sustainability

MDPI

Article

Care and Social Sustainability in Early Childhood Education: Transnational Perspectives †

Kassahun Weldemariam [1,*], Angel Chan [2], Ingrid Engdahl [3], Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson [4], Timothy Chepkwesi Katiba [5], Tewodros Habte [6] and Roland Muchanga [7]

1 Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Gothenburg, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
2 Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland 1023, New Zealand; angel.chan@auckland.ac.nz
3 Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden; ingridengdahl@gmail.com
4 Department of Education, Communication and Learning, Faculty of Education, University of Gothenburg, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden; ingrid.pramling@ped.gu.se
5 Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Campus, East Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia; timothy.katiba@myacu.edu.au
6 Center for International and Comparative Education, College of Education, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa P.O. Box 1176, Ethiopia; tewodros08@yahoo.com
7 Directorate of Early Childhood Education, Ministry of Education, Lusaka P.O. Box 50093, Zambia; rolmu@hotmail.com
* Correspondence: kassahun.weldemariam@gu.se

† This article is produced within the network 'global childhoods research collaboration' founded by the faculty of Education at University of Gothenburg, led by Associate Professor Anette Hellman and PhD student Natalie Davet. The network was founded as part of Gothenburg University's initiative to internationalize its activity through collaboration with researchers from the majority and minority world. The collaborating authors in this article are members of one of the subgroups in the network with a particular focus on ECEC and education for sustainability.

check for updates

Citation: Weldemariam, K.; Chan, A.; Engdahl, I.; Samuelsson, I.P.; Katiba, T.C.; Habte, T.; Muchanga, R. Care and Social Sustainability in Early Childhood Education: Transnational Perspectives. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 4952. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14094952

Academic Editors: Lasse Lipponen, Annukka Pursi, Jaakko Hilppö and Michail Kalogiannakis

Received: 14 February 2022
Accepted: 11 April 2022
Published: 20 April 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: This article explores how the notion of care is conceptualised and described in early childhood education policies across countries in the majority (Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia) and minority (New Zealand and Sweden) world. A central focus is the relationship and balance between care and education. The authors examined whether there are trends and tendencies to strengthen or weaken the care/education component at the expense of the other. Grounded in local and national knowledge, the authors employed a cross-national collaborative inquiry approach and interrogated the notion of care while extrapolating its implications for the endeavour to design socially sustainable early childhood education. The results revealed that care has remained ingrained within policies in the minority world, while there is a tendency to view it as separate from education in the majority world. Although quantitative goals for early childhood education and care still dominate the majority world, the importance of care and sustainable development are present in all policy documents across the five nations. The authors concluded that strengthening these promising policy endeavours paves the way towards effective educare approaches, which lay the foundation for social sustainability in early childhood education.

Keywords: care; collaborative inquiry; early childhood education; educare; majority and minority world; policy; social sustainability

1. Introduction

An important driver of sustainability in the world today is the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2: Equal Access to Quality Pre-primary Education, which states, "[B]y 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" [1], a

statement we know the world is far from reaching. SDG 4.7 also points to education, as it names the following central content: global citizenship, sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Together with many organisations, UNESCO recently launched the *Global Partnership Strategy (GPS) in Early Childhood* as one way to realise SDG 4.2 [2]. The overall aim of the GPS is driven by the Core Principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, "Leaving no child behind," by ensuring that early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings are fully inclusive, accessible, affordable, gender-responsive, equitable and developmentally appropriate for each child. A focus of the UNESCO strategy is to fulfil the indicators developed for each goal. Under SDG 4.2, Indicator 4.2.1 addresses the "[p]roportion of children under five years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex". Likewise, Indicator 4.2.2 refers to the "participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex". The overall impact of the strategy spills over to related SDG targets for child health, nutrition, water and sanitation, rights, protection, disability and gender.

ECEC have always been diverse in many aspects. First, different countries name the activities and settings for children not yet old enough for school differently, such as *preschool*, *kindergarten*, *early childhood education* (*ECE*) and so on, making it difficult to develop global policies [3]. In addition, the same kind of concept could refer to diverse age groups or activities. Here is, in a way, an inbuilt controversy that is both positive and demanding to have in a transnational dialogue.

When teachers label ECEC events related to social sustainability in a Swedish study [4], they discuss relationships between children. A caring relationship is vital in promoting social sustainability, particularly in ECEC settings, where young children deserve the best quality of care. There is growing awareness about the link between the social dimension of sustainability and the importance of implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [5]. Particularly, Article 3 addresses the need to act in the best interests of the child.

It is widely argued that ECE lays the foundation for a socially sustainable society. Social sustainability is a broad concept encompassing, among others, well-being and quality of life as key components. Being an inevitable prerequisite for well-being, the authors argue that the notion of care is central and deserves particular attention in the endeavour to design a socially sustainable ECE. Situated within this global context, the authors investigated how the notion of care is conceptualised in policy discourses across nations from the majority (Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia) and minority (New Zealand and Sweden) world. These five countries are chosen in an effort to represent both high, middle and low income countries, as care is often related with economic condition.

Although we (the authors) are aware that the importance of care is globally needed for a sustainable future, we are also mindful of the varied historical, political, social and cultural contexts among the five countries involved, which entails the difficulty of claiming a universal approach to care. Hence, we emphasise that this paper has not exhaustively explored these contexts in the five countries and hence remind our audience to read with this precondition.

This article is organised as follows. It begins by highlighting the aims and key research questions addressed. The following section outlines the methodology employed—that is, a collaborative inquiry with transnational dialogue. The subsequent section outlines the authors' descriptions and analyses of ECEC in the five countries. Then, the next section discusses the secondary data from a meta-level perspective by problematising the notion of care and extrapolating it to the wider notion of social sustainability. The final section summarises and concludes this work by highlighting the key features of the comparative analysis.

2. Aim and Research Questions

The central aim of this inquiry was to elucidate how the notion of care is conceptualised and described in ECE, educational policy and research in five countries: Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia from the majority world, and New Zealand and Sweden from the minority world.

To achieve this goal, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. How is the notion of care conceptualised, represented/presented and justified in policy, research and national curricula?
2. How is the balance between care and education maintained?
3. How can the policy discourse regarding education and care be linked and extrapolated to social sustainability and the transformative change it calls for?

