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**“What’s in a name?
Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development
as Slogans”**

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**“What’s in a name?
*Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development
as Slogans*”**

Abstract

We are currently in the throes of a situation in which the environment-related work formerly known as ‘environmental education’ (EE) is being aggressively and extensively ‘re-badged’ as ‘education for sustainable development’ (ESD). But do these rhetorical changes make any difference where it counts – ‘on the ground’ in classrooms and other educational settings?

This chapter reports on a recent research project conducted in collaboration with three coastal schools in Australia, each of which engages in environment-related education. We examined the literature, interviewed teachers, conducted focus groups with students, and employed a questionnaire survey of teachers and students to address issues such as:

- how is ESD defined in the literature?
- how is ESD understood by teachers?
- how is ESD understood by students?
- how is ESD enacted in classrooms?

Our research suggests that environment-related education is valued in the schools, but despite the rise of recent policy statements seeking to define ESD in terms of engagement with environmental, social and economic interests, the dominant interpretation of ESD is ‘environmentally sustainable development’, ‘sustainability’ is largely interpreted as ‘preservation’, and the driver of environment-related work tends to be the committed teacher rather than a new policy. We propose that these outcomes may be understood in terms of the concept of ‘slogan systems’, which proposes that certain policy statements, while advocating change, actually serve to support a kind of changeless reform.

Introduction

This chapter will report on a recent research project that explored ways in which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is understood in local coastal schools.

We reviewed the contemporary literature on ESD to establish the mandate for this educational approach at international, national and regional levels. We worked with three local primary schools along the ‘surf-coast’ of Victoria, Australia, engaging in several forms of data collection including interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire survey.

In this chapter we will outline the three-level mandate for ESD existing in the literature and consider the alleged distinctiveness of this relatively new form of environment-related education. We will outline our methodology and present the results of our data collection, and conclude with an interpretation of the outcomes of the research in terms of movements in the language of the field.

Background

Education for Sustainable Development: an educational response to sustainability issues

The principal field of education concerned with sustainability issues is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): “ESD involves learning how to make decisions that balance and integrate the long-term future of the economy, the natural environment and the well-being of all communities, near and far, now and in the future” (UNESCO 2005, p.1). ESD has emerged as an internationally-mandated educational movement concerned with responding to the rise of sustainability issues worldwide (DfES 2006, Selby 2006). The United Nations has taken the significant step of establishing an international *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD)* (UNESCO 2003), which has encouraged an impressive array of research and development projects around the world.

At the national level, the federal government’s “Educating for a Sustainable Future” (DEH 2005) statement clearly adopts an ESD perspective, and ESD has also recently received the full support of the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, which has declared a commitment to ESD in its formal statement that:

By 2020, the university sector in Australia will be playing a key role in promoting sustainability in the community through research and building capacity to achieve change for sustainability ...The AVCC will further promote sustainability by supporting its members and through the creation of strategic linkages with government... and encourages its members to engage with schools, industry and communities in partnership and projects which promote sustainable development” (AVCC 2006).

Conceptually, sustainability issues tend to entail at least three sets of contending interests – environmental, social and economic (DEH 2005, UNESCO 2003, Henderson and Tilbury 2004). Such issues are ‘essentially contested’ – the meaning of these issues is inherent in the debates among stakeholders representing these different interests. In addition, an important consideration when resolving these contending interests is the need to reconcile the rights of current and future generations in terms of continuing access to natural and social environments – the outcomes of contestation concerning sustainability issues therefore have both immediate (short-term) and cross-generational (long-term) implications (DfES 2006).

Our own recent case study research of sustainability issues in remote, sparsely-populated areas in the west of Scotland (Robottom 2002) illustrates some of the characteristics of sustainability issues: they are complex in their structure; this complexity takes different forms in different contexts; they involve a wide range of stakeholders; these stakeholders express a wide range of values and interests; their development requires negotiation and reconciliation, and these are usually difficult processes; and they are shaped and constrained by social, cultural, political, historical and environmental elements (they are unavoidably socially constructed). It is with issues of this complexity that ESD must engage. How does Australian education seek to engage complex sustainability issues?

