

# Guest editorial: Social justice, equity and agency: global challenges linking health, well-being and sustainability education

Global environmental changes in conjunction with substantial social justice issues are impacting the health and well-being of us all, raising significant concerns related to how education can address these sustainability challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted our close links with natural environments and a long-standing need to consider the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children and young people. UNESCO's (2021) report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* stresses the need for education to prepare students for addressing problems of environmental degradation and/or destruction, emerging related diseases and resulting health and well-being inequities in the present as well as in the future. Previous research findings within the interrelated areas of health, well-being and sustainability education indicate cultural and contextual differences in how inequalities and social justice issues are understood. However, a cross-cutting discussion about social justice and equity in relation to how health, well-being and sustainability challenges are addressed in education has been relatively absent, especially one that takes into account the agency of children and young people.

Over the last decades, a key issue for policy has been the need for deeper understanding of how global realities and contextual and cultural conditions impact the prospects of educational research and experiences of educational practice. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) underlines that in a children's rights-based approach, the process of realizing children's rights is as important as the result. They furthermore note that "as rights holders, children are entitled to protection from infringements of their rights stemming from environmental harm and to be recognized and fully respected as environmental actors" (Paragraph A.7). This statement is in agreement with the UNESCO 2023 report, underscoring the need for strengthened educational efforts so that children and young people can cultivate the skills and knowledge required to enact their agency in making informed decisions and taking action accordingly.

As pointed out in *The Sustainable Development Goals Report* (UN, 2022), following up on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) in relation to Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, the crises following the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing global environmental and climate change have deepened the global learning crisis. The pandemic has highlighted the world's interconnectedness and how public health threats are no longer the concerns of single nation-states, regions or discrete sectors but global challenges (Malqvist and Powell, 2022). The SDG report also underlines how education is a lifeline for children in crises, with research on global challenges in how health education responds to the pandemic underlining the critical role of education in strengthening children and young people's agency, including the need for equitable education (Darlington *et al.*, 2022). Perspectives on global inequalities and social justice issues related to health, well-being and sustainability are understood in different ways in different cultural contexts, which stresses the relevance of education research exploring and recognizing social and cultural diversity in



relation to what counts as knowledge in education, core values and educational practices (Carlsson and Torres, 2022). Nordic countries typically highlight values such as democracy and critical citizenship when addressing health, well-being and sustainability challenges in education, whereas other countries, such as Japan, might tend to have more natural science, biomedical or health science-grounded understandings (Dean and Elliot, 2022). In both cases, there has been a relatively absence of broader discussions about social justice and equity in relation to how these challenges are addressed in education and about the interconnectedness of health, well-being and sustainability. In low- and middle-income countries in regions such as Central and/or South America, the Caribbean and Southern Africa, social justice issues have a broader societal resonance as conceptualized in debates about health and well-being in relation to environmental or climate justice (Lotz-Sisitka, 2009; Mickelsson, 2020; Torres and Faucher, 2022). Although global environmental changes in conjunction with substantial social justice issues as related to health and well-being impact us all, not all of us is “in this together.” When addressing global and local concerns, differences in power and resources drive inequality and marginalization, with some being more afflicted by health, well-being and sustainability issues because of race, ethnicity, gender, economy and geographic locality (Andreotti *et al.*, 2018).

### Overview of the papers

Against this background, this special issue aims to highlight how social justice and equity perspectives can qualify and deepen our understanding of how health, well-being and sustainability challenges are addressed in education in different cultural contexts in a way that supports the agency of children and youth. Furthermore, the aim is to create greater awareness of the potential in linking health, well-being and sustainability in educational research and practice.

In the first paper, Carlsson presents a literature review of educational research exploring perspectives on social justice, equity and agency when schools address health, well-being and sustainability challenges. The analysis is narrative, highlighting how binary conceptions of equity, social justice and agency are explicitly or implicitly evident in the studies included in the review, distinguishing between as well as noting the interplay between the different conceptions. The first part of the analysis discusses perspectives on social justice and equity, emphasizing the need to address (1) a more equal sharing of resources in education, (2) dominance in education and (3) community(ies) and education as a common good. The second part of the analysis discusses perspectives on agency, framed as situated (1) between people, (2) between people and structures or social contexts and (3) between people and nature or the more-than-human. The paper helps shed light on various perspectives of social justice, equity and agency in education, with findings highlighting the possibility of addressing these perspectives in different forms of educational experiences and practices. Moreover, it elucidates the application and potential of understandings and approaches to education that may aid in addressing current and future sustainability and well-being challenges in schools.

In the next paper, Torres *et al.* compare approaches to school closures in four Latin American countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) and evaluate the implications of interrupting children’s formal education through the pandemic. Their study is based on an analysis of documents and literature referring to school closures during COVID-19 and their impact on children’s health and well-being. The thematic analyses draw on open, axial and selective coding and an application of the latest Health-Promoting School’s standards and indicators to the findings. The results show that the most significant impacts on well-being identified in the four countries were related to food security and mental health. The results furthermore highlight that countries followed epidemiological reasons for prioritizing school closures while adopting some policies that abide by Health-Promoting School’s principles.

