
Examining the Rhetoric: a comparison of how sustainability and young children's participation and agency are framed in Australian and Swedish early childhood education curricula

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ABSTRACT This article scrutinises the ways in which young children are described and supported as active participants for change within the Australian and Swedish national steering documents for early childhood education. A critical theory lens was applied, in combination with document analysis that looked for concepts related to environment and sustainability – i.e. the environmental, social, economic and political dimension of development, human place in nature, and environmental stewardship. Concepts concerned with critical thinking and children as active participants for change were used as specific dimensions of curriculum interpretation. The analyses show that, while both the Australian and Swedish curricula deal with content connected to environmental, social and cognitive dimensions, there is limited or no discussion of the political dimensions of human development, such as children as active citizens with political agency. In other words, children are not recognised as competent beings or agents of change for sustainability within these early childhood curriculum frameworks. Hence, these supposedly contemporary early childhood education documents lack curricular leadership to support children to contribute their voices and actions to civic and public spheres of participation as equal citizens.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s when the concept of sustainable development emerged in socio-political rhetoric and began to influence educational policies at international, national and local levels (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992), education has increasingly been seen as a vehicle for enabling children and youth to develop understandings, values and competencies relevant to a rapidly changing and challenging world (Barratt Hacking et al, 2007). Education for sustainability [1] has been part of this emerging recognition of the role of children and youth, with its particular emphasis on shaping sustainable futures. Education for sustainability within early childhood education, however, has come much later than in other parts of education. This means that there are considerable gaps in research and theorising around early childhood education for sustainability, though this situation is beginning to change. One particular gap is at the interface of policy and practice.

This article scrutinises the ways in which education for sustainability is framed within two recent national early childhood education curricula – one from Australia and the other from Sweden. It critically examines whether, and how, young children (specifically preschoolers) are interpreted as participants for change around sustainability topics in these curricula.

International research that links early childhood education and education for sustainability is small but growing (Davis, 2009, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2010; Duhn, 2012). However, this article does not discuss this body of research, nor does it discuss the structure, organisation or practice of early childhood education for sustainability in Australia and Sweden. This article specifically focuses on how these national early childhood education frameworks are oriented to, and thus express, sustainability and related concepts within the *Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 98* (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010) and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Both are recent documents, Australia's being the first ever Australian national curriculum framework for early childhood education, while Sweden's national curriculum has recently been updated from its 1998 version. In this article, we direct our gaze, too, at how, or whether, children are viewed as competent and active participants with the power to 'make a difference' in relation to sustainability issues. The objectives of this analysis relate to the following questions:

- Are the concepts of sustainability actually used in Australian and Swedish early childhood education steering documents? If so, how?
- How, and in what ways, is the notion of children as active participants for change manifested in the Australian and Swedish early childhood education steering documents?

First, though, it is important to explain the underlying theoretical and environmental positioning of the researchers – in response to Kopnina's (2012) call for more explicit clarification of the underlying environmental ethics of researchers in the field of education for sustainability. The fundamentals of this analysis are built on critical theory (Habermas, 1987; Davis & Elliott, 2009; Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2012, 2013, 2014), a framework that has resonated with many education for sustainability practitioners and researchers over the past two decades, and Fraser's (2003, 2009) social justice framework, which is related to the capacity for individuals (in this case, young children) to participate in the social life of their community. In this article, 'community' refers to both a geographical place and a social space where children's engagement and activities in relation to sustainability are 'rooted in the local concrete reality of young children' (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008, p. 12; see also Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). For example, while we recognise that reliance on fossil fuels poses major risks for people, environments and economies, the 'local concrete reality' of this issue for young children might be an investigation of practical ways to reduce energy use within their preschool setting, in collaboration with adults (usually preschool staff and parents). In other words, the 'big issue' of global energy consumption is contextualised and translated into collaboratively generated ideas and positive actions. We do not support learning approaches that 'dump' the social, economic or environmental problems that the world is facing onto children; these challenges remain the primary responsibility of adults. Nevertheless, our framework is one that recognises the nexus between sustainability issues and the lives of young children, and that early education is 'more than a sheltered enclave that is dominated by romantic notions of childhood and nature' (Duhn, 2012, p. 27).

