

International Research on Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood

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Preface

John Siraj-Blatchford

Sustainable development was first defined in 1987 by the Brundtland World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" (WCED, 1987, p. 43).

On the 25 September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted 17 new *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) and a total of 169 targets that establish the Development Agenda for United Nations Members States until 2030. The SDGs aim to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger, provide quality life-long education for every child, and they aim to promote peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies. They build upon the prior commitments reflected in the UN Millennium Development Goals but go well beyond these, and have been framed to apply to all the nations of the world and not just those in most urgent need. . In terms of early childhood, the SDGs include very significant goals and targets related to child protection, early childhood education, and the reduction of inequality.

SDG 4 specifically refers to the need to; “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” SDG target 4.2 is to ensure that; “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.” But as we shall argue further in the following pages, it is important to recognize the relevance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to the achievement of many of the other SDGs:

Goal 1: Eradicate poverty – research shows that ECCE provides one of the most cost-effective strategies for breaking out of vicious cycles in the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

Goal 2: End hunger and improve nutrition – young children are the first and worse victims, and integrated education and care approaches have been found most effective.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives - early interventions set a trajectory for good lifelong health and wellbeing.

Goal 4: Ensure lifelong learning – robust cost-benefit evidence shows that investments in ECCE provide the most positive long-term benefits and economic returns to society

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality - greater investment in high-quality and affordable childcare is directly linked to greater opportunities for women.

Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all – established Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects currently focused on schools urgently need to be extended to preschools. By 2050, it is projected that at least one in four people are likely to be affected by recurring water shortages.

Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy - one in five people lack access to electricity and this contributes significantly to the reproduction of global inequality. Most preschools in rural areas around the world

have no access to electricity or to the direct and indirect educational and care technologies that it may support.

Goal 8: Promote decent work for all - investments in the professionalization of the early childhood workforce contribute to full and productive employment.

Goal 9: Industry and innovation – creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship is being fostered in many preschools around the world and these initiatives require further support and encouragement by industry and government.

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries – ECCE has a proven record in reducing the intergenerational reproduction of inequality.

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – ECCE provides a popular primary focus, and an effective entry point for development planning.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption – these attitudes are formed at an early age and appropriate patterns of behavior towards consumption, and attitudes towards conservation may be set to last a lifetime.

Goal 13: Climate Action – young children are the primary stakeholders, and the first and the greatest victims of climate change. Their active participation in the promotion of public awareness and the political action may be crucial.

Goal 14: Life below water – young children have a strong affinity with the seaside and a fascination with marine life. Pollution and the threats to marine biodiversity has reached alarming proportions.

Goal 15: Life on Land – In the minority world, the early childhood forest school movement has already made a significant contribution to raising public awareness of the issues. These successes need to be supported further and built upon.

Goal 16: Promote peaceful societies – Intergenerational ECCE interventions contribute by promote fundamental values and behaviours that reduce violence and promote peace.

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation – the measurement of early childhood development and outcomes can serve as a powerful tool for global partnerships.

As Britto (2015) has suggested:

“Investments in ECD are fiscally smart, given the multiplier effect of ECD across several goals. But, they are also scientifically credible and morally correct. Let us affirm our commitment to the Global Goals by giving every child a fair chance in life from the start”(p1).

Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) convened in Johannesburg in 2002 it has been widely recognised that education has a major role to play in the realisation of a “*vision of sustainability that links economic well-being with respect for cultural diversity, the Earth and its resources*” (UNESCO, 2007, p. 6). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has also been recognised as an integral part of quality Education for All (EFA) as defined in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action (WEF, 2000) and it must begin in the early childhood years and continue through lifelong learning in adulthood (Feine; 2012; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2005; Wals, 2009). The United

Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers to the *"interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars"* of sustainable development as 'social development', 'economic development', and 'environmental protection'. The key challenges for educators is to develop educational systems, curriculum and pedagogic practices that provide foundations for the development of each of these pillars, and to encourage emergent understandings of sustainable development.

