

Tímarit um uppeldi og menntun / Icelandic Journal of Education | 33(1), 2024, 151-163

Sérrit um leikskólastarf, tileinkað dr. Guðrúnu Öldu Harðardóttur leikskólakennara

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<https://doi.org/10.24270/tuum.2024.33.9>

HONOURING THE COMPETENCES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Guðrún Alda Harðardóttir is a contemporary colleague with joint research interests, anchored in Iceland, and in Sweden. We have both researched preschool pedagogy, the view of the child, play, and education for sustainability. The aim of this article is to highlight the view on toddlers and play in the Swedish preschool, and how universal access to preschools in the Nordic countries has influenced societal and educational understandings of childhood. Parallel to this development, the global policy and implementation of children's rights has strengthened children's position in society. Furthermore, the article aims to campaign for children's rights as actors in education for sustainability. By analyzing the influence of these access policies and their alignment with global children's rights initiatives, the article underscores the importance of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability, advocating young children as key contributors to transformative societal changes.

Keywords: toddlers, play, preschool, children's rights, education for sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

I will tell a story from my life as a preschool teacher in Sweden. In this story, Guðrún Alda Harðardóttir is an ever-returning friend. She has worked from Iceland, but with extensive international outreach, and I have worked from Stockholm, also with many international connections. We have both been active in organisations linked to the preschool profession, either within the teacher unions or non-governmental organisations, such as OMEP, the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (ECE) or friends of Reggio Emilia. And we have both had the privilege to start preschools, and even to build a department for Early Childhood Education at the Universities in Akureyri and Stockholm. Our meetings have been irregular but always very thought-provoking and interesting. My main research fields have been toddlers, play, pedagogy, children's rights, and, in the past few decades, early education for sustainability (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2021). Drawing on my long experience, both as a teacher and as a researcher, the aim of this article is

to highlight the changed view on children in the Swedish preschool, and how universal access to preschools; that is, full coverage, in the Nordic countries has influenced the understanding of childhood (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006). Furthermore, the article aims to support children's rights as actors in education for sustainability.

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE CHILD?

In the 1980's, the teaching profession was challenged by some new research and philosophies. One of the best-known influencers of that time was of course Loris Malaguzzi. His thinking was introduced to a larger public by an exhibition at the Modern Museum of Art in Stockholm in 1981. This was the first presentation outside Italy, and it caused a loud echo that reached far beyond the ECE community.

To summarize Malaguzzi's thinking is not possible within this article. However, I consider the way Malaguzzi (1993) develops his view on the child as the thrilling start of a new era. Malaguzzi looked upon children as competent, actively involved in their own learning and development processes. The image of this rich child, with a hundred languages, was contrasted by the poor and needy child, a view that, according to Malaguzzi (1993) still dominates in school. Pupils are often looked upon as empty receivers for teachers to fill, and their previous experiences are not sufficiently recognised in school. As a contrast, Malaguzzi's view is holistic, and he identified the child as being competent and explorative from the start.

My own doctoral dissertation (Engdahl, 2011) – *Toddlers as social actors in the Swedish preschool* – was theoretically founded in studies of infant development, showing that a child can be socially active from the first minutes of its life and that learning can take place in interaction with others in meaningful contexts. Newborns can imitate expressions of the care giver (Meltzoff & Moore, 1999; Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 1988). These new findings were made possible by innovative techniques, using filming and video recordings in children's everyday life, as opposed to the previous experimental approach, most often carried out in laboratories.

The American Daniel N. Stern (1985) built a bridge between psychoanalytical theories and psychology, with the help of video-recordings. What could be seen in the videos did not correspond to theory. He presented his results in a theory about the interpersonal world of the infant. Stern found that children have an emergent sense of self from birth, and they develop more senses (in his terminology a core sense, a subjective sense, and a verbal sense) during interpersonal lifelong processes of communication. Already during their first year in life, infants show a beginning competence for emotional attunement with the caregiver, and an emerging insight into other persons' feelings in a shared situation.

This theory recognises, for example, that development and learning are seen as processes that always involve feelings. Cognitive aspects and thoughts are not isolated phenomena since the whole child, body, mind, and soul, is involved in these processes (Stern, 1985). Stern's concept of the present moment (Stern, 2004) points to the importance of the lived experience of phenomena in the life-world. The present moment can, according

to Stern, be considered as the fundamental building stone for creating experiences of relationships.

