Chapter 3

Education for Sustainable Development:
From Environmental Education to Broader Views

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ABSTRACT

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an important educational agenda at the international level, with significant implications for both formal and nonformal education. Though a relatively new topic in modern education, ESD frameworks have evolved and grown in number over the last few decades, from an early concern with education for development and environmental education, to more critical orientations that focus on the relationship between individual and social factors and between environmental and political factors contributing to challenges today for ecological sustainability and global development and flourishing. In this dynamic field, priorities may vary with social context, as a critical interrogation of the importance of place in education is considered fundamental to modern ESD frameworks. This chapter explores and assesses the development of ESD over the past few decades as a formal and nonformal educational policy and practice across world regions, before considering future directions for research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has become an important educational agenda internationally, with significant implications for both formal and nonformal education. However, as noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at the conclusion of its declared

Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2015), at this time ESD faces many challenges to effective implementation across a wide variety of societies, both developing and developed, while there remains much uncertainty in the public and in educational communities about its aims, means, and significance. One of the main causes of the challenges for researchers and educators in this field is no doubt related to

the wide variety of educational missions associated with the phrase, not all of which are mutually compatible, that have come to coexist across and within societies over time.

Part of this diversity of aims and meanings is related to the history of ESD. Originally, and still in some sense today, ESD has been a top-down approach to reform, wherein education is regarded as a tool for development in modernizing countries, as according to its use by global developmental and governance organizations, particularly UNESCO and United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Yet as societies face different developmental challenges and opportunities, diversity rather than uniformity at the level of practice has been a natural result. On the other hand, ESD has also unfolded in everyday educational use in industrialized countries as a form of environmental education that focuses on the environment as an eco-system and the role of humans to conserve resources and decrease negative impacts on the natural world. Again, diversity in ecological contexts, risks, and possibilities create different grounds for such environmentally-based ESD, facilitating additional forms of diversity within environmental education (EE). From these beginnings, the term has further evolved and developed, to include critical political and educational orientations that focus on the relationships between individual, social, environmental, and political factors contributing to contemporary challenges for sustainability and local and global development and flourishing. Today, some eschew the terms "ESD" and "sustainability" as "empty signifiers" (Bengtsson & Ostman, 2013) in light of this plethora of educational meanings and practices attached to these terms. Among such critics include those who argue that social justice should be foregrounded in a holistic approach to EE, "ecopedagogy," and in related postmodern views.

This chapter explores and assesses the development of ESD over the past few decades as a formal and nonformal educational policy and practice across world regions. After giving a historical overview and survey of the field across contexts, it considers future directions for research and practice in ESD and related fields. Though the purpose of this chapter is not to take sides in debates traced out and explored, it does aim to give readers a clear view of potentially beneficial ways forward for effectively conceiving of and implementing ESD, through analyzing the challenges ESD faces at the practical level from a global view.

BACKGROUND

Some argue that the diversity of definitions and understandings of ESD across research and education contexts can be attributed to its early definition being given not by educational (or research) communities but actually by people within the policymaking field. Indeed, education for social development and environmental sustainability has its roots not in the educational community, but in larger social debates over environmental ethics which emerged in developed Western contexts in the 1960s and 1970s. Before this time, environmentalism consisted largely of land conservation, such as in the formal establishing and protecting of lands as modern public parks in western societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet as Light and Rolston note (2003), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, heralded a new ecological consciousness in western societies, which rejected the liberal Enlightenment view of the natural environment as infinitely exploitable for human purposes. With the book notably increasing public awareness of the toll of pesticides on animals, plants, and human health, a critical and postmodern environmental movement emerged alongside peace and civil rights movements that argued for reorganizing of human life with greater consideration of the natural world.

This consciousness of the social and biological worlds as component parts of a more holistically understood ecosystem thereafter emerged in the

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