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## EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN EARLY YEARS: TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE – A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

This paper begins by examining the broad literature that emphasises the need for sustainable education in early childhood education. It then briefly examines previously published research initiatives concerning the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social and economic, in early childhood education. It acknowledges that this is a broad issue and globally, there is much to be done socially. Finding strategies to instil sustainable attitudes and behaviours that require fundamental social skills, such as collaborative working and empathy in children at an early age, is crucial if we want them to become environmentally conscious instead of unconsciously adopting materialistic lives. In conclusion, the paper highlights the need for education for sustainability (Efs) to address its social dimension competently and for society to adopt a more inclusive perspective and view children as active contributors.

**Keywords:** Education for sustainability; Sustainable Development; Early childhood education

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a constantly changing world affected by climate change and the increasing destruction of life, leading to multidimensional social effects. Inequality has increased globally (Mahler *et al.*, 2022), widening the gap between rich and poor and negatively affecting children's access to high-quality education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (McNair *et al.*, 2022). COVID-19 has been a worldwide disaster that has disproportionately afflicted all demographic groupings (Darvas, 2021). As a strategy to mitigate the pandemic, lockdowns were introduced, which eroded opportunities for children and adults to feel connected to the wider community and negatively affected their mental and physical well-being (Gromada *et al.*, 2020). A social disconnection was forced on the world as social distancing measures were established. As the virus surpassed borders and boundaries, this interconnectivity forged an alliance among scientists and experts hailing from every corner of the world, pooling their expertise and resources to create a vaccine (Jull and Moore, 2020). We soon entered a paradoxical world filled with reminders of our interconnectedness while self-surrendering to confinement. The social impact of confinement has been detrimental, leading to a decline in people's interest in others as their experiences with social interactions decrease (Brownlee, 2020).

Additionally, given that the present political and economic institutions have demonstrated a lack of readiness to address these issues (Bengtsson, 2019), education is now, more than ever, vital in supporting societies in shifting to alternative methods of sustainable living. In 2006, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defined sustainable development as the balance of economic, social and environmental demands, but what does this look like in early childhood education and care (ECEC)?

This paper aims to contribute, study and engage in the debate of various literature, focusing more closely on the literature for sustainable education in early childhood education. It opens the door to the potential of reconsidering what education for sustainability (Efs) in a child's early years can become due to the broadness of the concept of sustainability. The first chapter explores how the social dimension of Efs is not yet sufficiently embedded in early childhood education. This article then develops into four major sections, with the arguments organised in a problem and solution framework. In the second chapter, social sustainability is explored through various literature. Then, given the guidelines for social sustainability in ECEC, the divisive perceptions of 'society' are identified as another worldwide issue in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter, the argument is made that we first need to change our perceptions of childhood to strengthen young children's interest in civil society. The fifth chapter focuses on those skills needed on the path towards a more

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fair and just society in the search for a more sustainable world. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for advancement of EfS in early childhood education.

## 1. THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY: BALANCE OR GAP?

The term sustainability relates to three distinct sectors known as the three sustainability dimensions: environmental, social and economic. A closer look at the literature on sustainability in ECEC reveals many gaps and shortcomings. When approaching EfS (also known as learning for sustainability and education for sustainable development), the focus has been directed toward the environment and nature connectedness. In their systematic review, Tulin *et al.* (2021) revealed the gaps in the field of EfS. They showed that the most frequently discussed pillar of sustainability is the environment, then followed by all three dimensions of sustainability (multidisciplinary approach). Discussions regarding environmental sustainability have dominated research in recent years, whereas the social dimension is still lagging behind (Chatterji, 2021). The current hegemony of the environmental dimension in sustainability is blatant, but is it sufficient educationally?

EfS is a broad subject that aims to include the basic principles, rules, values and practices of sustainability in education processes within all dimensions (Kahriman *et al.*, 2019; Vargas, 2000). According to an examination of the literature Paoli and Addeo (2019) produced on the notion of sustainable development, there is no clear and agreed conceptual and practical definition of this term. Additionally, the literature shows no consensus on how to approach the three dimensions of EfS. For example, McKenzie (2004) recognised the necessity for a truly multidisciplinary model of sustainability that considers the undeniable relationship among the three dimensions. In this context, perhaps the focus of environmental education has been too narrow, particularly in relation to social issues. At the same time, difficulties are encountered when identifying issues that are solely social because there are many overlaps among the dimensions of sustainable development and especially between the economic and social dimensions (Delli *et al.*, 2021).