In July 2000, the Australian Government released the “National Action Plan for Environmental Education” (NAPEE). This plan, still current, addresses the link between environment and social and economic issues in its interpretation of environmental education. However, the thinking that led to the NAPEE is changing

as the government takes up the challenge of developing a more sustainable Australia through community education and learning. Currently the Australian Government is developing a National Action Plan for Education for Sustainable Development (NAPESD). The discussion paper relating to the new national plan indicates that the shift in thinking and ESD terminology will be incorporated in the plan. The broader concepts of sustainability are included in many government documents such as “Caring for our Future”, which is the Australian Government Strategy for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). This document defines ESD in this way:

Education for sustainable development aims to equip individuals, organizations and communities to deal effectively with the complex and inter-related social, economic and environmental challenges they encounter in their personal and working lives, in a way that protects the interests of future generations (DEH, 2007).

The discussion paper indicates that ESD is seen as transformative and is about managing change such that people are provided with not only knowledge and understanding, but also skills and capacity to administer change while recognizing the relationships between environmental protection, economic prosperity and social cohesion. The paper specifies that ESD terminology “encompasses the activities of environmental education, learning for sustainability and change for sustainability”.

Local governments around Australia are becoming involved in managing sustainability issues and in enacting this educational reform. Local governments recognize the range of interests at stake, as well as the need for social equity: the Surf Coast Shire Council for example includes among its aims the need to take into account environmental considerations as well as economic and social factors in their everyday activities, and an approach to business that promotes economic prosperity, social equity, health and wellbeing, while protecting and enhancing the Shire’s unique environmental values (SCSC 2006 p. 19).

Many Australian schools are involved in the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) which is trialling a range of programs seeking to integrate environmental, economic, educational and social outcomes into a holistic approach to sustainable education. Interestingly, the AuSSI initiative in Victoria has been translated to environmental education around a number of key environmental issues: water (conservation and storm management); waste (litter minimization & recycling); biodiversity and school grounds; and energy (conservation, renewable, air quality and reduction of greenhouse gas emission). While the focus of AuSSI is stated as being on quadruple bottom line outcomes (educational, environmental, social and economic), how education for sustainable development works in practice is one of the key focal points of our research.

It is clear from these developments that if ESD is to be a distinctive form of environment-related education, it needs to be educative about the ways contending interests interact and are ultimately reconciled in the resolution of sustainability issues.

But how does this work out in actual classroom practice? How do educators and school programs go about constructing an ESD program that adequately engages and explores local sustainability issues? How do educational agencies respond in their ESD programs, when much of conventional teaching and curriculum is arguably at odds with the task of educating about issues of this complexity and contextuality (Greenall Gough and Robottom 1993)?

In summary the research questions being addressed in the project reported in this chapter are:

- how is ESD defined in the literature?
- how is ESD understood by teachers?
- how is ESD understood by students?
- how is ESD enacted in classrooms?

Methodology

With rapid social/environmental change now part of the physical and conceptual landscape for children in coastal areas, it is particularly important and appropriate in this international *Decade of Education for Sustainability* that research focuses on the relationships between local curricula and learners' evolving constructions of local sustainability issues in fragile coastal environments. This is consistent with one of the aims of the Education for Sustainable Development movement (ESD):

Public understanding of the principles behind sustainability:

ESD has a major role in furthering the discussion of sustainability itself and the evolution of the concept from a vision to its practical application in culturally appropriate and locally relevant forms (GDRC 2005)

In this project we conducted case studies of three participating local schools to provide accounts of the ways teachers and students understand issues of coastal sustainability and the forms of teaching and curricula that have been developed in these schools. In particular, we explored the views that young people (as members of the next generation likely to inhabit coastal areas) hold on these issues and the factors that shape these views. A mixture of data collection strategies was used including: document analysis, questionnaire-based survey of teachers and students, interviews of teachers and focus groups of students. Three teachers were involved and their senior classes. School A involved Teacher A and 8 students from the grade 6. School B had Teacher B and 21 students from grade 5. School C had Teacher C and 13 students from the grade 5/6. Overall, we had forty-two participating children from the three classes.

