THE HARMONY DEBATES

Exploring a practical philosophy for a sustainable future

Edited by Nicholas Campion

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Early Years Education, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship and the Principles of Harmony

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In this chapter I will examine concepts of harmony in relation to my work in education and sustainability, relying on David Cadman's suggestion that:

> Harmony is an expression of wholeness, a way of looking at ourselves and the world of which we are part. It's about connections and relationships. The emotional, intellectual and physical are all connected. We are connected to our environments, both built and natural; and all the parts of our communities and their environments are connected, too. Harmony asks questions about relationship, justice, fairness and respect in economic, social and political relationships. As an integrative discipline it can be expressed in ideas and practice.[1]

This definition offers several parallels with the concept of sustainable development which also recognises the interconnectedness of the social, the environmental and the economic, together with a need for human communities to acknowledge that their wellbeing is closely interlinked to that of other communities as well as the wider living and non-living environment.[2] There is a growing awareness that young children are the decision-makers of the future and that those working in the early years' sector are well placed to support children see the interconnectedness of the world and support them understand the cycles and patterns of the natural environment indicative of both harmony and sustainable development.[3] In this context there are however also concerns that children are increasingly separated from opportunities to see the interconnectedness of their world, engaging more in a digital world with less time engaging with nature and less opportunities to be involved in essential life skills such as growing food, cooking and building. In response, early years researchers and practitioners have in recent years developed international research exploring how educators and young children can engage with issues linked to sustainability and citizenship.[4] These authors also refer to some of the principles noted by Cadman in terms of acknowledging wholeness, connection, interdependence and diversity and dovetail closely with the principles

of both early childhood and Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) discussed later in this chapter.[5] Globally, links have been made to approaches to education which emanate from the Agenda 21 goals which were developed during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development UNCED Earth Summit (1992). Agenda 21 noted the need for education to support adults and children to understand and take action to deliver long term environmental, social and economic sustainability.[6] Internationally, this approach to education has been referred to as Education for Sustainability/Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and different countries have developed their own approach based on the underpinning principles of Agenda 21.[7] In Wales, since devolution sustainable development has been a part of the Welsh Government constitution underpinning work across the different government sectors.[8] In the education sector, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) has been developed as a cross-curricular approach to engaging learners and educators in the values and principles of sustainable development and citizenship as a means to support the future wellbeing of human beings, other living things and the wider environment. As noted by the Welsh Government's Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), ESDGC is:

> About the things that we do every day. It is about the big issues in the world – such as climate change, trade, resource and environmental depletion, human rights, conflict and democracy- and about how they relate to each other and to us. It is about how we treat the earth and how we treat each other, no matter how far apart we live. It is about how we prepare for the future.[9]

I will explore how ESDGC can be developed for early years children and how some of the underpinning principles and values of early years' education and care is closely related to the principles of both Harmony and ESDGC.

The debate

The engagement of young children in the discussion and actions required to create a more sustainable society continues to be contentious.[10] Concerns regarding frightening children regarding the significant problems facing human society link closely to the consideration that childhood is innocent and that young children should not be concerned by problems such as global warming, poverty, inequality, habitat destruction and pollution.[11] However, for many children

globally, these are real concerns impacting on their everyday lives, whether they have been forced to migrate due to environmental degradation, war or poverty or other factors, or whether their health and wellbeing is impacted by pollution or lack of resources. The development of 24-hour media and sharing of images and digital technology from across the planet means that many young children in Western society are increasingly aware of the inequalities and consequences of living in an unsustainable society, and authors such as Siraj-Blatchford and Huggins and Davis suggest discussing such issues with children may support their understanding and offer possible solutions as opposed to frightening them more.[12]

Other authors have argued that it is not possible for young children to understand some complex issues, such as those linked to poverty, inequality, climate change, overconsumption and pollution.[13] However, a growing body of research has suggested that young children are both aware of, and concerned about, the challenges facing human society.[14] As noted later in this chapter, theorists such as Bruner suggest that children can engage with complex learning. However, this will be at a level appropriate to their understanding, and for young children, understanding the complex chemistry of climate change may therefore not be appropriate. However, exploring the seasons and being outdoors to see how the weather can change and how these changes can affect people would allow them to start considering the significance of the climate.[15]

It could also be argued that, if young children were to engage with the problems facing society, they may still have no impact as they lack a political voice or the independence to take action.[16] However, the international United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 has been ratified in most countries of the world in order to uphold children's rights and to underpin responsibilities to them. Article 29 suggests that:

> A child's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage a child to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help a child to learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.[17]