3. Methodology

Due to the international effort at the University of Gothenburg to develop collaboration between the majority and minority world of researchers, a programme called Global Childhoods was introduced with participants from many countries. During the pandemic, for suitability reasons, cooperation has been occurring digitally. The group has about 70 participants, divided into five areas of interest. The group that has worked with the present article is focusing on ECEC and education for sustainability.

Collaborative inquiry was the methodology employed to investigate the conceptualisation of the notion of care within ECEC policy and research discourse across the five countries [6,7]. The collaboration emerged from the researchers' common interest in sustainability in early-years education. An underlying assumption within collaborative inquiry is its intent to maintain a socio-constructivist orientation in investigation. In doing so, it has been conducted in the form of shared participation [6], shared responsibility [8], the co-construction of a shared vision [9], and the negotiation of shared goals for the inquiry [10]. Accordingly, collaborative inquiry engages the contributing authors to collaborate and empirically (using secondary data) investigate a common theme, leading to a broader understanding of the notion of care across the five nations.

As indicated by Nelson et al., collaborative inquiry acknowledges the significance of personal and experiential knowledge in the co-construction of meaning [11]. Hence, the study began with each collaborating author–researcher's individual descriptions of how the notion of care is conceptualised in his or her respective local and national contexts, thus ensuring the grounding of the inquiry. Each author conducted this description in line with the agreed research aim and questions; hence, there were no predetermined criteria for comparison. Subsequently, this individual knowledge served as the basis for the co-construction of a deeper conceptualisation of care.

The common focus on the conceptualisation of the notion of care helped us keep the internal flow of the descriptions. After the initial descriptions were developed, they were reviewed and restructured by three leading authors from Sweden. Then, each author read, analysed and commented on the wholeness, focus and internal flow of the text. The interplay between and among individual and group reflections was process-oriented and conducted through dialogues in Zoom meetings and email conversations [6]. This process led to the emergence of the themes presented in this paper and served as the basis for our cross-national enquiry and dialogue.

4. Early Childhood Education and Care in the Five Countries

The policies of the five countries are shaped by their varying images of children and family and perspectives of education and care, their unique social, cultural and economic situations, and their educational systems. The findings presented here show that the importance of care and social sustainability, although articulated differently, is embedded in the ECEC policies of our countries. We will now explore the policies of each of the five countries in turn below.

4.1. Ethiopia

Early childhood education (ECE) was an overlooked sector in the making of Ethiopian education policy before 2010 [12]. Ethiopia began to recognise the prominence of early childhood care and education (ECCE) along with the effort to meet the Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. Consequently, a joint ministerial agency among the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) was established in a multi-sectored approach to implementing ECCE [13]. In 2010, the agency prepared the National Policy Framework and the Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for ECCE [14].

The national policy framework introduced ECCE for two age cohorts: the first cohort (prenatal to three$^+$ years) and the second cohort (four to six$^+$ years). The first age cohort considered the crucial role of parents in health, nutrition and early stimulation, while the latter focused on the provision of more formal cognitive and psycho-social development. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education are each responsible for the first and second age cohorts, respectively [14]. The national policy integrated both care and education, and the term "early childhood care and education" (ECCE) was used by the government for the first time [14]. This term demonstrates a combined setting and approach to preschool and contains the notion of EDUCARE [15].

The policy left the care and education of the first age cohort (prenatal to three$^+$ years) to parents [14]. Although this cohort is practically marginalised, centre-based day care services are mushrooming, mostly in the capital, Addis Ababa. There are no standards, guides or manuals for caregivers [13], despite the enabling policy framework [14]. Many centres are not licenced, guided, supervised and monitored, as there are no organised regulatory and coordinating offices. Hence, the centres seemed to be more like stay sites or babysitting services than places of development for infants and toddlers [13].

ECCE in Ethiopia is facing a set of complex challenges. Many ECCE centres in Ethiopia are established in a very formal school setting. The centres also follow very heterogeneous, fragmented and out-of-context curricula, along with many untrained and dispassionate teachers [12,16–18]. Regardless of the few ECCE centres, particularly in the capital and some urban areas, ECCE in Ethiopia almost seems like a non-care service [12,13].

A substantial distinction was revealed between the envisioned and enacted policy of care in Ethiopian ECCE [12]. Adequate investment in ECCE is a major point of concern at the policy level [14], although the subsector suffers from quite negligible financing [12]. The policy envisages the provision of comprehensive, developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive services for all children. Equitable access to quality care and early stimulation in an inclusive approach were among the foundational rationales of the policy to reach vulnerable and marginalised children. Care was also well recognised from a child rights perspective [14].

The policy also underscored the need for social, emotional and physical development in a play-based approach [14]. In a similar vein, the goal of pre-primary education, as stated in the national curriculum framework, is to help children develop their emotional, cognitive, physical and social domains [19]. However, evidence shows that many Ethiopian preschool teachers emphasise literacy and numeracy skills [12,17].

Sustainability in relation to care is mentioned in the policy framework, if not explicitly. The policy demonstrates that the failure to provide better nutrition, healthcare and education deprives children of their right to enjoy a better quality of life and eventually contributes to society's growth. Sustainability is also intertwined with future socioeconomic returns due to increased investment in programmes for infants and children [14]. Moreover, the ECCE curriculum included content that could introduce children to environmental sustainability [19]. Considering all the challenges, however, the contribution of ECCE to a sustainable society seems problematic in Ethiopia [20].

4.2. Kenya

Shortly after Kenya's independence in 1963, the founding president Jomo Kenyatta implored citizens to embrace the Harambee philosophy, meaning "to pull together" in developing the new nation−state. This development-based philosophy has since been a guiding principle for state policies and programmes, including early childhood development and education (ECDE), also known as preprimary education, which is well known in sub-Saharan Africa for its strong parental and community participation [21,22]. Kenya's ECDE has its origin in the society's communal life, where families and communities bear the greatest responsibility for the protection, care and nurturance of young children. Researchers such as Nganga [23] have acknowledged the government's minimal involvement in the provision of ECDE services. The planning, establishment and running of community- and parent-led ECDE settings are left in the hands of parents and the communities. Therefore, the idea of care in Kenya's ECDE emerges from traditional child-rearing practices.