The student questionnaire consisted of fifteen open-ended questions relating to children's understandings and involvement in environmental issues, their attitude to their environment and their perception of the environmental curriculum at school. The questionnaire specifically asked the students what they thought the term "sustainability" meant. The teachers' questionnaire was similar although an additional focus was on the personal philosophy of the teacher and how that impacted on the curriculum they delivered. The interviews with the teachers and the focus group discussions with children were loosely structured around the themes of the questionnaires and were used to enlarge on some of the ideas and perceptions gained

from the questionnaires. Some school documents were collected which related to school policy, reports on school environmental projects and student participation.

Outcomes

We analysed the data in terms of the key elements of sustainability: the interplay of environmental, social and economic interests – and have drawn on the analysis to contribute to the debates concerning education for sustainability as well as pedagogical and curricula issues. We have, through surveys, and focus groups, established what ecological underpinnings informed the children's and teacher's views of environmental education and sustainability. Three themes emerged as we considered the data:

- The dominant interpretation of ESD in schools is as environmentally sustainable development. There is little or no recognition of the three pillars or their intersections of interests.
- Notions of sustainability are varied and relate mainly to preservation of the environment.
- The importance of teacher passion and commitment as a driver for environment-related work (rather than environmental policy).

The dominant interpretation of ESD in schools is as environmentally sustainable development. There is little or no recognition of the three pillars or their intersections of interests.

In this project we asked teachers to articulate what they thought the acronym ESD stood for. One teacher (Teacher B), who is particularly active in the promotion of environmental education within his school, was perplexed. He thought he had heard the term but was not sure what it stood for. After a few seconds of thinking, he decided that it must be short for "Ecological Sustainable Development". Interestingly, in 1992, a policy document "National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development" coined the term ESD so it is possible that the teacher had heard it many years earlier. The other two teachers interviewed (Teachers A & C) had never heard the term at all. Teacher A indicated that depending on what overall responsibility the teacher held within the school, it may be "outside" that teacher's role to know – "...its not my role, so other teachers might know what is ESD if that's a government initiative. I'm not sure what it means." Teacher C commented that she had never heard the term before and that in her school even the word "sustainability" wasn't used. She felt that "sustainability" was a term that "I don't think it's ...filtering, having a big impact on schools at the moment."

As we extended the discussion on the 'three pillars of ESD', all teachers indicated that certain aspects were covered within the curriculum, although not in any way as a planned approach. With School A, the school pursues environmental or community issues through a student based "enquiry" approach. If the students do not raise economic or social issues as part of the enquiry, then the teachers do not actively pursue them either. Teacher A was able to discuss a recent example where a local bridge was of concern to the students. This had environmental, economic and social implications, all of which were discussed as part of the enquiry students had engaged in. He indicated that it was through student interest that all aspects were involved. When asked about economic considerations, he commented, "Well there was the

economic decision to maintaining the bridge which they've decided to do now and we went into all of those things as well... It was definitely touched on, we didn't focus on it hugely, again in that situation we couldn't show a stance ourselves, as a school it was more opinions."

School B is known locally for its strong and sustained track record in environment-related work and addresses social aspects embedded in the environmental issues covered in the curriculum. This was explicitly raised by Teacher B in his description of his teaching and the approach of the school. He also indicated that economic aspects were not formally covered unless it was bound up in a broader "project" instigated by the education department in the state. For example, in participating in the "energy efficient schools project", undertaking an audit of energy costs within the school was part of the project. Other than this example, he was unable to indicate any other ways the school covered "economic" aspects of ESD.

