

Article

Fostering Cultural Sustainability in Early Childhood Education through a Neighbourhood Project

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Abstract: Culture is the life blood of a society, which influences people's worldviews, values, and behaviours. Research has confirmed that children's participation in culture helps develop thinking skills, builds self-esteem, and improves resilience. This paper aims to explore how a purposely designed project can foster cultural sustainability through a case study of a neighbourhood project conducted in Chinese and Norwegian kindergartens. A qualitative research methodology is utilised. Major data sources are an overall project plan prepared by one of the Norwegian university researchers, project descriptions and PowerPoint presentations from the kindergartens, as well as workshop notes taken by one researcher during the workshop, complemented and triangulated by the follow-up reflective narratives from three kindergartens. Qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis are used to analyse the collected data. Findings have indicated that kindergartens hold similar views on culture and cultural sustainability. Though the actual activities are diverse and implemented in different ways, the goal of fostering cultural sustainability is achieved in all participating kindergartens. Children not only have gained knowledge of their neighbourhood and problem solving and social skills but also have developed sense of belonging and emotional link with their local culture through the active participation. More importantly, this study has indicated that purposely designed projects/activities can promote early childhood education for sustainability and quality of early childhood education. It is thus recommended cultivating student teachers' and kindergarten teachers' competence to design projects/activities integrating different dimensions of sustainability in early childhood teacher education



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Keywords: cultural sustainability; neighbourhood project; ECE; Norway; China

“Culture is the fountain of our progress and creativity and must be carefully nurtured to grow and develop.”

World Commission on Culture and Development

1. Introduction

Culture is the lifeblood of a society, which influences people's worldviews, values, and behaviours. “The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values” [1] (p. 27). The global environmental and unsustainability crisis is also a crisis of culture [2]. Research has confirmed that children's participation in culture helps develop thinking skills, builds self-esteem, and improves resilience. As the world is becoming increasingly diverse, it is important that we understand and appreciate our own culture and at the same time other cultures. Besides, to achieve sustainability about making an appropriate use of the planet's resources, culture must be at the centre of development strategies [3], because cultures frame people's relationship to others in their society and the world around them, and condition their behaviours [4].

Early childhood education “(ECE) has all the possibilities in the world to lead children into interest, knowledge, and values that will give support for a more sustainable life and world, since children by nature are open-minded and curious towards the world around them including human and animals” [5] (p. 1) and “education for sustainability can be a driver for quality ECE” [6] (p. 347). Therefore, education for sustainability should be advocated and promoted in ECE [7]. Research indicates that most early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) and related activities focus on an environmental dimension with cultural/social, economic, and good governance dimensions being neglected [8]. The project that this paper reports aims to bridge and close this gap with its overarching aim to promote ECEfS through cross-cultural community of practice (CoP) with the major focus on cultural sustainability in Chinese and Norwegian ECE contexts. This paper aims to share experiences and practices of the efforts.

2. Background and Research Context

The project is a result of a China–Norway collaboration, which started with an early childhood teacher education exchange programme in 2004. Later, the research collaboration started. Then in 2015, kindergartens from both countries were included in the collaboration and the number of participating kindergartens is now five in China and two in Norway. Thus, a cross-cultural CoP involving teacher educators/researchers at universities, student teachers, kindergarten principals, and teachers was established, aiming at improving ECE through teacher education, research, and kindergarten network with education for sustainability as a major focus.

Sustainability has always been a key word in the collaboration in terms of the contents of collaboration and the cross-cultural collaboration itself. Kindergartens in both countries have been sharing their practices to inspire each other in annual meetings held in Norway and China alternatively. Realising the importance and the lack of focus on cultural sustainability in ECE, in 2019, the cross-cultural CoP decided to work on a project titled *Our Neighbourhood* to promote cultural sustainability in both countries through promoting kindergarten children’s knowledge of and sense of pride in their local cultures. The major rationale for the project is that (1) culture takes diverse forms across time; (2) cultural diversity is a source of exchange, innovation, and creativity and is necessary for humankind and, thus, should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations [9]; and (3) all individuals are vehicles of culture, as well as participants in its development [10] (p.218). The researchers of this cross-cultural CoP suggested some topics under three broad categories that kindergarten teachers could use for their project. The three categories are: (1) the local natural environment; (2) local heritages, histories, and historical building; (3) local traditions and customs. The kindergartens had the autonomy to decide what they wanted to work on as long as the focus was on local culture(s). All the seven kindergartens participated in this project. Six months after the initiation of the project, a workshop was planned to share project plan and progress.

