

# Early Childhood Education for Sustainability: A Driver for Quality

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an ambitious and universal agenda to transform our world have issued the world a bold challenge: Provide all children with quality early childhood development, care, and preprimary education by 2030 (United Nations [UN], 2015). As a key instrument to achieve the SDGs, education for sustainable development (ESD) “empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017, p. 7). International recognition of ESD as a key enabler for sustainability has been growing steadily and expanding to different stakeholders, which encourages early childhood education (ECE) to be more active in the transformative process (Engdahl, 2015; United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, 2019; World Organization for Early Childhood Education [OMEP], 2017). ECE has all the possibilities in the world to lead children into interest, knowledge, and values that will give support for a more sustainable life and world, since children by nature are open-minded and curious toward the world around them

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including human and animals. Education starts at birth, and since UN has pointed out ECE (preprimary) as a quality aspect of lifelong learning in education globally, we within the field have to take ESD seriously and develop it to become part of all children's life. ESD should be among the most important elements in young children's education. This special issue recounts the joint adventures of integrating ESD into ECE in China and Nordic countries.

This special issue focuses on early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) in China and Nordic countries, where two distinctive pedagogical traditions, readiness for school and social pedagogy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006), have been prioritized differently. However, both Chinese and Nordic scholars have almost simultaneously argued for a "third approach" for ECE, beyond the dichotomy of the social-pedagogical and the preparation-for-school approaches (Huo, 2015; Pramling et al., 2017). China and Nordic countries do share some similarities in terms of strong commitment to ECE. Definitely, based on a unitary setting structure with a clear curriculum framework for all children, delivered by highly qualified staff and supported by committed government and consistent policies, Nordic countries have been ranked as role models in good quality ECE and care, even for children under age 3 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). China has shown its strong commitment to universal preschool for all since 2010 and over 80% children aged 3–6 had access to 3-year preprimary education in 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Furthermore, China is one of the fastest-growing innovative countries in the world, which has required and motivated the government to pay more attention to quality and universal preprimary education for all. In this respect, both China and Nordic countries prioritize quality ECE for all, as it sets a solid and strong foundation for learning. Given the common vision and commitment, all cultures strive for the SDGs and explore more possibilities in ECEfS. Based on the rich findings from large research projects on sustainability conducted within OMEP through 2009–2014, Engdahl (2015) argued that education for sustainability can be a driver for quality ECE. The case studies and comparative analyses in this special issue make important contributions to expanding the international knowledge base and the frontiers of ECEfS.

Furthermore, the articles in this special issue provide examples of inclusively dialogical spaces to connect the conceptual/theoretical, empirical, and practical worlds in ECEfS. Traditionally, we define sustainability holistically based on these considerations. We equally value the environmental, social, and economic dimensions in everyday practice. The first article written by Grindheim et al. (2019) provides a very thoughtful and conceptual perspective to a broader understanding of sustainability relevant to ECE guided by the four dimensions suggested by UNESCO: ecological, economic, and social/cultural sustainability, and good governance. It is however also important to theoretically try out new notions, like good governance and concepts of socialization, qualification, and subjectification (Biesta, 2013), when reflecting on ESD work with young children for

developing new ideas. These notions may also inspire teachers to think in new ways and explore practice in different and diverse ways.

The four empirical studies report in-depth research from China, Norway, and Sweden. In Larsson and Pramling Samuelsson's study (2019), by implementing and enhancing the operationalization of the work with sustainability-related issues in four Swedish preschools, the research figures out how the OMEP Environmental Rating Scale for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood (ERS-SDEC) can be used for teachers' professional development to support them to reflect on and change their own practice and see their everyday activities in a new light toward ESD for young children. In the article of local weather by Ødegaard and Marandon (2019), it becomes visible that many activities children are engaged in in everyday life in ECE related to weather and weather serves as a material condition that is integrated with everyday practices in an educational institution (in this case a kindergarten) and presented as a culturally formative practice. Li et al. (2019) provide a detailed comparison to examine the concepts associated with sustainability in early childhood curriculum documents in China and Norway, highlighting three key components. Later, Birkeland and Li (2019) work together to critically reflect on an international partnership program in ECEfS. In a word, in-service and pre-service teachers need to be skilled and knowledgeable in SDGs, not only for distributing knowledge to children, but also for being able to guide children's attention toward important aspects for sustainability which are clearly pointed out in SDGs 4.7, declaring to "ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (UN, 2015). But it is also important to recognize that UN (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, as an international agreement on childhood, offers a framework and structure for working on children's agency and laying the foundation for global citizenship.

The last two articles are voices from insiders of pedagogically strong ECEfS projects from praxis in preschools. We need good examples from practice to inspire different stakeholders. In this inspiring article by Broström and Frøkjær (2019), not only the pedagogical approaches but also enlightening creativity, play, and science activities have been connected to ESD in Danish preschool. In this article, children's playworlds become visible if we listen to them, and it is when they can think, reflect, and express themselves that they become agents of change for ESD. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) explore how to integrate ESD into different activities and learning areas listed in Chinese preschool curriculum guidelines using action research, extending our understanding of culturally appropriate practice in ECEfS. It is also interesting to notice that there exists a number of tools like the OMEP's ERS-SDEC, and also earlier studies (see Resources Bank for Education for

Sustainable Development, <http://www.eceresourcebank.org>) that seem to have influenced pre-school teachers to develop their work in the area of ESD.

Taken together, all these articles expand our understanding of sustainability as a global concept in Chinese and Nordic contexts and provide inspiring reference for local adaptations for promising practices of ECEfS in these countries and beyond.

Last but not least, this special issue is our scholarly way to celebrate the 30th anniversary of UN Convention of the Right of the Child and the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Norway in 2019. This special issue is to develop a platform for sharing and networking and to encourage cross-national research in the field of ECEfS, especially to highlight the balance of global consensus and local vitality in different cultural contexts.

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