Education for Sustainability in the New Preschool Curriculum in Sweden

Introduction

Although the concept of sustainability has been on the agenda in Sweden for long time, the term sustainability has recently been integrated in the new preschool curriculum, which will be effective from July 2019 (Skolverket, 2018). The original concept of sustainability was introduced in the Brundtland Report as a ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, p. 47). Education for sustainability (EfS) reorients education and learning by creating opportunities for everyone to acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to promote a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2005).

In a time of accelerating changes and globalization, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) is going to be law in Sweden. In the new preschool curriculum, it is stated that the preschool shall lay foundation for developing children’s growing interests and active participation in society for sustainability. Democracy, with space for individual children to express their views and interests, and to be listened to, has always been a main theme in the Swedish preschool curricula. In addition to the right to express themselves, the new curriculum points out that children have the right to participate and influence. This takes a lot of thinking to bring into preschool pedagogical practices; not the least do children have to be considered to be agents in their own every-day lives.

Even though Sweden is considered to be a pioneer in the field of sustainability, the analysis of the previous preschool curriculum (Lpfö98, rev. 2010), revealed that children were not recognised as competent citizens or agents of change for sustainability within
the Swedish curriculum framework (Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Davis, 2014). In an analysis of the 2016 revision of the curriculum, the authors (Weldemariam et al., 2017) expressed their concern about the inexplicit use of sustainability, describing it as a hinder for ‘meaningful engagement with sustainability in preschool settings.’ (Weldemariam et al., 2017, p. 344). The authors argued that it was not enough just to recognise children's agency, rather the curriculum needs to indicate how their agency can be enacted. Thus, there is a need to conduct explore how children's participation rights and agency are addressed in the new curriculum, especially with focus on sustainability.

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are:

- to explore what are the major changes that took place in the new Swedish preschool curriculum,
- to investigate how education for sustainability (EfS) is addressed with regards to young children's voices, participation and agency in the curriculum, and
- to discuss these findings in relation to relevant international policy documents and published empirical research.

Theoretical framework

In early childhood education for sustainability, children are viewed as change agents with the capacity to take part in various issues related to sustainability (Davis, 2015). Children's active and creative participation in activities in social contexts is one of the most important basis for their learning (Corsaro, Molinari, & Rosier, 2002). Children actively construct their experiences of the world. They learn and develop through active interactions with others and through participation in different activities (Bandura, 2001; Corsaro 2005). In this study, child perspectives and children's perspectives are considered relevant since these perspectives are widely used in Scandinavian curricula (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2009). Children's perspectives concern children's own experiences, understanding and contribution, whereas child perspectives represent what adults try to understand about children's views of their world. Acknowledging the intertwined nature and a holistic view of sustainability, the three dimensions of sustainability – environmental, social and economic – will be used to explore how the concept is addressed.

Method

A content analysis of the curriculum was conducted to analyse the curriculum (Cohen, Manion, & Morisson, 2011). The analysis was carried out highlighting the following questions: What are the major changes made in the curriculum? What and how sustainability-related terms are included? How are children's voices, participation and agency addressed in relation to social, environmental and economic sustainability? How the rights of the child are included in the new curriculum? How the preschool staff is supposed to value children's personal agency and their rights to participation as competent and capable persons? What view of the child is portrayed? Are there any other issues that can be noted? The findings of the analysis will be discussed in light of published empirical research focusing on young children's voices, participation and agency with regards to EfS, as well as international policy documents (e.g. UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 1989; United Nations, 2015) that address early childhood education for sustainability.

Expected Outcomes

It is expected that the findings will demonstrate the major changes that took part in the new curriculum. Concerning children's voices, participation and agency, the study will show how those aspects are addressed in relation to the environmental, the social and the economic dimensions sustainability in the new preschool curriculum in Sweden. Since the UN Convention on the Rights of
the Child (UNICEF, 1989) is going to be law in Sweden, it will be very useful to identify and reflect on how the rights of the child are addressed in the curriculum. The analysis will also reveal what responsibilities preschool staff have to value children's personal agency and to ensure that children's rights to participation as competent and capable persons for creating a sustainable society. Moreover, it can help to identify strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum in relation to earlier analysis of the curriculum undertaken by Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Davis (2014) and Weldemariam et al. (2017) from both national and global perspectives. (Preliminary results are not yet available, as the analysis of the curriculum has just started.)

References


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