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Thinking Global and Acting Local, and Thinking Local and Acting Global: Sustainable Development in Early Childhood Care and Education

John Siraj-Blatchford and Valerie Huggins

In the 1960s and 1970s it was common to talk about "Thinking *global*, and acting *local*. That was a time when the environmental problems we were facing were all around us...air and water pollution, unsustainable land fill practices, industrial effluent. There has been progress, but increasingly governments around the world have become more aware of much bigger threats, like that of climate change, which require international cooperation and collaboration at a level we have never known before. Today we need to educate children to understand global interdependency and we need to promote an education for global citizenship. The situation is such that even if everyone in the Minority World of northern Europe and the UK, and even the USA, quickly became carbon neutral, and we stopped adding to global warming it would already be too late for us on our own to avoid the natural feedback systems that can accelerate the warming effects. We are not, in fact, making very good progress towards the target reductions that have been recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) to reduce the likelihood of these feedback effects happening.

Our future security now depends on working together, it depends upon us setting a better example to the rest of the world, and showing solidarity with other nations that are already bearing the brunt of the global effects. The level of scientific consensus is actually quite remarkable. Governments around the world are taking action, sometimes, and increasingly, at significant cost to short term economic growth.

In the circumstances, "Thinking global and acting local" is no longer sufficient, ESD needs to promote global citizenship and solidarity. Being a citizen means accepting the rights and responsibilities of being a member of a community. In some settings around the world more than others, teachers are aware of their responsibility to the diversity in the local community around them. In far fewer so far, this caring for the community extends to humanity as a whole, to global diversity, and the needs of the Earth as a whole. Yet our recognition of global interdependence is profoundly important in collectively dealing with the environmental and biological challenges that we face. Arguably, such a promotion of global citizenship presents the most significant ongoing challenge to early childhood education. We need to be thinking local and acting globally as well as thinking globally and acting locally.

One way that we have been trying to achieve this in practice has been in creating learning partnerships between children, students and practitioners in the UK and in sub-saharan Africa. Some of these are part of the British Council 'Connecting Classrooms' initiative (British Council 2014) and some are supported by OMEP, but either way, we have learnt that there are significant challenges for all involved.

One example of this work has been the Exeter Ethiopia Link in Devon which supports up to 20 school links with settings in Nekemte in Ethiopia. Originally involving mainly primary children, the introduction of O grade schooling for children aged 4-6 in Ethiopia is now giving the schools involved a focus on Early Education. Another project has been the World Organisation for Early Childhood (OMEP) partnership between a similar number of preschools in East Dorset and in

Kenya. One of the most significant difficulties with such initiatives has often been that there have been unchallenged assumptions made that they will be of benefit for everyone involved, a taken-for-granted notion that they are a good thing, based on notions of cultural supremacy from the UK participants, and an opportunity for obtaining money and material resources from the Ethiopian and Kenyan perspective.

There are clearly different concerns about sustainability in the two communities. In the Majority World context of Ethiopia and Kenya, the focus of survival and sustainability is short-term, the emphasis is on access to basic education, health-care, nutrition and sanitation, while for us in the over-developed world it is on how to develop what we have without compromising further the needs of the children of the future. 'Sustainability' is an ever-evolving concept but issues of inequity apply in all communities. If you employ the sustainability lens/approach to curriculum in the same way, the communities in the two countries will learn different things, and thus ESD reveals the inadequacy of the conceptual construction of the Connecting Classrooms which seems to imply that both sides will learn and benefit in a similar way, simply learning about each other.

A key voice in this debate, Vanesa Andreotti (2011:147) has argued that school links of this kind have the potential to:

“provide an exciting and highly motivating opportunity to enable learners to engage ethically and productively with complex and interdependent processes that shape global/local contexts, identities and struggles for justice today and to build global solidarity.”