Initially, workshops were planned to be held for the participating teachers and children to present their projects/activities in Beijing in April 2020. Due to COVID-19, a digital workshop was held instead in the schedule month. Kindergarten principals and one to three kindergarten teachers who have led the project participated in the workshop. One presenter from each kindergarten shared their projects followed with questions and discussion on the presented projects. During the workshop presentations, presenters and participants were asked to reflect on and share answers to questions, such as (1) what is cultural sustainability and how is it achieved through the project; (2) what do kindergartens have in common when talking about cultural sustainability; (3) what differs in the way it is understood and ways of achieving it through the projects/activities. After the workshop, each kindergarten was asked to write reflective narratives about the project with some guiding questions such as (1) What does neighborhood mean to you in the context of kindergarten?; (2) What does cultural sustainability mean to you?; (3) In what way did your kindergarten neighborhood project presented in April relate to cultural sustainability?;

(4) What challenges have your kindergarten met in the process?; (5) What suggestions would you like to give for the next stage of this neighborhood project? The prompts were provided by the participating researchers in Norway. Utilising the materials mentioned, the present paper aims to explore how a purposely designed project can foster cultural sustainability through a case study of a neighbourhood project conducted in Chinese and Norwegian ECE contexts. To achieve the aim, the following research question is asked: How can a purposely designed project foster cultural sustainability in the researched ECE context?

3. Theoretical Perspectives

3.1. Culture and Cultural Sustainability

Culture is both an everyday and an academic concept, which makes it complicated to define. Culture has been defined differently [11]. In this paper, culture is seen as a composition of “the values, beliefs, languages, knowledge, art and wisdom, with which a person or people, individually or collectively, expresses both their humanity and the meaning they give to their life and its course” and a process that allows people “to understand, interpret, and transform reality” [12]. There is both a material culture “representative of the physical creations made, used, or shared by the members of a certain society” [13] (p. 141) and immaterial culture “the abstract or unseen human creations by the society fashioned towards the behavioural influence of the said society” [13] (p. 141) including “symbols, languages, values, and norms” [13] (p. 141). Furthermore, “culture is neither static nor unchanging but rather is in a constant state of flux, influencing and being influenced by other world views and expressive forms” [14]. The classifications of culture and its changing nature have laid a foundation for scholars (e.g., Axelsson et al., WCCD) to set criteria of culture sustainability.

Cultural aspects of sustainability have mainly been discussed as a part of the social sustainability or combined with social sustainability (socio-cultural sustainability) [15]. Cultural sustainability was first mentioned by the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) in the report titled Report of the World Commission on Cultural and Development in 1995 when the importance of future generations gaining access to cultural resources was stressed. It is mentioned in the report that it is wrong to treat culture merely as an instrument for sustaining something or treat it as static, instead culture should be respected and valued for its own sake [16]. The same report also points out that “cultural valuations and cultural activities can be looked at in terms of cultural sustainability” [16] (p. 207).

Dessein et al. [15] and Soini and Dessein [11] not only see culture as a dimension of sustainability but also illustrate its relationship with sustainability through three roles culture has in sustainability, which they call three representations. The first representation, called culture in sustainability, sees culture as an independent dimension of sustainability, thus, cultural sustainability. This representation points to the importance of conservation, maintenance, and preservation of cultural capital in different forms such as arts, heritage, knowledge, and cultural diversity for the next generations. The second representation, culture for sustainability, stresses culture’s role in achieving other dimensions of sustainability. The third representation, culture as sustainability, emphasises culture as an indispensable foundation for meeting the overall aims of sustainability and sustainability becomes embedded in culture [15].

