a particular focus on babies and toddlers. They are given added importance when we consider that Ireland has a large and increasingly growing population of young children under school age – the most recent available census figures indicate there are approximately half a million children in this age group, of a total population of approximately four and a half million (CSO, 2016).

The Irish government introduced its first free pre-school year, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in 2010 and extended it to two years in 2016. The aim of the scheme was to benefit children during the key developmental period prior to starting school (DCYA, 2010). In Ireland, therefore, the ECE space includes toddlers and young children, both attending the ECCE programme and during the early years of primary school. For the purposes of this scoping review, this report analyses and evaluates the extent of global citizenship education within ECE research, policy and practice for all young children aged 3–6 years in the years since 2010.

The landscape of ECE in Ireland is both complex and nuanced and has grown exponentially over the past five decades with increased investment, policy developments and reviews. To contextualise the current position of ECE, it is essential to trace its genealogy and to position it within the historical, social, economic and political construct of its time. The roots of these developments stem from years of campaigning and lobbying by early years organisations, government bodies and policy makers. In historical terms, the period 1960–90 marked an increased interest in ECCE in Ireland. Firstly, research provided significant evidence of the importance of quality ECCE in enabling all children to realise their full potential. With Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 and increased connections to international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Irish ECE policy gradually became influenced by European counterparts and international developments (CECDE, 2006). The introduction of *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education* in 1999 signified an important milestone as its objective was to facilitate the development of a high-quality system of early childhood education (DES, 1999, p. 9). In 2002, the Department of Education launched the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) whose aim was to develop and coordinate early childhood education in Ireland. The

CECDE developed *Síolta: The National Quality Framework* (2006) and played a vital role in the development and implementation of the national policy approach to early childhood learning. The publication of *Síolta* contributed significantly to the realisation of the objectives of the *White Paper*.

In the same year that the CECDE was established, Ireland also signed up to the Barcelona Agreement (2002). As part of this agreement, Ireland committed “to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” (EC, 2002, p. 3). Before the introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010, pre-schools services in Ireland had been provided by competing private, commercial and community-based sectors. There was a significant variation in the pedagogical approaches, staff qualifications and payment rates, as well as attendance fees (Neylon, 2014). This market-driven approach was contested from a rights-based perspective as it did not ensure equality of access to pre-school services for all children in Ireland (Hayes, 2005). The programme was extended to two years in 2016 and was closely followed in 2018 by *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028*. Several upcoming reforms and policy developments were announced for Budget 2022, which committed to an allocation of €716m for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare. Some key policy drivers of this reform are the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and the *First 5* strategy. A goal of AIM, which was introduced in September 2016, is to create a more inclusive, accessible pre-school environment, so that all children can benefit from quality, meaningful early learning experiences. While the rapid growth and intensification of policy has brought ECE issues to the fore, this current report explores the extent of GCE within research, policy and practice.

## 2.1 A fractured ECE system

The positioning of ECE in Ireland is representative of a fractured system, as identified by the *White Paper* on early childhood education over two decades ago:

Section 2.2 outlined the involvement of a number of Government Departments in the early childhood area and noted that as many as eleven Departments are involved in the childcare area. The large number of State Departments involved, and the close linkages and overlaps between education and childcare, would suggest that coordination of effort between the various Departments and agencies should be a key element of provision. However, lack of coordination has been identified by the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, among others, as a significant problem inhibiting the development of adequate systems of early education and childcare. (DES, 1995, p. 28)

Eleven government departments are involved in the education and care of Ireland’s youngest children, and the responsibility for shaping pedagogy and care is somewhat manoeuvred from one department to the next. The lack of a coordinated approach to early childhood education and care produces a fractured system and creates a contentious landscape for policy, practice and pedagogy. Another factor of this fractured system is that children in this age group attend a range of different early childhood settings, including infant classes in primary schools. For instance, in 2020–21, 83% of all eligible children attended an ECCE setting (Pobal, 2022) and, according to the European Commission (2021), 100% of children between three years of age and the starting age of compulsory primary education participated in ECCE. However, as children in Ireland may start primary education between the ages of 4 and 6, this percentage includes many junior and senior infants, as well as pre-school children. The ratio of community (not-for-profit) to private services (for-profit) varies by level of socio-economic status and geographical

location. Community-operated services are more likely to be in disadvantaged areas and there are no commercially operated services in very, or extremely, disadvantaged areas (Pobal, 2022). The unequal distribution of ECCE settings across different parts of the country is at least in part due to the absence of significant planning controls in relation to providers entering and exiting the market (Lloyd & Penn, 2014).

## 2.2 ECE curricular developments

The newly developed *Primary Curriculum Framework* positions “being an active citizen” (NCCA, 2023, p. 9) as a key competency. It defines this competency as developing children’s “capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society at local, national, and global levels, and fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately to creating a more sustainable and just world” (ibid.). This focus on active citizenship is in stark contrast to the two brief mentions of citizenship in the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999), with no mention of citizenship in *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006). The increased prominence of citizenship as a key competency is echoed in French & McKenna’s (2022) literature review for the enhancement of *Aistear*. For example, Aim 3 of *Aistear* specifies that “children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights, and views of others” (NCCA, 2009). In fact, there are over forty inclusions of the term ‘citizenship’ within French & McKenna’s review, thus positioning it as a key principle within the framework. While *Aistear* reaffirms children’s position as rights holders and emphasises children’s citizenship, it also recognises the disparity between policy rhetoric and the reality of children’s everyday experiences regarding citizenship (French & McKenna, 2022, p. 145). It should also be noted that at the time of publication, the NCCA are updating *Aistear* and a public consultation on the proposed revised framework has just closed. A report on the consultation findings is due in Spring 2024.



# 3 Research methodology

The research design was developed in response to the research questions guiding this study, namely:

- 1 What current examples and expressions of GCE exist in ECE?
- 2 What are the possibilities of extending GCE in ECE?
- 3 What are the needs and challenges for the enhancement of GCE in ECE?

In order to provide a preliminary assessment of GCE in early childhood education in Ireland and to scope the needs and possibilities for GCE in this area, the study employed two complementary approaches. Firstly, a scoping literature review gathered and synthesised existing research into GCE within early childhood contexts. Secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews with experts on the policies and practices of early childhood education provided deeper insight into this field of work. The research study was given full ethical clearance by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (DCUREC/2023/018) in March 2023. The following sections address the scoping literature review and qualitative interviews in greater depth.

## 3.1 Scoping literature review

This study incorporated a scoping literature review in order to identify and synthesise existing research and studies into GCE within early childhood contexts. The review followed the guidance of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), employing key stages such as the development of research questions, identification of relevant evidence (in this case relevant publications), the selection of eligible evidence based on a range of criteria, the collation and analysis of that evidence and, finally, the presentation of results. This report addresses each of these stages in turn.

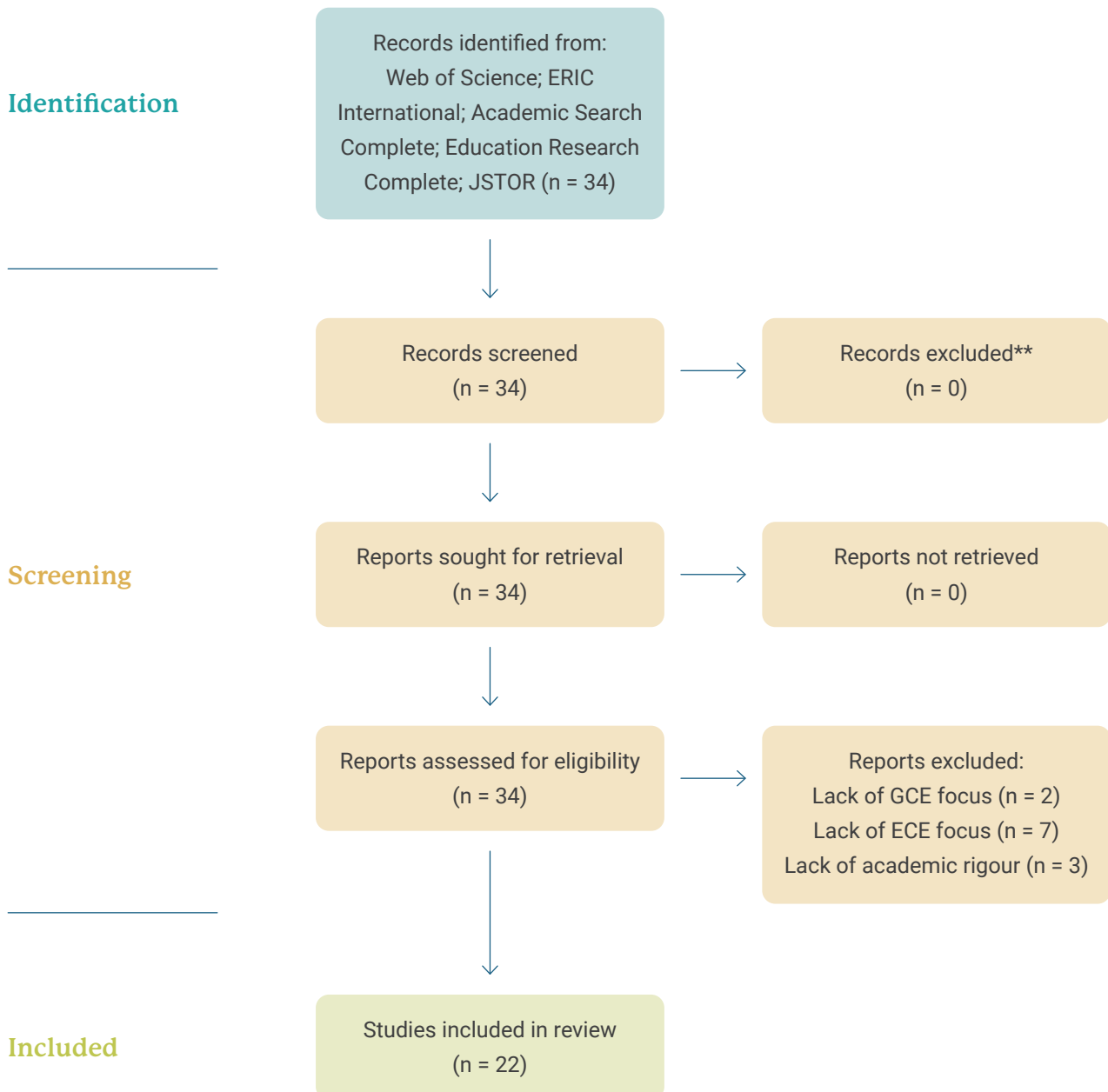
In order to provide opportunities for exploring GCE research in early childhood settings, the primary search terms were agreed as 'Global citizenship' and 'Early years' or 'Early childhood' or 'Early education' or 'Early childhood

education'. The search focused on publications dating from 2010 to May 2023, to align with the publication of the early years framework, *Aistear*, in 2009, and to remain open to research considering GCE as a relatively recent phenomenon. The search focused on education concerned with children aged 0–6 years, in line with the definition of early years according to Ireland's *Aistear* curriculum. Other inclusion and exclusion criteria focused on whether the primary search term, namely 'Global citizenship', was mentioned in the body of the text, as opposed to just within an abstract. Studies were also excluded where no English language version was available, where studies were classified as grey literature, or where the publication could not be accessed using DCU subscriptions. The search was conducted across five databases: Web of Science, ERIC International, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete and JSTOR. Figure 1 provides a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram to map out the number of records identified, included and excluded, and the reasons for exclusions.

