

Rethinking the Relation between Pedagogy and Sustainability: The Views of Preschool Teachers in Sweden.

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A core value underpinning activities in early childhood education and care for sustainability (ECECfS) is that these activities be organized to support forms of democratic, intergenerational collaboration in which children can act as “agents of change.” From the perspective of mediational theories of mind, the possibilities for children to participate actively and agentively in ECECfS can be understood by studying the ECEC settings in which these activities unfold as systems of culturally-constituted and historically contingent conditions.

The present study applied this perspective in qualitative case studies of how teachers in three Swedish preschools understand and practice ECECfS, and the degree to which children in these preschools could act as agents of change in relation to ECECfS activities. This research is based on survey and interview data collected from teacher teams in preschools that participated in a series of regional government-sponsored workshops designed to support teachers’ efforts to develop the outdoor spaces in their preschools as sustainable, multifunctional environments. Drawing on concepts from cultural historical activity theory (systemic tensions as underpinning expansive learning), surveys and interview transcripts were analyzed to characterize: how the participating teachers engaged with concepts relevant for understanding their approach to ECECfS (sustainability, teaching, pretend and exploratory play); pedagogical and organizational tensions that teachers described in relation to these concepts; and cultural means that mediated teachers relations to the general object of implementing ECECfS.

Teachers conceptions and practices of ECECfS were in general consistent with findings of prior research of in-service and pre-service preschool staff in Sweden: While teachers understood ECECfS holistically as a project that integrates environmental, economic, and social dimensions, the majority of the activities organized by the teachers emphasized the environmental dimension, with none explicitly emphasizing the economic dimension. Furthermore, teachers in all three schools described their day-to-day preschool practices as inherently about and for sustainability, noting a kind of tension or contradiction with needing to make sustainability explicit in preschool activities.

With respect to opportunities for children to act as agents of change in day-to-day preschool activities, we found examples in all three cases in which children engaged in actions that changed their material environment and/or their participation in relevant community(ies) of practice. Critically, what varied across preschools was if and to what degree these actions were clearly motivated by children’s questions, interests, and/or intentions. We draw on the concepts of instrumental and ontological communities of learners (Matusov et al., 2013) to argue that pedagogical and organizational aspects of each preschool’s idioculture (Fine, 2012) enabled or constrained the possibilities for children to act as agents of change.

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