Overall, our approach takes an ethical stance; paradoxically, this is non-anthropocentric, as it seeks to give recognition to the full range of living beings. At the same time, however, it is inspired by the human values of justice and participation (Mellor, 2005; Fraser, 2009), including the children's rights agendas promulgated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).[2]

Understanding Australian and Swedish Early Childhood Curricula from a Critical Theoretical Perspective

The ... curriculum communicates what we choose to remember about our past, what we believe about the present and what we hope for the future. (Pinar, 2004, p. 20)

Critical studies that scrutinise modern schooling and education as part of the political arena have developed significantly over the last 30 years or so (Gough, 2003), and have been an important part of the theoretical landscape of environmental education/education for sustainability (Payne, 2006). Earlier traditions in environmental education/education for sustainability focused more on the impact of children's relations with nature, referred to in the literature as 'education *in* the environment', and on the transference of fact-based (usually scientific) knowledge, referred to as 'education *about* the environment'. The critical tradition stresses the importance of social critique – particularly how humans contribute to environmental issues and how education is complicit in creating/maintaining unsustainable practices. This has been referred to as 'education *for* the environment' or 'education *for* sustainability' (Fien, 1993).

These critiques are often informed, too, by theories that challenge mainstream constructions of children and youth, emphasising children and young people as citizens with rights and responsibilities in the present, rather than as adults in waiting. Because of their relative newness, however, critical studies within early childhood education for sustainability are lacking, although critical education has been taken up in early education to examine gender and class (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005).

This article, then, contributes a jigsaw of theories that aims to extend critical understandings of early childhood education and early childhood curricula, with a particular focus on education for sustainability. It uses a Habermasian egalitarian approach, where democracy and emancipation require that people's voices have to be heard, together with Fraser's (2003, 2009) concepts of 'participation parity' and 'affirmative' versus 'transformative' remedies, which are also used as analytical tools. Fraser's (2009) framework, in particular, provided us with a theoretical lens for considering the construction of children as equal human beings with possibilities to have their say and to have the right to take part in society as citizens. Table I shows how Fraser's concepts can be aligned with the characteristics of critical early education.

<i>Participation parity</i>	
Recognition	Children's thinking and opinions are equally valued, without misrecognition of gender or age
Redistribution	Access to quality early childhood education and socio-economic transformation
Representation	Children participate and have their voices heard
<i>Strategies of change</i>	
Affirmative remedies	Constructions of action without disturbing underlying injustice
Transformative remedies	Deconstructing underlying frameworks of injustice

Table I. An overview of Fraser's (2003, 2009) concepts, translated to meet early childhood education (an interpretation inspired by Brownlee et al, 2012).

The rationale for the use of this theoretical framework in connection to early childhood education for sustainability has three dimensions. First, it refutes conceptions of children and childhood that separate children from adults and that formulate childhood as context-free and a natural, but separate, part of human development. We see children and childhood as interconnected within structural categories similar to class, gender and age (James & Prout, 1997). Second, our view has implications for, and challenges, traditional early learning models that value individualistic cognitive, social, physical and emotional child development. Instead, it is a view that is more consistent with growing up in the twenty-first century, which demands new forms of learning and collaborative problem solving, especially for sustainability issues, where there is already evidence that individuals have poor responses to issues with collective answers. This does not mean that we take no notice of children's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development; rather, our orientation is one that supports holistic expectations of children as human beings with civil rights and the right to take part in civic engagement (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Kjørholt, 2005; Theis, 2010). Third, because education is seen as a key instrument for the construction of a 'good' citizen, there is a need for critical analysis of underlying assumptions and hegemonic structures of the ways of understanding early childhood education as an educational arena. Our view contradicts

movements where children take part in educational initiatives and are protected from danger; rather it is where children are active participants and agents of change (Davis, 2009).

These concepts and approaches are discussed in more detail later in this article, but first we discuss the research method that was used to critically investigate the Australian and Swedish early education steering documents, which help shape how curriculum and pedagogy are understood and implemented in these two countries.