Pre-primary education, or ECDE, denotes "the elements of care, early stimulation and early learning experiences provided to children before entry to grade one" [24] (p. XII). Kenya's 2010 constitution delegated the administration of ECDE services to county governments. The national government, through the Ministry of Education, develops policy frameworks, standard service guidelines and curricula to ensure county units provide quality ECDE services across the country. The policy aims to "enhance access to equitable, inclusive quality care and early learning of pre-primary children" [24] (p. VII). Even though the concept of care is deeply embedded in local communities (see, e.g., [25]), official policy documents do not operationalise care in terms of how it is manifested in early childhood other than mentioning some of its dimensions, such as partnerships, collaboration, relationships and mutual support among stakeholders in the provision of quality ECDE services [24]. Policy documents privilege the discourse of education and mention the care aspect merely in passing. The care discourse, however, features in research and practice (see, e.g., [25]).

At the practice level, there is emerging anecdotal evidence of how some devolved units are conceptualising nurturing care in ECDE. For instance, Siaya County is implementing nurturing care policies that aim to enable children to survive and thrive. The county has rolled out policies and programmes that promote nurturing care by providing caregivers with the appropriate tools and information required to promote responsive caregiving and early learning [26]. Disparate action plans are in place to ensure the implementation of nurturing care, including making nurturing care a policy agenda and integrating nurturing care into health service delivery. At the research level, Arndt et al. used Nodding's ethics of care framework to study young children's local narratives about childhoods in Kwale County [25]. The authors argued that "children in Kwale perform their own, active 'relational self' and that they are engrossed as both cared-for and one-caring, in the very fabric of their families and communities" [25] (p. 299). By "one-caring", the authors mean that children, themselves, are carers.

Regarding sustainability, the government of Kenya recognises the centrality of ECDE in the realisation of SDGs and that a sustainable world has its roots in the quality of education and care offered to young children [24]. Therefore, the government acknowledges that high-quality education and care are critical in the development of sustainability values, attitudes and behaviour, including those related to social sustainability. However, Macharia and Kimani demonstrated a lack of empirical investigations detailing ways through which social sustainability can be integrated into ECDE curriculum and pedagogy [27]. As already stated, the notion of care is embedded in communities' ways of life, values, beliefs and practices, especially those that relate to being cared for and caring for others, and the environment around young children. This approach is meant to help young children learn to be sensitive to others' hardships by "engaging in acts and attitudes of caring" [25] (p. 299). Thus, the high quality of education and care is a step closer to attaining social sustainability in Kenya's early childhood development and education.

4.3. Zambia

In Zambia's national education policy documents, various terminologies are used interchangeably to refer to the type of education offered to children between zero and six years old. Some common terms used include "early childhood education" (ECE) and "pre-school and early childhood care, development and education" (ECCDE).

According to the National Education Policy "Educating Our Future" of 1996 [28], early childhood education (ECE) is an organised form of educational provision for children between three and six years of age, and such a provision is offered in preschools. However, the Education Act of April 2011 [29] employs the term "early childhood care, development and education", which means the care, development and education of a child from birth to the prescribed school entry age—in this regard, seven years. Meanwhile, the Early Childhood Education National Policy of 2015 [30] has adopted the term "early childhood education" in its application and focuses on children aged three to six years old.

The Early Childhood Education National Policy [30] was developed to provide an all-inclusive national framework that promotes the optimal learning and development of children aged three to six years for the public sector and those aged zero to two years for the private sector. The policy provides extensive guidance to all stakeholders to promote the delivery of quality ECE to young children in the country in a stimulating environment where their rights are recognised and respected. The issues of early learning and stimulation (zero to two years) were left to the private sector, which includes the cooperating partners (CPs) throughout community ECE centres [31,32].

The early childhood care, development and education (ECCDE) terminology used in the Education Act of 2011 is also applied in the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework of 2013 [33], where it maintains that ECCDE refers to both non-formal and formal service provision, which prepares children for entry into primary school education. It is considered developmental support for children aged zero to six years. ECCDE focuses on the holistic development of children.

Social sustainability concerns well-being, fairness, social justice, cultural capability, adaptability and social accountability, argues [34]. She further states that this has implications for educators when meeting the needs of children (and others) based on age, learning style, additional needs, language, culture and so on. Social sustainability is also about being all-encompassing and culturally capable.

The Zambian government has outlined several measures under the Education and Skills Sector Plan (ESSP) 2017–2021 [35] that focus on early childhood education and its implications for social sustainability and inclusion discourses. The equity thematic area has inferences for social sustainability and inclusion dialogues for ECE.

The equity thematic area stipulates an education system that is accessible to all, irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic origin or any other discriminatory characteristics [35]. Access to early childhood education (ECEC) is very limited for children with special educational needs (CSEND), although data on this category is insufficient. ECEC offers a window of opportunity to identify and intervene to address the challenges of CSEND, but the insufficient guidelines and limited assessment tools mean that this is not fully exploited [35].

Social sustainability, inclusion and equitability are also observed in ECE expansion in the country. While ECE expansion is necessary throughout the country, there is a greater need in rural and remote areas. The Early Childhood Education National Policy [30] seeks to provide and enable innovative and multi-sectoral implementation strategies that expand ECE delivery to reach the most vulnerable children who generally grow up in environments plagued by poverty, malnutrition and a high rate of communicable diseases.

One of the objectives of the ECE National Policy Implementation Plan (PIP) 2017–2021 [36] was to increase access to ECE using low-cost, multimode service delivery approaches by 2021 for all children, especially vulnerable and rural children. However, the 2021 Zambia Education budgetary allocation to the ECE subsector proved a hindrance to the attainment of this policy objective. For instance, in the Zambia budget brief 2020–2021: "Averting

a Learning Crisis in the Face of a Pandemic", UNICEF [37] stated that, even though investment in early-years education has the most impact on redressing inequalities [38], only 0.1 percent of the education budget was allocated to ECE in the 2021 national budget. The proportion of grade one entrants with ECE exposure grew from 16 percent in 2004 to 29.4 percent in 2018. Although enrolment in public, community and private ECE centres doubled between 2014 and 2018, this enrolment represents less than 10 percent of pre-primary school-aged children.