In this article, we use the first and the third representations as the theoretical departure and an analytical framework. In addition, we also use three criteria of cultural sustainability categorised by Axelsson’s, et al. [11]. They are listed as follows: (1) Material Early: cultural heritage in terms of human built objects, landscapes, and combined man and nature systems; (2) Immaterial New: cultural heritage such as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with practices, including tradition, identity, values, cultural diversity, spirituality, and aesthetics; (3) Emerging: tools and skills needed to understand and transform the world towards

sustainability, including but not limited to literacy, creativity, critical knowledge, sense of place, empathy, trust, risk, respect, and recognition. Axelsson et al. use the term cultural heritage, but we use the term culture in presenting the findings.

3.2. A culture as Sustainability: Cross-Cultural CoP

The longstanding collaboration is called cross-cultural CoP because it is composed of a group of people who share a common concern and interest and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals with focus on sharing best practice in ECE with ECEfS as a major theme and creating new knowledge to advance professional practice [17,18]. Besides, this CoP has been connecting participants and providing them with a platform for regular dialogues, which has stimulated learning and better practices. All these have indicated that the cross-cultural CoP serves as foundation to realise ECEfS. Additionally, the establishment and sustainability of this cross-cultural CoP in many ways follows the lifecycle phases of CoP illustrated by Cambridge, Kaplan, and Suter [19]. In the initial stage, the cross-cultural CoP was established, its goals set (mainly collaboration at higher education level to improve the education of ECE teachers and, thus, the practices in the field), and roles and activities of the participants defined (“inquire” and “design”). The collaboration was, thus, developed, piloted, and launched (“prototype” and “launch”). After several years’ successful collaboration, the CoP then included kindergarten partners and extended the collaboration from education to practice. The “grow” phase, which has lasted to date, thus, enters the “sustain” phase.

Table 1 below illustrates the theoretical departure and analytical framework of this article.

Table 1. Theoretical departure and analytical framework (adapted from Axelsson’s, et al., [10] (p. 218)).

Representation	Categories
Cultural sustainability	Material culture: in terms of human built objects, landscapes, and combined man and nature systems.
	Immaterial culture: such as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with practices, including tradition, identity, values, cultural diversity, spirituality, and aesthetics.
	Emerging culture: in terms of tools and skills needed to understand and transform the world towards sustainability, including but not limited to literacy, creativity, critical knowledge, sense of place, empathy, trust, risk, respect, and recognition.
Culture as sustainability	Cross-cultural CoP

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Sites and Participants

Data have been collected from five kindergartens from China and two kindergartens from Norway. The major reason for choosing them is that they are members of the cross-cultural CoP and have carried out a Neighbourhood Project. For confidentiality, the country initial plus a number is used to identify them and distinguish them from one another in presenting the findings. Table 2 illustrates the codes of the participating kindergartens.

Table 2. Codes of participating kindergartens.

Country	Code				
China	CN1	CN2	CN3	CN4	CN5
Norway	NO1	NO2			

4.2. Data Collection

Major data sources are an overall project plan prepared by one of the Norwegian university researchers, project descriptions and PowerPoint presentations from the kindergartens, as well as workshop notes taken by one researcher during the workshop and checked by another three among all the participating researchers. All the kindergartens sent their project descriptions and PowerPoint presentations through emails beforehand. Each kindergarten was given 30 minutes to present and discuss their project with participants. All the above data were collected in 2020.

Based on the preliminary findings generated from project descriptions, PowerPoint presentations, and workshop notes, kindergartens were asked to write reflective narratives. In January 2021, reflective narratives were collected via emails from the participating kindergartens to supplement and triangulate evidence from the above-mentioned sources. All were conducted in English. This online approach was a necessity given the difficulty in travelling around at this critical period of COVID-19.

