

PREFACE

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This book is written at a critical point in history. In January 2016, the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) came into force. The United Kingdom, along with all other nations of the world, have committed themselves to achieving these ambitious goals, 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 and promote peace, justice and prosperity. These united efforts are being instituted in recognition of the fact that challenges that we currently face, in terms of climate change, environmental damage, natural resource depletion, conflict, diminishing biodiversity, and so on, are all global problems that cannot be solved by national policies alone. Their solution requires common efforts and shared understandings. It is important to recognise that if the UK, or, by some magical swipe of Harry Potter's wand, even the whole of Europe and the United States were suddenly to become 'sustainable' societies, the world would still be set on an inevitable path of ecological destruction. In the UK, and in other relatively wealthy countries, we need to set a good international example, adopt sustainable practices and reduce consumption and carbon emissions, but we also need to recognise that all round the world nations are in this together. We need to collaborate and communicate more effectively than ever before if we are to face the challenge. 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 gross domestic product (GDP) by 20 per cent by 2050 (cited in Sauven, 2015). An economic contraction on that scale would have a massive effect on the lives and welfare of us all, but as always, it would disproportionately affect those already most disadvantaged.

Governments around the world are addressing the issues and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is seen as fundamentally important in tackling 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 that we think and act.

(Bokova, 2012, p. 2)

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been recognised as a significant contributor to ESD (UNESCO, 2014). The SDGs include explicit aims to increase early childhood educational provisions and to reorientate education at every level towards sustainable development. Britto (2015) and Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2016) have argued that ECEC is of crucial importance in achieving many of the other SDGs. It is increasingly recognised, as Britto (2015) writes that:

Investments in ECEC are fiscally smart, given the multiplier effect of ECEC 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.

(Britto, 2015, p. 1)

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, and this text makes an important contribution towards developing a better understanding of the kind of curriculum and approaches that may be adopted to support sustainability. The authors' adoption of the term 'Education *for* Sustainability' (EfS) in itself reflects a shared concern to promote the active involvement of the child in the development of more sustainable futures. This emphasis upon the importance of recognising the agency and rights of young children can be found echoed throughout the text, and in my own recent writing (Siraj-Blatchford & Brock, 2017).

A controversial view adopted by a number of authors, and referred to in this text, questions the very possibility of defining *any* effective global prescriptions for EfS. The United States president apparently sees the whole sustainability agenda as bad for business, and a threat to US sovereignty. But Donald Trump is not the only critic, and the issues are also presented at times in stark dichotomous terms, where EfS is defined as an unwarranted Minority World imposition upon the less industrially developed Majority World. The very real and deadly excesses of cultural imperialism in the past (Rodney, 1972) might sometimes blind us to the historical reality that cultural exchanges have often had positive as well as negative consequences. For example, Barbara Rogoff (2003) has referred to the introduction of farming from Mesopotamia 10,000 years ago, and the events that followed the domestication of horses in the Ukraine about 5,000 years ago. While globalisation has allowed transnational companies to build upon the colonial domination of the past to exploit those least able to defend themselves (Chomsky, 2004), the same features of globalisation have supported the United Nations (UN) in improving global dialogue and have contributed significantly towards the achievement of greater peace, environmental protection and human rights. The achievements of

the UN may be difficult to assess but, worldwide, fewer people died in conflict in the first decade of the 21st century than in any decade of the 20th. Whilst a great deal more needs to be done to end famine, this century has already seen massive reductions in the number of people who have died from hunger. Thanks in large part to UN efforts, the number of deaths worldwide for children under the age of five has also reduced from nearly 12 million in 1990 to 6.9 million in 2011. UN efforts to deal with HIV/AIDS and other epidemics have also been crucial. The UN Conventions on Climate Change and on Children's Rights are critically important in terms of sustainable development. World Heritage sites contribute to conservation. Refugees have been aided through UN agencies, the proliferation of atomic weapons has been reduced and war crimes tribunals have also been established. While there remains so much to be achieved, UNESCO's coordination of the Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD¹ is set to make a substantial contribution to the implementation of SDG 4 and to its 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.

While all of these institutional efforts are essential, it is important to recognise that there are important global ideological struggles taking place that we are all, more or less, engaged in through our day-to-day democratic and cultural participation, in our purchasing decisions and in our economic assumptions and behaviour. The fact is, as suggested above, that sustainability can only be achieved through global collaboration. We should consider the agreement on a common core curriculum for sustainability in the same light. We need to recognise that there is a need for more dialogue between the Minority and Majority World and not less.

