EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY : RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Julie Davis (Australia)

Ingrid Engdahl, (Sweden)

Lorraine Otieno, (Kenya)

Ingrid Pramling-Samuelsson, (Sweden)

John Siraj-Blatchford, (United Kingdom)

Priya Vallabh (South Africa)

The following recommendations for *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)* in Early Childhood Education were the product of an extended international collaboration that was supported by a number of bodies including the Centre for Environment and Sustainability in Gothenburg, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO, and the Swedish International Centre for Education for Sustainable Development. The recommendations were formally adopted in November 2008.

These recommendations are grounded on notions that children are competent, active agents in their own lives. They are affected by, and capable of, engaging with complex environmental and social issues. They steer away from romanticized notions of childhood as an arena of innocent play that positions all children as leading exclusively sheltered, safe and happy lives untouched by events around them.

1. ACCESS FOR ALL TO A PROCESS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

It is imperative that Early Childhood Education (ECE) is recognized as the starting point for lifelong learning within education for sustainability. There are still a large proportion of children who do not have access to ECE. As ECE offers such a valuable starting point for Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS), is therefore of highest priority that access to all ECE services is also enabled for all children.

As emphasized in the preamble, it is within these early years that children present the greatest ability to learn and develop. ECEfS has the potential to foster socio-environmental resilience based on interdependence and critical thinking, setting foundations for lives characterised by self respect, respect for others, and respect for the environment. All efforts to develop education for sustainability at every 'level' should therefore consider the relevance of their work to, and the quality of their engagement with, young children and the early childhood community.

ACTION POINT.

- Prioritise access to ECE for all children as imperative to their healthy development and life-long learning towards a sustainable future.

2. GENDER

ECE is a highly gendered field. It is a potential starting point for identifying, critically analysing and engaging with the important contributions that women from diverse contexts offer to educational practice broadly and to child development and Education for Sustainability (EfS). It

also offers the opportunity to critically engage with the roles of men within the field, especially in terms of their impact as role-models for young boys. These same gendered issues and opportunities also relate to ECEfS.

There are strong reasons why we should take gender into consideration – not least among them is the ongoing challenge of all girls into education. Girls' education is a special global priority as they are currently greatly under-represented in terms of educational enrolment and their education provides sustainable benefits to societies in terms of family income, later marriage and reduced fertility rates, reduced infant and maternal mortality (including HIV/AIDS).

ACTION POINTS :

- Critical research into gendered approaches of teaching and learning embedded within the ECEfS field needs to be conducted and shared.
- There is a need to critically engage with the ways in which women and men contribute differently to laying foundations of life-long learning within a broad variety of educational contexts.
- There is a need to recognize and celebrate a relational approach often demonstrated by women, in particular, within the ECEfS field, and to adopt or translate this approach to other fields and disciplines.
- Commit resources specifically to encourage the early and continuing education of girls.

3. LEARNING FOR CHANGE

ECE has strong traditions of curriculum integration, engagement with the lived environment and child participation, which align well with EfS. ECEfS can thus readily build on these foundations and embrace the complexities of transformative learning. We know from experience and research that even very young children are capable of sophisticated thinking in relation to socio-environmental issues and that the earlier EfS ideas are introduced the greater the impact can be. To reiterate, ECE is a key step for all EfS. Furthermore, children are potential agents for change, and often influence their families and grandparents to change towards more sustainable thinking and behaviours.

There is, therefore, a need to further develop existing ECE approaches that lean on the experiences that children bring from their everyday lives and where problem-solving and solution seeking are relevant to sustainable living.

ACTION POINTS :

- Prioritize ECE as a first step in learning to live sustainably. This includes international educational and social development resource allocation, policy prioritization and cross-sectoral support (including with social and community workers, formal and higher education, and other community support structures).
- Build capacity of communities and families, to strengthen their roles within learning, doing and being, with an emphasis on inter-generational learning.

4. NETWORKS, ARENAS AND PARTNERSHIPS:

We are aware that good practices that integrate indigenous knowledge, sustainable living practices, basic human rights and learning through experience and doing already do exist in many community ECEfS provisions. However, these practices remain largely undocumented and un-promoted.

Children live different childhoods. There is a need not to romanticise, but to critically engage in the varied contextualised approaches, and to document and share successful practices.

ACTION POINTS :

- Develop and promote ECEfS frameworks, approaches and practices that are strong on family and community participation, indigenous community knowledge, and every day and immediate issues related to sustainability.
- As far as possible ECEfS projects should: a) contribute towards intercultural understanding and a wider recognition of mutual interdependency, and, b) involve local collaborations that provide access to, and a greater visibility of, community contributions and cultural heritage.
- Develop a broad-based global alliance and international community of ECEfS practitioners, informal and formal teacher educators, policymakers and researchers to collaborate in efforts to raising the profile of ECE, improve its development and implementation of ECEfS and to build communities of practice.

5. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO STRENGTHEN ESD ACROSS ALL

As ECE is foundational for lifelong learning, there is an urgent need for capacity building within practitioners and other members of society to form strong safety nets and communities for young children, including strengthening the capabilities of their primary caregivers in a tradition that embraces sustainability.

ACTION POINTS :

- Explicit professional development in EfS for ECE practitioners and those in the extended community who work with young children is needed. Similarly, the broader EfS community needs explicit professional development in ECE.

6. ESD IN CURRICULUM

ECE has a tradition of integrated curriculum approaches embedded in children's everyday lives, even if not always fully enacted. Such approaches need to be more widely adopted into the formal curricula of schooling and into informal and non-formal learning approaches.

ACTION POINTS :

- Rework the traditional ECE approaches to better serve the needs of sustainability including stronger support for the implementation of integrated curricula.
- Build collaboration with formal, informal and non-formal educational services and systems that build on the foundations developed within ECEfS. These include: primary and secondary schools; higher education; informal learning programmes; local, national and international decision makers and curriculum developers.

- There are challenges in the implementation of ideal ECE curricula. Stronger support for the implementation of integrated curricula still needs to be realized in many contexts.
- Curriculum development and re-orientation should include children as active participants, as well as adults (teachers, parents and others), thus helping to ensure the relevance of content to children's everyday lives and their development as active citizens of sustainability.

7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE

The group recognises that you live as you teach is very important. ECE settings and services need to be places where sustainability is practiced. This means that all early childhood education settings should examine their own 'ecological footprints' and work towards reducing waste in energy, water and materials. They should aim to live out democratic and participatory social practice. They should 'practice what they teach'.

ACTION POINTS :

- Support the development of 'whole of settings' approaches to Education for Sustainable Development where the goal is to create a 'culture of sustainability'.
- Create new traditions that celebrate good practices in ECEfS, including awards, festivals, exhibitions and prizes.

8. RESEARCH

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

ACTION POINTS :

- Increase the allocation of resources for research in ECEfS.
- Initiate research studies that are participatory and action-centered, through transdisciplinary collaboration with professionals from all sectors and disciplines.
- Enable structures and processes that support ECEfS practitioners to conduct their own research studies.
- Provide greater research mentoring and capacity building. While important everywhere, this is especially important in industrially developing countries where significant portions of research are still conducted by researchers who have no experience in teaching ECE in the sector.

Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Dr Julie Davis
 School of Early Childhood
 Kelvin Grove Campus
 QUT
 Brisbane
 Australia
 j.davis@qut.edu.au