There is an expectation that children should be supported in their ability to respect other people and the environment and to learn to live harmoniously with others. Furthermore, authors such as Heft and Chawla and Elliott and Davis have discussed the significance of viewing children as competent and active

participants.[18] Mackay suggests that adults should be 'honouring the young child's right to know about social and environmental issues; to be part of conversations and possible solutions; to have their ideas and contributions valued'.[19] This focus on the child's voice, and the recognition of children as competent, is also the focus of approaches to early years education such as that of Reggio Emilia. In the Reggio approach children are afforded choice and a variety of ways of communicating their ideas through several different 'languages' or modes of expression, including through art, dance, drawing and sculpture.[20] In Wales, the Welsh Government, through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 has given 'due regard' to children's rights in all decisions which impact on children and young people. In doing so the Welsh Government has reinforced rights such as that of Article 12 which notes 'children have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them and have their opinions taken in account'.[21] In terms of the intergenerational, long term implications of some of the problems that young children will have to respond to in the future, listening to children now and providing them with opportunities to articulate their views and opinions when young could support their meaningful participation as they grow older.[22]

The philosophy of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD/ESDGC)

The writers of Agenda 21 and other authors on Education for Sustainable Development have indicated that it does not constitute merely a set of subjects to be taught but rather a values based curriculum which both informs and allows children to understand the interconnected nature of their world, as well as to develop the skills and knowledge to be able to actively benefit society and the environment for generations to come.[23] In doing this, authors across the ESD research field have identified the key principles of ESD.

It is striking that the principles of ESD globally, and thus ESDGC in Wales (as noted above), are in close parallel with the theory and values underpinning early years education.[24] For example, this can be observed directly in early years activities which incorporate outdoor learning or are linked to approaches, such as Forest School.[25] For example, children playing in a woodland environment trying to move logs from one place to make dens are engaged in experiential practical learning which involves problem solving and creative thinking when working out the best methods to move the logs or build a den. Such play

Principles of ESD

- Interdisciplinary
- Holistic and interconnected
- Critical
- Creative
- Complicated
- Active discovery
- Problem solving
- Reflective
- Whole setting approach
- Futures approach
- Active participation
- Inclusive
- Student led
- Practitioner facilitates rather than instruct

involves cooperation and team-work skills, which, if child-led can also place the adult in a facilitation role supporting peer learning and avoiding didactic teaching. Furthermore, when such activities are planned through a sustainability lens, they can also engage cross-curricular and interdisciplinary study with the outdoors providing a backdrop for all areas of the curriculum from science and mathematics to language development, art, drama, and humanities. Regular outdoor experience may also allow for significant interactions with nature as well as peers and can be an opportunity to learn about the environment, to co-work and show empathy for both the living and non-living world.[26] Natural areas can also stimulate discussion exploring how, for example, woodland was used in the past and how it can be protected for other people to enjoy in the future.

In the context of young children, as Froebel pointed out, 'play at this stage is not trivial; it is highly serious and of deep significance' and as noted previously child-led play can provide the backdrop for children to develop more detailed understanding.[27] Practitioners can also use this context to develop sustained shared thinking by allowing a child to collaborate with other adults or peers to

extend his/her understanding in relation to specific concepts, problems or other enquiry. In terms of approaches to pedagogy, Dewey suggested learning should be grounded in real situations and Piaget referred to children as 'young scientists' that gain understanding from interacting with the environment and learning from mistakes.[28] Play offers opportunities for children, therefore, to construct their own knowledge. In terms of understanding sustainability, children can learn away from a rigid classroom environment through building, cooking and in nature which offer a platform to reengage with the patterns and interactions of life.[29]

Socio-constructivism, which holds that human development takes place within a social context, and that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others, points to the significant role of the adult in supporting and facilitating learning. For example, Lev Vygotsky referred to the 'more knowledgeable other', including peers who could support a child to achieve a higher level of understanding by offering support and guidance, and Bruner referred to this support as 'scaffolding', where a child develops deeper knowledge as initial learning is embedded, and new support is required to develop further.[30] Thus, as noted by Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie, when required the adult will guide play and provide the environment to ensure deeper understanding.[31] With young children this could be developing empathy for living things; for older children this could involve developing an understanding of a natural cycle or the links between environment and wellbeing. Thus practitioners also have a significant role in modelling the positive behaviour, and work by Vygotsky and Bandura suggests that young children are influenced by the practice they see around them.[32] Thus developing ESDGC is not the role of only one enthusiastic 'ecowarrior' or an opportunity for 'do as I say, not as I do' instead as reflected in programmes such as Ecoschools is a whole school approach where all adults working with children support good practice and engage in work with parents and the community to create more sustainable environments.[33]

Early years practice which is informed by this theory may also support the ESDGC agenda and aspects of the Harmony principles in terms of children being able to recognise their interconnectedness with their world, empathise with other living things, and recognise the holistic and interdisciplinary nature of the world they live in.

