Article

Caring for Worldviews in Early Childhood Education: Theoretical and Analytical Tool for Socially Sustainable Communities of Care

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Abstract: Societies of today are becoming increasingly pluralistic. This applies also to the diversity of values and worldviews in Swedish early childhood education and care (ECEC). Still, in the increasingly secular contexts, societal hegemony often fails to include children's home religions and worldviews in the actions and understandings aiming towards inclusiveness. We argue that it is of critical importance to also include the plurality of worldviews in the educational perception of "the whole child" in the care and education taking place in ECEC. The purpose of this article is to connect the discussions in the fields of intercultural and interreligious education, in particular those dealing with the diversity of religions and worldviews, to discussions on care and social sustainability in ECEC. The UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development promotes inclusive and equitable education, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child states children's right to freedom of religion and a concern for the spiritual, moral, and social development. Our previous findings have illustrated the importance of religions and worldviews in the intercultural work within early childhood education, both empirically and conceptually, and as part of the moral core of teaching. This article employs feminist and postcolonial ethics of care as a theoretical lens in elaborating on the three key notions: social sustainability, care, and worldviews. Several discursive challenges that ECEC teachers in Sweden face in their work, to enhance social sustainability by supporting the child's well-being and sense of belonging in the ECEC, have been outlined. To conclude, we bring forth a theoretical and analytical tool for the understanding, researching, and planning of socially sustainable communities of care.

Keywords: early childhood education and care; religion; worldviews; care ethics; social sustainability

1. Introduction

Societies, also their Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter ECEC) contexts, are becoming increasingly pluralistic, with both 'old' and 'new' diversities [1,2]. This applies also to the diversity of values and worldviews—an aspect of diversity that the discourse on multicultural education so often disregards [3,4]. In Sweden, the development of nation-construction of 'Swedishness' and the history of the Swedish (Lutheran, then State) Church have been closely entwined with one another since the late Middle Ages [5]. Lutheranism is still an important part of the societal cultural heritage and visible in many homes, ECEC and the wider society, even if society has gradually become increasingly secularized. Still, also in secularized societies like Sweden, the historical development is still a notable part of the nation-construction at present. Hence, even if the societal hegemony of 'the majority' and the nation-construction of 'us Swedes' is turning increasingly secular within public spheres such as the ECEC, Lutheranism itself remains close to 'Swedishness' in its 'Secular

Lutheran' [3] form, too. For this reason, those with religious worldviews, even if it is 'religious Lutheran', may be perceived as 'the other', in some situations also 'non-Swedish' and 'bound to their cultures' [3,4,6,7]. This is problematic from the perspective of children growing up in families maintaining a religious worldview, if the way they and their home traditions and worldviews are not encountered as a critical element of ethical "care" in the ECEC, and equally welcomed and included as that of the other children. This lack of inclusiveness can be visible also in the contents and activities performed and carried out in the ECEC, such as merely maintaining the highly secularized forms of Christian traditions like the Lucia, or Santa and the elves in December [3,4,6–10]. Utilizing a feminist and postcolonial approach, we therefore argue for the need to decolonize the "care" in ECEC so that it becomes socially sustainable also in the way children's worldviews are considered, that is, "caring" for "the whole child".

There is a notable lack of research on social sustainability in the context of ECEC education [11]. There is also an urgent need for new and sustainable ways of living, and for further understanding of how education for sustainability is being accounted for in the ECEC, as it is often the young children who are at the forefront of many global challenges [12]. Borg and Pramling Samuelsson [13] have pointed out that in sustainability research, environmental aspects have been prioritized, whereas social aspects, such as children's own participation, their agency, as well as social justice and transformative learning have received much less attention. This is despite that the national ECEC curriculum in Sweden has explicitly introduced the concept of sustainability from a holistic perspective, also including a social dimension [13]. Furthermore, Makrakis [14] has argued that while social justice is often utilized as a notion in the "deconstruction and reconstruction of instructional practice", what is actually lacking is a deeper focus on 'sustainability-justice' that, "in addition to social justice, integrates environmental, economic and cultural justice" for a more sustainable and just society [14], p. 103.

The UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development [15] promotes inclusive and equitable education. The aims set in the Agenda were ambitious, for instance, guaranteeing quality early education and care for all children by 2030. As regards the ECEC as an educational context, the UN also acknowledged its importance as a foundation for lifelong learning [16]. Furthermore, in the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter CRC) [17], it is stated that children should be equal and have a right to freedom of religion. A concern for children's wellbeing, including their spiritual, moral, and social development was also expressed. Based on this, we argue that supporting children's development of a cultural identity is one of several key tasks in the work for social sustainability. It also includes children's acquisition of values, norms, traditions, and worldviews. We argue that promoting social sustainability in preschool embraces offering a caring, equal and including form of education, allowing children to have access to many aspects of themselves, including religious or other worldviews. Addressing issues of religion and worldviews in ECEC, based on the Swedish curriculum for the preschool Lpfö [18], involves passing on and developing a cultural heritage and providing the children with knowledge of a diversity of worldviews. It can also cover addressing children's existential life questions.

