Education and Sustainable Development: challenges, responsibilities, and frames of mind

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Introduction

The development of social imperatives in relation to sustainable development now has considerable momentum and the phrase is becoming rooted in the discourse of UN agencies, national governments, business, the professions, educational institutions, and NGOs. However, Dobson noted finding over 300 definitions, and disputation continues with rival meanings being used as competing rhetorical currencies in a market for which, and whose, worldviews will best save the planet.

Pawley describes phrases such as sustainable development as textbook examples of political fudge-words that combine opposite positions by proposing the authority of a third, while Stables has described them, along with phrases such as equality of opportunity and global citizenship, as paradoxical compound policy slogans. In education, currently, there is a tendency towards prepositional forms: *education for sustainable development*. Although this is likely to owe something to pre-existing terminology (viz., *education for the environment*), its use may also be programmatic for particular social purposes. As Jickling and Spork note:

Â A programmatic definitions Â go further than prescribing a particular meaning. They may be used to express particular moral or
practical choices – to advance an agenda.

In England, two main aims are set for the school curriculum. These are:

The school curriculum should pass on enduring values and help learners to be responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to a just society. It should develop their awareness and understanding of, and respect for, the environments in which they live, and secure their commitment to sustainable development at a personal, local, national and global level.

Such a fundamental social goal as sustainable development has potentially considerable implications for all aspects of society and raises question about the balance between schools’ need to help implement government policies and their need to mediate them. Such policies will apply to schools as institutions, as well as to curricula, and different responsibilities apply. It will be difficult for schools to avoid the effects of some sustainable development policies (e.g., legislation on waste disposal) but, even with a mandated national curriculum, schools may still choose to question the policy. This is not to argue that such policy should be opposed through the curriculum; rather it is to acknowledge the choice, and the need to exercise this both consciously and conscientiously.

Should (education for) sustainable development be supported?

Debates in the literature, and recent editions of Environmental Education Research and the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, show the growth of the sustainable development discourse and particular tendencies. Hopkins comments that education should be seen as a primary tool in the critical endeavour of attaining a sustainable future, and the World Wildlife Fund-UK’s school resource, Lessons in Life notes:

We have a responsibility to help young people to understand the reasons for sustainable development, and to develop the knowledge, skills and values on which to base their future decisions and actions.

Such tendentious and determinist language is not uncommon within the literature.

More appropriately, and more democratically perhaps, we ought to want schools to help learners develop critical understandings of sustainable development, and
help them achieve levels of critical environmental literacy that will enable them to
develop and continually adapt their own understandings and make up their
own minds as to how (and whether) to change the ways that they live. It would
be more ethical, and more useful, were we to acknowledge that the purpose
of education in relation to sustainable development was to explore the concept
and its implications, tolerating different views in this process, rather than to
persuade people to accept it, whatever its implications.

But this would sit uncomfortably under an education for sustainable develop-
ment banner where the for represents an instrumental view of education in the
service of government in pursuit of the goal of sustainable development, and a
denial of the essence of education within a liberal democracy which aims to aid
learners to think for themselves.

Foster argues that:

The relation between education and sustainability cannot be an external,
still less an instrumental one. Learning to understand the natural world and the human place in it can only be an active process through which our sense of what counts as going with the grain of nature is continually constituted and recreated. This process cannot have its agenda set to subserve sustainability criteria which it actually makes meaningful. The policy discourse, parameters and indices of operational sustainability are heuristics, and the conditions for deploying them intelligently are at one and the same time the condition for a genuinely learning, and for a deeply sustainability, society.

Concern about the dangers of schools doing a government’s bidding, is hardly new. Neither is the notion that the responsibility which schools and teachers have should be to society, as a means of aiding its development, rather than to transient government. So what should the responsibility of schools be towards sustainable development? What are schools for?

What are Schools and Teachers for? Curriculum and Liberty

In a 1998 on-line colloquium on the future of environmental education in a
postmodern world, Sauvé critiqued moves to reshape education such that sus-
tainable development is seen as the ultimate goal of human development with
education as instrumental to this end, noting modernism’s tendency to develop universalizing socio-political theories and socio-economic organizing principles, namely capitalism and communism, which tend to convey universal values.
Clearly, humanist thought arising from the Enlightenment has effected both capitalist and socialist development. Equally clearly, many such modernist projects set out to constrain and shape the liberty of the individual in order to realize their social and political goals.

Of course, even in relatively liberal social democracies, there are constraints on aspects of individual liberty to protect other liberties, and this is done largely with majority compliance. Liberal democratic governments run into civil liberties difficulties when they criminalize activities which their citizens (a significant minority, at least) regard as quite proper, or act to achieve social goals which command little respect. Such approaches are common where governments have strong social agendas. In communist societies, the freedom of the individual was routinely curtailed in order to achieve revolutionary social ends, with schools being used instrumentally in this. I dwell on these issues because liberty is a word which is effectively missing from the sustainable development, education discourse, where value concepts of “justice” (both social and ecological) and “equality” (both inter- and intra-generational, and sometimes inter-species) dominate.

This notion of liberty grew out of Enlightenment thinking and might be thought a particularly western notion, with cultural limitations, but none of this invalidates its importance as an idea, or reduces its ideological significance. Ignoring liberty lends credence to the idea that justice and equality can each be maximised at no cost to other values. However, the concepts of justice, equality and liberty are incommensurate, and to claim otherwise is to mislead. It is a point Ross also makes, quoting Pepper, who promises that a future green socialism, “will be less prone to totalitarianism than some previous ‘socialisms’, though it will still entail sacrifice of some extant liberal ‘freedoms’ but this may be no bad thing.” Although this is a view which Dworkin would not entirely share.

