The Role of Early Childhood Education for a Sustainable Society

Ingrid Engdahl
President of the Swedish OMEP Committee
Stockholm University, Department of Child and Youth Studies, www.buv.su.se
ingrid.engdahl@buv.su.se

Paper presented at the OMEP European Conference April 10-11, 2008, in Bratislava

Abstract:
This paper introduces learning for sustainable development as a new task for the OMEP organisation and for OMEP’s members. Sustainable development could be perceived as a new perspective for the early childhood curriculum.

The concept is defined and discussed. A preschool project on hens and egg is presented as an illustration of how learning for sustainable development could be carried out in preschools. The children were encouraged by their teachers to explore questions about life and death, about the life of hens and the different conditions hens have. With the help of continuous pedagogical documentation and an enquiry-based approach the teachers organised rich learning opportunities. The children were active and involved and the projected also resulted in changes in the economic routines for the preschools and schools in Värmdö.

As a conclusion learning for life is suggested as a possible guideline for early childhood education and care. The six R:s, Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Recycle, Respect and Refuse, also reach out towards sustainability and could serve as Reminders for the every-day activities.

Dear delegates and honoured guests

It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to address you today. I work at Stockholm University with Teacher Education and with Child and Youth Studies. One of the founders of the Preschool Teacher Education in Stockholm was Alva Myrdal, the same Alva Myrdal who was an active member in the founding committee of OMEP, and who was elected to become the first World President of OMEP. I am proud to continue her work, now as the president of the Swedish committee of OMEP. At our university we also honour and teach about Johan Amos Comenius, or rather Jan Koménsky as he is known to you, and our campus has a statue of Koménsky. We have recently edited two of his books in a modern translation.

Questions linked to sustainable development are also important within early childhood education and care. All over the world children, parents, professionals, researchers and politicians are involved with the problems linked to the survival of the planet, such as global warming, lack of fresh water, war and conflicts, pandemics.

There isn’t one joint understanding of the concept of sustainable development; in fact the interpretation is different according to the local conditions. However, I have chosen to use the definition, which was proposed by the Brundtland committee, appointed by UN, for the so called Agenda 21- conference in Rio in 1992:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The Brundtland Report, 1987, Our common future
When we talk about Education for a Sustainable Development (ESD) there are always three components involved; ecological, social/cultural and economic. Characteristically, these perspectives are intertwined and present themselves in reality and in themes. Yet another condition for ESD is that it also has to be performed in a democratic way ensuring participation and influence for all learners (empowerment).

ESD is composed of three pillars; ecologic, economic and social/cultural and is also carried out in a democratic and participatory way empowering all learners, children and teachers, to action competence (1+3)

Sustainable Development is an ambiguous concept with different understandings depending on which perspective and what issues you focus on. In Sweden, the parliament in 2003 decided upon a policy that demands a multiple approach and a holistic thinking. The policy also gives the task of ESD to all parts of the education system, including the preschools. With this task, there is a risk for a normative approach, the Education for a sustainable development turns into teaching about sustainability.

My understanding of the concept is based on the urgency and the importance to reach a more sustainable society. The realisation of ESD and Early Childhood Education (ECE) must be contextual as the actual situations around the world are so diverse and with very different resources. ESD calls for a change which challenges rich and poor, north and south, gender differences and inequality between and within countries. Thus, I can realise that we have to do with a political issue as we focus on human behaviour and changes in attitudes and in daily habits.

**The UN Millennium Goals**

The United Nations has pointed out some important steps towards a more sustainable society - The UN Millennium Goals, to be carried out before 2015, and UN has also pronounced this decade for Education for all. I will quickly address some of the UN goals:

- **Extinct extreme poverty and hunger**
  - 50 % less to live on one dollar a day
  - 50 % less that suffer from hunger

- **Free Primary Education for all children**
  All children – girls and boys – shall be able to finish school and more resources should be allocated for Early Childhood Education

- **Promote gender equity**
  Increase women’s power, reduce the death rate of children and develop health care for Mothers

- **Fight HIV/aids, malaria and other diseases**

- **Focus on Sustainable development**
  - 50 % less people who don’t have fresh drinking water in 2015
  - Help at least 100 million people in tin towns to better housing until 2015
Children, also the younger ones, can be told about and also discuss the Millennium goals. In my experience, they have some trouble understanding some of the goals, and they say for instance: *Shouldn’t all children have access to fresh water? And food for the day? Why have they put the goal to 50 per cent?* Getting to know how other people live is a pre-requisite for a broad perspective. Early Childhood Education can tell about the world and help children to know about each other’s conditions, which is a good basis for feeling, caring and empathic empowerment.

**The hen – a preschool project**

Early Childhood Education has a tradition, which is very appropriate for ESD with its theme-based or project-based interdisciplinary learning, which is also pointed out in The Swedish National Curriculum for the preschool. I will give you an example from a theme about HENS, which took place in Långvik’s preschool, in Värmdö, a municipal close to Stockholm, Sweden. The starting out point for this theme was a study visit to the Museum of Natural History. The excursion was planned to be the final high light of a Dinosaur project for a group of five year olds, but in reality, it started the next theme. The children stood looking at a huge dinosaur egg and started to discuss the relations between eggs, size, life, time et cetera.

Back in the preschool, the teachers interviewed all children, using questions like:

- What is alive, what carries life and what is not alive?
- Is there life within an egg?
- How come some eggs carry chickens and some don’t?
- How is life for a chicken?