Method

This study is based on critical interpretive documentary analysis, aimed at revealing hidden assumptions and values about sustainability and about how children are understood as active citizens. To begin our analysis, we first investigated how other researchers have sought to critique curricula using similar lenses to our own. Thus, we familiarised ourselves with Jóhannesson et al's (2011) analysis of how Icelandic curricula (from early childhood education up to and including upper secondary school) deal with education for sustainability. These researchers identified seven analytic indicators to show how sustainability is valued in these curricula: (1) indications of values, opinions and feelings about nature and the environment; (2) identification of knowledge contributing to a sensible use of nature; (3) statements about welfare and public health; (4) indications of democracy, participation and action competence; (5) recognition of equality and multicultural issues; (6) indications of awareness and understanding of global issues; and (7) references to economic development and future prospects (Jóhannesson et al, 2011, p. 379). Overall, these researchers found that Icelandic curriculum documents did not express a clear view of sustainability and education for sustainability.

Inspired by this approach, we identified four dimensions for our analysis of the Australian and Swedish early childhood education curricula: (1) the inclusion of concepts of sustainability; (2) recognition of humans' place in nature and environmental stewardship; (3) critical thinking for sustainability; and (4) references to children as active participants for change. These characteristics emerged from our ontological understandings about sustainability and of young children (in particular, what a child is and can do), based on many years of working in this field and a reasonably well-developed knowledge of the scholarly literature in both early childhood education and education for sustainability. In relation to our fourth dimension, in particular, children are viewed as competent beings, already with capabilities to be agents of change, who are able to act and think critically, philosophically and ethically about their world (Berthelsen, 2009; Davis, 2009, 2010, 2014; Johansson, 2009; Engdahl & Rabušicová, 2011; Hägglund, 2011). In summary, we attach special importance to active citizenship, contemporary childhood, and learning and pedagogies from a child-oriented perspective. There follows a discussion of each of these four dimensions, as they are central to our curriculum document analysis.

Inclusion of Concepts of Sustainability

Children have been described as important stakeholders in tackling issues of unsustainability, ever since the concept of 'sustainable development' began to influence educational policies at international, national and local levels (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992). The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 8) report, *Our Common Future*, defines sustainable development as: 'development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Sustainability is generally understood to have three interrelated aspects: social, economic and environmental. It is accepted by many that current models of human development overemphasise the economic dimension at the expense of the social and environmental dimensions, and that most economic decision makers still regard sustainability as extraneous to their core responsibilities of macroeconomic management and other economic policy imperatives (Lowe, 2012).

The concept of sustainable development, however, is rather ambiguous and, to some extent, a normative concept (Jickling & Wals, 2008; Wals, 2009). Some even claim that it is an oxymoron (Jackson, 2011), in that development interpreted as economic growth, as Lowe (2012) claims, is

problematic and unsustainable (Wright, 1993). It is normative if there is no scrutinising of the relationships between humanity and nature, or of inequalities between different social groups (Mellor, 2005). As the concept of 'sustainability' (or 'sustainable development') is used in both national and international political spheres, in scientific research and in education for sustainability research, there is a need to clarify the ideas and understandings that underpin the concept. Thus, we acknowledge that our framework of sustainability is one which recognises that there are limits to economic growth; that the health of the natural environment underpins human and economic well-being; and that current actions are compromising opportunities and choices for both present and future generations. We agree, too, with Scott and Gough's (2003, p. xiv) general acknowledgement that 'we shall need to learn to live more in tune with the environment', and Davis's (2010, p. 28) comment that 'a process to create "cultures of sustainability" that build or transform thinking, practices and relationships around sustainability' is necessary.