But they have to be undertaken using a critical approach. Andreotti characterises this postcolonial perspective in terms of a debate that:

- problematises the representation of the Third World (*sic*) and the issues of power, voice and cultural subordination/supremacy
- questions notions of development and visions of reality that are imposed as universal
- recognises the violence of colonialism and its effects, but also acknowledges its productive outcomes
- questions Eurocentrism, charity and 'benevolence'
- also questions issues of identity, belonging and representation, and the romanticism (*sic*) of the South. (Andreotti 2006a:3)

Postcolonial theory argues that we substantially create who we are by defining who we are not. The inevitable recognition of difference resulting from European/Western exploration and colonisation led to Minority World ideas, values and customs being projected as superior to those of the Majority World (Bennett 2009) and so to the notion of a 'civilising' mission on the part of the Minority World, a notion still seen in the underlying discourses of global education in the National Curriculum (DfES 2005) and in the Global Link programme (DfID 2011), as well as in much media coverage of events in the Majority World. It has also led to the very common perception that countries and people in the Majority World are essentially inadequate and incompetent, so encouraging a response based upon intervention, aid and the attempt to impose Minority World practices. Andreotti goes on to argue that there are several dangers to such well-meaning initiatives and that they can have unintended consequences if embarked upon uncritically. The first is that such links too easily promote a limited multicultural approach based on a limited knowledge of customs and cultural artefacts, thus emphasising the surface differences between peoples, rather than an intercultural and postcolonial one with its focus on our shared humanity and the flow of ideas between and among cultural groups (Cantle, 2012). They can also reinforce stereotypes through the uncritical celebration of diversity and a patronising attitude from the North to the South. What has been needed has been for the UK schools to be prompted to undertake a rigorous and continuous self-critique on North/South power, Western supremacy and the origins of inequalities in labour and resources and ethnocentric benevolence. This begs the question of how this can be done in Early Childhood settings in a way that is meaningful and relevant for young children. A third danger is that the UK practitioners want

to 'harvest' the cultural resources of the Ethiopian and Kenyan settings in order to enhance their curriculum and gain an international award and the approval of Ofsted. In doing so, the teachers 'romanticise' aspects of Ethiopian/Kenyan culture that are appealing, in a 'saris and samosas', tip of the cultural iceberg way. They also expect these aspects to stay rooted in the past, without a recognition of the changing and ever-evolving nature of cultures, for example, . most Ethiopians and Kenyans now wear Western clothes rather than traditional dress. The partnerships have to avoid cultural nostalgia and the projection of inaccurate images when they teach about similarities as well as cultural differences. In return for this 'local' culture, the English schools have typically offered aid, and a 'globalised' culture and language, which by implication, is often expected to replace indigenous culture in the long term. This tendency is made more powerful by the understandable appeal, especially to young Ethiopians and Kenyans, of the global culture, which holds out the possibilities of wider opportunities, and greater wealth.

The ESD agenda can present practitioners a way of working in an ethical and productive way through offering a challenging and critical pedagogy, and the North/South partnerships can provide safe spaces for collaborative enquiry. There are certainly challenges to be recognised on both sides of the partnership to this way of promoting the pillars of ESD. One is that it requires a critical examination of both the Western and the African construction of knowledge, beliefs and values, when often the Western knowledge is privileged and the African marginalised. The issues of inequalities in wealth and in power relationships must be recognised when linking settings in the UK and in Africa. The British Council (2014) is very clear in its guidelines that the Connecting Classrooms initiative is about cultural exchange and sharing experiences for mutual benefit. We would argue that the motives of such a link need to be clearly negotiated from the outset. This may involve challenging many preconceptions and assumptions, particularly if the partnership involves a setting from a Majority World low-income community.

With the Nekemte-Exeter link, the sharing of cultural experiences is at the heart of the project. Such an approach is constantly under pressure from both sides. Once the practitioners in the UK become aware of the lack of resources and basic facilities, such as toilets, in their link school, they often initiate fund-raising events. This could be critiqued as an extension of the colonial responsibility to "help", leading to an increased self-worth and increased respect within their own communities for their charitable benevolence. But could it be interpreted in a positive way through the lens of sustainability? One partner in the link provides some finance for the other to make their lives more sustainable through improved health. The receiving community contributes labour and local expertise to the project. The same happens with providing spring capping. The children in Ethiopia gain considerably by not having to spend so much time and energy collecting water and improved health, while the English children learn about their responsibilities towards water being a world resource, that is precious and they need to use it sparingly and reuse when possible. It opens up the potential for the Ethiopian children to critique the overconsumption that can occur when water comes freely out of a tap in everyone's homes, and to challenge their aspirations for a Western lifestyle, which will compromise the future of their local environment. This one example highlights the complexity of the global/local processes that can be critiqued, even by very young children through such shared projects.