Other childhood researchers contributed to the image of a competent child. Sommer (1997) stated that children are born with a social competence of togetherness. From this perspective, socialization is seen as a process whereby the relatively competent human being is capturing and handling the surrounding society and culture in an active and continuous way (Sommer et al., 2010). Sommer believes that the heyday of older developmental psychological theories is over and argues for a paradigm shift in the view of children, from vulnerable to resilient, illustrated in table 1 (Sommer, 2005).

Table 1

Paradigmatic shift: From child psychology to childhood psychology (Sommer, 2005)

From	To
Grand general theories	Mini theories, partial theories
Universal knowledge	Culturally and historically bound knowledge, constantly updated
Neutrality of experts	Professional voices of the times
Family Centrism	Network Relationships
Maternal centrism	The multi-personal world of the child
The fragile child	The relatively resilient child
Development in stages	Development of cultural, social, and personal competence

To illustrate this view of the child as relatively competent, I refer to an example about Molly, a toddler of 23 months (Engdahl, 2011, p. 13):

Molly was walking around in the kitchen area, clicked on the stove switches. On the wall, there is a group of the children's paintings. Molly found a painting on the floor, it had fallen down. She picked up the drawing, looked at me and started walking towards me. She stopped, turned around and went up to the wall. Molly pressed the painting to the wall, but it didn't stay.

- He ha hama, Molly said, and again walked towards me.

On her way, she tried to hang the painting on a chair by pressing it to the back of the chair. Molly came up to me and reached out to me, the drawing in her hand. She held up the drawing towards me, and looked at the wall, back and fore. She showed me that she wanted to re-place the drawing on the wall.

- Do you want to put it back on the wall? Shall I help you? I asked.

- MMMM, Molly said, and I put it back on its place.

- Is this OK? I wondered.

- Mmm, Molly said.

She pointed at the drawing, nodding her head. Molly stayed there for a while, looking at the drawings.

What makes this episode special is the fact that Molly is not yet two years old. Still, I think that she shows an awareness of the environment, an aesthetical sense, and a sense of order. She moves freely in the room and acts as a competent agent in relation to the perceived disorder. A drawing has fallen down, and she takes the initiative to put it back where it belongs. She stays focused on the self-appointed task to hang up the painting, although she fails many times. Molly uses her social and cognitive competencies when she is making her intentions clear to me, the new researcher (Sommer et al., 2010; Stern, 2004). Although her mother tongue is not Swedish, Molly demonstrates her competence in communication as she invites me to help her correct the disorder. With the final confirming nod, Molly shows that her acting is intentional. To me, this example illustrates a feeling of connectedness and responsibility, carried out by toddler Molly.

Now imagine a similar situation in a corridor in a school for teenagers. In a Swedish school, it cannot be taken for granted that teen-agers show the same competence as Molly in taking care of their shared environment.

THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

During the 1980's, there was a dominating focus on children and children's rights in international policy, and in UN, and UN-related organisations. One of those was OMEP. In September 1989, world leaders made a historic commitment to the world's children by adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – an international agreement on childhood (United Nations [UN], 1989). This convention is a treaty, an international legal framework, between the UN member states. The UNCRC adds to the shift in research and marks a new way of considering children: Children are not merely objects belonging to their parents and about which decisions are made. Children are not just training to become adults, they are human beings, citizens, and individuals with their own rights (Engdahl, 2019). The Convention has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, and today 196 member states have ratified the UNCRC. Following the UNCRC, childhood is separate from adulthood, and lasts until 18; it is a special, protected time, in which children must be allowed to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity (Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021).

Today, in addition to the convention, there are three optional protocols and around 20 General Comments, that elaborate the intentions behind the 54 articles. I was a member of the committee that developed General Comment 17 on Article 31 - Children's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life, and the arts (Committee on the rights of the child, 2013). UNCRC is integrated in national legislations in 96 countries, which further strengthens the overall position of the child (Engdahl, 2019).