Liberty, of course, tends to be exercised most (but not always extended) by those with the most power in society, but herein lies the dilemma: should societies reduce available freedoms on the hypothesis that more can then share, more equally, whatever is left, (seeing equality as the dominant value), or should they extend freedoms more widely through educational, legislative, economic, and other levers (seeing liberty as the higher value)? Education has a crucial, if quite different role, in each of these strategies: between a voluntary approach, where people make their own decisions, and a compulsory approach where non-compliance is subject to legal sanction. The implications for state-funded schools in England of having a legally mandated curriculum aim of securing pupils’ “commitment to sustainable development at a personal, local, national and global level,” are unknown.

If the purpose of education isn’t to effect some external-evolved social plan, as strongly criticized by Jensen and Schnack, or to transmit culture through a conservative project, what is it for? Can it be just for itself? The point argued
here is that the prime focus of education is the life of the individual, involving an exposure to cultural norms, trends, and aspirations, as all curriculum is, arguably, a selection from culture. It also involves an exploration of present-day problems without looking nostalgically to the known past, or optimistically or pessimistically to an unknown future. Rather, it embodies a rationale that sees educated and capable individuals, who possess strong social orientations and skills, as the best hope for democratically evolving solutions to both known and unknown problems, including the meanings of both democratically and evolving in this context.

I am arguing here a case for liberty as a cornerstone value. I have suggested already that the notion of liberty, as approximated to in liberal democracies may seem too western a concept to have much currency elsewhere. Parekh has argued that this is the case for much of the developing world, and that liberal democracy as a form of government should not be regarded as universalisable. Vincent also argues that the values and practices implicit within liberal justice theory constitute key environmental dangers, although Thomas sees what he calls environmental liberalism within higher education as an essential step towards ecological sustainability.

Enslin rejects Parekh’s analysis, firstly, through an historical case that pre-colonial societies in Africa enjoyed traditions of free expression, deliberation, opposition, representation, participation, and checks and balances; secondly on the pragmatic grounds that the newly emerging South Africa has chosen a liberal democratic route; and thirdly, on the more principled criteria that the transcendental qualities of liberalism bring benefits that no other system can, through its emphasis on independent and critical thought and through this, on the development of autonomy and responsibility. Enslin says that the ultimate argument for liberalism is that for societies, and, by implication, individuals within them, to be free to choose right actions, they need the conditions of choice which liberalism seeks to establish. The sustainable development education literature tends not to make this case for liberty and choice, even from within fundamentally liberal democratic societies.

Exploring Necessary Opportunities

These arguments support calls for choice within sustainable development education, for schools and teachers to be free to mediate government policy and educate people about sustainable development free of a priori certainties about outcomes, and unfettered by instructions about what and how to teach. An education which considers issues relating to sustainable development will touch on many issues faced by learners and their families on a daily basis. It is, of course, not always clear what appropriate actions are, and yet actions have to be taken because lives have to be led. Doing nothing is not an option, just as
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schools’ ignoring sustainable development will prove an unsustainable response.

So what can education do in relation to this, and what are practical ways forward? Perhaps educators have four kinds of responsibility: one, to help learners understand why the idea of sustainable development ought to be of interest to them; two, to help learners gain plural perspectives on issues from a range of cultural stances; three, to provide opportunities for an active consideration of issues through appropriate pedagogies which, for example, might begin from learners’ and teachers’ different interests, helping pupils understand what they are learning and its significance; and four, to encourage pupils to continue to think about what to do, individually and socially, and to keep their own and other people’s options open. Doing less than this seems neglectful; doing much more runs the risk of indoctrination. Government agencies and NGOs walk a tightrope when they attempt guidance in such matters because of their need to stimulate without prescribing, and our need to see conceptual frameworks as scaffolding to build learning around, rather than as barriers to new ideas and creativity.

The role of schools is integral to processes of thinking and learning about what might constitute appropriate futures, but its role must be limited, in this case to helping future citizens now, and as their lives evolve. Jensen and Schnack explore such limits when they write:

Á it is not and cannot be the task of the school to solve the political problems of society. Its task is not to improve the world with the help of pupils’ activities. These activities must be evaluated on the basis of their educational value and according to educational criteria.
Á The crucial factor must be what students learn from participating in such activities

Such a consideration of interests seems necessary to an effective engagement with issues raised by sustainable development, and it offers some protection against forces which would shape society in particular fashions or according to predetermined nostrums, in ways corrosive of democracy and liberty. Institutions such as schools need to exercise the responsibility that society requires of them, and be free to take up and explore with learners what sustainable development might be in ways that make contingent and contextual sense. Following Enslin, for societies, and for freely cooperating individuals within them, to be free to choose right actions, they themselves need to embody the frames of mind and conditions of choice that enable this. If schools are to be nurseries for such choice and learning, they need encouragement and help in freely experimenting with learning.

The Trumpeter
References


*The Trumpeter*
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Thomas.


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Endnotes


2. Dobson 1996.


10. WWF(UK) 1999.

11. For various commentaries on this, see Gough 1987; Jickling 1992; Payne
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1997; Scott and Oulton 1999; Sauvé 1999.
34. Enslin 1999.