



# Childhood in the **Anthropocene**

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## Revisiting and developing peace education in early childhood

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### Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the need to revisit peace education, and to develop and strengthen peace education in early childhood, as part of early childhood education for sustainability. Peace education refers to humanitarian concerns, equal rights, liberty, equality, social justice, and social competences. Both scholars and (early childhood) teachers have emphasized the relationships with sustainable development, environmental education and value education. Peace education is central in the Earth Charter and in the Global Sustainable Development Goal 16. Alfonso defines peace education in early childhood. Embedded in sociocultural theory. I explore the literature and approaches to developing and strengthening peace education in early childhood. I argue for peace education as integral to early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS). Acknowledging children as being and becoming global and ecological citizens, peace education may further pedagogies to promote humane, sustainable, and just societies on all levels from small groups in kindergarten to the global society of humankind.

## Introduction

There has been a considerable international increase in research output and capacities around early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) over the last decade. This has been inspired by the United Nation's Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2012), the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015), and networking and collaborations in the field (Emery et al., 2017; Elliott et al. 2020; Güler et al., 2021). Researchers may build further on their capacities in various directions, for example, towards the integrating peace education in ECEfS. Multiple ongoing conflicts on our planet, for example the current wars in Ukraine, Israel-Gaza and Sudan, sadly remind us of the importance to revisit, develop and strengthen peace education, and to integrate it into early childhood education (Alfonso, 2014).

Peace education is as old as mankind and was defined by philosophers like Rousseau (1712-1778) and Kant (1724-1804). They did not use the term 'peace education', but emphasized similar themes, like humanitarian concerns, equal rights, liberty, equality, and social justice. Peace education's early focus has been on disarmament and the prevention of war. Critical peace education grew from Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Freire, 1970). Critical peace education is framed as problem-posing, dialogical and analytical in nature, leading to a critical consciousness for transformative action.

The Earth Charter (Earth Charter Commission, 2000) has been an important international, intercultural, and interreligious document with a special focus on non-violence and peace, and thus complementary to the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987). Informed by ethical principles for sustainability, it is a valuable resource to generate reflections that may lead to changes in attitudes, values and behaviours (Corcoran, 2012). The Sustainable Development Goal 16 promotes 'peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and provide access to justice to all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels' (United Nations, 2015). Building on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986), in this literature study I research the question: How can peace education in early childhood be developed and strengthened as integral to ECEfS?

## Peace education and peace education in early childhood education

Peace education is broadly defined as the educational policy, planning, pedagogy, and practice that develops awareness, skills and values toward peace (Alfonso, 2014). Peace education has developed as a scholarly field over the past 40 years, from the field of peace and conflict studies, mainly founded by the Norwegian sociologist Galtung (1969).

The holistic approach to early childhood education creates an open door to the integration of peace education (Alfonso, 2014). Peace education in kindergarten is based on the Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Alfonso (2014) defines peace education in early childhood as a sustainable approach with a focus on young children's social competences. He divides peace education into four pillars: respect for self; appreciation of diversity; understanding of justice and fairness; and, awareness of mutual connections between humans. These pillars are all founded on creativity and critical thinking. Peace education in early childhood includes pedagogies promoting peaceful social interactions and the development of social competences (Alfonso, 2014). Early childhood teacher, Pratt (2014), has simplified The Earth Charter for young children with four principles: 1. Be kind to each other, to the animals and the plants; 2. Take good care of the environment; 3. We are all equal; and 4. Say yes to peace and no to violence.

## **How can peace education in early childhood education be developed and strengthened as an integral to ECEfS?**

Peace education is somewhat evident across theory and pedagogy in early childhood education, however, I argue the integral role of peace education requires stronger definition and acknowledgement. Peace education is closely related to and shares common goals with sustainable development and environmental education (Bajaj & Chiu, 2009; Corcoran, 2012; Reardon, 2012) and this should be made explicit in pedagogical contexts. Reardon (2012) underlines that promoting sustainable development is a key component of comprehensive global peace. The role of education in addressing values to promote peace, protect the environment and develop a more sustainable society (Bajaj & Chiu, 2009), need to be "translated" into early childhood education pedagogies.

Education and development that is good for all humankind, the Earth's ecosystems and a peaceful world society, is a key message for promoting global citizenship (Næss 1976; Pope Francis 2015; Sageidet & Heggen, 2021; UNESCO 2012; United Nations, 2015). This initiative and model for social, democratic, ecological and economic interactions, should be further explored to promote young children as both being and becoming global and ecological citizens (cf. Heggen & Sageidet, 2019). The Earth Charter and more recently multiple scholars have expanded and validated the importance of global citizens, citizens with awareness of mutual connections and responsibilities between humans (Alfonso, 2014) and the non-human community of life (The Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

Children in kindergarten may have various experiences with violence/non-violence, justice/injustice, or social safety in their environments. Children may have real and/or digital experiences with violence and/or war. I argue it is important to research and develop pedagogical approaches to meet these challenges and facilitate local and international exchanges. Practitioners and researchers may explore how peace education is related to questions of social competence, gender, nature and outdoor learning (Bevington et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

There is a close interrelationship between ecological responsibility, peace, social justice, and sustainable development. Early childhood education can build peace education pedagogies on established holistic early childhood education approaches. Peace education is concerned with cultivating citizens for global ecological citizenship. Peace education is about teachers developing and implementing pedagogies to promote humane, sustainable and just societies on all levels from small groups in kindergarten to the global society of humankind. Comparative studies may reveal the potential for intercultural exchanges and collaboration on peace education in early childhood.

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