



Childhood in the Anthropocene

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Solidarity – within and beyond the Early Childhood Education settings



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Abstract

At the beginning of 2024, it was reported that 2023 was the warmest year in recorded history. The Earth is suffering from the human-made changes to nature, to the Earth's biodiversity and resources. Humanity's impact on the Earth, called the Great Acceleration, has since the mid-20th century until today changed the Earth's geology and ecosystems. Now is the time to combat climate change and prevent further habitat and biodiversity loss. For humans and more-than-humans to live healthier now and in the future, we are urged to restore and regenerate our damaged planet. In this paper, I discuss the meaning of solidarity in relation to sustainability and what it can mean in the everyday life of Early Childhood Education (ECE) services. The concepts I will explore in this text are internal institutional solidarity (in the ECE service and with children), external solidarity (outside the immediate sphere of the ECE service) and solidarity across time and space (solidarity with future generations and other than humans). An ECE service that works with solidarity supports children in feeling safe, promotes wellbeing here and now with the individual child and the group. It also offers compassion for others outside their immediate sphere in solidarity with the Earth, more-than-humans and the future generations of life on Earth.

Working with institutional solidarity in early childhood education

Solidarity as a concept can be understood in many ways. Berthelsen, Brownlee and Boulton-Lewis (2012) argue that solidarity is about learning to live together with each other in ECE and recognizing the importance of shared understandings and respect for others. According to Smith (2012), solidarity is about the feeling of belonging, of interacting, of empathy for, knowing something about, and relating to a group of people.

We are all dependent on each other, and positive relationships and social interaction are crucial for children in the present and future to feel the value of a larger community. This means creating an ECE setting where individual and collective care, inclusion, and expressing and developing empathy are central. The work on human rights, social equality, gender equity, and participatory rights is also prominent in ECE and all staff have a crucial role to play in creating opportunities for this work with children. In the Swedish ECE setting (preschool with the enrolled children aged 1-6 years), solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are values that ECE staff should keep alive, according to the Swedish preschool curriculum (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Every single person working in the preschool should promote respect for the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, girls and boys, and solidarity between people. No child in the preschool should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of the gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age, of the child or any person with whom the child is associated, or to any other abusive treatment (p. 5).

ECE has great opportunities to offer knowledge content and learning processes that promote children's solidarity, compassion and action skills and the goal in the Swedish curriculum is to develop "openness, respect, solidarity and responsibility" (p. 13) among the children and staff. However, the word solidarity is not frequently used in the preschool teacher's general vocabulary as testified by this teacher:

We have not used the words solidarity in our work in preschool, but we work a lot with camaraderie, inviting to play, sharing. It can be in the play with toys [as well as] that the fruit at fruit time should be enough for all the children, something that I see as working with solidarity. (Swedish preschool teacher, 2020)

The work in ECE settings with social sustainability is ultimately a work of solidarity. Another word close to the concept of solidarity is belonging (Johansson & Purulia, 2021). Research has shown that there is a growing concern about that even the youngest children meeting challenges such as discrimination, rejection and harassment in ECE and in wider society (Einarsdottir et al., 2022; Einarsdottir & Ólafsdóttir, 2021; Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2022; Puroila et al., 2023). The work of internal institutional solidarity is about developing a sense of belonging

between children and adults and between children themselves, as well as developing empathy and a willingness to support and help others. It is about taking advantage of and developing children's capacities for a sense of responsibility and social readiness to act, as well as strengthening children's compassion and empathy for other people's situations, so that solidarity and respect are established at an early age. It can be to work with care and inclusion, plus respect for differences and friendships within the ECE group. In this role, ECE staff are responsible for creating a 'good' climate, where children feel safe and are treated with respect and have the right not to be discriminated against. Furthermore, it is about establishing respect and esteem for every human being, regardless of background. It is about developing the ability of ECE staff to live with and understand the values inherent in linguistic and cultural diversity and contribute to the development of multicultural competence and belonging.

External solidarity and solidarity across time and space

Solidarity can also be the development of compassion for others outside one's immediate sphere, in the local community or other countries, near or far. In addition, such compassion can extend beyond time and space. It is also about feeling involved, having influence and being part of a community (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2009). One approach is to explore the dilemmas that arise when different values and realities come into conflict with each other – economic, social, cultural and political – as knowledge of what appears to be unfair towards children (Hägglund & Johansson, 2014).

