Peace Education and Sustainability

John Siraj-Blatchford discusses Maria Montessori’s views on interdependence and solidarity and their continuing relevance today.

“Everyone talks about peace but no one educates for peace. In this world, they educate for competition, and competition is the beginning of any war. When educating to cooperate and owe each other solidarity, that day we will be educating for peace.”

(Maria Montessori)

In a Stanford University conference commemorating the work of Martin Luther King, Amartya Sen (2008), the Nobel prize-winning Indian economist and philosopher, discussed the role of King and Mahatma Gandhi in their calls for social reform through peaceful protest. While Sen said that he considered himself an atheist, he argued that religion had played a large part in social reform, and he illustrated his argument with a story that Jesus apparently told a lawyer about a wounded man who was eventually given aid by a Samaritan despite being ignored by his neighbours who passed him by without providing any help. In the story, Jesus asked the lawyer who was it that should be considered the wounded man’s neighbour? The point of the story boiled down to the question of how we understand the concept of what a ‘neighbour’ actually is. The lawyer finally answered that it was the ‘Good Samaritan’ who helped the man who was the neighbour, which was Jesus’s point. Sen concluded by arguing that the case illustrated how “The boundaries of justice grow ever larger in proportion to the largeness of men’s views”.

In the world of today, improved transportation, digital connectivity and media have created a global village. Our recognition of interdependency as individuals does not rely upon us being especially ‘good’, it simply requires a recognition of global realities. Montessori recognised this more than 100 years ago. She argued that:

“Social integration has occurred when the individual identifies himself with the group to which he belongs. When this has happened, the individual thinks more about the success of his group than of his own personal success.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, p.212)

“Good laws and good government cannot hold the mass of men together and make them act in harmony, unless the individuals themselves are oriented toward something that gives them solidarity and makes them into a group.” (Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, p.215).

Montessori believed that every child should develop to recognise their own dignity and self worth, their place and role in the world; the importance of giving, receiving and contributing to something much greater than themselves. As Grazzini (2001) has noted, Montessori argued that a ‘universal union’, already existed, and that all that was needed was that we should become aware of its reality. We should therefore:

“...replace the idea of the necessity of bringing about union among men, by the recognition of the real and profound existence of these bonds of interdependence and social solidarity among the peoples of the whole world.” (Montessori, 1949, p11)

The roots of solidarity are, from this perspective, the acceptance of our inherent human social nature and an affirmation of the bonds that we share with every other member of our species. Of course Montessori’s concern was not limited to humanity alone and her cosmic understanding of our interdependency with nature will be identified further below.

Montessori (Human Solidarity and Peace, p.20) argued that

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the "great task of education", was to "cultivate humanity", and that this was to be achieved by making "...the child conscious of the reality and depth of human solidarity" (p.21). While the pervasive media coverage of conflict and warfare around the world may make it difficult for us to recognise at times, it is also important for us to remember that wherever we find ourselves in the world, human beings are mostly and very significantly friendly, unselfish and civilised towards each other. In fact, these qualities may be seen as intrinsic to global society. As Jürgen Habermas showed, the intrinsic rationality and morality of all of humanity’s communicative action should make us optimistic about the future. For Habermas (1984), freedom and the ideals of reconciliation are ‘ ingrained’ in the fundamental mechanisms of the linguistically mediated sociations of humanity (Szczechun, 1999).

While “interdependence” may be widely recognised as of fundamental significance, less understood, perhaps especially in the British context, is the notion of ‘solidarity’. The aim of developing solidarity has not traditionally been seen as a priority in the British education system and this may in part be understood in terms of its apparent conflict with efforts to encourage greater competition. Yet as Rogoff (2003) has suggested, while:

“Issues of morality bring questions of individual rights versus harmonious social order to centre stage. Individual achievement can be sought and recognised in ways that prioritise competition or can be appreciated as a contribution to community functioning.” (p.234-5)

Solidarity as a concept has only very recently been evoked in the UK context of its relevance to countering a rise in religious and political extremism and terrorism. The national strategy, that has been applied with the aim of discouraging radicalisation throughout education and beyond, has been entitled Prevent. The Prevent strategy provides support in countering extremist propaganda and aims to identify and support vulnerable individuals with services that include mentoring and diversion. Unfortunately, the strategy has often been viewed with suspicion by minority communities and is sometimes regarded as counter-productive. Much of the problem stems from its association with efforts to get people to unite around a set of declared Fundamental British Values. While the particular values identified by the curriculum authorities might be considered much more widely held, framing them in terms of being fundamental and specifically British, was considered confrontational from the very beginning to many of those who take pride in the country’s diversity and multiculturalism. Politicians often speak of the need for an education that promotes ‘acceptance’, ‘respect’ and ‘toleration’ rather than focusing upon active, democratic, and civic engagement in the creation and re-creation of common values. Arguably, this issue takes us back to Amartya Sen, and Jesus’s earlier cited point about what it is to be neighbours.

Britain has a historical legacy of cultural chauvinism, colonialism and imperialism that very few now take pride in. As a common cause, a central aim, or ambition, ‘solidarity’ would have none of the problems associated with the promotion of assumedly ‘fundamental British values’ and it can now be applied in the framework of an Education for Sustainable Citizenship (ESC) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2010, 2016, Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016) at the classroom level, in association with the local community, and at national and global levels of concern for humanity as a whole. As Taylor (2013) put it:

“Twenty-first century children need relational and collective dispositions not individualistic ones to equip them to live well within the kind of world they have inherited” (p.117).

