

8. EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

➤ LECTURE NOTES

Building blocks

- Environmental education & development education
- Global education & futures education

Sustainable schools

- Some initiatives from the UK
- Distinctive school leadership skills

Tensions and contradictions

- Economics, ecology and happiness
- Cosmetic v. more fundamental changes

➤ KEY READING

- UN Decade for ESD ~ www.unesco.org/education/desd/
- Hicks, D. (2009) Naturally resourceful: could your school be a Transition School? ([Downloads](#))

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the state of education for sustainability in your local/national context?
- What needs to be done to raise the profile of education for sustainability in your local/national context?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Critical understanding of the need for and nature of education for sustainability
- Appreciation of the nature of good practice in education for sustainability

LECTURE NOTES

1. THE BUILDING BLOCKS

The term education for sustainable development (ESD) or education for sustainability (EfS) came of age in 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, when governments acknowledged that issues of environment and development were two sides of the same coin (see Session 7). Although the nomenclature was new it is important to recognise that this burgeoning field did not arrive out of thin air. Pre-existing fields such as environmental education, development education and global education provided much of the expertise for ESD and also continue to be significant influences and initiatives in their own right.

Environmental education

The term environmental education (EE) came into use in the 1960s in order to highlight the need for students to understand environmental issues. The emphasis in environmental education shifted over the years, from conservation of the countryside in the 60s and 70s (plants, trees, hedgerows, wildlife), to national and global problems in the 70s and 80s (pollution, resource depletion, urban issues) and issues of sustainability in the 1990s. In particular, UNESCO and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) promoted environmental education at milestone international conferences in the 70s and 80s. Over several decades environmental educators have developed wide-ranging expertise in all matters relating to the biosphere. Some see environmental education as embracing issues of sustainability whilst others now prefer the term education for sustainability.

Development education

The term development education was coined in the late 1960s to refer to the need for education, both formal and informal, to explore issues of global poverty and injustice. During the 1970s and 80s a number of development educational centres (DECs) were set up in the UK to provide resources and support for teacher, for example, Teachers in Development Education (TIDEC) in Birmingham (www.tidec.org/) and Manchester Development Education Project (www.dep.org.uk). The umbrella organisation for development education and global learning in the UK is Think Global (www.think-global.org.uk) based in London. During the 80s it became increasingly clear that issues relating to the environment, peace and conflict, and human rights were also inextricably bound up with issues of development. The focus of development education thus expanded to embrace a wider range of global issues. It was also felt

that what was missing more broadly was a 'global dimension' in the curriculum. This is the term now used in the UK to refer to the need for a range of global issues to be explored in schools.

Global education

Other radical educators in the 1970s were arguing that a wider range of global issues needed to be included in the school curriculum. The term used at that time for this in the UK was world studies. Two national projects were influential in bringing these ideas to a much wider audience ('Ways of Seeing'/[Download](#)). In the 1990s the term world studies was replaced by the more internationally known term global education. A summary of UK developments in this field can be found on the Global Dimension page ([link](#)) and detailed exploration of good practice is to be found in Hicks and Holden's (2007) *Teaching the Global Dimension*.

Futures education

In addition to the major contributions made by the above three fields to education for sustainable development one must note that the insights of futures studies and futures education have yet to be fully valued, incorporated and utilised. Since education for sustainability is particularly concerned with the transition from an unsustainable present to a more sustainable future one wonders how it can effectively do this without also embracing the insights offered by the futures field.

2. SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS

A warning

David Orr (2004) highlights the dilemmas that education itself poses for those interested in educating for sustainability:

Education is not widely regarded as a problem, although the lack of it is. The conventional wisdom holds that all education is good, and the more one has of it, the better...The truth is that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth. If one listens carefully, it may even be possible to hear the Creation groan every year in late May when another batch of smart, degree-holding, but ecologically illiterate, *Homo sapiens* who are eager to succeed are launched into the biosphere.

Orr goes on to point out that all education, whether intended so or not, is a form of education for sustainability. Thus if one's schooling makes no reference, or just a token reference, to issues of sustainability what one learns is that these matters are of little importance. The neoliberal bent of western education, as described in Session 5, can often make it tokenistic in this respect, technocentric rather than ecocentric in stance, light rather than dark green in its endeavours. However, in many countries sustainability has been flagged as an important strand in education and one which committed educators can work creatively with.