ADOPTING A CHILD-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE

When trying to further understand young children as citizens, researchers need to be aware of the asymmetric aspects of the relationships between children and adults. Children are dependent on care and trust (Sommer, 1997). Studying children from a child-oriented perspective is an attempt to direct adults' attention towards an understanding of children's perceptions, experiences, and actions in the world. With such an approach, researchers' attention is directed towards children's perceptions, experiences, and actions by getting close to and gaining insight into their worlds. However, researchers only present interpretations of the children's perspectives. The term 'children's perspectives' relates to studies aiming at the children's own perceptions. Children's perspectives could be defined as 'to represent children's experiences, perceptions and understanding in their life world' (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 23), where the experiencing child is seen as a subject in his or her own world. By careful listening, observing, and analysing the ways in which children communicate, researchers may develop a better understanding of how children make sense of their lives.

A child-oriented approach is now clearly stated in the Swedish *Curriculum for the Pre-school – Lpfö* (National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 5). The preschool should reflect the values and rights expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Education should, therefore, be based on what is deemed to be in the child's best interests, that children have the right to participation and influence, and that children should be made aware of their rights. This is further explained in section 2.3, Participation and influence of the child:

Education in the preschool should lay the foundations for children to understand what democracy is. The social development of children presupposes, according to their ability, that they can assume responsibility for their own actions and for the environment in the preschool. Children have the right to participation and influence. The needs and interests that the children themselves express in different ways should provide the foundation for shaping the environment and planning the education. (National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 5).

To sum up, after more than 30 years with the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), children today are recognized as citizens with rights in many countries (Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021). Although this confirms the new view on children and childhood, as I have described above, the Convention is still not widely enough disseminated and implemented; many children are not aware of their rights, nor are there enough politicians and professionals working with children. However, in one area, Education for sustainabil-

ity, children are recognized as important and with agency, both in research and in practice and I will now turn to this field.

REORIENTING ALL EDUCATION, AND THE WHOLE SOCIETY, TO SUSTAINABILITY

The view of children as actors whose opinions should be taken into account is clearly seen in Education for sustainability. There is a growing awareness of how unsustainably we are living, and that the conditions for planet Earth are rapidly changing. From the UN report *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), resulting in an Agenda for the 21st century, education for sustainable development have been a major concern to me. And already in the UN Top Summit in Rio in 1992, children were pointed out as especially important in the process. I want to stress that all steps in the future must include the children, as illustrated in the following quote:

Not only will children inherit the responsibility of looking after the Earth, but in many developing countries they comprise nearly half the population. The specific interests of children need to be taken fully into account in the participatory process on environment and development in order to safeguard the future sustainability of any actions taken to improve the environment. (UN, n.d., chapter 25:12)

Young children should be recognised as rights' holders and rights' partakers in a broader societal perspective that also includes collective, inter-generational entitlements and rights beyond those held by adults (Davis, 2009; Elliott et al., 2020).

Education cannot follow old curricula from the 19th century; both the children and the content have changed. We must reorient education towards the foundational principles of the UNCRC: no discrimination, making decisions in the best interests of the children, ensure all children's right to life, survival and development and promoting the children's right to give voice and to be listened to. For the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014, UNESCO argued for a reorientation where formal, informal, and non-formal education and learning processes for sustainability must be strengthened and prioritized. This reorientation was illustrated in some key education principles that still are highly relevant, also in education about human rights (UNESCO, 2005):

- interdisciplinary and holistic
- values-driven
- critical thinking and problem solving
- multi method
- participatory decision making
- applicability and
- locally relevant.

These principles align well with early childhood pedagogy and may be one of the reasons why ECE and ESD are relatively easy to integrate. The holistic and child-oriented approach has made ECE a vibrant arena for education for sustainability (Engdahl & Furu, 2022).

Professor and UNESCO Chair, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, made education for sustainable development one of her major tasks (Pramling Samuelsson, 2011), and we have worked together during the last decades. The very first international workshop within ECE for sustainability was held in Gothenburg (Ottosson & Samuelsson, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). OMEP Sweden hosted the first international congress for ECE on the topic *Children – citizens in a challenged world in 2010*, where I served as the congress chair. OMEP has been an active partner during the Decade for ESD 2005–2014, and a partner in the development of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (UN, 2015). The commitment of OMEP was founded in a large OMEP World project on ECE for sustainability, where I have been one of the world leaders.

THE OMEP ESD WORLD PROJECT

Starting in 2009, World OMEP has run a project on ECE for sustainable development. More than half of the 70 member countries have participated over the years. The overall aim of the project is to enhance the awareness of ESD among OMEP members, young children and early childhood education at large, with a special focus on a child-oriented perspective. The idea behind the project was to introduce and invite children and professionals to discuss ESD with a focus on the children's ideas. The methods used were deliberately designed to address and give voice to children and to enhance child participation.

