Children: Citizens in a Challenged World

Introduction to the 26th OMEP World Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden, August 11–13, 2010

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This special issue of IJEC will present most of the key notes, the OMEP World Project on ESD and some of the other contributions to the congress. The congress had 758 participants from 72 countries. I thank you all for your contributions, which made the congress into an event full of involved and happy meetings in the best interest of the world's youngest children.

The congress attracted a large interest, with in total around 370 abstracts. There were around 200 abstracts for the strand *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)*, making this congress the largest meeting ever on ESD within Early Childhood Education. 50 abstracts addressed the strand *Gender equity and equal rights* and 120 abstracts within the strand *Different childhoods*. There were five key note speeches, around 100 parallel sessions and around 50 poster presentations intertwined with study visits to preschools and informal talks with colleagues.

In his key note speech the former Foreign Minister of Sweden Jan Eliasson started by saying that we don't have sufficient respect for the wisdom of young children. In fact Eliasson wanted to change the title to Children—challenged citizens in a changing world, and deplored that children have become 'objects of warfare'. Children and women are suffering the most in disasters. They are exposed to violence, they are victims and bystanders and also war zones lead to many wounded and traumatised children.

Jan Eliasson quoted articles 1, 3 and 26 from the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and showed by exchanging the world people to children that children are not respected as humans. This disrespect and the maltreatment of children are reasons for developing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). However, Eliasson stated that children are still not respected as citizens and even the UNCRC is not respected, not implemented, not even known all over the world, although it is ratified by almost all nations.

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Jan Eliasson asked for a deeper involvement and higher priority by governments to reach the eight UN Millennium Development Goals. The evaluation from 2010 is not very promising and the goals will not be reached with the ongoing efforts. In 2010, around 5,000 thousand children die everyday because of bad water, which is far more than deaths caused by diseases. There are 885 million children without drinking water and 2.4 billion children without sanitation. It is especially important to educate girls and women because, as Eliasson said: 'A literate woman educates her children. Men don't!'

Eliasson asked us to rely on the knowledge of the children and listen to their experience and ideas. In our times strength and power are linked to cohesion, communication and environmental health, not to arms and weapons as previously. Education for sustainability is a means to make young people believe in the future, which is our most important task, according to Eliasson, who ended his speech with this call:

Every individual matters, everyone can do something and each one of us can make a difference for the life of one or many children.

95 abstracts referred to Development work, where practitioners presented their projects from preschools, schools and other practices with young children. One very active participant was Beatrice Bahago from Nigeria with four presentations. She talked about Issues of access, equality and quality of universal basic education for the Nigerian child, The influence of violence on learning in Nigerian schools. How children, teacher students, teachers and parents look upon the possibilities for ESD and Factors of importance for ESD in nomadic schools in the Adamawa state.

There were 32 applications for ESD Grants and eight projects were awarded the possibility to come to the congress with their projects. I will present four of these ESD Grant winning projects here as follows.

Rosslyne Waiyigo Kiragu has started the Elimu Daycare Kindergarten, Nakuru, Kenya. She reported about a project on *Water Purification*, which she started because of the high numbers of sick children in her preschool. The children collected the water they used to drink, and together with their teacher they tried out different purification methods, that were possible to maintain in the village. Clean drinking water and healthy children were some of the results in this ESD project.

Shankar Musafir from Meerut in northern India presented an ESD project about the everyday life around the school. Although it is common to study and read stories about wild and exciting animals like elephants, crocodiles, bears and tigers, not even children in India are used to seeing these animals live. The project *The Urban Jungle* was built around the flora and fauna that are available in the local environment for the 6- to 8-year-old children.

By exploring plants, animals, insects, birds and other living creatures the children became aware of their natural environment, and learned about food, water, nests as well as about dangers and threats. Snakes were common and interesting, and interviews with snake charmers, ape charmers, garbage collectors neighbours and family members made the project rich in learning opportunities. Also economic and social aspects were explored, for instance to understand why animals were kept in small cages.

The aim of the project, according to Shankar Musafir, was to promote an interest in nature, and he was amazed by the many connections to social and economic life that the children came up with, and questions linked to ethics and values: Is it acceptable to keep snakes in cages if this is a means to get money for food for your family? More teachers in the school also became involved in the project and they noted what clever children they have. The involved and active children have inspired the teachers to continue ESD projects and this time with the 4- to 5-year-old children. The project children will continue by choosing items from the children's homes and follow their history. What is it made of, does this material come from nature or is it produced, in India or where?

Mariela Losso from the teacher education in Comahue, northern Argentina presented a university course and a project on *Ecological literacy*. The goals are to be able to read the local environment in order to understand the conditions for the people living there. The lecturers had to reorient their teaching from Biology to Ecology, promoting learning about the environment in a specific context. The project took place in the village of Cipolletti, where twenty 3- to 4-year olds and their student teachers explored flora in the natural environment and in the plantations in the farming village. This project highlighted the democratic and empowering aspects of ESD, as all participants became learners. By also investigating the farming, the children's families became involved by the inquiry based methods.

What plants are there? Drawings were made, discussing colours, roots, leaves, fruits and nuts. How does the soil around the plants look? What smell, taste and texture can be perceived?

Is there water nearby? What is the name of the plant, the existential value? For what purposes is it used? How many plants are there per square metre?

The project resulted in two parallel exhibitions in the preschool and all the facts led to more questions. The importance of water for instance, how much water does this plant need? All fresh water in the region comes from Rio Negro, and there are huge irrigation systems. The project also looked into economical aspects, linked to the power of controlling the water. The children also found lots of garbage, mostly plastic, attached to the farmland fences. Why and where did all that come from? What happens to the natural flora and fauna when the water was restricted and the plastic flew around?

The whole village became involved and traditional knowledge was acknowledged and compared to the farming traditions. The genuine questions brought out knowledge about the interdependency between humans and nature. Restoring, keeping and producing were all seen as important processes and gave different perspectives to the education for sustainable development.

When it snowed on Crete in January 2010, this rare event became the starting point for the project *The Polar Bear*, with eighteen 4- and 5-year-old children in the preschool Mikro Ergastiri in Heraklion and their teacher Agapi Liapaki. After exploring the snow in many ways the children's interest turned to the North Pole and eventually to the polar bear. The children found out that the polar bears are at risk because of global warming and decided to do something to help the bears and reduce the CO₂ omissions.

In Herakleion, you cannot drink tap water and all the children's families bought many bottles of water every week. Recycling started as late as in 2006, and not all the bottles were accepted, so bottles grew into mountains of garbage. One family uses almost 1,500 bottles a year. The children collected plastic bottles for some weeks and then using the children's creativity they built a huge igloo in the preschool with the plastic bottles. At the same time, the project on saving the polar bears continued by trying to come up with more sustainable everyday habits.

The children invited the whole neighbourhood to a workshop about polar bears and global warming. There was an exhibition of all the drawings and facts that the children had come up with and the children's suggestions for a more sustainable everyday life style. The children also wrote letters to the Mayor of Herakleion with suggestions how to solve the water issues, demonstrating that also young children can play important roles for the environment, with good guidance from their teacher.

The aim of ESD is to reorient all education towards sustainable development. The above-mentioned projects were but a few of the inspiring presentations. The involved teachers all found new ways to listen to what the children actually said and how to build the education from this input. In what ways does the everyday curriculum in your preschool or school contribute to sustainability? How can you cooperate with the local society on the reorientation towards sustainability? We should all continue asking the young children. One child who was interviewed in the OMEP ESD world project said:

Sustainable development – it means that everybody makes something for the globe.