In the case of the UK-Kenyan preschools the partnership is focused on the sharing of ESD curriculum resources. Communication between the preschools was initially carried out directly using text messaging and occasionally email (where available). But each pair of preschools has also been provided with a secure (password protected) web page and the English preschools are being encouraged to provide some help to their partners in getting online. The OMEP partnership project team in the UK and Kenya provide all the preschools with practical ideas on how they can support their partners and they circulate information on joint projects e.g. <http://www.globalhandwashingday.org.uk/> and other ESD themes and projects. The UK preschools benefit significantly from the illustrations of innovative recycling and the reuse of resources that they draw from Kenya, the Kenyan preschools have so far gained most significantly in terms of their introduction to new pedagogical models and resources.

The potential problem of encouraging culturally chauvinist and patronising attitudes through charitable giving on the one hand, and in fostering attitudes of dependency on the other were addressed from the start. The partnerships were developed with a view to achieving social, economic and environmental sustainability through ‘carbon partnerships’ where both parties support each other in achieving convergence in their environmental impact (measured through carbon emissions) to achieve their ‘fair earth share’ within global limits. Many resources are now available to support schools and other institutions in accounting for their carbon footprints, and in the UK and in many other nations a Government Minister has been appointed to provide leadership and direction in encouraging such efforts. Preschools seeking to reduce their footprint need to look at many different aspects of their lives e.g. their energy use, their use of transport, food, waste, what they buy, potential for recycling etc. The partnerships provide a means by which the children and wider preschool community can compare their situation to those commonly experienced in Africa.

The UK and Kenyan partners are therefore encouraged to provide mutual support to their partners by:

- Providing support in sustaining and developing the preschool provision
- Developing resources and curriculum
- Reducing (where appropriate) carbon footprints
- Sharing knowledge and ideas
- Listening and learning from each other
- Gaining strength from the knowledge shared concerns
- Fund raising (when appropriate) for JUSTICE rather than CHARITY



We have estimated that a typical Kenyan preschool has a carbon footprint of about 3kg per child

For a typical UK preschool we estimate the carbon footprint to be about 600kg



The Carbon Partners model turn the idea of fundraising “out of kindness” around by showing that, based on carbon usage, the school in the global North might initially be considered to be providing compensation to their partner school!

Yet another danger of school linking is that the giving of material resources from UK to the Ethiopian and Kenyan settings can be seen as privileging Western knowledge and pedagogy through these cultural symbols, with the English teachers perceiving their African partners as deficient/inferior in their approaches because of their lack of resources, reflecting Bhabha’s moral imperative to ‘improve’ the Other as a civilising mission. School links if seen in this way can become an affirmation of Minority World privilege and a call for action (Andreotti 2011). These messages are easily transmitted through to the children and can lead to the replication of unhelpful stereotypes and practices, based on the discourses of aid. But it is often not sufficiently appreciated that these discourses can have negative effects upon the recipients, reinforcing their self-definition as victims of colonialism who are ‘entitled’ to compensation, a stance which can weaken their responsibility and willingness to make more use of the increasing wealth and resources of their own country and continent. How can this be counteracted? One way is that resources donated by the English teachers are critically evaluated, in open and equal dialogue, in terms of their suitability for the Ethiopian or Kenyan contexts and then replicated using locally sourced materials. In Devon, many settings use mini whiteboards and marker pens for early literacy. The teachers in Nekemte could see the potential for supporting exploratory marketing, especially with very limited access to paper

and pens. A local group of carpenters with disabilities was commissioned to make hundreds of mini-blackboards. This is now developing into a sustainable business as they are making a range of resources for mathematics too. This is sustainable and not reliant upon a continuous supply of donations.