Early childhood education has been contributing to some of these areas of concern for many years. Yet the work has often been fragmented and ill defined, and we are currently in a situation where only a small proportion of the international community of early childhood educators are fully aware of the overall objectives and scope of ESD, or are adopting an integrated approach to the subject. In this text we review the 'state of play' in terms of ESD in the early childhood educational contexts of 10 countries: Chile, China, Kenya, Korea, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. We also report upon the efforts that have been made by the individual research teams in each country, and through an international collaboration in developing a new research and development tool that we believe has significant potential to support our efforts in promoting an education for sustainable development in early childhood settings around the world. All of the work reported in this book has been supported over the past three years by the World Organisation for Early Childhood (OMEP). The work has not been funded, and the scale of the voluntary work involved itself bears testament to the massive commitment of all of those involved in this project.

The work is especially well targeted and timely. Resolution 57/254 of the United Nations General Assembly declared the period 2005-2014 as the *Decade for Education for Sustainable Development* (DESD) with an overall goal to:

"...integrate values, activities and principles that are inherently linked to sustainable development into all forms of education and learning and help usher in a change in attitudes, behaviours and values to ensure a more sustainable future in social environmental and economic terms"

(UNESCO, 2007, p.5)

The UNESCO objectives of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) have been to:

Facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD
Foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development
Help countries make progress towards and attain the Millennium Development Goals through ESD efforts
Provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts

(UNESCO, 2007)

The work that is reported in this text was thus developed as a contribution to these initiatives and was carried out in collaboration with initiatives by the *Swedish International Centre of Education for Sustainable development (SWEDESD)*, The *European Panel on Sustainable Development (EPSD)* and *UNESCO*. It has also drawn upon a perspective strongly informed by the latest research, discussions and developments in the wider field of Education for Sustainable Development. It is crucially important that policy makers recognise that early childhood education provides the *foundations* for lifelong learning within education for sustainability. While policy makers now recognise that children have the right to be educated, there needs to be a clearer understanding that it is in the early years that children have the greatest capacity to learn. It is also in early childhood that the foundations of many of our fundamental attitudes and values are first put into place. From a human rights perspective, young children must be recognised as the citizen group with the greatest stake, and *at stake* in terms of sustainability, and they should also be recognised as potential agents for change. Young children have an influence upon their families and on their communities and their interests provide a major motivation for changes towards more sustainable thinking and behaviours throughout societies.

Our primary intention in writing this book has therefore been to report upon a major international research collaboration carried out through the OMEP between 2010-13, which has sought to define and support the establishment of an international research and development programme for Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood (ESDEC). The volume has also been produced to provide practical support and stimulus for professional researchers, research students and practitioners carrying out their own studies and development work in this crucial area of educational concern.

The *Organisation Mondiale Pour L'Éducation Préscolaire (OMEP) (World Association for early Childhood Education)* has already provided significant leadership in the area of ESD in ECCE (Wals, 2009). OMEP was founded in 1948 in Prague as an international, non-governmental and non-profit organisation concerned with all aspects of ECCE. The organisation has a long history in the defense, and in the promotion of the rights of the child to education and care worldwide. OMEP has membership represented by 73 national committees, from all five regions, Europe, Asia/Pacific, Africa, Latin America, North America and Caribbean. In 2007, UNESCO established a Chair in Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development at Goteborg University with the purpose of promoting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The SWEDESD (2008) '*Gothenburg Recommendations on Education for Sustainable Development*' were produced by an expert panel of early childhood educators strongly represented by OMEP in collaboration with experts from across the educational life course. They identified an urgent need for capacity building in Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development. The report argued that:

"As an emerging field of practice, early childhood education for sustainability is seriously under-researched. This must be remedied in order to build the field on an evidence-base of critique, reflection and creativity."

(SWEDESD, 2008, p.31)

The SWEDESD recommendations also included the need to:

Increase the allocation of resources for research;

Initiate research studies that are participatory and action-centred, through transdisciplinary collaboration with professionals from all sectors and discipline;
Enable structures and processes that support practitioners to conduct their own research studies; and
Provide greater research mentoring and capacity building.

