



Childhood in the **Anthropocene**

VOL 1, No. 1. 2024, 12-15

Where to go next? Getting leaders and practitioners in daycare centres on board in the shift to sustainable childcare - connecting sustainability with existing pedagogical frameworks and theories

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DOI: [10.64952/cia.1.58831](https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58831) **ISSN:** 1234-5678

Abstract

During the TND8 discussions, bringing about sustainable changes in thoughts and practices among practitioners and leaders of daycare centres (B-3 years) was identified as one of the potential pathways for further research. In this reflection paper, we introduce a new approach to promoting sustainable changes in the thoughts and practices of daycare centre practitioners and leaders. We highlight the challenge of making real changes in the sustainability practices of daycare practitioners. Rather than introducing new pedagogical approaches or ruptures with the common practice, we propose the identification of sustainable anchor points within existing frameworks and utilizing these as influential narratives. In this paper, we delve deeper into this avenue.

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Childhood in the Anthropocene, 1(1), 12-15. <https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58831>

Connecting sustainability with existing pedagogical frameworks and theories in daycare centres

During TND8, we presented an action research study during which we investigated together with two teams of practitioners how sustainability could be integrated into their pedagogical and organizational approach (Willockx & Dom, 2022). We were honest about the final project results that somewhat disappointed us, as we had failed to make practitioners sustainably change their actions. The audience reactions to the presentation were confrontational: "What did you expect to achieve in two years? Change takes time." and "You have to get it into people's hearts." These reactions, as well as the discussions that took place over the three days, made us reflect on where and why it goes wrong in sustainably transforming thinking and acting in daycare centres, and where possible solutions might lie. Our critical reflection starts with questioning whether "How do you ensure that sustainability becomes something that is in the practitioners' hearts?" is the right thing to investigate. Does sustainability have to be in practitioners' hearts to become embedded in their practice? And, critically does the world have enough time for this?

It is not surprising that early childhood practitioners find it difficult to embrace sustainability thinking. Early childhood professionals are often at the bottom of the social ladder, working in a crisis-ridden sector with staff shortages, a high workload and often strict rules with limited professional autonomy. We observed resistance to sustainability thinking, both in the practical sphere because of the workload and, more often, in the personal sphere. During our research, power relations were questioned: "Is it up to us to change the world?" and "Isn't that the responsibility of the powerful?" Understanding how change works is essential to finding successful solutions on how to help practitioners past resistance. We propose to use the structuration theory by Giddens (1984; 1991). According to Giddens, there is no dualism between agency and structure, but rather a duality. Social practices connect structure and agency, as actors produce and reproduce structures and systems through their everyday actions. Giddens also described the actors themselves as dual, with both a discursive and a practical consciousness. The former refers to actors' ability to explain the reasons for their actions, while the latter refers to the knowledge that enables them to socially interact, but which they cannot necessarily articulate.

Giddens's types of consciousness are reflected in the two types of theories Friedman and Rogers (2009), following Argyris and Schön (1974), use for analysing action research: espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are what actors say or think they do and describe or justify behaviour. Theories-in-use represent a tacit knowledge that actors are generally unaware of and which they employ almost automatically. To achieve sustainable change, a

transformation in both the practical and discursive consciousness of actors is necessary. Not just their theories-in-use, but also their espoused theories need changing. Only then can systems evolve with them.

During our project, we tried to introduce the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework as a form of espoused theory and look for ways to relate it to daily practices in childcare provision. Our goal was to reach not only the discursive consciousness of practitioners, but after a while also their practical consciousness, which would allow them to change the system in which they operated. However, the practitioners positioned sustainability in the political sphere, well outside their practical and personal spheres (O'Brien & Signa, 2013).

To move on, we hypothesise that to bring about sustainable changes in childcare, we should relate sustainability to the core aspects of childcare provisions: the pedagogical practice. After all, pedagogical practice is where both practitioners' espoused theories and their theories-in-use are strongly connected. As most childcare provisions base their work on pedagogical theories or views, we propose to investigate in what ways existing pedagogical theories such as Reggio Emilia, Freinet, Montessori and experiential learning relate to sustainability theories. So, rather than creating a new signature pedagogy (Ødegaard, 2021) we propose to explore how to connect existing frameworks and theories with sustainability and thus, work towards an engaging narrative, which relates to the espoused theories and the theories-in-use already evident.

We propose a four-step study. Firstly, identify anchor points within existing pedagogical frameworks that relate to sustainability theories and formulate them into an espoused theory. Secondly, relate these anchor points to the theories-in-use in childcare practices and thirdly, talk to groups of practitioners about these connections with pedagogical theories and the daily practices based on them. In a fourth step, we would advocate for explicitly adding the connecting elements in pedagogical policy frameworks.

Looking back to our work, and also to the conference, we need to change our approach as action researchers. Currently, we are too focused on our frame of reference, which may differ significantly from that of child practitioners, and this may be why they are not so engaged. For example, when we try to involve them in sustainability through nature experiences not all of them may have relevant experiences to relate back to. If we only focus on practitioners who already resonate with sustainability, we are limiting ourselves and moving too slowly. Therefore, we propose to replace the question "How do we get it into the hearts of the professionals?" by the question 'How do we relate sustainability to existing pedagogical theories?' By linking sustainability to existing pedagogical frameworks and advocating for sustainable policy frameworks, we can find a faster and more accessible path to change.

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