The teachers analysed the answers and brought up common thoughts with the children. The theme grew into a project and the children, where the children were asked to come up with answers to all the questions. These are some examples of the children’s questions:

**About life in eggs:**
- Where does the life come from?
- Can a cock mate any hen?
- Why are eggs different?
- Can a chicken have baby-chickens?
- Do the eggs come from the pooh-pooh hole?

**About every-day life:**
- Can they go out-side?
- Can they fly?
- How much do they eat?
- Do they like bathing?
- How do they find worms?

The children and the teachers made good use of books and they also made lots of paintings and drawings of hens, cocks and chicken. The teachers also asked the children about more methods to find answers to all the questions, and there were many ideas:

- We can ask Anna’s grandmother
- We can read in a book about eggs, Mathilda has one at home
- We can go to a farm and ask
The Study visit to a poultry farm and all new knowledge were documented in different forms, and the teachers made good use of the video- and tape recorders, and put lots of things on show for parents and other interested. By using pedagogical documentation in a conscious way the teachers supported the learning processes and also made it easier for parents to become involved in the project. After having seen hens in reality the children wanted to make their own hens. With the use of chicken-wire and shredded paper all interested children created their own hen. This opened up for a new phase of the project, because the children also wanted to build houses for their hens. This lead to new realisations:

Life is not always nice. Most hens live in coops, small coops. They don’t even have a perch to sit on. Some hens stay indoors all their lives! The children now used advanced mathematics and building skills to construct coops that were copies of real hen-coops. And they learned that chicken and hens live under very different conditions.

There are Farm hens in narrow coops that are very crowded. There are Scratch hens, with slightly better conditions. They may move around somewhat, but only indoors. And there are also Free going hens, also called ecological, that may walk on their own both indoors and outdoors. I think you can guess what children think about the different living conditions – NOT fair.

The next step was to discuss the eggs. And children learned that eggs from farm hens are the cheapest ones and eggs from free going hens are the most expensive ones. In fact they figured out that for the same price you could buy six eggs from farm hens, five eggs from scratch hens and only four eggs from hens that were able to go outside.

Now was the time for the real world and the political perspective to enter the project. The children asked themselves: Where do our eggs come from? They ran to the kitchen to find out. THEY COME FROM FARM HENS. This was not acceptable for the children. They asked the cook to buy eggs from free going hens instead. But this was not allowed, according to the purchase routines in the municipality. No ecological farm was included on the list.

Together with their teachers the children started a PROTEST movement in order to change the purchase routines. They wrote to the school administration and to the local school board. And, they were invited to the school administrators to put there case forward. And they were successful. A change was made in the routines and from that day all preschools and schools in Värmdö are allowed to buy eggs from ecologic farms. And, of course this goes for all the families, relatives, and teachers too, and so on for ever and ever…

We should all promote a curriculum for Early Childhood Education (ECE) based on interdisciplinary project based learning, where question based methods make children active participators. The project above illustrates learning for sustainable development and it includes all the perspectives:

- Ecological, learning about live and death, food, nature and farms
- Social/cultural, learning about the different conditions for hens and the importance of caring
- Economic, learning about the price of eggs and why it varies so

The different perspectives are intertwined, one enhancing the other. And by using pedagogical documentation the teachers ensured participation and influence for all learners, them selves and the parents included, the project was absolutely performed in a democratic and empowering way.
ECE must be contextual
There is no universal model for what to do or how to integrate ESD into education. However, I think the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) can serve as a good common foundation. Quality within ECE should be looked upon as ‘the most appropriate and sustainable solution with the allocated resources in this particular place’. This approach enables teachers and parents to form their local programme.

Looking back at the origins of the preschools I would also like to suggest a somewhat changed overall goal. The EU objective Lifelong learning makes the individual human being responsible for always being up-to-date, always knowledgeable and employable. But for what purpose and in what society? Maybe not a sustainable one. I propose instead an old goal with a sustainable content Learning for Life. Everyday activities lay the foundation for future action patterns. What we do, and what we learn to do, in the early years make up the foundation of our socio-cultural behaviour for the rest of our lives.

Therefore, preschool education shall introduce behaviour that is sustainable and easy to do and understand. We could all become learners for sustainability and for survival by recapturing basic life skills. Within ECE multiple languages are used and allowed, both verbal and linked to the other senses, ECE thus supports holistic learning, which also is aligned with Sustainable Development.

There are some words – concepts – all starting with R, which could be useful in Early Childhood Education. I don’t mean the three R:s reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. Instead I suggest the following concepts:

REDUCE - REUSE – REPAIR – RECYCLE – RESPECT - REFUSE

Working with these concepts as a curricular backbone can give us children who are ready for action as citizens in a sustainable world.

Invitation to Sweden
Finally, I would like to invite you all to the next OMEP congress. We are privileged to have been chosen as organisers and I hereby welcome you to the 26th OMEP World Congress in Göteborg, August 11-13, 2010. The theme of the congress is very aligned with my presentation here:
Children – citizens in a challenged world
- Sustainable Development
- Different Childhood
- Gender Equity and Equal rights

We have lots of projects going on in Swedish preschools around this theme and we hope to present many of them in 2010. You will find more information on the website www.omep2010.org.

Thank you for your attention!
References:


