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INTRODUCTION

This research takes the form of a descriptive case study whose focus is an educational project serving a suburban community in South Wales. An intrinsic interest in the particularities of the work of EcoDysgu-EcoLearn¹ provided the context for an exploration of several issues related to children's and young people's education. The objectives of the research were firstly to explicate the theoretical model that informs the educational practice of the project, and secondly to explore EcoDysgu's potential for creating transformative learning experiences for young people (with particular reference to those considered "hard to reach"). The data examined included project records and documents, and stakeholder correspondence. In addition, a month of fieldwork yielded first-hand observations of six workshops and interviews with project founder Julie Lyddon and various staff members and volunteers. The theoretical framework guiding the description and interpretation was derived essentially from three sources: the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner; recent educational research literature addressing the needs of disadvantaged young people; and the thinking of two contemporary authors, physicist Fritjof Capra and environmental lobbyist/academic Stephen Sterling.

Chapter One gives a general introduction to EcoDysgu, taking into consideration the history of the project, the character of the site, the organisational structure and principal stakeholders. Mention is made of some important policy initiatives in education introduced by the Welsh government since parliamentary devolution in 1999, which have influenced the direction that EcoDysgu's work has taken. In addition, six educational aims of the project have been derived from a process of observation, reflection and dialogue with the people most closely involved. In Chapter Two, the above aims are used to construct a framework that serves to emphasise those aspects of the pedagogy of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner which are most coherent with the model of education espoused by EcoDysgu. The discussion is necessarily limited for the most part to educational philosophy, since the focus of the thesis is a learning community (in the broadest sense) rather than an

¹ The Welsh verb *dysgu* can be translated as *learn* or *teach*.

alternative school such as those founded by Steiner and Montessori. Chapter Three makes use of recent research, government policy and field observations to contextualise the practical manifestations of the three pillars of Julie Lyddon's Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn model of education: creativity, connectedness with the natural environment and healing, conceived as an ongoing process of renewal and integration rather than a "one-off" experience. Reference is made to a community project in Sri Lanka whose programme of accompaniment and healing for traumatised children embodies some of the aims and values that inform the work of EcoDysgu. Chapter Four focuses on the client group which engages most of EcoDysgu's resources: children and young people judged to be disadvantaged and/or disaffected, who tend to be marginalised or excluded by a meritocratic and selective school system which continues to privilege academic achievement. Field observations and individual case studies are provided to illustrate the efficacy of an innovative approach to re-engaging hard-to-reach youth in learning and change. Chapter Five (the last) aims to do two things: (a) locate the Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn model of education within a holistic/ecological worldview characterised by transformative (as opposed to informative) learning; and (b) articulate the EcoDysgu methodology in a convenient format, using the framework for sustainable education developed by Sterling (2009). Reference is made to "systems thinking" as a way of understanding the new ecological paradigm and its educational applications.

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of EcoDysgu-EcoLearn



Plate 1: *Tondy House Farm*

EcoDysgu-EcoLearn was established in November 2002. It is a not-for-profit company and community education centre situated on a 42 acre woodland site at Tondy House Farm, near the town of Bridgend in South Wales. EcoDysgu has won the Queen's Award for Voluntary Services "Unsung Heroes" (2008) and the All Wales Award of the Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health (2009). The Welsh Assembly Government has seconded a full-time member of staff to act as Project Manager of EcoDysgu from October 2009.

National awards and recognition, culminating in an official visit from the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall in June 2009, have been achieved by the efforts of a small group of people committed to a vision of holistic, creative education supported by healing practices in a natural environment. To date, approximately 5,500 residents of the local communities - people of all ages - have visited the site and participated in creative workshops and courses accompanied by complementary therapies (Indian head massage, Reflexology, Reiki and Hands On Healing) delivered by qualified practitioners.

History

The origins of EcoDysgu lie within the educational vision of Julie Lyddon, an alternative healthcare practitioner who has sought to address some of the needs of the children and young people of her area by offering them learning experiences and healing in a context of unconditional acceptance. It is a vision that grew out of Julie's own experience of an education system that crushed her abilities, out of the difficulty she had in finding a school that respected and nurtured the personality of her daughter, and out of a conviction that people need to learn that they have choices in life. For example, the law provides that parents who wish to do so may educate their children at home, or treat their illnesses with homeopathic remedies rather than antibiotics.

Prior to the establishment of EcoDysgu on a permanent site, Julie organised a 3 day event called "Stepping into the Circle" on community woodland at Pen y Fai, near Tondy, from 31st August to 2nd September 2001. The event was supported and funded by Bridgend Youth Service and South Wales Police. Sixty-six young people took part in various activities such as willow weaving, glass painting, woodcarving, forge work and yurt building. On the third day, which was open to the public, the articles produced by the young people were put on display in the woods and a group of alternative healthcare practitioners offered sessions of Reiki, Indian head massage, reflexology and other healing techniques free of charge. The event won a prize in the Youth Work in Wales Excellence Awards from the Wales Youth Agency and

received very positive feedback both from the Police and the Youth Service. Julie Lyddon wrote at the time: “Many of the young people are asking for more of the same and we feel it is of great importance to offer them continuity”.

Shortly after the “Stepping into the Circle” event, Julie Lyddon was contacted by a local school, Maesteg Comprehensive, which had received funding to run an environmental project. The school wanted a course that would teach some key skills to a group of 15-16 year olds who were at risk of leaving school without any qualifications. Julie accepted the challenge and a piece of land behind a pub car park was made available by a local farmer. The course began in March 2002. A group of nine pupils, who called themselves the Maesteg Environmental Care Agency (MECA), spent 10 weeks (one day a week), with Julie and two tutors, clearing the land, building a hut and making a picnic table, benches, stools, bird boxes and various sculptures. A channel was dug to carry rain water into a stream and a wooden bridge placed over the stream to give access to the land from the car park.

In the course of the 10 week project a strong rapport developed between the group and the staff and regular customers of the pub. The landowner and several local people also came to watch the work in progress. The site was then officially opened to the public by a member of the Welsh Assembly. According to Julie Lyddon, the young people involved worked very hard on the project and displayed considerable creativity in their work. The school was delighted with the result.

These experiences convinced Julie that a permanent site was needed where courses and workshops run by local craftspeople could be accessed regularly by groups from schools, youth clubs and associations. She wrote: “My vision is an educational centre of excellence that offers a creative, nurturing, holistic environment. I feel it can be brought together by a core group of people who are interested in using their energy, enthusiasm and knowledge to manifest a way of living that is sustainable, peaceful and fun”. The requirements for the centre were: a farmhouse with outbuildings for accommodation and workshops, set in woodland, situated on high ground not far from the coast, to take advantage of wind power. It would be open to the public, with a cafe and a shop selling the products and produce of the centre. Just

at this time Tondu House Farm became available, and, with an offer of funding from Cyd Coed (Forestry Commission), Julie was able to obtain a long term lease for the purposes she had in mind.

In this way Tondu House Farm became the permanent home of EcoDysgu, and a temporary home for Julie Lyddon, her daughter Rosie-May, and a friend whom Julie invited to join her in the day-to-day running of the centre, Rebekah Keaveny, an artist and alternative healthcare practitioner from Ireland. The young people of the MECA group, who left school in July 2002, were invited to attend a further 10 week course at the new site, renovating a dilapidated building and constructing a bender to be used for healing sessions. This was done without the use of tools (there was no funding at this stage) and in a period (during the Gulf War) when every available tarpaulin had been requisitioned for military use. Since it was impossible to cover the bender, it was decided that sessions of complementary therapy would be conducted in the open air and without the use of music, candles or aromas. Thus there was no air of 'mystery' about what was happening and the others present felt free to observe, comment and ask questions. From this point on the sessions of hands-on healing, reiki, Indian head massage and other therapeutic techniques became an integral part of Julie Lyddon's model of education, called Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn (L2H-H2L).

Description of the site

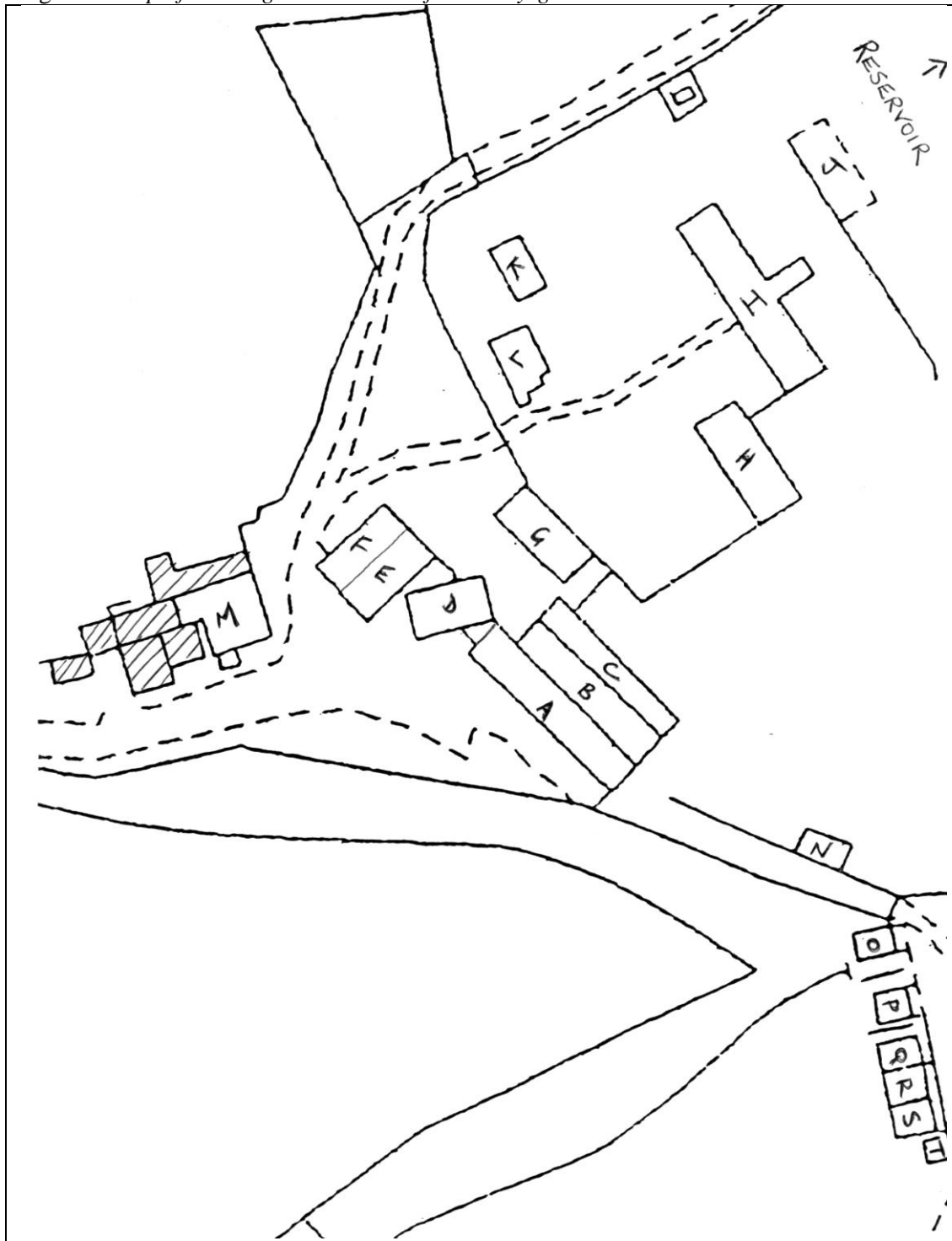
It was decided at the outset that the Tondu House Farm site would be developed with the ultimate aim of providing an income sufficient to sustain the work of EcoDysgu. To date, an office and meeting area has been constructed, the old tractor shed has been converted into a large workshop area, an outdoor theatre has been created in a wooded area and the old dairy building has been transformed into a 12-bed bunkhouse with a lounge area, café and community meeting room. Solar panels now supply electricity to some of the buildings. A large area of woodland has been improved with a management plan and themed sculpture trails, increasing local public access and enjoyment. Neglected pasture has been fenced and brought into use, vegetable gardens and sensory gardens created and two poly geodomes

constructed as greenhouses. Much of this work has been done by volunteers, who are generally local people who share the vision of sustainable development and support the role of EcoDysgu in their community. Throughout the site one can see gardens, benches, fences, signs, sculptures and various artwork created by groups of children and young people during the workshop programmes taught by EcoDysgu's tutors.



Plate 2: Making a plant support inside a low willow hurdle

Figure 1: *Map of building use allocation for EcoDysgu at Tondu House Farm*



This drawing illustrates the position of the main buildings currently occupying the EcoDysgu site at Tondu House Farm. The letters refer to the key on the following page which indicates the condition of the structures and the uses to which they have been put.

Building use allocation: refer to Figure 1 on previous page

- A. Old pit pony hospital – to be renovated, restoring old stalls to original condition and using that area on ground floor as a show place for storyboards, arts & crafts and the history of Tondu Farm. A shop selling arts and whole foods would also be sited on the ground floor as well as office and staff accommodation. The first floor to be used for single room accommodation. Solar energy panels would be incorporated into the roof area.
- B. To be renovated to provide training space for visiting healers/artists.
- C. Meeting/training room.
- D. Workshop space for EcoDysgu participants.
- E & F. Café, community/workshop/seminar room and toilets on the ground floor with 12 bed bunk house, 2 carers rooms, sitting area, toilets and showers on first floor.
- G. Part or all of this building will have to be demolished due to its very poor condition. It will be rebuilt to provide a semi-open space for woodwork and forge work.
- H. To be made good for use as workshop/tutor space.
- I. Demolished – to be rebuilt as a log structure for training/classroom/meeting activities.
- J. Floor area which did have an open sided barn – may replace.
- K. Currently being used as project office and volunteers' meeting area.

L. Renovated & now used by a local mental health group for woodturning.

M. House is in need of total renovation to provide an 8 bedroom guest house plus 2 staff rooms.

N. This building has collapsed.

O. This building no longer exists.

P, Q, R, S & T. This is the area that has been cleared of benzoate contamination by the Ministry Of Defence. Eventually the buildings will be renovated and used as individual workshop units for residential artists/crafts people.

U. Reservoir – currently empty with a collection of trees growing in it. We would ideally like to bring this back into use as part of our water system.

V & W. Remains of old Mansion House/Coach House to be brought into use as part of the bed and breakfast accommodation.

Organisational structure

EcoDysgu is a Community Business Enterprise with co-operative principles. It is a not for profit Company Limited by Guarantee. Meetings are called by the members as required. There are currently three committee members. The members have recently invited four people with wisdom and relevant abilities to form an Advisory Steering Group to take EcoDysgu forward. Although the Committee Board guides the project, being responsible for major decisions and direction, everyone involved with the project - staff, volunteers and young people - plays an integral role in the creation, development and decisions of EcoDysgu.

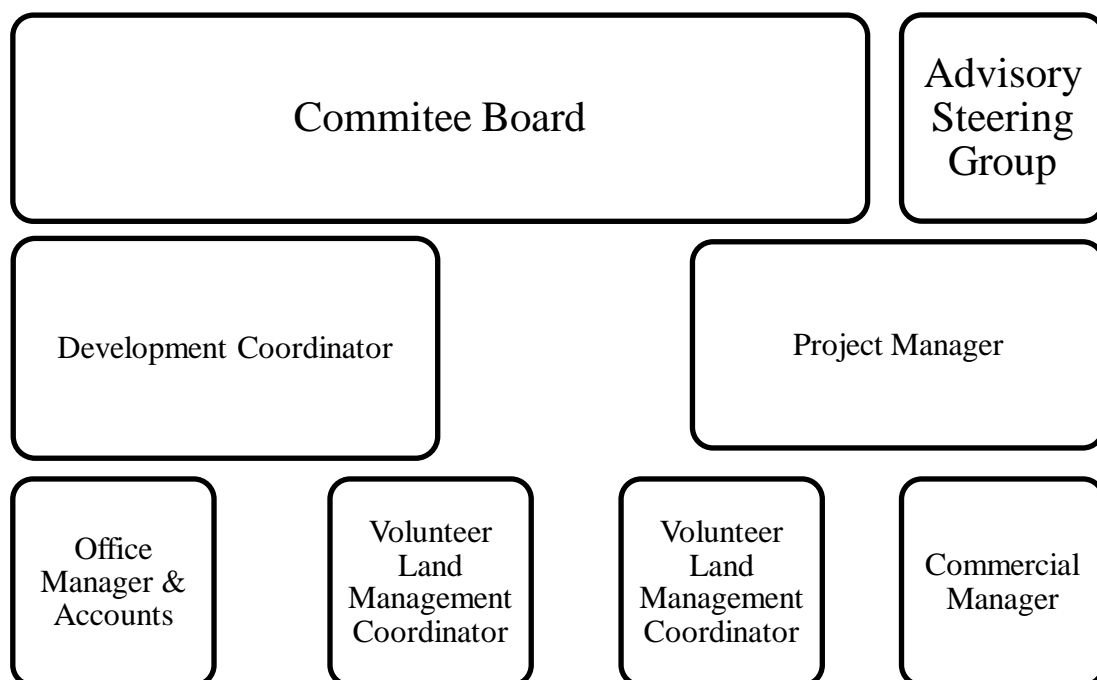


Figure 2: *EcoDysgu* organigram

Project Role	No. of Posts	Responsibilities
Project manager (WAG Secondee)	1 full-time	Project development and sustainability Staff management Grant applications Financial controls Quality assurance Documentation
Development Coordinator	1 part-time	Planning, monitoring and evaluation of workshops Project development and sustainability Learning Coach Grant applications

Office Manager and Accounts	2 part-time	General administration Quality assurance Financial controls Residential and service user bookings Grant applications
Volunteer and Land Management Coordinator	2 part-time	Management of volunteers and groups on work programmes Woodland and garden management Grant applications
Commercial Manager	1 part-time (No funding is currently available for this post)	Marketing Grant applications Fundraising Publicity

Table 1: Posts currently occupied at EcoDysgu (subject to availability of funding)

Economic context

South Wales is “a region characterised by extensive social and economic disadvantage. Unemployment is relatively high and earnings are among the lowest in Britain. ... The extent of these problems has been recognised recently by the designation of South Wales as one of the most deprived parts of the European Union (and consequently eligible for Objective One funding)” (Gorard and Rees, 2002, p.33). The County Borough of Bridgend, population 130,400 (2004), lies at the geographical heart of South Wales. Its land area of 28,500 hectares stretches 20km from east to west, and contains the Llynfi, Garw, and Ogmere valleys. Bridgend is a diverse area, with an arbitrary divide north and south of the M4 motorway. The area south of the M4 contains much of the industry of the borough whilst the north is home to the valley communities. Bridgend has ten areas of deprivation among the top 10% of the most deprived wards across Wales, and an economic inactivity rate of 30% (Estyn, 2004).

School curriculum framework

Since 1999, education and training in Wales has been the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales, with policies being developed by the new Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). Whereas in England there now exists a large independent sector and a variety of differently funded Specialist Schools and Academies, Wales has preserved a fully comprehensive and community-based school system. The Welsh vision of education is reflected in its *Extending Entitlement* strategy (NAWPU, 2000; Haines et al., 2004) and the *14-19 Learning Pathways* framework (WAG, 2002).

Extending Entitlement adopted a holistic approach to education, addressing “all aspects of the lives of young people” and embracing “all national and local agencies and organisations whose work has an impact on the opportunities and choices of young people in Wales” (Haines et al., 2004, p.5). A key principle of the strategy is “to raise the quality and extend the diversity of what is offered to young people so that they are motivated to participate in learning and as citizens” (ibid, p.7). One of the priorities was the implementation of “effective partnerships working at the local level to create a network open and accessible to all and capable of responding proportionately to young people with problems” (ibid, p.9). Each local authority was required to create a Young People’s Partnership (involving statutory, voluntary and private sector partners) to plan and deliver a coherent range of services to all young people in their area, in cooperation with the young people themselves. As a member of the Children and Young People’s Partnership for the County of Bridgend, EcoDysgu shares this vision of education and has an important role to play in providing learning opportunities for the children and young people of the local community.

The *14-19 Learning Pathways* framework envisaged an “individual learning pathway” for each young person combining, according to his or her needs and preferences, formal qualifications, non-formal awards (e.g. those offered by the Open

College Network), and informal learning (e.g. community activities). Learning Coaches have been appointed to provide individual support to young people to help them develop their skills. At the local level, “14-19 Networks” have been established in each local authority area in Wales, bringing together education and training providers, learners and employers. Each 14-19 Network was expected to develop a coordinated programme of provision within their area. The Bridgend Learning & Skills Network publishes an Annual Prospectus of Activities in which EcoDysgu is listed as a provider of non-formal and informal learning. Julie Lyddon, EcoDysgu’s Development Coordinator, has been appointed a Learning Coach.

A further WAG initiative which has created a role for EcoDysgu is that of *Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship* (ESDGC), which is now taught in all Welsh schools across the curriculum, through all subjects and at all ages. Pupils should be given opportunities to “visit local woodlands to observe biodiversity”, “make use of development education centres” and “develop a fascination with and respect for the natural world” (DCELLS, 2008, pp.28, 29, 31). Schools are encouraged to “work with outside agencies in programmes and projects that promote ESDGC” and to “establish effective networks or partnerships with the local community” (ibid, p.18). Such partnerships are considered to be fundamental to the delivery of ESDGC because they can provide support to teachers, sharing knowledge and experience and introducing appropriate activities. A good example is the partnership between EcoDysgu and Maesteg Comprehensive School, previously described.

Stakeholders

- Schools.

EcoDysgu provides varied and enjoyable learning experiences with a focus on sustainable development for pupils, and guidance for teachers on planning and organising environmental and gardening projects.

- Local Authority (Youth Service).

The Youth Service has a team which works with vulnerable young people on the streets of Bridgend, with a broad agenda of personal and social development. EcoDysgu has collaborated with the Youth Service for several years and is considered “an invaluable partner” in the work of engaging young people and building relationships.

- Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

PRUs are centres for children who for various reasons cannot be educated in a normal school environment. They teach a reduced curriculum and some lessons are outsourced to alternative curriculum providers, such as EcoDysgu. EcoDysgu has offered several educational programmes to groups of young people excluded from school, which have provided the motivation for some of them to re-engage with learning.

- Youth Offending Team (YOT).

YOTs were set up following the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act with the aim of reducing the risk of young people offending and re-offending, and to provide counsel and rehabilitation to those who do offend. YOTs engage in a wide variety of work with young offenders (those under 18) including supervising young people who have been ordered by the court to serve sentences in the community. EcoDysgu has a longstanding relationship with Bridgend YOT.

- Positive Futures.

Positive Futures is a national activity-based social inclusion programme for young people aged 10-16 funded by the Home Office. It is delivered through partnership projects in some of the most deprived communities across England and Wales. EcoDysgu supports the work of Positive Futures by offering workshops in practical skills to groups of young people who for two days a week receive instruction from alternative curriculum providers.

- Community Groups and Youth Groups.

EcoDysgu is able to offer residential facilities and programmes of activities to groups of up to 12 people who love the land and share a sense of their connectedness with it and responsibility for it. There are many opportunities to contribute to the development of the project for those who wish to do so. International exchange visits have also been hosted at EcoDysgu.

- Groundwork.

Groundwork is a charitable trust contracted by the government to provide community work placements for 18-24 year olds who have been unemployed for more than six months. Since the scheme was announced, more than 60 young people have been referred to EcoDysgu, where they have engaged in gardening and woodland clearance and improvements. There is no direct financial benefit to EcoDysgu.

Philosophy of education

The mission statement of EcoDysgu is:

“To encourage freedom, expression, creativity and the innate talents and gifts within all children, young people and adults. Supporting these expressions with healing practices and new skills, manifesting them into the reality of creating a place of beauty in harmony with the environment, for community use, for generations to come.” (from the EcoDysgu *Operational Business Plan 2007-2011*)

The values embodied in this statement are reflected in a holistic model of education, called Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn (L2H-H2L), designed by Julie Lyddon, Development Coordinator of EcoDysgu. The aims and principles underlying the model, which I have gleaned from the relevant documents, from observation of workshop activities and from conversations with Julie Lyddon, I would summarise as follows:

1. *Promote the development of the whole person (the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual being) as opposed to the mere acquisition of skills and knowledge.*

This principle depends on the recognition of the human being as an inseparable, integrated whole rather than an assemblage of units. Since the intellect is only one part of the total personality, “the attempt to educate the intellect must, especially where young children are concerned, address the child’s total personality and awaken an emotional response, in order to be effective” (Cockerill, 1999, p.79). It has been argued that Western culture and education have been dominated by the *yang*, “which emphasises the rational, the material, the masculine and the individual to the exclusion of the intuitive, the spiritual, the feminine and the group [the *yin*]” (Miller, 2008, p.7). The work of EcoDysgu could be seen as one attempt to redress the balance.

2. *Recognise and acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual.*

Each human being is a complex, competent and unique individual who develops differently, learns differently and unfolds his or her faculties at a distinctive pace. Thus an individualised approach to education is needed to accommodate the needs and peculiarities of each child. Maria Montessori saw each child as the builder of a unique personality, driven by a creative force from within to engage the world inquisitively and purposefully.

3. *Promote ecological awareness, and a sense of connectedness with the natural world.*

Holistic education generally devotes a particular attention to how human beings relate to the natural world. In fact, the ecological perspective is so integral to holistic education that “the term ‘holistic’ is often used interchangeably with ‘ecological’” (Nakagawa, 2000, p.80). This is so because the focus of ecology is on the principle of interconnectedness of all living organisms. Education that fosters a reverence for life and a sense of wonder in children “would occur more often out-of-doors and in relation to the local community” (Orr, 2004, p.148).

4. Promote children's health.

Holistic educators view the child as a spiritual being with inherent potentials which require nurture if the human nature is to evolve to its full extent. Nature and nurture play an equal part in the unfolding of the whole person. The function of education is to bring forth that which is already potentially present within the child. During this process, the use of complementary therapies can remove blockages, increase children's sense of wellbeing and encourage them to assume a measure of responsibility for their own health. In fact, some illnesses may be caused in part by negative attitudes or patterns of behaviour (EcoDysgu *Operational Business Plan 2007-2011*).

5. Nurture a love of learning in the child.

Most children love to learn basic "hands-on" skills which they can use at home and pass on to their friends. It gives them confidence and self-esteem, particularly when they can see that their efforts have contributed to making something beautiful for others to enjoy. Some learners may discover a special ability which suggests a possible vocation. The Soviet educator V.A. Sukhomlinsky tried to find practical activities in which each child in his school could excel (e.g. grafting fruit trees) so that their success would give them the desire and confidence to persevere with their studies (Cockerill, 1999, p.34).

6. Create a harmonious learning environment.

In the environment in which learning occurs, everything is important. A learning milieu which nurtures the individual is one where conscious and unconscious influences are in harmonious agreement. The best way to achieve such a harmony is to actively involve each and every learner in the creation of a place of beauty. Sukhomlinsky believed that a child whose sense of beauty has been awakened cannot help wanting to become a better person (Cockerill, 1999, pp.41-42, 57).

CHAPTER 2

Sources

In this chapter I attempt to draw some parallels between the pedagogical objectives which I have identified as central to the vision of EcoDysgu, and the educational philosophy of the two authors whom Julie Lyddon recognises as major influences on her approach to education: Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952).

Rudolf Steiner

Background

Rudolf Steiner was a visionary spiritual teacher and founder of the “science of the spirit” which he called Anthroposophy. A student of natural sciences and a self-taught philosopher, Steiner became the leader of a movement of spiritual renewal. His theory of human development and education gave birth to the Waldorf School which he founded for the children of the workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919. The school was non-denominational, open to all children regardless of social class or economic status, and offered a twelve year curriculum based on Steiner’s beliefs about the nature and development of humankind (Uhrmacher, 1995, p.383). An intensely charismatic figure, Steiner at his death entrusted the movement that he had started to his followers. Today the Anthroposophical Society continues as a centre for spiritual study in western Europe, the United States, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Marshak, 2002, pp.23-24) and Waldorf education is practised in some 950 private, independent schools located in about sixty-three countries (Oberman, 2007, pp.5-6). The Waldorf educational model, for many years regarded as a “special philosophy for special children”, has now been adopted by more than forty public schools across the United States (ibid, pp.2, 3). Parents and civil rights groups have filed lawsuits against several of these schools, accusing them of undermining the constitutional rights of U.S citizens by covertly introducing “religion” into the public school classroom (Morehead, 1997).

For Nielsen (2004, pp.43-45), Steiner education has remained “insulated” from mainstream education and scholarship, despite its status as a worldwide movement, because it is based on a spiritual-holistic worldview which has never been widely accepted or even understood. Steiner himself rejected the “materialistic” approach to education as fundamentally flawed because it failed to recognise that the outward appearances of things are merely symbolic representations of an inner, spiritual reality which cannot be apprehended by the physical senses (Steiner, 1977, p.38). He proposed the “spiritual science” of Anthroposophy as the basis for an education that concerned itself with the whole person – body, soul and spirit (Steiner, 1995, pp.4-5). For Miller (1997, p.176), Steiner was among the first educators to highlight the dichotomy “between a preoccupation with a material world which can be measured and controlled, and a concern for the inner human world which must be respectfully contemplated and gently nurtured ... between a social discipline imposed by those with economic power, which aims at economic advancement and national glory – and a spiritual unfolding from within each individual, which aspires towards personal wholeness and planetary peace”.

Development of the whole person

Steiner believed that when a human being is conceived, a spirit-soul descends from a higher plane of existence and enters an embryonic physical body. The union of body and spirit-soul remains tenuous until the child is born, but from then on is gradually consolidated as the infant internalises the rhythms of breathing and waking and sleep (Steiner, 1970a, pp.22-25). For Steiner, the task of the educator becomes fundamentally a spiritual one: to facilitate the gradual integration of the higher human being (spirit and soul) with our lower being (the physical body) (Steiner, 1970a, p.23; 1970b, p.9). The small child is an “other-worldly” creature in whom the spirit is in the process of occupying a physical body and adapting itself to life in a world into which it does not easily fit (Steiner, 1995, pp. 9-11). Before we descended to Earth, according to Steiner, we had no need or desire for knowledge of the external world. In fact, it is only after the change of teeth, at age seven, that our curiosity begins to awaken (ibid, pp.12-13). The child is curious, but not with an intellectual curiosity, for as yet she has no reasoning powers. It is not the intellect, but fantasy that fills her life at this age; and educators must be able to develop this

life of fantasy (ibid, p.22). In Nielsen's words: "Steiner believed that at this stage it is only through the imagination – a way of knowing that involves the whole person in a receptive relationship to the environment – that the child can become intimately familiar with the world and his or her full being" (Nielsen, 2004, p.69). Thus "fantasy and imagination are not silly things that the child eventually will, and should, grow out of, but means by which we pictorially may express higher truths to the child" (ibid, p.81). The goal of education, for Steiner, is to develop character, i.e. children's whole human nature. Between the ages of about seven and ten, in particular, education must appeal directly to the child's feelings, because it is out of feeling that we develop intelligence and a strong will (Steiner, 2004, pp.137-138). What children know, they need to know with their whole being, not just in their heads; otherwise, they will never be able to transform their thoughts into action (ibid, pp.187-188).

Promoting children's health

Our childhood educational experiences, in Steiner's view, influence our development in ways that may contribute significantly to our future wellbeing. Educators should understand that everything they communicate to a child, consciously or unconsciously, may pass into her soul, to re-emerge later in the form of physical or psychological characteristics (Steiner, 1977, pp.52-59). Steiner maintained that children do not get tired if they are educated correctly, with respect to what child development demands at each stage of life (Steiner, 1995, pp.112-114). The explanation depends on a theory of human nature and development that posits a link between the "astral body", which for Steiner is the seat of feeling and imagination, and the "rhythmic system" of blood circulation and breathing, and everything related to the digestive functions. Prolonged physical exercise depletes a child's metabolic system, just as excessive study exhausts her nervous system. The rhythmic system, however, is inexhaustible: our breathing never stops and our heart never tires of beating. Thus, according to Steiner, an education that resonates with the rhythmic, creative life in the child should not produce fatigue. This applies particularly to the period between the change of teeth and puberty, when the astral body (the soul) is in the process of being integrated into the child's physical body (ibid, pp.94-96). Steiner believed that when education is imbued with an artistic quality, it actually

improves children's breathing and circulation; conversely, when children are forced to think too much, it can lead to premature hardening of the arteries and respiratory problems (Steiner, 2004, pp.106-108). By educating children intellectually, we loosen the soul from the body so that people go through life feeling that only spirit has value; the body is merely "of the earth" – a burden to be carried. An artistic education, on the other hand, is capable of developing whole people, whose every step and gesture produces an inner sense of joy and wellbeing (ibid, pp.109-110).

Promoting ecological awareness

Steiner claimed that before age nine or ten, the child does not clearly differentiate herself as an ego – a separate entity – from her surroundings. Although she is accustomed to speak of herself as "I", she *feels* herself to be one with the cosmos. Educators should therefore make use of legends, myths, stories and pictorial representations to imbue everything with human feeling – plants, animals, even stones. In this way we give the child in an artistic form what is found within her own soul, rather than trying to force extraneous ideas into her head (Steiner, 1995, pp.30-31, 50). In order to bring children into a right relationship with the world around them, Steiner wanted all children to feel that they were standing upon a living Earth, which produces plants just as a human head produces hair. Animals should be introduced as related to human beings by their soul qualities; we are not descended from animals, but we represent a kind of synthesis of all the members of the animal kingdom (Steiner, 1995, pp.41-42, 48-49; 2004, pp.155-156). The essential thing, for Steiner, is that children see how all life is intimately connected, because once they have grasped this, they will be able to take their place in the world with their whole life of body, soul and spirit, and their thinking will be in harmony with nature (Steiner, 1995, p.49). Steiner argued that everything that is intimately connected with life can be understood; conversely, whatever one really understands has this intimate connection with life (ibid, p.72). We can see how even inanimate things such as minerals are related to the living world when we proceed from the whole to the parts that make up the whole: the Earth, the soil, mountain ranges, rocks and minerals (ibid, pp.110-111). Abstract concepts, such as the idea of numbers, need to be related to things that can be seen and touched. Language should be inwardly experienced and expressed in movement before it is rationally conceptualised (ibid,

pp.78, 104). A cardinal rule of education, according to Steiner, is that a child's thinking must never become separated from her visual experience (ibid, p.84).

Nurturing love of learning through the Arts

Young children, according to Steiner, are particularly receptive to beauty and derive great joy and satisfaction from learning to express themselves artistically. The will of a child is activated and strengthened by the element of repetition that is central to the learning process in all creative activity (Steiner, 1970a, pp.74-75). By introducing children to creative activities such as painting, drawing and clay modelling during their first days of school, Steiner believed that one could draw forth each individual's essential creative being and stimulate their interest in the world around them (Carlgren, 1995, p.52). Education itself, for Steiner, is an art which must continually strive to bring joy into children's lives through the discovery of beauty; it should never be dull, prosaic or merely "utilitarian" (Steiner, 1970a, pp.139-140).

Steiner divided the arts into two currents: the sculptural-figurative and the musical-poetic. The two currents, in his view, correspond to opposite sides of our human nature; the former is associated with the will, the latter with conceptual thought (Steiner, 1970b, pp.38-39). According to Steiner, children of school age need help to establish a right relationship between thinking and volition. In animals this develops naturally, but in the human being it is the outcome of a moral process which forms the basis of a person's character. In ancient Greece, thought and will were reconciled through the use of gymnastics in education, but by the 16th century this insight had been lost to western civilisation (Steiner, 2004, pp.74-75). Conceptual activity, Steiner argued, employs mental images; it is essentially a process of static observation. Consequently, the conceptual life of the growing child is constantly in danger of becoming dry and fixed. However, by the use of our will we can transform our thinking processes, filling them with life (Steiner, 1970b, pp.38-39). Schmitt-Stegmann (Steiner, 2000, p.x) argues that an education "through and of the will" is vital in modern society, where children are often lethargic and unmotivated, accustomed from an early age to being "entertained". One of the strengths of Steiner education, for this author, is its ability to "connect growing children with their active,

striving, energetic, creative Self” through the elements of imagination and creativity. Schooling, for many children, provides little opportunity to “engage in the kind of nature-related practical activities they need in order to become balanced human beings in later life” (ivi, p.x).

Everything in education, in Steiner’s view, should lead up to a knowledge of the human being, and an understanding of our place within the cosmos. He was convinced that this should include some knowledge of the practicalities of work. The Waldorf School in Stuttgart was the first co-educational school in Germany, and Steiner saw nothing wrong in boys and girls learning to knit and crochet together, or using carpentry tools in the workshop (Steiner, 2004, p.185). He saw a natural progression from play to creative activity (e.g. making toys) to art as an aspect of industry (e.g. cabinetmaking). The essential thing was that children be given the freedom to follow their own artistic instincts (ibid, pp.186-187). Steiner suggested that it would be an excellent idea to give children the opportunity to learn to use miniature farm implements where possible, because this kind of experience changes a child’s outlook and brings her closer to real life (Steiner, 1970b, p.157). He stressed that ideas and concepts are of no value to a child unless she can make them her own, through her own lived experience. Ideas must develop like limbs on the body. The purpose of education is not to deliver a fixed, measureable body of knowledge to the learner, but to provide experiences that she carries within her, learning that she can develop and call upon when she needs it (Steiner, 1995, pp.6-7; Nielsen, 2004, pp.75-76). The “thought-pictures” that a child is given through stories when she is seven or eight years old have this quality; they grow as the child grows, and educators can use them to help children develop their own moral judgement and spirituality in a way that would be practically impossible through reasoning alone (Steiner, 1995, pp.57-66).

Acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual

Steiner expected teachers and educators to devote a lot of time to getting to know each child in their care, and he stressed the need to keep in touch with the parents. It is said of Steiner himself that on many occasions his keen observation of the children in the Waldorf School at Stuttgart allowed him to give advice to teachers which

proved decisive in resolving disciplinary problems (Carlgren, 1995, pp.19-20). The mark of a truly human education, in Steiner's terms, is that it enables children of fourteen or fifteen to find their own feet in life, i.e. to pass from dependence on authority to independent judgement and discernment. If their feelings have been awakened and nurtured correctly from infancy, such children will be guided by their own sense of morality when they reach adolescence (Steiner, 2004, pp.189-191). Steiner believed that the character of the educator must be such that he or she can lead children to love goodness and hate evil without having to resort to explanations or exhortations (Steiner, 1977, pp.123-124). In Chistolini, 2008, p.196, a teacher from the Rudolf Steiner School in Rome explains that at the end of the academic year he tries to draw a picture of what each child in his class is like, including the progress he or she has made and some words of guidance for the future. There are no grades, either for achievement or behaviour, and teachers avoid using negative, judgemental language. Steiner himself said that reports should be something children will love and want to keep (Steiner, 1995, p.123). On the question of individual learning needs, Rudge (2008, p.149) notes that "Waldorf Schools do not support individualized approaches to learning or accommodate different learning styles"; in other words, the teacher directs herself to the whole class and all children participate in the same activities. According to DeSouza Rocha (2003, p.131), "Waldorf educators are more concerned with addressing children's weaknesses than with promoting their special talents". In order to develop a well-rounded personality, one needs to encourage expression in those areas where the child is weaker, even if it is difficult for him or her.

Maria Montessori

Background

Maria Montessori was a physician who developed a successful programme for the education of mentally retarded children. She then applied her discoveries to the process of normal child development. When she was refused permission to work in elementary schools, she turned to younger children. In 1907 Montessori began an "experiment" with 50-60 children aged from three to six in an apartment near the University of Rome. She designed special furniture for the classroom and tested

various teaching materials and approaches in order to match them to the children's needs and interests. This was the beginning of almost half a century of continuous empirical study in which Montessori developed her system of education, working with children in Italy, Spain, the United States, India and the Netherlands. At her death, besides her various pedagogical writings, she left a curriculum covering all the major subject areas for children aged three to twelve. Today the Association Montessori Internationale carries on the work of its founder, supervising the training of Montessori teachers and organising congresses and study conferences. Worldwide, there are an estimated 22,000 Montessori schools in over 110 countries (Tornar, 2007, p.220). Much criticised and misunderstood during the author's lifetime, the Montessori method has been re-evaluated in recent years. "Modern research in psychology suggests the Montessori system is much more suited to how children learn and develop than the traditional system is" (Lillard, 2005, p.3). However, as the same author points out, Montessori education remains outside the mainstream and inaccessible to most children (ibid., p.341).

Development of the whole person

Montessori believed that a thorough, systematic education of the senses provides the essential foundation, on the one hand, for the construction of the child's intellect, and on the other, for the development of her practical abilities (Montessori, 1991, pp.158-159). Why is it that learners who seem to have understood an idea often have such difficulty in translating it into action? The answer, Montessori suggested, is to be found in the lack of a timely sensory education. Every practical skill, in fact, is acquired by means of a prolonged training of the senses and the muscles, and the process is always more successful when it builds on an adequate physiological education begun in early childhood, during the formative period of the sense organs (ibid, p.160). Montessori also identified a close link between sensory education and moral and aesthetic education. She argued that the capacity to appreciate beauty derives from the continual exercise of the organs of perception, which are capable of almost infinite refinement. Much of the beauty of nature and of art are inaccessible to those whose senses are uneducated, and the hunger for aesthetic experiences finds its only outlet in crude pleasures which tend to dull the sensibility of the individual over time (ibid, pp.162-163).

As Lillard (2005, p.39) notes, Montessori “saw the stationary child as problematic, because she believed movement and thought were very closely tied”. In fact, she observed a symbiotic relationship between movement and mental development in children which led her to conclude that (a) our movements are not genetically programmed, but created and perfected through practical experiences; (b) a certain amount of physical activity is indispensable to our health and general wellbeing; (c) for action to be useful to mental development, it must serve a practical purpose (Montessori, 1968, pp.144, 146, 142-143). Movement is therefore integral to the educational programme that Montessori developed. At the pre-school level, children learn to care for their environment and their own person by means of the “Exercises of Practical Life”, which are designed to “educate the child to carry out organized sequences of activity, employing the body in the service of the mind” (Lillard, 2005, p.49) or to “develop a more complete unity between body and mind” (Standing, 1966, pp.57-58). Primary education in Montessori schools involves a lot of hands-on activity: for example, children learn physical and mathematical concepts by building bridges, model railways and aeroplanes. In addition, children are often accompanied on trips to nature reserves, bird sanctuaries or other places where they can experience the natural world at first hand (Lillard, 2005, pp.70-73).

The period of transition between childhood and adolescence is characterised by Montessori as a “rebirth”: we are born the first time into a family, then later, at about age twelve, we are born into society (Montessori, 1970b, p.124). Having first learned to love and revere the world of nature, children then need to be introduced to the human world so that they can begin to take their place in society (ibid, pp.118-119). The role of secondary education, in Montessori’s view, is not to supply society with “intellectual” or “manual” workers, but to develop strong and adaptable personalities with a broad range of practical competencies and a deep love and understanding of humanity (ibid, p.120). Montessori criticised the schools of her day for, on the one hand, insulating young people from the real world, giving them a false sense of security which left them unprepared for life beyond bookwork and exams, and on the other, taking no account of the physical and psychological developments which make adolescence a particularly difficult time for learners and

their families (ibid, pp.121, 123). As an alternative, she advocated the creation of “experiential” schools where young people could learn through hands-on experience and receive an income for their work. Montessori equated economic independence with psychological independence; in other words, our sense of self, and the value we place on our personal qualities, depends ultimately on our proven capacity to provide for our own material needs (ibid, pp.126-127). Thus, for this author, the opportunity to engage in some kind of productive, remunerative activity is a natural and essential part of a young person’s education.

Promoting children’s health

Montessori spoke of a process of “normalisation”, or psychic healing, which she considered necessary for children to be able to manifest their true, “normal” nature. The great majority of children, in Montessori’s view, are denied the free activity that they need to acquire independence. This means that the mental energy which should have guided the child’s development is deviated, resulting in abnormal behaviour such as disobedience, lying, greediness or extreme possessiveness (Montessori, 1969, pp.201-202). Many of these abnormalities are so common as to be generally regarded as normal characteristics of childhood. Montessori contradicts popular belief by asserting that the normal child loves to work, loves order, is careful of property and displays considerable powers of self-discipline and concentration. Normalisation, in Montessorian terms, is the removal of the mask (i.e. the deviant behaviour) that hides the normal child. This comes about spontaneously when children are allowed to concentrate on some purposeful activity of their own choice, without interference from adults – in a word, “when they are given the liberty to live their own lives according to the laws of development within them, in a specially prepared environment” (Standing, 1966, p.90). The healing, or normalisation of a child’s character, is a fundamental goal of Montessori education because it facilitates access to the “inner guide” or “inner teacher” that helps her to make constructive choices, i.e. to choose the activity which will best assist her development, by stimulating her concentration (Montessori, 1968, p.205). Most adolescents, according to Montessori, experience inadequate relationships with adults which tend to provoke abnormal behaviour, such as rebelliousness or moroseness, while suppressing the young person’s natural creativity (Tornar, 2007, pp.191-192). The

process of normalisation in adolescence is essentially the same as in childhood: remove the conditions of dependence and subordination, allow the individual to assume control of her own development, and her true personality will emerge.

Promoting ecological awareness

“Cosmic Education”, an integrative framework for learning for children aged six to twelve, developed in India during the Second World War, has been called the key to the entire work of Maria Montessori (Tornar, 2007, p.206). The author’s son, Mario Montessori, wrote that “cosmic education seeks to offer the young, at the appropriate sensitive period, the stimulation and help they need to develop their minds, their vision, and their creative power” (Montessori, 1992, p.101). Maria Montessori’s idea was to use the “sensitive period” of the imagination, beginning at age six, to give children a vision of the universe in its entirety, in which all things - living and non-living - are intimately related. The child’s imagination is captured by “grandeur” and “mystery”, and even the smallest things become fascinating when they are seen to be part of the wondrous Whole (Montessori, 1970b, p.46). Aline Wolf has written: “Essentially Montessori’s cosmic education gives the child first an all-encompassing sense of the universe with its billions of galaxies. Then it focuses on our galaxy, the Milky Way, our solar system, planet Earth and its geological history, the first specimens of life, all species of plants and animals and finally human beings. Inherent in the whole study is the interconnectedness of all creation, the oneness of things” (cited in Miller, 2006, pp.130-131). The beauty of this approach to education, in Montessori’s view, is that it allows children to place themselves within a universal scheme of order and purpose. It stimulates philosophical enquiry, and nurtures a sense of reverence for life, and gratitude for the contributions of others (Montessori, 1970a, pp.19-21).

Nurturing a love of learning

In the Montessorian theory of child development, at about age seven all children experience an “evolution” from the sensory towards the moral and intellectual planes of life, while at the same time the imagination begins to figure more prominently in their learning (Montessori, 1970b, pp.18, 46). Previously, most of the child’s interests were instinctive, i.e. guided by what she needed to assist her development;

now, they become more individual. Montessori wanted primary school children's learning to be driven entirely by choice. She argued that if children are free to dedicate themselves completely to their individual passions, their learning will be self-motivated rather than dependent on incentives or the threat of punishment (ibid, p.31). As Lillard (2005, p.129) notes: "The Montessori system is open enough to allow the evolution of interests and learning to happen organically". Instead of imposing a programme of education on schoolchildren, Montessori suggested that educators would do well to stimulate learners' curiosity by offering them a broad field of knowledge to explore at their leisure. We instil a love of learning in children by giving their minds the right kind of nourishment in the first years of school; alternatively, we as educators may create a deep resistance to learning by neglecting or frustrating children's mental development at this age (Montessori, 1970a, pp.15-16).

Montessori believed that children can grasp with their imagination ideas and concepts which are beyond the reach of their understanding. The "cosmic idea" of the vast, mysterious universe is essential to the development of the child's intelligence precisely because it points to a reality which even the greatest thinkers cannot fully comprehend (Montessori, 1970a, pp.28-29). The power of the imagination, for Montessori, lies in its ability to stimulate that sense of wonder and awe which accompanies any authentic learning experience (ibid, p.29). It is the source of the child's creativity and, to a large extent, of her perception of the world (Montessori, 1970b, p.46). Consequently, Montessori education does not confine the use of the imagination to "entertainment" which has nothing to do with reality; it is nurtured through all scholastic activity, in the belief that the development of the mind is inseparable from that of the emotions (Montessori, 1970a, pp.30, 42).

Creating a harmonious learning environment

Tornar (2007, pp.110-111) identifies several elements of continuity between the Montessori primary classroom and the pre-school Casa dei Bambini. While the former generally has various rooms or areas dedicated to different activities, such as mathematics, languages or music, children of all ages nevertheless have unrestricted

access to the materials. Montessori believed that children become more interested in social interaction as they grow older, and she therefore designed a system of education which allows schoolchildren to work together in small groups of their own choosing (Lillard, 2005, pp.194-195). She rejected the practice of grouping schoolchildren according to age and academic ability because her observations convinced her that to do so would impoverish the learning community by stifling peer learning and encouraging anti-social feelings such as jealousy, pride and disrespect (Montessori, 1968, pp.224-225). She noted that when children of different ages are allowed to interact freely, much learning occurs by a kind of “mental osmosis”, which is far more effective than the teacher’s interventions. There is, in fact, a natural tendency for children to help and protect their younger peers. Similarly, young children instinctively admire and respect their older peers, and turn to them spontaneously when they need help. Where children are allowed this kind of freedom, according to Montessori, we see the kind of relationships that characterise the essence of authentic human society (ibid, pp.225-227).

Education, in Montessorian terms, is essentially a natural process which unfolds spontaneously in a healthy child, beginning at birth. It comes about not through the transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner, but by means of ongoing experiences in a carefully prepared environment, whether the learner be a tiny infant, a primary school pupil or an adolescent (Montessori, 1968, p.6). Since the child’s intelligence naturally seeks to establish order among the confused sensory input she continually receives from her surroundings, Montessori reasoned that the ideal learning environment will necessarily be a highly organised one. In the words of E. M. Standing (1966, p.4), Montessori “created a *natural* environment for the child (that is, one suited to his nature)”. In other words, a place which gives free reign to the child’s spirit of inquiry, while helping her to gradually organise her learning experiences into a coherent system of thought. The importance of the environment, however, lies not so much in the design of the rooms or the building as in the presence of the didactic materials; it is by means of these objects that children learn to concentrate, and concentration is a crucial factor in the development of character and social skills (Montessori, 1968, p.220).

In a Montessori school, “the teacher does not teach the children directly and collectively, but indirectly and individually through the teaching materials” (Standing, 1966, p.63). It is the teacher’s task to direct children’s energy into creative activity, using just enough instruction to initiate them into the correct use of the materials; he must be ready to intervene in case of necessity, but should respect the child’s right to work freely without interference from adults (ibid, pp.13-14). Children are free to take a break from work when they need it, rather than having to wait for break-time, and they are allowed to chat with their friends while they are working. If there is an outdoor area, children are normally allowed to organise a sports activity for 20-30 minutes if they can get a group together (Lillard, 2005, pp.73-74). Montessori argued that programmed break-times are unnecessary where children can choose their own activities, socialise and move about freely: why break their concentration when they may be in the middle of an important learning experience?

CHAPTER 3

Creativity, Healing and Out of Classroom Learning

Creative inclusion

Learning, in the context of the mission and values espoused by EcoDysgu, is a creative experience; or, in other words, it is inseparable from the discovery and expression of those innate talents and gifts which each individual possesses in some measure. Equally, the creative process itself arguably has an important role to play in re-engaging disaffected young people in learning (Miles, 2007). In a review of research literature published between 1985 and 2004, Halsey et al. (2006, pp.18-35) looked at what stimulates creativity among socially excluded young people, and what impact (if any) the stimulation of creativity has on social exclusion. They found that the key factors in developing individuals' creativity were:

- *Authenticity* – activities that were relevant and meaningful to the young people, led by tutors or practitioners who were “real working artists”.
- *Something different* – ideas and concepts new to the young people, working with new people, using different locations and learning styles.
- “*Significant other*” – someone capable of providing support and encouragement while mediating the creative process, and modelling expertise for the young people.
- *Exploring ideas* – freedom to explore ideas and concepts, so that young people could value their creativity, and making time for reflection.
- *Challenge* – taking risks, i.e. young people trying something they didn't know they could do.
- *Working with others* – particularly in small groups, helped to build young people's confidence in their creativity through sharing ideas.
- *Time* – having enough time to develop creative ideas, and making time to reflect on ideas and to allow learning to embed.

All of the above criteria are recognisable to some degree as part of the learning experience which EcoDysgu delivers to children and young people through its workshop programmes. The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training found that “a tradition of learning based on practical engagement has been lost in schools, reflected in the near demise of Woodwork, Metalwork and Home Economics” (Pring et al., 2009, p.69). By contrast, “hands-on” learning is central to all the activities organised by EcoDysgu. In addition, the creative process is related to the “lived world” of the young people through the healing component of the workshops, so that learning is both practical and experiential. Julie Lyddon explains: “These therapies, delivered to individuals with the rest of the group present, always bring about group dialogue on relevant topics to everyone there, it is organic in nature. Topics can be as varied as illnesses, drugs, alcohol, suicide, religion, family, ... In this group environment everyone is learning from each other”. The confluence of learning and healing in the context of a shared creative endeavour makes for a visceral experience which engages mind, body and emotions. Kieran Vivian-Byrne, a psychotherapist based at the University of Glamorgan Family Institute, and consultant to the EcoDysgu learning community, offered the following insight:

“The principle which is embodied in EcoDysgu is that learning is a natural process – one which each creature has the potential for (a true humanist perspective reflected in the natural environment of woods and streams and other living creatures – a whole ecology). So while effort is involved in any learning enterprise, the emphasis is on finding the grain of your own wood (in a community context), so to speak, and then working on it. This directly links to healing in that the same natural process is employed, i.e. the creature’s own built-in ability to self-heal through a greater reciprocity with its surrounding community and environment” (personal communication, 2010).

It almost goes without saying that exceptional personal qualities are needed to reach and connect with young people “who have walked with their minds if not yet with their feet” (Buckley, 2004, p.2) in educational terms, i.e. who have been discouraged from taking any kind of pro-active part in formal learning. The secure and

supportive space which EcoDysgu provides for young people depends on the presence of adults with whom they can develop adult relationships. “The voluntary sector”, as Williams (2007, p.11) notes, “is a place where young people, who are multiply disadvantaged in terms of relationships at home, at school and in a wider sense of community, often encounter for the first time those able to be effective in their lives as significant others”. Smyth (2004, p.19) argues that some socially excluded and disadvantaged pupils “do not have access to social capital consistent with the middle-class values around which schools are constructed”; which means that these young people are effectively disenfranchised from participating in academic achievement. In the next chapter I present some anecdotal evidence which suggests that EcoDysgu is an important provider of social and cultural capital to disaffected and disengaged young people.

“The value of creative learning for socially excluded young people”, according to Miles (2007, p.516), “emanates from the fact that it represents a celebration of participation and of risk-making, and as such allows a space within which academic achievement is not the be-all and end-all”. At the same time, as Smyth (2004, p.29) points out, “unless learning experiences can be constructed in a way that minimizes anxiety, apprehension, or fear then it becomes too hard, and the institutionalized exclusion of the school prevails”. For young people who may have carried with them an “ingrained sense of failure” (Hayward et al., 2008, p.44) since primary school, the barriers to participation in learning can be considerable. Much of the work of EcoDysgu is about challenging young people’s negative perceptions of themselves; it is about education in the deep sense described by Wenger (1999, p.263) as “the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state”. Julie Lyddon narrates one notable early success as follows:

“In the first few months of setting up EcoDysgu, a full time educational service for excluded young people, run in connection with a local school, brought a group to EcoDysgu on a 6 week programme, 1 day a week. Within this group was a 15 year old boy, Adam², whose eyes were almost always looking at the ground, he offered no

² All names of children and young people have been changed to ensure anonymity.

eye contact at all and only really communicated with grunts, although he did fully participate in the workshop activities and healing sessions. On arrival to site on week 4, his head was up, we had full eye contact and he very excitedly shouted that he needed to tell us something. We were stunned by how communicative he was. His supervisor confirmed that he had something he needed to tell us and asked if we could go somewhere private to discuss it. Once settled away from the group, Adam excitedly explained that the healing sessions he'd had at EcoDysgu had changed him. He said that after he had gone home the previous week he felt really different and when his step father had come home drunk and gone to beat him as he usually did Adam had put his hands out to stop him and shouted 'NO you are not doing that to me anymore', he had then phoned the police. He explained that he had informed the police that his stepfather had been beating him for years whenever he got drunk and that his step father had been arrested. He smiled broadly telling us that coming to EcoDysgu had made him feel strong enough to stop it from happening and be able to tell people about it for the first time and now it would never happen again".

A number of factors militate against the investment of time in creative learning. One is the attitudes and behaviours of the participants themselves. For example, among the young people referred to EcoDysgu there are some with special educational needs, some who display disruptive behaviour, and others who are simply unable to manage time commitments. Consequently, participants' involvement is often unpredictable and intermittent, and a good deal of flexibility has to be built into the provision. At the same time, the absence of any national strategy or systematic government investment means that voluntary organisations who seek to help the most needy learners of all are unable to make long-term provision. Since none of the referring agencies guarantees full funding, much time has to be spent trying to attract short-term funding from local authorities, businesses, charities or prominent individuals. Inadequate resourcing has implications for the amount of contact time between staff and young people, the availability of tools and materials, the skills that can be taught and the degree of autonomy that individuals can be allowed to develop their creative ideas, as well as the outcomes that can be achieved, and the evaluation of those outcomes. According to Julie Lyddon, "an enormously valuable amount of

information and progress is ... lost and never truly evaluated". Within these constraints, EcoDysgu's staff make every effort to ensure that the young people involved in programmed activities are able to see their work through to a finished product by the end of the day.

Returning to the review of research by Halsey et al., some typical outcomes of young people's participation in creative activities were found to be: Raised aspirations, enhanced self-esteem and confidence, better understanding of self and recognition of abilities, greater maturity, improved social skills and relationships, development of "transferable skills" (e.g. self-expression, teamwork), enjoyment of learning and desire to pursue creative activity (ibid, pp.72-77). These outcomes may be compared with those described in the case studies from EcoDysgu included in the next chapter. There is little doubt that they help to reduce social exclusion in such areas as education, employment, cultural pursuits and relationships (ibid, pp.77-79).