The initial search was conducted by one reviewer who read the abstract for all search results. If the inclusion criteria were met, the reviewer would then read the full paper. If all criteria were met, the paper would be marked as 'Yes' to be included in the review. If it was clear from the abstract or from the paper that the study did not meet criteria, the paper would be marked as 'No', to be excluded from the review. If any information was unclear or if clarification was needed with something, the paper would be marked as 'Maybe', to be highlighted for a thorough second review. These decisions and any relevant extra comments, including reasons for exclusion, were noted on an excel sheet. Basic quantitative data (publication date, country where study was conducted, children's age, type of setting included in study, sample population size, whether the study was quantitative or qualitative, and the database on which it was found) were collected during this first review and included on the excel sheet. Following this process, 34 papers were analysed in total, yielding 6 'Maybe' papers, 12 'No' ones and 16 'Yes' ones. Two other team members carried out a separate second review. All the 'Yes' and 'Maybe' papers were read, and the reasoning notes for the 'No' papers. Following a discussion, a final selection of publications for inclusion was made: 12 were excluded and 22 included. The key aspects of each of the 22 studies included within the review were synthesised and written up in a literature review which follows in Section 3.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 – Identification of Studies (Adapted from: Page, MJ, McKenzie, JE, Bossuyt, PM, Boutron, I, Hoffmann, TC, Mulrow, CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021; 372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71)

### Identification of studies via databases and registers



## 3.2 Interviews

In order to scope current expressions of global citizenship education in early childhood education, and to identify possibilities, challenges and needs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten key professionals working within the field of ECE. Three specific types of professionals were identified for their position, scope and expertise.

**Table 1: Position and expertise of the ten participants**

Participants	Type of Professional	Expertise
Participants A, I and G	Early childhood practitioners	Early childhood education practice in public and private settings and junior primary
Participants C, D, E and F	Early childhood policy specialists	Policy development in the context of early childhood education
Participants B, H and J	Early childhood academics	Theory and evidence-based practice in relation to early childhood education

Participants were recruited through a series of emails from the research team to three different types of ECE professionals. The study's plain language statement was also shared (see Appendix A). After gaining written consent from participants, nine semi-structured interviews took place (one with two participants, C and D, from the same organisation and eight one-to-one meetings) between April and May 2023. Interview questions explored current examples and expressions of GCE in ECE, possibilities to extend GCE in ECE, and the needs and challenges of GCE in ECE (see Appendix B for more). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Transcripts of the interviews were uploaded to NVivo software (a qualitative research package). Analysis followed a deductive codebook approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) given the focused research questions and the scoping nature of the study. The codebook was developed by two members of the research team that included fourteen codes, a description and example for each code, in addition to exclusion criteria. All nine transcripts were then analysed using these codes and an analytical memo for each set of data was developed. The findings from this process are presented in Section 4.



# 4 A synthesis of existing literature

Twenty-two papers were reviewed and critically analysed to inform this study. The studies include papers from 2010 through to 2022, with a mix of empirical and position papers. Studies focused on North, South and Central America (Ecuador, Costa Rica, USA), Asia (Hong Kong), Europe (Spain) and Australasia (Australia, New Zealand). Analysis of these papers revealed a number of key themes which are explored below in greater depth.

## 4.1 Importance and relevance of GCE for young children

It is widely recognised that children today are more globally connected and knowledgeable about global citizenship issues than ever before. Global citizenship education provides young children with the mindset to think critically, act justly and compassionately, and build relationships respectfully. Children in classrooms around the world are engaged in learning which focuses on civic responsibility from a very young age. However, the notion of young children being global citizens is a relatively new concept, given that childhood experiences often focus on local environments and communities (Twigg, Pendergast & Twigg, 2015). O'Shea's (2013) reflective article highlights the emergent nature of this area and explores some of the possible tensions that can arise within an early childhood education context in an age of global citizenship. In particular, O'Shea considers the intersection between child-centred and 'wholeness' approaches in education and those focused on wider global concerns. In general, research conducted into young children's lived experiences with global citizenship education reveals two broader themes: 1) the social experiences of children's decision-making and participation in the world; and 2) technological and financial literacy skills develop in early childhood and are influenced by the adult world (Twigg, Pendergast & Twigg, 2015). These findings are underpinned by the suggestion that connections children form with the wider world in the early years, and the decisions they make in relation to local and global issues, build foundations for life-long active citizenship.

The importance of GCE for younger children is also recognised within global policy. UNESCO's *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)* (2019) showcases the need to revolutionise learning environments for young children, through the inclusion of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals stemming from the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This presents a challenge for early childhood educators – to transform the practices shaping young children's everyday lived experiences to ensure these goals are met. For example, Target 4.7 of Sustainable Development Goal 4, quality education, emphasises the need to ensure all learners, including young children, acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions to promote sustainable development through education for sustainability, human rights, gender equality, compassion and care, and global citizenship, amongst others. This current review showcases how these targets can be achieved by illuminating GCE practices with young children.

## 4.2 Contesting GCE in early years spaces

While the goal of global citizenship education is to promote a sense of belonging and connectedness with, and knowledge of, local and global issues, van Oudenhoven and van Oudenhoven (2019) problematise the enactment of this for young children. They maintain that there has been an almost exclusive focus on academically formal practices within pre-schools and kindergartens, and subsequently non-formal spaces are largely ignored. Yet, they argue, it is in these informal spaces that the attitudes and dispositions related to GCE are most successfully cultivated in early childhood (van Oudenhoven & van Oudenhoven, 2019, p. 39). They suggest a “culturization” (ibid.) of early childhood development, meaning that ECE programs would focus on supporting children as they participate in, contribute to, and give direction to, cultural activities. In this way, they suggest that “if we ‘let children be children’, then the foundation for global citizenship will be laid, without specifically aiming for it” (ibid., p. 41). This philosophical approach is somewhat rebuked by Twigg, Pendergast and Twigg (2015) who offer a definition of the term ‘global citizenship’ in light of early years policy, pedagogy and practice. For them, a young child is capable of being aware of the wider world; has a sense of their own role as a global citizen; respects and values diversity; has a curiosity and sense of understanding of how the world works; and is willing to make the world a more just and sustainable place. As such, these traits form the basis of what it means to be a global citizen. They argue that constructions of childhood, early childhood education practices, and approaches to early childhood education all lead to understandings about the child as a citizen (Twigg, Pendergast & Twigg, 2015).

While existing research considers global citizenship and social responsibility as a key element to effective early years education (France, Freiburg & Homel, 2010; Moss, 2006), it has not necessarily focused on uncovering the everyday lived experiences of young children in relation to global citizenship. This literature review aims to somewhat address this gap, by analysing current examples of GCE in practice, and considering the challenges and possibilities of global citizenship within early childhood education, with a particular focus on children’s everyday lived experiences.

## 4.3 Effectiveness of GCE in ECE

The last four decades has witnessed an emerging interest in global citizenship education and its impact for policy and practice. UNESCO recognises GCE as an important aspect of school programmes with significant implications for its success. A growing number of studies show that GCE programmes develop awareness and knowledge of global interconnections, foster a sense of identity and belonging, and encourage children’s commitment to take action in responding to local and global issues (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2022). The current emphasis on GCE is framed by the belief that all children, including those in their early years, should be encouraged and prepared to be active global citizens. This requires commitment from schools and teachers to prepare children to be engaged citizens in an interconnected and increasingly globalised society. Ahmed and Mohammed (2022) completed a systematic review to evaluate the accountability of global citizenship education programmes to assess the evidence that such programmes improved children’s global learning. The findings of the study revealed that GCE programmes are effective in preparing children for living in the global world. O’Flaherty and Liddy (2018) analysed the benefits of including education for sustainable development and GCE in forty-four research studies. Of these studies, twelve focused on GCE. Of the studies included in the final synthesis, some reported a positive effect from the educational interventions. Overall, the study found that while positive outcomes are generally reported in evaluated programmes, their analysis identified that few programmes included interventions for teachers (less than 5%) (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2022). They argue that teachers’ global awareness impacts children’s global citizenship and has the potential to transform practice.

## 4.4 Underpinning principles of GCE in ECE practice

The challenge of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in early years practice is identified by Chapman and O’Gorman (2022). They list some of these challenges, including developing strategies to aid children’s resilience skills, ensuring children have the opportunity to express their voice, reviewing educators’ views of children’s abilities, and resisting narrow views of children’s learning and development. They offer a meaningful way to bridge the gap from policy (or Development Goal) to practice as they argue that early childhood education can support sustainability, global citizenship, human rights and peace (see Targets 4.2 and 4.7) through the arts, which allow young children to engage with others’ lived experiences (Chapman & O’Gorman, 2022). Their research demonstrates that the language of the arts and arts immersion can enable young children to understand issues related to sustainability, to express this understanding, to strengthen their development in literacy, numeracy, social and physical development, and to build their agency as global citizens in a more sustainable, just and peaceful world.

The conceptualisation of peace is not a new phenomenon within the ECE space. Brunold-Conesa (2010) outlines the link between the promotion of global citizenship through peace education espoused by Montessorian philosophy and pedagogy. Montessori predicated such a need even before the outbreak of World War II and created materials and a curriculum for young children to foster not only a sense of the interdependence of all humanity, but also of each individual’s responsibility towards humanity (Brunold-Consea, 2010). Montessori education is therefore positioned as a leader in the promotion of global citizenship for young children. The conceptualisation of peace also emerges in more recent work from Salah (2018), which highlights the millions of young children who are trapped in situations of conflict, war, violence and displacement. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the ‘sustaining peace resolutions’ call on all members of society to engage in peacebuilding endeavours. This has implications for early childhood educators. Salah (2018) identifies that the promise of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC) is to join forces to create a global movement to build more peaceful and just societies in order to transform young children’s lives.

