

Challenging a “Closing Circle”: Alternative Research Agendas for the ESD Decade

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CORE QUESTIONS

The object of our professional work is the reconstruction of the complex web of personal and social relations to the environment, considered as a crucial educational issue. We conceptualize and practice EE (or “environment-related education,” following Paul Hart’s expression, 2003, p. 3) as an essential dimension of education that emphasizes the close relationships between the human and the “more-than-human-world,” woven in the same life matrix. It interprets culture and nature as two intertwined dimensions of our living milieu. It considers environmental matters as socio-ecological realities and examines the links between eco-logy and eco-nomy: the *logos* (logic, theory and discourse) and *nomos* (rules, custom) of *oikos* (our shared habitat or house) in light of a critical and constantly evolving eco-sophy (knowledge, wisdom). In our professional practice—mainly centered on educators’ professional development—research, teaching, and social involvement in field projects are closely interconnected reflexive activities.

Through our projects, one of our observations is that students, colleagues, teachers, and other educators often are attracted to all sorts of “new” concepts and language (they

have recently “discovered” through their readings or encounters), ranging, for example, from “place-based education” to “community-based social marketing to foster sustainable behavior.” Facing the seductive attraction of what is “new”—“new” seen as “better”—and also facing the large range of theoretical and practical possibilities for environmental education, we keep co-learning with them through simple questions, so as to challenge or double-check what too often appears self-evident:

- What do I mean when I talk about the “environment”?
- What is “education” to me? Where does this meaning come from?
- What is my understanding of “environmental education”? How did I construct it?
- What does “development” mean to me?
- What about the meaning of this other idea called “sustainable development”?
- And then what about “education for sustainable development”?
- Where do these ideas come from?
- Upon which type of reasoning or arguments do they rest?
- What are the various foundations upon which my own educational endeavors rest?
- What are some of the possible blind spots of my own educational theory and practice?

These are not rhetorical or abstract or useless questions. We ask these questions and many others to educators and to ourselves in the hope of continuously improving the meaning and relevance of our educational practice, both to widen and to deepen its prospects. Because of

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its complexity, educating about the relation with the environment calls for diversity, for the recognition and exploration of the many diverse ways of conceiving and practicing EE. The questions we raise aim at creating a reflexive distance with one's own educational history, thinking, and practice and also help to historicize the field.

HISTORICIZING THE FIELDS OF EE AND ESD

Our reading of the history of the field of EE is paradoxical. On the one hand, through our exploration of the richness, the depth, and the importance of educational writings concerning the ontogenic dimension of our human relation with the environment, through examining philosophically and ethically inspired “environmental” literature and also documenting some of the currents (models and strategies) of EE as they are theorized and practiced in different parts of the world and diverse cultures, we realized the field of EE was potentially and actually much more fertile and diversified than the formal proposals that stemmed from the Belgrade and Tbilissi conferences of 1975 and 1977, centered on environmental problem solving. On the other hand, we grew more and more wary as we witnessed a rising tide of almost purely instrumental views of EE where, as an example, education is reduced to a means of implementing a globalized mix of (highly questionable) developmental and environmental agendas, such as in *Agenda 21*.

We undertook a research project to analyze international proposals for EE that arose through the past 30 years, starting from the Stockholm conference of 1972 to the Johannesburg one of 2002. Through a content analysis of these proposals, notably focusing on the representations of “education,” “environment,” “development,” “environmental education,” and “education for development” they carry, we were staggered to see how the range of approaches to the environment have somehow

been constantly narrowing. Even though the rhetoric of the proposals is increasingly about expanding the so-called narrow perspectives of EE and bringing about a “new paradigm,” their actual content essentially presents education as an instrument for the conservation of the environment, which is reduced to the status of resource for economic development, itself seen as an essential precondition and goal for social development. In the conceptual framework of sustainable development (represented by three interrelated spheres: economy, society, and environment), economy is a driving force strangely reified and situated outside society, and which regulates the relations between society and environment. In the essentially anthropocentric ethics and occidental developmentalist evolutionary view of the world it proposes, the relations between human and nature (or society and environment) are reduced to the couple manager-resources, thus reducing both the environment (inputs for economy) and human nature (human as consumer and human capital “resource” for economic growth). This “cosmology” exacerbates the tendency already present through the 30-year story of international proposals for EE, which was born, let's recall, in the crucible of the United Nations (UN) “New world economic order” (1974), worried about the preservation of “raw materials” and the sharing of profits with “underdeveloped” countries. The “new” feature of education for sustainable development is that it now finally consecrates the shift from an environmental perspective (“a healthy human environment needs careful development”) to a developmental one (“sustained economic development needs sustained environmental resources”). The claims of an expansion of the field of EE through ESD and DESD can thus rather be seen as an enclosure. More than 30 years after Barry Commoner (1971) wrote *The Closing Circle*, another closing seems to be expanding.

