

A Green Childhood: Sustainability in Early Childhood.

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I am a student in Wales and I am writing this journal article which will explore the benefits and challenges of delivering Education for Sustainability in Early Childhood settings. I will explore the ESDGC, Estyn and its reports on the deliverance of ESDGC, Australia and the ESD and National Early Years Framework, the challenges practitioners face delivering ESDGC. The Foundation Phase will also be looked at alongside the opportunities to integrate the ESDGC into the Foundation Phase. I will explore outdoor learning and Forest Schools and early years theory and pedagogy.

Our next generation of children are growing up in a changing world. We are experiencing challenges such as climate change and global warming. Nature is being damaged, a third of our planets natural resources are gone and eighty percent of our forests have gone. Something needs to be done to educate our next generation, to ensure they grow up with the abilities to be able to cope in an ever-changing world. Recycling is not enough, we need to get to the core of the problems and educate on this for change (Psyche Truth, 2008; Williams, 2013).

Taking the classroom to the outdoors provides a real link between theory and the reality of the issues that affect our life choices and our natural world. Children need to be aware of sustainable development from a young age in order to form good habits in their adult lives (Belgeonne et al., 2014; Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2007).

Every child has the right to Education for Sustainable and Global Citizenship (ESDGC). Article 29 of the UNCRC states that a child's education should enable them to learn to respect others, their own and human rights and should help children to live a peaceful life, to protect and nurture the environment and the people in it. Agenda 21 is global plan of action that clearly states that everyone all over the world needs to take responsibility for their impact on nature and the only way to achieve and address these issues is to promote it through education (Fien and Tilbury, 1998; Sustainable Development, no date; Unicef, no date).

Wales.

In Wales, we have the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), which aims to educate all learners in Wales on the effect we have on the economy and the environment, it is delivered across all education settings in Wales. The ESDGC is compulsory in settings and allows children to develop an awareness of the world around them from an early age (Carmarthenshire County Council, No date; Tinney and Hirst, 2018; Welsh Government, 2017).

The ESDGC has seven themes the natural environment, consumption and waste, climate change, wealth and poverty, identity and culture, choices and decisions and health. Practitioners educate children based on these seven themes and in more recent years the ESDGC is slowly becoming rooted into subjects across the curriculum (Welsh Government, (2017).

Wales have also introduced the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, this act is about improving the environment in Wales, to create a Wales that people want to live in now and in the future (Welsh Government, 2015).

In order to ensure that settings are delivering the ESDGC, it became part of the inspection framework for Estyn in 2010. Estyn inspect the quality of the provision made for ESDGC in all education settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017).

In 2008, Wales introduced a new curriculum, the Foundation Phase. The foundation Phase placed the child at the centre of learning as it considers the holistic development of children (Tinney and Hirst, 2018; Welsh Assembly Government, 2008), the ESDGC is deeply rooted within the foundation phase, here the emphasis is on experiential learning that takes place both indoors and outdoors. The foundation Phase places emphasis on the environment and the people who live there and the ESDGC teaches learners awareness of the world around them, from an early age (Carmarthenshire County Council, No date).

Australia.

In Australia, they have the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD), the aim of the ESD is to educate the people of Australia on sustainability to conserve the environment for future generations (Department of the Environment and Energy, 1992).

Australia have the Early Years Learning Framework for children from birth to five, this was developed as a guide to enable practitioners to provide children with open ended play based learning and is similar to the Foundation Phase. It is based on three themes, belonging, being and becoming (Australian Government, 2012; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, No date).

The National Early Years Learning Framework recommends that sustainability should be rooted in to daily routines in all settings (Edwards et al., 2012).

The Early Years Learning Framework also places the child at the centre and has a holistic approach that enables children to develop a connection with their environment (Australian Government, 2012). Early Childhood education on sustainability is growing in Australia and they have recognised that it is crucial that Early years children are increasingly aware of education for sustainability. In one Early Years setting in Australia, the children had taken an interest in the quality of the lake that lay next to the school. A practitioner responded to the children's interest and helped the children to improve the lake. When they carried out some water tests, they found the water was polluted, the children worked hard and planted new reeds in the water and litter picked in the surrounding areas. A year later the children were able to see the benefits of caring for their local lake as they now could see that animals had now come to live in the lake and surrounding areas and the area was bursting with life. The children had a real-life hand on experience with true meaning (Lewis et al., 2010).

Estyn.

