Caring for People and the Planet

Preschool Children’s Knowledge and Practices of Sustainability

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Doctoral dissertation

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The dissertation will be defended in English.

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Abstract

With an overall aim of enhancing the knowledge about preschool children’s learning for sustainability in Sweden, the objectives of this study have been to investigate and compare self-reported knowledge and practices of sustainability among children attending eco-certified and non-eco-certified preschools and to explore the extent to which preschool- and home-related factors are associated with children’s knowledge and practices of sustainability. In addition, this study explored children’s perceived sources of such knowledge.

The three-interlocking-circles model of sustainability, illustrating the interconnections of the environmental, social and economic dimensions, was used as a conceptual framework. The concept of sustainability was operationalized into four themes: economic equality, resource sharing, recycling and transport use. Data were collected from 53 final-year preschool children, aged five to six years, 89 guardians, 74 teachers and seven directors at six eco-certified and six non-eco-certified preschools. Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using content analysis and multivariate analysis, respectively.

The results showed that by the time the children completed preschool, many had acquired some knowledge about how to use money, about the sorting of different recyclable items at home and at preschool, and about the impact of different modes of transport on the environment and people’s lives. They also had ideas about the lives of other children in the world and what it can mean to share resources with other people. There was a positive relationship between children’s declarative (understanding) and functional (practice) knowledge of sustainability issues and the involvement of teachers and guardians in sustainability-related discussions and activities. No statistically significant differences between eco- and non-eco-certified preschools in terms of children’s declarative and functional knowledge were found. Parents were reported to be the main sources of children’s knowledge along with the children themselves, teachers and media.

The findings offer support for integrating environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability in the daily pedagogical activities of preschools and for giving children opportunities to participate in discussions and practical activities that concern their lives.

Keywords
consumption; daycare center; economic sustainability; environmental education; environmental sustainability; guardians; kindergarten; parents; preschool; preschool director; recycling; sharing resources; social sustainability; sustainable development; teacher; young children.