**Embedding the EYFS into the Eco-schools Programme; Visualising the journey**

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**Abstract**

Eco-Schools is an initiative which encourages children and young people to engage in their environment by allowing them the opportunity to actively protect it. Eco-schools are advocates for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the guidance within the Eco-Schools handbook mentions the necessity for an ‘investigation of links with the National Curriculum’ (2015/6: 5).  As an English statutory framework, the EYFS (DfE, 2014) has been adapted, with notable revisions since 2007, however, the constructivist premise of this developmental framework means that there are a plethora of opportunities for young children to become aware of aspects related to the three traditional key pillars of sustainable development: environment, society-culture and economy (Brundtland, 1987). This project is in an embryonic state, with the initial phase aiming to embed the EYFS within the Eco-Schools framework. Although the seven areas of learning and development are considered, the emphasis has been on exploring how young children learn (characteristics of effective learning) and on making connections to education for sustainability. In this direction, emerging challenges and opportunities are discussed. At a later stage, phase two of the project supports the development of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991); with early years providers  coming together to support each other with principles, pedagogy and practice. This paper concludes with considerations about the importance of encouraging children from an early age to explore, create meanings, develop skills, attitudes and understandings, on aspects of ecology, economy and equity as future citizens.

**Key words**: Sustainability; Eco Schools; EYFS; Pedagogy; ECEfS; Curriculum; Early Childhood

**1. Setting the scene: Sustainability, Eco-Schools and Children’s rights**

Sustainability is defined in the Brundtland report - *Our Common Future* (1987: 41) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” At the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002: 6) there was a “collective determination” to highlight not only environmental concerns but wider issues that had previously been neglected. Davies (2015: 10) reminds us of the “linkage and interdependencies of the social, political, environmental and economic dimensions of human capabilities.” These interdependencies were recognised in the Earth Charter Initiative (2012) that promoted  the four dimensions of respect and care for the community of life; ecological integrity;  social and economic justice and democracy, nonviolence and peace.

The Brundtland report (1987: 9) also recognised that all “citizen groups” should and must play an “indispensable role in the creation of public awareness” around sustainable development. 1987 was also the European Year of the Environment , which coincided with the development of the European Blue Flag scheme for beaches .This blue flag idea was later adopted by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) which developed the International Eco-School Programme to support the implementation of the key aims and objectives of the Earth Summit 1992.The Earth Summit recognised the need for all to recognise “new forms of participation” especially in regard to decision making “which potentially affect the communities in which they live” (1992: 270). Additionally, in 1991 most countries of the World signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which established children as participants in decision making.

However, Hart (1997: 3) stresses that it is only through direct participation that children will gain “a sense of their own competence and responsibility to participate.” Shier (2001) developed this notion of participation further and in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He stressed *if* children are actively part of the decision making within the school or setting, this is only the minimum requirement to endorse the rights of the child. He articulates the need for children to “share power and responsibility for decision making”(2001: 111).The International Eco School Programme offers a platform for schools and settings to provide children with opportunities to not only voice their opinions in matters that affect them, their families and communities but to act upon them and to develop a sense of agency.

The International Eco -School programme is now operating in over sixty countries worldwide adopting the green flag as a symbol of a sustainable school/setting. Its aim is to support both children and staff to organise a strategic plan of action, “action learning” or “learning by doing” (Eco-School handbook 2015/16: 7). Responsive and co- constructing relationships between the child and adult are a crucial aspect of embedding this ESD approach into settings. This co- construction resonates with the Reggio philosophy that is situated in a socio- cultural context with an emphasis on interrelationships. Dahlberg and Moss (2006: 6) describe this as knowledge that is constructed through “a process of meaning making in continuous encounters with others and the world”. Nevertheless, adopting the Education for Sustainability approach (ESD) is dependent not only upon the leadership and ethos of the school /setting but also upon the broader expectations and priorities set by national curricula, policy-makers’ agendas and demands .

The Eco-Schools handbook underlines the necessity for an ‘investigation of links with the National Curriculum to increase the quality and quantity of learning for sustainability in England’ (2015/6: 5).Thus, the aim of this project is to explore how the English statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) can be embedded in the Eco-schools programme, through a sustainability lens, at both a theoretical and practical level. However, the scope and remit of the project is considerably wider than what the nomenclature ‘early years’ denotes.

**2. EYFS and Eco-schools: challenges and opportunities**

The EYFS (DfE, 2014) sets the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five in England. It is based on constructivist pedagogical principles but can also be read as a prescriptive, goal orientated framework. The English Early Years framework provides opportunities for playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically (DfE, 2014). It also sets three prime areas of learning and development (communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development) and four specific areas of learning and development (literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts and design).