We can see that one of the biggest challenges in promoting social equality and sustainability, both in education and in society in a broader sense, is counteracting discrimination and ensuring inclusion. These are critical issues for social sustainability, whether it concerns gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, functionality, age, or religion. In this article, we focus on the last-named area of religions and worldviews, and thus aim to contribute to the up to now under-researched area of diversity of religions and worldviews in relation to social sustainability work in ECEC. To be more specific, we will explore the following questions: What discursive challenges do preschool teachers (in Sweden) face in their work to enhance social sustainability in the ECEC, especially when it comes to religious and worldview equality? How can a feminist and postcolonial analytical tool help to address these challenges? What sort of understanding of the relationship between social

sustainability and care in preschool could contribute to the ongoing discussion of preschool teachers' competencies and strategies regarding religions and worldviews?

2. Conceptual Framework

There are three central subjects that will function as starting points in this article: religion and worldviews, social sustainability, and care. Our understanding of the latter two will only be briefly defined here and outlined further in their respective sections. In line with Kuusisto [19], we are using a broad definition of religion here. Religion can be understood as, "whatever its specific content bringing people a sense of comfort or support," citing Kuusisto [19]. We refer to worldview as the individual's specific ontological, epistemological, and ethical understanding of one's surroundings. Beliefs, knowledge, and values, which are used both in meaning-making and in making choices, are also seen as based on the individual's worldview [19,20]. Therefore, we see the terms religion and worldview as overlapping, but sometimes, to separate between religious and secular worldviews, we keep them apart. Within this kind of framing, a religious worldview becomes one way of understanding the world and one's place in it. In addition, there are also secular worldviews that to a certain extent have the same roles as religious ones. According to Kuusisto [19], a person's individual worldview has a crucial role in his or her understanding of central life issues and of reality. Other than that, worldview can also mean group values and epistemologies, which help to formulate common understandings of what is perceived as true in a particular context. At the group level, the worldview also includes the construction of a group identity and, to a corresponding degree, of someone portrayed as 'the other' cf. [4,21].

We understand social sustainability, in line with one of the four aspects in Eizenberg and Jabareen's [22] model of social sustainability, as equity, here with a specific focus on equal and inclusive care regarding a diversity of worldviews in preschool. Johansson and Rosell [23] were inspired by McKenzie [24] and described social sustainability in a wider sense as "the social, cultural, and political issues affecting people's lives within and between nations and on Earth" and as what "occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities" [23], p. 2. Within research in an educational setting like ECEC, there are several examples of Yuval-Davis's [25] thoughts on the politics of belonging that are used to discuss social sustainability. Following this, we perceive children's social and cultural inclusion together with a sense of belonging as vital aspects of social sustainability [23,26].

Care is, in this article, perceived from the perspective of an intersectional feminist ethics of care. Informed by Noddings [27], Pettersen [28], and Langford and White [29], we understand care as ethical interactions between the caregiver; the caring-one, and the receiver of care; and the cared-for. Within ethical decision-making, the absence or presence of care, according to this understanding, has real effects on whether children will flourish and experience well-being. Every interaction with a child can, in our definition of care as ethical interactions, be understood as events where ethics are embedded in the everyday routines of preschool. The underpinnings and consequences of these definitions of social sustainability and care will be further elaborated on later in the article. First, however, we aim at situating our work and what we consider to be motivating discursive factors for our proposed theoretical framework, within both a global and a local Swedish context.

3. Discursive Challenges for Social Sustainability in ECEC

When it comes to the underpinnings and societal landscapes of Western worldviews or history of ideas, there are competing discursive factors at play affecting everyday work in ECEC. Some ideas can be traced as far back as the Enlightenment and the early industrialization of society. Viewing the Western history of ideas (whether secular or religious) from an antiracist/postcolonial feminist and postmodern point of view e.g., Refs [30–34] can help us make visible discursive challenges concerning culturally inherited dualist, racist,

sexist, hegemonic and essentialist ideas that are reproduced in ECEC. Ideas that constitute ethnocentric and androcentric worldviews that affect, for example, the understanding of religious identities and the position of religion in ECEC. In some ways, this kind of analysis is already implicitly present and known to teachers in ECEC via the policies governing preschool. The goals regarding gender equality, equality, equity, and inclusion in Agenda 2030 [15], the CRC [17], as well as in the local curricula for the preschool in Sweden [18], can all be understood as representing a feminist and postcolonial analysis of the current problems in society made on both the global (UN) and national (NAE) level. As discussed by, for example Gearon et al. [35], there still exist expressions and assumptions in these kind of policy documents that need to be decolonized and analysed through various intersectional perspectives, like the one applied in this article.