There is evidence in school documentation that ESD is not a commonly-used phrase in the school. Whilst the school pursues a whole range of school projects, none of them relates to ESD, but rather to Environmental Education: "Environmental Education is Education IN, ABOUT and FOR the environment. Through Environmental Education, we provide our students with the skills, knowledge and values that will allow them to take action to protect their world". Documentation that the school provides as part of its role in The Sustainable Schools Program states, "As a Sustainable School, TPS has developed a 4 year plan that will focus on setting targets, saving money, reducing environmental impact and improving the aesthetics of the school grounds. Targets have been set in the following areas: Biodiversity; Water Conservation; Energy Use; Waste." While aspects of sustainability are implicit in some of the language, references to the intersection of the broader pillars of ESD are not explicit.

Teacher C commented on School C's curriculum. The school introduces "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" as a whole school theme every two years, so this is the more formal application of environmental education. When asked how the school covers social or economic aspects in what is taught, the teacher commented, "Last year's camp - We talked about people buying up the land and how these things were going to impact on the environment." Sustainability in terms of the other two aspects (economic and social) may be covered if it is part of the camp context. Otherwise, for Teacher C, this is not covered in any other part of her class curriculum.

Notions of sustainability are varied and relate mainly to preservation of the environment.

Teachers' notions of sustainability vary but on the whole relate to the idea of preservation of the environment. Of the three teachers involved in this study, Teacher C had least to say about sustainability, Teacher A had some idea but wasn't firm in his beliefs whilst Teacher B had much stronger notions of sustainability. Teacher A discussed the need to try to redress the problems caused by human intervention by more intervention.

Teacher A: Basically everything that we do now, we seem to have this awareness, we have groups that think "Well what effect is that going to have in the long run?" So with every action we take, whether we're

cutting down trees, “Are we planting more trees to rejuvenate the area?”, and to the kids that’s what we talk about when we plant the trees, why we’re doing it because we’ve taken down so many trees, we need to plant some more and the reasons why we do that. So it’s basically having with every action there is a reaction and it does take place in the environment, and what we do to compensate for that action.

Teacher B’s ideas of sustainability were strongly linked with the school’s long history of involvement in environmental education. In discussing the idea that the environment could sustain itself, he commented:

...it goes back to that idea that we have an impact, so we will always have an impact and the coast will still be here, no matter what we do to it, no matter how savage we are environmentally, it’ll still be here, it’ll just be different, it will last. ...it’s just being a part of the environment, understanding their world that they are living in, so understanding the science of it and how it all fits together, understanding the economics of it and the social implications and all of those things make the environment.

Teacher C had the least developed ideas of sustainability. For her, sustainability included keeping the rolling pastures of farms free from developers, as well as trying to retain the integrity of cliff faces at local beaches.

if they keep letting people build and if people were able to build closer to the cliffs um, they just keep building and there’s no real infrastructure...there needs to become a time where they sort of have to say stop. It’s going to destroy, you know... you’ve got that farmland, and down at Bells Beach you’ve got that farmland as well, and if people were to build that would really destroy sort of the character of the environment...

In discussing social sustainability, Teacher C was thinking more in terms of being sociable, rather than addressing the social dimensions of a sustainability issue: “Social, I guess to me would be the interaction, the social within the community, um, so yes they are important, like it’s great to be able to walk down the street and for someone to say hello ...and developing social relationships with people.”

Most students’ ideas of sustainability were undeveloped. When asked in the questionnaire “What do you understand by the term “sustainability” in relation to the environment?” most used language related to conserving or preserving the environment. Within the student cohort (N=42) across the three schools, where students actually attempted to address the question, at least 19 students used the wording “protect” the environment. At least a third of the students indicated that plants and animals were involved in sustainability. Words like “preserve”, “look after”, “take care of”, “save” were also frequently used by students in describing sustainability. A handful of students from School A used language that indicated a further understanding as it involved a time element: “Look after something for a long time”; “I think looking after the environment will help sustain our environment”, and “keeping what we have at the moment”. Further enquiry of focus groups at each of the schools defined some students’ understandings more fully. One student (School

B) commented that sustainability was “keeping something for the next generation so they can have what we have”. Another student from the same school indicated that it was “to keep in good condition so it’s ready when other people want to use it”.