A special issue of OMEP's International Journal of Early Childhood published in 2009 focused upon Sustainable Development in Early Childhood, and OMEP has been working on various international development projects in ESD since 2008. Their work began with an interview study based on a logo (Figure. 1) where children were portrayed cleaning the planet: In this *Children's Voices about the State of the Earth and Sustainable Development project*, 9,142 children between two and eight years of age were interviewed by 641 OMEP interviewers in 28 Countries and 385 preschools around the world. A report on the project provided a focus for the OMEP World Assembly and World Congress in Gothenburg in 2010 (Engdahl & Rabušicová, 2010), and ESD has featured as a dedicated strand of each annual conference since then.

Figure 1: The child's voice



“This dirty planet was ugly. When it is dirty we can be ill. When water is dirty the fish will die. The children want health and happiness for everybody”

(Engdahl & Rabušicová, 2010)

Further OMEP World projects have involved children engaged in preschool practices based upon the 7Rs: to Respect, Reflect, Rethink, Reuse, Reduce, Recycle, and Redistribute, and in encouraging intergenerational dialogues, where three generations were involved in looking at how food can be grown at home and in the preschool. Another project, developed in collaboration with UNESCO and *Wash in Schools*, has been the *WASH from the Start* initiative, which addresses the need for all children to be provided with water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and education. The 2013-2014 OMEP world project was also concerned with supporting International projects concerned with Equality for Sustainability and the Rights of the Child.

It has often been noted that the methodological choices applied in educational research are subject to pendulum swings of fashion (McIntyre & McIntyre, 2000). In the UK for example, the quantitative corre-

lation studies that dominated the 1970s were heavily criticised and this led to the increased use of qualitative methods in the 1980s. These methods were widely considered unfit for purpose by policy makers in the decades that followed (Tooley, 1998). And this has led to increased emphasis upon quantitative research. Yet, as McIntyre and McIntyre (2000) suggested, within the academic research community an ideal *pattern* of research has always been recognised and accepted, where individual qualitative studies should be carried out to establish the most relevant variables, followed by correlation studies that isolate the strongest of these variables, and finally by randomised controlled experiments to identify the strength of their effects. As in every other scientific endeavour, ‘*knowledge*’ is developed in the process of long-term collaborative and cumulative research programmes, where individual research studies are subjected to peer review, and the relevance of their findings established only after they have been replicated in other contexts. In supporting the research and development of ESDEC we felt the need to recognise the implications of these processes, and that we needed to rise above them to consider the subject at the level of the overall programme of ESDEC research rather than simply at the level of individual studies. This has inevitably led us into discussions of epistemology that are ongoing. Our approach in developing the international collaboration from the start has been to focus most especially upon two elements, the identification of a baseline of practice in ESD in global early childhood, and in developing a research programme for ESDEC. In developing the evidence baseline we have produced an instrument, the *Environmental Rating Scale for Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood* (ERS-SDEC) that can be used to evaluate the impact of practice in ESD in a range of contexts. Any attempt at an international comparative pilot study using this tool would have been beyond our resources due to the costs of providing research training across all of the sites and in the provision of inter-rater reliability trials (more information on this is provided in the guidance in Appendix. There were also epistemological objections. With such a large and diverse collaboration final conclusions in this were not to be expected (or required) in the short term. Our common commitment has been to the dialogue and while chapter two identifies many principle areas of contention we have not sought to resolve them all, but rather to learn from the discussion in the spirit of respectful international collaboration, and in the interests of professional self-development.

The development of the evidence baseline has been iterative in the process of engaging with practitioners and preschool practice in the development of the instrument, and has involved more than 60 preschools located in 10 countries with participating preschools located in Europe, North America, South America, Australia, Africa, and the Middle and Far East. We intend that these processes of revision should continue in the future. Our conclusions draw upon this review alongside the evidence baseline to make practical recommendations for short, medium and long-term projects that will support research and development in this crucial area of concern. Appendices are also included identifying other relevant and established research instruments, online resources and search tools.

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