OMEP World Project on Education for Sustainable Development in Practice and Excellence and Equity in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe

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Abstract

The article presents some initiatives taken by the European Commission on early childhood education and care. A summary is given of the relation between ESD and ECEC and some basic principles for high quality pedagogy. Examples from a large World Project on Education for Sustainable Development within Early Childhood will be presented. The project was organised by OMEP, the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education, where the authors have served as project leaders.

European initiatives in ECEC

The first part of this paper is based on results of the European Union Conference held in February 2011 in Budapest under Hungarian Presidency in cooperation with the European Commission. The title of the conference was „Excellence and Equity in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe“. European Union puts special emphasis on the topic of equitable access to high quality Early Childhood Education and Care for all. The aim is to establish a policy framework for further European cooperation in this field and is based on the following arguments:

- quality early childhood education and care is crucial in the well-being and overall development of a child
- ECEC can offer the best start especially for children with disadvantage to realize their individual potential
- the first years of a child are decisive in physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and language-wise
- positive experiences set the child on a path of success, whereas negative ones may cause irreversible damage
- enhancing social cohesion by breaking the cycle of disadvantage
- laying the foundation for lifelong learning as well as contributing to better educational outcomes
- provides the best return in human capital development
- provides a solid foundation for success: better educational achievement, better social development, better skills and occupational success, fewer drop-outs, and more efficient public spending.

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There are several tools concerning early childhood education and care (ECEC) which are seen as crucial on the European Union level:

1. **ECEC seen in a broad social and economic context**
   Much evidence shows that experience in the early years has profound consequences for later life. Recent large-scale studies indicate how patterns of experience in the early years can have long-term impact on children’s educational and social development. Also recent policy interventions have been found to have an impact on parenting and child development. It is clear that particular environmental inputs, e.g. pre-primary education, socio-economic status, parenting, will influence children’s development leading to long-term consequences for individuals and societies.

2. **The structure, governance and quality assurance of early childhood services in the EU**
   The ideal should be that every child should have the right to primary health, development and education, first within the family and thereafter in services supported and regulated by the State. But the country variation is great. Europe has among the best services in the world, particularly in the Nordic countries and some other islands of excellence, but that equity of access and high quality are not achieved in all European countries. European countries have been largely successful in maintaining public pre-primary education for 3-6s, with high enrolment rates. Services for children under 3 years are often weak and in many countries still remain under-financed and under-regulated. Specific populations, such as Roma families and young children, are unable to access early education services in accordance with their numbers and needs. In several countries, successful transition to primary school remains a huge barrier for these children.

3. **Investment in equitable and high quality ECEC**
   Investment in equitable and high quality early childhood education and care pays off. It lays the foundation for more effective lifelong learning and for future economic success and social wellbeing. Three rationales for investment are used: education oriented rationales, welfare oriented rationales and employment oriented rationales. A further challenge many countries face is to ensure that all children are able to access high quality ECEC services and a range of policy measures may be needed to ensure that even the most disadvantaged children who are likely to gain the greatest benefit from attending high quality ECEC can participate.

4. **Staff competences**
   There is substantial evidence that staff competences are one of the more salient predictors of quality in ECEC. Competences cannot be considered only at the individual level. Systemic aspects (including team support and working conditions) also need to be taken into account when investing in the professionalization of staff. Staff competences cannot be viewed as a static status of individuals, but rather as an ongoing, dynamic and reflexive process. In front of European countries are also challenges for the coming years concerning staff competences like how to combat the continuing gender gap in the early years workforce, and how to create more inclusive and flexible learning pathways and career enhancement possibilities, including pay, for the wide range of practitioners working with young children.

5. **Partnership with parents and the local community**
   Parents are experts visavi their childrenand also their first educators, so parental engagement is essential for successful pre-primary education. Basic assumptions from which partnership with parents should proceed are these:
   - working with children inevitably means working with parents
• ensuring that all families receive the community support they need
• partnerships between parents and the community
• a common vision of ECEC and
• involving parents and the community in financing ECEC and providing easier transitions for children and support for marginalised groups.