In a Swedish study (Dolk, 2023), social vulnerability in the form of begging was discussed with ECE teachers. Notably since 2007, begging in Sweden is a new phenomenon connected to the expansion of the European Union, which led to more countries coming under international rules of "free movement". Since then, poorer people from Eastern Europe have travelled to Sweden and beggars can be seen sitting outside shops and shopping centres. The study reported that beggars were visible in the children's everyday lives and neighbourhoods and most of the teachers have met "beggars" when they have been on neighbourhood walks with the children. However, none of the teachers had raised the issue of begging for discussion with the children. The teachers also stated that the children rarely asked about the beggars, such as this new normality in public spaces. The teachers stated that both they and the parents avoiding talking about the phenomenon as it raised different educational and ethical difficulties. The three most central findings in the study were that teachers described: i) the fear of reinforcing "us" and "them"; ii) uncertainty about dealing with power relations; and, iii) the fear of not being perceived as neutral, but rather political. The study showed that solidarity and fairness in ECE can be about what we as teachers choose to examine in children's everyday lives and the choices and decisions

made, for example when children in an ECE group walk past a beggar in the street. These choices and decisions involve pedagogical and ethical difficulties and at the same time there is a potential for ethical solidarity and justice. This is an example on external solidarity (outside the immediate sphere).

In Dixson-Decléve et al.'s (2022) book *Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity* (Earth4All) a model for systems change in the Anthropocene is developed. The model is built on five extraordinary turnarounds designed to identify the transformations required for creating prosperity for all (the planet, the humans and the more-than humans). In their book, they discussed the transition to sustainability as involving significant reductions in the average human environmental footprint. The model leans on the knowledge of the planetary boundaries developed by Rockström et al. (2009) and the best available science with new thinking about social, political, environmental and economic systems change. Their five extraordinary turnarounds are:

1. **Eliminate poverty:** Reform the international financial systems and trade regulations to support low-income countries – reducing multidimensional poverty and enabling sustainable economic progress for all.
2. **Reduce inequality:** Governments should increase taxes (income and wealth) on the 10% richest in societies until they take less than 40% of national incomes.
3. **Empowerment:** Empower women and others disadvantaged in current systems to have equal access to education, economic and social rights, power and assets by 2030 – stabilising the world's population immediately and unleashing the potential of all.
4. **Transform the food system:** Transform the food system towards regenerative and sustainable agriculture and provide healthy diets for people without destroying the planet – halting biodiversity loss and protecting the global commons to ensure food for all without destroying nature and health.
5. **Transform the energy system:** Transform our inefficient fossil energy system to a clean and optimised energy system reaching a 50% cut in GHG emissions by 2030 and net zero carbon and biodiversity loss by 2050 – Ensuring sustainable energy for all. (Dixson-Decléve et al., 2022, pp. 13-14).

So how can these turnarounds be linked to solidarity and ECE? The model links to the crisis that is upon us now, the climate crisis encompassing social, political and ecologic insecurity, instability, non-prosperity and inequity. The five turnarounds mentioned above can create change for a prosperous Earth, regenerated Nature and human wellbeing. So how can we take part in this change in early childhood? ECE teachers' knowledge about these sustainability issues and work with all aspects of sustainability in relation to human wellbeing, equality and democracy is

crucial. Solidarity is about empathy and care for others as shared understandings and respect for other humans, all are intrinsically linked to the changes required for humanity.

In addition to solidarity with humans, solidarity with the planet is required for animals and plants, their future existence and rights to sustainable living. How can we in ECE support solidarity work, for example, with endangered animals, plants and physical environments? In recent years, it was reported that bee numbers have declined alarmingly in several countries. Bees are necessary for pollinating plants for human food production. Building insect hotels and following the work of bees is a transformative way to support bees that has become increasingly common in ECE services. A study by Woldemariam (2020) explored the pedagogical opportunities to engage young children in sustainability issues with a focus on bee death. The study showed that when the children were part of a bee theatre, their speech, actions and commitment to bees changed, leading to responses such as expressed feelings of joy and anxiety as well as actions of embodied intensity. In addition, Rooney and Blaise (2003) have raised ethical engagement as a significant aspect in rethinking human relations with nature, specifically weather. They state this “involves more than learning about things, and rather requires a willingness to (un)think and (un)learn, to challenge the framings we (adults) have grown up with and take for granted, and to shift our orientation to learning with worlds” (p. 9). These research insights demonstrate that children in ECE settings need adults that are “teaching for sustainability [...] that emphasizes planetary ethic and degrowth” (Kopnina, 2020, p. 280). Further, Jickling (2017) argues for approaches to education that are disruptive:

As humans, we have the capacity to feel, empathize, love, and mourn loss ... We need to pay attention ... creating educational experiences that are held, felt, and disruptive might just be the basis for learning that is, indeed, transformational. (p. 28)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how educators in ECE can work with solidarity by discussing it from the perspective of internal institutional solidarity (in ECE, in the ECE group), external solidarity (outside the immediate sphere) and solidarity across time and space (solidarity with future generations). Children are living in a world in change, a world that needs solidarity and sustainability, plus new ways of taking care of humans, more-than-humans and the planet Earth.

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