4.4. New Zealand

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 between the Indigenous Māori chiefs and the British Crown. It legitimised Britain's settlement in and colonisation of New Zealand, and it is the nation's founding document that shapes official policies. The Treaty is an inclusive document that recognizes the Māori as the 'people of the land' and all those New Zealanders without their ancestry as the "people of the treaty' (Durie, cited in [39]). From this perspective, it is relationship-based. Relationships strongly feature in ECEC policies. Correspondingly, this section examines how the notion of care is conceptualised and described in three key ECEC documents: (1) "Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029" [40]; (2) "Te Whāriki" [41]; and (3) "Indicators of Quality for ECE" from the Education Review Office (ERO) [42]. The Action Plan sets out the Ministry's 10-year objectives for ECEC provision. Te Whāriki is the mandated EC curriculum, and the ERO uses the Indicators to evaluate the quality of individual ECEC services. These documents have constructed many discourses, including the discourse of care, outlined the Ministry's overarching expectations, and shaped pedagogies. The term "ECEC services" is used across the three documents, recognising that education and care have equal status. Te Whāriki is a holistic curriculum that states that all teachers "have a responsibility for the care and education of children" [41] (p. 7). These recognitions align with local [43,44] and international [45,46] concerns that call for restoring the role of care in EC education.

In honouring a relationship-oriented treaty, the three documents highlight the role of relationships in the pedagogy of care. The Action Plan states that "responsive relationships with well-qualified adults" [40] (p. 16) offer children positive experiences of "consistent care" [40] (p. 17). "Relationships" are among the four principles interwoven through the strands, goals and learning outcomes in Te Whāriki. This principle states that "children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things" [41] (p. 21). The ERO evaluates the practice of relationships and explains that teachers need time 'to develop positive relationships with each child, their parents and whanau/family' [42] (p. 37). EC teachers who participated in a New Zealand study believed that "relationships were the key for everything" they did [44] (p. 269). Relationships involve receptive and attentive listening and reciprocal dialogue [46,47]. The Indicators highlight the importance of listening and responding to children and families [42]. Te Whāriki expects teachers to "encourage children to initiate conversation [and] listen to them attentively to understand their perspectives" [41] (p. 45), including "the views of parents and whanau/family about their children's learning" [41] (p. 35).

Te Whāriki further expects teachers to provide "culturally appropriate care practices" [41] (p. 38) and aspires for children to develop the competence to respect, recognise, negotiate and share "different points of view" [41] (p. 55). The Indicators state that "effective and culturally appropriate evaluation activities are those that foster meaningful and honest engagement with Māori" [42] (p. 26). The emphasis on Māori heritage provides "a foundation for positive transformation" [41] (p. 60), potentially challenging and disrupting dominant and taken-for-granted ECEC discourses and practices. Together, these documents highlight how a pedagogy of care should accept and respect different caring, parenting and education perspectives.

Policies and pedagogies should aim at "creating a climate for caring" [48] (p. 777). Manaaki is a Māori value featured in Te Whāriki, and it means "show respect, generosity, hospitality and care for others" [41] (p. 66). This expectation extends to caring for the

environment. The curriculum states that children need to develop "a sense of responsibility for the living world and knowledge about how to care for it" [41] (p. 47). A local study highlights the benefits of adjusting the ECEC environment to provide care spaces for children to exercise their agency in self-care [49]. Te Whāriki provides group-specific examples of practices for infants, toddlers and young children. Both Te Whāriki and the Indicators consider infants to be the recipients of care but expect young children to be the providers of care. Te Whariki encourages young children "to take up opportunities to fix things, clean, garden and care for the environment and the people in it" [41] (p. 34). In addition, the Indicators expects children to look after "the land and environments" [42] (p. 20). Finally, Te Whāriki is non-prescriptive. It provides broad strategies for teachers to enact its aspirations but encourages each ECEC setting to develop a local curriculum that caters to local communities' diverse needs [41].

4.5. Sweden

The notion of care in Sweden has a history that traces to the beginning of the 20th century, when the Moberg sisters had an ambition to integrate care and education as a social project in one kind of programme for young children [50]. Klingvall and Pramling Samuelsson [51] also illustrate how the conflict between education and care became a political struggle when modern preschool education was formulated in the 1970s [52] (p. 27). Daycare, which had been a full-day care and education offering, and kindergarten's half-day education and care concept were integrated and became the preschool, often united. The holistic approach referred to as educare integrated play, care, fostering, learning and development [53]. Care and education are combined in preschool class (six years) and school-age educare (six to 12 years). Both of these institutions are based on traditions of social pedagogical values and developed into institutions of educare [54].

In the latest revised Swedish curriculum for preschool, care, development and learning are described as a holistic unity [55] (p. 10). According to this curriculum, preschool education should offer integrated care, development and learning, and it has an important role to play in helping to form a child's security and self-esteem. Education should be characterised by care for a child's well-being and security. From a socio-cultural perspective, both care and learning are related to communication [56]. There are, of course, aspects of care linked to physical wellbeing, such as food, recreation, hygiene and sanitation, but most of the caring in preschools is about a caring atmosphere and how the staff meets, relates and communicates with the children. Care, as well as learning, is a question of giving children space to act and listen to their initiatives, imagination, creativity and reflections of their experiences. In these processes, children reveal how they think and feel, which enables the staff to understand the children's worlds and perspectives and to act in relation to children's emotions and cognition. The whole preschool day in Sweden is a base for care, learning and possibilities to play. Play is an important foundational activity during early childhood and is highly esteemed [55].

Turning to sustainability, the national curriculum clearly states that sustainable development is a fundamental value and a basic task for preschool education and all staff:

Education should be undertaken in democratic forms and lay the foundation for a growing interest and responsibility among children for active participation in civic life and for sustainable development—not only economic, but also social and environmental. Both long-term and global future perspectives should be made explicit in education. "Everyone who works in the preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of every person and strive for sustainable development" [55] (p. 5).

Giving all children a childhood where they feel safe, are cared for, receive educational stimulation and have friends to play with is a beginning to build on to develop a sustainable life where children care for others and are empowered to address problems. There are a few goals to strive towards that directly pertain to sustainability:

"The preschool should provide each child with the conditions to develop a growing responsibility for and interest in sustainable development and active participation in society,

an understanding of relationships in nature and different cycles in nature, and how people, nature and society affect each other, and an understanding of how different choices people make in everyday life can contribute to sustainable development" [55] (pp. 13, 15).

These goals are now informing the preschool staff and inspiring them towards transformative actions for sustainability together with children. However, it is not enough for children to become active citizens; children must also be involved in and experience different aspects of sustainability: environmental, socio-cultural, economic and transformative [57]. Different aspects of sustainability are shared and communicated with children, leaning on a pedagogy where teachers treat children as competent and capable individuals.