Recognition of Humans' Place in Nature and Environmental Stewardship

Environmental awareness and recognising our place in nature are understood as important aspects of developing pro-environment beliefs and behaviours in people. While the original focus of both practice and research in environmental education (seen as a precursor of education for sustainability) was behaviour modification – that is, changing an individual's psychological disposition towards nature – more recently, researchers have highlighted this consideration in relation to sustainability more broadly (Palmer, 1995; Chawla, 1998; Wilson, 2007; Sandell & Öhman, 2010). Chawla and Flanders Cushing's (2007) research, for example, examines the range of ways used to foster environmental awareness and action skills to protect and improve the environment. Specifically, these authors identified four foci, aimed at developing (1) responsible environmental behaviour; (2) civic action; (3) a sense of individual competence; and (4) collective competence. According to Evans et al (2007), however, there is still only a small amount of research aimed at investigating children's environmental attitudes and behaviours. Nevertheless, in the last decades, environmental behavioural modification approaches have taken a more participatory and critical education approach (Öhman, 2011), encompassed by recognition of the child as an active and competent citizen.

Recognising our place in nature and environmental stewardship in this context refer to 'knowing the impacts of human behaviour on the environment' and eagerness to take responsibility for the environment (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002, p. 253). In this study, we align more with this latter view, but we are also interested in how groups and communities can work together to create change for sustainability.

Critical Thinking for Sustainability

Critical thinking is used in a range of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, political theory and education. Such a widespread concept can be expected, then, to be unclear and ambiguous. Nonetheless, the essence of critical thinking is seen as a combination of skills in complex thinking, curiosity and creativity, with the practice of such skills being seen as an essential aspect in their development (Ennis, 1991, 1993, cited in Daniel & Auriac, 2011, p. 418). Many scholars stress the significance of critical thinking in education for sustainability (for example, Tilbury, 1995; Vare & Scott, 2007; Sterling, 2010). Vare and Scott (2007) also link capacity-building with critical thinking, and the exploration of the contradictions inherent in concepts such as sustainable living. Hägglund and Pramling Samuelsson make explicit reference to young children and the need for critical thinking skills:

Our image of the child as a learner for sustainable development is a person with the ability to comprehend complex and difficult truths about life, today and tomorrow. This child holds rights and a kind of citizenship which recognizes her/him as someone who can demand serious effort from responsible adults and institutions to create effective context for learning about premises for sustainability. (Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009, p. 60)

The meaning of critical thinking in this article is inspired by Vare and Scott (2007), who interpret it as 'reflexive, creative and complex thinking and a culture of critical questioning, curiosity, evaluation and problem solving'.

References to Children as Active Participants for Change

Young children's engagement has been recognised as a key element in promoting a lifelong disposition towards caring for the environment (Barratt Hacking et al, 2007). In order to fully appreciate meanings of children as active participants for sustainability, it is important to understand how childhood, children's competence and children's autonomy have been constructed over time. Childhood sociologists such as Prout (2005) and Lee (2001) challenge previous concepts of how children are viewed, drawing distinctions between children as 'human beings' and 'human becomings'. Lee (2009) has further theorised the being/becoming binary, claiming that both children and adults are both being *and* becoming, depending on context.

Several researchers have defined typologies of participation, as illustrated in Shier's (2001) research, which defines five stages of child participation: (1) children are listened to; (2) children are supported in expressing their views; (3) children's views are taken into account; (4) children are involved in decision-making processes; and (5) children share power and responsibility for decision making. Hart's (1997) ladder, developed from Arnstein (1969), is another way of thinking about participation, showing a graduated approach to children's participation. The lowest rungs indicate child manipulation and children as decoration in adult projects and activities – in other words, they are not participants at all. In this article, we are attracted to the form of participation illustrated in Hart's last step of the participation ladder – i.e. where decisions are child-initiated and shared with adults. As stated earlier, this reflects recognition, in the present, of children as social agents with civil rights and the right to take part in civic engagement (Theis, 2010). Education for sustainability that operates at the top rung of Hart's ladder would see, for example, young children thinking about, problem-solving and taking action in local sustainability issues – for example, water and energy conservation in their kindergarten or preschool, or designing and looking after a garden or nature area.

In order to clarify further our ideas about children as active participants, we also recognise that participation has both individual and shared elements – that is, an individual child may initiate a sustainability idea or action, which is then taken up collectively by a group of children. This problematises the issue of individual and collective participation, as raised by Penn (2009) in relation to children's participatory learning in early education across different sociocultural contexts, but we see that both ways of actively participating are important. However, in terms of a transformative approach to education for sustainability, shared participation by children is our preference, as it harnesses the ideas, creativity and energies of the wider group.