Plate 3: *Making an oak garden gate*

The outdoor context

Education outside the classroom can be defined as “any structured learning experience that takes place outside a classroom environment, during the school day, after school or during the holidays” (O’Donnell et al., 2006, p.1). For Dillon et al. (2005: 19), the “outdoor classroom” is represented by “those spaces where students can experience familiar and unfamiliar phenomena beyond the normal confines of the classroom”. Rickinson et al. (2004, p.15), emphasised the complexity and diversity of the concept of outdoor learning. The focus of activity may be on learning about nature, or about some aspect of society related to nature (such as crop growing), or it may be oriented towards self-discovery, learning new skills, or learning to work with others. The location may be school grounds, parks, gardens, rural or city farms, field study or nature centres, urban areas, woodland or wilderness. Waite and Rea (2006, p.1) raise the question: “Does nature itself provide the catalyst for creativity or are the distinct types of pedagogy employed ‘outdoors’ sufficient regardless of context?” Julie Lyddon is unequivocal: “Children have a sense of freedom and wonder when young, they are exuberant, alive and fully embracing, feel invincible and the centre of their own universe – until they are restricted – the natural environment whether it be woodland, fields or beach mirrors this hugeness, potential and connectedness, it is unrestrictive ... It is an arrogance with the school structure that the teachers know it all and the children are the learners in that environment. At EcoDysgu we are all learners, the children teach us so much”.

Wilson (1984) suggested that the human tendency to affiliate with life and natural processes might be the expression of “a biological need, one that is integral to the human species’ developmental process and essential in physical and mental growth” (Kellert, 1993, p.20). Wilson’s “biophilia hypothesis” asserts, in other words, that “much of the human search for a coherent and fulfilling existence is intimately dependent upon our relationship to nature” (ibid, p.43). Orr (2004, pp.132-141) argues that the process of “modernization” has eroded the human affinity for life, triggering an ecological crisis which threatens the very species and environments that

support our own survival. In the words of Schumacher (1983, pp.10-11): “Modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it”. Education, unfortunately, has compounded the crisis by dealing largely in abstract knowledge which ignores the importance of *place* – our own places, the neighbourhoods and communities where we live (Orr, 2005, p.87). In fact, as Dewey (1956, p.11) noted, knowledge must be applied to specific places and problems before it loses its abstractness. Equally, a deep, visceral attachment to nature grows out of contact with places we can see, touch and smell, rather than intellectual convictions, however sincerely held. Orr (2004, pp.148, 147) therefore recommends that we “reshape education in a way that fosters innate biophilia” and “rediscover and reinhabit our places and regions, finding in them sources of food, livelihood, energy, healing, recreation and celebration”. Bringing to mind the activities of EcoDysgu, Orr adds that the recovery of a sense of place would involve “reweaving the local ecology into the fabric of the economy and life patterns”, “more gardens and more solar collectors”, “restoring the natural history of our places”, and education that “occur[s] more often out-of-doors and in relation to the local community” (ibid, pp.147, 148).

Turning to the Welsh Assembly Government’s education policy, the information document *Out of classroom learning* (DCELLS, 2007) contains a code of practice for “Out of classroom” learning providers. Guidance on the Foundation Phase (age 3-7), states: “Because of the holistic nature of the curriculum, outdoor learning should take place in all seven areas [of learning] on an almost daily basis. In addition to using the school grounds, there is massive potential to go beyond the classroom and make use of wider environments and external providers to supplement and complement the work carried out at school” (ibid, p.3). The visit itself “should be inspiring, involving and participative” as well as “relevant, stimulating and thought-provoking”. The children “should be able to fully immerse themselves in the day and find it safe, lively and fun” (ibid, p.6). Rather than list the recommendations of the code of practice, I give below a summary of my own observations of six workshops involving school groups held at EcoDysgu between January and February

2010. A comparison of these comments with the code of practice will show that most of the recommendations have been met.

- Five workshops were spent in a large converted tractor shed and one entirely in the open air. One workshop, in which the children made scarecrows, involved the group going out into the field to cut wild saplings and, at the end of the day, positioning the finished scarecrows in the garden.
- Before each visit, the schools were contacted in order to clarify all the arrangements, and printed information about EcoDysgu was sent to those visiting for the first time.
- On arrival, each group was given a brief introduction to the mission and values of EcoDysgu and invited to create something which would remain on site as a tangible contribution to the restoration of the local environment. The healing process was also explained in simple terms, the children were asked to be careful and responsible, and during the day they were shown some of the interesting features of the site.
- The workshops were led by a tutor, supported by an alternative healthcare practitioner. The groups numbered between five and ten children, accompanied by two adults who generally took an active part in the activities.
- The collaboration of tutor and healer seemed to me to enhance participation by creating a dynamic learning situation in which the children moved between two poles of activity – one outward and practical, the other inward and experiential. There was little time for reflection on the day's work, but the experience and the setting I feel would have impressed the children sufficiently to provide ample possibilities for follow-up work at school.
- As part of an ongoing process of assessment and evaluation of learning provision, EcoDysgu asks all workshop participants and group supervisors to provide written feedback both before and after their visit.

Healing

It seems appropriate to say a few words here about a community development project on the other side of the world which shares many of the beliefs which underpin Julie Lyddon's *Leaning to Heal – Healing to Learn* model of education, as well as some of the aims and methodology of *EcoDysgu*, whilst operating in a very different cultural and societal context. The Butterfly Peace Garden, located in Batticaloa on the east coast of Sri Lanka, is a non-governmental organization, founded in 1995 and dedicated to the "creative healing" of traumatized children. The project was conceived by a physician, an artist and a Jesuit priest who shared a concern for the long-term psychological healing of the many wounded, displaced and bereaved children in the province – victims of years of internecine conflict (Santa Barbara, 2004, p.232). Physically, the Garden is a walled compound occupying less than one hectare, containing a few trees, many plants and shrubs, a sandpit, a 30-foot boat mounted on stilts and various structures for creative activities, as well as a small menagerie of animals (Chase, 2002, p.39); symbolically, it represents "a container of nurturance ... where the preciousness of children's imagination is encouraged to flourish in many sorts of ways, and where the effects of war made by adults are unmade" (Lawrence, 2003, p.14). It is also an "in-between" space which is open to all because it does not belong to any particular culture (ibid, p.30).

Protagonists of the Butterfly Garden are the children and the "animators", local men and women committed to the creative process as a way of self-discovery and healing. Children are referred to the Garden by the local schools and attend one day a week, 50 at a time, in equal numbers of boys and girls, Tamils and Muslims (Santa Barbara, 2004, p.233). The nine month programme has two stages: First, the children are helped to affirm their individual creativity and imagination by making simple works of art; second, they invent stories which, combined with the collective elaboration of more complex art forms, provide the basis for a theatrical performance – which draws the community into the Garden – or a parade, which takes the Garden to the community (Lawrence, 2003, pp.32-33). Chase, co-founder of the project, puts it this way: "What is evolving in the Butterfly Garden is a culturally appropriate

approach to healing and community that is growing out of the creative spirit inherent in children. This universal quality, expressed through play, may be as sacred and affirming as religious ritual is for adults” (Chase, 2002, p.44). Rather than imposing order on the children, the Garden nurtures trust, confidence and awareness in such a way that they are able to recover their self-expression. The healing process is supported by much use of rituals, games and ceremonies drawn from various traditions, which children intuitively understand and enjoy (Lawrence, 2003, pp.70-72). Lawrence describes the Garden’s “poiesis” as an endless flow of creativity which absorbs and transforms the many lived experiences of war through the collective making and telling of stories, and through theatrical performances, operas and parades (ibid, pp.77-81).

CHAPTER 4

Vulnerable Children and Young People

The purpose of this chapter, which draws on anecdotal evidence and my own observations, is to describe the role of EcoDysgu in providing learning opportunities for vulnerable children and young people which both complement and transcend the educational provision of the schools.

Background

A recent UNICEF publication, *An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, placed the United Kingdom in the bottom third of the rankings for children's material well-being, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks and subjective well-being. The percentage of children growing up in relative poverty in the UK is among the highest in Europe (over 15%), as is the percentage of 15-19 year-olds not in education, training or employment (almost 10%). The UK is also distinguished by a high percentage of children living in single-parent and step-families, and very high levels of risk behaviour (smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, precocious sexual activity) among young people (UNICEF, 2007). All this, combined with the growing inequality and separateness between rich and poor, means that the schools have difficulty in providing the care and support which vulnerable, disadvantaged and disaffected children and young people need to help them negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence has been described as "the period of transition between the *perceived* dependency of childhood and the *perceived* independence and autonomy of adulthood" (Pring et al., 2009, p.27). It is an age of conflict and anxiety, since parents naturally wish to protect their children from the consequences of unfortunate choices, while at the same time young people, who are learning to accept responsibility and already perceive themselves as adults, tend to see their parents' interventions as an abuse of authority. Similarly, in the context of the education system, students, teachers and parents have differing perceptions regarding their respective roles and responsibilities. Many would argue that teachers have an important role to play in preparing young people for adulthood. Yet government prescription of a "one size

fits all” learning programme (including objectives, content, teaching method, assessment and evaluation) beginning with the introduction of the UK national curriculum in 1988, has arguably had the net effect of equating school teaching to the business of delivering knowledge and skills in order to meet attainment targets (ibid, pp.98-99). The Institute for Public Policy Research (Margo et al., 2008, p.6) recently affirmed that the “difference between an ‘excellent’ teacher and a ‘bad’ teacher is equal to one GCSE³ grade, all other things being equal”. The constraints imposed on schools by the “skills agenda” are problematic because they tend to progressively undermine the teachers’ ability to deliver a learning experience that recognises and reflects the growing personal independence of the student. Such constraints have also, according to Williams (2007, p.5), “incontrovertibly reduced the ability of [the schools] to tolerate young people who present behaviour and discipline issues that fall outside of a narrowing definition of acceptable conduct”.

NEET

A significant number of the young people participating in EcoDysgu’s programmes have been identified by their schools as “potential NEET”, i.e. at risk of not making a successful transition to further education, vocational training or employment. The term NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is a statistical residual category used by government since 1999 to indicate 16-18 year olds whose status is either not known or cannot be defined in any other way (Hayward et al., 2008, p.6). The staff and volunteers at EcoDysgu regularly encounter “disaffected” young people who are said to participate in school lessons reluctantly or not at all. These are pupils whom their teachers describe as at risk of educational failure through poor attendance, bad behaviour or lack of motivation. Some of them have been temporarily or even permanently excluded from school. Many of the young people themselves feel that the school system has no place for them; that it neither shares their values nor recognises their needs and aspirations. They are alienated by the constant emphasis on academic achievement and qualifications, and by authority

³ General Certificate of Secondary Education, awarded on successful completion of two years’ study, following a written examination (usually at age 16).

structures which are perceived as arbitrary and unreasonable. The authors of the Engaging Youth Enquiry (into young people classified as NEET) characterised the majority of their respondents as “failing on their own terms”, in the sense that dropping out of school represented – for the young people – a decisive rejection of a humiliating and demoralising experience (ibid, pp.34, 42). However, many other young people find themselves effectively excluded from education by circumstances beyond their control, for example, bullying, learning disabilities, pregnancy, chronic illness or the trauma caused by a catastrophic event such as the death of a relative or close friend. Recent statistics indicate that “at least 40% of the secondary [school] population end their time as failures relative to the government’s attainment targets” (Williams, 2007, p.1). What is more difficult to measure is the sense of personal failure carried by those individual young people who, for whatever reason, opt out of education before the school leaving age.