5. Discussion

This study explores how the notion of care is conceptualised, recognised and articulated in five countries' early childhood education, educational policy and research. Connecting and examining the data collected from these policies revealed commonalities and obvious distinctions between the conditions in the majority and minority ECEC worlds, leading to three emerging themes. This section reports our data analysis and discussion using previous local and international care- and social sustainability-related research and international guiding documents. The discussion is organised into four sections. It begins with an initial analysis of the overall condition and essence/conceptualisation of care in ECE across the five nations, followed by a discussion concerning three other themes: the language of care, holistic development versus schoolification concerns and relationships, cultural responsiveness, and social sustainability.

5.1. Conceptualisation of Care and ECEC across Nations

This section uses the findings to answer research questions 1 and 2. Within the majority world, care is recognised from developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive services and a children's rights perspective in Ethiopia, while it is viewed from a health service perspective in Kenya. In Zambia, the provision of ECEC forms part of the right to education for the holistic and healthy development of all children, including children with special needs. Conversely, within the minority world, the notion of care is woven through the principles, strands and learning outcomes in the New Zealand EC curriculum, while it is viewed from a holistic perspective encompassing development, play and learning in Sweden.

In New Zealand and Sweden, care and education are naturally, inherently embedded and woven into policies and expected in everyday practices in ECEC settings. Politicians in these nations of the minority world recognise the necessity of their societies supporting families. National curricula for ECEC were already adopted in the late 1990s. It appears that, in the majority of the world, extended families are still the major support for families with young children.

What stands out in the section from New Zealand is the strong policy to build on the Māori worldviews of care and its focus on relationships with people, places and things. In the Swedish context, democracy and children's participation from a very early age have a strong and ethical foundational role—to see the youngest people as human beings, citizens and rights holders, with rights of their own.

Perhaps politicians in the majority world, where ECEC is developing, consider ECE closer and more similar to formal primary school education. In minority countries, politicians seem to have another view of what ECE for young children means—a life-long process where all learning, including social sustainability, is the shared responsibility of both the family and ECEC.

Additionally, one can see in policy documents from Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia that EDUCARE is recognised as a notion, although not yet implemented. The education system in these three countries separates children between birth and three years from older children and sometimes under different ministries. The concept of care, alongside nurturing and health, is emphasised for the younger age group, as is explicated in Ethiopian

policy documents. This enables and highlights a view of care and education as entities that are mutually exclusive. Despite policy endeavours to embrace an integrated view, as shown in the notion of educare, underlying assumptions in the three countries entail that education may be an entity devoid of care. Consequently, care is left as a family and community responsibility, as in the case of Kenya. Such assumptions tend to weaken the intertwined nature of care and education, resulting in a reductionist approach with a mere focus on cognitive development. In 2010, a UNESCO study revealed that everyone benefits from having education settings for all age groups under the same department or ministry. The recommendation was not to separate care and education [58]. This paper argues that grounding the importance of care in young children's education requires explicitly using the language of care.

5.2. The Language of Care

Language creates, promotes, and perpetuates discourse [59]. Out of the five participating countries, four have included the word care in their national policies. The terms "early childhood care and education" (Ethiopia), "early childhood education and care" (New Zealand), "care, development and learning" (Sweden) and "early childhood care, development and education" (Zambia) formally established the discourse of care in young children's education. Other terms, such as "early childhood development", "early childhood development education" and "pre-primary education" (Kenya), do not explicitly refer to the word "care". However, the importance of care is recognised in Kenya's county policies. The term "Educare" has also gained momentum in Sweden [56,60]. However, officiating the word "care" is not a guarantee of enacting care in practices; this concern about the gap between envisioned and enacted practices has been raised in Ethiopian research [12] and Kenyan policy [24].

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 Equal Access to Quality Pre-primary Education states that all children should have access to quality development, care and pre-primary education by 2030 [1]. Moreover, policies from Ethiopia, Zambia and Sweden recognise children's rights. Previous research has highlighted the connections between care and sustainability [61,62]. This paper argues that it is the right of each child to receive quality care in education and thrive in a climate of care [48], an approach that lays the foundation for a sustainable society. It is laudable for the Kenyan [23] and Zambian government [35] to officially recognise the importance of high-quality ECEC to a sustainable world. We believe that the word "care" should be included when describing ECEC to construct and reinforce a discourse of care-focused ECE. It is also timely to advance the notion of care in ECEC policies due to increasing concerns regarding the schoolification of ECEC, which is happening at the expense of care and play [63].

5.3. Holistic Development vs. Schoolification Concerns

The data gathered suggests that ECEC policies in Ethiopia, Sweden and New Zealand adopt a holistic approach that pays attention to children's varying areas of development and learning. However, researchers from Ethiopia [12] and Sweden [54,64] have raised concerns regarding older children aged four to six in Ethiopia and six to eight in Sweden. There are reports of the schoolification phenomenon in these countries where the primary goal of ECEC has become to prepare for primary schooling. Consequently, teachers pay more attention to children's cognitive learning than providing integrated educare.

A lack of guiding strategies to support teachers in enacting a caring pedagogy is another issue in Ethiopia, Sweden and New Zealand. It will be valuable for future research to investigate the effectiveness of guidelines provided by the Ministry of General Education in Zambia and delve deeper into the pros and cons of universal guidelines. Te Whāriki promotes a local curriculum that expects teachers to develop a collaborative relationship with children, parents and communities to construct a programme that responds and caters to the heterogeneous needs of local communities [41,65]. This idea of a local curriculum may be comparable with the policy of local responsibility, by parents, families and communities,

for the care of children under three in Kenya. Sustainability research [66–68] shows that caring for children is a collective effort in many indigenous communities, such as the Māori in New Zealand and other countries in the minority world. Our data depict that this practice is similarly common in the majority world. This paper suggests that when ECEC develops further, it facilitates collaboration between families and ECEC settings, which allows the implementation of the notion of EDUCARE [4].