Ang (2014:16) notes the unintended consequences of an over prescriptive curriculum may be to ‘silence’ the child and this also resonates with Malaguzzi’s idea of a prophetic curriculum (Cagliari et al 2016); a curriculum that predicts what will happen even though the future is based on uncertainty, variability and change. On another note, the discourse of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014) reflects school readiness. This has developed with the increase in early intervention strategies, in alternative ‘stories’, in the ‘game of assessment’ (Basford & Bath, 2014), thus, contesting the narratives related to the purpose of early childhood education (Moss, 2014). Furthermore, there are discussions on whether, and to what degree, the EYFS considers children’s point of view and how the framework supports young children to develop their own ‘human sense’ (Donaldson, 1978) of the world around them. For example, within the prime area, Communication and Language, children are encouraged to ‘listen attentively’, ‘respond appropriately’ and ‘follow instructions’, followed by a technical approach related to speaking, with references to “accurate form” (DfE, 2014:8); It could be argued that if the context is not meaningful to the child, this technical approach could hinder, rather than support the development of meaningful dialogic learning.

In contrast to the regulatory EYFS framework, the Eco-Schools handbook offers an invitational response, a voluntary framework and refers to ‘friends of Eco-Schools England’ (2015/16:9). Thus, embedding the EYFS (DfE, 2014) into the Eco- School highlights the juxtaposition of statutory and voluntary guidance with opportunities to view the learning and development requirements using alternative lenses. However, the Brundtland report (1987:17) suggests that adopting an education for sustainability approach rests solely on “political will” and there is an acknowledgement of Governments' “reluctance to recognize sufficiently the need to change themselves,” as realistically “it makes long-term economic sense to pursue environmentally sound policies” (1987: 275).

The Eco Schools lens, may support an interpretation of the curriculum where children are trusted to make decisions and engage in some complex issues surrounding an ‘Understanding of [their] world’ (DfE, 2014). ESD supports a counter argument to the preparation for school debate with the possibility of ‘preparation for life’ (Korzak 2002: 97 cited in Davies & Elliot, 2014: 48), where children are supported to ‘recognise a lie’. Davies (2015:16 ) suggests it is a mistake to think of young children as passive “victims” but through a change of mindset they should be seen as “extraordinarily resilient and positive about their world’’ and they need to play an active and responsive role in “shaping it”. However, the theoretical elements of democratic agonism (Mouffe 2000) highlight that there is not only a place for, but the importance of contesting and challenging critical issues in early childhood. This is underlined by Rinaldi (2006:156) when she states that in early childhood there must be an acceptance of “conflict as part of dialogue” when considering critical and ethical tensions and issues.

“*What kind of preparation for life is it to tell children that everything is just, fair, sensible, well-motivated and unchangeable? In our agenda for upbringing, we have forgotten to insert the idea that the child needs to learn not only to love the truth, but also to recognize a lie, not only to love but also to hate, not only to respect but also to reject, not only to overlook, but also to be indignant, not only to adapt but also to revolt”.*

Korczak (2002:97 cited in Davies & Elliot, 2014:48)

**3. Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)**

ECEfS is an emergent field, internationally, aiming to translate the relationships of the co-evolution of social and biophysical systems into early childhood educational praxis (Davies and Elliott, 2014). It is not only a content area that traditionally is linked to environmental education but also a way of working with children (Pramling Samuelsson, 2011; Davis and Elliott, 2014), addressing aspects from the three key pillars of sustainable development: environmental and ecological concerns, social and cultural implications and economic aspects (Brundtland, 1987). According to UNESCO, the purpose of ESD in EC is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre: respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the resources of the planet we inhabit.

An early childhood education curriculum reflecting aspects like sensitive and culturally relevant contexts, contents that foster caring attitudes and empathy for the natural environment and people, respect for diversity, consideration of gender issues and equal rights, learning of basic life skills, learning for life and enhancement of activities built around the seven Rs: reduce, reuse, repair, recycle, respect, reflect and refuse (Pramling Samuelsson and Kaga, 2008) encompasses the perspective of a sustainable world. As Inoue (2014:88) states, ECEfS should not be seen as a ‘new’ educational issue, added successively to the existing curricula but should be advanced through an integrated and transformative approach.

Whilst learning *in* and *about* the environment is embedded into early childhood education, learning *for* the environment helps to lay the foundations for sustainability and to encourage children to explore human/environment interactions as causal in sustainability problems and aspects (Davis, 2009). Very young children have been found capable of sophisticated thinking in relation to socio-economic aspects and the earlier ESD ideas are introduced, the greater their impact and influence can be (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, & Pramling, Samuelsson, 2010). The nine themes that underpin the Eco-schools program are: Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School Grounds, Transport, Healthy Living, Global Perspective, Biodiversity. In addition, the more directly and explicitly linked area of Learning and Development in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) is ‘Understanding the World’. Education *for* sustainability provides opportunities for transformative, participatory and empowering education around global issues (Davies, 2014).