4.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is conducted because it “allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” through exploring “the meaning underlying physical messages” [20]. Comparative analysis is utilised to find out “invariant and variant relationships between studied phenomena in different countries” [21] (p. 68). An example of the comparative analysis is the similarities and differences among kindergartens in terms of how they understood neighbourhood and designed and implemented the activities accordingly. Comparative analysis has been used in the whole analysis process.

Data have been analysed inductively in the following stages. All data were first saved in one spreadsheet in Excel with the same parts of project information being saved in parallel cells. This process allowed an overview of all collected data and at the same time coding them individually. After that, the initial codes were refined and reorganised into themes with reference to theoretical and analytical framework.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

The ethical issues have been considered at all stages of the project and the writing of this article. Ethics focuses on both the role of the researchers and the people being studied. Research ethical guidelines elaborated by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) (Details can be found: <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-humanities-law-and-theology/>, accessed on 15 April 2021) of Norway have been rigorously followed in the data collection process and finding presentation. All participants have been well informed with the use of their submitted materials as research data and aims of the research at the initial stage of the project as well as in the April workshop. They have also been informed that the participation is voluntary, and they can withdraw their consent anytime without giving a reason or having any negative consequences. Oral consent has been given by all the participating kindergartens.

5. Findings

Findings are presented under the following five themes namely (1) understanding of culture and cultural sustainability; (2) projects/activities to foster cultural sustainability; (3) outcomes of the projects/activities; (4) challenges and opportunities; (5) culture as sustainability—cross-cultural CoP, supported with quotes from different data materials collected for this article. When quoting what participating kindergartens have written and presented, we use the codes we have assigned to them. When we quote what participants have discussed in the workshop, we cannot give a code to them because they are not identifiable in the meeting notes. The quotes are quoted exactly as they have been written/articulated without any changes by the authors.

5.1. Understanding of Culture and Cultural Sustainability

Seen from the perspectives they have taken into consideration in the design of projects/activities, it is evident that kindergartens share a similar understanding of culture and they see culture as something material, immaterial, and emerging. Table 3 illustrates how different categories of cultures are operationalised in the project activities.

Table 3. Overview of categories of culture and elements in practice.

Categories of Culture	Elements in Practice	Kindergartens
Material	Historical buildings such as old farmhouses, museums, libraries	NO1, NO2, CN1, CN3, CN5
Immaterial	Knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artefacts and tradition, and aesthetics (art pieces)	NO1, NO2, CN1, CN2, CN3, CN5
Emerging	Knowledge and skills to fight against COVID-19	NO1, NO2, CN3, CN4

Kindergartens listed in Table 3 that explore material culture have taken children to historical buildings, such as the nearby farmhouse that people in the past lived in, museums that tell the history and development of ethnic groups, or the university that the kindergarten is affiliated to. In terms of immaterial culture, children have learned about how people in the past cooked and preserved food, played, used different tools and instruments for different purposes, how people in the past celebrated holidays and created art pieces and music. Besides material and immaterial cultures, emerging culture appears in the form of helping children gain knowledge and skills to fight against COVID-19. Because of the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, kindergartens have also made changes accordingly. One Chinese kindergarten have changed their plan to build online platforms to help parents/carers and children gain and share knowledge and skills to prevent spreading the virus while the two Norwegian kindergartens have been taking measures with children to prevent it from spreading since they were reopened in April 2020 after five weeks' lockdown.

In addition, they have articulated what cultural sustainability means to them. Some think it is about preservation of historical cultural capital such as historical buildings, as one of the participants of the workshop said, "there is discussion about preserving historical buildings in both China and Norway and this is part of cultural sustainability and this is sustainability of our history . . . we have to know our own history and be proud, and then we can understand others better" (CN5). Others see it as basis for a decent life saying, "Social and cultural sustainability is about ensuring that all people have a good and fair basis for a decent life" (NO2).

5.2. Activities to Foster Cultural Sustainability

5.2.1. Different Understanding of Neighbourhood

As the title of the project indicates, the project takes its point of departure from getting to know the culture of the neighbourhood. At the same time, it is left to the participating kindergartens to define what neighbourhood means to them, which results in different definitions.