It seems clear that if such initiatives as Connecting Classrooms are to promote ESD they must involve stronger and more critical examination of current taken-for-granted approaches. The conceptual framework that we find useful to support this work is Andreotti's critical literacy (Andreotti & Warwick 2007). Drawing on the work of Spivak, she puts forward a 4 stage model (Andreotti 2011). It starts with the fundamental process of **learning to unlearn** where we become aware of our own views and perspectives, of their dangers and limitations, recognising that they come from our own contexts. This allows a deeper recognition that although we are different from others in our own contexts, we share much in common. An example of this is a Journey to School Project carried out by the children in a school in Devon and one in Nekemte in Ethiopia.

The children in each of the schools started the Project by sharing their experiences of their journey from home with each other in their own class, using a mix of photographs, drawings and talking. In Devon, the school was in a large village on the edge of a city. The children had quite short journeys, mostly by car as the parents dropped them off on their way into work, with some children walking accompanied by their parents. The partner school in Nekemte was in a rural area several kilometres from the town. All the children walked but the distances varied. They walked with the other children and very few were accompanied by their parents.

The next stage, **learning to listen**, involved the children in making comparisons of experiences within their own community, considering the benefits and disadvantages of their choice of transport. Using the concept of carbon footprint the teachers encouraged the children to consider the environmental impact of their journey.

The children then **learned to learn** from the perspectives of others through the exchange of letters, drawings and scribed photos on the topic of My Journey to School from the linked school. The teachers encouraged the children to consider the journeys through a sustainability lens and they then reconsidered their own experiences.

Andreotti's next step is being able to reach out and take this new understanding about the economic, environment and social impact of their journeys to consider other ways of behaving, and this may involve challenging the taken-for-granted ways of doing things. This can be tricky, when in England the families may have choices not open to those in Ethiopia, such as using a car or walking, but the English children can consider their journey in terms of environmental friendliness and the impact of their families' choices on people elsewhere in the world.

Having undertaken this curriculum project, the children move on to another, with the Devon school and the Nekemte school taking in turns to identify the topic and engage in another cycle. As Andreotti (2011:230) notes "once one has learnt to reach out in one context, one is ready to start a new cycle of unlearning, listening, learning and reaching out again at another level." Another aspect of the cycle is the interaction with the families of the children and this may lead to conflict, if the practitioners in the setting are challenging the actions and beliefs of the parents.

Using a critical literacy approach to ESD will ensure that the children will be able to learn about different perspectives of complex global/local processes such as recycling and consider the implications of their own beliefs and actions. They will start to make responsible and conscious choices in the way they behave and start to form ethical and caring relationships with people in their own community and beyond (Andreotti 2011).

The promotion of intercultural capabilities, such as empathy, curiosity and respect (Barrett, 2013), has to be central to the professional development of practitioners in order to counteract the dangers of linked projects and to ensure that they are beneficial to all.

In our area, teacher education, we see the need to reorient our existing pedagogical approaches to ECE to explicitly include the 3 pillars of sustainability in all aspects of our work. We must underpin this with an ethos of interculturalism and the development of practitioners' intercultural capabilities. In practice this means both embedding a culture of sustainability in our everyday routines and behaviours and offering opportunities for project-based work on sustainability topics that will provoke young children into critical discussion, problem solving and systemic thinking.

To do the former, practitioners must adopt a whole-setting approach based on the principles of sustainability. Daily practices, such as recycling, saving energy and water, and giving them a voice in decision-making the setting, such as in circle time, will show young children that they can make a difference within the scope of their lives. For the latter, the project-based approach (Ji & Stumcke 2014), practitioners must consider specific activities that will for example provide intercultural encounters.

In this article our intention has not been prescriptive in telling you what should be thought or believed, our intention has been to raise greater awareness of the benefits and limitations, even dangers, of international partnerships. From our experiences, we are hoping to open up sites of dialogue and spaces for reflection for you to choose to take these ideas forward in a way that fits for your community.

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