Education for Sustainable Development in the Early Years

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Sustainable Development</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Environmental Pillar</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social and Cultural Pillar</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Economic Pillar</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing good practice</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Organisations and Associations</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References, further reading and support</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMEP World Congress 2010</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Environment Pillar

Depleting natural resources, increased greenhouse gas emissions, overflowing landfills and polluted waterways are a few of the effects demonstrating how societies have adopted lifestyles that have focused on maximising immediate comfort and convenience at the expense of future generations. Rising sea levels are threatening many communities, and many of the people living in the poorest countries are the worst affected. These factors already have implications for poverty, migration, food and water production and health care. Unfortunately, already much damage to our planet has been done, and much of the damage is irreparable.

As early years practitioners we have a role to play in offering children experiences, and in supporting them in gaining knowledge and understanding of the environment as it relates to their society. At an early age children can begin to develop the critical thinking skills required to make the sort of informed decisions that will affect the quality of not only their own and the lives of others around the world, but also the lives of future generations. Yet, historically this has not always been our way of teaching young children about the environment. Up until the last few years environmental education promoted awareness and knowledge about the environment, biodiversity, and the interactions and connections between people and nature. While environmental education has had a place in our education system for many years, the focus has now developed to a perspective emphasising sustainable development.

This new perspective has a greater emphasis on equipping generation to take responsibility for making informed decisions towards a sustainable future by considering what is best in the long term. This no longer involves children learning about what has happened, but also about what can be done for tomorrow.

In Ireland Wood Children’s Centre in England three and four year old children have been actively involved in setting up their own fruit and vegetable garden. Initially the children had looked at photographs of allotments around the world and looked at a range of fiction and non-fiction books on gardening for inspiration. The teacher noted all of the children’s ideas, and the children also made their own designs of how they wanted their garden to look. As they did this, there were extended dialogues about where and what should be grown in the garden and how this could be achieved. Throughout the next few months the
children helped plant seeds, bulbs and trees. Later on in the year the fruit and vegetables were harvested and eaten at meal times and shared with family and the local community.

The children have been actively involved in setting up their own fruit and vegetable garden

As suggested earlier, the most important issue here is that it is young children who have the highest stake in the protection of the environment. Within early years education we also know that even very young children are capable of thinking about environmental issues and we also know that the earlier these ideas are introduced the greater the impact can be. But while research evidence is available we don’t really need the research to convince of this. We all know from experience that if an adult has never recycled, it is quite hard to forget the wasteful habits habitats of a lifetime even when it is their intention to develop more positive values. For children who grown up, from an early age to recycle and care for their environment these attitudes will be sustained for a lifetime.

In fact young children are capable of making even quite complex moral judgements. One concrete example is provided by Bates and Tregenza (2009) in a case study from Hallett Cove Preschool in Australia. They report on a four-year old child and her mother standing at the supermarket counter. The child is reported to have picked up an item and following a close inspection saying:

“We can’t buy these, Mummy...they don’t have recycle symbols on them!”

As Bates and Tregenza go on to observe, children are often seen as having little influence on our world. Yet here is an example of a four-year old trusting her beliefs and exerting her influence on her family, and thus, indirectly, on society (op cit, 2009).

Many early years settings are already making significant contributions to education for environmental sustainability through integrating recycling and composting into their every day practice. Yet arguably, the biggest development that needs to be made in terms of the early years is to involve the children more closely in making decisions on the issues affecting their own lives and local environment.

Outdoor Learning

In many Western urban contexts, during the last few years there has been renewed concern that children

should spend more time outside. There have been concerns about children’s play in the home, being dominated by the use of electronic toys, computers and the television. There has also been some concern that this type of play can be linked to the restriction of social skills and that the limited time spent outside had serious implications for children engaging in physical activity. Particular concerns have also been expressed regarding early childhood obesity.

Yet early years practitioners have long recognised the learning potential of the outdoor learning environment. Outdoor education in Scandinavia has a high status, with the aim of improving physical development, and the child’s connection with nature. Many of the Scandinavian forest preschools are built and run in secluded woodland, other settings provide regular access to local woodlands by bus. Throughout a typical day children have the opportunity to engage in child initiated activities and investigate the tree’s, wildlife, and eco systems. The children are often encouraged to work in teams, problem solving and learning through direct hands on experience.

In the UK, forest school developments have also been extremely successful and have been shown to have made a positive impact on those children with behavioural problems and those that need to develop confidence and self esteem. Reggio Emilia has provided another international influence that has supported the learning potential of the outdoors. In fact in the Reggio Emilia model of early childhood education the environment is seen as the third teacher.

**Using the child’s interests as a starting point**

**Watching a chick hatch from its egg**

Curriculum planning should always take account of the children’s interests, this is an important aspect of personalised learning. At Glusburn Primary School, for example, they have used the children’s interests in Easter and in hatching eggs to provide opportunities for the children to look after and watch real chicken eggs hatch in an incubator. This highlights the value of learning through first-hand experience. Building upon particular interests or concerns that the children express, pictures, video clips and
objects can all then be used as a starting points for discussion to find out what children already know and understand. Once the foundations for new knowledge and understanding are identified then we can build children’s awareness of quite different social cultural contexts and experiences.

In one project at Cannon Park Primary School in Coventry for example, the children were concerned that they were unable to keep their drinks cool. The teacher was able to show the children pictures of unglazed pots known as ‘Chatties’ that are often used in South Asia and Africa to store water and keep food fresh.

The children were shown how, if they wanted to keep their drinks cool on a hot day, they could use the same principle as the Chattie to make their own refrigerator. All it takes is for their can or bottle of drink to be stood in a bowl and a flowerpot soaked in water placed on top. As the water evaporates from the clay pot it takes the heat away and keeps the drink underneath good and cool. This ‘cooling effect of evaporation’ is the same principle applied in modern electric refrigerators. The advantage here is of course that the refrigerator doesn’t need electricity...If they pour a little water in the bottom of the bowl and the pot will gradually soak it up and the ‘fridge’ will last even longer.

A ‘Chattie’ refrigerator
Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development

This book has been written to support practitioners in developing their understanding of education for sustainability in the field of early childhood. The introduction briefly describes how the idea of education for sustainable development (ESD) emerged, and how it today includes an integration of social, environmental and economic aspects of life and society. We argue that ESD in early childhood should be understood in terms of the knowledge, attitudes and actions taken by members of the early years educational community of practitioners, parents, carers and children. We also argue that the foundations of all aspects of this work are already laid in early years’ education.

The book then presents a number of examples of themes carried out in practice with young children. There are many suggested references and Internet links from which more information can be found.

Our main objective in writing this book has been to give teachers all over the world inspiration for further development of Education for Sustainable Development in early years.

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