6. **High quality pedagogy**

High quality pedagogy is decisive for long term effectiveness, but what makes high quality is still a matter of debate. Not all approaches are equally successful. A core question is which pedagogical formats and social interaction patterns will foster learning-related skills (working memory, executive functions and self-regulation) best. Avoiding two often observed but much less adequate approaches in early childhood care and education: the ‘drill and kill’ approach, when the contents and learning formats of primary school are simply copied, and the ‘laisser faire’ approach, when the curriculum predominantly consists of free activities without teacher guidance. Instead, teacher-guided and collaborative playful learning interactions with relevant content is particularly promising in this regard.

**What is Education for sustainable development?**

Sustainable Development (SD) is according to the report *Our Common Future* a form of development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987).

One of the children from Ireland in the OMEP study described sustainable development like this: *I think it might mean, like, to save the world for later.* Education for sustainability integrates and intertwines environmental, social, cultural and economic perspectives and builds on empowerment, participation and influence for all learners (UNESCO, 2005).

The overall aims of the OMEP project on ESD are:

• to enhance the awareness of Education for Sustainable Development among OMEP members, young children and early childhood education at large,
• to collect information about young children’s thoughts, comments and understanding of ESD, with a sincere intention to actually listen to what children say, and
• to encourage local projects in preschools and schools on implementing education for sustainable development in practice.

The aims of the first part of the project were reached. In 2010, OMEP members in 28 countries from all regions of the world interviewed 9142 children aged two to eight years around the 2010 OMEP Congress logo. The participating countries from Europe were Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, France, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovak Republic, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom (Engdahl & Rabušicová, 2011).
In some countries, like China and USA, teacher students have been studying ESD and then performed the child interviews, thus involving colleges and universities in an ESD reorienting process. Ethical considerations were followed and consent was required from parents and children.

The result indicates that the children interpret the picture in many different ways. Most common is the answer that the children are cleaning the globe because it’s dirty. But many children also thought that the children on the picture were painting the globe. The reasons why the children are cleaning or painting were aesthetical, to take care of the environment, solving a garbage problem, and because they wanted to promote health.

Most countries report that the children do not recognise the concept Sustainable Development. In some countries it doesn’t exist as a word and there is no translation into their mother tongue. However, many interviewers were amazed by all the knowledge the children showed them. The children had thoughts and ideas to bring up about the state of the earth in relation to sustainability. The result shows that young children have knowledge about the environment, thoughts about environmental issues, the responsibility people carry and ideas about what to do. Child interviewing based on a picture was as a method very well received and has since become a tool for ESD within ECEC.

**Where ECEC meets ESD - High quality pedagogy grows**

There are some common characteristics for education for sustainability and early childhood education and care:

- using children’s everyday lives
- integrated curriculum approaches,
- thematic oriented teaching and
- authentic topics.

In both cases the education leans on close relationships between teachers and children and on child participation. Some concepts in education can be used to describe both ESD and ECEC; Experiential learning, values clarification, creative thinking, problem solving, storytelling and inquiry learning.

**OMEP World Project Part two – ESD in practice**

The OMEP project continued in 2010 with a Part two - ESD in practice. The goal is to encourage local projects in preschools and schools on implementing education for sustainable
development, inspired by the words respect, reflect, rethink, reduce, reuse, recycle and redistribute.

The participants are asked to work with the children around the 7 Rs, one, two or many. The Rs were originally identified by the Brundtland Commission Our Common Future (1987). Together, they include all three ESD pillars; Respect, Reflect and Rethink relate directly to social and cultural dimensions. Reuse and Reduce highlight environmental aspects and Recycle and Redistribute clearly draw on the economic perspective. Children, teachers, parents or other adults choose together how to organise ESD in practice projects; what can be done in everyday life and what to focus on.

In the following, we will present some successful European ESD-projects which at the same time show high quality ECEC.

A Peaceful Place
from Kindergarten no 401 in Warzaw, Poland, presented in 2010 by the Polish National Committee of OMEP

Aims of the project:
- Making children sensitive and open for the world by creating conditions for experience, discovery and action,
- To awake curiosity and positive attitudes to environment,
- Developing skills of using natural science knowledge in practice and
- Taking and creating opportunity to learn social-cultural, family, regional and national traditions

To create Peaceful place they used parts of their garden. They have separated this area and divided it into small parts.
In the Spring, before starting the field work, they fertilized the field with natural compost. Afterwards it was a big sowing, planting and ..... waiting for results.