5.4. Relationships, Cultural Responsiveness, Social Sustainability and Transformative Change

This final discussion section focuses on answering Research Question 3 by examining the relationships between care and social sustainability and their potential for creating transformative change. When discussing the role of care in education, especially in ECEC, Noddings [46,48], Dahlberg and Moss [47] and Moss [45] use the notion of relational ethics of care to emphasise the importance of relationships and their accompanying attributes, such as attentiveness and responsiveness. Dahlberg and Moss state that "the care ethic, so applied, would foreground attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness to the Other" [47] (p. 92). Relationships encompass at least two parties, and relational care requires reflection and responsiveness to "the expressed needs of the cared-for" [46] (p. xv). Relationship and culturally responsive care practices are highlighted in ECEC policies in New Zealand, Ethiopia and Zambia. For example, the Ethiopian National Policy Framework [14] calls for culturally responsive services for all children. In addition, Zambia's Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education [33] explains that care is fostered through a safe relationship. Swedish research [56,69] and Te Whāriki [41] stress the importance of relationships in care and education and advocate for a two-way, relational dialogue between children and adults. The notion of children's self-care is emphasised in New Zealand, Kenyan and Swedish policies. Besides caring for oneself, a caring and ethical approach in ECEC also involves caring for others and caring for nature [70]. These elements are strongly linked and relevant to social sustainability.

Social sustainability concerns well-being, fairness, social justice, cultural capability, adaptability and social accountability. It has implications for educators when meeting the differing needs of children (and others) with diverse language and cultural backgrounds [34] and against all forms of discrimination and harassment. Key ideas of social sustainability are embedded and expressed in the ECEC policies of all five countries. However, research in Kenya [27] critiques a lack of empirical evidence to illustrate how social sustainability integrates into the curriculum and pedagogy. The national curricula of Ethiopia, New Zealand and Sweden aspire for children to care for the environment. This aspiration aligns with previous research [61,62] and SDG4.7, which highlight the role of education in a sustainable world. Including a consideration of environmental care broadens the scope of care ethics and illustrates the idea of mutual dependency, since all living things are intricately connected and self-interests bring harmful consequences to all [47]. Research [66–68] has also discussed the significance of attending to interrelationality in a sustainable world.

While policies in Zambia pay attention to poverty, malnutrition and diseases, they also promote equitable and inclusive pedagogies, which are similarly highlighted in Ethiopian, New Zealand and Swedish policies. These pedagogies, first, challenge taken-for-granted and dominant discourses, such as the concerns of schoolification and care-less ECE, as highlighted in the findings presented earlier. Instead, they embrace different perspectives and sustain diverse cultural knowledge and practices, potentially transforming ECEC practices. This paper suggests that ECEC stakeholders, including teachers and policymakers, practise a relational and caring pedagogy by working in partnerships with diverse families and communities, engaging in dialogue with them and including their perspectives and expectations, transforming policies and pedagogies to create socially just, equitable and sustainable societies. They are also part of the overall aim of the Global Partnership Strategy in Early Childhood [2] to realise SDG 4.2 Equal Access to Quality Pre-primary Education.

6. Conclusions

At the heart of social sustainability lies the need to create and maintain an equitable society that meets the needs of all citizens, including young children. Educational policies play a critical role in setting the tone and paving the way for practice. If we want to lay a solid foundation for a world where sustainability and sustainable development are lived realities, we must grant the care that young children deserve. Thus, ECEC policies across the five nations (particularly the majority world) ought to surpass the recognition of care and effectively integrate it into their everyday educational practices, mainstreaming the educare approach. Pertinent policies should play a critical role and serve as a driving force in promoting children's political and legal rights to care from a young age. Particularly, policies in the majority world should strengthen their efforts to address the health, wellbeing and protection of vulnerable citizens in preschool. This is also in line with the global journey that we all are onboard, that is the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 and Target 4.2, which emphasise access to quality childcare.

Across the five nations, there appears to be a pattern where ECEC policies recognise both care and education, albeit a variation in vocabulary, approach and underlying assumptions on whether care is integrated into education. While the notions of care and education have remained ingrained within policies in the minority world (Sweden and New Zealand), it appears that these inherently intertwined notions and entities have long been viewed as separate and mutually exclusive in the majority world (Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia). The ways in which a national policy deals with the notion of care may also be a question of which age group the ECEC policy is focusing on. By tradition in some countries, care is a primary concern for the youngest children—under three years—and is sometimes under a separate ministry. ECEC for older children in these countries is then often related to primary education. Simultaneously, while care is recognised, it is often marginalised in practice. Today, an integrated approach of age groups, policies, responsible ministries and curricula are recognised as important for sustainable ECEC.

We recognise that there are multiple policy-related perspectives that have not been captured in the present paper. We are mindful that the five countries' historic, political, social and cultural contexts differ, and no one ECEC approach is universally applicable. Nonetheless, we argue that the aspiration and significance of care must be globally recognised for a sustainable future, explicitly and implicitly, to varying extents by the policymakers of the five investigated countries.