In Wales, such theory underpinned the creation of the Foundation Phase Framework, the early years curriculum designed for the education of children between three and seven years old.[34] The curriculum was introduced in 2008 as a play curriculum with a focus on experiential learning, a learning environment

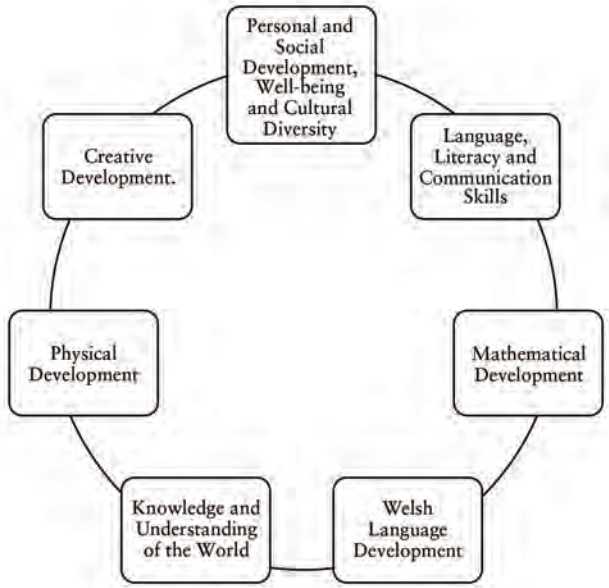

Diagram 1: Foundation Phase areas of learning (based on DCELLS, see note 34)

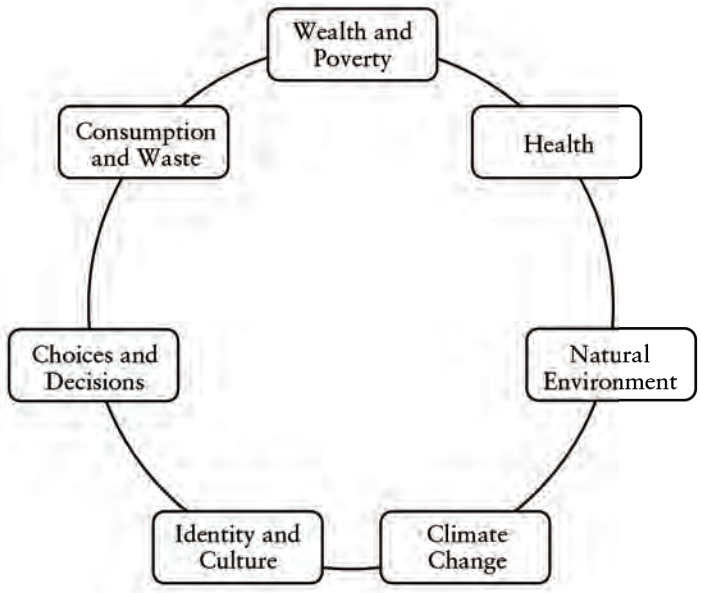

Diagram 2: Themes of ESDGC (DCELLS, see note 9)

which should have both an indoor and outdoor learning ethos, based on seven cross-curricular areas of learning (see Diagram 1).[35]

The ESDGC curriculum includes seven themes which are designed to be cross-curricular (See Diagram 2).

In reality these two curricula interlink where children have opportunities to explore the Foundation Phase areas of learning and ESDGC themes simultaneously.

For example, when cooking with young children, such as making a pizza, there are opportunities to be creative when choosing ingredients, to develop language literacy and communication when working together, listening or reading a recipe and sharing instructions, as well as describing the taste and smells encountered. Weighing ingredients and sharing pieces of pizza develops mathematics skills. In terms of understanding and knowledge of the world, children may grow some of the herbs and other ingredients involved or may discuss how they grow, or explore how the different foods change state when cooking. Making pizza involves rolling and cutting which develop children's fine motor skills (physical development), and in Wales much of the discussion could incorporate incidental Welsh or be through the medium of Welsh depending on the context of the setting. It is also an opportunity to engage other languages used by the children or linked to the food stuffs being used. ESDGC themes could also be incorporated at the same time. For example, pizza could be explored in terms of identity and culture in terms of countries where pizza or similar foods originated and how pizza crosses several countries and cultures. Health could be developed in terms of considering the health benefits of balanced diets and choosing healthier toppings. The natural environment could be explored in terms of where the ingredients were grown or children could be encouraged to grow their own ingredients and thus start understanding plant biology, plant-animal interactions and adaptations to the environment. Choices and decisions would be part of the process of allowing children to choose the best ways to approach the cooking but could also link to choosing ingredients and deciding on, for example, Fair Trade, locally sourced, home-grown foods or options linked to minimal air miles or packaging. This could also link to climate change and consideration of how the choices made could impact on the environment and carbon emissions. Consumption and waste could involve considering where any waste should go in terms of composting, the rubbish bin, or being taken for the school hamster or local pig farm. Wealth and poverty could also be considered in terms of thinking about the amount of resources available to make the pizza and to think if this would be the case in all contexts. All aspects of a

child's daily play and activity could support this cross-curricular approach in terms of gardening, building, playing with mud, building dens, role play, water and sand play and thus there would be no expectation to cover everything in one activity. Rather, this would be a long term approach where as children developed they would return to familiar ideas and build on these with different insights as explored in Bruner's spiral curriculum.[36]