3.1. Challenges and Negotiations of National Identities

Even if the situation for preschool teachers and children in preschool differs in many ways between countries from both local and global perspectives, there are still global discursive factors affecting local conditions [36]. Hence, the Agenda 2030 [15] is relevant in all countries of the world. To begin with, due to globalization, armed conflicts, and climate change, there is an increased demographic mobility on a global scale, resulting in increased cultural diversities in many countries. As our geographical place of departure is Sweden, we will use Sweden and the Swedish ECEC as a case, besides locating it into a broader Nordic context. The increased diversity on a global scale is also visible in a Swedish ECEC setting. Statistics collected from the Swedish NAE [37] show that, of the total number of 517,405 children aged 1–5 enrolled in the municipal and private preschools in 2020, 85% were either born in a country other than Sweden, or were born in Sweden, but had parents that were born outside Sweden. The cultural diversity of Sweden's population has, together with influences from postmodern, more fluid understandings of identity, contributed to the enhanced discursive negotiation of national identity, that is, the construction of "Swedishness" in Sweden e.g., [38,39].

A related discursive factor at play when promoting social equality and sustainability in the Swedish and Nordic context, is that these Western, postmodern, and neoliberal societies can be described as both secular and 'marinated' [40] in Lutheran Christianity as a main ideological influence historically [2–4]. Sweden in particular is described as the most secular and the most multi-faith country in the world [35]. Still, even though secularism holds a normative position in society, Sweden is still considered as largely influenced by its Lutheran cultural heritage [41,42]. It is also a country where religion is often regarded as an individual and private matter [43]. The secular norm is maintained by the discursive reproduction of what Riitaoja et al. [3] called Secular Lutheran or Poulter et al. [4] describe as Secular Christian, and Reimers [41] as Western Lutheran Secularism. In addition, Poulter et al. [3,4] argued that also the majority of Lutheran worldviews are 'othered', when the individual's personal worldview is religious through its Lutheranism. The same applies to other educational settings. One example where this is elaborated on, is Kittelmann Flensners [44] study, where she identified three discourses in Swedish religious studies teaching in primary school: a secularist, a spiritual and a discourse of Swedishness. According to her study, in the most common secularist discourse, religion and religious positions are ridiculed. A secular positioning is further considered to be the prerequisite for neutral, objective teaching. Within the spiritual discourse, Kittelman Flesner [44] showed that there was an acceptance of religious positions, especially regarding private, individualistic religiosity, without connection to a more organized religious activity. Finally, the discourse of Swedishness was characterized in her study by the fact that Christianity was used as an identity marker to delimit and distinguish a Christian, Swedish 'we' from an (often Muslim) foreign 'them'. International research has also shown that children, who identify themselves as having a religious worldview, feel the need to downplay or hide their religiosity to avoid vulnerability and being bullied e.g., [45]. Schihalejev et al. [46] have illustrated, through an international comparative study, that children with several

intersecting minority positions, and especially those with religiously more committed families, are more exposed to bullying in Swedish, Estonian and Finnish schools.

The implications of these different studies are that to be Swedish, is to be secular and, as a consequence, 'Swedishness' means being non-religious and not adhering to religious traditions or expressing a spiritual or religious worldview. Hence, to be seen as 'a believer', regardless of religious identity, similarly to factors like origin and ethnicity will contribute to 'othering' in most Swedish or Nordic social contexts, as it means deviating from the norm, and increasing the risk of being contested or discriminated.

3.2. Challenges in the Everyday Work of Preschool Teachers concerning Religions and Worldviews

Although there is a growing body of literature on linguistic and cultural diversity e.g., [47–54] in Swedish preschools, apart from a few exceptions [9,10,41,42,55–58], these studies do not tend to examine questions related to diversity of religions or worldviews. When it comes to worldview inclusion and religious and cultural diversity in Swedish and other Nordic ECEC, the available studies have pointed out at least two additional critical and discursive factors. One factor regards the contents in the policy documents. The Lpfö18 [18] includes the goals from both Agenda 2030 [15] and the CRC [17], to promote social sustainability and to make preschool education equal and inclusive. In Sweden however, the documents do not give directions about the place of religion in ECEC, other than stating that all teaching is to be non-denominational and should not enhance one worldview more than another [21,41,42,58]. If one looks at religion as a cultural phenomenon [58,59], thus including religions and worldviews as relevant issues whenever culture is addressed, this might indicate where religion could have a place in Swedish preschool education and teaching. In relation to other Nordic curricula for preschool, comparative research [21] has shown that, compared to the Swedish curriculum, the Norwegian and the Finnish curricula are both more explicit in their writings on religion and worldviews. There are however also similarities, like the stating of democratic values as fundamental within preschool education. Other than this, there are obscurities in all curricula regarding what is covered within the concepts of 'democracy', 'central national values' and 'cultural heritage'. Based on this, the authors highlighted the role of the personnel as "crucial when transmitting "silent" attitudes and values on religions and worldviews" [21], p. 53. Previous findings thus indicate that religions and worldviews can be seen as important aspects of the intercultural work in early childhood education [58,59], and indeed, as part of the moral core of teaching [60].