According to dictionary definitions (e.g., Cambridge or Merriam-Webster), a neighbourhood can be a geographical area that surrounds people's homes and can be relational in terms of the people living near each other or giving a sense of closeness. Three of the kindergartens (two from Norway and one from China) define neighbourhood from a geographical point of view and the activities they have designed, thus, are related to the nearby surroundings. One kindergarten from China look at the bigger surrounding of their kindergarten, that is, the district where the kindergarten is located. Three Chinese kindergartens define neighbourhood from a relational perspective so one conducts a project

on getting to know the different ethnic groups of China and the other is doing a project involving children's families. The third involves parents and carers (mostly grandparents) and establishes an online community to train them to educate their children. One of the kindergartens also justifies why they focus on the relational perspective of neighbourhood/community, saying, "less attention is paid to the interaction between people. The understanding of community is mainly based on the architecture and characteristics of the city, reflecting the concept of living as a home" (CN 4).

5.2.2. The Different Activities

Though the participating kindergartens hold similar views in terms of culture and cultural sustainability, they have different understandings of the concept of neighbourhood and have initiated different activities to practise and promote cultural sustainability. Table 4 below is an overview of the topics and major activities of the participating kindergartens.

Table 4. Projects of the participating kindergartens.

Understanding of Neighbourhood	Themes	Major Activities
Spatial dimension of neighbourhood	The development of our neighbourhood.	Visiting the neighbouring schools, shops, library, gym. Exploring life in the past through the life of a boy living in the nearby farmhouse.
	Neighbourhood project	A music project and visiting the neighbouring farm and hiking in a different local natural environment.
	Little feet walking around the district.	Visiting eight different characteristic towns in the district, especially the specialty each town is famous for.
	Bathed in the sun on the campus.	Visiting the university's library and museum; inviting professionals to share their knowledge such as doing physical and chemistry experiments, fire drills, using songs to lead a life during COVID-19.
Relational dimension of neighbourhood	Cultural traditions	Playing a traditional folk game with toddlers; inviting grandparents to introduce calligraphy and allow children to play with inks. Celebrating traditional Chinese holidays; building an online community to teach parents to educate their children.
	Multi-ethnic China.	Visiting the China Ethnic Museum; taking notes on the ethnic groups they chose to learn about; sharing their knowledge with peers after the visit.
	Big vision through children's eyes, co-growth with homes fighting COVID-19.	Establishing an online community for sharing, such as an art exhibition, storytelling, I have a chat with my friend, I want to go to primary school.

From the overview of the activities, it is clear that kindergartens have different themes and activities for children to get to know local cultures and practice and foster cultural sustainability. Some trace back to the past while others work on the contemporary emerging challenge that is COVID-19. Some undertake the activities at kindergarten level while others involve parents and the community.

The project descriptions and workshop presentations have indicated that the ways the projects have been carried out are diverse. What is common within culture is that both Norwegian kindergartens have used stories as starting point and they have also made good use of the rich natural resources around them, while activities in Chinese kindergartens undergo three stages: preparation, implementation, and reflection/showcase. Learning outcomes are emphasised. Besides, the projects are of different timeframes. Some are long-term (three years) projects or still going on at the time of the workshop presentation with some being short-term (a few weeks) projects.

5.3. Outcomes of the Project

5.3.1. Documentation of the Process and Display of the Products

The kindergartens use different forms to document the process and display the outcomes and products of the project. Different art forms have been used for documentation. Exhibiting children's drawings is a common approach. "When we came back, we made exhibition and the parents can see what we have done for the day. Since we don't have a picture of C (the boy who was the son of the owner of the house) (There was a name in the original one, we deleted it for confidentiality.) so the children drew their own picture of him. They also had drawn the house" (NO2). Because of COVID-19, children could not meet physically until June 2020 in China (The Chinese participating kindergartens started winter holiday in January 2020 and were not open for children until June 2020), the kindergartens encouraged parents to help children to keep records (photos and/or videos) of the process. "A boy in our kindergarten made a picture book with his father talking about ways to fight against COVID, and what people have been doing in the neighbourhood. Besides, he role played with his mum about what to do and not to do" (CN4).