The authors point out that, while the countries emphasized the need to reopen schools so that instruction could continue, school closures in this region were among the longest in the world. The study highlights the importance of cross-country qualitative analysis on the topic. Moreover, the comparison of school closures across different countries highlights the importance of context-specific interventions.

Alonso-Martínez and Vigo-Arrazola also pursue a comparative methodological approach in their analysis of educational laws on sex education in Spain and the United Kingdom. The authors underline the role of sex education in promoting inclusivity and sexual health, stressing why it is essential to understand the impact of the legislation on sex education, in order to evaluate education at the different training levels. The paper presents a critical review aimed at comparing educational and state legislation and its impact on sex education in Spain and the United Kingdom. The authors find that in both countries the biological aspect of sexuality education is included as compulsory in school education and that schools are also beginning to incorporate content on sexual diversity. The paper also reveals differences in the regulatory frameworks and educational practices. In Spain, sex education remains transversal and compulsory, supported by legislation that ensures social equality and non-discrimination based on gender identity and sexual characteristics. The UK enforces compulsory sex education but faces challenges related to how it is taught and its societal implications. The authors point out that the results emphasize the need for improved teaching strategies and standardized curricula, guided by legislation to overcome ideological and societal obstacles.

Finally, the paper by Oljans *et al.* focuses on how values and knowledge are expressed in students' discussions about food and health. The findings highlight how food practices are a complex phenomenon, extending beyond biomedical descriptions to include social dynamics of food in families and communities. Contextual conditions of social groups and settings thus have a significant impact on students' food choices and practices. Although values are central to educational goals, deliberate values-based education remains an often-neglected area. There is a tendency in both curricula and educational practice to focus solely on knowledge and overlook how values intersect with knowledge. The paper draws on group interviews with 20 students from secondary schools/high schools in Zimbabwe, supported by participant observations to understand food and health practices as expressed in students' discussions. According to the findings, values are expressed together with knowledge as value-knowledges around food and health within the social contexts of family, cultural identities and peer relationships. While moving through their lives, students draw on and use *biomedical*, *social-cultural* and *sensory* value-knowledges, simultaneously considering the nutrition and taste of foods, the value of connecting with family and peers in cultural settings and how to get enough food to feel satiated. The paper highlights the necessity to consider and integrate cultural identities in discussions and education about food and health to empower students and their communities in a way that is socially just and equitable.

### **Perspectives and reflections for future research**

Overall, the papers in this special issue contribute with new perspectives on how the concepts of equity, social justice and agency are addressed in educational research within the interrelated areas of health, well-being and sustainability education. The authors illustrate how these concepts cannot be seen in isolation from overall value objects in educational as well as other systems in a society tasked with offering opportunities for all children and youth. The need for considering and exploring the social, cultural and legislative contexts in which issues related to social justice and equity are identified, as well as the possibilities of responsive educational approaches to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion, is underlined across all the papers.

In relation to future directions, the limited research base on the relation and interconnection between health, well-being and sustainability challenges requires further research examining this interconnection. Young (2015), discussing commonalities in the challenges of health, well-being and sustainability, draw attention to the complex contexts in which health promoting schools and sustainable schools have to operate, suggesting that they would be stronger if they worked together. Although the perspectives of equity, social justice and agency highlighted in this special issue do not claim to be exhaustive, they can serve as a starting point for a more systematic research focus regarding these interconnected challenges. Recently, there has been more focus in policy on the synergies between the challenges of health, well-being and sustainability bringing forward notions such as “sustainable well-being societies” (The Geneva Charter for Well-being, World Health Organization, 2022). This extends to research exploring how such policy ideas are translated in regional and national policy and practice development. Disterheft (2023) highlights that this is the first time that the term “sustainable well-being societies” is introduced as a key theme for global health.

### Concluding remarks

We thank all authors for their valuable contributions and hope that this special issue will advance a neglected field of research and lead to an interest in further exploring the interconnectedness of health, well-being and sustainability education. As argued in the special issue, social justice, equity and agency perspectives can qualify and deepen our understanding of how health, well-being and sustainability challenges are addressed in education in different cultural contexts.

Research addressing social justice and equity perspectives often draws on critiques of challenges founded in social structures and systemic failures that oppress children and young people and hinder schools and communities from offering opportunities for participation for all children and youth. These perspectives are captured in this special issue, providing examples of approaches to education that may aid in addressing current and future sustainability and well-being challenges in schools.

The complexity of challenges founded in inequality and social justice issues calls for further bridging of crucial research gaps in the health–well-being–sustainability nexus. Studies must direct efforts toward providing insights and critical inquiry into educational systems that are living with and anticipating the impacts of global changes.

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