



Childhood in the **Anthropocene**

VOL 1, No. 1. 2024, 16–19

Recognising the role of Early Childhood Education for a sustainable future

 **Ingrid Engdahl** Stockholm University, Sweden

Corresponding author Ingrid Engdahl, ingridengdahl@gmail.com
DOI: [10.64952/cia.1.58833](https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58833) / ISSN: 1234-5678

Abstract

In the early childhood period, children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills, behaviours and habits, which may be long lasting. Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) is about understanding how different choices people make in everyday life can contribute to sustainable development. Many teachers give priority to ECEfS, but we need all teachers to address ECEfS, framed by a view of each child as participating in society towards a sustainable world. Together, we must all address the most urgent challenge of our time: Transformation at all levels towards sustainability.

The role of Early Childhood Education for a sustainable future

During the OMEP project on education for sustainable development (ESD) (Engdahl, 2015; OMEP, 2023), it became clear to me that children and adults have different knowledges, which sometimes lead to different priorities. For instance, when discussing growing food, the grandparents named vegetables, while the children named flowers and fruit. The grandparents valued knowing how

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<https://doi.org/10.64952/cia.1.58833>

to grow things you can eat, whereas the children, who sometimes think food just comes from the supermarket, preferred flowers and some fruits. The different preferences, vegetables or flowers, I argue are linked to values related to sustainability.

Another important result, from my 15 years leading OMEP ESD projects, is the number of ideas that the children offered, which were frequently carried through into local projects directly reflecting the children's lives (Engdahl, 2015). The political ambition in EfS is about empowerment and transactive and transformative change (UNESCO, 2020). Through these projects, I have seen that young children do have the competencies to participate actively – if they are given the possibility. There are many reasons for prioritising children's participation, starting with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), where the child's right to participation is stated as a non-conditional human right. Additionally, children's participation and a play-responsive pedagogy will enhance children's meaning-making and learning (Pramling et al., 2019). Play is an important aspect of children's perspectives that enables a sharing of their worlds. Finally, children's participation means recognising that children contribute with other knowledges and perspectives to the contextual realities and issues at hand.

During the ESD projects, many teachers became aware of the empowering effects of a child-oriented pedagogical approach. Agency is often highlighted together with child participation, and I stress that agency is not only the possibility for children to be active. Agency, as a theoretical concept, is being able to distance oneself and implement an acknowledgement of possibilities to intervene and have space for acting. Therefore, a whole school approach to ECEfS must include the children, promoting their interests and ideas to achieve inter-subjectivity, finding the 'tricky' balance between the children's and the teachers' initiatives, and empowering children through authentic and contextual activities. If we plan for such an approach, my experience is that the children often are the drivers of the projects and actions for sustainability.

In a research and development program entitled *Sustainable Preschool*, managed by the research institute *Innovation, Research & Development in School and Preschool* (IFOUS), a collaboration between Swedish municipalities, providers and researchers, the 200 participating Swedish preschool teachers reported that recycling was the most mentioned content (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, Engdahl, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2023). Recycling can start from the youngest age, with learning the waste symbols and where to put waste, but for the older preschoolers, in some preschools this subject was developed into themes including financial aspects as well as changing lifestyles. Other commonly reported areas were plant cultivation in various ways as well as questions about animals and nature. Children must process that we are dependent on the nature around us and that the diversity of plants and animals are important for the future of life on Earth. It is about weaving

in the rapidly changing living conditions for all living things, thus expanding from questions of biology to ecology (Pramling Samuelsson, Engdahl & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, draft manuscript).

Many preschool teachers in the program also linked their work with the UNCRC (UN, 1989) to ESD. Teachers' collaborating with others and reaching outside one's own preschool became a way of giving a voice, space and influence on preschool children's thoughts and suggestions in broader society. However, reorienting to ECEfS demands professional and skilled teachers and educators. There is no more urgent topic for in-service and pre-service education than ESD (Engdahl & Furu, 2022). Within an Erasmus project, I had the pleasure to develop a free online course specifically for Early Childhood Educators in Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainability from the Start (edChild et al., 2023). It was a collaborative effort between Kristianstad University in Sweden, the organisation edChild and OMEP across Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Ireland and Sweden. The course is available in the app ECE Academy and offered in multiple languages. Another tool for reorienting towards high quality ECEfS is the OMEP ESD Rating Scale (OMEP, 2019). This scale offers teachers a broader understanding of the concept sustainable development, promotes a joint professional language and may enable assessment of which content areas are included or still to be included in the early childhood education (ECE) program and setting.

One necessary professional skill for teachers is the capacity to communicate in a way that children readily express their ideas and share focus, level and content with the teacher (Engdahl et al., 2023). The teachers' skills in sharing attention with the children are necessary to achieve a common sustainability focus. Children's voices are to be respected and treated as important, especially in the ECE institutions created for them, but also in society generally around the intergenerational dialogue on issues of intergenerational importance. The UNCRC (UN, 1989) empowers the right for these voices, albeit coming from a social group that is not yet allowed to vote.

Our generation is probably one of the last that based on the complexity of the situation can and must take responsibility to accomplish the challenging changes. It is of highest importance to strengthen a sustainable and just road, in the best interests of the children, for humankind, and for the planet (Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021, p. 267).

Lastly, I am convinced that many teachers share my dedication to children participating in society towards a sustainable world. Together, we must all address the most urgent challenge of our time: Transformation at all levels towards sustainability. ECE settings can decisively contribute to how societies achieve the SDGs (UN, 2015). This transformative process must be based on children's participation. Today's children – not us – will live through most of the 21st century.

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