However, we must recognize that the objectives of education for sustainability in early years have focused on nature connection and environmental issues to develop a curriculum that is distant from its social core. Instead, education must support approaches to learning that include the principles of social justice, human rights, environmental protection, socioeconomic prosperity and peace (Droubi *et al.*, 2023). The focus is on the importance of social connections and working together, with a particular emphasis on developing fundamental social skills in children at an early age to help them become environmentally conscious before unconsciously adopting materialistic lives (Droubi *et al.*, 2023). These efforts are necessary for the survival of humanity. All of this without trying to

dissociate social sustainability from a genuinely multidisciplinary model of sustainability that considers the undeniable relationship among the three dimensions. After all, equity cannot be understood only as something social; it should also be understood from the perspective of how we relate to resources and their economic distribution. Moreover, good individual connections with nature alone do not guarantee the planetary future. Nothing alone does. In consonance with Zguir (2021), education urgently needs a shift from producing well-rounded workers for an uncertain future to be a conduit for intercultural communication, social justice and sustainability in the present.

## 2. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN ECEC

Social sustainability is about social justice. It addresses the social issues affecting most countries, including poverty, inequality, discrimination and isolation (Siraj-Blatchford, 2016). It is a 'life-promoting state within communities' (McKenzie, 2004, p. 12) that focuses on establishing conditions that encourage and feature positive social connections (Grindheim *et al.*, 2019). Social justice can be a challenging subject. It requires bringing to the classroom difficult conversations and specific and complex knowledge.

Nevertheless, we must question how we address social issues without jeopardising a happy childhood. The realities of prejudice and discrimination affect children's development very early, as they seek to understand their social and cultural environment (Ostroff, 2022). As Ostroff (2022) puts it, it is not only age-appropriate but also essential to address tackling difficult subjects in our interactions with young children. Håkansson *et al.* (2019) highlighted the value of conflict and risk-taking through the radical democratic approach, which entails creating space for conflict in any democratic society to enhance the democratic process. In line with Håkansson *et al.* (2019), Grindheim *et al.* (2019) highlighted the importance of conflict as an agent of change. They explained how all three dimensions of sustainability provide solid ground for a curriculum where children can learn about farming (the ecological dimension) and directly experience the concepts of value and consumption (the economic dimension) while learning how to work together to achieve a common goal and while reflecting on how to deal with the problem of uneven distribution of resources (the social dimension). This approach seems particularly suitable when dealing with the complex aspects of sustainability. From this standpoint, the first step towards a solid ground for a curriculum in EfS in ECEC may involve a change in our social reality and perspective.

## 3. THE MISTAKEN PERCEPTIONS OF 'SOCIETY': IT IS NOT THEM. IT IS US

Education systems may even perpetuate social, racial and ethnic inequalities (Wolff *et al.*, 2020). Very often, awareness campaigns by non-government organisations, many of which are supported by and within the school system, have created stereotypes without clearly explaining what causes social sustainability issues (Grindheim *et al.*, 2019). We explain about a child in Africa walking miles to find clean water. However, we need to explain why this issue is so widespread in certain countries, how much colonialism damaged such countries and how much the capitalist system in its current form is worsening the situation. There is also a need to recognise that the current approach often creates a perception of the world based on 'us' and 'others', where 'us' refers to Western, capitalist democracies and 'others' to everything that does not fit in this frame (Grindheim *et al.*, 2019). By focusing on providing children with tools to enhance their critical thinking and empathy skills in an environment where young children can dedicate sufficient educational time and space for their exploration and thoughtful discussions, educators can enable children to critically examine various aspects of biased conceptions, contents, contexts and systems that dominate their lives (Butler *et al.*, 2019).

This is supported by Mahadew (2023) who argues that despite global and national imperatives to build an inclusive society, incidences of discrimination based on numerous marginalised identity markers are widely reported. According to her Mahadew (2023), the early years are an ideal moment for children to form initial attitudes towards different groups of people. Whether or not empathy begins with children noticing and accepting each other's shared and unique characteristics (Nichols *et al.*, 2009), exposing children to various cultures, abilities and ways of being will help them perceive others as 'like them' (Ostroff, 2022, p. 17). From this perspective, we can challenge the current approach that the capitalist system has created and perceive society as one.

#### **4. THE INTERCONNECTION OF SOCIETY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: IT IS NOT US. IT IS THEM**

The interconnection of society is one of the cornerstones of sustainable development. In her essay on social rights and freedoms, Brownlee (2020) considered a social connection to be a fundamental human right because upon it depends on other human rights. Therefore, some pertinent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG four, that is, quality education, rely on the existence, development and quality of social connectedness. Social connections promote long-term physical health outcomes and emotional well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Research has shown that loss of belonging has been associated with stress, illness, decreased well-being and depression (University of Michigan, 1999). Likewise, Baumeister *et al.* (1995) argued that threats to our need to belong

could negatively affect our cognition, behaviour and emotions. In Allen *et al.* (2022), Baumeister and Leary state that recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased focus on racial justice, demonstrated how the desire to form social connections and to fit in, and the inability to do so, can affect not only individual behaviour but also social movements. In early childhood, well-being and togetherness are inextricably linked (Hännikäinen, 2017).