We argue that dichotomous thinking about care as a family and local community affair and education/learning as a responsibility of the preschool in some nations has resulted in an excessive emphasis on cognitive development and the school readiness approach. Although quantitative goals for ECEC still dominate in the majority world, the importance of care and sustainable development are present in all policy documents across the five nations. While the enactment of these recent, promising policy initiatives requires its own investigation, we believe that strengthening these promising policy endeavours foregrounds and paves the way towards effective educare approaches, laying the foundation for social sustainability and the active citizenship of young children. It will be interesting in the future for researchers to empirically explore on a large scale how the notions of care and social sustainability are operationalised in ECEC settings by teachers and children, and to examine how the findings can be used to strengthen policies, especially in the majority world.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.W., A.C., I.E. and I.P.S.; Formal analysis, A.C., K.W., I.E. and I.P.S.; Methodology, K.W.; Writing—original draft, K.W., A.C., I.E., I.P.S.; Writing—review & editing, A.C., I.E., I.P.S., T.C.K., T.H. and R.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals. 2015. Available online: https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals (accessed on 1 October 2021).
2. UNESCO. Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood: 2021–2030. Available online: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380077 (accessed on 15 December 2021).
3. Pramling Samuelsson, I.; Kultti, A.; Pramling, N. Epilogue: Conceptualizing early childhood education and care for a global community: New directions in policy initiatives. In *Handbook of International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*; Roopnarine, J.L., Johnson, J.E., Quinn, S.F., Patte, M.M., Eds.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2018; pp. 423–429.
4. Engdahl, I. Toddlers as social actors in early education. *Psicol.-Conoc. Y Soc.* **2021**, *11*, 103–128.
5. United Nations. *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*; UN General Assembly: New York, NY, USA, 1989.
6. Bray, J.N.; Lee, J.; Smith, L.; Yorks, L. *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice: Action, Reflection and Making Meaning*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2000.
7. Butler, D.L.; Schnellert, L. Collaborative inquiry in teacher professional development. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2012**, *28*, 1206–1220. [CrossRef]
8. Clauset, K.H.; Murphy, C.U. Creating synergy: Cycle of enquiry shifts learning teams into high gear. *J. Staff Dev.* **2012**, *33*, 30–33.
9. Nelson, T.H.; Slavit, D. Collaborative inquiry among science and mathematics teachers in the USA: Professional learning experiences through cross-grade, cross-discipline dialogue. *J. Serv. Educ.* **2007**, *33*, 23–39. [CrossRef]
10. Carroll, T.G.; Fulton, K.; Doerr, H. *Team Up for 21st Century Teaching and Learning: What Research and Practice Reveal about Professional Learning*; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future: Washington, DC, USA, 2010.
11. Nelson, T.H.; Slavit, D.; Deuel, A. Two dimensions of an inquiry stance toward student-learning data. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **2012**, *114*, 1–42. [CrossRef]
12. Habte, T. Structural Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): A Cross-National Comparative Study on Ethiopian and Kenyan initial Teacher Education. Ph.D. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2020.
13. Belay, T.; Hawaz, H.Y. Childcare services in the emerging day care centers of Addis Ababa: Status, practices, and lessons. *Ethiop. J. Soc. Lang. Stud.* **2015**, *2*, 4–26.
14. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Health. *National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)*; Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Health: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2010.
15. Hayes, N. *Perspectives on the Relationship between Education and Care in Early Childhood: Background Paper*; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: Dublin, Ireland, 2007.
16. Weldemariam, K. Professionalism in early childhood education and care in Ethiopia: What are we talking about? *Child. Educ.* **2013**, *89*, 152–158. [CrossRef]
17. Lemma, G. Quality of Early Childhood Care and Education in Addis Ababa: Caregiver Child Interaction, Parental Perception and Social Competence of Children (Input-Process-Output Approach). Ph.D. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2014. Available online: https://etd.aau.edu.et (accessed on 5 February 2021).
18. Admas, F. Early childhood education in Ethiopia: Present practices and future directions. *Ethiop. J. Educ.* **2016**, *36*, 41–72.
19. Ministry of Education. *Curriculum Framework for Ethiopian Education (KG-Grade 12)*; A.M. Printing and Packaging P.L.C.: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2010.
20. Pramling Samuelsson, I.; Kaga, Y. (Eds.) *The Contribution of Early Childhood Education to a Sustainable Society*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2008.
21. Mbugua, T. From Montessori to culturally relevant schools under trees in Kenya. In *Common Characteristics and Unique Qualities in Preschool Programs: Educating the Young Child (Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice 5)*; Wortham, S.C., Ed.; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2013; pp. 23–35.
22. Valentino, T. Developing teacher collaboration along a global perspective: Using inquiry in a Kenyan preschool. In *Educational Change in International Early Childhood Contexts: Crossing Borders of Reflection*; Kroll, L.R., Meier, D.R., Eds.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2015; pp. 39–52.
23. Nganga, L.W. Early childhood education programs in Kenya: Challenges and solutions. *Early Years* **2009**, *29*, 227–236. [CrossRef]
24. Republic of Kenya. *National Pre-Primary Education Policy*; Ministry of Education, State Department of Basic Education: Nairobi, Kenya, 2017.
25. Arndt, S.; Tesar, M.; Pupala, B.; Kaščák, O.; Mbugua, T. Re-negotiating an ethics of care in Kenyan childhoods. *Hum. Aff.* **2016**, *26*, 288–303. [CrossRef]
26. USAID. Nurturing Care to Improve Early Childhood Development: Kenya Country Profile. 2020. Available online: https://www.advancingnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/landscape-brief_kenya.pdf (accessed on 12 October 2021).

