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## **Creating Sustainable Early Childhood Learning Environments: A Transformatory Posthumanist Perspective**

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This special issue of *Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)* deepens and privileges the concerns of the journal in terms of social justice, equity, freedom, peace, and hope. The argument is that nations and communities can no longer leave their children to their own devices to develop and mature naturally into particular and defined identities and roles; this change must be accelerated through the deliberate intervention of early childhood education and learning. Gone are the days when children from birth to 4 or 5 years old were assumed to not be school ready and thus left in the hands of a caring grandparent or nanny with little to no formal education or professional teaching skills. This issue emphasises the notion of early childhood care and education (ECCE) to refer to this band of formal education and to distinguish it from early childhood development (ECD). The latter is understood to cover all the transformational processes from birth to 9 years of age of a growing child and comprises ECCE (birth to 4/5 years) and foundation phase (5/6 to 9 years). The articles in this special issue grapple with this from diverse perspectives that ultimately explode the myth that no formal education takes place between birth to 4 years because the child is in the care of the mother, home, centre or family. The way in which these articles theorise this age group shows that it is an era of unparalleled learning among children where rigorous intervention and professionalised curriculum has to be introduced and learnt, beyond what the mother, grandparent, or nanny can provide. Hasina Ebrahim and colleagues (2019), whose book is celebrated in this issue, has demonstrated beyond doubt how advanced the child at this age is in terms of their agentic powers. Children, like adults, understand conversations, initiate them, and interpret them—albeit in their own unique ways. Children at this stage, just like the adults, lobby, scheme, gossip, and empathise with others. They are capable of deep communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and more. The notion that there is no formal education (nor need for it) at this stage is misguided, as argued in the articles presented in this special issue. The articles take their cue from the fact that over the past few years, early childhood education and care for sustainability (ECECfS) has been articulated as essential to development of young children who are

shaped by the experiences afforded to them. This implies that children should be provided with opportunities to conceptualise, plan, do, and reflect in order to teach them to pursue sustainable futures. ECECFs should no longer be regarded as knowledge transmission, but should engage young children in opportunities for change, growth, and development. In fact, The World Health Organisation (2018, p. 1) has argued that “if we change the beginning of the story, then we change the whole story.”

Young children, compared to youth and adults in any society, are the most vulnerable to any problems experienced therein, be they physical, cognitive, physiological, psychological, or socio-cultural. Problems relating to parental engagement, socioeconomic status, the Covid-19 pandemic, rurality, gender, or race exacerbate educational challenges especially, in unequal societies like that of South Africa. Maintaining a low or no educational level in the early years could create future conditions characterised by high levels of disadvantage, poverty, and compromised health that could result in a vicious circle of deterioration. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was intended to serve as a global commitment to ensuring access to comprehensive care and support for all young children. Recognition of equitable quality education as a key driver of sustainable development led to the adoption of Sustainable Developmental Goal 4. ECECFs is a tool to not only lay the foundation for holistic development, but also to pursue sustainability. Research by various influential theorists from different parts of the world and diverse schools of thought, such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Pierre Bourdieu, Tara Yosso, and Urie Bronfenbrenner have acknowledged the importance of context and quality education that focus on the holistic development of young children by empowering them with values, skills, and knowledge that could contribute significantly to shaping their individual potential.

ECECFs does, however, not exist in isolation and researchers working in the field of sustainability have suggested that a synergy between holistic well-being and social change should be considered. The aim of most nations, it seems, is to transform their systems of schooling such that early childhood education is entrenched, formalised, universalised, and improved in terms of quality because it that would lead to social justice, equity, freedom, peace, and hope. It constitutes the basis on which to mount the cultivation of good and democratic citizens who are, inter alia, socially just, equitable, peaceful, hopeful, and free. Young children who have been thus exposed will become productive citizens promoting a democratic ethos in their communities. This special issue thus celebrates research that documents transformational and transformative early childhood education research. The understanding is that quality early childhood education should ideally bring about change in skills, values and behaviours that could enable young children to flourish as they move towards a more sustainable future. These articles report on real, practical work conducted so that social change can be achieved. They are all praxis oriented and largely couched within posthumanist theorisation. They emphasise the importance of collaborative action by teams and stakeholders in communities to transform early childhood education because by working collaboratively, they can address the complexity that is early childhood education from multilayered and multiperspectival vantage points. From this perspective, young learners are seen as entangled with, connected to, and responsible for themselves alongside the lives and habitats of all humans, nonhumans, the environment, and the planet. This implies going beyond locating problems solely in the individuality of the young children, thus blaming the victim. Rather, all articles consider the micro and the macro systems containing young children as a starting point to develop a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. They reflect on how identity is not exclusively “centred” but is constructed in relationships with an environment made up of humans, not-humans, and more-than-humans. Such nuanced understandings enable these contributions to go beyond the anthropocentric approaches informed by humanism’s and the Enlightenment’s discriminatory approaches based on race, gender, and social class. The posthumanist theorisation suffusing the entire issue enables the articles herein to go beyond the limited confines of that which is human to focus on relationalities as being critical in determining identity, challenges, and solutions to performance in learning. In short, the articles herein address real-life problems using