The OMEP world project is placed within a child-oriented perspective (Sommer et al., 2010) and is specially designed to invite child participation. Teachers with an interest in understanding the child's meaning-making were invited to try to collect children's thoughts, accounts and ideas linked to their daily lives and sustainability. Children learn from the adult world while, at the same time, they are citizens who interpret, reproduce, and produce their own culture (Corsaro, 2005).

Children's voice as a theoretical concept includes: '...that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own and that only surfaces when the adults have learned to ask and get out of the way' (James, 2004, p. 28). With this approach, children are looked upon as actors who contribute both to stability and to change in a continuous interplay with their environment. Through their agency, they influence and change their everyday lives (Engdahl, 2011).

The ongoing project consists of many parts, including informal child interviews, ESD-projects in preschools, intergenerational dialogues for ESD and in-service training of staff. One common result is that adults tend to underestimate children's knowledge about sustainability-related issues. Many interviewers were amazed by the knowledge the children showed them. The children had thoughts and ideas to bring up about the state of the Earth in relation to sustainability. Four national project leaders wrote the following concluding comments, which together summarise why ECE should be an arena for ESD (Engdahl, 2015):

It is essential to change the social attitude against their ability to participate effectively. (Brazil)

Until the implementation of this global project, I felt that preschool children are not very aware of environmental protection, ecology and other sub-themes linked to ESD. However, following the actual 17 interviews with children and reading through the individual responses, I realised that the opposite is true. Children perceive information they hear, without it being the adults' intention, and the moment they receive a particular impulse they are able to use it. (Czech Republic)

One of the most important results is the support for the children's initiative. Often pedagogues themselves define the theme of a project and then try to involve the children in the theme. During the course of the OMEP project, many pedagogues for the first time took the children's opinions and initiatives seriously. Children offered subjects for research. Pedagogues and parents came to the conclusion that children have their own views and suggestions on sustainable development. So children were active participants in the projects. They did not only follow plans that adults had created for them. (Russia)

In particular, during the project on intergenerational dialogues, it became clear that children and adults have different knowledge, which sometimes leads to different priorities. When discussing growing food, the grandparents named vegetables, the children flowers and fruit. Grandparents value knowing how to grow things you can eat, whereas children who sometimes think food comes from the supermarket, prefer to grow flowers and some fruits. The different preferences, vegetables or flowers, are linked to values on sustainability.

The most important result, however, that I would like to bring forward from these ESD projects, is the number of ideas the children came up with which oftentimes were carried through in local projects that directly reflected on the children's lives (Engdahl, 2015). The political ambition relating to education for sustainability is about empowerment and transactive and transformative change (UNESCO, 2020).

Sustainable Preschool

Recently, I became involved as a researcher in an ongoing research and development programme (2021–2024) entitled Sustainable Preschool (Ifous, 2021). Eight municipalities (local government areas) and one independent national provider of ECE have enrolled around 200 preschool teachers and 50 preschool principals in the programme. As one of three researchers in this initiative, we support the overall development of the programme and design ongoing research and collect various kinds of data on EfS in preschool education. So far, we have collected information about why one should work with ESD in Swedish preschools (Ärlemalm-Hagsér et al., 2023). Four different motives were identified; 1) To counteract unsustainable lifestyles; 2) To follow the governing documents; 3) To take responsibility for a sustainable present and future and 4) Equipping children for the future. The study also shows that children's participation in a sustainable present and future is presented as decisive for change to happen.

The teachers also have reported what content they focus on in ESD. Three topics dominated; Recycling, Growing plants, and Animals, which could be interpreted as business as

usual, online with other studies. However, in many preschools the teaching goes deeper and shows transformative and transactional perspectives integrated with the topics. ESD in early education in Sweden is no longer dominated by the environmental dimension, as earlier content studies have shown; a new common content relates to the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 regarding sustainable lifestyles and human rights and is enriching ESD in Swedish preschools. The study also shows that reorienting education towards sustainability is a long process, founded in empowerment, action competence, and changed policy.

