



## TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

The current educational system has exposed a crisis in education as it has mainly adopted two approaches to deal with education. Firstly, education has been considered as a means to approach a specific end and second, education has been viewed as means to respond to a given situation in the future. This makes the role of education as narrow, and shapeable. This paper tries to highlight that the goal of education can be conceived of as more than qualification in order to be sustainable in the future. The principles of openness, self-determination and freedom shape the values that are integral for a transformative vision of sustainability which forges to look beyond the notions of certainty in pursuing academic careers. It requires us to think of the future as open and encourages students, researchers to opt for alternative futures to pursue. The paper delves into the integration of non-traditional aspects of sustainability in the educational discourse- such as ethics, aesthetics and culture and also points out the significance of the non-material values such as mutual help, solidarity and compassion in institutional learning systems. Sustainable development has been considered as a process in which citizens need to take active part to promote critical thinking and self-reflection. The paper has generated data from in depth content analysis. The findings of the paper suggested that to transform education for a sustainable future, the current educational system requires to develop a collaborative approach to mitigate the theory-action gap via working groups and faculty learning communities, with open discussions about how to redesign courses and foster a multicultural vision in teaching and learning.

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### Introduction

Education and the future are inseparably intertwined. It is impossible to think about educational matters without making references to the future. Our understanding of future determines, for example, what knowledge and which skills are considered to be important for the next generation. Regarding sustainability issues, it makes a difference whether sustainability is thought as a concrete aim which can be reached through technical innovation and efficiency, or whether it is more a normative direction which needs to be determined democratically. Jacques Delors and the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century were quite clear on the importance of education as a highly influential process of social framing:

*“There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings – their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community”* Delors (1996: 21).

The call for a kind of education which can contribute to a sustainable future has resulted in the “education for sustainable development” (ESD) campaign. What is implied here is that a sustainable future can be achieved if people are properly educated. The concept of the inner or personal (sphere of) transformation has only recently received growing attention in both sustainability science and education. Inner transformation, as used here, describes changes related to people’s mindsets, which are made up of their values, beliefs, worldviews and associated cognitive/emotional capacities (such as mindfulness, self-awareness, compassion and empathy), and thus involves changes in people’s consciousness. They lie at the root of many sustainability challenges; they can be important leverage points for change, and are thus fundamental to the solutions to the world’s greatest challenge.

### **The objectives of the study are to**

1. To highlight how the Education for Sustainability campaign aims to contribute to Sustainable Development.
2. To signify the competencies that are needed for making a sustainable future.
3. To delve into the non- traditional aspects of sustainability in the educational discourse.
4. To point out the challenges faced by the Education for Sustainability Approach.
5. To highlight the need for adopting a transformative approach to education.

The research has extensively followed a qualitative methodology. It consists of in-depth content analysis, through review of related literatures in the subject. It has systematically collected the data from different sources and has given its own interpretation on the topic.

### **Education: A major pillar for achieving Sustainable Development**

Agenda 21 initially mentioned education as one important contribution to sustainable development. This resulted ultimately in the ESD campaign, initiated by UNESCO and promoted worldwide during the UN Decade of education for sustainable development beginning in 2005. ESD is an essential contribution to all efforts to achieve the SDGs, enabling individuals to contribute to sustainable development by promoting societal, economic and political change as well as by transforming their own behaviour. ESD can produce specific cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural learning outcomes that enable individuals to deal with the particular challenges of each SDG, thus facilitating its achievement. In short, ESD enables all individuals to contribute to achieving the SDGs by equipping them with the knowledge and competencies they need, not only to understand what the SDGs are about, but to engage as informed citizens in bringing about the necessary transformation.

The aim of the campaign has been to educate people so that they acquire competencies and learn to think and behave in a sustainable way. In the academic milieu, the call to foster sustainable behavior was mainly answered by determining what the necessary competencies for so doing must be. Among the more important proficiencies are systems-thinking competence, anticipatory competence, normative competence, strategic competence, interpersonal competence and critical thinking. In general, competencies are understood as a combination of cognitive skills and abilities as well as the motivational, volitional, and social readiness to solve problems responsibly in a variety of situations. Consequently, competencies are not based on any specific knowledge content, but rather more oriented toward questions of how the acquisition of the required competencies can be made possible. ESD clearly exceeds the goal to impart knowledge and raise awareness; it is about a variety of learning outcomes that are conceived as a contribution to societal transformation. The success of education in accordance with the logic of the political call will be determined by the extent to which sustainable development goals (SDGs) are realized. But the hope of creating a better future through education seems to rest on the development of more innovative and alternative methods and the focus on competencies.

### **Challenges towards the Education for Sustainability Approach**

Since at least two decades, education policies have been influenced increasingly by actors outside the traditional education system, such as the IMF, World Bank and OECD.

To make sense of and function well in this world, individuals need for example to master changing technologies and to make sense of large amounts of available information. They also face collective challenges as societies – such as balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability, and prosperity with social equity. In these contexts, the competencies that individuals need to meet their goals have become more complex, requiring more than the mastery of certain narrowly defined skills.

On closer observation of society and educational practice, the described idealized picture of education seems difficult to maintain (Bateman, 2012). Especially institutionalized education is far from being free of external influences (e.g., the educator or society's interests). The promise of a better future has been shattered because of a number of severe global crises. Future in post-modern societies has come to be understood, instead, as uncertain and contingent. ESD focuses mainly on society in general and therefore more distant futures, rather than an individual's personal future – something that is likely due to the educational system's separation of disciplines. All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus, all education, whether intended or not, is a preparation for the future. Unless we understand the future for which we are preparing, we may do tragic damage to those we teach. Unless we understand the powerful psychological role played by images of the future in motivating – or de-motivating – the learner, we cannot effectively overhaul our schools, colleges or universities, no matter what innovations we introduce.