Research on the position of religion in Swedish preschools indicates that, partly due to the obscurity of the curriculum, there is an uncertainty among preschool teachers regarding how to manage intercultural work in a multicultural ECEC setting [57], how to deal with issues of religion and how to pass on a cultural heritage in a non-denominational education [9,10,42]. Due to Sweden's Lutheran heritage, according to Puskás and Andersson [9,10] and Reimers [42], there is a risk that children will be unilaterally influenced by Christian values when Christmas and Easter traditions are celebrated. This research also shows that preschool teachers experience a lack of confidence when approaching children and guardians with different worldviews and cultural traditions, especially of a religious kind. One suggested explanation, in addition to unclear directions in the curriculum, to why preschool teachers feel insecure about encountering religious diversity, is whether they have adequate knowledge of the worldviews and religions that are represented in preschool. The studies mentioned above indicate that quite a large percentage of preschool teachers in Sweden have expressed their lack of knowledge of this area. The issue of preschool student teachers' lack of proper knowledge and lack of self-awareness, when it comes to understanding and acknowledging the impact of their own pre-understanding and worldviews, has been addressed in studies of teacher education in Finland e.g., [61]. In Sweden however, religions and worldviews in ECEC teacher education remains a mostly uncharted area of research.

4. Social Sustainability as Equal and Inclusive Caring Interactions in Preschool

A triad model including an ecological, an economic, and a social dimension, is often referred to when sustainable development is on the agenda [22,62]. In research on sustainability in ECEC, where a holistic view is often employed, economic and environmental aspects have been prioritized while social aspects have been given less attention [63]. Furthermore, few studies have investigated topics related to diversity or multicultural perspectives, and there is a lot more to do as regards understanding diversity in relation to sustainability in ECEC [63,64]. Religious or worldview diversity in a secular Nordic context is, as shown above, an even more scarcely researched area, with only a handful of studies available. Even more so, the intersection between social sustainable and religious and worldview diversity in ECEC, has so far been more or less unexplored. In Eizenberg and Jabareen's [22] theoretical model where social sustainability is defined as integrating social, economic, and ecological aspects, four concepts are used: safety, equity, eco-prosumption, and sustainable urban forms. As stated earlier, our focus is on social sustainability as equity, equality, and inclusion.

4.1. Children's Well-Being and Sense of Belonging as Key Aspects of Social Sustainability

Our point of departure is children's well-being and sense of belonging as key aspects for ensuring social sustainability [23,63,65,66]. The preschool teacher holding adequate knowledge of religions and worldviews and a sensitivity for children's religious, secular or spiritual expressions, can be regarded as part of their caring mission for children's well- being and sense of belonging in the short run, and in the long run, for social sustainability. Different values, ways of communicating and language barriers between a child's home and preschool have been shown to make it difficult for children to feel a sense of belonging [26,67]. As pointed out earlier, in the increasingly secular Nordic societal contexts, religious Lutheran worldviews often become "othered" alongside "other" religions, and the societal hegemony retains its particular power structures [3,41,42,68]. This, and the other discursive challenges outlined above, have far-reaching consequences for the preschool as a social community and its ability to provide all children with a sense of belonging.

The ECEC has a central role and opportunity for creating sustainable well-being, by promoting children's interests, knowledge, and values [15,16]. These aims are closely connected to what Helne and Hirvilammi [69] and, also Ronen and Kerret [70], have defined as sustainable well-being, which is the well-being of an individual in relation to the well-being of the environment. Ronen and Kerret [70], p. 1 wrote that "Sustainable wellbeing is achieved when improving individual wellbeing is correlated with improving the wellbeing of other members of society and the natural environment". Societal fragmentation, socio-economic struggles and (mental) illness in families, child poverty and exclusion are notable problems regarding many children's possibilities of experiencing well-being. Just like multiple intersectional minority positions in children's lives make them more vulnerable in the face of bullying and exclusion than other children in peer-group [46], continuous experiences of exclusion along children's life trajectories can lead to an experience of exclusion from society e.g., [21]. Salminen [71] described challenges with promoting social sustainability in education, such as improving children's sustainable well-being, as "wicked" problems, since they are notably multifaceted as societal problems.