In 2006, Estyn conducted their own research into how Settings incorporate ESDGC into their settings and to see if there were any challenges that prevented them from delivering the ESDGC. One of their main findings was that the ESDGC was being delivered as a separate subject and found that settings were doing a lot of work around recycling and energy saving (sustainable development) but were not focused on global citizenship. On a positive note, most settings were recycling. This research highlighted the fact that practitioners were lacking knowledge of ESDGC and they

expressed their confusion on it, even though practitioners had identified the need to extend their provision of the ESDGC (Estyn, 2006).

This research was repeated in 2014 and an improvement in the deliverance of global citizenship was noticed. The report found that most children understood the importance of looking after the environment and the fact that we rely on it for food and energy, pupils in all key stages had sound understanding on inequality and the effects it has on people's lives. Another improvement found was that schools now had ESDGC Policies in place and had identified key practitioners to take over the responsibility for delivering ESDGC throughout the setting (Estyn, 2014).

Challenges of delivering to children.

Children all over the world in early childhood settings have awareness on the impact we are having on the environment. Children understand and have ideas on how we can improve on it (Edwards et al., 2012).

Some practitioners also believe that ESDGC is too difficult for children to understand (Tinney, 2013).

Children in their early years have a strong desire to learn and develop and as children grow older, they have the potential to change, often managing to influence their families to introduce change, therefore they could be the driving force between introducing a more sustainable thinking future (Davis et al., 2008).

Children understand what is going on in the world, they understand that throwing rubbish in the sea has an impact on the creatures that live in the sea, they know we have to protect the environment and the people and animals living in it, they understand that we need the plants for medicine and that without trees, we will have no oxygen (Engdahl and Rabusicova, 2010).

With this in mind, we ask the question 'why do practitioners struggle to deliver sustainability to children?'

Many practitioners struggle to understand sustainability and whether or not we should be teaching this to the children within our settings.

In Wales, research has found that practitioners who had received little or no training were lacking in confidence to deliver the ESDGC. This research also found that in schools where ESDGC was delivered well, these practitioners had received training and time was well spent discussing and training staff through in-house training (Estyn 2006; Estyn 2014).

In Wales, new teachers receive training in ESDGC as part of their initial teacher training. Settings should be utilising these new teacher's knowledge in order to shape their policy and practice (Belgeonne et al., 2014).

Australia also share the same problem, they have identified that early childhood practitioners recognise that they are lacking in confidence to know how to teach ESD and to know the exact content that children are capable of and should be learning (Edwards et al., 2012).

Practitioners could include children in the decision making on how to include ESDGC and ESD into settings as this would enable practitioners to ensure that the content was suited to the needs of children's everyday lives (Davis et al., 2008).

Another reason practitioners struggle to deliver the ESDGC effectively to children is that they see it as something extra that they need to cover, they view it as an add on rather than linking it into everyday activities at the setting (Tinney, 2013). Many authors believe that the ESDGC should be embedded into everyday activities, what children learn and see as part of a daily routine becomes rooted into the children (WAG, 2008).

Outdoor Learning.

An advantage to children being outdoors is that they develop an awareness of their environment and all the living things within it. Children can begin to understand how the natural world works and develop relationships with the environment that will allow them to nurture and develop positive attitudes to sustainability (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007).

Both the foundation Phase and the ESDGC encourage children to be outdoors. When children are allowed to explore and discover in the outdoors, they have first-hand experience of the changing seasons, the different weathers and incidentally experience conservation and sustainability, this enables them to develop a love for nature (Department for children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009).

One of the ways to which a practitioner can improve their knowledge of ESDGC and allow the children to experience outdoors is to attend a Forest school. A Forest Schools approach has similar principles to the Foundation Phase pedagogy. Forest school training courses provide practitioners with the knowledge and links to the ESDGC, such training allows practitioners to develop their knowledge of ESDGC and will enable them to develop their own forest school areas at their respective settings. It is important that practitioners model good behaviour while being outdoors and show respect for the environment, as this will show good practice to the children and in doing so, they may imitate their behaviour. Forest Schools provide children with practical child-led hands on learning experiences as can be seen in picture A, but it is not enough to just go outdoors the one time, in order for it to be successful, ESDGC and the principles of forest school have to be embedded into daily life (Barkham, 2014; Boyd et al., 2017; DCELLS, 2009; Robertson, Sear and Lee, 2013). However, some authors argue that children are only developing knowledge of what may be right for them and their environment and children do not learn how to behave and preserve nature (Davis and Elliott, 2014).



Picture A. (Source: Opal School, 2017)

Theory.

Part of the problem with delivering the ESDGC is that many practitioners believe that it is an add on subject, they do not realise that it can be integrated into daily life at a setting (Tinney and Hirst, 2018). However, ESDGC should not be seen as an add on subject, it should be rooted into settings in everything they do (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

Children attending a Steiner school experience nature as part of everyday life. Here, nature is both inside the classroom as well as outside. Every room contains plants, to which the children learn to care for, many Steiner settings have animals in

the garden and again the children learn to care for them. Children develop a caring connection with others and a connection with the natural world, they aim to awaken a student's interest in the world and encourage children to become independent thinkers (Hooton, 2014; Three Rivers School, 2012; Waldorf 100, 2017).