In light of children being and becoming global citizens, peace, justice and compassion are perceived to form part of the foundation for promoting sustainable lifestyles in which all citizens live well together and flourish in an interconnected and interdependent world (Broadfoot & Pascal, 2020; OECD, 2018). Broadfoot and Pascal (2020) extend this argument and position compassion as a core global competence for sustainable development in promoting wellbeing, global citizenship and peace. They argue that compassion, as it relates to GCE, is a little understood and contested component within early childhood education. To investigate further, they explored how pre-school communities in England experience compassion in their everyday lives. Their data revealed a need for embedding compassion in early childhood education as an approach to sustainability, highlighting the importance of children’s needs, rights, capabilities and wellbeing in their day to day lives. They position compassion as an appropriate practice within ECE for promoting wellbeing, while fostering the dispositions required to live justly and sustainably as global citizens (UNESCO, 2017). They extended this research with a corresponding praxeological investigation to identify what conditions facilitate compassion in the daily life of a pre-school in England (Broadfoot & Pascal, 2021). The research was conducted in response to the need for an increased focus on wellbeing, sustainability and global citizenship in ECE, as they argue compassionate behaviours underpin all three. The range of data gathered included multi-layered participant observations, interviews and focus groups. A key finding to emerge from the study is the development of a practice enhancement framework through five interrelated conditions: knowledge, communication and collaboration, opportunity, social role and broader influence (ibid.). They found that when these conditions are employed, meaningful, authentic holistic experiences can occur which can empower pre-school children as global citizens who lead sustainable lives.

## 4.5 The concept of sustainability within ECE

The concept of sustainability is widely recognised as a critical component of GCE in early childhood education (Haas & Ashman, 2014; Hall, Linnea Howe, Roberts, Foster Shaffer & Williams, 2014; Mackey, 2012; Ritchie, 2015). Haas and Ashman (2014) outline the development of global citizenship within the kindergarten through the implementation of the learning emphases of global education. Their research, conducted in kindergartens in Tasmania, had a particular emphasis on sustainability education and explored the ways in which nature play and issues of sustainability come to fruition as young children become global citizens. Nature play in the early years lays foundations for future responsible citizens and curators of both their natural and social worlds. The findings from their research outline the importance of global education in the early years, particularly the role of sustainability and education in nature (Haas & Ashman, 2014). The conceptualisation of nature play and outdoor play as it pertains to GCE is also identified in the work of Hall, Linnea Howe, Roberts, Foster Shaffer and Williams (2014). They describe a year-long observational investigation in a school for young children in Colorado. They propose that young children, aged 3 to 6, have a different relationship with nature than older children and adults. They propose that children in this age range have a utilitarian and dominionistic relationship with nature. This is evidenced in children's connections with nature and how they used their entire bodies to explore the outdoor environment. They also observed children as active and dynamic agents in their learning environments. The research also revealed that "nature can be discovered in almost everything" (ibid., p. 201) and highlights children's right to play and participate actively and to contribute to the learning of others. Beyond sustainability, Russo (2012) argues for the centrality of play in early childhood education. She maintains that play can contribute to children's sense of empathy and is an essential part of quality early childhood learning.

The emphasis on young children's involvement with the environment emerges strongly in the work of Mackey (2012). When young children are supported to make decisions about the environment, including sustainability, they are capable of contributing to active decision making. The research revealed the importance of recognising young children's right to know about social and environmental issues; to be part of conversations and possible solutions; to have their ideas and contributions valued; and to seek solutions with others in order to be able to take meaningful action (Mackey, 2012). From a New Zealand perspective, Ritchie (2015) offers insights on the correlation between food reciprocity and sustainability in early childhood spaces. The research draws on a range of data focusing on pedagogical practices informed by indigenous (Māori) perspectives. Ritchie maintains Māori values, such as *manaakitanga* (caring, generosity) and *whanaungatanga* (relatedness), are visible in routines focused on the provision of food as a key focus of early childhood education for sustainability. The evidence suggests that providing opportunities to become involved with growing, cooking and sharing food enables young children to develop empathy and compassion for themselves, their peers and the environment (Ritchie, 2015). By drawing on local, indigenous experience and perspectives, localised wisdom in relation to sustainability practices comes to the fore. This research affirms the findings elsewhere (Haas & Ashman, 2014; Hall, Linnea Howe, Roberts, Foster Shaffer & Williams, 2014) and reaffirms the concept that when the rights of young children are respected, they are confident advocates for the environment and for a more sustainable world.

## 4.6 Possibilities to extend GCE

The possibility of blending philosophies from the East and West is explored by Bryan-Silva, Sanders-Smith and Ya-Hsuan Yang (2022). They draw on Western ideologies, including Dewey's views of democracy, and merge these with Confucian thinking. Confucian ideology recognises the child's ability to become *junzi* (君子, an exemplary person) through harmonious relationships, respect and appreciation of differences, and compassion for the natural world (Bryan-Silva, Sanders-Smith & Ya-Hsuan Yang, 2022). The findings from a study they conducted focuses on



early years programmes at the International School, Hong Kong (ISHK), where the focus is on global mindedness. The aim of these programmes is to move beyond binary conceptions, but rather view the world through a range of perspectives. They argue the key components of early childhood programmes should be the interrelatedness of care for others and the environment, while nurturing mutual relationships (ibid.). The findings from the study suggest that children in their early years need to learn to engage and respect cultures beyond their own, and explore meaningful ways to conserve the planet. In doing so, young children can build early competencies for long-term global citizenship and engagement. The concept of care and value-creating education as it pertains to GCE also emerges in the work of Mokuria and Wandix-White (2020), who highlight the experiences of early years educators in Brazil. Through their narratives, the role of care in value-creating education is explored as a critical aspect of education that supports children's holistic growth and development. The research illuminates early years education as a space that fosters global citizenship by encouraging students to recognise their roles as agents of societal change and instruments of social justice (Mokuria & Wandix-White, 2020).

A number of studies focus on possibilities for GCE in ECE foundation or pre-service teacher training programmes. From a pedagogical perspective, Damiani (2020) identifies the benefits and possibilities of embedding GCE and related issues into pre-service teacher training programmes. The findings from the research reveal that while pre-service teachers are provided with basic content-specific and general pedagogical knowledge, often it is not linked directly to GCE; rather it offers possibilities for GCE in an early years classroom. Embedding specific GCE content and pedagogical approaches for young children in pre-service programmes can increase teachers' sense of self-preparedness and confidence in the GCE learning opportunities that occur in both formal and non-formal contexts (Damiani, 2020). Delacruz (2019) explores the possibilities of virtual field trips in pre-school contexts to contribute to greater cross-cultural experiences, collaboration and understanding. Her in-depth study with three pre-school student teachers (from Ecuador, Costa Rica and the USA) traces the challenges and opportunities of employing technology for GCE in ECE. The findings indicate that virtual field trips can promote authentic content and global understanding and the development of 'new literacies' such as oral language, visual representation and audio representation. A key challenge identified in the study was the lack of preparedness of both teachers and children to engage with digital technology for learning. Moreno-Pino, Jiménez-Fontana, Domingo and Goded (2022) also researched pre-service teacher training, with respect to incorporating sustainability issues into mathematics education. Their findings conclude that effective integration of sustainability into mathematics education requires specific content and knowledge, and also the need for university teachers to change and to work together from the same perspective, the one they intend to promote (Moreno-Pino, Jiménez-Fontana, Domingo & Goded, 2022). Similarly, Thomas and Banki (2021) argue that teacher education programmes can and should be reviewed and assessed for the presence of both 'global' and 'citizenship' elements. From their analysis of syllabi from four foundational, teacher education programmes in Australia, they developed a framework to enable teachers and educators to assess their programmes, in order to enhance their global citizenship dimension. Through their study, they found possibilities to extend the global dimension from a solely local focus and they offer a framework to support teachers and educators to do so. Together, the findings from all these teacher education contexts highlight the need and possibilities to embed specific GCE content and pedagogical approaches into pre-service teacher programmes.

Hancock (2017) identifies the possibilities of emancipatory practice in a pre-school in New York. She identifies a gap in the literature on the value of GCE for African American pre-schoolers. She conducted a case study in a community-based pre-school practice serving a predominantly African American community in New York. The study identified four primary themes within the curriculum – lessons in power, membership in a global community, self-esteem development and teacher intentionality – as essential components for GCE. A further critical finding from the research was the discovery that in this setting the enactment of the global citizenship curriculum contributed

to combating negative conceptions of self in very young African American children (Hancock, 2017). This research does not position global citizenship education and multicultural education as mutually exclusive; rather, Hancock argues that GCE should be viewed as a natural progression with multicultural education being its key foundation. This research reveals the possibilities for GCE, particularly in marginalised communities; this, Hancock argues, is “doing the work of global citizenship” (ibid., p. 579).

## 4.7 Needs and challenges of GCE in ECE

In addition to the challenges faced by early years teachers as discussed above, Luis Parejo, Molina-Fernández and González-Pedraza (2021) identify additional needs that globalisation has brought. While it has brought great social and economic impact and development, their research approaches the concept of migration, particularly that of refugees, as a learning space for early childhood education. They present qualitative data of a research project conducted in a school in Spain. Their findings reveal that children attribute external factors, of survival, to the refugees’ forced displacement from their country of origin (ibid., 2021). From a pedagogical perspective, the challenge in the earliest stages of education is aligning the construction of citizenship with a model of social justice. Teaching strategies should incorporate the diversity of children’s experiences, including languages, to ensure they can express themselves meaningfully, as evidenced by the data. The challenge for early years educators therefore is to listen sincerely to young children in order to transform a space of formal education into a context of reflection for the construction of a global citizenship that can overcome stereotypes through authentic knowledge (ibid.).

## 4.8 Summary of existing literature

This literature review reaffirms the relevance of global citizenship education within early childhood spaces. While the notion has been previously contested (van Oudenhoven & van Oudenhoven, 2019), the literature reveals the everyday lived experiences of young children as they engage with concepts related to GCE, including arts experiences (Chapman & O’Gorman, 2022), nature play (Haas & Ashman, 2014) and issues pertaining to sustainability (Haas & Ashman, 2014; Hall, Linnea Howe, Roberts, Foster Shaffer & Williams, 2014; Mackey, 2012; Ritchie, 2015). The challenge for early years policy makers and educators is to ensure the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from the UN Agenda 2030 are meaningfully embedded in policy and practice. The findings from the literature reveal that as young children become global citizens, peace, justice, care (for others and the environment) and compassion form part of the foundation for promoting global citizenship education (Broadfoot & Pascal, 2020; Mokuria & Wandix-White, 2020; OECD, 2018; Salah, 2018). The review findings suggest that teachers’ global awareness impacts children’s global citizenship and has the potential to transform practice. As such, embedding specific GCE content and pedagogical approaches into pre-service programmes will increase teachers’ sense of self-preparedness and confidence in the GCE learning opportunities that occur in both formal and non-formal contexts (Damiani, 2020). While the literature review recognises the challenges of embedding GCE within early childhood education, it also acknowledges this period as a time to foster global citizenship by encouraging students to recognise their roles as agents of societal change and instruments of social justice (Mokuria & Wandix-White, 2020).



# 5 Findings from expert interviews

This section describes and illustrates the key themes that emerged in our analysis of the expert interviews. The themes include the role and place of ECE frameworks, policies and networks for the enhancement of global childhood education in the ECE sector, and reflections on the transition from ECE to primary. Global citizenship education in action also emerged as a significant theme across the expert interviews and the findings highlight examples and ideas for GCE in practice within ECE contexts.