We interpret this as participation that makes a difference in the present and, simultaneously, builds active citizenship for the future. Further, inspired by the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997), we understand children as being competent and capable of exercising agency in their own lives and in the community (Thomas, 2007; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Mackey, 2012). Specifically, we interpret child agency as 'young children [being] able to contribute ideas, energy and creativity towards the management and solving of local issues' (Davis, 2010, p. 25).

We are not naive, though, in thinking that involving children in tackling sustainability issues will be easily understood or implemented. Childhood does not take place in a vacuum; children are affected every day by power imbalances and gender and class structures, as well as social and political cultures. In order to address these injustices and power structures, remedies for social transformation need to be made visible (Kjørholt, 2005). One way to do this is to use the concepts of transformation and affirmation (Fraser, 2003, 2009) shown in Table I.

In order to develop skills in active citizenship, children need opportunities to practise it (Chawla & Flanders Cushing, 2007). Davis (2009), in a research overview from 1996-2008, found that there have been very few studies which investigate young children as agents of change in connection with sustainability. This, we suspect, is more symptomatic of views about young children which discount their ability to engage in activism and politics (James & Prout, 1997), than it is of the dearth of early childhood education for sustainability research. However, as research in

early childhood education and education for sustainability grows, it is anticipated that there will be more studies that report on children actively initiating and sharing processes of ‘making a difference’ with adults. One example that can be cited is Ritchie et al’s (2010) study, which examined how a number of New Zealand early childhood centres participated in collective endeavours with their wider communities around environmental and sustainability issues. They described this process as building ‘community empathy’ (Ritchie et al, 2010, p. 120). Siraj-Blatchford et al (2010) have also collated a number of ‘best practice’ examples focused on young children’s learning and actions about social, economic and environmental sustainable development. Collectively, what these few studies illustrate is that very young children can relate sustainability issues to their daily lives, think critically, and view themselves as active citizens for the environment and their community.

The Analysis Process

Having elaborated on the dimensions we used to interrogate the Australian and Swedish early childhood curriculum documents, we now explain how we conducted the analysis – a five-step analytic process. We then describe our findings. First, as already discussed, we read the Icelandic article for ideas about ways to conduct a critical reading of the early childhood education curricula. Second, we constructed the four dimensions discussed above, which guided our analysis and comparisons of the target early childhood curriculum documents.

The third step involved reading and rereading these documents in order to build our understandings of them. Aided by the four analytic ‘dimensions’, we strived to investigate omissions, hidden assumptions and mindsets about sustainability and children as active citizens (Ozga, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the fourth step, we marked excerpts of importance connected to each dimension and, in the final step, the results of the document analysis were examined from our critical Habermasian approach and Fraser’s ‘participation parity’ and ‘affirmative’ versus ‘transformative’ remedies.

Findings

In *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) and in the *Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 98* (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010) there are similarities, but also some differences in terms of how, or even whether, sustainability is framed and how, or whether, children are identified as participants in relation to sustainability issues. In Table II, we present an overview of the four dimensions as they are represented within these curriculum documents. We then deal one by one with each of these dimensions and their representation within these documents.

	Inclusion of concepts of sustainability	Recognition of humans’ place in nature and environmental stewardship	Critical thinking for sustainability	References to children as active participants for change
Sweden <i>Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 98</i> (2010)	NO (but noted in the supporting documents allied with the curriculum)	YES	YES	YES
Australia <i>Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</i> (2009)	YES	YES	YES (but only as an aspect of children’s play)	NO

Table II. Overview of the representation of the four dimensions of early childhood education for sustainability within the target curriculum documents.

Inclusion of Concepts of Sustainability

Australia. In relation to the inclusion of the concept of sustainability, this is mentioned in the Australian curriculum as an aspect of learning to be embedded in daily routines and practices (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 29). What sustainability means, however, is not explained further in the document, nor are there any explanatory guidelines for how a teacher might embed sustainability into daily routines and practices.