When it comes to displaying the final products as a result of the project, some have used artistic performances such as a musical and drawings, while others have asked children to demonstrate to other children/teachers/parents what they had learnt in the project through oral presentation and/or an exhibition. The common way of displaying the final products are exhibitions of children's work, such as handcrafts and drawings. "The activities back in the kindergarten as all shown in the kindergarten hall. Children make architect or costumes of ethnic groups they visited. They also presented to other children the minority groups they have seen and what they knew about them with the help of pictures they took during the visit of the museum" (CN 1). One of the kindergartens (NO1) adapted the local mythology for a musical. All the children who performed in the musical remembered their lines and performed successfully, which was videotaped and shared with parents and a wider audience. CN5 held a fair for the children, teachers as well as parents and carers, where there were different stands for children to sell the traditional snacks which they learned to make in the project. There were also stands where children could pay to play traditional games they learned to play in the project. Children earned money at their own stand and spent it on snacks and/or games of other stands.

5.3.2. Gains for the Children from Participating the Project

Project description, workshop presentation, and reflective narrative data have indicated children have gained not only knowledge about their neighbourhood/community but also different skills.

First of all, all participants have gained better and in-depth knowledge of their local cultures and have developed a sense of identity, belonging, and pride, as reflected by two participating kindergartens, "we use music and different artefacts to learn about the neighbourhood. Children and teachers learned a lot" (NO1) and "Children, teachers, and parents know their hometown and local culture more and established a deeper emotional link" (CN5). Besides, they share similar views of the importance of knowing local culture as uttered by one participating kindergarten, "have knowledge of the neighbourhood creates understanding, commitments and love for surroundings" (NO2).

Some kindergarten teachers have also mentioned that children have become engaged, independent, and autonomous learners. "Children discuss and design their routes go visit different ethnic exhibition halls for information. Children will prepare information to introduce to their peers the information of the ethnic groups. They form their own groups. They design their own group flags" (CN1). "The project has given us more knowledge about the kindergarten's immediate environment and the children have been very motivated and interested" (NO1).

Additionally, it has been pointed out by some teachers that children have gained problem-solving and social skills in the process of doing the activities, as shared by the following two kindergartens: "children had problems and they solved problems together.

They had arguments but they made up after communications and dialogues.” (CN1) “social emotional development, what COVID 19 is and their cognitive development, and social emotional development, express their emotions online Chat with friends online, play with friends online as well as learn to manage time and self-control” (CN4).

5.3.3. Gains for the Teachers and the Kindergartens from Participating in the Project

Participating kindergartens have pointed out that doing this project has promoted teachers’ critical reflection in terms of how to plan and implement activities in the future. “Teachers can also listen and observe children more in order to stimulate the desire to explore and trigger deep learning. We need time to get to know children. Phase 1 has been too fast. We need to improve that” (CN5).

Collaborating with parents is an important part of kindergarten teachers’ job in both countries. In Norway, parents’ and carers’ involvement in the project is more as audience while in China parents and carers have been involved in doing the activities together with children or teaching some traditional folk games or folklores. “Some folk games are in the curriculum, at the same time we invited parents and grandparents to share the folk games they played when they were young. For example, a grandma shared an old folk game, and teachers gained from different learning opportunities” (CN 2). Furthermore, in those kindergartens that have involved parents in China, teachers have reflected on collaboration with parents and have come up with strategies. “We found that parents have some special need and they feel nervous especially for those whose children are going to school. We have held some talk about going to school and share information. We set up groups for parents to talk about their special needs and we have one issue a month to discuss. We do a lot, but we need to know parents’ need first” (CN5).

Furthermore, all involved parties have benefited differently through the interactive activities and a most important one is parents/carers getting to know children and ways to communicate with them. The following two quotes are illustrative. “We made exhibition and the parents can see what we have done for the day” (NO1). “We teach parents through face-to-face interaction and videos demonstration” (CN4).

