



Childhood in the Anthropocene

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Co-creation for the wise and urgent decisions in the best interest of child and planet



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Abstract

The intergenerational responsibility of adult communities is vital for fostering sustainable futures for children and the planet. Despite existing knowledge on child development and environmental needs, historical neglect of these areas by decision-makers often prioritizes economic growth over the welfare of children and ecological integrity. This article emphasises the importance of a value-based curriculum in education that prioritises kindness and humanity alongside cleverness. It proposes three overlapping research paths: promoting locally anchored practice-development research, amplifying the voices of vulnerable populations, and fostering collaborative research initiatives. The article advocates for interdisciplinary approaches in early childhood education that recognize the interconnectedness of social, emotional, and academic development and calls for a UN Decade of Early Childhood Education to enhance advocacy for children's rights and sustainable futures.

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Intergenerational Responsibility: Pathways for Sustainable Futures

It is crucial for children, that the adult communities, from families, to local, national and international authorities and organisations, take intergenerational responsibility with the necessary actions of humanity and care for children and the planet. Today we have accumulated knowledge of child development and needs, and we have evidence-based knowledge of the climate state and the needs of the planet's lands, oceans, and life organisms. This means that we already have a grounded knowledge base for taking wise actions and steps for developing hope for the next generation. But sadly, history has shown that these areas of research are often ignored or lose the research game of funding and seriousness on behalf of research that creates economic growth, speed, and effective societies.

Children's lives are often neglected in world agendas and societies, and the planet loses when measures of economic growth rule the world. These words come from Charlie Chaplin in his classic speech in the film *The Dictator* from 1940.

Greed has poisoned men's souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery, we need humanity. More than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost...

At the beginning of World War II, he appealed very strongly to man's humanity and warned us all of 'machine thinking'. This speech can remind us of that cleverness alone, artificial intelligence alone, is not the ultimate goal of education. Without a negotiated value-based curriculum, where kindness, gentleness and action for the protection of children and planet are central, education can fail the individual as well as the future.

Taking learning points from history and ongoing crises in civil societies, I will suggest three overlapping paths for future research, which all must be value based and must contribute to a concretisation of the political concept, Sustainable Future.

- The first overlapping path is to continue to work with locally anchored approaches to practice-developmental research (Ødegaard, 2021; Wallerstedt et al., 2023). Early childhood research must be sensitive to local cultures and landscapes when working with children, families and institutions.
- The second overlapping path is to develop theory and methodology suitable for giving voice to the most vulnerable and/or unrepresented among children and families. This could include children from the global south, Indigenous or refugee backgrounds, and/or children with urgent or permanent need of special support. Survival kit, play, joy and hope should be integrated into the research design.

- The third overlapping path is to include co-creation and innovation in research designs. A manifold of stakeholders might have a better chance of approaching, understanding and solving wicked problems, than the early childhood researcher alone.

Therefore, the next step for early childhood education for sustainability research is to join forces between interdisciplinary teams and design research projects that include research areas of leadership and governance, economy, ecology, sociality and education. Education will include both early childhood education, as well as higher education and further development (professional development).

In times of multiple and entangled crises, due to wars, climate change neglect, and multiple wicked problems that harm the most vulnerable, the next step of early childhood education and care should be to undertake collaborative research initiatives where co-creation and pedagogical innovation include collaborators across academia, organisations and stakeholders from the early childhood educational field. Early childhood researchers have a responsibility to not forget the history or local culture, but take the best from the tradition, be sensitive to cultures and landscapes, when designing and arguing for the best interests of children, families, education and planet (Oropilla & Ødegaard, 2021).

Researchers must make sure that all the accumulated knowledge of children's development, needs, and local situations have an impact on policies of change and hope for sustainable futures.

Early childhood education and care is not only a crucial phase in a child's development, but it is also a crucial place for professions, for local and world leaders and politicians to study and learn from quality aspects of how quality education can lead to wisdom, kindness and promote the importance of formative development. Kindness and collaboration are values that are often associated with the history of early childhood education and care, an educational approach where the social and emotional development of young children is seen as integrated with academic and formative development. It is on these important arguments that future early childhood education for sustainability research must deepen our knowledge on how children, as part of intergenerational communities, experience, explore, discover and learn (Oropilla & Ødegaard, 2021).

To conclude

The next step for Early Childhood Education for Sustainability research will be to highlight values of survival for the next generation, the planet, and to join forces in and beyond early childhood education research. Research designs that co-create with different stakeholders will be crucial. It is an important responsibility for the early childhood researchers to bear in mind the best interests of the child when creating and engaging in sustainability research. To advocate for children's rights to humanity and sustainable futures could be achieved through a UN Decade of Early Childhood Education (OMEP World, 2022). A UN Decade of Early Childhood

Education would give attention and resources to deepen knowledge in the best interests of children from a global and intergenerational perspective.

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