The situation in the UK

In the UK the Department for Children, Schools and Families encouraged all schools to be sustainable schools by 2020 and accordingly set out a National Framework for Sustainable Schools (www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainable-schools), together with guidelines for planning (DCFS, 2010). The introduction states:

A sustainable school prepares young people for a lifetime of sustainable living, through its teaching, fabric and its day-to-day practices. It is guided by a commitment to care:

- for oneself (our health and well-being);
- for each other (across cultures, distances & generations);
- for the environment (both locally and globally).

Sustainable development means inspiring people in all parts of the world to find solutions that improve their quality of life without storing up problems for the future, or impacting unfairly on other people's lives. It must be much more than recycling bottles or giving money to charity. It is about thinking and working in a profoundly different way (DCSF, 2008a: 6-7).

I am particularly struck by the reference here to care for future generations and going beyond projects on recycling and giving money to charities, which have too often been the mainstay of education for sustainability in UK primary schools. NB. Whilst the Conservative coalition is now giving less attention to education for sustainability many organisations and networks, such as Think Global, are continuing to support and promote this vital initiative. this and related issues. For current key issues in relation to education for sustainability see The Long Transition ([link](#)) which highlights the need for teachers and students to explore climate change, peak oil and the limits to growth.

School leadership

The governmental body for school inspection (OFSTED, 2009) has noted a range of exemplar good practice in a sample of schools and the National College for School Leadership (2008) has investigated the qualities that leaders of sustainable schools need to have or develop. It is noted that traditionally successful schools, which focus on pupil attainment and good management, often tend to be inward looking, whilst sustainable schools look outwards to engage with both the local and global community. In addition to what is already known about effective school leadership heads of such schools also demonstrate personal commitment to these matters, understand the interconnectedness of society and environment, and have an outward looking orientation and optimistic worldview.

The report also stresses the need for distributed leadership, that is, different aspects of the sustainability agenda are led by different members of the school community, including pupils. The sharing out of tasks leads to greater participation in overall strategy, reduces the burden on head teachers and embeds sustainability more deeply across the institution.

3. TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Economics v. ecology

There are many arguments and debates about the nature of sustainability/unsustainability and thus about what might or should go on in schools. Whilst economists tend to believe that there are no limits to growth ecologists and many other scientists recognise the finiteness of the Earth's natural systems. However, economic activity can no longer be viewed as separate and independent of nature. Growth (making an economy bigger) is not the same as development (making it better), although neoliberal economics often tends to take the former for the latter.

In the conventional economic view consumption is seen as the route to improved well-being, yet repeatedly studies on life satisfaction show there is little correlation between increased income and an improved sense of well-being. In the UK the percentage of people describing themselves as 'very happy' has dropped from 52% in 1957 to 36% in 2008. Globally people regularly report that their sense of well-being depends primarily on family stability, good friendships, satisfaction at work and the strength of their local community (Jackson, 2008). These are some of the issues that education for sustainability must engage with if it is to avoid merely cosmetic change and aim at deeper, lasting changes which fundamentally challenge unsustainable lifestyles and practices.

Whose version of sustainability?

It should also be noted that this discussion of education for sustainability comes from and responds to western perceptions of the issues, of society and education. The notions explored here, and in Sessions 9 and 10, look very different in other national and cultural contexts. In his exploration of the cultural politics of sustainable development Bob Offei Manteaw (2009) thus contrasts American and African development paradigms.

Unlike the American development paradigm, which is characterised by economic competitiveness and the craze for techno-scientific innovations that seek to dominate nature, the African paradigm aims at dominating poverty and the conditions that create it. Notions of human survival or progress in an African development paradigm have, therefore, been constructed around a concept of nature which directs the relationship between humans and their environments. The natural environment serves as home – an inseparable anchorage for survival and sustenance. There is no distinction between people and nature; people live *in* and *with* nature. They also live off nature.

To see the world only through one's own cultural lens is ethnocentric, to begin to see the range of cultural values and perceptions relating to education and sustainable development offers opportunity for greater dialogue and critical debate.

This session has identified education for sustainability as a crucial element in educating for the future and a field which, like futures, needs to be appreciated and interpreted in a variety of culturally specific ways.

REFERENCES & KEY READING (*)

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<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/education-for-sustainable-development-improving-schools-improving-lives>

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the nature and importance of education for sustainability. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. What is the state of education for sustainability in your local/national context?
2. What needs to be done to raise the profile of education for sustainability in your local/national context?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?