The challenges that the Education for Sustainability approach presents that education has been conceived of as a means to approach a specific end, and also education has been seen as a means to respond to a given situation. It misses the fact that one main task of education is thus to encourage and support the coming generation in shaping its own future toward the ideal of a democratic and just society.

The political call for ESD emphasizes the possibility of creating a better world through education. With this in mind, future is clearly understood to be a result of human action, that is, the promise of a certain future (a sustainable one) can be fulfilled under the condition that all people are educated in a certain way. This understanding of ESD means that education is understood as training to obtain a qualification. It follows the dominant educational paradigm in Western systems, namely, that education should equip learners with competencies which are deemed useful for a fast-changing and uncertain future. The underlying

justification for this is a “taken-for-granted” future which “reinforces the status quo, in many cases by attempting to use education as an agency in colonizing technologically and economically deterministic futures”. Future is something which you cannot shape but which acts on you; it is a threat (Facer 2013) rather than something formable which would give individuals an alternative other than sub- mission. The OECD selected competencies reproduce and support this currently prevalent notion of a deterministic future. The OECD’s selected competencies are undoubtedly important ones, but they are not inherently tied to specific moral values. They are merely means which can be used to achieve any end. E.g., the competence to think systemically can be used in warfare but also for carbon-reduced transport systems. Referring to the future as taken-for-granted (perceived in the present as passive and non-shapeable) can only result in adaption, whereby change (or initiating it) would be not possible. In both cases – for ESD and the educational system – future is perceived as a narrowed predetermined path. And in both cases, a specific notion of educability is evoked. A picture is sketched which considers human beings as closed entities able to learn anything if just the right methods are selected. This is in line with the increasingly evidence-based understanding of education wherein the basic question is “what works” or “what is effective” and not “what is it effective for” (Biesta, 2007). The belief in educability, and with it the idea of an educable identity, is reproduced when the question of how to overcome the knowledge-action gap is raised, instead of asking what is and should be the contribution of education in terms of sustainability. The presented empirical findings show that the majority of young people do consider the future as non- shapeable, a response which is considered to be passive.

### **Shift from Confirmative Learning to Collaborative Learning: A Journey towards a Transformative Approach to Education**

Setting a sustainable future as a clear, realistic goal and in so doing determining exactly what constitutes sustainable action is not the right approach. Rather, Sustainable Development should be considered as a process in which citizens need to take active part. Education as a form of subjectification should be encouraged which signifies that educational approaches would be oriented towards the individual’s formability and creativity. It stands for education as a platform for experimentation and critique to go beyond the status quo. Also, it requires us to think of the future as open and at the same time it has the potential to open up alternative futures for us to pursue. A shift from confirmative or even reformatory learning to transformative learning will involve personal, institutional, and political resistance by students that then poses a challenge to their beliefs and ideas and a whole reconstruction of meaning. In this new reality, universities should operate as knowledge and reflection institutions developing critical thinking and not only as teaching institutions that transfer knowledge (Amsler & Facer, 2017). The values that are essential to realise this new reality are ethics, aesthetics and culture, also non material values such as mutual help, solidarity and compassion. Inter and transdisciplinary approaches, the integration of theory and practice, the individual commitment and development of synergic actions in groups, the ethical discussions and reflections, the adoption of critical thinking play a vital part in such transformation. Another major dimension to realise the goal of transformation in education is that the transformation should be directed towards more complex teaching epistemologies that recognise uncertainty and risk. Integration between theory and practice can be done by adopting a collaborative approach such as highlighting service training in the framework of internship programmes in the educational pedagogy.

### **Findings**

- interdisciplinary and systemic teaching approaches.
- the transformation of taken-for-granted assumptions about the scientific underpinning of different disciplines, and the values they engender.
- a re-orientation towards more experimental, innovative and whole-person approaches that challenge the fundamental assumptions of mass education, which, in turn requires;
- the incorporation of new pedagogical models, where engaged students become agents for change in a learning community.
- The study highlights the need for learning that builds on experience and emotions that are embodied – and not only embrained – and which are therefore better aimed at fostering the behavioural change needed to act sustainably.

### **Conclusion**

From the study it can be derived that how we understand the future influences how we think about education. the Education for Sustainability campaign promotes the idea that a sustainable future is possible if people are educated in a certain way. It assumes that people consider the societal future as shapeable, an assumption that ignores the prevailing societal perception. It also follows a similar understanding of what education ought to be: namely, it is conceived as training for achieving a specific aim. In both the cases, future is a closed concept; the kind of future the learners should be educated for is already prescribed and, to that extent, immutable. This implies a shortsighted view of the individual and of education itself, which misses the real potentials of education for the desired societal transformation. At the same time, a critical second aspect has been neglected: the inner dimensions of individuals. More holistic pedagogies are urgently needed to address today’s challenges, as education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development. It has to be mentioned that if education is also conceived of as a form of subjectification, educational approaches would be oriented towards the individuals’ formability and creativity. This would mean to support and enable learners’ self-efficacy with regards to the societal future. Subjectification-based education would also mean education as a platform for experimentation and critique (e.g., of societal conditions but also of the sustainability concept itself). The scope of education makes it possible to reflect collectively on current societal conditions and to consider

alternatives, without having to engage in some immediate action. Therefore, it requires us to think of the future as open and adopt a collaborative approach as it has the potential to open up alternative futures for us to pursue.

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