As noted above there appear to be significant opportunities to support esdgc in the early years, and also to support Harmony principles where children are supported to have empathy for their world, to understand the patterns and interconnectedness of the environment and societies in which they live, and to have respect not only for their current communities locally and internationally but to act in ways that will protect generations to come.

However, such opportunities can be limited. For example, Sterling suggests that:

> Most mainstream education sustains unsustainability-through uncritically reproducing norms, by fragmenting only a narrow part of the spectrum of human ability and need, by an inability to explore alternatives, by rewarding dependency and conformity, and by servicing the consumerist machine.[37]

Other authors note that practitioners may feel uneasy and lack confidence to engage with sustainability and citizenship due to feeling they do not have the knowledge to respond to the complexities of the issue or because they come from a tradition where teaching is about facts rather than promoting a set of values or action.[38] However, esdgc fits the wider personal social and emotional development curriculum linked to supporting positive behaviour and inclusive settings and it being promoted in this way may be less daunting. One of my own previous studies noted that practitioners working in the Foundation Phase perceived certain barriers involved in delivering esdgc, including perceptions of time constraints, a curriculum which is already full, and themes that were too complex for young children.[39] This suggests that practitioners may value training and ideas to support esdgc in the Foundation Phase and that this should acknowledge that esdgc is not about being all-knowing, but involves a pedagogy linked to child-led learning, and adults as facilitators who encourage children to be creative and reflective problem solvers. Such skills may allow children the disposition to respond to some of the problems facing humanity as they grow older, as well as developing empathy for others which allows them to become

positive role models and citizens in later life.[40]

Others barriers to promoting ESDGC and some of the principles of Harmony are also relevant to an early years context. Practitioners and young children, especially in a Western context, live in a society increasingly removed from the natural environment. Several children may not have access to green space regularly or be involved in growing or preparing food. With the advent of central heating and other technological innovations, children may not be able to see the links between switching on electric appliances and non-renewable resources such as oil, gas and coal energy sources that make this possible. For others, natural cycles such as the carbon or nitrogen cycle may not be recognised in terms of the links between the living and non-living parts of nature. For example, in my own interactions with my own children, linking wood, coal, petrol and gas to carbon stores and thus to carbon dioxide pollution is not straightforward, and thus the expectation that children will understand how 'walk to school days' or switching off lights and electric appliances are designed to lower carbon emissions may need children and adults to revisit the more basic connections between the natural and human world.

Another perspective is provided by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which suggests that a child's development is influenced by his/her environment at different levels.[41] Such different levels include the immediate environment (microsystem, such as parents, peers, setting); the interactions between their immediate environment (mesosystem, such as the interaction between parents, setting and peers); the exosystem which are factors such as parents' employment conditions which will indirectly affect the child's wellbeing in terms of how often they will see their parents and the macrosystem which is the cultural and political context of the child's environment (which may include poverty, living in a developed or industrialised country and can evolve with time as successive generations impact on their environment). Another level, the chronosystem explores how socio-historical changes can impact on a child's development. In this context, the lives of children growing up today may be very different from those of the practitioners they work with: for example, the development of digital technology as a significant communication tool amongst the young. However, the context of the practitioners themselves will also be impacted by their own early environments, and in richer nations, as Davis argues, this has been characterised by overconsumption and consumerism which is at times at odds with long term sustainability.[42] However, to ignore this context can lead to ESDGC existing in a vacuum, and there may sometimes need to be a middle ground where practitioners

and children can be supported to engage with approaches, which may not be part of their current experience. On early years courses which I am personally involved in delivering, the provision of a safe environment in which to explore possible alternative approaches has been valuable. Such experiences include visits to Down to Earth, an outdoor centred in the Gower, on the Welsh coast, in order to experience learning in nature; visiting a Forest School in order to learn how to light fires, cook food and see the practical links between fuel and natural cycles; joining the John Muir Award in order to learn about a special environment and to support its conservation and learning about more sustainable ways of building can all provide valuable tasters to encourage engagement with esdgc. In doing this, practitioners and young children can develop innovative approaches to esgdc that may also support the values of Harmony.

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