During these ESD projects, many teachers became aware of the empowering effects of a child-oriented approach (Engdahl et al., 2024). A necessary skill, then, is the capacity to communicate in a way where children express their ideas and to share focus, level and content with the child (Engdahl et al., 2023). An analysis of the teachers' approaches during informal child talks showed three ways: a joint creation of meaning, a question and answer-approach, focusing on remembering facts, and following the children. A key factor seemed to be to create a shared inter-subjective atmosphere, while at the same time being open for alterity; that is, introducing new or slightly changed perspectives for the dialogue to deepen and continue (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2023). The teachers' skills in balancing the children's interest with intended content were pivotal for achieving a shared sustainable focus.

Another initiative for ESD in early childhood is the development of an online course *Sustainability from the Start* (edChild et al., 2023). It is accessible through the application ECE Academy, and free of charge, as it is co-financed by the European Union. The course was developed by researchers in five European countries, and is available in Croatian, Czech, English, French, and Swedish. After six months, it has already reached more than 2500 participants in 46 countries.

CHILDREN LEAD THE WAY

Reorienting education to being based on the principle of child participation seems to be hard to realize. Although it is more common today to accept what is stated in Articles 12–14 in the UNCRC, that children have the right to be involved and to be heard in matters affecting them, the tradition that adults know what is best for children remains. However, there is a long tradition of experts being allowed to define what is quality in ECE. But what about the influence of the primary users – the children themselves? Is anyone interested in the kind of daily life the children want? Does anyone regard children as experts when it comes to their own lives? (Langsted, 1994, pp. 28–29). Now is the time also to ask the children.

I would like to address the extraordinary contribution to life made by one Swedish child – Greta Thunberg. Already in her early teens, she was challenged by the ongoing global warming and climate change. And not only challenged; she was frustrated by the lack of action from decision makers, leaders, teachers, indeed more or less all adults. She decided to go on strike every Friday. Instead of going to school she sat down outside the Swedish Parliament with a sign “SCHOOL STRIKE FOR THE CLIMATE”. This was of

course very provocative for society. Could it be that a teenage girl was more responsive to the need of the planet and humans than the Members of Parliament? As opposed to adults, be it politicians, teachers, parents or others – children and youth around the world understood the message and liked it. The movement *Fridays for Future* was born, and within one year, it grew to become the largest ever youth movement. When asked why she was on strike, Greta Thunberg answered that she would continue until Sweden takes action to meet the requirements in the Paris agreement of 2015 (Thunberg, 2019).

In September 2019, Greta Thunberg was invited to the UN where she spoke to the world leaders. She stated that her place should be in school, and that they, the leaders, should deal with the necessary steps to counter global warming. She added that it is just a question of time until change will come, because young people don't accept the continued global warming and disruption of conditions on planet Earth.

CONCLUSION: EMPOWERING CHILDREN

The aim of this article is to highlight the view on toddlers and play in the Swedish preschool and demonstrate how universal access to preschools in the Nordic countries has influenced understandings of childhood. Today, children's voices are respected and treated as important, especially within ECE institutions created for them, but also increasingly in society, in the intergenerational dialogue on issues of intergenerational importance. The UNCRC empowers the right for these voices also to be represented in public places and debates, albeit coming from a social group that is not yet allowed to vote. Here, ECE institutions play an important role by paving the way.

Furthermore, the article explored Early Childhood Education for Sustainability. In the last two decades, both research and practice have adopted the task of education for sustainability, which is shown in a number of articles and reports from practice. The young voices, as proven by the Fridays for future-movement, may reach the global political agenda, and the decision-makers at local, national, and international levels. Greta Thunberg latest contribution is a collection of scientific arguments for climate change (Thunberg, 2022).

The urgency of taking action for ESD during the coming years is clearly stated in a review about young children and their rights (Višnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021, p. 267):

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.

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Greinin barst tímaritinu 8. apríl 2024 og var samþykkt til birtingar 26. maí 2024.

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Ingrid Engdahl (ingridengdahl@gmail.com), Assistant Professor, is a preschool teacher and psychologist, with a PhD in Child and Youth Sciences from Stockholm University, Sweden, now a senior researcher. Her research area is preschool and includes toddlers, play, friendship, children's rights, and education for sustainable development. Ongoing research concerns the Ifous programme 'Sustainable preschool' and the development of an app-based on-line course 'Sustainability from the Start', reachable in the app ECE Academy. Ingrid is active within OMEP, the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education, in Sweden and internationally, focusing on human rights and education for children from birth to 8 years.