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Editorial

Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Care and Education (SDECCE)

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UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has suggested that 2015 may be the most important year since the founding of the UN seventy years ago. The third UN Conference on Financing for Development will be convened in Addis Ababa in July, the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in New York in September, where the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that are set to replace and build on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), will be agreed, and then there is the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in December. A reorientation of international efforts is taking place to address the common challenges to sustainability that are being caused by environmental degradation and climate change, biodiversity loss, the disruption and insecurities caused by natural disasters, conflict, and deep economic and social inequalities. Nicholas Stern, a Former World bank chief economist and UK government economic advisor, has described Climate Change as the 'greatest market failure in history', and he has estimated that in the absence of radical intervention, it could reduce global GDP by 20% by 2050 (cited in Sauven, 2015). Education for Sustainable Development is seen as fundamentally important in addressing these problems. As Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO has argued:

“Education is the most powerful path to sustainability. Economic and technological solutions, political regulations or financial incentives are not enough. We need a fundamental change in the way we think and act”. (Bokova, 2012)

Early Childhood Education has been recognised as a significant contributor to ESD (UNESCO, 2014). It is in the early years that many fundamental attitudes towards the environment, towards consumption and waste, and towards fairness and social justice are formed. Yet as we have come to the end of the UN Decade for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), and the MDGs (2000-2015), it is timely to reflect on how ESD has been

promoted in ECCE settings in the UK, and what might be the priorities for future development. It provides an opportunity to rethink some of our existing taken-for-granted practices, to consider them in light of our increasingly diverse communities and make them explicitly underpinned by a discourse of sustainability. This may even lead us to a revision of the fundamental purpose of ECCE for our communities.

Sustainable Development is widely understood as a form of development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). Sustainable Development may therefore be considered to represent an attempt to provide equity with, to, and for, future generations. This recognition serves to highlight the crucial role that might be played by early childhood professionals. As soon as we recognise that the world population group with the greatest stake in the future are children, that it is their future that depends upon ESD, then the matter becomes a citizenship issue and a question of rights. If we consider ourselves to be professional advocates for young children then we may also accept a special responsibility to promote the subject.

Curriculum debate and controversies are often concerned with questions regarding 'whose' knowledge is to be prioritised, and such considerations inevitably bring us to question the overall aims of education. From a conservative perspective these have typically been related to perceived economic requirements to improve the labour market and to make the country more competitive in terms of international trade. From a radically different perspective, parents and educators have often considered the child's freedom of individual self-expression to be the primary concern. For most of us in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) the most appropriate curriculum lies somewhere between these two extremes, with an emphasis upon providing holistic support for every child to achieve a fulfilling and successful life.. This begs the question of what future social, economic and environmental context we envisage children being fulfilled and successful within. In drawing together the papers in this edition of the journal we are arguing that ECCE has a dual role to play: in supporting the unique child, and in contributing towards the development of a more sustainable economic, environmental and social world. To do this, we need to engage in the debate about what a 'good life' is, and how we are preparing children for it. This will involve us in making choices about the most appropriate curriculum content and pedagogy. There is unlikely to be unanimity, particularly as some members of the local community, including practitioners, will want to hold on to certain practices, but we may need to challenge these, as well as be willing to accept and learn from cultural traditions that individual members of the community bring. The challenge for ECCE practitioners is that at times they may need to

take a stand and this may bring them into conflict with others. Having a vision for the setting of promoting a 'good life', underpinned by the principles and strands of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), can help to resolve such tricky issues.

The most fundamental principle informing the pedagogy of ESD in Early Childhood Education is that Young Children have the right to be consulted 'in all matters that affect' them (Article 12 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). Sustainable Development is essentially concerned with the future, and it is young children who have the greatest stake as citizens in that future. As Hart (1997) suggested, and Davies (2005) and others have shown, Young children are already competent, active agents and they are both capable, and required by circumstance, to engage with complex environmental and social issues that affect their lives.

A series of international meetings held in Gothenburg in 2008 resulted in the development of a set of specific recommendations (SWEDESD, 2008) for Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Education:

ACCESS FOR ALL TO A PROCESS OF LIFELONG LEARNING, recognising that the very provision of early childhood education that is the most pressing ESD issue in many countries around the world.