4.2. Care as Ethical Interaction for Equality and Inclusion in Preschool

The Care Manifesto [72] presented how the states since the 1980s, have promoted and fostered an ideal citizen of autonomy, entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency and have, through neoliberal ideas, created systems where everyone has to fend for themselves. Accordingly, children today are fostered to look after themselves. The consequences are that we, in these 'careless states' and 'uncaring communities', fail to discover people's interconnectedness and shared vulnerabilities [72] and therefore fail to care for the weak and the poor. From a socially sustainable perspective, this is counterproductive. Instead, it can be

argued that there is a need to foster and develop caring societies "that breathe sustainability, wellbeing, and inclusiveness . . . if 'we' are to continue to live on the Earth" [73], p. 157. Maintaining equitable and meaningful relationships with different cultures is highlighted by Wals [73] as part of the key question for how to live sustainably. Taking this into account, fostering children to care for others (as part of creating space for well-being and a sense of belonging) can be seen as fundamental for social sustainability in preschool, as well as in society at large.

In our proposed theoretical framework, the concept of care is thus to be understood from a feminist [28,29,74] and postcolonial [31–34,75] point of view, which means including the relationship and the interaction between the educator, the children, the preschool environment and the educational artefacts used [27,76]. The relational approach outlined by Noddings [27] and further developed by Pettersen [28] and Langford and White [29] contains an idea of moral education, in which the child, referred to as the cared-for, is to be educated by the teacher, referred to as the caring-one to develop sympathy and empathy for others, finally turning into a caring-one. Both Pettersen [28] and Langford and White [29] highlighted the importance of a dialogical rather than monologic approach during caregiving, where the interactions between the caring-one and the cared-for are characterized by attentiveness, responsiveness and reciprocity. Like Langford and White [29], and in line with Chatzidakis et al.'s [72] political definition of 'careless states' and 'uncaring communities', we find it productive to be able to describe interactions as either becoming a caring or 'care less' space for the caring-one and the cared-for. Following Langford and White [29], care can be defined as ethical interactions, which do not exclude a broader social and political understanding of care ethics. From this point of view, establishing a caring relationship with the child, which includes a preschool teacher's acknowledgement and awareness of, and openness and curiosity for children's spiritual, secular, or religious expressions of worldviews, will develop children's tolerance and openness for others. Following this line of thought, the preschool teacher's ethical interactions are seen as an important part of the preschool teachers' caring duty expressed in for example the Swedish Lpfö18 [18].

Similar susceptibility to children's expressions, and the teacher's sensitivity in the sense outlined above, has also been described through different concepts, such as intercultural sensitivity [61,77]. The author bell hooks (she chose not to capitalise her name in order to emphasise the importance of the substance of the writing rather than her person) [32], who we will return to in our text, also wrote about this kind of caring approach as crucial for creating what she called 'caring communities'. Like Langford and White [29], she added a critical and power conscious dimension to the role of the teacher, something of importance also from our perspective. In Langford and White's [29], p. 69 words:

> Moreover, we regard early childhood institutions as sites of minor politics in which care as ethical interactions is fraught with power relationships implicating gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability among other social factors / . . . /. The caregiver and the cared-for cannot be separated from an understanding that each ethical care interaction is asymmetrical in terms of who has needs and who has power.

Following our suggestion for a widened definition of an ethics of care perspective within preschool implies a focus on creating a subjectified relation between the teacher and the child. As such, the teacher has a specific responsibility to meet the needs of the child and to challenge the hegemonic and othering norms that often are reproduced in Nordic preschools due to their secular and Eurocentric standards.

5. An Intersectional Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective

International studies have pointed to the importance of using an intersectional lens when studying overlaps and intersections of ethnicity, gender and religion, and to highlight and challenge oppression and hegemonies, such as racism, sexism and othering due to religious identity e.g., [78]. The use of feminist perspectives in ECEC studies has

contributed to the visibility of unequal power relations regarding gender in preschool and the renegotiation of key concepts in the field e.g., [79–81]. The scope of this article can be seen as unique in the sense that we combine issues of ECEC, religions and worldviews, with intersectional feminist theory and ethics. Feminists within social sciences have generally viewed religion through a critical Marxist lens, and as (only) causing the subordination and discrimination of women [82,83]. However, this has been countered by feminist theologians and scholars of religious studies (ibid.), who have pointed out that such criticism is built upon 'religion blindness'. This means that there is a lack of qualified analysis, which can cause a negative stereotyping of religion, and that social feminist storytelling contributes to a reproduction of stereotypes and to 'othering' of cultural groups and individuals for whom religion is of great importance in everyday life. Even though our focus here has not been on gender aspects as such, but on issues of power, inclusion equity and equality in a broader sense, it can be argued, based on the character of the critical discursive challenges that we have presented above, that the combined use of feminist and postcolonial perspectives is vital when studying religion and worldviews in relation to creating social sustainability in the ECEC.