Four key sub-themes emerged strongly from the data, namely, children's rights, cultural inclusion and diversity, the local and global dimensions of GCE, and sustainability. Other themes that are presented in the findings include the importance and relevance of GCE in ECE, in addition to possibilities for further development, and needs and challenges to consider.

## 5.1 ECE frameworks as foundations for GCE

Many participants spoke at length about connections between GCE and ECE frameworks that include *Aistear*, *Síolta* and the *Primary School Curriculum*. All participants indicated that for global citizenship education to be realised in early childhood settings, a key priority is its presence in policies and frameworks. Several participants, in particular those coming from policy backgrounds, highlighted the potential for GCE that already exists in both *Aistear* and the new primary curriculum framework. One participant stated:

*You'll be hopeful from the new primary curriculum framework; there seems to be a bit more of a lean towards that idea of a global viewpoint. (Participant C)*

Within *Aistear*, specific areas identified include 'Identity and Belonging', one of *Aistear's* four key themes, as well as connections to *Aistear's* learning goal of care for the environment. At primary level, participants made specific links to the SESE curriculum, specifically Geography and Science. Subsequently, participants spoke of the already existing "potential" for GCE and the ECE context as being "fertile ground" (Participant F).

It is also acknowledged by many participants that some existing concepts and connections within these curricular areas can be further developed, strengthened, enhanced and updated. For example, although *Aistear* includes the area of diversity and inclusion, a number of participants indicated that this area would benefit from further

elaboration, meeting the requirements of current and future contexts. One participant highlighted the need to strengthen the global aspects of citizenship:

*The citizenship side of it was a significant step forward and it was seen as a great strength of Aistear that young children like from— this is from birth – were being seen as citizens. Now, global citizenship, not so much ... We can say what the thinking behind it was and how Aistear wanted to position children as active citizens. The degree to which global citizenship was built into it, as I say, conceptually, in the years in which it was being developed, I don't think that was a well-developed concept at all. (Participant E)*

It should be noted that the most recent draft of the revised *Aistear* framework does develop these opportunities further and this is welcome. A number of participants suggested that GCE needs explicit references within curriculum development in order for this potential to be fully realised and to address patchy practice across the sector. Indeed, one participant suggested establishing GCE as a curricular 'pillar'.

The strongest and most consistent connection made between GCE and ECE throughout the interviews is the child-centred nature of *Aistear*, specifically the conceptualisation of the child as agentic with rights and voice. Whilst this appeared as the most frequently cited example of connection, a few participants indicated that how this conceptualisation is extended from a local to global dimension needs further clarification and development. Most importantly, participants point to the urgency for action in this area. Several speak about current curriculum developments that are ongoing, including the updating of *Aistear*. They highlight reviews that recommend the reaffirming of *Aistear* and the need for some updating. The four central themes are being retained, while emphasising the relevance of GCE within ECE, especially within the contexts of inclusion, diversity and sustainability (French & McKenna, 2022). Participants expressed the urgent need to influence curriculum developers and makers and pointed to the short window of opportunity at the moment. Participant B recognised the importance of this study and the key gap:

*And what they found out was that sustainability, and we knew, is a gap, okay? So while good stuff is in there, sustainability is a gap. So I suspect that has come through so strongly that that will be addressed in Aistear. So that's really good. Because all early education settings will work too, and with Aistear.*

A number of participants also acknowledged that whilst *Aistear* is well regarded, its implementation was under-resourced when it was introduced in 2009. The curriculum framework was not accompanied by an implementation plan and implementation has been patchy across the country (Participant E), with limited opportunities for educators to participate in professional development.

*Also, [I] have to be honest and say that really, Aistear never really had an implementation plan. So ... while we could recognise that all of that is there, built into the framework, we also have to recognise, I suppose, that the degree to which that has been enacted is in a different kind of space. (Participant E)*

Some participants also suggest that curriculum development can be viewed “as additional work” (Participant F) by practitioners and this needs to be challenged. It is interesting to note that two of the educators interviewed for this study had experienced some training through *Aistear* and clearly spoke about its connections to GCE. They spoke about how *Aistear* framed their practice through both playful pedagogy and child-centred approaches, thus highlighting the need for training in the enhanced version of *Aistear*. Finally, there was very little reference to *Síolta* across the interviews, with only one participant emphasising the fact that within early childhood education, there are “two national frameworks, *Síolta*, the quality framework, and *Aistear*, the curriculum framework” (Participant F).

Beyond *Aistear* and *Síolta*, throughout the interviews there are only a few references to wider policies relating to ECE, with little consensus across these particular contributions. One thread of discussion does point to a lack of coherence across government policy, particularly with regard to where or how to channel funding. For example, one participant questions the allocation of government funding to large crèches, as opposed to small ones. Another highlights a focus on other national educational priorities, such as literacy, numeracy and technology, and questions why GCE is not there. They state that “as a pillar ... it’s not in our system” (Participant C). Further considerations included the role of the Department of Education in monitoring early childhood settings, in contrast to the role of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth:

*... the Department of Education has not been so involved. They’re getting more involved in early education, but that’s more gradual. And their involvement at the moment is primarily around their inspections that they do in earlier settings to really begin to look at the pedagogy and the learning that’s happening, okay? But the thrust in terms of curriculum development and the funding for that is coming through the Department of Children, okay? (Participant C)*

More broadly, one participant explains how government policy relating to ECE has grown in an ad hoc way over decades, gaining more political attention in recent times, describing recent developments as occurring at “breakneck speed” and the area as a “political hot topic” (Participant F), given its connection to women working outside the home. This finding also reaffirms how ECE is a fractured system, as described earlier (Section 2.1). This participant suggests that as a result of this kind of evolution, the area is “splintered” and lacking in a national, coherent infrastructure. Perhaps the most consistent message here is the need for GCE in ECE to be embraced at a policy level. It is suggested that more can and should be done in this area. For example, Participant H states that:

*Yes, and I do think it has to be embraced at a much higher level. You know, policy needs to embrace it, and we need to realise that this is something that definitely needs to be done in those early years. It’s too late later on. And to encourage this all at an early years level. And, therefore, it needs to be supported not by just you and me and that type of thing in terms of doing simple projects, but at that higher level in terms of injecting funding into it and understanding its significance.*

## 5.2 ECE to primary transition

Two dominant threads emerged in participants' responses to questions relating to the transition from pre-school to primary level. Firstly, two participants from a policy perspective report strong and increasing "curricular alignment" (Participants E and F) between pre-school and primary level. They note that until the updated *Aistear* framework is introduced, *Aistear* crosses over and is a framework for children aged 0–6, including children in junior and senior infants. This alignment has been supported by a focus on a number of key principles that include the child as agent and playful pedagogy. It is also noted that the new primary curriculum framework has been "*Aistear*-ised" (Participant F) to ensure continuity and familiarity and also to develop and encourage more playful pedagogy at the junior primary level.

*I suppose what's happened with the primary curriculum framework [is that it] has been, I suppose, influenced and informed by Aistear. So, having that much more, you know, valuing playful learning, being less rigid, less subject based, all of those kinds of things have been incorporated into the primary curriculum framework. (Participant F)*

By contrast, a number of practitioners indicate that, in practice, pre-school to primary transition is tricky, underdeveloped and, at times, overlooked.

*... transitions are hugely important and we don't really do them very well between early childhood and primary and that's equally for both. This is not saying that primary is good or bad or early childhood is good or bad. Transitions could be maximised. (Participant B)*

One practitioner indicates that, whilst it is important, there is little consideration of the process "apart from maybe a little passport and a graduation ceremony" (Participant G). A number of others suggested it is a trickier process in practice, "And I'll leave it there because transition is a whole other ..." (Participant E), while another indicated that there is "no clear pathway there right now" (Participant C).

**Participant C:** That transition period is not there. So that's kind of a trickier one, to kind of ...

**Interviewer:** So, it might be a concept that's talked about, but maybe structures, processes-wise ...

**Participant D:** Yeah, don't exist.

**Interviewer:** Yes, okay.

**Participant C:** Yeah, like [Participant D] said, they don't exist.

**Participant D:** They don't exist. We have found in the very small piece of research that we conducted as a pilot, that there are wide and varied practices out there as to how children transition from early years to primary. There's a lot of distrust between the sectors. Or maybe it's a lack of knowledge rather than distrust and, you know, primary schools look for information around children with special needs, earlier settings and [audio unclear] and they are very nervous about why they are giving this information.

Within this context, any role GCE might play seems unclear and perhaps difficult. The clearest role identified by participants is GCE's association with inclusion, both broadly as a concept that is connected to welcoming, but also in relation to cultural diversity.

## 5.3 GCE and ECE networks

Similar to ECE policy, analysis of the expert interviews confirms the nature of ECE networks as fragmented and splintered, as outlined in Section 2.1.

*Because it's very, I mean, if you hear anything from people [working] in early childhood, you would hear that it is splintered all over the place. Because it has evolved in this kind of ad hoc way. (Participant F)*

Most participants highlight an array of different groups, bodies and associations that come from national, local and governmental levels. Specific networks and associations identified include Early Childhood Ireland, the Better Start national policy development service, TUSLA, national voluntary childcare organisations (NVCOs), the National Childhood Network, the Department of Education's Early Years Inspectorate, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, County Childcare Committees (CCCs), Childcare Committees Ireland, the Federation of Childhood Education, and a range of both national and local civil society groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

*Oh yeah, I mean really, yeah. So, they're, you know, at a policy level, they are the department with responsibility for early childhood. So, obviously they're the kind of key player. Exactly. And you know, for funding initiatives such as this, and again, a synergy between the Department of Education and Further and Higher, particularly that department as opposed to the primary and secondary departments, or all three potentially. And I mean, the NCCA is under the Department of Education, primary and post primary. But, if you did want to bring the third-level colleges and training institutions on board then ... And then, I suppose, at a more – if you come down the tiers – at a more localised level, Better Start, the CCCs, Early Childhood Ireland. So, they're the kind of delivery agents, if you like. (Participant F)*

The bodies and associations identified by participants, though many, can be grouped around a number of spheres that include national, regional and local networks and are inclusive of both state and non-state actors. Within this, there are a number that appear more frequently across the interviews.

The importance of local and community-led and based networks in ECE are highlighted by many participants. Within this, three different types of networks are frequently drawn on as examples. Firstly, County Childcare Committees are identified by some participants as a key body within ECE. The committees are described as “an advocacy group ... or a liaison between themselves and the department”, as “the kind of information hub, the local information point for lots of funding and policy changes that are coming out” (Participant F), and as a “kind of our go-to for everything” (Participant I). Participant B considered whether committees could include networks related to GCE:

*A sustainability-type network could equally be set up that would be open to educators in the locality, but that would probably need in time to be recognised as CPD [continuous professional development] for them.*

Secondly, parents are identified as a key network relating to ECE. One participant describes the ‘parent population’ as part of the community and specifically highlights them within the context of early years education:



*And it's a time in a child's life where parents still have a lot of contact with the school. Those two years in junior and senior infants before they start the longer day, parents still have a lot of access to schools. They tend to drop and collect a lot in that age group. A lot of school gate conversations, lots of engagement with teachers, lots of engagement with other parents because they are the ones setting up the play dates or the collecting or the dropping or whatever. So, I think that that's a really good time to invest in parent education at that stage. (Participant D)*

Participant B also identified the potential of developing 'connections with the community' to share knowledge and experiences in order to enhance ECE provision.