GENDER, highlighting the important contributions of women, and the need to improve the provisions of education for girls.

LEARNING FOR CHANGE, recognising that children are potential agents for change, and often influence their families and grandparents to change towards more sustainable thinking and behaviours

NETWORKS, ARENAS AND PARTNERSHIPS, the need to document and share successful practices.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO STRENGTHEN ESD ACROSS ALL, stressing the urgent need for capacity building

ESD IN CURRICULUM, promoting more integrated curriculum approaches.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE, the critical importance of all preschool individuals and settings examining their own 'ecological footprints'.

In terms of specific preschool pedagogy the guidance also highlighted the need for:

- *Building upon the everyday experience of children*
- *Curriculum integration and creativity*

- *Intergenerational problem solving and solution seeking*
- *Promotion of intercultural understanding and recognition of interdependency*
- *Involvement of the wider community*
- *Active citizenship in the early years*
- *The creation of cultures of sustainability*

These are very similar to the conclusions reached in the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living initiative (PERL, 2011) where they identify the core life skills needed for all ages which include the ability to:

- **reflect** on the purpose of life and on our personal and collective needs and actions
- **take responsibility** for one's own betterment and for the advancement of society as a whole
- **consult** in the public and private discourse on the nature, purpose and choices involved in human development
- **be creative** in envisioning and constructing alternative solutions to challenges
- **collaborate** with others through continual questioning, learning and taking action
- **commit to both short and long-term goals.**

(PERL, 2011)

What is required is therefore something along the lines of Freirean Praxis for children to be encouraged to reflect and take action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1974).

In recent years much work has been done around the world to develop early childhood ESD and young children in our preschools are increasingly encouraged to develop an emergent awareness of the nature and value of sustainable development. Strong foundations are being laid and positive dispositions are being developed towards the subject. In many of the most celebrated and successful pre-primary settings the transition from this early years play-based education to the more formal educational model of the school is supported through the development of small group project and topic work. Some of the most sophisticated of these approaches involve the children working together with the teacher in ESD collaborative problem solving enquiries and topic work. But this remains marginal to mainstream practice.

The SDECCE curriculum has three key components: environmental education, social/cultural education and economic education. Where problem solving enquiries are conducted these

three areas are combined to provide the basis for appropriately holistic solutions. There have long been elements of these subjects addressed in ECCE settings, but now we need to consider each of them specifically in the work that we do, and also to bring them together to explore the connections and commonalities in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the children's lives. It is when children are young that their views, attitudes and beliefs are most shaped by those around them, so ECCE has a key role to play in promoting and demonstrating sustainability in everyday practices and everyday lives. Some practitioners have been concerned that this might lead to a 'gloom and doom' agenda, but here we argue for a much more optimistic perspective where we see SDECCE as a means by which we can begin to create a more positive and fulfilling future for young children.

One major shift needed is that many practitioners currently see the Sustainable Development in terms of environmental education alone. Children in the UK have enjoyed a long history of engaging in a wide range of activities related to the environmental aspect of SDECCE, undertaking specific projects on recycling, for example, or creating a garden. These have increasingly included the 7 Rs of sustainable living: Refuse (don't buy it if you don't need it); Reduce; Repair, Reuse, Recycle, Respect and Reflect. Yet they often neglect any mention of wider environmental concerns, such energy saving, water conservation for example, and yet these offer ideal opportunities for practitioners to make the global links that will develop the children's understanding of their place in the wider world, and their responsibilities within it.

The social/cultural dimension of SDECCE, underpins much of the everyday practice in settings. It is implicit in the way we encourage children to relate to each other, manage conflict and appreciate diversity. However, it is often not recognised as a part of the sustainability agenda, even though it has potential to impact both at local and global levels.