**4. Outline of the project**

Given the increasing need to support children in becoming responsible decision-makers of and for a sustainable future, this project aims to develop a shared understanding of ECEfS within multiple communities of practice.

*Phase 1*

The first phase was based on open informal conversations among practitioners, academics and representatives from Eco Schools England. The project is currently emerging within a rhizomatic model, where collaborations are not being driven by predefined outcomes, with the EYFS (DfE, 2014) embedded into the handbook by experts. Rather, the table below offers an initial frame for discussion with the group collaborations noted in phase 2.

Table 1 shows how early years providers, adhering to the statutory framework (EYFS, DfE, 2014) could (and many already are)  deliver education for sustainability with very clear links to the Eco-Schools topics. This table is intended as a guide to help demonstrate how providers can link their activities with ECEfS and Eco -Schools topics. This will help ensure that Education for sustainability is embedded throughout their provision by enabling children to learn through engagement with their world.

Table 1: **Embedding the EYFS into the Eco-schools Programme**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **EYFS** |  | **Aspect** | **Eco-Schools topics** |
| **Prime areas of learning and development** | **Personal, Social and Emotional Development** | Making relationships | **Healthy living, global perspective** |
| Self-confidence and self-awareness | **Healthy living****global perspective** |
| Managing feelings and behaviour | **Healthy living, global perspective** |
| **Physical Development** | Moving and handling | **Water****School grounds** |
| Health and self-care | **Healthy living, global perspective, Water, Energy, Waste, litter, biodiversity** |
| **Communication and Language** | Listening and attentionUnderstandingSpeaking | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| **Specific  areas of learning and development** | **Literacy** | ReadingWriting | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| **Mathematics** | NumbersShape, space and measure | **School grounds, Global Perspective**, **Water, Energy, Waste, Litter, Transport** |
| **Understanding the World** | People and communities | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| The world | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| Technology | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| **Expressive Arts and Design** | Exploring and using media and materials | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |
| Being imaginative | **Energy, Waste, Water, Litter, School grounds, Transport, Healthy  living, Global perspective, Biodiversity** |

*Phase 2*

Louv (2010) notes how research by Chawla (2006) and Wells and Lekies (2006) highlighted the importance of sharing in direct experiential and sensorial opportunities in nature. Settings must embed a culture of sustainability to ensure that children develop a lifelong disposition for their world, however, this lifelong disposition requires the sophisticated support of caring and knowledgeable ‘others’ (Vygotsky, 1978).

Ethical considerations have been embedded holistically within phase 2 of the project with the completion of a formal ethical approval process within Liverpool John Moores University. Cluster groups from Saint Helens, Liverpool, Dorset, Hertfordshire, Hampshire and the Midlands have been formed with lead practitioners to guide and facilitate the process. Each cluster group has opted to collaborate with practitioners who work within the early childhood education sector to discuss the table and provide constructive suggestions related to its suitability. This phase is characterised by (re)construction and negotiation and there is an anticipatory hopefulness that the cluster group collaborations will ultimately have their own ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987) resulting in valuable conversations for a shared ownership of the project. This participatory project approach resonates with the 1992 Earth Summit, *Empowering communities* (3.7) where Sustainable development must be achieved at every level of society. People, organisations, women's groups and non-governmental organisations are important sources of innovation and action at the local level and have a strong interest and proven ability to promote sustainable livelihoods (1992:15)

In the collaborative discussions the cluster groups each had a copy of the draft table (Table 1) to consider both the negative or positive practical implications of implementing it within their early years context. The contexts are varied both geographically and with a disparate range of early years provision, including childminders, Children’s Centres and nurseries. Additionally, they had access to the self-reflective tool (Siraj-Blatchford and Mogharreban 2016) that highlighted the three pillars of ESD, again in a practical context. The feedback from these discussions will be themed and documented to develop phase three of the pilot project.

**5. Conclusions**

With a developing research profile, ESD is becoming more visible within early childhood communities and this project aims to support the transition of ESD from the fringes to legitimate participation. It is noted that governments should, in cooperation with appropriate International/National and non-governmental organisations such as Eco -School England, support a community-driven approach to sustainability. This project provides the opportunity for transformative participation with all policy makers, leaders, practitioners, children and communities being involved. Ironically, the current political climate resonates with the “reluctance” noted in 1987 and is characterised in some of the passive and ambiguous responses from the Department of Education (2016) where ‘diary overloads’ framed an inability to commit to engagement with the project. As the first years of every human being’s life are the most favourable ones for developing attitudes and values it is important to support children during these years in appreciating and advocating for a world that is diverse, fair/unfair, just/unjust, with careful use of resources and concern for the well-being of the people and the planet. As Davis and Elliott underline (2014) future research is needed to depict the connections between theoretical frameworks and evidence-based practices, in providing a deeper understanding and re-conceptualisation of ECEfS as an important contributor to global sustainability.

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