We are well aware that advancing the idea of education for sustainable development as part of a closing circle, as part of educational and environmental problems, is unsettling for many people. This idea is generally not

welcomed for various reasons. Stakeholders associated with the advancement of these proposals (which entered the spheres of political programs) do not wish for contestation, they wish for consensus, for progress, quantifiable progress, often through indicators. Most actors in the field are convinced of the goodness, the fairness, and the soundness of education for sustainable development. But again, as educators and researchers, we need to be reflexive, we need to ponder very seriously the worldview we advance through our educational endeavors, through our choice of language, through our practice, through the themes we tend to prefer, and so on.

SOME ELEMENTS OF AN ALTERNATIVE AGENDA

The ESD Decade, a diffusion strategy entrusted to UNESCO by the UN Economic and Social Council to promote a worldwide politicoeconomic program, offers a new context in which to pursue such reflections through our research projects and teaching programs, following an alternative agenda from which we present the following elements:

- Exercise a critical watch regarding languages, discourses, and practices. Identify potentially hegemonic strategies in some lines of thought. For example, the rather usual promoting of educational activities on "water resources as the blue gold of the future" or on "biodiversity as genetic pools or reserves" fail to acknowledge how loaded these are with almost purely market economy approaches to the environment. Issues of language often are discarded as unimportant by many educators. While we recognize language as only one dimension of practice, for us, treating it disparagingly as a minor detail compared with action is dramatic. As Piaget noted, "every language contains a logic and a cosmology, and the child, while learning to speak at the same time or even before he learns to think, thinks according to the adult social milieu" (1926/1947, p. XL).
- Examine and experience various educational proposals for their heuristic potential to stimulate the search for political and economical alternatives within societies. Promote educational interventions that facilitate the exploration of and development of alternative cosmologies. Promote initiatives of social development that carry us "beyond development."
- Develop a "pedagogy of uncertainty" and of humility as an alternative to the naive assurance sometimes associated with sustainability. Learn to live with uncertainty, recognizing and dealing with the absence of knowledge. Be wary of large-scale projects for salvation and ideologies presented as monolithic driving powers, however virtuous they can be. Related to the notion of uncertainty, it is also important to associate "risk education" with an education for socioenvironmental resiliency, according to the proposal of Arturo Curiel Ballesterio (2005). Such resiliency can only be lived through the multiplicity of singular projects, culturally and contextually relevant, aiming at creative "resistance" (Aubenas & Benasayag, 2002) as opposed to grand universal projects (as the one of global sustainable development) that impose themselves as "slogans" and moulds for thought, in spite of their call to "local agendas," which are, in fact, small-scale replicas of the same planetary project.
- Celebrate the diversity of theoretical and practical possibilities in EE: at least 15 trends regrouping a very large diversity of models and strategies have been developed through the last decades (Sauvé, 2005). Education for sustainable development in only one of the many referential frameworks in which EE (or environment-related education) can be theorized and practiced. The possibilities of other referential frameworks also should be examined: political ecologies (which strive to integrate issues of nature and society so as to overcome the dualism between culture

and nature), ecodevelopment (which integrates cultural anthropology), ecosocialism, ecofeminism, social ecology, and so on.

- Reappropriate our history of EE, as Edgar González Gaudiano (2002) invites us to do. Exert a vigil with regards to the historical reconstructions made through deforming prisms. Reappropriate our professional and cultural identity, without withdrawing. Keep on enriching this identity through our professional experiences, our exchanges, and the occasions of fertile interbreeding between various fields of education (like health education or peace education), social sciences, environmental sciences, and others.
- Pursue diagnostic assessments. Where EE seems “defectively oriented” or too limited in some particular application, as sometimes decried by ESD proponents, let’s colearn with participants in these projects, possibly through the “core questions” mentioned above, as ways to enrich these initiatives rather than change them for a whole “new” educational project whose foundations remain eminently debatable and that, on the practical level, has not yet proven reliable.

While doing this, we can take up the challenge of trying to meet zones of educational intervention that ESD cannot meet as Bob

Jickling (2004) signals, working both in wider and deeper ways to rebuild how we relate to the world. Environmental education can suggest paths allowing us to move beyond “sustainable development,” to travel other paths and to seek breaches in this new closing circle.

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