The importance of teacher passion and commitment as a driver for environment-related work (rather than environmental policy).

From the data, it was clear that the personal experiences of the teacher affected what and how they taught. Each teacher differed in their personal background and commitment to the environment and this impacted on teaching style, expectations and input into the school curriculum decisions.

Teacher A is a member of the local community in which he teaches. He belongs to a local environmental group however he is not involved in any “environmental issues group”. When asked what role the coast played in his life, he commented: “...a huge dimension of my life, like I live on the coast, every aspect of sport has something to do with the coast. In summer I am involved in rowing surf boats, so I’ve got to do that, and I’ll be definitely driving vehicles and bring boats down to the beach and so forth.” In his teaching role, he indicates that the school, and himself in particular, have been quite passive in the past in addressing environmental issues.

... well we’ve been quite passive, they [students] don’t understand their actions and where they could lead to. If you ask any of the children in the school, they are really happy with the environment that they have now, and they wouldn’t want it to change. So if we can understand that, well what we’re doing with it, are we using it up, is it changing, is it renewable, they’ll ask themselves the questions of what they can do to make sure that changes.

Teacher A indicates that the school doesn’t have a particular focus on the environment, however, he is becoming more aware of the issues and is actively seeking greater knowledge. At a personal level he comments on the impact of the environment in his life: “My own personal one... it’s precious, it’s not renewable to the extent that we are using it, it really is important.”

Teacher B has had a lifelong interest in his natural surroundings and his environment. He comments that it is important to his identity.

The connection to the environment is central, I mean, part of my leisure time would be going out bird watching or whatever, so it’s crucial, doesn’t have to be coastal though, if I was in the bush or if I was in a desert or....even I’m in a ‘built’ environment like a new city, I would go for a walk through it to look at the natural aspects to it, and see what’s there.

Owing to his personal commitment to the environment, Teacher B has been instrumental in initiating whole school projects: Animals in the classroom; Sustainable Schools Program; Biological control/sand dunes; Conservation camp (involving 8 local schools); School wetland, Frog Frenzy night; Ponding; Revegetation; Planting; Habitat aviary and Koorie garden. In terms of his own curriculum, he talks about his approach rather than particular topics:

...in terms of that idea of positive environmental action, for me...a very high goal in anything we do that has got an environmental aspect of it. But I mean again, the whole thing is about empowerment and that's what teaching is about, it's setting up...it's not there lecturing kids on certain thing, it's there getting them involved and them finding out about their world and then being empowered to sort of take action and do something about it or feel like they can make a difference....

When Teacher C spoke of her background it was from the point of being a user of the environment and her desire to maintain it as it was. She commented that the coast was part of her identity in that she participated in groups within the local community and saw that she should be putting something back into that community. As before, her definition of the environment is strongly tied up with the notion of community and a sense of belonging to a group of people rather than a place.

When she spoke of her curriculum, it was in terms of what the school had in place to address environmental issues. She did not indicate any specific areas that were her own initiative, although she commented on her involvement in the school camp and how that was used to raise environmental understandings. She felt that most teachers took on some aspect of environment education within their own planning, but could not give any specific examples other than a unit on "Health and your environment" taken within the grade 5/6 area the previous year. It would seem that the school has a mandated curriculum in terms of the topics covered in each school term and the expectation is that teacher will follow the whole school approach. Teacher C was relatively new to the school, only having been there 2 years and may have felt uncomfortable about changing any curriculum offerings.

Overall, in explaining their environment-related work, the teachers tended to refer to their own lifestyle, identity, commitment and perceived role in their community, rather than to the mandating influence of school or government policies.