On the one hand, there is a large field of research covering intersectional feminist perspectives on religion [82]. The body of work touching on issues related to religion and worldviews in the ECEC discussed from a feminist postcolonial perspective is on the other hand e.g., [26,81], still small, but growing. In addition, a postcolonial perspective has been used by Gearon and Kuusisto [84] discussing religion in ECEC with an intersectional perspective on studies concerning conditions for, and experiences of intercultural teaching within ECEC e.g., [26,57,85]. To be able to expose essentialism, ethnocentrism, exoticisation and exclusion as consequences of religious and gender-blind interpretations of the preschool and preschool teacher's professional mission, in agreement with Smith et al. [81] and Berge and Johansson [26], we regard postcolonial and black feminist thought as important critical perspectives. Postcolonial and black feminist thought can add an understanding of power relations, where gender and ethnicity, skin colour or culture are seen as social categories mutually influencing each other, to the feminist analysis. It can also add an awareness of one's own position through an intersectional lens e.g., [30–34]. We find this especially crucial when the researchers, as in our own case, are white Western women, or within ECEC, if one is a white Western, secular preschool teacher, in relation to the children, parents and co-workers, in an increasingly multicultural society. Spivak's [33,34] deconstruction of universal and essentialist ideas and hers and hooks' [31,32] critique of racist and sexist norms and hegemonies within education and knowledge production have been used as starting points, inspiring our critical understandings of discursive challenges considering especially religions and worldviews in enhancing social sustainability in ECEC. In our construction of a theoretical and analytical tool for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable preschool communities of care, we have also adopted Spivak's and hooks' ideas.

In her classic text "Can the subaltern speak?", Spivak [33] used Derrida's poststructuralist theory in her critique and deconstruction of universal claims, and as the title points out, she discussed who has the right to speak for someone else, and how Western feminism tends to portray women in the third world as 'the others'. When addressing the effects of religion and gender-blind interpretations of the preschool and of preschool teacher's professional duties, as well as the cultural or religious exotification of individuals or traditions, we find the terms exclusion and marginalization, or being marginalized (when subjects are made less important and given less possibility to influence a situation), and 'othering' (being discursively constructed as 'the other'), to be helpful. Within a Swedish context it is, as noted above, adequate to discuss the centralization or hegemony of secular ways of doing things or viewing the world, as contributing to the construction of 'Swedishness' [44] and constructing a subject regarded as religious as less Swedish.

The definitions of the concepts 'engaged pedagogy' and 'beloved community', as used by hooks [31,32], paired with Yuval-Davis [25] definition of the concept 'communities',

have inspired our line of thought regarding how to envision preschool as 'sustainable community of care', with care as being the core of the preschool teachers' work. hooks' [31,32] main focus, is like Spivak's, issues of racism, classism and marginalization. Inspired by thinkers like Freire, hooks [32] aspired to create a pedagogy of freedom. She translated Freire's concept of 'conscientization' in the classroom, into "critical awareness and engagement", while using the concept 'engaged pedagogy' [32], p. 14. Other than Freire, hooks' pedagogical vision was inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist philosophy, where the pedagogical focus lies on practice as well as on contemplation and a holistic approach to learning with an emphasis on a union of mind, body, and spirit. hooks [32] depicted the actions of an 'engaged pedagogue', as aside from enhancing students' critical awareness, being engaged in a process of her own self-actualization and self-care, to promote her own well-being. According to hooks, this is required if teachers are to be able to empower students through their teaching.

Yuval-Davis [25] outlined a feminist and postcolonial theory of belonging, which distinguishes between first, the politics of belonging as being processes of protecting borders, determining who belongs inside and who is regarded as outside a community, and second, belonging in the sense of feeling emotionally connected to a community. hooks [32] used the concept 'beloved communities', addressing the political aspects of belonging seen from a black feminist point of view. This was done by inspiration from Martin Luther King, who according to hooks [32], p. 263 imagined "a beloved community where race would be transcended, forgotten, where no one would see skin color". hooks noted that this has not yet been accomplished and pointed out an embedded flaw in King's vision as being the idea that a beloved community should be characterized by racial difference to be erased and forgotten. Instead, hooks' understanding of a beloved community was a community where "loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences" [32], p. 264. Hence, rather than building communities based on a strategy where differences are erased, hooks promoted justice and caring built on the affirmation by everyone in the community to appreciate that themselves and others are shaped by their different identities and cultural legacies. To us, hooks' vision, might also include promoting justice and caring, considering differences of religions and worldviews. In addition, her vision resonates well with the intentions focusing on equality and inclusion found in the Lpfö 18 [18], as well as in The CRC [17] and Agenda 2030 [15].