Thirdly, a number of civil society organisations are identified, especially as they relate to GCE. These include "traditional NGOs ... The Trócaires, and the Concerns, and the Gortas, and the GOALs of this world, where schools have an affinity with them. You know, that goodwill and that really strong branding, for want of a better word, is out there already in the system" (Participant D), in addition to Languages Connect, Green Schools, the Forests Association and local farmers.

A very strong thread across participant contributions relates to the importance of cooperation, collaboration and partnership across networks. Whilst a number speak to the fragmented nature of the sector, others recognise the vibrancy and diversity of the field, and at times, of cohesion and increasing consolidation. One participant stated:

*I think it's fair to say probably that, by and large, everybody knows everybody, and there's quite a bit of connectivity ... If you take something, for example, like the national Síolta-Aistear initiative, that's a partnership, you know? Better Start, Department of Children, Department of Education, and NCCA. So, that's a partnership. And I know that if you look even at the NVCOs, you know, that collaborative, where they have their own structure. So, it is very networked ... I'm involved for a long, long, long time, since the early 2000s when I was working on Síolta, and I can see, really, how so much consolidation has taken place. By comparison to the primary sector, for example, which, I'm going to say, has a longer history in terms of consolidation, it does appear to be quite ... Oh God, I think I need more coffee, because the word that's in my head, but it's the wrong word, it's the wrong word – fragmented. Diverse, maybe, is a better word. But it's diverse now, but it was splintered twenty years ago. So, we can see increasing consolidation. But huge work goes into the networking and sharing. (Participant E)*

Another indication of increased consolidation is provided by one participant who reports that there are plans at governmental level to establish a plan for the development of a statutory agency for early childhood education. Others indicate that the range of diverse networks is required, given the diversity of provision in ECE. Furthermore, many participants are keen to stress the importance of a collaborative and partnership-based approach in order to enhance global childhood education in ECE. They indicate that several networks exist and that GCE should seek to integrate, and work with, what already exists. Moreover, analysis of the interviews indicates that for the enhancement of GCE in ECE, there needs to be increased awareness within the ECE sector of the GCE networks, supports, resources and groups that already exist.



## 5.4 The importance and relevance of GCE in ECE

Across participants, there is unanimous recognition that global childhood education is both important and relevant to children aged 0–6 years. In fact, several indicate that it is “essential”. Two participants report that early years is the best place to start.

*I think early years is our best place to just embrace it. (Participant A)*

*And you know that as a kind of a primary lens through which to view the world and to view other peoples and even, you know, very simple things like, you know, sharing and everybody gets a turn and, you know, all of those things and everybody is welcome. So, I mean, I think it is, you know, I think it's the place to start. (Participant F)*

*Within their responses, there are a number of reasons why GCE is important and relevant at early childhood level. These reasons include increasing diversity within their communities, a recognition of wider social justice issues such as climate change, and the need to address mindsets and critical thinking at an early age. In addition, there is a strong thread across participants that children from an early age are both receptive to, and capable of, engaging with GCE-related values and themes. Specific and relevant values and areas identified include empathy, critical thinking, fairness, care for the environment and preparation for the future. Some participants are keen to stress that oftentimes, younger children are underestimated in terms of their competency and capacity and “innately [have] a very strong sense of fairness” (Participant A), and “the greatest sense of justice of any of us” (Participant G).*

There were some references to forms of caution or resistance to GCE at early childhood level. One participant noted that:

*... sometimes they'll [parents and colleagues] say, “oh, children just need to be children. Don't worry about their culture”. And it's not that I'm worried about culture, I want [you] to know. (Participant I)*

Another participant who works with student educators notes some concern amongst her students relating to causing anxiety for younger children. However, having engaged with children on the theme of climate and caring for our environment, they noted that student teachers acknowledged that:

*... they [children] need to know this, this is real, it's not disappearing, it's not going away. Children have to learn to cope with it and deal with it. (Participant J)*

Whilst one participant reported frustration with an ongoing focus on literacy and numeracy, a number of participants indicated a change or move in a direction towards more GCE-related themes.

*I think there definitely is a move in that direction. You know what I mean? I think sort of because I've been around in the field of early years for quite some time. I certainly noted within the last sort of five years, in particular, there seems to be that move in a change in mindset, and certainly I do think post-COVID, there's a greater interest, particularly in the whole field of outdoors and that kind of thing, respecting your environment, looking after your environment, caring for your environment. So I think there's a shift in thinking there.*  
(Participant H)

The concept of children as citizens or child agency also appears in this context, with two participants referring to the contributions young children can make. One talked about GCE as an important part of “children’s formation, but also part of their contribution” (Participant F). Another, a practitioner, spoke about the actions of one child after a trip to the beach:

*But even just to model that empathy with young children, they're so empathetic at a young age. I mean, we were talking about beach school earlier on. We had one particular experience where the person from the Atlanta aquarium was talking about rubbish and how it's harmful to sealife, you know? So this little child really took it to heart and was very concerned that, you know, that the litter would be harming the animals and the creatures. So it stuck with her – she brought it back to the pre-school after that, she talked about it with her parents, and she's only three, you know? So I think we underestimate how competent and capable young children are, so definitely GCE is very important, yeah, for sure.* (Participant A)

Participant B suggested that as a “really important” practice, GCE was multidimensional:

*I think Global Citizenship, as I see it in practice, relates to values. Relates to the skill of the educator to make connections with and for the child. It is, of course, around rights, but it is also around concepts such as caring. Because, you know, back to the kind of Bruner stuff of the spiral curriculum, everything starts somewhere at the beginning, and the beginning point is care, in my words, in my view.*

Through such approaches, Participant B felt that children were supported to develop key knowledge, skills and attitudes:

*So we try not to limit children by their age and stage, because so much is about the context and the pedagogical approach that's used that enables them to become little enquirers and carers of the future.*

## 5.5 Global citizenship education in action

Participants drew on a range of examples to illustrate GCE-related themes and concepts in action at early childhood education level. In some cases, explicit connections were made between particular ECE practices and GCE, and in other cases, examples of ECE practice that, although connected to GCE, may not be understood as explicitly so by practitioners or providers. For example, Participant F reported that ECE was already “fertile ground” for GCE and indicated that there existed a raised consciousness and professionalism within ECE that had a “kind of awareness, you know, across all kinds of [things], you know, about family units, family types, you know, children’s beliefs, children’s orientation”. They further asserted that:

*Yeah, it’s not necessarily identified in simple ways, global citizen information. But, the concept of citizenship, you know, is ... I would say in some ways it’s almost more well-established in early childhood than in primary school, which is still a very authoritarian and hierarchical kind of structure. I think the new primary curriculum framework has shifted that considerably.*

From our analysis of all the examples drawn from ECE practice, four particular pillars were most prevalent. They are children’s rights, cultural diversity and inclusion, local and global citizenship, and sustainability. We now present each of these in turn.

### 5.5.1 Children’s rights and participation in ECE

Children’s rights and the concept of children as agentic rights holders was a very strong theme that emerged in participant contributions relating to GCE in action. Across the interviews, participants drew on examples from curriculum and practice to illustrate how this theme is conceptualised and practised on a day-to-day basis, by both ECE policy informants and ECE practitioners. In this first example below, the participant discussed how ECE practice had developed to provide children with greater opportunities to lead their own learning, and make decisions about activities within their setting.

*As opposed to us deciding at the beginning of the week or the beginning of the month, here’s what we’re doing, kids, this is what we’re going to [do]. We’re going to do this beautiful flower for Mummy, for Mother’s Day and everyone will go home with the same one. And we used to do that in the past. You’d have your lovely template done up and you’d have them already. And you’d even have the petals all cut out, it’d take you ages at night, and you’d have your glue and everybody would do it and if one did it upside down, oh no, you may take that off, turn it this way. That’s all gone. Now we just say, we’ve a children’s meeting, and we say, what would you like to do? For example, we’d a children’s meeting for Father’s Day this year. And the list, just stop. You know, anything from tractors to a pear with eyes – “Daddy loves pears.” How does someone put a pair of eyes on a pear? (Participant 1)*

Another participant reflected on the centrality of child agency to their ECE practice:

*Where we would see it, and this is something that has happened with the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum. You know, we published the primary curriculum framework. And one of the things that's very important to us there is child agency. And we would see that as significant in terms of citizenship, global citizenship ... Because what it is, one of the things that we're very clear about in [the] curriculum and certainly particularly so in relation to Aistear, is that it's a time of being and of becoming, but it's a time of being. (Participant E)*

Here, children's agency, or capacity to act, as guaranteed in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), is associated with both citizenship and global citizenship. However, a number of participants also indicated the need to further conceptualise both citizenship and global citizenship within the context of early childhood education. Regarding global citizenship, one participant asserted that it is not a "distinct concept" within *Aistear*, despite citizenship being well developed. They also recognised the need to ensure that future practice examines what global citizenship means for young children today. One current gap they identified is inclusion and diversity, stating that:

*And interestingly, in terms of the change, everybody acknowledged what you just mentioned there – the fact that, in terms of seeing children, the youngest children, birth to six, as citizens, they're saying, yes, that's there. But it needs to be enhanced because we need to be an awful lot clearer about inclusion and diversity. (Participant E)*

Moreover this participant and another alluded to tensions between the age of children in ECE contexts, and the level of citizenship education that should be provided:

*Well, we don't want, you know, we don't want them to know about it that [young], you know, you don't want to put that pressure on them so young. And they're, like, they're so ... I would find that teachers would try to keep to the happier, clappier side of things when they're in junior and senior infants, understandably so. (Participant C)*

Here, the question of whether younger children possess the cognitive and/or emotional capacity to deal with complex and potentially sensitive issues is raised. With a slightly different focus, participant E drew attention to a current debate regarding rights and responsibilities and how responsibilities can be conceptualised for young children. They indicated that issues of fairness may be one possible avenue but that further development and consultation with young children is needed in this area.