Thomas and Hocking (2003) argue that a societal trend towards individualism and privatisation of responsibility over the last 30 years or so has helped to create a situation in which the tangible aspects of children’s quality of life which contribute to individual “standard of living” (health, wealth and safety) are prioritised out of all proportion to the intangible aspects – in particular autonomy, identity, trust and belonging. According to the authors, despite the fact that “children, and the need to nurture, protect and socialise them, comprise one of our few remaining areas of focus that is genuinely communal”, “the emotional well-being of children is generally seen as a private matter pertaining to families alone” (ibid, pp.50, 48). Confusion about the character of childhood coupled with exclusion of children from community settings seem to be the predominant manifestations of the privatised culture (ibid, pp.25, 52). To improve children’s lives, the advice to service providers is:

- Create time and space for children to express their growing sense of self and to exercise some control over their own lives.
- Help children to develop life skills and resilience coherent with a broader understanding of “success”.

- Involve the whole community in children’s learning, inculcating a strong sense of belonging “through the exchange of actual and intangible resources” (ibid, pp.53-57).

In conclusion, the authors note that “negative outcomes for children can only be reduced so far without a central, explicit vision of what is good for children” (ibid, p.104).

The learner’s voice

The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training argued that “the learning needs of the young person should shape the learning rather than be shaped by targets and qualifications, and that there is a need to respond more effectively to the different, often more active, practical and experiential modes of learning of many young people” and noted that where providers of education have succeeded in helping young people to re-engage with learning, this “often emerges from a change in the relationship between teacher and learner, and in the style and place of learning” (Pring et al., 2009, pp.77, 78). The Welsh Assembly Government has itself adopted a more holistic approach to education, with an agenda which focuses on young people’s all-round development and seeks to coordinate the work of the various agencies involved in their welfare through Young People’s Partnerships (as explained in Chapter 1). The new emphasis on flexible, cooperative and community-focused modes of learning is reflected in the “strategic intentions” of the Children and Young People’s Partnership for the County of Bridgend, for example:

- “all children and young people will be able to access education and learning opportunities that are:
 - appropriate to their individual needs and designed to help them reach their full potential;
 - equitable, wherever they happen to live within the county borough;
 - broadly based and rich in experience”
- “education and learning opportunities will support social inclusion and recognise and celebrate diversity”

- “resources will be targeted at groups and individuals who are potentially disadvantaged by their personal, social or economic circumstances in order to reduce existing inequalities”
- “formal and informal learning opportunities will complement each other in a coherent and well-planned manner”
- “learning providers from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors will work together in partnership to secure a common learning entitlement for all children and young people and high quality provision” (*Bridgend County Children and Young People’s Plan 2008-11*).

EcoDysgu was among the first of the voluntary and community sector organisations in the County of Bridgend to be recognised and accredited by the local authority as a provider of non-formal and informal learning opportunities for young people aged 14-19.

The learning coach

In December 2009, EcoDysgu and two other voluntary organisations received funding from the Bridgend Learning and Skills Network (which coordinates learning provision for 14-19 year olds within the County of Bridgend) to provide Learning Coach support to designated young people until March 2011. The Learning Coach’s role is one of “support, guidance and mentoring”, envisaged in the context of a team approach which should allow learners to access support “at different times in different ways and in different places” (National Assembly for Wales, 2006, pp.lxvi, xl). In other words, learning coach support is complementary to that of teachers, youth workers and other local service providers. Key objectives are to help young people to set themselves realistic goals, make informed choices and understand their learning styles, and to monitor their progress (ibid, p.lxvi). EcoDysgu designed a six week programme of activities for a group of up to six participants to run on Wednesdays and an open-ended programme for individuals, to allow long-term attendance, to run concurrently on Tuesdays. This provision was offered to local

schools, the Youth Service, the Pupil Referral Unit and several voluntary sector organisations working with disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

The first group programme was booked by Yellow Wales, a voluntary organisation for homeless young people, and began in February 2010. This was followed by a second six week programme involving young people from the Pupil Referral Unit; a third programme with young people at risk of educational failure, supported by the Youth Service; and a fourth programme (ongoing at the time of writing) involving selected pupils from a local school. There was a mixture of male and female participants, except on the fourth programme (all male). Some of the activities undertaken were: sewing, painting signs, planting flowers, digging, building a bridge, making a fence, a bench, a garden planter, a coffee table, a guinea pig hutch, a bushcraft shelter and a tree-house. Complementary therapies – Indian Head Massage, Reiki and Hands-on Healing – were offered to all participants throughout the programmes. Whilst there was a certain amount of disruption due to cancellations and absenteeism, the majority of the participants finished the six week programmes and the supervisors' reports indicate a number of positive outcomes, notably a high level of participation and cooperation, a willingness to take on challenging activities, new skills acquired, improved attitudes and communication skills, increased calmness and confidence. Successful outcomes were achieved in many instances by listening and responding to the specific needs of the young people, offering alternative activities, encouraging group discussions and setting time aside for individuals to receive emotional support and complementary therapy. Arrangements were made with the Pupil Referral Unit for one young man who wished to gain work experience to spend three days a week at EcoDysgu. As regards the programmes for individual young people, the following case studies are offered by way of illustration:

Huw, a 14 year old attending a local school, was described by the Pupil Support Officer as a young man who prefers to spend his time outdoors rather than mixing socially with his peers. As a learner, Huw is intelligent and focused on his school work, but he had experienced bullying at school and staff were concerned that he was becoming increasingly isolated. It was hoped that by participating in the individual

programme at EcoDysgu, Huw would be empowered by meeting other young people with similar interests, and by working in an environment where he could make a valid contribution. His school arranged for Huw to spend one day a week at EcoDysgu, and he followed the programme for two months. Huw himself described his experience of EcoDysgu as follows:

“I had a lot of problems with school, bullying and at home and I was talking to my school counsellor and she suggested [EcoDysgu] to me as I love the outdoors. At EcoDysgu I started on the tree house completing all of it except of the roof and I learnt new wood jointing methods and social skills. It helped me a lot at school with my emotions and friends around me! I liked everything about EcoDysgu from nobody judging you to so many friendly people who share the same interest as the outdoorsman is a dying breed. Being at EcoDysgu made me feel more confident about my work and lifted my spirits. The experience ... changed my life dramatically for the best as I am now very happy!”

After the completion of Huw’s work experience at EcoDysgu, the school provided an evaluation of the outcome, of which the following is an extract:

“Huw has developed a positive outlook on life and now has purpose in achieving at school. He takes greater care in his work and appears to be more focused. He has developed his social skills, he now feels he has the confidence to communicate effectively with people that he may have stayed away from in the past. This has had a positive impact on his behaviour. He has become a more outgoing young person. Huw appears to be more self-confident and at one with his feelings and emotions. He says that the complementary therapy has impacted on him and that he feels re-energised after every session. Huw has recently obtained a place at college and drew excellent feedback from those who interviewed him – I have a feeling you might see more of Huw in a voluntary capacity. Visits to EcoDysgu would

be beneficial to other pupils who have an interest in the environment and are kinaesthetic learners.”

Three other boys from Huw’s school, Brian, Gavin and Ieuan, were referred to EcoDysgu in September this year and now attend three days a week. All three were asked to complete a short interim questionnaire about their work experience. Brian had this to say:

“We were asked to come [to EcoDysgu], I liked it, so I asked could I come up here from school to experience working. What we made: guinea pig run – gates for fences – built a treehouse – willow weaved a fence – fencing – how to be aware of a horse’s reaction to our actions. What we learned: how to be careful with sharp and heavy objects – work in a team for **BIG OBJECTIVES** – use tools more effectively. It has helped me realise how much I need education. I have missed so much school work I’m not ready for my GCSEs. It has helped me become independent about learning. I like EcoDysgu because all the work is practical and fun. I like the people here, they are very friendly and helpful. It makes me feel happy, I enjoy coming here, it is very good to learn. I have changed my behaviour for the good. I don’t mess about at all compared to how I used to be. I had the Reiki massage, it made me feel relaxed and chilled me out for other things.”

The following is an interim evaluation of these boys’ progress provided by the school:

EcoDysgu has provided a focal point for our pupils. There is a noticeable change in their attitudes and a more mature outlook shown. Pupils have commented that they are more confident to attempt new challenges. Pupils have learned the value of each other’s opinions and have used each other’s ideas to work as a team in order to complete tasks safely and successfully. Pupils say that they are more relaxed and that it helps them to channel their energies, although they have expressed that they need to experience more

sessions in order to give a more in depth evaluation. A change in environment can be inspiring and breathe new life into young people. This breeds confidence and gives pupils time to make informed decisions about their futures. EcoDysgu has added another dimension to our pupils' week. They are coping better with the demands of school and are significantly more confident in communicating with others. Thank you, keep up the excellent work!"

Workshops January – March 2010

The Western Valleys, a part of Wales which includes the County of Bridgend, was nominated a Strategic Regeneration Area (SRA) by the Welsh Assembly Government in 2009. As a result, EcoDysgu was able to obtain government funding to run 28 workshops between January and March 2010. This provision was particularly aimed at children attending schools in the most disadvantaged communities in the area, i.e. those included in the Government's Communities First programme, launched in 2001 and "conceived as a long-term strategy to address the deep-rooted social and economic problems of those communities" (WAG, 2007, p.2). The following comments are drawn from my own observations of the first six of these workshops.

The converted tractor shed generally served as the centre of activities, heated by a wood fire in the fireplace at the far end. While the tutor guided the group through the creative process, the alternative healthcare practitioner offered individual healing sessions, which almost all the children accepted. The activities observed were bench-making, willow-weaving, making scarecrows and making a willow fence decorated with painted wooden flowers. The fence was erected on site, in the field behind the project office. This last activity was undertaken entirely in the open air by a group of seven girls aged 11 to 13. A fire was kept burning in a brazier to provide some respite from the cold wind. Most of the children who attended these workshops were from Maesteg School, which was the first school to establish a partnership with EcoDysgu in 2002. The pupils selected to participate were among

the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in their class, of whom it was said that they often refuse to get involved in out-of-school activities because they lack confidence and/or parental support. The first workshop that I observed was attended by a group of eight children aged 12 to 15, all of whom are following an “alternative curriculum” supported by the Youth Service which, for two days a week, allows them to receive out-of-school tuition in “life skills” such as cooking, budgeting and sexual health and to engage in outdoor activities. Since many of the participants had had negative experiences of education in the school environment, it could not be assumed that they would readily engage in learning in a different context. From what I saw, however, the vast majority of children did engage to some extent with the educational activities offered by EcoDysgu. The high level of participation may be partly explained, I suggest, by the ability of the adults involved to support learning through dialogue and negotiation. It is a conversational approach that perhaps has more in common with the informal education practised by youth workers than with education in “compulsory settings”, illustrating the words of Egan (2007, pp.6-7) who, citing research into out-of-school learning opportunities for disadvantaged pupils, notes that: “The role of adults in supporting these activities and interacting with young people in a way that is different from the relationships that exist with teachers in schools is ... seen to be critical. These adults are best seen as friends who, like the young people, are voluntarily engaged in the activities and are also participating in learning”. The staff of EcoDysgu respect the children’s choice to accept or reject the proposed activities, and every effort is made to show them that they are appreciated as individuals regardless of how much they contribute to the outcome of the workshop. This supportive, caring dynamic is enhanced by the provision of complementary therapies, with alternative healthcare practitioners working alongside the tutors. Far from distracting attention from learning, the parallel therapeutic activity seemed (in most cases) to concentrate the attention of the children so that they rejoined the group with new energy and motivation. The therapist generally begins by explaining to the child the nature of the technique which she practises and what kind of physical sensations the individual is likely to experience. When the child is quiet and relaxed, the therapist proceeds to “channel” energy into him or her in such a way that she becomes aware of the condition of the

individual's mental and physical health. In the ensuing conversation, much practical advice is given in which the child is generally encouraged to assume a sense of personal agency, in other words to take control of the course of their life rather than passively waiting for things to happen to them.