The characteristics for high quality in this project are:

- Many people of different sorts were involved in the project:
  - children involved their parents
  - teachers and kindergarten staff worked together with the children.
- The methods used were active:
  - direct observation,
  - activities,
  - exhibitions and demonstrations
- Focussing both on Learning about nature and Learning in nature
- Also, this project integrated social, cultural and economic aspects.

The Polar Beer project
By preschool children and their teacher Agapi Liapaki, Crete, Greece

The project is a spontaneous exploration, initiated from a very unusual snow fall in Crete (!) Further explorations led to a focus on the extinction of the Polar Bears.

The explorations and discussion led to a Children’s list of how to save the polar bear:

- Familiarizing children, parents and community with global warming.
- Making children, parents and the community aware about the increasing usage of plastic water bottles and its impact on the environment
- Making children, their parents, and the community aware about the environmental pollution. One concrete example from Crete was the lack of fresh drinking water. All families on Crete need to buy their drinking water in plastic bottles in the shops, plastic bottles that end up as garbage and contribute to the pollution.

The project then continued with a decision to build an igloo. Parents and children participated in the collection of the plastic bottles needed and helped with its construction.
At the same time the children continued their studies of plastic bottles and identified the type of plastics that are safe to use. They also looked for alternative ways of plastic water bottles such as water filters. The project was presented in a festival, where politicians, the public, children and parents were invited to visit the igloo and to read the children’s drawings and texts about the problem with the bottled fresh water on Crete.

The teacher identified the following lessons learned – examples of high quality pedagogy:

• We feel that our efforts to save the environment did not end up with this project. We feel that each of these children and their families will continue to do something good, either small or big, for the sake of the environment.

• As far as myself, I realized that it’s so important to listen to the children’s genuine interests and intentions and to let go of my intentions as a teacher.

• Children don’t want to be told, they need to have a partner. They want to discover it themselves. They only need some guidance by someone who believes in them.

• When the children feel empowered they will be able to empower others for a BETTER FUTURE.

**Working with gendered attitudes about professions**

Preschool Tärnan, Gothenburg, Siv Jirblom and Giselle Fuentes, and OMEP Sweden

The aims of this project were to study gender stereotypes and gendered patterns starting with the many comments on what a woman or a man can do for a living. By using Child Interviews, the teachers heard the children express the following views:

• A doctor is a guy
• Girls can’t be fire fighters
• Daddies cannot bake
• Girls can’t play ice-hockey
• Girls can bicycle
• Fathers can do tricks
• A nurse is always a girl
• Daddies can’t put up your hair

The teachers then made up paper dolls representing different professions; a police, doctor, nurse, fire fighter, dentist, school teacher, preschool teacher, carpenter. They introduced them
to the children, and posed the question: Who can work in this profession? Can a woman? Can a man? Both?

The children then built sceneries for the different professions. The materials used during the project were paper dolls, men and women, and professional and clothes that suited all dolls. Large play boxes were designed together with the children as a hospital, a fire department, a garage and a police department and books about different professions. The boxes and the dolls were then used in free play.

After some months interviews showed that the children now said that most professions were open and possible for both women and men. When the teachers asked about the change, the children said that they didn’t know previously that both men and women could work in all the professions as they had never seen it.

The high quality indicators in this project were:

- Listening to the children, challenging them but also allowing them to try out their own ideas and pathways (sharing focus)
- A sustainable future was integrated as a possible goal. Teachers can promote the fostering of values among children (democracy)
- The children were treated as thoughtful and creative human beings who strive for the well-being of nature and mankind (empowerment)

**The teacher - a bridge between children and the ESD curriculum**

The projects point out a new way for teachers who are interested in working with education for sustainability. It is important for teachers to:

- Get to know the children’s world
- Use the children’s interests, experiences, ideas
- Focus on the children’s intentions and the children’s perspectives
- Arrange for rich and varied experiences,
- Strive for a balance between Child initiatives and Teacher initiatives and
- Support and challenge the children during play.

OMEP – the World organization for early childhood education – has through these projects been established as an important actor for ECEC and ESD in Europe and the world. We are sure that the ESD project will go on for many years, aiming to enhance the awareness of ESD among OMEP members, young children and early childhood education, to reorient education
in order to contribute to a sustainable future, to recognise the dependence of humanity on a healthy biosphere and to give significant recognition to Early Childhood Pedagogy.

References