Furthermore, and of particular relevance to GCE, a number of participants noted the need for approaches to be child-led and to start with both the interests and the experience of the child. Within an ECE context, this includes a playful approach to learning and starting with a personal understanding of self, my family and my place. One participant stressed the importance of this:

*And I suppose, yeah, again the other thing which I suppose is what I would want to push is just children seeing their own agency. That it's not that idea of when I grow up, I will help the world by, kind of like, well, you know, what can you do now? What can you do for your community now? (Participant G)*

Here the idea of children being citizens, rather than children becoming citizens is brought to the fore. Another participant spoke specifically about how ECE relates to GCE within the concept of children's agency. They stated:

*So, when we look at issues of citizenship, global citizenship, we need to say, "what will a child experience now?" So, if we look at children having rights, if we look at issues to do with fairness, which is very important to small children, and the right to be listened to and heard, where, conceptually, we would position all of that is in the idea of agency. And we are using that language explicitly as a way of capturing issues to do with citizenship generally, but increasingly, I would say, global citizenship. Because we see how children live their lives now. They live in a global world and we are referencing the language of global citizenship ... We had a debate recently with our partners around the table where people were looking at, you know, is it enough, you know, can you just say citizenship now? Given that we have so many children for whom maybe an older version of citizenship is no longer relevant. Where, in a real sense, where the global, for example, crops up is in language diversity, in a child's entitlement, and their right to be able to speak their mother tongue and to have their mother tongue acknowledged in their setting, to be able to tell their own story of their family's journey, perhaps. So, I'm kind of going off on a tangent, but you can [see]— where we would put all [of that], where we would really see all of that and try to conceptualise it so that it is built into all of this, is in this idea of child agency. (Participant E)*

This reflection makes reference to the global nature of children's lives, e.g., through language and migration, and in doing so calls to question certain approaches which focus on a particular version of 'the local'. The scope of young children's participation is also important within the context of the next theme – community.

### **5.5.2 Local and global communities**

Global citizenship education practice, in relation to local or global issues, primarily stems from participant insistence that any approach or topic explored in ECE must be rooted in the lived experience of young children. One example of this is a participant's description of exploring the concept of injustice with infant classes:

*And, I suppose, kind of that whole concept of injustice from the very roots, like, is it fair? Is it fair for me? Is it fair for you? You know, kind of role playing those things and in Aistear, when you're doing, say, dramatic play or a small world and so on. Within the play time, integrated curriculum time, is just that most basic understanding of "is this fair? Is that fair?" Why is it not kind of drawing them out and getting them to articulate that? And giving them the language to say, well, you know, why is it not fair? And, I suppose, problem solving is one of the biggest areas within play and play methodology, and giving the time to children to figure out if something is fair or unfair, just really at its root. (Participant G)*

In addition, a number of participants spoke to the local community in which children live and go to pre-school, and of the value of drawing on those experiences as a starting point that can then extend further. For example, one participant suggested:

*I think the lived experience of children, we probably need to value more, you know? Even if it's something [like], you know, those families in Clonmel who live next to the river that now floods, and it didn't use to before. You know, those farming families along the banks of the Shannon River and the devastation flooding has caused there. I think we can look for examples in our own country as well. You know, where even the debate around do we or do we not want wind turbines? Have we spoken to the farmers who have them on their farms? And, you know, I think the lived experience, I think, we really need to tap into. (Participant D)*

Another described how local connections can resonate strongly with younger children:

*And I think probably every school does have its own global community. You know, if parents are involved and so on, like I always found when I had the junior classes, that that was the thing that inspired them the most: seeing someone's aunty coming in who was an architect, seeing someone's granddad come who was a farmer, learning about Mexico from someone who's come from Mexico. And they were fairly random now, to be honest, but I just think, whatever people have to share, I think that's the most valuable to the kids in the room and maybe what's going to resonate more than a set piece about, you know, some fictional person across the world. I think, you know, having real-life connections and local connections that kind of relay it out, is, I think, more useful. (Participant G)*

### 5.5.3 Cultural inclusion and diversity

The cultural diversification of both Irish society and ECE settings emerged as a strong contextual example of GCE in action. Several participants spoke about the changing profile of children in ECE settings and also cultural changes taking place within children's lived experiences.

*And more recently, particularly in the last, but over a number of, years, the diversification of, you know, Ireland becoming a much more diverse, multicultural society, and the impact of that. And people literally seeing, you know, children from different cultures, different backgrounds, different religions, different customs, you know, appearing in preschool and being global citizens, you know? (Participant F)*

From an analysis of participant contributions, there is an overall sense that this cultural diversity will contribute significantly to the enhanced *Aistear* framework and also extend the global nature of day-to-day encounters in ECE settings. Participants also drew on examples of education related to cultural diversity they had observed or practised themselves across a range of areas, such as language diversity, cultural and religious practices, celebrations and festivals, ways of living and food. One participant observed:

*And I have, I've been around quite a number of settings in the South as a result of this ECCE project and you do see examples of good practice, you know what I mean? There's no doubt about that. Even in terms of the whole issue of diversity and whatever, you know. I see even on display boards and whatever, you know, maps of the world and, yes, children as young as three aren't going to have an idea of what a map is, and all of that is concerned, but even just, you know, that those conversations are being had. (Participant H)*

Another participant shared an example from their own setting:

*I had Urdu, a child from Pakistan with Urdu. And I said, "I'm so interested. Please come in and show us, even to show us the alphabet to show the other children. You see, we have A B C." This is how they write it and as well they would go from right to left. And things like that. (Participant I)*

One specific example of global citizenship education in ECE practice that a number of participants highlighted is the use of story as an appropriate, child-friendly and impactful approach. One participant stated that:

*And I remember we brought a dad in and he had a book ... in their language, but they didn't understand the language. And he was reading the story, but he was showing the pictures and they got the gist of it, you know, which was amazing. (Participant I)*

Another participant described how they used story in infant classes to explore cultural diversity and inclusion:

*Storyline Online was a nice one for, kind of, exploring books from different cultures or different perspectives and things like that, and getting maybe a different lens on, kind of, similar stories. You know, if everybody's talking about Granny's house then you're kind of looking at Granny's house in different cultures and, you know, special times and celebrations and different cultures and looking at the same very childlike topics and themes and ideas, but from different perspectives around the world. And probably that idea of interculturalism more so than multiculturalism and kind of seeing, well, what are the connections, first of all, that we have with other people and why should we empathise with them? Well, because we see that they have the same hopes, dreams, tastes, likes, dislikes as us.*

*In the INTO [Irish National Teachers' Organisation] magazines, there were lists of better books and citizenship books and things based on identity and family makeup and things like that. (Participant G)*

However, a number of contributions from participants indicate that although there are examples of how cultural diversity and inclusion are connected to GCE and central to ECE and GCE, the area requires further development. One participant asserted that:



*So I think there's good practice in that direction, but again, it needs to be further developed, but I do feel the area of diversity is definitely an area that we just haven't got sorted as yet. There's plenty of more work to be done there. (Participant H)*

And another indicated that:

*So, that type of thing is, you know – I've learned as I go along – and it's all about communication and taking the funds of knowledge from their family and putting it to use. So that you're not just sitting in the corner, you're Mohammed and you're there and whatever, you know? It's much more than that. And often parents look at you and go, "are you actually interested?" Because an awful lot, they don't really go into it, delve into it that much. It's more like tick a box, you know? And maybe learn a couple of words. It's much more than that. (Participant I)*

#### **5.5.4 Environment and sustainability**

Global citizenship education practice in relation to sustainability, climate change or the environment in early childhood education is a strong theme across participant interviews. A number of participants allude to some policy developments and initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the Green Flags initiatives. These examples are drawn on as frames that are increasingly informing ECE contexts. For example, one participant stated that:

*Well, the other point is that Aistear is currently being updated ... And that specifically includes references to sustainability and everybody's, I suppose, responsibility for guardianship of the planet, starting with babies and children, and equality and inclusion and, you know, recognition ... And the material, I suppose, the backup material, the practise guidance that is in development now, but it will come with that, is very strongly rooted in social justice, fairness and sustainability. (Participant F)*

Another thread within this theme is the role of outdoor education within ECE, particularly as it relates to sustainability-related themes. One participant asserted that it was the 'ultimate' approach for sustainability-related education, while a number identified the theme of caring for the environment and the importance and benefit of children connecting with nature. Moreover, they identify outdoor education as good practice and increasingly common.

*In terms of making children more aware of the wider climate and all of that, being more eco-friendly and whatever, I do feel that the work that we're doing in the field of outdoor play and outdoor learning is particularly helpful in that regard, and I've seen across early years practice some excellent examples of good practice there in terms of, you know, in the outdoors, using a water bucket and that kind of thing. The garden patches, you know what I mean? All of those sorts of things making children more aware, looking after their bug hotels, that kind of thing. All of that excellent practice in the outdoors. (Participant H)*



Participants also offer other specific and wide-ranging examples from practice that are connected to sustainability. One participant is involved in the development of a resource based on the SDGs for early childhood education. Other examples include gardening, beach tidy-ups, observing animals, building bird baths from recycled materials and cooking outdoors. One participant described in more detail some of their work with children:

*... the children led us into the idea of environmentalism and taking care of the environment and we talked a lot about, like, what things would you like to change in your world or what could you change or where do you have agency and where can you help? ... They all wanted to help the animals and the fish and the birds and the bees and we came up with an action plan of, like, well, what can you do at home to help? Well, what can you do at school to help? Or what can you do in the wider community to help? And, kind of, mapping those things out with the kids and for the kids and then taking action, showing the kids then that they can have an impact on their world. And, you know, it can be as simple as watering the strawberries and feeding the fish and, you know. But then you can have a wider impact, like, there was a project where people would go to the beach some weekend and they would see how many pieces of litter they could pick up and they would, kind of, carry the same thing, trying to become more global. Kind of from the local to the global. So, I suppose that was the area that the children had the most interest in. (Participant G)*

Other participants also reported positive responses and interest from both children and student teachers to sustainability-related education. One stated:

*But, you know, so the students really ran with that [module on Sustainability and Climate Change across primary schools]. So we had, for example, bees, we had littering, pollution in the ocean, oil spills was a nice focus. I've just finished marking, actually, the student essays. So we got them to do a reflective account of sustainability, climate change in the primary school. And actually their arguments would convince a lot of people. The students were totally motivated. (Participant J)*

It should also be noted that some participants indicated that sustainability-related practices are not yet mainstream and in some cases, not yet in practice. For example:

**Interviewer:** Or is there another example that you've come across?

**Participant I:** Now, you mean injustice or just children from a different nationality?

**Interviewer:** It can be broader, yes, it could be in relation to human rights or sustainability or climate change or diversity, yeah.

**Participant I:** Yeah, I'd have to see. All the other ones, I don't have examples, like climate change, no. (Participant I)

For participant B, this environmental or sustainability focus could be developed through enquiry-based or project-based approaches:

*They have taken the topic of caring for the Earth over almost a year, right? Now, like all good settings, they begin their inquiries from the interests of the children. The educators are skilled to pick up those interests and to harness them and, in a way, maybe through an inquiry-based curriculum, or a project-based approach, to take those ideas.*

Participant B recognised that although similar practices may happen in a variety of settings, the depth to which practitioners are supporting children's learning may vary: "So they're small things that happen in lots of settings, they're not unusual. But you have extraordinary things then in small pockets of services."

