

'Be the Change' – Early Childhood Studies – Project Report

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Our project had three aims:

Firstly, to gain insight into current thinking in relation to Education for Sustainability (EfS) within our discipline – in order to articulate a working definition of EfS for Early Childhood Studies (ECS).

Secondly, to apply this insight to our curriculum, in dialogue with colleagues – in order to highlight instances of EfS within ECS and to identify opportunities for EfS in all ECS modules.

Thirdly, to plan activities to highlight and foreground EfS within ECS – beginning with a prepared induction week activity for EfS and developing means for students to track knowledge and understanding, skills, and attributes of EfS throughout their course.

Brief background to EfS within ECS:

Early Childhood Studies, as a discipline, encompasses many aspects of sustainability. We follow the heritage of theorists and pioneer educators who aspired to change the world by means of transformative early educational opportunities. We are passionate about the health, well-being, learning and optimal development of all children and their families. We advocate for embracing of diversity and fair, inclusive policies and practices in early childhood education and care. We foster awareness of the environment via experiential learning and connecting children with nature through outdoor learning and creative play. In our course there is a strong emphasis upon Children's Rights and we aim for an ethos of democracy and active participation underpinned by ethics of care. Thus the 'change' that we want to bring about is for colleagues and students to recognise these implicit features of ECS as 'sustainability' and to highlight them explicitly as 'Education for Sustainability'. This focus upon EfS is essential for students of ECS, in HE, as they will go on to work with the youngest children and their families with real prospects for raising awareness of sustainability through influencing values and attitudes at a vital early stage in life.

The project:

The funding from the 'Be the Change' project enabled Mallika Kanyal, Christine Such and Paulette Luff to attend the 'Early Education' annual conference, as an opportunity for insight into EfS in our subject area. We participated in workshops with colleagues (from other HEIs and from practice) and heard Professor John Siraj-Blatchford speak on 'Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood: a retrospective on the UNESCO Decade and prospects for the future'. In this keynote talk examples of Early Childhood Care and Education for Sustainable Development (ECCESD) from around the world showed the capabilities of young children to observe, reflect and take action upon the world in order to transform it. ECCESD is needed to make a difference and redress inequalities, especially in parts of the world where children's lives are under threat due to political and economic crises, natural disaster, disease or other forms of disadvantage.

Following this experience, the distinctions between education for sustainable development (ESD) and education for sustainability (EfS), were discussed. ESD is increasingly important in our field with one of the draft targets for the proposed global Sustainable Development Goal for education being: 'by 2030 ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. We identified a difference

between ESD, which is what we aspire to and are working towards with and for all young children, and EfS as the focus for higher education students of ECS, with whom we are developing understandings and ways of working towards ECCESD.

The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Early Childhood Studies, updated in 2014, emphasises an ecological approach, understanding the complexities of family lives and children's development in various social and cultural contexts. It states that: '*A critical analysis of children as active participants, their rights and an anti-bias approach which considers early childhood as a site for democracy, sustainability and social justice underpins and permeates the subject*'. In the course at ARU we are:

- working towards social and cultural sustainability through recognition of diversity, rejection of bias and stereotyping, and the creation of caring, inclusive participatory communities of learners;
- aiming for economic sustainability through democratic decision making, careful consumption, reduction of waste and raised awareness of equity and social justice;
- plus developing a sense of place and respect for the environment with opportunities for intercultural and global learning.

These definitions were shared with colleagues, including tutors from our regional colleges, when we met for curriculum planning in July, and formed the basis for a useful discussion of EfS within ECS. As a result of this we created an initial mapping of EfS opportunities across all course modules. This took two forms, firstly looking at the QAA 'Education for Sustainable Development: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers' and identifying in which modules those criteria for knowledge, skills and attitudes might be met and, secondly, looking at the nine core modules for the course and highlighting strong features of ESD/EfS within these modules.

We have now planned activities for induction week that will highlight EfS from the outset of our courses. One aspect of this will be a quiz, using 'Kahoot' or similar mobile phone multiple choice approach, as a baseline for identifying and discussing students' knowledge of aspects of sustainability. The second will be a practical activity in which we provide examples of evidence of children's lives around the world and then set students the task of finding statistics relating to infant and child mortality, prevalence of disease, access to healthcare, nutrition, water and sanitation, education etc. We will then create 100 'children', using reclaimed materials sourced from a local scrap project, and then use these (and photographs of these) to represent percentages of children.

Our original intention was to develop and prepare a means for ECS students to map / track EfS throughout their course but, after discussion, we have decided that the more democratic and participatory approach (aligned to EfS) will be to discuss sustainability with students, proactively, and encourage them to identify where they have learned about sustainability within their course.

Next steps:

This 'Be the Change' project has renewed and strengthened our commitment to work for sustainability through our early childhood teaching and research. We look forward to ongoing discussion between ourselves with regional partners and students as is part of developing our learning community within the culture of an ecological, systemic approach. We intend to record and celebrate our induction week activities and to share our ongoing definitions of EfS and approaches to highlighting sustainability within ECS – initially amongst colleagues in our department, school and faculty and then more widely through the national ECS Degrees Network and via OMEP UK.