The importance of effective and engaged social interactions for sustainable development was highlighted previously. Thus, EfS needs to support young children's interest in civil society, strengthen their social connections and help create self-confidence. Moreover, for that to happen, we need to envision young children not only as confident learners but as carriers of knowledge, values and attitudes and as active members of social reality. In their review of climate change education, Rousell *et al.* (2020) called for the need for researchers who engage collaboratively, imaginatively and creatively with children. Erwin *et al.* (2022) confirmed this by stating that young children's voices have been mostly excluded from studies of belonging. Most of these studies have been carried out on children rather than with them, implying that their first-hand observations, experiences and viewpoints are not befitting of research (Erwin *et al.*, 2022). For this paper, childhood is not seen as a set period but as a "permanent structural category" (Corsaro, 2018, p. 30) where children learn and contribute appropriately for their stage of life (Phillips *et al.*, 2020). It is essential to acknowledge and uphold children's right to be capable contributors to society, allowing them to bring their prior expertise and knowledge into the learning process (Cantor *et al.*, 2021). Thus, it is everyone's responsibility to envision young children not only as confident learners (receptors) but as carriers of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (transmitters) that could help to form and shape a culture of sustainability within their immediate nucleus as effective agents of social change (Nishiyama, 2017).

Children acquire the most sophisticated knowledge and skills from social interactions with peers and adults. This process of socialisation combined with active learning may well be the source of moral sensibility in adulthood (Woo *et al.*, 2022). Only once children have gotten some practice at learning and growing together will they be strongly disposed to relate respect and empathise with others in a just and fair manner (Ostroff, 2022). In other words, children will benefit from support from an early age to promote social sustainability. They will be given agency to work toward solutions in collaboration with adults because they are members of the social reality (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014), and as such they have the need to contribute to society. This is in line with Brownlee (2020), who states that young children have non-contingent fundamental social needs due their inability to meet their own needs. Brownlee (2020) further distinguishes between two types of

essential social needs, social-access needs and social-contribution needs. The former pertains to the need for stability and well-being in social interactions, while the latter involves the need to actively contribute to the lives of others. By prioritizing community relationships, social sustainability not only enhances each child's social capital and sense of belonging but also fosters problem-solving, awareness and critical thinking (Johansson & Rosell, 2021).

## 5. FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL SKILLS FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Empathy plays a crucial role in sustainability research, as it has the potential to foster sustainable practices (Brown *et al.*, 2019). Brown *et al.* (2019) assert that this is particularly evident when individuals develop empathic connections with the consequences of environmental damage, when they cultivate inclusive identities that extend beyond their immediate surroundings and when empathy encourages collective responses to environmental challenges. Empathy comes through when we greet shared pain with compassion and our medial orbital frontal cortex responds positively (Chierchia, 2017). Ostroff (2022, p. 22) distinguished between 'imagine other' and 'imagine self' as two different perspectives. Brown *et al.* (2019) and others argue that empathy is an important but previously underutilised variable in sustainability research. According to Brown *et al.* (2019), important life skills such as empathy have received little attention in research on sustainability. They state that combining a study of empathy for one another and empathy for nature can make significant progress in understanding sustainability challenges.

Sobel (2013) proposes developing children's empathy towards the natural world as the first phase of environmental education in early childhood through cultivating relationships with fauna. Along similar lines, what I propose is to develop the young children's empathy, sense of fairness and solidarity with others through cultivating their relationships with peers and adults alike. This proposal is grounded in the evidence presented in this paper. What's more, it can help to build human connections based on the relationship between diversity and interdependency (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). This is supported by Guntersdorfer and Golubeva (2018), who state that integrating the ideas of empathy and emotional intelligence into the classroom is crucial for students' conceptual growth and the practical application of intercultural understanding.

Additionally, even though conflict will inevitably arise in early childhood education, children may learn conflict resolution techniques by collectively recognising issues and finding solutions (Grindheim *et al.*, 2019). By working together, children gain a deeper procession of content information (Ostroff, 2022). Collaborative play allows children to copy others' strategies, encounter

opposing viewpoints and build new understandings, which helps develop their moral character (Tomasello, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

In the context of EfS, what it means to be 'sustainable' is a core assumption that has been challenged throughout this paper. It is crucial to rethink EfS in the early years to break free from repeating unsustainable ways of being by adding fundamental social skills such as collaborative working and empathy into its framework. For this to happen, we need to:

- Acknowledge biases in educators' practices and enhance children's critical thinking and empathy, to challenge society's perception of 'us' and 'them'.
- Recognize children's right to be capable contributors to society who are part of the wider social world.
- Put social and emotional learning ahead of a list of standards.

Education for sustainability is a multifaceted discipline that encompasses environmental, social and economic dimensions. This paper argues the need to create a framework that equally involves all three dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the need for educators to explore further the social dimension to guarantee a sustainable future for the generations to come. Education may succeed where democratic systems have failed by empowering children to be advocates of social change and perspective adaptation (Droubi *et al.*, 2023).

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