



Young children's perceptions of environmental sustainability: a Maltese perspective

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THESIS SUMMARY



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Young children's perceptions of environmental sustainability and the contextual influences upon these are important concepts within the new and emerging field of early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS), however there has been little empirical research to inform the field. This research investigated, how and in which ways, young children perceive environmental sustainability, and how these concepts are influenced, particularly in the contexts of the family and the school.

Twelve young children, aged between 3 and 7 years, 10 parents, five teachers and one head teacher participated in this study, which was conducted in 2013 in two State schools and one household, in Malta. Children's data in this qualitative multiple case study were generated by observations in the home and schools; conversational interviews with children; their interpretations of photographs; and their drawings and interpretation of them. Contributions were also drawn from semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers and head teacher, a researcher's journal and document analysis. Data were interpreted and themed. By merging different theoretical perspectives commonly used in early childhood education (ECE) research to ECEfS research, including cognitive theory, socio-cultural theory, bio-ecological theory of human development, the 'new sociology of childhood' and related policy initiatives like the UNCRRC, and theories of inter-generational influence, this study has brought new theoretical insights in ECEfS research.

This study made three significant contributions. Firstly, it proposed that young children possessed some knowledge about the environment and environmental sustainability, and were able to talk about it at a basic level by drawing on personal experience. Children's perceptions were influenced by their local context, their worldviews and life-experiences; and were socially and culturally constructed. Secondly, it recorded and reflected methodological, theoretical and pedagogical issues for the broader ECEfS community to consider if education for sustainable development (ESD) pedagogy approach is to be realised, particularly in the context of small island States such as Malta. Doing so would enable young children to delve more deeply into sustainability issues and become agents of change for sustainability, now and in the future. Lastly, this research outlined several avenues most suitable for such study to be incorporated into future research in ECEfS.

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