27. Macharia, M.; Kimani, N. Early childhood education for sustainable development in Kenya. In *International Research on Education for Sustainable Development in Early Childhood*; Siraj-Blatchford, J., Mogharreban, C., Park, E., Eds.; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2016; pp. 59–76.
28. Ministry of Education Zambia. *National Policy on Education: Educating Our Future*; Ministry of Education: Lusaka, Zambia, 1996.
29. Government Republic of Zambia. *The Education Act, 2011*; Government Printers: Lusaka, Zambia, 2011.
30. Ministry of General Education Zambia. *Early Childhood Education National Policy*; MoGE: Lusaka, Zambia, 2015.
31. Matafwali, B. *Mapping of Early Childhood Services in Muchinga, Luapula, Northern and Western Provinces of Zambia: A Review of the Supply and Demand Side (Draft Report)*; Ministry of General Education, the World Bank: Lusaka, Zambia, 2018; (Unpublished).
32. Muchanga, R.N. Motivation and job satisfaction for early childhood teachers based on Herzberg's two-factor theory: The case of Kitwe district on the Copperbelt province, Zambia. *Zamb. J. Teach. Prof. Growth* **2013**, *1*, 66–83.
33. Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (Zambia). *Zambia Education Curriculum Framework 2013*; Curriculum Development Centre: Lusaka, Zambia, 1996.
34. Fantini, K. Social Sustainability in Early Childhood: Are You Happy? *2017.* Available online: https://earlyyearstraining.com.au/blog/social-sustainability-eary-childhood-happy/ (accessed on 15 September 2021).
35. Ministry of General Education and Ministry of Higher Education Zambia. *Education and Skills Sector Plan 2017–2021*; Ministry of General Education and Ministry of Higher Education: Lusaka, Zambia, 2018.
36. Ministry of General Education Zambia. *Early Childhood Education Policy: Implementation Plan 2017–2021*; MoGE: Lusaka, Zambia, 2016.
37. UNICEF. Zambia Budget Brief 2020–2021: Averting a Learning Crisis in the Face of a Pandemic. Available online: https://www.unicef.org/zambia/reports/2020-2021-zambia-budget-briefs (accessed on 15 November 2021).
38. Global Campaign for Education. Financing Matter–A Toolkit for Domestic Financing of Education. *Johannesburg.* Available online: https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/financing-matters-toolkit-domestic-financing-education (accessed on 14 September 2016).
39. King, M. *The Penguin History of New Zealand*; Penguin: Auckland, New Zealand, 2003.
40. Ministry of Education. He Taonga Tetamaiti. *Every Child a Taonga. Early Learning Action Plan 2019–2029.* Available online: https://conversation-space.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/SES_0342_ELS_10YP_Final+Report_Web.pdf (accessed on 30 August 2021).
41. Ministry of Education. Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum. Available online: https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf (accessed on 30 August 2021).
42. Education Review Office. Te Ara Poutama. Indicators of Quality for Early Childhood Education: What Matters Most. Available online: https://ero.govt.nz/how-ero-reviews/early-childhood-services/akarangi-quality-evaluation/te-ara-poutama-indicators-of-quality-for-early-childhood-education-what-matters (accessed on 15 November 2020).
43. Dalli, C. Re-visioning love and care in early childhood: Constructing the future of our profession. *N. Z. J. Infant Toddler Educ.* **2006**, *8*, 5–11.
44. Warren, A. 'Relationships for me are the key for everything': Early childhood teachers' subjectivities as relational professionals. *Contemp. Issues Early Child.* **2014**, *15*, 262–271. [CrossRef]
45. Moss, P. What place for 'care' in early childhood policy? In *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Policy*; Miller, L., Cameron, C., Dalli, C., Barbour, N., Eds.; SAGE Publications Ltd.: London, UK, 2017; pp. 256–267.
46. Noddings, N. *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education, 2nd ed*; Teachers College Press: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
47. Dahlberg, G.; Moss, P. *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*; Routledge Falmer: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
48. Noddings, N. The caring relation in teaching. *Oxf. Rev. Educ.* **2012**, *38*, 771–781. [CrossRef]
49. Pairman, A.; Dalli, C. Children creating spaces of care in diverse early childhood centre built environments: A complex interplay of social relations and materialities. In *Children, Young People and Care*; Horton, J., Pyer, M., Eds.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2017; pp. 124–143.
50. Engdahl, I. Implementing a national curriculum in the Swedish preschool. *Korean Int. J. Early Child. Educ.* **2004**, *10*, 53–78.
51. Klingvall, M.-I.; Pramling Samuelsson, I. *Den Moderna Svenska Förskolans Födelse och Utveckling i Politiken och Pedagogiken [The Birth of the Modern Swedish Preschool and the Development of Policy and Practice]*; Liber: Stockholm, Sweden, 2022.
52. SOU. *Barnstugeutredningen, Förskolan del 1*; Socialdepartementet: Stockholm, Sweden, 1972.
53. Engdahl, I.; Losso, M. The human rights of children and young people from the beginning: Early childhood care and education. In *Human Rights for Children and Youth*; Reis, M., Isidório, M.S., Eds.; Emeralds: Bingley, UK, 2019; pp. 11–34.
54. Ackesjö, H.; Lago, L.; Persson, S. Erkännandets Dynamik: Förskoleklasslärares Tolkning av ny Läroplanstext. *Educare* **2018**, *4*, 7–25. Available online: http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1418012&dswid=-9231 (accessed on 15 September 2021).
55. National Agency for Education. Curriculum for the preschool Lpfö 18. *National Agency for Education.* Available online: https://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=4049 (accessed on 1 September 2021).

56. Pramling, N.; Doverborg, E.; Pramling Samuelsson, I. Re-metaphorizing teaching and learning in early childhood education beyond the instruction: Social fostering divide. In *Nordic Social Pedagogical Approach to Early Years*; Ringsmose, C., Kragh-Müller, G., Eds.; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2017; pp. 205–218.
57. Engdahl, I.; Pramling Samuelsson, I.; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, E. Swedish teachers in the process of implementing education for sustainability in early childhood education. *New Ideas Child Educ. Policies* **2021**, *1*, 3–23.
58. Kaga, Y.; Bennett, J.; Moss, P. *Caring and Learning Together: A Cross-National Study of Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education within Education*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2010.
59. Gee, J.P. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, 3rd ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2011.
60. Einarsdottir, J.; Purola, A.-M.; Johansson, E.M.; Broström, S.; Emilson, A. Democracy, caring and competence: Values perspectives in ECEC curricula in the Nordic countries. *J. Early Years Educ.* **2015**, *23*, 97–114. [CrossRef]
61. Ritchie, J. Qualities for early childhood care and education in an age of increasing superdiversity and decreasing biodiversity. *Contemp. Issues Early Child.* **2016**, *17*, 78–91. [CrossRef]
62. Wals, A.E.J. Sustainability by default: Co-creating care and relationality through early childhood education. *Int. J. Early Child.* **2017**, *49*, 155–164. [CrossRef]
63. Brooker, L.; Blaise, M.; Edwards, S. *The SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2014.
64. Haglund, B.; Boström, L. Everyday practices in Swedish school-age educare centres: A reproduction of subordination and difficulty in fulfilling their mission. *Early Child Dev. Care* **2022**, *192*, 248–262. [CrossRef]
65. Chan, A. *Te Whāriki*: An early childhood curriculum in a superdiverse New Zealand. *N. Z. J. Educ. Stud.* **2019**, *54*, 245–259. [CrossRef]
66. Cajete, G.A.; Williams, D.R. Eco-aesthetics, metaphor, story and symbolism: An indigenous perspective. In *Research Handbook on Childhood Nature: Assemblages of Childhood and Nature Research*; Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A., Malone, K., Barratt Hacking, E., Eds.; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2020; pp. 1707–1733.
67. Duhn, I. Making 'place' for ecological sustainability in early childhood education. *Environ. Educ. Res.* **2012**, *18*, 19–29. [CrossRef]
68. Ritchie, J. Indigenous Onto-Epistemologies and Pedagogies of Care and Affect in Aotearoa. *Glob. Stud. Child.* **2013**, *3*, 395–406. [CrossRef]
69. Hjalmarsson, M.; Löfdahl, A. Omsorg i svenska fritidshem: Fritidspedagogers etiska förmåga och konsekvenser för barn [Care in Swedish school-age educare centres: Teachers' ethical competence and consequences for children]. *BARN* **2014**, *3*, 91–105.
70. Elliott, S.; Davis, J. (Eds.) *Research in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2014.