The Slogan System in Education for Sustainable Development

As we have stated, according to recent literature, the ESD concept rests on 'the three pillars' of ecology, society and economics. Put another way, ESD sees sustainability issues as located conceptually at the intersection of three sets of contending human interests – ecological, social and economic (DEH, 2005, UNESCO, 2003, Henderson and Tilbury, 2004). Sustainability issues consist in arguments among proponents of these three kinds of interests. In addition, an important consideration when resolving these contending interests is the need to reconcile the rights of current and future generations in terms of their access to natural and social environments. So, if ESD is to be regarded as a distinctive form of environment-related education, it must focus on adopting an educative approach about sustainability issues – to improve the capacity of learners to comprehend, participate in and hopefully become better at resolving the contentious clash of ecological, social and economic interests in our environments. In short, ESD focuses on environmental issues for which there are discernible ecological, social and economic interests in dispute, and provides learners with opportunities to engage with and witness the resolution of these issues.

This is the view emerging from the relevant literature. Yet in the schools we worked with in this project:

- The dominant interpretation of ESD is ‘environmentally (or ecologically) sustainable development’;
- Sustainability is mainly seen as preservation of the environment; and
- Teacher-based factors (passion and commitment) are the main driver for environment-related work, rather than new policies in ESD.

How may we account for these seeming differences between the language and practice of environment-related work?

We suggest that one reason is that Education for Sustainable Development is a comfortable idea in that it suggests an interest in a continuation of what we value and what works for us. There need be no real challenge in the idea of sustainability – we can relax in the comfort of a continuation of our current living conditions. It is comfortable also because it is open to interpretation in ways that remain unchallenging for established practice whatever that may be (whether it reflects ecological, social, or economic interests). The language of ESD, like that of environmental education, serves as a three-dimensional slogan; because it embraces the ‘three pillars’ of sustainability, it permits interpretations favoring *any* of the ‘pillars’. Just as the term ‘environmental education’ may be interpreted in any of several ways (including as ‘education *about, in* and *for* the environment’), the ESD slogan may be interpreted as promoting any or all of ecologically sustainable development, socially sustainable development, or economically sustainable development. Where there is a slogan that invites different interpretations at the level of practice, the interpretation most likely to dominate is the one that coheres most closely with dominant interests in the context of implementation. In the case of environment-related work we investigated in this study, this interpretation is ‘environmentally/ecologically sustainable development’. In this sense, it can be argued that the tripartite nature of the ESD language serves as a slogan system (in a similar way to the tripartite language of environmental education) to sustain environment-related educational practice that is essentially the same as traditional environmental education that it was intended to replace – a form that is not necessarily aligned with the aspirations of ESD emerging from the literature.

Conclusion

Institutionalised language can become very powerful, especially when the institutionalisation is conducted by an intergovernmental agency of such high visibility as UNESCO. As in Environmental Education, the three dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development may operate as a slogan system. These slogan systems actually invite, support and justify several interpretations, the effect of which is self-justified and field-justified continuity of practice. Ironically, the three sets of interests whose intersection is allegedly the distinctive feature of ESD also presents a problem for this field of environment-related work. A problem with the descriptor ‘education for sustainable development’ is that it can serve as a slogan that is capable of supporting several interpretations. The idea of ‘sustainability’ itself is a comforting one for most people; it suggests a continuation of living conditions, however we value these. At the very least, this slogan may be interpreted as promoting any or all of ecologically sustainable development, socially sustainable development, or economically sustainable development.

In the re-badging of environmental education as ESD, we have a situation in which individuals in the field are invited and encouraged to engage in environment-related work, and in doing so may take on the legitimating language of the field in any of a variety of ways. So what is the problem with the aggressive re-badging of EE? It is the problem spoken of by Popkewitz (1982) – that the slogans can be used to justify a lot of activity at the levels of language and organization without actually leading to any real or lasting change at the important level of practice. There is a danger that ESD will not lead to an improvement of environment-related education in schools. This is the lesson from environmental education – that when there is a slogan system operating, there is every chance that change will be symbolic only. The language itself will enable a continuity of established practice: resources will be expended, careers developed, associations formed, journals filled – and environment-related practice will not necessarily change for the better. The challenge for ESD is to promote ESD practice in schools and elsewhere that is qualitatively different from established environment-related practice and that is more inclusive than any of ecologically sustainable development, socially sustainable development, or economically sustainable development on their own.

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