The economic aspect of SDECCE is the area that is often the most difficult to promote in ECCE settings. Practitioners often consider the children too young to understand financial matters, or do not see the relevance of it, and they may also be concerned to avoid any controversy or difficulty that it may lead to, given the disparities of wealth in our communities and the prevailing discourse of consumerism. However, while it is unrealistic and inappropriate to expect young children to challenge unsustainable lifestyles, e.g. of their own family, it is important to recognise that they do at times comment on, or even put pressure on, the family over particular lifestyle issues. Young children have often been successful in the past in encouraging more effective waste sorting and have even been known to convince a parent to give up smoking. As with other aspects of SDECCE, carefully planned project

work based on relevant real-life experiences works well. Setting up fundraising for new equipment or shopping around for best price for the ingredients for cake-making are good examples. Alongside this is needed an explicit ethos of thrift, the constant challenging of over-consumption and waste, commenting on value for money, resistance to advertising and peer pressure, e.g. present buying for birthdays and special occasions, and encouraging the children to come to the setting dressed in working clothes rather than their best, to avoid unnecessary damage and unnecessary expenditure. Many of these themes are taken up in the papers included in this edition of the journal.

In their 'Pedagogy of Love' article, Alice and Paul Warwick draw on their considerable expertise in Early Years Education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to advocate a pedagogy of hope for young children. They argue powerfully that early years practitioners have a leading role in equipping children to live sustainable and caring lives, both in the present and in their futures. Using a six-dimensional butterfly model, Alice and Paul identify the centrality of values in ESD, such as care and compassion towards each other and the planet. They link this to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, demonstrating that ESD is not an addition to our current provision, but a reorientation of what we currently do well in our settings. Alice and Paul suggest a playful approach to SDECCE, underpinned by optimistic and appreciative activities, that encourage us to tackle what may be potentially difficult and depressing sustainability topics, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, in a way that builds on children's natural curiosity and sense of wonder of their world, and gives them ways to make a positive difference. They provide practical examples and a case study of a school to illustrate this approach and show us how to reorientate our pedagogy to place ECE for Sustainable Development at the heart of what we do.

In our 'Thinking global and acting local, and thinking local and acting global: Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Care and Education' paper, we identify the value and importance, of entering into international school links and partnerships, as well as potential pitfalls and dangers. We argue that the development of global citizenship and solidarity has become a priority in supporting SDECCE.

Coltman, Whitebread and Siraj-Blatchford's paper: 'ESD, Enterprise, and the development of social entrepreneurs in the Early Years' provides guidance and examples of the kind of projects that are being carried out with young children to develop their knowledge and understanding on the economy. A few years ago, proposals were put forward to introduce more economics education, and especially education about credit, to children from the age of five onwards. There is a wide consensus that this is an area of the curriculum that has been neglected even if there are different motivations for this awareness. In this paper the projects show that the capabilities of children in early childhood are often underestimated.

Luff, Miles and Wangui's report on a project concerned with Bat Conservation in the UK and Kenya provides an illustration of the OMEP UK-Kenya preschool partnership that is referred to in the previous paper. The project was typical of an integrated topic approach to an ESD theme that was applied across the full curriculum of the preschools. This is followed by Jan Georgeson's article on 'Leading for Sustainability', in which she considers the key aspects of resources, curriculum and people in promoting an ethos of sustainability in Early Years settings. She places the emphasis on the principles of sustainability in terms of an ethics of care and social responsibility. When considering sustainable resourcing, Jan identifies some potential conflicts that can arise between good early years practice and sustainability, such as free-flow play and energy conservation. These are excellent examples of issues that can promote critical discussion with the children and the practitioners, leading to changes in taken for granted behaviours and in everyone taking responsibility for sustainability. As early years practitioners, we all spend a lot of time supporting children in taking turns, in encouraging them to share and be fair to each other. Jan highlights the way this links to the key principles of sustainability – sufficiency, fairness and consideration. It illustrates again that aspects of Education for Sustainable Development are already embedded in our early years settings, but are not recognized as such. Reorienting our ethos and practice in such fundamental ways requires sustainable leadership and Jan demonstrates in this article how the principles of sustainability need to underpin staff relationships and professional development. She makes the significant point that leaders have a responsibility to develop the early years workforce not just for their local community but as global citizens and campaigners for children's rights internationally. She acknowledges that developing such an ethos of sustainability can take time and effort from all involved, but it will bring benefits to the children and the practitioners, both now and in the future.

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