Sweden. The concept of sustainable development is not used at all within the Swedish curriculum, although it is used in the supporting documents of the curriculum, which state that:

A major challenge is to educate future generations to understand and act on the principle of sustainable development, i.e. to strive for development that meets their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Preschool is a natural starting point for this work because interests, values and skills are formed during the early years. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2010, pp. 14-15)

Recognition of Humans' Place in Nature and Environmental Stewardship

Australia. In the Australian curriculum, environmental responsiveness is mentioned as an important outcome of early learning. Recognition of the interdependence between humans, flora, fauna and the land is clearly expressed. The notion of fostering appreciation and respect for the natural environment, as a precursor to taking responsibility, is recognised, as the following excerpts reveal:

An integrated, holistic approach to teaching and learning also focuses on connections to the natural world. Educators foster children's capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land. (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 14)

In the Australian curriculum the importance of promoting a potentially lifelong disposition towards caring for the environment among young children is emphasised as an objective:

... foster an appreciation of the natural environment, develop environmental awareness and provide a platform for ongoing environmental education ... Environments and resources can also highlight our responsibilities for a sustainable future and promote children's understanding about their responsibility to care for the environment. They [teachers] can foster hope, wonder and knowledge about the natural world. (pp. 15-16)

Sweden. In the Swedish curriculum, environmental responsiveness is emphasised as an important objective for young children's learning. The link between children and the natural environment is clearly expressed. Having an 'ecological approach' is emphasised, although this is not explained. The document suggests that an environmental orientation should be embedded into all activities in early childhood education, rather than being seen as an add-on. The following excerpt illustrates this:

The pre-school should put great emphasis on issues concerning the environment and nature conservation. An ecological approach and a positive belief in the future should typify the pre-school's activities. The pre-school should contribute to ensuring children acquire a caring attitude to nature and the environment, and understand that they are a part of nature's recycling process. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010, p. 9)

Critical Thinking for Sustainability

Australia. In the Australian early childhood framework, critical thinking and problem solving are seen as important aspects of children's play. Critical thinking, however, is not applied deliberately to thinking about sustainability issues:

Play provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play can expand children's thinking and enhance their desire to know

and to learn. In these ways play can promote positive dispositions towards learning. (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 15)

Sweden. In the Swedish curriculum, children's abilities to reflect, solve problems and make their own decisions are stressed. While not specifically mentioned, the way critical thinking is represented in the Swedish curriculum – that is, as a means of exploring an issue proposed by a child – offers the possibility that environmental issues might be examined critically:

Children should have the opportunity of developing their ability to observe and reflect. The pre-school should be a living social and cultural environment that stimulates children into taking initiatives and developing their social and communicative competence. Children should also have the opportunity to explore on their own an issue in greater detail and to look for their own answers and solutions. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010, p. 8)

References to Children as Active Participants for Change

Australia. In the Australian curriculum framework, children as active learners is a notion that is embedded within the overall framework. Children are described as active, however, mainly from an individualistic viewpoint in relation to their own immediate learning. The concept is not really applied to the idea of active citizenship, which implies that they are viewed as 'becoming' adults in terms of citizenship. Furthermore, what inferences can be made about children's active participation are primarily focused on social/human relations – it is ambiguous about being active for the environment. The following excerpts are indicative of this:

Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 9)

Children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others' learning. They recognise their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning. (p. 9)

Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation. (p. 26)

Having a positive sense of identity and experiencing respectful, responsive relationships strengthens children's interest and skills in being and becoming active contributors to their world. (p. 25)

Sweden. In the Swedish curriculum, the idea of children determining their own learning and shaping their learning environment within the preschool is understood as an important part of learning about democracy. Indeed, this aspect has its own section in the curriculum, where it is clearly stated that children are to be supported as active participants in planning their own learning, everyday activities within the preschool and the overall environment of the preschool. Furthermore, the Swedish curriculum is specific about children having agency and taking an active part in working towards a better environment, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

The pre-school provides the foundations for children to understand what democracy is. The social development of the child presupposes that in relation to their capacity, they are able to take responsibility for their own actions and for the environment in the pre-school. The needs and interests which children themselves express in different ways should provide the foundation for shaping the environment and planning pedagogical activities. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010, p. 14)

The pre-school should help children understand that daily reality and work can be organised so that they contribute to a better environment, both now and in the future. (p. 9)

Summary of Findings

In summary, in the early childhood curriculum *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, which sets the directions for early childhood education nationally:

- conceptual understandings of sustainability are vague and ambiguous;
- children are seen as needing to develop skills to be active future citizens; and
- children's agency is connected to their own life, family and early childhood centre (focused on their social worlds).