versions of actions and participatory action research involving communities larger than the school- or learning-centred interaction of stakeholders, and thus giving them more traction.

In pursuance of the above, Ashnie Mahadew in her article titled “Reimagining Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Posthuman Perspective,” argues that despite global and national imperatives to build an inclusive society, incidences of discrimination based on numerous marginalised identity markers are widely reported. According to her, the early years are an ideal moment for children to form initial attitudes towards different groups of people. In fact, the early years are regarded as a means for social and economic transformation, according to the South African National Development Plan. This article is portion of a study on a group of ECCE teachers and teacher trainers who explored inclusion using a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design. Eight members formed an action learning set and engaged in mutual and collaborative learning to transform their learning environments to become more inclusive. Data were generated in two iterative cycles using a baseline questionnaire, reflective journals, and purposeful conversations. Underpinned by the posthumanist perspective, the findings highlight that diversity needs to be regarded as a strength to be valued, rather than as an impediment. The findings also suggest the need for collectivism in opposition to individualism, and a reconfiguration of the child’s identity as posthuman. The study thus contributes to positive outcomes by identifying ways of positively transforming early learning environments to become more inclusive. This can not only lead to a more democratic and socially just learning environment but contribute to wider positive societal change.

Stef Esterhuizen, Martie Uys, and Nomsa Mohosho take the argument further in their article, “Parent–Practitioner Collaboration to Support Sustainable Development in Early Years Education.” Their view is that children’s health care, education, social services, and nutrition are at risk due to the environmental, health, social, political, and economic threats that the world faces. Their article stems from a research project in five ECD centres in South Africa, and focuses on parent–practitioner collaboration for sustainable development in early years education. Using a qualitative approach, they followed a PALAR design to answer their main research question: “How can parent–practitioner collaboration support education for sustainable development in the early years?” Participants formed an action learning set (ALS) in which they acted as co-researchers and equal partners to construct their own meanings in order to advocate for social change. Data were collected in the ALS during Cycle 3 of the PALAR process. They relied on transcribed, recorded ALS discussions and photovoice activities to generate data, and used thematic content analysis to collaboratively analyse the data. Their findings disclose that education for sustainable development is possible when parents and practitioners collaborate.

Furthermore, Makeresemese Qhosola’s study in her article titled “Early Childhood Education and Care Towards Sustainable Academic Performance in Accounting,” aimed to design a strategy to improve the academic performance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) learners in mathematics, thence accounting, in a sustainable manner. Although accounting is not taught as a separate subject to mathematics at the ECEC level, in the article, she focused on those aspects of mathematics that link directly with central learning areas in accounting. She used participatory action research, and posthuman theory framed the study. Multistakeholder participation was used to encourage five key skills of the 21st century (collaboration, communication, compassion, critical thinking, and creativity) in the learners as co-researchers in order to promote sustainability in the learning of mathematics in ECEC as basis for accounting in the future

Moeketsi Tlali, in his article titled, “Towards Developing a Science-Language Learning Programme for the Equality of Sustainable Learning Opportunities for Young Children” notes that it is imperative to

offer equal quality learning opportunities for young children at both deprived and advantaged ECD centres. To this end, he argues, substantive involvement by young children in the envisioned quality learning that should take place, even in constrained contexts, warrants thoughtful exploration. Consequently, his study investigated the development of young children's communication and mathematical skills to explore the affordances of the South African National Curriculum Framework for children from birth to 4 years in relation to incorporating science concepts. His proposition for privileging science concepts relevant to early learning and development areas of the curriculum framework was premised on the urge to respond to young children's current learning needs, and to make learning in the future sustainable. The team adopted a participatory action research design, undergirded by principles of intra-relationality, to develop an assessment and activity plan consistent with their proposition. Using the principles of free attitude interviews and brainstorming as techniques, rich qualitative data were generated during meetings, workshops, and reflection sessions with study team member participants. The team made the following observations and findings: the transition of young children from ECD to Grade R is marred by challenges that make the learning of young children beyond ECD unsustainable because of the absence of continual communication between the ECD and Grade R teachers and, to some extent, between the parents (home) and the ECDC. Through the knowledge gained from regular participatory action-oriented meetings, workshops, and reflections, the study contributed to the development of participants and benefited the ECDC involved in this study in several respects.