5.4. Challenges and Opportunities

While sharing good experiences about the project, all kindergartens have mentioned challenges COVID-19 has brought to them. At the same time, they have mentioned how they quickly took actions to make changes. For those who started the project before the outbreak, they had to make some changes. As one shared, “Unfortunately the COVID-19 situation brings the kindergarten challenges that we one year ago would not have imagined. Nevertheless, we see that it has given us some unexpected opportunities . . . Children have been hiking to well-known areas around the kindergarten, but they have also been exploring new areas. We are very lucky to have a location near nature” (NO1). When the pandemic started, a kindergarten initiated a project to help children take active actions to fight the pandemic. They shared, “In 2020, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the rhythm of people’s life. The extra long vacation forced the children to stay at home and fight against the pandemic passively. They could neither go out for activities nor meeting their friends, . . . This situation makes us teachers think a question-how to let children’s home fight against COVID-19 actively instead of passively. So, we started our project” (CN4).

In both Norway and China, there was a lockdown period for kindergartens, so it was impossible to have physical meetings, which has brought challenges to children and teachers. All kindergartens have used online communication to keep in touch with children and family. Another challenge worth mentioning is that a kindergarten has mentioned in the reflective narratives that it has taken some time for them to learn about cultural sustainability and how to initiate related projects.

5.5. Culture as Sustainability—Cross-Cultural CoP

As introduced above, this cross-cultural CoP has been working together for over 15 years and the inclusion of kindergartens over five years. All have indicated that sustainability is embedded in the CoP in terms of the projects they have carried out and the CoP per se.

All participants have expressed that this is a good platform for their professional and personal development through exchanges of knowledge, ideas, experiences, and practices. In doing this project on cultural sustainability focusing on local culture with autonomy to decide what to do in practice and then share the experiences, they especially point out that they have learnt each other's cultures better and been inspired for better practices. Some of them said, "It's inspiring that you connect with the practice with sustainable development," and "I see children's deep learning. That inspired us." After the workshop, one of the kindergarten principals said that all presentations were inspiring and wanted to have a copy of them. The participating researchers shared the presentations with all participants after getting consent from all kindergartens to share.

Besides being inspired, participants in the project have been encouraging and supporting each other. Kindergartens in China are required to provide a good physical environment for children, which in practice means that teachers have to change the settings and decorations on the wall quite frequently, and even every day for some, and there are other administrative duties to beautify the environment as well. One participating kindergarten expressed that they adapted the rules and regulations after one of the kindergarten leaders visited Norwegian kindergartens and gained inspiration. They believe it is important that teachers spend more time with children instead of making changes to the physical environment frequently, which have been supported by most participants, and one said, "I want to support the idea of being outspoken as professionals. The officials have different perspectives. We know what is better for the children." This has indicated that kindergarten teachers have gained professional confidence in trusting their professional judgement for their pedagogical practices, which is of great importance for the kindergarten teaching profession.

6. Discussion and Implication

6.1. Kindergartens Are the Place for (Cultural) Sustainability Education

In line with what Davis and Elliott [7] have proposed, that education for sustainability should be advocated and promoted in ECE, the findings of this article have confirmed that kindergartens can and should be the place for sustainability education. Findings have indicated that the general aims set out by the project have been achieved. Though different activities have been planned and implemented, the knowledge of the place they live, social and communication skills as well as the sense of love for and the emotional link with their neighbourhood that children have gained, are similar in both cultures. The difference is that Chinese kindergartens stress social and problem-solving skills more than Norwegian kindergartens. One possible explanation is that Chinese tend to be more pragmatic and believe that children/students should gain knowledge and skills through education [22]. Another explanation is that the projects Norwegian kindergartens implemented have embedded nature in the activities while the projects Chinese kindergartens carried out are more of socio-cultural dimension. Because of the safety policy in China, kindergarten children are seldom taken into nature for activities, while in Norway outdoor in nature is part of kindergarten education [23]. Further study is needed to explore how this difference can impact children and ECEfs.

