Sustainable development in education: Consensus as an ethical issue

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The core argument put forward by Charles Hopkins, Jeanne Damlamian and Gustavo López Ospina (1996) to justify "sustainable development" as the central goal of education, is the "new international consensus" among "experts" on the importance of education to promote sustainable development. To demonstrate the strength of this consensus, they refer to international conferences held in the 90's (funded and thus legitimated by UN agencies) that did promote "sustainable development". This argument, based on the authority of experts and organisations, sets the railway of thought and practices towards a global educational reform. What remains to be done is to "refine" the concept. Minimally, this idea of a consensus as the core argument for this world wide reform needs to be critically appraised. Why is the idea of a consensus so seductive? Is there really such a consensus amongst educators? Is a consensus an appropriate basis for educational reform and environmental action? What are the core elements of this consensus?

The proposal of "sustainable development" was framed by the World Commission on Environment and Development as a compromise negotiated between some privileged actors of the economical, political and environmental spheres (WCED, 1987). Vaillancourt (1992) remembers that in this negotiation round, any explicit reference to "environment" or any expression including eco- (like eco-developement) had been discarded because it was an irritant for many participants: the focus had to be on (economic) development. This compromise was then presented as a universal consensus.

In this way, following Delruelle (1993), consensus has become a new frame of reference for decisions, a "new ethical and political paradigm". It is then much more than a "democratic" strategy to facilitate co-operation between social actors: consensus also brings an impression of certainty against the anguish and stress caused by the dissolution of previous ideologies, the collapse of "truths" and the decline of religions.

The problem arises when consensus becomes a universal prescription, as "the touchstone of truth and the guarantor of correctness in matters of decision and action" (Rescher, 1993, p. 7). Nicholas Rescher develops a rigorous argumentation to demonstrate that "consensus is not a criterion of truth, is not a standard of value, is not an index of moral or ethical appropriateness, is not a requisite for co-operation, is not a communal imperative for just social order, is not, in itself, an appropriate ideal" (p. 199). Moreover consensus as a dogma does not consider the diversity of other visions, desires, signification, possibilities. The search for consensus should not overshadow pluralism and "dissension" which can become important creative forces in a society. Considering diversity is not only an ecological strategy to promote richness and equilibrium in a

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social system, but it is also an ethical imperative. The ethical process specifically implies to take into account what is outside of "common sense" (decreed by consensus), of "normality", and to listen to difference (Delruelle, 1993). In this perspective, to reframe indigenous cultures as an expression of sustainable development reveals a lack of cultural sensitivity and an ethical myopia.

Amongst educators, there exists a rich diversity of world visions, of conceptions of environment, society, development, education ... As examples, the alternative treaty on environmental education resulting from the Global Forum (Council of the Earth, 1992) and the different views and critics expressed during the regional meetings organised by UNESCO in preparation for the Thessaloniki Conference (Orellana and Fauteux, 2000). It has to be considered also that more than half of the participants in the recent International Debate on Education for Sustainable Development agreed that "Education for Sustainable Development has to be abolished as a concept" (Hesselink *et al*, 2000). Still the promoters of ESD maintain that there is a consensus for this proposal; and this consensus should be the world wide basis of education. "Whose interests are being served?" asks Jickling (2000).

Bob Jickling is one of the "dissident" researchers and educators who call for a critical analysis of "sustainable development" and the derived "sustainability" proposal, as values and goals for education. To understand such dissent, it is necessary to examine for example the discourse of Chapter 36 of the Action 21 (WCED, 1993) and the proposal of the Thessaloniki Declaration (UNESCO, 1997). In these documents (whose guidelines are promoted by Hopkins *et al.*, 1996 and Hopkins, 1998), environment is essentially seen as a reservoir of resources for development; conservation practices are unavoidable constraints to sustain development; the relation to the environment is one of management; development is associated with sustained growth in a new world economic order; education (as a communication and training process) is an instrument to promote sustainable development; following this "new vision of education", the "populace" will be "informed" and "prepared to support changes" determined by experts and world leaders (Sauvé *et al.*, 2000).

These views, "wrapped in a generous rhetoric of equity for sustainability" (Sauvé and Berryman, 2001) confirm the economisation of all human activities and legitimate "development" as the new cultural and ethical paradigm, based on the historically constructed occidental belief that "development" is the universal key to save humanity (Rist, 1996). The core content of the conceptual framework of sustainable development is illustrated by the three interrelated poles of economy, society and environment: it promotes a vision of the world where economy is outside the social sphere and is legitimated to determine society's relationships with the environment. ESD brings people to adopt this "new cosmology" (Berryman, 2000). The language is normative: all the teachers over the world "must" "deliver" sustainable development.

It is not surprising if many environmental educators feel uncomfortable with this global and hegemonic educational project characterised by "determinism" and "exclusivity" (Jickling, 1999). Environment, our shared house (*Oikos*) of human and non human life, woven with the interlaced treads of nature and culture, cannot be reduced to "raw material" for economic growth. Development cannot be the only reference framework to interpret our desires, initiatives, activities, etc. Education is not an instrument to promote an exogenous project: it is "concerned with enabling people to think for themselves" (Jickling, 1992), which implies critical thinking.

Finally, environmental education is not a "discipline" and does not "focus primarily on the environment": it is an essential dimension of fundamental education whose object is the reconstruction of the complex web of relationships between persons, social groups and the environment (Sauvé, L., 1999).

The idea is not to set environmental education and education for sustainable development one against the other, nor to try to integrate them one into the other. Before positioning both, there is still work do be done to examine the evolving ESD proposal, as in the *Environmental Education Research* journal's special issue (Vol. 7, no 2). As noted by Jickling (1999), sustainability appears to be a seductive idea: "it has the capacity to capture important issues and inspire imagination". Considering its universal claim, ESD is an important socio-historical phenomenon that deserves critical appraisal; there is a need "to examine its gestation, incubation and evolution" (Berryman, 2000). Consensus, however, will never suffice as its legitimation.

Consensus raises from diversity; it implies divergences and dissension, and reflects a moving and evolving social reality. As an argument for hegemony, "consensus" can bring tensions, dysfunction and ruptures. In a real democratic context, it can help co-operation, but still it is not an essential precondition of collaborative work in a society: mutual understanding, respect and empathy are much more important (Rescher, 1993, p. 179). The search for consensus, if considered to be possible and needed, should be an evolving, reflexive and critical process, with ... "some humility please!" (Jickling, 1991).

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