## 5.6 Factors determining the levels and quality of GCE in ECE

Participants identified a range of different factors which shape the provision of global citizenship education in early childhood education: investment, policy and system coherence, stakeholder attitudes, mainstreaming GCE, and professional learning. Where each of these levers were activated positively, GCE provision in ECE was perceived to have the greater chance of success. Where these factors were not addressed, barriers to effective GCE in ECE settings appeared.

A number of participants identified issues related to practitioner pay and underpay, and a lack of financial support or recognition for training. The closure of many private services was perceived as a significant challenge for the ECE sector, and subsequently investment was considered as an important lever shaping any possible integration of GCE within this space.

Elsewhere the fragmented nature of the sector and policy and system coherence was perceived to shape the quality of provision and any possible engagement with GCE. One participant suggested that the splintering effect can create duplication, a feeling of too many agencies which then leads to difficulties for services to identify the support they need. Another stated that "it's a complex area and it's an area with loads of different stuff going on, so trying to knit it all together is a challenge as well" (Participant E).

In addition, whilst all participants felt that recent policy developments created opportunities and possibilities for ECE, one participant cautioned that given the extent of policy change in recent times, there is a risk of policy overload. They stated:

*Yeah. So, I suppose, the first thing that I would say, as I kind of mentioned, was there is – there has been, there is, and there is planned to be – significant policy changes in early childhood. So, I suppose, it's the, we'll say, the scope, the headspace, the ability to engage with yet another process ... So, I suppose there's a sense in early childhood of policy overload ... But most of the providers are, you know, two or three people and they employ some staff and they're self-employed and they're running a business, and they're demented, you know? So, I think, you know, if it can be, I think the more it can be tied into or aligned with the existing structures and developments, you know, the more successful it's going to be. As I said, I do think there's an openness, there's an interest, there would be a hunger for good resources. But there is, there is a risk, I suppose, of just overload. (Participant F)*

Secondly, whilst many indicated a general interest in and openness to GCE-related issues, participants also reported some concerns or even resistance to GCE in ECE. These stakeholder attitudes were perceived to influence the extent to which GCE would be enacted in ECE settings. For example, the extract below raises questions around the extent to which GCE is perceived as appropriate for young children:

**Participant C:** And I think – you probably agree [Participant D] – that [as] teachers, especially at that early age, we shy away from those more, those topics; I suppose, you fear that they're so young.

**Participant D:** Riskier, yeah.

**Participant C:** Yeah. Well, we don't want, you know, we don't want them to know about it that, you know, you don't want to put that pressure on them so young. And they're, like, they're so ... I would find that teachers would try to keep to the happier, clappier side of things when they're in junior and senior infants, understandably so.

Participant E also asserted the need for global citizenship education in ECE to avoid starting in the wrong place. They stated:

*I think that one of the things that I would be very wary of here, because [of] working with young children – and this is something that Aistear seeks to do, we're very clear about [this] – is that you start with the child. So, one of the risks with a focus on global citizenship ... or a focus on education for sustainable development, is that you're starting in the wrong place. So, one of the things that needs to happen, that I would consider to be really important, is that this discussion about global citizenship not start with global citizenship. That it starts with our children. (Participant E)*

There was also recognition that other actors' attitudes towards GCE were important to consider. A number of participants also identified the need to address the mindsets of both educators and parents, and to support consideration of the value of GCE in ECE. Most participants asserted that oftentimes, parents need to be communicated with, so that they understand and support what services are doing. In addition, two examples of resistance to GCE-related issues are reported below:

*Or I have often heard services saying as well, you know, "well, we always did Mary and Joseph for Christmas. So that's what we do. You know, to hell with ..." But another example is that you would need to stop and think, you know. This is what we do because we're an Irish, sort of, service. But are we facilitating everybody? Is everybody happy with what we're doing? So we would always stop and think, well, we wouldn't have really done that because it wouldn't really have occurred to us. (Participant I)*

*We did have one student come back who said – they had to find their own school to teach the [sustainability and climate change] lessons to them – and he went to one school and the principal took him in and tore him to pieces. "Why is [educational establishment] teaching about this? This is a load of nonsense. It's a myth. They told me whenever I would be an adult that we'd all be in boats because the whole place would have been flooded. It's a load of nonsense. Why is that a priority in [educational establishment]?" But that's one, only one. (Participant G)*

In some cases, educators may not be aware of the broader aims towards which they are contributing. As Participant B described: “The gap, the shortfall there is that educators are not always conscious of the bigger picture that they are contributing to”. There was also recognition that children themselves may have attitudes which should be considered in the planning of ECE-based GCE. For example, while many participants indicated that young children are disposed to caring attitudes, one participant suggested that developing empathy among young children can be difficult at times. They stated:

*Developing that sense of empathy can be very difficult. Particularly, I think, in today’s world. We have seen a change in the junior infant landing in primary schools. Simple things like, you know, sharing, not winning the game, all those kinds of things are obstacles which have to be overcome. (Participant C)*

Thirdly, participants identified challenges in relation to mainstreaming and sustaining GCE in ECE. Whilst several examples of good practice were provided over the course of the ten interviews, a number of participants also indicated that these only represented ‘pockets’ of good practice, as opposed to being widespread. One participant described how in one school, enthusiasm or change of GCE-related work can vary significantly. As a result, they felt that whole school change remained a challenge:

*And some absolutely do, and [for] some that’s their own personal, you know, that’s their own personal agenda and they’re amazing at it and, you know, I work with some of them. But for a lot of older teachers, it’s just, like, that’s not, you know, where we’re at. And I think that’s difficult. And then it’s difficult as well to implement major critical changes when people are just less enthusiastic. So I think that’s probably one of the major challenges, is getting everybody on the same page and for kids going through from one class to the next that there is that continuity for them. (Participant G)*

Another participant suggested that services and the sector more widely can operate in silos and that the lack of a centralised body or aspect made collaboration difficult and limited. They stated:

*I do feel that, particularly across Ireland, we tend to work in our own wee silos and there’s not enough collaboration and sort of a central body looking after all of this work and again, I do feel that centralised aspect could really make a difference and, again, make it more powerful, and that it’s something that’s central on the agenda of policymakers. (Participant H)*

In addition, a number of participants described how certain projects or initiatives can start and finish, without reaching the entire school or service. One participant indicated that funding cuts resulted in the discontinuation of programmes, while another stated that:

*So many initiatives start and finish and they kind of – I guess it’s important to have certain things that introduce novelty. Whether it’s kind of like Irish Aid competitions and things like that and, I suppose, they do stir things up for a length of time. But it’s hard to know what can be sustained throughout the year without adding to a teacher’s load and thinking of suggesting to teachers, “okay, now you’ve got to also add this, this and this”. (Participant G)*

Importantly, several participants also recognised that there remain children and communities in Ireland who are hard to reach within ECE. They recognised gaps in provision and, indeed, a failure to reach parents and children living in disadvantaged contexts.

Fourthly, a number of participants indicated that for GCE to be enhanced in ECE, increased knowledge and awareness was necessary and that any developments or approach should consider communications and coherence.

We will now consider the role of formation programmes and professional learning in supporting early childhood educators.

### 5.6.1 Formation programmes and professional learning

A number of participants referred to the importance of formation programmes as spaces which could offer the opportunity to engage with studies of early childhood education and primary student teachers in the areas of GCE. Participants reported emerging practice within this area related to GCE, particularly around sustainability. This included considerations of values-based practice, leadership and inclusive practice. Participants also highlighted formation or undergraduate programmes as one way of universalising training and suggested integrating a module into early childhood education degrees:

*... because that's the kind of universal point as opposed to, you know, depending on, you know, Margaret to be motivated enough to go off on a Tuesday night and do an extra module somewhere, you know? So, I mean to get it built into the degree programmes. (Participant F)*

Another participant highlighted the role that students of early childhood education can play while undertaking placement. They spoke about a 'co-teaching' approach, where initial teacher education and CPD are occurring at the same time. This approach to co-teaching seeks to draw on the expertise of both the classroom teacher and the student teacher. Through this approach, student teachers can bring expertise related to a curriculum area or teaching pedagogy, while the classroom teacher brings a range of other expertise and experience. The participant reported very positive outcomes arising from this approach, both for student teacher confidence, but also changes in practice for the classroom teacher. Furthermore, they argue that students are overlooked in terms of their contributions to the professional development of teachers.

*And we find the impact of that huge for teachers in school because it's in their classroom. It's not costing them any time. It's with the children they are with. Someone else, a student, an expert, is bringing science resources, is bringing maybe ideas and doing it with them. So, the student brings – not always, they're not always science experts – but they're bringing the science knowledge and the science ideas. The teacher is bringing the classroom expertise. And together then, they deliver these activities and we have found that so many more teachers continue science after having seen how easy it is to do and actually how valuable it is for the children. So for me, student teachers is something that's always hugely overlooked, but they are a resource there who are always there, who are always out in schools and who very often actually are quite interested in global citizenship education. (Participant J)*

Funding for such formation programmes was viewed as imperative to ensure the potential of those open to undertaking such qualifications is realised.

*So, you know, we need investment at that university level, if that's the way that they want to proceed with it. But I do see value in that because the students this year said – I've just finished reading their essays – their feedback has been unbelievable and they are motivated.*  
(Participant J)

Participant B suggested that key challenges to educators included “CPD and time”. More specifically:

*We need to have Aistear and Síolta, which are the two frameworks, we need to have them resourced. We need to have them resourced with CPD that is relevant and local to enable these kind of sustainability pieces, the piece that's been identified as a gap. To have that meaningfully connected with educators. So, we need more CPD or funding or possibilities for that.*

Several participants were explicit as to the importance of professional learning to strengthen educational practice. For example:

*Yeah, I think that's a key thing, personally. The supports that are required are more knowledge, more information, more recognition, exactly, for the CPD that the educators do. But that, yeah, the top thing for me is more knowledge.* (Participant A)

Participants also shared ideas about how education programmes should be formulated. For example, a number of participants indicated that any response or support needed to be consistent, contextualised, coordinated, coherent and integrated into existing systems, programmes, networks and bodies. The need for specific provision was identified:

*If early years or early childhood isn't addressed specifically, what happens is this danger of a watered-down primary version coming and that's not applicable and that is dangerous, because we are looking at children at a different stage who would benefit from different kinds of learning, active hands-on learning. And that's not to say that isn't relevant, it's highly relevant for other sector sections, but particularly at early childhood level.* (Participant B)

Another participant, who had recently been involved in consultation with children, indicated that responding to needs was a balancing act that requires a clear pathway for all. Supports needed to balance the need for CPD with the existing workload but also with appropriate initiatives. For example, professional learning more recently may have had to address the COVID pandemic, and a recognised anxiety amongst children, who were “very scared during the pandemic” and felt “the world is ending”. Within this context, GCE supports need to be child-centred and appropriate for the child and context.

