

Bourn, Douglas

## Education for sustainable development and global citizenship. The challenge of the UN-decade

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## UN-Dekade „Bildung für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung“ (2005 – 2014)

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- Herausforderungen der Dekade für die Erziehungswissenschaft
- Bildung für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung in Schule und Hochschule
- Europäische und internationale Perspektiven
- Kritische Einwürfe

# Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik

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Douglas Bourn

# Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship

## The Challenge of the UN-Decade

*Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag informiert über Errungenschaften und konzeptionelle Unzulänglichkeiten der „Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung“ in Großbritannien im bildungspolitischen und schulischen Bereich. Es wird auf vernachlässigte Zusammenhänge zwischen einer Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung und entwicklungspolitischer Bildung aufmerksam gemacht und dafür plädiert, Fragen der Verflechtung von Ökologie, Ökonomie und Gesellschaft auf lokaler, nationaler und globaler Ebene, verbunden mit der Förderung politischer Partizipation und von Empowerment, in den Mittelpunkt der UN-Dekade zu stellen.*

*Abstract: This article informs about the achievements and conceptual insufficiencies of „education for sustainable development“ on the politico-educational and school level in Great Britain. Therefore attention is drawn to neglected connections between an education for sustainable development and the education for developmental policy. It is argued that questions concerning the interconnection between ecology, economy and society on a local, national and global scale should be put into the centre of the UN-decade, together with the promotion of political participation and of empowerment.*

Learning and understanding more about sustainable development had become a feature of policy initiatives and programmes by a number of countries prior to the decision at the Johannesburg Summit to promote a Decade on the subject (Scott/Gough 2003; 2004; Huckle/Sterling 1996). But research and evaluation of programmes on sustainable development education over the past ten years have in the main highlighted the initiatives as being little more than an extension and development from environmental education (Reid 2002).

The aim in this paper is to remind readers that an important root of sustainable development education has been development education. The launch of the UN decade provides an opportunity to ensure that international and national programmes are closely linked to understanding the world in which we live, the divisions between rich and poor, and the need to engage people in working for a more just and equitable world. In addition this paper, by reviewing progress to date in England, suggests that as a result of a lack of clarity and debate about what is distinctive about education for sustainable development, many of the national policy initiatives

have also been extensions of environmental education with limited objectives.

### Development Education and Education for Sustainable Development

I come to the agenda of education for sustainable development as a development educationalist. This means as one who sees sustainable development closely linked to understanding the world in which we live, the divisions between rich and poor and the need to engage people in working for a more just and equitable world.

For development educationalists today there is increasing recognition that our agenda is not about learning about development, but encouraging an understanding of how the global and the local are interconnected. It is also about give people the skills and knowledge to engage in society in order to secure global as well as local change. Development education practice in England is closely linked to debates and programmes around areas such as active citizenship, human rights, improving the quality of life and understanding cultural diversity (Bourn 2003).

2005 is a year which it is not only the launch of the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development but is also the first review of progress with the Millennium Development Goals and increased international pressure from civil society organisations to ‘make global poverty history’.

Therefore discussions about education for sustainable development need to include discussions about development education and where the global and the environmental dimensions to education relate. The roots of education for sustainable development could be argued to be from both the thinking and practice around environment education and development education. Indeed education for sustainable development has been seen as a bringing together of these two educational movements (Belgeonne 2003).

### UNESCO and UN Decade

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, it was agreed, to recommend the creation

of a Decade on Education for Sustainable Development. Since then UNESCO have developed their strategy in taking this work forward. For them the aims of the decade are closely linked to the global campaign of Education for All. They also want to encourage initiatives at all levels, local, national, regional and global. They recommend that national strategies ensure engagement and partnership with the key stakeholders including voluntary bodies as well as education ministries and schools.

For UNESCO, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development aims to promote education as a basis for a more sustainable human society and to integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels. They see: „Education for sustainable development as a dynamic concept that utilises all aspects of public awareness, education and training to create or enhance an understanding of the linkages among the issues of sustainable development and to develop the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values which will empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. It is about the way we live our lives, the way we respect the lives of others – far and near, present and future – and our attitudes to the world *around us*“ ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)).

UNESCO's Draft Implementation Scheme for the Decade encourages national strategies to consider the following:

- Identify key stakeholders;
- identify and set up appropriate financial mechanisms to cover support to implementing the decade;
- ensure ESD is reflected in existing educational plans;
- develop a framework for co-operation across government and with civil society bodies.

## Education for Sustainable Development in England

The UK could from an initial reading of what is happening on Education for Sustainable Development be seen as one of the few countries that had already begun to implement many of the aims and goals of UNESCO's strategy. But what has happened in England over the past three years has presented as many problems as well as openings for engaging broader support and understanding of sustainable development.

Successive UK government sustainable development strategies have increasingly recognised the need to move beyond environmental indicators and make connections to global and development issues as well as connections to areas such as health, crime and personal lifestyle. The 2005 Sustainable Development government strategy, *'Securing the Future'*, includes a chapter on 'From local to global: creating sustainable communities and a fairer world', but the recommendations for action appear to separate out local and global issues (see [www.sustainable-development.gov.uk](http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk)).

Education belatedly appeared as a priority area within the government's overall sustainable development strategy. This was in a large part due to the work of the government's Sustainable Development Education Panel. They defined ESD

as: „Education for sustainable development is about developing the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to participate in decisions about the way we do things individually and collectively, both locally and globally, that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet for the future“ (DETR/DfEE 1998).