A related debate concerns the issue of 'readiness for school' or 'schoolification'. Moss (2013) and others have been extremely critical of those promoting the view that ECEC provisions should be considered as some sort of investment in children's later performance in school. Such arguments are often reduced to a simplistic binary opposition where the child's welfare is seen as being disregarded in efforts to gain economic advantage for the wider society. The more complex motives of those promoting greater investment in the early education of disadvantaged children are often ignored:

Why should society invest in disadvantaged young children? The traditional argument for doing so is made on the grounds of fairness and social justice. It is an argument founded on equity considerations.

There is another argument that can be made. It is based on economic efficiency. It is more powerful than the equity argument, in part because the gains

from such investment can be quantified and they are large. There are many reasons why investing in disadvantaged young children has a high economic return.

It is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children is such a policy.

(Heckman, 2006, p. 2)

A central issue in this ‘readiness’ debate concerns the degree of emphasis placed upon literacy and numeracy in the early childhood curriculum. While recognising that an overemphasis on literacy and numeracy outcomes may sometimes serve as a barrier to the development of ECECfS, in these pages, Årlemalm-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson sensibly suggest that literacy and numeracy on the one hand, and ECECfS on the other, can be seen as complementary, rather than as oppositional alternatives. They argue for a more balanced approach, and suggest that an EfS curriculum focused upon the development of ‘collaboration and critical thinking, the development of self-confidence, and a sense of responsibility’ may contribute significantly towards children being even more ‘ready’ for their future life challenges.

We know that high quality preschool education is effective in supporting young children who have been disadvantaged in their early years. If we consider this issue in terms of the Rights of the Child then it is clear that they should be given every opportunity possible to succeed in education and not suffer due to the ‘accident of birth’ in a disadvantaged family or community (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2016). The very first of the UN’s SDGs to be achieved by 2030 is to end poverty in all its forms (Goal 1), and the UN recognises that poverty is more than a simple lack of income or resources; it includes the lack of basic services such as education, health and nutrition, social discrimination and exclusion, and a lack of participation in decision-making. In many cases poverty must also be considered in terms of a poverty of aspirations that often exerts unnecessary limitations upon social mobility. An adequate view of ECECfS must therefore include those basic skills in literacy and numeracy that are absolutely necessary if the child is to actively participate in modern democratic civil society.

Often the ‘readiness’ discourse has also been reduced to a misleading binary opposition that is set between emphasising teaching or play. Both concepts are often presented as exaggerated caricatures, with an image of whole class didactic instruction on the one hand, and children given total freedom to play and express themselves away from adult influence on the other. Neither of these are a reality in UK early childhood practice and, just as long as play is given strong precedence, they may be seen as essentially synergistic (Siraj-Blatchford & Brock, 2016a, 2016b):

The promotion of totally ‘free play’ in early childhood doesn’t put the curriculum in the hands of the child; inevitably they are playing in the cultural

contexts and within the environmental constraints provided by the adults around them, and for good or ill they ‘play out’ the day to day realities of all those whose lives they observe around them.

(Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2016, p. 199)

Rogoff (2003) has contributed greatly to our understanding that play is of universal consequence to child development and learning. This is an aspect of quality practice that might usefully be encouraged through a global EfS programme which would also provide recommendations related the child’s playful access to natural environments and their freedom to express themselves on issues of sustainability. In doing so we would also be supporting Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which states that the child has a right to leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities.

Educational practices are always informed most significantly by conceptions of what it is that constitutes the making of a ‘good life’. Inevitably these conceptions change over time, and the curriculum changes with them. Processes of curriculum development always involve making choices, and in the interests of social justice all the members of any culture or society should be actively engaged in decisions about what should be preserved and what should be let go (Sen, 1999, p. 242). Sen argues that when it comes to deciding which capabilities should be prioritised we can never expect complete unanimity, but that a just ‘working solution’ may still be found in dialogue. This is an important principle. Curriculum change is just the same, and what we should be aiming for is the development of just ‘working solutions’ in free and unrestrained dialogue. Thus, while acknowledging the wide range of other important ideas and approaches in EfS, we should accept that in the 21st century, literacy and numeracy may also be considered essential to enjoy a life of ‘genuine choices with serious options’, enhancing ‘the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world’ (Sen, 1999).

Nevertheless, seeking an appropriate balance does not mean that that educators should seek to be neutral; as Freire (1998), and Gramsci (1971, pp. xvii–xcvi) before him, argued, educators must always take a stand:

We need to be clear that respecting a plurality of conceptions of the good life (and hence of how education is arranged) is not the same as endorsing all versions of the good life, and this has clear educational implications. The key issue here is that to count as education, processes and outcomes ought to enhance freedom, agency, and well-being by making one’s life richer with the opportunity of reflective choice.

(Sen, 1992, p. 41)

This book looks to support Early Childhood educators in laying the foundations for such reflective choice as children worldwide embark upon tackling the pressures and problems of the coming decades.

Note

1 <http://en.unesco.org/gap>

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