Interestingly, one participant identified the need for a communication strategy as a starting point. Another stressed the need to ensure that any support is well-researched and evidence-informed, so as to avoid it being seen as “just somebody’s particular hobby horse” (Participant D). They added:

*I think a central repository of resources is also useful. Something along the lines of what [the] NCCA has been doing with the Maths toolkit, the RSE [Relationships and Sexual Education] toolkit, that are held by a trusted partner that we know if we’re going to the NCCA or whoever, to the department, or to Oide, or to Scoilnet, or whoever. That it is a trusted partner, that everything there is moderated, that it is something that teachers know, “I will get good information here. I will get good resources here. I will get good back up here.” (Participant D)*

One participant spoke about an attitude that is needed for GCE and for the need for time, time “to come together as a staff and to develop those ideas” (Participant G). Again, a number of participants spoke about funding and investment in such approaches.

Participants identified several opportunities to extend and enhance professional development for GCE in ECE. There were also several references to the benefits of CPD to inform and change mindsets and practice and for the potential for this type of support to be transformative. Challenges were also highlighted and include a lack of funding and recognition for professional development, an overly localised reality that relies on the interest or passion of one educator, a lack of a national, coherent approach, and a sense of constant review, reform and change, with little space to critically think or reflect on the meaning of the policy initiatives for a service or classroom. For example, Participant B noted that CPD should be incentivised:

*What educators need is CPD that suits them. They’re very busy, they’re low paid, they’re not well paid. They need to be incentivised to engage with the CPD and the CPD by its very nature, needs to be kind of embedded in what they do.*

A number of participants also spoke about professional development courses that they are aware of or participated in. Many of these are related to diversity and inclusion. One professional development programme, in particular, was named and described by a number of participants as an example of encompassing very good practice approaches – AIM (the Access & Inclusion Model under the ECCE programme). Participant reports of the programme demonstrate key elements that contribute to its benefits and positive impact. These include piloting of training approaches and materials, a consortium or partnership approach in delivery, a national reach, training for practitioners but also leaders, a website with a suite of supports and resources and, finally, funding and recognition by means of accreditation for those who participate. One participant described it as a programme that is “sector-wide, and it was done by the city and county childcare committees, who are distributed throughout the country” (Participant F), while another reported that the programme is “brilliant. Amazing ideas from that. And very easy. I found it easier than the degree because it was level 6, which was a bit easier, but also, the lecturers, they just spoke more plain English, you know? And explained things and it really got you thinking ... They were amazing. And today, now, they’re still there as a network.” (Participant I)



This participant referenced the notion of ongoing support on a number of occasions. They spoke about the need for refresher and follow-up workshops and the benefit of coming together to meet other practitioners in similar situations, to share and support each other. They stated:

*Yes, I have definitely noticed, yes. And I suppose the way I would notice really is when you attend workshops and follow-up workshops. Because obviously you're all in it and you talk, but then when you meet people again later on, and they talk about what they're doing, the changes they're making in their services to accommodate diversity and inclusion, equality, then you do see that we're all kind of singing from the same hymn sheet. Which is brilliant, that we are interested. (Participant I)*

Finally, one participant suggested that GCE practitioners and providers should attend, not only to the design and delivery of professional development to enhance GCE in ECE, but also to the need to "influence then what kind of CPD, to make sure that the CPD includes the concept [of GCE] ... this would be very important" (Participant C). In particular, they identified curriculum developers and makers as key actors in this area. They asserted that this would support consistent and national roll out.

### **5.6.2 Opportunities for future professional learning**

All participants were asked directly to identify opportunities for the enhancement of GCE in ECE. An analysis of their contributions here indicates an expansive range centred around a number of core areas. Firstly, a number of participants indicated an openness, interest and readiness at ECE level to GCE-related themes. They reiterated that some very good examples already exist and suggested that this could be one starting point. At a national level, many identified opportunities that are expected to accompany the roll out of the revised *Aistear* curriculum framework and its enhancement, focused on areas such as diversity, inclusion and sustainability. A number of participants suggested that a suite of materials, toolkits and resources could be developed to accompany this roll out. Many pointed to the time-bound nature of these developments given that the roll out is expected to take place within the next eighteen months to two years.

*Yeah, updating Aistear definitely. Like, it's actually written all over it. And there will be, so, I mean, some kind of engagement or collaboration with the NCCA. Because they will be building an online toolkit to resource the implementation of Aistear over the next, probably, two years. And you know, resources to support the implementation and practice. And they will probably be working closely with people like all of the, I suppose, the support agencies. So, Early Childhood Ireland, Better Start, the CCCs, who are all, you know, the people who do the, kind of, on the ground CPD. (Participant F)*

Continuous professional development was also identified as a possible avenue through which to integrate GCE further into ECE. A number of participants alluded to examples relating to communities of practice and the need to provide practitioners with opportunities to share and support each other. Others suggested a 'train the trainers' approach. Within this, key bodies and networks were identified, particularly the county childcare committees. In addition, a number of participants suggested the possibility of developing a new training model, built around previous successful models such as the AIM and the LINC (Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years) programme. The Access and Inclusion Model was identified, in particular, as it was cross-departmental and very successful. The idea of the need for coherence and cross-departmental partnership was identified by a number of participants. They stressed the need to work with existing networks and structures which could provide good potential avenues for development.



The development of materials and guidelines is another possibility identified. One participant suggested that several resources already exist and that what was needed was a centralised point or one person in each setting or network who could curate the materials for others. Participant B perceived that the Green Flag programme had provided important avenues for the integration of GCE into ECE settings. Elsewhere, the *Aistear-Síolta* practice guide was presented as one model of good quality support materials from existing practice that could be adapted for GCE. It is an online resource and was developed in collaboration with the Department of Children and Better Start. Participant F described how it works:

*So, one of the things they do is they'd have an internationally, as I said, recognised expert who would, you know, describe their particular area of interest or topic. You know, it might be around children's brain development and the importance of attachment. And then they would have a piece of video from a service in Ireland that demonstrated how that was done in practice. But they've done some really good resources around that.*

In addition to CPD, formation programmes and degree courses are also identified as areas of possibility. Others spoke about the need to build contacts and visibility, in addition to a knowledge base.



# 6 Conclusion, implications and recommendations

Ireland has a growing population of half a million children under school age (CSO, 2016), which has clear implications for early childhood education as a critical period of learning and development in a child's life (OECD, 2015). Whilst significant opportunities to develop global citizenship education in early childhood spaces is increasingly recognised (e.g., French & McKenna, 2022), little is known about current practices, possibilities and challenges for such instruction at this educational level.

The scoping literature review in the first phase of this project has identified the importance and relevance of GCE for young children (Twigg et al., 2015), and reveals a number of central concepts which shape ECE in practice, including peace, justice and compassion, each expressed through human and environmental dimensions. Although conflict exists regarding the means by which young children may enact their citizenship, there are clear avenues for the development of content and pedagogical knowledge to support effective GCE practice within ECE settings.

The expert interviews conducted within the second phase of the project highlight the significant potential of ECE frameworks (Aistear, Síolta and the Primary School Curriculum) to support the extension of GCE in ECE settings. Furthermore, the study recognises that whilst fragmentation remains an issue within the early childhood education sector, there are important local, regional and national partnerships and networks through which evidence-based GCE practices can be developed. The interviews unearth pertinent examples and expressions of GCE in action within ECE settings, with case studies clustered around the pillars of children's rights, cultural inclusion and diversity, local and global communities, and sustainability. Each example represents viable avenues through which early childhood practitioners and policymakers could further develop the integration of GCE into ECE settings. Finally, this qualitative analysis also recognises a number of important levers which are perceived to either support or limit the implementation of GCE in ECE settings, namely, policy and system coherence, investment, educators' capacity, stakeholder attitudes, and professional learning opportunities and resources. There is a need for each aspect to be maximised in order for GCE provision in ECE to be enhanced, and the universal goals of education for global citizenship and sustainability to be met within the Irish context.

## 6.1 Recommendations for policy

- Pursue wider policy coherence in relation to the importance of global citizenship education as part of a lifelong educational experience, and specifically in relation to early childhood education.
- Develop evidence-based and theoretically grounded supports to deepen ECE practitioners' conceptualisations of babies, toddlers and young children's global citizenship within ECE.
- Recognise the depth of concepts such as peace, justice, care and compassion which can underpin ECE practices and form part of the foundation for global citizenship policies (Broadfoot & Pascal, 2020; Mokuria & Wandix-White, 2020; OECD, 2018; Salah, 2018).
- Build upon and contribute to existing ECE frameworks to further the advancement of child-centred, rights-based conceptualisations of global citizenship, for example, the roll out of an enhanced Aistear curriculum framework.
- Draw on local, indigenous experiences and perspectives, so localised wisdom in relation to GCE and sustainability practices come to the fore (Ritchie, 2015).
- Collaborate with existing partners and local, regional and national networks to further integrate GCE into a diversity of early childhood spaces.
- Ensure the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from the UN Agenda 2030 are meaningfully embedded into policy, and in particular Target 4.7 regarding education for sustainable development and global citizenship.
- Ensure a child-led approach to the development of GCE-related research, guidelines, materials and policies for ECE, specifically to ensure appropriate themes and approaches for the age range.
- Invest and ring-fence funding for this specific area as evidence in this report suggests further resourcing is required

## 6.2 Recommendations for practice

- Embed global citizenship education into children's everyday educational experiences, such as the arts (Chapman & O'Gorman, 2022) and nature play (Haas & Ashman, 2014), and in interactions with the environment and sustainability-related activities (Haas & Ashman, 2014; Hall, Linnea Howe, Roberts, Foster Shaffer & Williams, 2014; Mackey, 2012).
- Encourage and support young children to participate in decision-making processes concerning their environments, including decisions with a sustainability focus (Mackey, 2012).
- Develop GCE practices around the interrelatedness of care for others and the environment, while nurturing mutual relationships (Bryan-Silva, Sanders-Smith & Ya-Hsuan Yang, 2022).
- Continue to work with and involve parents and the wider community to develop GCE practices at ECE level. The engagement of parents and the wider community is a distant feature at ECE level that can be drawn on.

## 6.3 Recommendations for professional learning and development

- Embed specific global citizenship education content and pedagogical approaches in pre-service programmes to increase teachers' sense of self-preparedness and confidence in facilitating GCE in diverse ECE contexts (Damiani, 2020).
- Develop case studies of innovative GCE practice that illustrate how educators conceptualise and enact GCE in diverse ECE contexts.
- Engage educators with the research material, considering young children's engagement with, understanding of, and attitudes towards, GCE in ECE settings.
- Invest in GCE professional development for ECE practitioners through existing networks and by drawing on previous successful CPD models, for example, AIM and LINC, as highlighted in this report

## 6.4 Recommendations for research

- Pursue children's rights-based research approaches to investigate young children's understandings and practices of global citizenship, including their perspectives on underpinning ideas such as peace, compassion and justice.
- Deepen understanding of the relationship between the theory and practice underpinning GCE in diverse ECE settings.
- Explore the synergies and tensions between GCE approaches and potentially complementary ECE frameworks, such as play/playful pedagogy.

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