Steiner schools value the child and believe in protecting and nurturing children in the immediate environment, they protect children from the news and media until they believe they are ready for it. However, some authors believe that children should not be protected too much as they can incidentally come across a news article about what is going on in the world and this then needs to be explained to them (Collins, 2008).

The Steiner Approach is similar to the Reggio Emilia approach. Children in Reggio Emilia settings are able to explore and discover, and to learn through their senses, to ask questions, solve problems and to think further. There is no formal teaching in a Reggio setting. Children play with open ended natural materials and the environment is seen as the third educator, Reggio Emilia settings place a strong focus on nature and also have living plants indoors (Cartoon Madrasah, 2014; Guilletots Playful Learning, 2016).

Montessori agrees with many of the above. It was her vision that children be allowed to independently explore, to learn through hands on experiences. Children attending a Montessori nursery are free to explore and to develop their senses. There is no formal teaching at a Montessori setting, children learn through hands on discovery and practitioners are there to assist the children, if needed (Educational Video Publishing, 2015; No Small Matter, 2016).

Vygotsky also believed in this theory of children learning through discovery, as he believed that children needed a more knowledgeable other who can assist the child to consolidate their learning. However, he believed that children needed to be in the zone of proximal development to consolidate their learning, this also goes along with the practice of the Montessori setting as children are not interrupted in their play, therefore a child is able to concentrate fully in their play and this is when real learning takes place (Educational Video Publishing, 2015; Harkonen, no date; Khan Academy Medicine, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Piaget believed that children needed hands on experiences to learn and to investigate and interact through their senses, he believed that children needed opportunities to repeat experiences and time to learn at their own pace with guidance from a practitioner (Blake and Pope, 2008; Grotewell and Burton, 2008).

Bronfenbrenner believed that the child should be placed at the centre of our thinking and that there should be clear links between settings and home and in the wider community (Harkonen, no date).



Picture B. (Source: Stock Photo, No date).

Making Connections.

All the above theories and pedagogy's link with the ethos within the Foundation Phase and the ESDGC.

Integrating the ESDGC into the Foundation Phase seems relatively simple as there are clear links that can be made between the Foundation Phase and the ESDGC. For example, a simple cooking activity of making pizza can link knowledge and understanding of the world in the Foundation Phase with Identity and culture from the ESDGC. Children can learn where the ingredients come from, look at a map and locate the countries, they could learn if pizza is a national food and visit a pizza parlour and identify any Italian links within their community (Boyd et al, 2017; Tinney et al., no date).

Taking into account the theory discussed in the above, it is clear to see that education for sustainability can be connected (Harkonen, no date).

It is the next generation that needs to be more environmentally aware and change is needed, to enable children to understand this they must be given opportunity through exploration and discovery in their early years.

Today's children are growing up in a new world filled with technology and it is felt that they are losing their connections with the natural world. Being outside, children can begin to learn about the living things in their environment and how the natural world works, as can be seen in picture B, children are developing a natural connection with nature, this is achieved by having the opportunity to explore it for themselves (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2007). The foundation phase is based around the holistic learning of the child and is a play based curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015). The ESDGC is also based around children and experiential learning both indoors and outdoors (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

The Foundation Phase framework states that children need to have the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world, to use all their senses to learn and to begin to understand and respect living things and the environment (WG, 2015). As can be seen in picture C, children need to have hands on experience with nature in all weathers, the ESDGC also says that children need to be encouraged to learn how to care for themselves, the environment and for living things. It looks at all living things and teaches about how living things relate with one another (WAG, 2008).

The Foundation Phase provides opportunity for children to develop themselves and encourage them to become creative thinkers (WG, 2015), the ESDGC encourages

and supports children's thinking skills and encourages children to engage in their own learning (WAG, 2008).



Picture C. (Source: Getty Images, No date).

Conclusion.

While Government appear to be doing all they can by introducing acts and education for sustainable development, there is a problem with getting that message across to our future generations.

Some settings such as Steiner and Montessori appear to be able to achieve allowing children to learn through play and educating their children to care and nurture their environment.

Much more needs to be done in terms of training practitioners on the ESDGC and how to incorporate it back into their settings.

Practitioners need to recognise that children are capable of understanding and learning anything that crosses their path.

It is interesting to read that Australia are becoming increasingly aware of the need to educate children in their early years.

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