Concrete Examples of Education for Sustainability Practices in Preschool in Sweden

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Session Information

30 SES 12 A, Early childhood sustainability education

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Time: 2019-09-05
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Chair: Paul Vare

Contribution

To integrate education for sustainability (EfS) in pedagogical practices is often described as complex and challenging by teachers at preschool to higher education levels. Teachers’ lack of competence in teaching EfS or inspiring examples from educational practices have been identified as some major reasons for this (Borg, Gericke, Höglund, & Bergman, 2012; Corney, 2006; Hedefalk, Almqvist & Östman, 2015). The intention with EfS is to empower learners ‘to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity’ (UNESCO, 2019). In early childhood education, a main starting point in EfS is building on children’s participation, and viewing them as active agents and stakeholders for the future (Gothenburg Environmental Centre, 2010). Despite an increase in integrating EfS in preschools in Sweden, there are teachers that do not fully acknowledge children as active citizens who are capable of being involved in activities that bring changes in society (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013).

Preschool teachers play a significant role in developing young children's verbal and practical knowledge about environmental and sustainability-related issues through engaging them in conversations, discussions, and in practical activities (Borg, 2017). According to Pramling Samuelsson (2011, p. 110) an important factor for developing children’s competence in EfS is ‘the teacher's competence and understanding of the questions as such related to young children's everyday life’. However, only a few studies have been conducted to explore how teachers integrated EfS in preschool education (e.g. Svedäng, Halvars, Elfström, & Unga, 2018). Knowledge operationalization of EfS is needed for teachers to identify practical and proven examples of how to integrate EfS in their daily pedagogical practices.
Aim and objectives

The purpose of this study was to highlight preschool teachers' operationalization of education for sustainability (EfS) in their daily pedagogical practices in Sweden. The objectives were:

- to explore teachers' sustainability awareness in preschool education; and
- to investigate how teachers integrate EfS in their daily pedagogical activities

In this paper, 'sustainability awareness' refers to what teachers describe about what they know and how they view of sustainability in relation to preschool education from their personal perspectives. In Sweden, preschool education refers to early childhood education for children, who are below six years old.

In Sweden, a new curriculum for preschool education will be effective from July 2019 (Skolverket, 2018), in which a number of changes compared with the previous curriculum have been made, e.g., the concept sustainably is explicitly mentioned for the first time in relation to preschool education and children's learning. The new curriculum states that each person that works in preschool shall promote respect for individual's intrinsic value and for sustainability.

Conceptual framework

Children are active participants in learning, and the involvement of adults and knowledgeable peers can make a great difference in the learning process (Bruner, 1966). Bruner (1960, 1977) argues that a child of any age is capable of understanding complex information; even very young children are capable of learning any material if the instruction is organized appropriately. Considering the complexity of the concept of sustainability, the study uses an interlocking circles model that depicts how the environmental, the social and the environmental dimensions are closely connected (Elliott, 2013). Any practices and policies developed without taking all dimensions into account are likely to provide only limited understanding of the sustainability concept and is less likely to lead to action (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, & Samuelsson, 2010). With regard to EfS, the challenges are not only to operationalize these sustainability dimensions for preschool's pedagogical practices, but there is a great need to concretize EfS with examples that are connected with children's daily life.

Method

This study was part of a larger EfS-school development project, which was developed with practitioners to provide support for teacher professional development (TPD) in a municipality in Sweden. A qualitative approach was utilized to acquire an in-depth understanding of preschool teachers' sustainability awareness, and their ways of operationalizing the EfS for day-today activities. The study was conducted between April and May 2018. A description of Participants and data collection, and Data analysis is given below. Participants and data collection Individual interview data were collected from 12 certified preschool teachers, who were employed in 8 preschools that participated in the EfS-school development project for a year. The preschool teachers were all women with working experiences with young children ranging from 6 to 33 years. Although 10 preschools participated in the EfS-school development project, two of them could not participate in the study due to other commitments. An interview guide was developed that included questions concerning demographic information, teacher's definition and views of the concept of sustainability and EfS, their experiences of working with EfS with practical examples, as well as any challenges they might have experienced to integrate EfS in preschool education. Conducted in Swedish, the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed by a professional transcriber. Data analysis Content analysis was undertaken to analyse the interview transcriptions to identify main contents of data and the messages (Cohen, Manion, & Morisson, 2011). The transcriptions were read and re-read in...
order to become thoroughly familiarized with the data and initial codes were noted concurrently. Any similarities, inconsistencies or contradictions in relation to what individual teachers informed, were noted for further exploration. In later stages of the analysis, some of the codes were modified while re-reading the transcriptions to ensure consistencies and coverage of the codes. Similar types of codes were categorized and from these categories major themes emerged. To ensure reliability, the coding started with a small sample of texts, which helps to make amendments of the coding and categorisation. This study followed the codes and guidelines of research ethics in relation to informed consents of the participants, maintenance of confidentiality, and the use of information for the study (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

**Expected Outcomes**

Regarding sustainability awareness, most of the teachers reported an integrated views of sustainability. All participants were capable of describing sustainability using the three interconnected dimensions: the environmental, the social and the economic. In general, all teachers viewed sustainability as an abstract and complex concept, which can be difficult to make apprehensible in preschool's educational activities. The preliminary findings of how the teachers integrate EFs in their daily pedagogical activities are presented under emerging themes below: Environmental dimensions on focus: Common activities in all preschools were recycling of plastic materials, reusing of milk packets and plastic corks, as well as composting of leftover food. Going out in the nature appeared to be a routine for all preschools. Concrete examples for young children: A few teachers argued that working with young children with EFs, requires efforts to concretize various activities at children's developmental levels. In general the teachers were lacking concrete ways of working with EFs; especially to integrate the social and economic dimension. Internationalization and global perspectives: A couple of preschools started integrating global perspectives, e.g. one teacher mentioned that they had a collaboration with a preschool in Canada, and, according to her, it is important that children get a wider perspective about other countries, languages and cultures, which she viewed as a part of social sustainability. Some of the teachers connected their educational practices with the preschool curriculum highlighting the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that address the 'areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet' (United Nations, 2015, p.1). To summarize the main findings, it seemed that the current TPD had, to greater extent, impact on transforming teachers' views of sustainability into a holistic concept, and they were also struggling to transform their knowledge into concrete pedagogical activities. Positive and unexpected activities though evolved in relation to globalization.

**References**


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Programme by Network 2019

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Network 23. Policy Studies and Politics of Education

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Network 30. Research on Environmental und Sustainability Education

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