Plate 4: *Building a tree-house*

CHAPTER 5

Transferability of the Model

I have described EcoDysgu as a “holistic educational project” and I have ascribed to it certain educational aims and beliefs, such as an awareness of the multidimensional nature of the human being and a view of education as a process of integration into a wider community, fostering both heightened autonomy and deeper connectedness. I have also considered the work of two educators – Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner – who embraced a holistic understanding of what human beings are and can become, and whom Julie Lyddon recognises as formative influences. The following chapters have illustrated some of the practical, creative manifestations of EcoDysgu’s educational ethos. In closing, it seems appropriate to widen the focus of inquiry in order to consider the cultural sea change that has created the conditions in which new theories of education and learning can arise to challenge the dominant instrumental, market-driven thinking.

Paradigm shift

Capra (1982, pp.11-12) argued that Western civilization is in a period of transition between two distinct worldviews, or cultural paradigms. The receding paradigm is associated with the ideas and values of the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, for example “the view of the universe as a mechanical system ..., the view of the human body as a machine, the view of life in society as a competitive struggle for existence, the belief in unlimited material progress ...” (Capra, 1997, p.6). The emergent paradigm is holistic and ecological, recognizing “the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature” (ivi, p.6). Evidence of the transition is visible in, for example, the gradual introduction of technologies which function in an “*integral relationship with earth technologies*” (Berry, 1990, p.65); the emergence of various ecological movements and schools of thought such as eco-feminism, eco-psychology and deep ecology; and a growing literature dedicated to the wisdom and spiritual practices of indigenous peoples. Capra sees the theory of living systems as the key to

understanding the new worldview. He points out that the principles of organisation of ecological communities (ecosystems), which have served to maximise sustainability during billions of years of evolution, can be used to create sustainable human communities (Capra, 1997, pp.289-290). The basic principles are these:

- Interdependence – the mutual dependence of all members of the community.
- The cyclical flow of resources – one species' waste becomes another's food.
- Partnership – the “tendency to associate, establish links ... and cooperate”.
- Co-evolution – the mutually enriching process of learning and change.
- Flexibility – the ability to adapt to changing conditions.
- Diversity – structural complexity, which creates resilience (ibid, pp.290-295).

Thus, as Capra notes elsewhere, (2003, p.200), “we do not need to invent sustainable human communities from scratch”; the model already exists. However, we do need to become ecologically literate. The problem is that contemporary education is still generally locked into a mechanistic view of the world which takes little or no account of the new understanding of life referred to above. This has given rise to the paradoxical situation in which the “educated classes” are responsible for the greatest damage to the environment (Orr, 2004, pp.16-17). Jucker (2002, p.261) underlines the point: “In the so-called highly industrialised countries, primarily responsible for the bulk of environmental destruction on Earth, we consistently find in surveys that there is a high environmental awareness, yet no matching sustainable behaviour. Often on the contrary: the higher the environmental awareness and the higher the income the bigger is the ecological footprint”. Sterling (2009, pp.61, 15) argues that only where the learning process and the process of sustainable development coincide will personal and collective transformation occur. In other words, “paradigm change is itself a transformative learning process”. This requires some clarification. For Sterling, learning and change with respect to sustainable education and development can occur at three levels of awareness. At the first level, the emphasis is on the transmission of information. The knowledge acquired is functional to a given learning context; there is no requirement and generally no expectation of a change in attitude or behaviour on the part of the learner. At the second level, the learning

process itself comes under scrutiny. The learner engages the new thinking in a critical dialogue, and the resulting process of reflection leads to some questioning and modification of previously unchallenged assumptions. Finally, at the third level, which subsumes the lower levels of awareness, learning becomes a radical process of change – a creative movement involving individuals, organisations and whole communities. This is the paradigmatic change in education which ecologically sustainable development requires.

Systems thinking, for Sterling, is the “connective pattern” (Bateson’s expression) which links learning and education to sustainability, and it provides the philosophical basis for a model of education applicable to the emergent ecological paradigm, in which health and wholeness are the guiding principles (ibid, pp.54, 51). At the philosophical level, the model proposed by Sterling has three dimensions, representing perceptual (intuitive), conceptual (intellectual) and practical ways of knowing. Whereas the old, reductionist perspective tended to separate these dimensions, giving disproportionate weight to intellectual knowledge, the new ecological/systemic thinking extends, deepens and integrates all three (ibid, p.52). At the level of educational settings, the model can be applied at three contextual levels corresponding to the above epistemic levels as follows (ibid, pp.55-56). (The need for contextual thinking, as Capra (1997, pp.29-30, 37) explains, derives from the fact that living systems cannot be understood by analysis, but only in the context of their environment.)

1. Educational paradigm (perceptual dimension)
2. Organisation and management of the learning environment (conceptual dimension)
3. Learning and pedagogy (practical dimension)

At this point, I propose to apply Sterling’s outline of an ecological education paradigm to the Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn model developed by Julie Lyddon for EcoDysgu, with the intention of summarising and making explicit the values, beliefs and methodology which have contributed to one particular (ongoing) attempt to re-vision education.

Level 1: Educational Paradigm	
Core Values	
Holism	Promotion of social, emotional and spiritual development; equal emphasis on individual and collective, tangible and intangible.
Creativity	A process that engages the whole person, promoting well-being, participation, skill development.
Healing	“Activation and renewal of spirit in the individual and the group”, linking practical, social and experiential learning.
Belonging to nature	A strong sense of connectedness to the natural world through attachment to a place.
Social inclusion	Focus on children and young people considered “at-risk” of exclusion from education. Appreciation of difference.
Flexibility	Maintaining continuity and stability despite underfunding and the changing priorities of statutory bodies.
Partnership	Collaboration with other learning providers, both voluntary and institutional, in order to provide balanced support.
Responsibility	Investing in the local community through the provision of actual and intangible resources.
Autonomy	In the literal sense of <i>control of the self</i> , which is essential for a healthy relationship with others.

Level 2: Organisation and Management of the Learning Environment	
Curriculum	
Interactive	Proceeds from the interaction of the participants, prioritising felt needs rather than <i>a priori</i> subject matter.
Evolving	Programming is shaped by a continuous process of critical reflection on past experience.
Evaluation and Assessment	
Self-evaluation	Pre- and post-visit questionnaires for learners, feedback form for supervisors, monitoring form for the Learning Coach.

External supervision	Regular meetings with 14-19 Learning & Skills Network to discuss progress and issues arising.
Soft indicators	Qualitative tools developed to measure progress towards learning outcomes and “distance travelled”.
Management	
Sustainable Development	Use of local suppliers, non-toxic materials, waste recycling, solar energy, organic produce, natural regeneration of woodland.
Human-scale learning	Small group and one-to-one provision, prioritising supportive relationships for learners at risk of disengagement.
Child-driven learning	Structure and process derived from the needs of the children/young people.
Community	
Inclusive	Influence extending outwards through a network of family and friendship relationships.

Level 3: Learning and Pedagogy	
View of Learning	
Transformative	Changing learners’ ability to participate in the world, opening new dimensions of meaning and identity.
Emergent	Learning is not bound to specific, pre-determined objectives, but emerges from personal experience.
Contextual	Knowledge acquired through first-hand contact with real things and materials, in a unique learning environment.
Transferable	Fostering the pursuit of genuine interests and passions which are internalised and carried into other contexts.
Interactive	A continuous, dynamic process in which the educator responds to the learner’s needs once his or her interest is engaged.
Imaginative	Giving learners a chance to explore who they are and who they could become.

View of the Learner	
Holistic	A whole, integrated human being whose intellectual, emotional and spiritual-aesthetic faculties require harmonious development.
Unique	A person with unique abilities, potentials and needs which at times need to be addressed in a one-to-one situation.
Active	Not a passive recipient, but an active participant in shaping his or her identity in an ongoing “learning career”.
View of the Teacher	
Resource	A person who provides learners with emotional support and encouragement, information and guidance.
Role model	Someone whose personal qualities, such as sensitivity towards others, cause learners to want to emulate them.
Learner	Learning is a mutual experience engaging teacher and student alike in the quest for understanding.

Table 2: *Sterling’s framework for sustainable education applied to Julie Lyddon’s Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn model. Source: Sterling (2009).*

CONCLUSIONS

This inquiry, now completed, has focused on one particular non-formal (or informal) model of education which can be seen as both a manifestation of a post-industrial, postmodern worldview and, at the same time, a response to the call for a more equitable, participative and democratic education system. If we believe, with the authors of the UNESCO report on *Education for the Twenty-first Century*, that “none of the talents which are hidden like buried treasure in every person must be left untapped” (Delors et al., 1996, p.23), then there can be no question of the necessity to create more inclusive, personalised educational experiences which can attract and reintegrate the many socially disadvantaged children and young people who are currently being marginalised solely on the basis of academic underachievement. The Welsh Assembly Government, through the creation of Young People’s Partnerships and 14-19 Networks, has formally recognised the key role of the voluntary and community sector in supporting and complementing the work of the schools. However, while funding continues to be allocated on the basis of short-term initiatives which take little account of the human resources involved in helping vulnerable young people, projects like EcoDysgu are destined to have a precarious existence. Funding agencies typically evaluate services for young people in terms of the extrinsic benefits they provide, such as qualifications or employment obtained. Intrinsic benefits, such as the forming of friendships and positive attitudes, are impossible to quantify and therefore not recognised as “outcomes”, i.e. as evidence of success/cost-effectiveness on the part of the service provider. Since, in the case of EcoDysgu, the “service” being delivered to the clients (to use the business management terminology currently in vogue) is education, the question naturally arises, is the value of education purely extrinsic, or does it have some intrinsic value? To put it another way, is education a means to an end, or an end in itself? John Dewey, perhaps the greatest educational philosopher of the last century, adhered firmly to the second proposition. He saw education as synonymous with human growth and development, a process destined to continue throughout life provided children’s love of learning is correctly nurtured by the schools (Dewey, 1926, pp.60, 62). Dewey criticised the tendency to reduce children’s education to a mere “preparation” for adult life and regarded the subordination of education to external

ends as incompatible with the organisation of a democratic society (ibid, pp.63, 117). From this perspective, each learning experience has its own intrinsic significance, above and beyond the prescriptions and dictates of external authorities. Therefore, the worth of an educational aim or activity can only be judged by its appropriateness to the specific needs of an individual learner in a given time and place (ibid, pp.126-128). This view of education is perfectly congruent with the constructive-transformative methodology that informs Julie Lyddon's Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn model as I understand it, and as I have argued here following Sterling (2009).

The formal education sector, reformed from top to bottom since the 1970s, has witnessed the consequences of the subservience of educational ends to economic priorities. The political rhetoric of “raising standards” and maximising opportunities for individuals through “choice and diversity” has translated into a fragmented and divisive school system characterised by a differential treatment (selection) of children and young people on the basis of academic ability, which tends to reproduce and reinforce existing social class divisions (Tomlinson, 2009, pp.49, 218). Conversely, social exclusion is constructed by the policy makers as an outcome of individual educational deficiency rather than a consequence of economic inequalities. There is a relentless emphasis on educational achievement, with young people being told that they must obtain skills and qualifications in order to be competitive in the jobs market. Much time is dedicated to preparation for examinations, while evidence suggests that “lower level qualifications, particularly vocational qualifications, produce weak, complex and uncertain returns in the labour market and ... any pay advantage they attract is often limited, even when measured against the benchmark of those who possess no qualifications at all” (Pring et al., 2009, p.142). Thus, as Dewey suggested, the ultimate casualty of the marketisation of education is democracy itself, but the more immediate loss is the intrinsic meaning of each single educational encounter with its “end in view”.

I close with a quote from David Orr which seems to me to encapsulate the potential of EcoDysgu to give children and young people a more authentic, more personal and

more inclusive experience of learning than is normally possible in the formal education sector:

“The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture has defined it.” (Orr, 2004, p.12).

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