6. Preschools as Sustainable Communities of Care

The discursive factors presented above point towards challenges at different levels, regarding social sustainability in the ECEC, and more specifically questions about religions and worldviews within both ECEC and preschool teacher education. When conducting further research, we can draw the conclusion that there is a need for both critical perspectives and new conceptualizations regarding the meaning of care in relation to social sustainability in ECEC and to visualize these in a theoretical model. As presented above we suggest a possible theoretical and analytical tool to be based on an intersectional feminist and postcolonial ethics of care perspective. As a result, we have constructed a model where these perspectives inform our suggested understandings of what might serve as the foundations for making the preschool function as a sustainable community of care, where equality and inclusion of a diversity of religions and worldviews are manifested via ethical interactions, creating caring relations and, in the long run, providing well-being and a sense of belonging for all children. Our theoretical and analytical model for understanding, researching, and planning sustainable communities of care (Figure 1) has partly been inspired by Kuusisto et al. [21] who explored Nordic curricula and preschool education regarding national values and worldviews through the analytical concepts of international level, societal level and community level. The model was also inspired by the social and analytical units for investigating interactions of language and social life outlined by Hymes [86]: speech community, speech situation, speech event and speech act. The

different analytical dimensions: international, societal, community, situation, event and act, should be understood as flexible, overlapping, entangled and in constant change.

Figure 1. A model for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable communities of care.

6.1. The International Level of Care

On the international level, we find both global discursive challenges regarding historically rooted ideas expressed as Eurocentrism, sexism, racism, orientalism etc., addressed earlier on, and the governmental and policy documents that aim to secure the human rights of citizens. In this model, we elaborate on policy documents such as the Agenda 2030 [15], the CRC [12] and EU-regulations. At this level, we also find the Nordic perspective on childhood and education—EduCare, which underscores play and outdoor activities as essential for learning throughout the educational system. This perspective affects the construction of the individuals' relationships with each other and with nature, and thus affects values of sustainability.

6.2. The Societal Level of Care

At societal level, societal values are communicated through national policy documents. In Sweden, policy documents such as the Lpfö 18 [18], p. 5 stated that "Education should also convey and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based." On the societal level, we also find the societal hegemony that express what the norm is versus what minority values or traditions end up being marginalized [31–34], that is, what is the specific "spectrum of value?" [87]. What or who is excluded due to a lack of 'Swedishness' or viewed as non-Swedish, can be related to religion such as religious worldviews or membership, and thus constructed as 'the other' [3,4,44].

6.3. Community Level of Care

Building on Berge and Johansson [26], Yuval-Davis [25] and hooks [32], we define preschool as a community of care with norms and values for caring. Thus, the norms and values for caring that surrounds the child construct the community of care and create borders for inclusion and exclusion [25,26]. To create a community of care, which supports social and cultural diversity and inclusion [32] as well as children's well-being [69,70] and sense of belonging [23,63,66], the teachers' understanding for the importance of children's right to their secular, spiritual or religious aspects/sides of themselves is vital. Establishing inclusion here, refers to the children's own perception of how they and their peers care about

each other, and appreciate one another's different identities and cultural legacies [32]. It also includes that apart from being physically included, they perceive inclusion and a sense of belonging regarding their cultural heritage and religious or secular background [25,26]. When the norms include the maintenance of pro-social sustainability work [88], such as equality and openness for diversity of religions and worldviews, children will display such values.

6.4. Situations of Care

Within the communities of care, situations of care are planned for. These caring situations are recurring activities, routines that occur daily within the preschool and are relational. A caring relational situation can be a warm reception and welcoming, meals, planned activities and projects, and spontaneous activities. These situations of care are aimed at developing children's knowledge and to provide a sense of belonging and well-being. Creating an identity-safe space in which the child feels safe, should also be seen from the point of view of religious values, worldviews and being members of a community e.g., [89–91]. It is the teachers' duty to care for the children's experience of feeling safe. A project focusing on structured collaboration with peers and stable adult guidance has shown to be successful among caring communities [88].