In *Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 98*, the early childhood curriculum which sets the directions for early childhood education in Sweden:

- conceptual understandings of sustainable development are lacking;
- children are seen as needing to develop skills to become active democratic citizens in the future, and are also seen as being active in the present, capable of taking part in a range of current actions; and
- children's agency is connected to their own lives and the early childhood centre (focused on their social worlds), and, more broadly, they are encouraged to take part in creating changes for a better environment in both the present and the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has scrutinised different understandings of sustainability and of young children as active participants for change within the national Australian and Swedish steering documents for early childhood education. The key points for examination have been how, or whether, learning opportunities for sustainability are profiled within these documents, and how children are, or are not, represented as citizens with rights and responsibilities linked to sustainability. Overall, the analysis shows that learning about and for sustainability in both the Australian and Swedish early childhood education curricula is defined in vague and ambiguous terms.

It is apparent that both documents have been influenced by the traditions of environmental education and nature education, which we see as offering narrower and weaker forms of education for sustainability because of their focus primarily on natural environmental aspects. However, in the Swedish curriculum, taking actions towards the development of a more ecologically sustainable society in the present and the future is highlighted. While important, we consider that this predominantly 'green' focus is not enough in terms of addressing the serious and complex challenges that are presented by global unsustainability. What is missing in both the Australian and Swedish early childhood education curricula, and what we consider to be pivotal to contemporary education for sustainability, is recognition of children as already having the capacity to be critical thinkers and active agents of change. This form of activist education for sustainability resonates, more generally, with education as transformative rather than affirmative (Fraser, 2003, 2009), only shades of which can be seen in the Swedish curriculum. In the Australian curriculum, children are mainly represented as 'becomings' rather than 'beings' (Prout, 2005) – as learners for the future rather than as active participants for change in the present. Thus, from this analysis, we conclude that children's voices are not recognised to any great extent as agents of change. There is a need, then, for stronger articulation of ideas about children and children's agency in future iterations of these documents. Looking beyond the binary of being/becoming will give support to children as agents of change now and in the future (Lee, 2009).

Johansson (2009) raises the idea of world citizenship as important content in the Swedish national preschool curriculum, and the need to give greater consideration to the moral dimensions in learning for sustainable development. She highlights the need for more research on 'how moral and democratic values are treated in the Swedish preschools interconnected with the ideas of globalization' (Johansson, 2009, p. 91). It is valuable, too, for future research to explore, empirically, the complexities of child participation and agency in local and global contexts. Links between how children are represented in curricula in different parts of the world and how global issues such as sustainability are discussed within such documents are a good place to start. We hope that others will continue the critical analyses of other steering documents for early childhood education that we have initiated and discussed in this article.

We argue that children, both individually and collectively, have the competence to be agents of change for sustainability within their early childhood settings and in their wider communities. We suggest that early childhood education – and specifically the curriculum frameworks that shape so much of our work – should embrace an activist and transformative approach to early education,

which includes the imperative of sustainability. Relying on weaker forms of early childhood education, environmental education and restricted views of children will not provide the outcomes that are necessary in this rapidly changing world (Stevenson, 2011).

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Notes

- [1] In Sweden, the concept of 'education for sustainable development' is used in policy, politics and research (Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010; Öhman, 2011). In Australia, it is more typical to refer to this concept as 'education for sustainability'. In this article, we use 'education for sustainability' as our generic term. If, however, a particular text or reference uses 'education for sustainable development', we use the author's original term.
- [2] See http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/CHILD_E.PDF

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