Ncamisile Mthiyane, Dipolelo Malema, and Nompumelelo Madonda took the matter further in their article titled, "Promoting the Well-Being of Supervisors for Sustainable Early Childhood Development in an Informal Settlement." They contend that ECD centres are strategically positioned to create quality early learning opportunities that prepare children for adulthood, providing the necessary holistic sustainable learning. However, many ECD facilities in the informal settlements in South Africa function under a variety of psychosocial and contextual challenges that impact directly on the well-being of supervisors and practitioners. This study explored the need to enable, and the ways to relationally promote, the well-being of supervisors. Underpinned by posthumanism, and consistent with participatory action learning and action research cycles, they recognised that the challenges facing humanity today require new understandings and responsive solutions, which include engagements and contributions with and by nonhuman relationalities for sustainable early childhood learning. They further argue that focus on the promotion of the well-being of ECD supervisors in informal settlements is crucial. Data generation was conducted with an action team of six participants, that is, three ECD supervisors and three researchers utilising reflective drawings and group meetings that provided opportunities for action and reflection. A critical thematic analysis of data concluded that innovative collaborative ways to solve own problems in own contexts utilising responsive solutions promotes social change. An adaption to the decentralisation of supervisors' power using interdisciplinary interventions makes communities feel responsible, valued, and accountable for the ECD centres—thus, relational interconnections are improved at human and nonhuman levels. This study has the potential to contribute to the well-being of supervisors, which may filter down to improved well-being for teachers and learners, resulting in sustainable ECD in informal settlements.

Finally, Fran Hughes with her article titled, "Early Childhood Educators' Professional Learning for Sustainability Through Action Research in Australian Immersive Nature Play Programmes," provides insights into how action research influenced the movement of Australian early childhood educator's worldviews, identities, and their agency in relation to education for sustainability (EfS) in natural outdoor settings. This was integral to a larger study that explored early childhood educators' understandings of a nature–sustainability nexus and its influence on their pedagogies in Australian immersive nature play programmes. The findings indicated personal transformations for some participants as individuals and as teams of early childhood professionals resulting in new discourses

for Efs—with others engaging in an ongoing journey of disrupting dominant anthropocentric ways of thinking.

This special issue closes with a book review and conference report. The book, *Critical Issues in Professional Development: Situated Knowledges from South Africa* edited by Hasina Banu Ebrahim and Vitallis Chikoko, presents perspectives on professional learning and development in early childhood development, education, and care in South Africa. In her review, Glynnis Daries emphasises the need for collective ownership and approaches to professional development and learning, as well as promotion of the participatory rights of children. The book features various authors discussing constructs of professional development, pedagogy, sources of teacher knowledge, child participation, multigrade teaching, teacher identity, and curriculum change. She makes it clear that this book is a powerful contribution to building contextually relevant and responsive professional development opportunities for practitioners, teachers, managers, mentors, and policymakers in South Africa.

Lastly, Mariëtte Koen presents a report on the 30th European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) annual conference, *Cultures of Play: Actors, Affordances and Arenas*, in Glasgow. The event welcomed over 900 researchers from around the world to explore how cultures shape play in early childhood across time and space. In her welcoming address, Chris Pascal (president of EECERA) expressed her gratitude that delegates could come together again after Covid-19 kept them apart for two years. The four keynote speakers explored various aspects of play including, the use of digital technologies, Scotland's approach to practice-to-policy-to-practice, the importance of time in early childhood education and care, and teachers' participation in dramatic play. Delegates also engaged in special interest group presentations and visited nurseries to learn from practitioners.

The articles in this issue deepen and privilege the importance of social justice, equity, freedom, peace, and hope. They are praxis oriented and largely couched within a posthumanist theorisation. Their message is that there is a synergy between holistic well-being and social change, which should be acknowledged through collaborative action by teams, stakeholders, and communities.

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