6.5. Events of Care

Within the situations of care, ethical interactions are potentially being created. The care events are framed by child-teacher interactions and a joint focus of attention [28,29]. In these interactions, the teachers as the caring-ones [27], or the adult guide [88], cares for the children's (as the cared-for) wellbeing and moral education. The norms of the caring community are here put into play. This means that a receptive and sensitive approach to children's different expressions of a spiritual, religious, or secular nature is applied. It also means that the teachers seek to ask about the children's interests, experiences, and thoughts. In interactions and supporting and stable relationships with teachers and peers, children will experience and develop values of openness and equity [27]. In a caring event, the teacher engages children in a conversation or a play with a specific subject, targeting children's religious, secular, or spiritual worldviews. Through the teacher's engagement, certain values are transferred and these acts serve as a role model for a certain kind of behaviour [92].

6.6. Acts of Care

In the caring events, children and teachers are potentially constructing acts of care. The teacher acknowledges, highlights, and brings attention to the traditions, thoughts, and experiences of the child. As the caring-one [27,29], the teacher carries out acts of caring, such as showing an interest in something, questioning, informing, educating, and communicating religious, secular, or spiritual aspects with the child, its peers, and its guardians. The child as the cared-for [27], will experience and develop agency and autonomy to be able to perform acts of caring toward others now and in the future (social sustainability).

6.7. Examples of Interpretations and Implementation

To sum up, we will provide a couple of examples of how this framework can be implemented both in practice and for further research. First, we give a practical example of an ECEC situation where this could be applied. Within the caring community of preschool caring situations, such as the morning reception when the child arrives at the preschool together with its parents, rituals can take place. Within the caring situation reception, the teacher initiates a caring event, an ethical interaction about how the child is doing or about the weekend's happenings. Finally, within this caring event when the caring ones, the teacher and the parent, communicate, caring acts are made, such as questioning, educating or extending information, with the purpose of providing sustainable care; hopefully resulting in the child's well-being and sense of belonging. Thereby, the model presented

above can be used to conceptualize and further analyse—both for the purposes of research and practice—these different roles and events take place in social and emotional caring relationships and encounters.

Second, we want to illustrate this with an example that begins with a caring act. The teacher highlights a child's question about whether we become flowers after death, by encouraging the child to share and expand his/her thoughts (an act of care). The teacher then builds on the child's reflections and asks the other children to join into the discussion with their ideas and reasonings on the matter. The teacher may also share her own reflections (also acts of care). These caring acts take place within a spontaneous conversation about life and death (a caring event). The conversation in its turn develops during an art-class, during which the children are painting flowers (a caring situation). Finally, the norms and standards for communication and participation expressed by the teacher are characterized by an awareness of social and cultural hegemonies within the preschool and by openness and empathy for the diversity of worldviews and ways of seeing, being and understanding life and the world (a caring community). Again, this model can support discussions regarding such pedagogical situations as the reflections and evaluations taking place in the pedagogical team responsible for the care and education of the child group, as they reflect on, evaluate and aim to continuously improve their own professional practice. Similarly, the model can help scholars to analyse the different elements that are at stake between the various stakeholders in the classroom interaction, in particular those regarding social sustainability and care in the ECEC every day.

7. Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we have argued for the importance of taking "the whole child", including its worldviews into account, in the daily work of caring in preschool. Specifically, we have argued for a need to include the plurality of worldviews in the understanding of the holistic educational perception of the child in ECEC, as regards the care and education of these young children. We have focused on care as ethical interactions involving a diversity of religions and worldviews and put this in relation to social sustainability work in ECEC. A number of discursive challenges that preschool teachers (in Sweden) face in their work to enhance social sustainability, by supporting the child's well-being and sense of belonging in the ECEC, have been outlined. By utilizing a feminist and postcolonial ethics of care approach to address these challenges, we bring forth a theoretical and analytical tool (Figure 1) to understand, research and plan socially sustainable communities of care in ECEC. In our view, working for social sustainability in preschool, includes counteracting discrimination and exclusion due to marginalized worldviews. It also includes contributing to children's development into moral, care-oriented subjects with the ability to coexist in peaceful relationships and to actively co-create a democratic and more sustainable-just [14] society. This points to the educator's responsibility to acknowledge and be receptive and sensitive regarding all children's existential thoughts (worldview) and cultural background.

We suggest that preschools need caring educators with methods based on norm-critical worldview awareness. We find this competence to be mandatory when carrying out the task of working for social sustainability together with children to create conditions for inclusive, caring relationships. That is, to make preschool a sustainable community of care. An important issue here is whether future teachers will be properly equipped to understand how to act when encountering the diversity and pluralism that society and its ECEC contexts are catering for at present. Finally, this theoretical and analytical tool (Figure 1), is also considered to be required in research on worldviews and social and cultural diversity in different educational settings. This applies both to higher education and in preschool when the aim is to enhance awareness and to highlight and challenge social power structures, marginalization and othering.

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