As Klaus Toft (2014), the United Nations (UNEP) Director has argued: “Sustainable development is the peace policy of the future”. Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai made the point succinctly when she said that in just a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict will seem almost as obvious as the connection that we see today between human rights, democracy and peace. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a powerful new global initiative to support and encourage good practice. Montessori was a founding member of UNESCO and was nominated in 1948 for the Nobel Peace Prize (Isaacs, 2013) and UNESCO’s co-ordination of the Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESC is set to make a substantial contribution to the UN global target 4.7 in particular:

“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

Montessori’s ‘Cosmic’ curriculum was developed and continues to function in many Montessori schools and preschools around the world to draw children’s attention to the fundamental interconnected and interdependent nature of life and the natural world. Siraj-Blatchford and Brock (2016) argue that it was her emphasis upon encouraging children’s independence, their ability to assess risk and to accept responsibility that provides a significant grounding for children to take on a responsibility for active sustainable citizenship in early childhood (Montessori, 2007, p.56). Montessori argued that the democratic and peaceful organisation of a society depended upon the independence and responsibility of the individuals that made it up. In the Montessori classroom:

“The children have the freedom to choose which activity to work with and where to work with it. Children make their own choices, explore and take responsibility. The freedoms within limits (ground rules and time to make choices) offer
empowerment and support the development of responsibility for themselves and others. They are constantly challenged with decision making such as 'I need to carry glass jugs, which will be the best route?' ‘How should I handle these china plates?' The early freedom and the responsibility that goes with it promotes self-respect, respect for others and self-discipline.” (Siraj-Blatchford and Brock, 2016a, p8)

As Susan Feetz has put it, in Montessori practice:

“The order and interdependency of all things in the universe becomes a metaphor for the classroom community the children build with their peers and the ethical questions they are encouraged to explore.” (Feetz, p.146)

Montessori believed children should have a great deal of freedom within education and she considered an education that repressed and imposed limits on children was extremely harmful as it undermined the development of their independent moral judgement. She argued that “…the real first line of defence against war is man himself, and where man is socially disorganised and devalued, the universal enemy will enter the breach.” (Montessori, 1972, p.xv)

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim, by the year 2030, to reduce inequalities, eradicate extreme poverty, bring an end to hunger, improve health and education provisions, achieve gender equality, protect the environment, promote peace, justice and prosperity. Sustainable Development is fundamentally concerned with social justice and equality within and between generations. Integrated approaches to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) are increasingly being developed around the world in response to a growing recognition of the potential of early childhood interventions in reducing poverty and countering inequality. The relevance of Amartya Sen’s ‘capability’ centered approach to sustainable development is an approach that aims to “integrate the idea of sustainability with the perspective of freedom, so that we see human beings not merely as creatures who have needs but primarily as people whose freedoms really matter”.

Yet compared with many other countries the UK has a very unequal distribution of income and shockingly, writing from one of the richest countries in the world in 2018, many UK children now have the experience of attending a local foodbank with their parents. There are now 2,000 food banks across the UK giving out food parcels on a weekly basis to people in need. In the UK and around the world, efforts to reduce poverty are less controversial than efforts to reduce inequality but it may be necessary for us to ‘get our own house in order first’ if we are to begin the contribute meaningfully towards solving the global problems.

Notions of equality of opportunity and individual freedom provide major principles of contemporary philosophical and political consensus. The consensus view of social justice in the western world is that it should be achieved through ‘fairness
Montessori reached out

and impartiality', and through a 'social contract' where everyone agrees that individuals working together improve the chances of everyone individually achieving their goals in life. Inequalities, according to this widely accepted model, are considered acceptable as long as they work out to everyone’s ultimate advantage, and as long as welfare priority is given to the interests of the worst-off. While there are many problems and criticisms of this model of social justice, it continues to reflect the democratic consensus.

From the perspective of the social contract, the role of the State in education, and in the social services, is to provide a 'level playing field' which is designed not so much to achieve equality of outcomes, but rather an equality of opportunity for individuals to be successful. 'Success' whether it be considered in material, economic and/or other terms of self realisation is, according to this consensus view, seen as the inevitable result of the free choices that individuals make in their lives. In educational terms the most significant of these choices may be considered to be the deferred gratification that individuals accept in foregoing the short-term rewards of idle play, or an early income to achieve long-term educational achievements.

It is recognised that in their early years individual children are not yet in any position to make such a choice. Household poverty or other barriers in early childhood often act to exclude the very possibility of making such choices. The priority must therefore be to ensure children are in a position to take advantage of the level playing field provided in their subsequent schooling and we must first achieve an equality of outcome in the pre-school period. This was the declared aim of UK educational policy where the Every Child Matters outcomes framework set a target to halve child poverty by 2010 when compared with 1997, and to eradicate it completely by 2020. The aim has been to provide success for all but the most disabled children in school with at least 90% developing well across all the areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile by the age of five:

"The Early Years Foundation Stage will provide a level playing field so all children start school with an equal chance of doing well."

(Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008)

Unfortunately recent research shows that ‘early intervention’ allocation to local authorities has fallen 64% in the seven years between 2010/2011 (the peak of children’s centre provision) and 2017/2018 (Smith et al, 2018). This funding and provision urgently needs to be reinstated.

References


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