The findings also confirmed that "education for sustainability can be a driver for quality ECE" [6] (p. 347). As illustrated in the findings, this project has enhanced professional development of the participating kindergarten staff not only in terms of how to implement projects on sustainability but also being professionals who can make professional judgements on their professional practices. Additionally, with their involvement, parents

have gained ways to fight the pandemic, to educate their children and to collaborate with kindergartens. All are important indicators for the improvement of the quality of ECE.

6.2. Cross-Cultural CoP Makes a Difference to ECEfS

Findings have indicated that this cross-cultural CoP consisted of university teacher educators/researchers, and kindergarten staff makes a difference for ECEfS in that it provides a platform for professional development and learning. This corroborates other researchers' findings, e.g., CoP results in participants' professional development and lifelong learning [24], scholarly teaching and scholarship of teaching and learning [25]. For kindergarten participants, they gain intercultural knowledge and are inspired and supported in what they are doing. The university teacher educators/researchers provide a framework for the kindergartens to carry out projects and support if needed. A cross-cultural platform for dialogues has also been established to allow people to get to know, learn, and gain inspiration from each other. Collective reflections have been conducted in the whole process. In-service and communicative support, along with reflection within the team of teachers, has important impacts on educational practices with young children [26]. For participating researchers/teacher educators, they not only gain deeper knowledge about cultural sustainability to support kindergartens' projects but also gain opportunities to connect theories and practices and at the same time do research. Researchers have decided to write and publish articles in academic journals on this project from different perspectives. This article is one of them. The ECE teacher education programs of the two participating universities can benefit from this close collaboration among teacher education, research and the field.

Besides, a new cycle of the neighbourhood project on cultural sustainability initiated by the university teacher educators/researchers started in early 2021 with a focus on closer research collaboration among kindergartens and university teacher educators/researchers.

6.3. Teachers Need Education & Training to Promote ECEfS

Borg et al. point out that, "there is a significant and positive relationship between young children's learning about sustainability and the involvement of teachers and guardians in sustainability-related discussions and activities" [27] (p. 169). Findings of this article support this statement. This research has also found that kindergarten teachers need education and training so that they can purposely and systematically carry out activities on sustainability. The five-year collaboration with the participating kindergartens has indicated that there is no systematic and purposeful design and implementation of projects/activities that practise and promote sustainability in dimensions other than an environmental one, which is in line with the finding of Kultti et al. [8] and is a reason for the initiation of the project this article reports. If teachers have received education on ECEfS, the possibilities to plan and implement related projects/activities may be increased.

7. Final Remark

Bascopé et al. [28] (p. 13) suggest that "action to promote sustainability in ECE is needed and that acting to adequately share ideas and examples is an important issue". We agree with their suggestions. This is also one reason for us to share our practices and experiences. Our example is not a perfect one but, in many ways, it is a successful one and can be of some inspiration for ECEfS, especially how cross-cultural CoP of multi-partners can work together to practise and promote ECEfS, which should be encouraged and promoted. The projects conducted to foster cultural sustainability in this study corroborate Axelsson et al.'s classification, namely material, immaterial, and emerging dimensions of cultural sustainability with quite a number of kindergartens incorporating emerging dimensions as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19. More importantly, the different projects have achieved the set goals with all participants gaining knowledge of their neighbourhood and, thus, the sense of identity, belonging, and pride. Furthermore, engagement in cultural activities help children gain sense of belonging, self-esteem, problem-solving and social

skills while teachers gained professional development and parents some parenting skills. Moreover, while preserving the traditions, histories, and historical buildings, participants of the projects are influencing the existing cultures and creating new cultures.

In the future, when designing projects to practise and promote sustainability, we suggest considering how kindergartens and neighbourhoods become each other's resource for education and practices of sustainability. It is also important to consider how to integrate all dimensions of sustainability in one project.

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Informed Consent Statement: Oral consent was obtained from all participating kindergartens in the research project.

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