The Panel successfully secured in the revisions to the national curriculum for schools in 2000, direct reference to sustainable development in its aims and purpose and explicitly within four core curriculum subjects: geography, sciences, design and technology and citizenship. Underpinning their approach there were different concepts (see Fig. 1).

In reporting on progress on education for sustainable development in 2003, a Parliamentary Committee in England commented: 'There is little dissent that these concepts encompass the range of thinking required to engage with the multi-faceted issues, such as climate change, which sustainable development embraces. An understanding of some or all of the concepts is not uncommon; they provide the basis for many other life skills and are consistent with what many would consider a good all-round education, providing the foundation for personal and professional development' ([www.parliament.uk/eac](http://www.parliament.uk/eac)).

Examples of good practice were identified on curriculum body's for England specially created web site ([www.nc.uk.net/esd](http://www.nc.uk.net/esd)). The inspection body for schools undertook a review of sustainable development in schools. The outcomes of their review identified again some good examples but identified that much of the activities under the heading of sustainable development were in reality little more than recycling, local environmental projects with occasional references to areas such as fair trade and school linking (see [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)).

Throughout the life of the Panel the following key issues continued to emerge as major challenges:

- Lack of clarity as to what is meant by education for sustainable development which is linked to how do we communicate its key messages and principles;
- over-emphasis within education policy-makers and practitioners to see ESD as about the environment and green issues;
- learning agenda not seen as central – all too often interpreted as environmental management indicators;
- recognition need to make closer connections to debates in society about citizenship, social inclusion, and health and quality of life matters.

(see Annual Reports of the Panel 1998-2002, [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk))

In essence whilst the aims of the government's strategy for sustainable development were visionary and the underlying principles agreed by the Panel provided a framework to implement this vision, educational policy-makers tended to reduce ESD to technocratic and management focused indicators rather than learning outcomes.

In September 2003 the Ministry of Education in England launched its Sustainable Development Action Plan. Those of us who were directly engaged in education for sustainable development were initially enthusiastic about the plan. Its main objectives were as follows:

**Interdependence**

*Understanding the connections and links between all aspects of our lives and those of other people and places at a local and global level, and that decisions taken in one place will affect what happens elsewhere.*

**Citizenship and stewardship**

*Recognising that we have rights and responsibilities to participate in decision-making and that everyone should have a say in what happens in the future.*

**Needs and rights of future generations**

*Learning how we can lead lives that consider the rights and needs of others, and that what we do now has implications for what life will be like in the future.*

**Diversity**

*Understanding the importance and value of diversity in our lives - culturally, socially, economically and biologically - and that all our lives are impoverished without it.*

**Quality of life**

*Recognising that for any development to be sustainable it must benefit people in an equitable way, it is about improving everybody's lives.*

**Sustainable change**

*Understanding that there is a limit to the way in which the world, particularly the richer countries, can develop and that the consequences of unmanaged and unsustainable growth are increased poverty and hardship, and the degradation of the environment, to the disadvantage of us all.*

**Uncertainty and precaution**

*Realising that as we are learning all the time and our actions may have unforeseen consequences we should adopt a cautious approach to the welfare of the planet. (DETR/DfEE 1998).*

Fig. 1: Conceptual challenges of Education for Sustainability in Great Britain

- „All learners will develop the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society.
- We will pursue the highest standards of environmental management across all properties owned and managed by The Department and its associated bodies.
- We will encourage and support all publicly-funded educational establishments to help them operate to the highest environmental standards.
- We will make effective links between education and sustainable development to build capacity within local communities“ (DfES 2003).

As can be seen from these objectives environmental management indicators were brought together in one document with learning strategies. But the plan made no direct reference to the interconnectedness between these two strands.

Since then there has been some progress in taking forward the Action Plan. Consultation documents have been produced for higher education and lifelong learning. A work programme for youth work has also been agreed. The biggest disappointment have been in the area of schools where there has been plenty of activity but based primarily around short-term initiatives be it around school transport, ‘greening the school buildings’ and ‘growing schools’.

## Civil Society and Stakeholder Involvement

A key component of the aims of the UNESCO Implementation Plan is the engagement of civil society organisations.

Most of the initiatives on education for sustainable development around the world have emerged from practice by voluntary and community groups, often responding to local pressure and thirst for more knowledge and opportunity to engage in social action. This has been reflected in England with the strength in support for the two umbrella bodies in this area, the Council for Environmental Education (CEE) and the Development Education Association (DEA). The combined membership of both networks is over three hundred civil society organisations.

Local Agenda 21 provided a major impetus during the 1990s for public engagement in sustainable development through civil society and local government partnerships. Across the UK a range of projects and initiatives were developed linked to strategies which went beyond environmental indicators and began to make connections to areas such as social cohesion and poverty reduction (Huckle/Sterling 1996).

Connections with global issues and development education were recognised by some members of parliament at a debate on the ‘Global in the Local’ organised by the DEA. The member for Milton Keynes for example commented, that her local Development Education Centre had developed a very successful project for schools on what we can learn from Ghana on recycling. „This educational project“, she commented, „had wider impact because it coincided with a plan to build a waste incinerator in the city. Residents’ groups, through the process of campaigning against the plan, began to learn more about recycling. Connections were than what the children were learning about recycling in Ghana“ (DEA 2005).

In more recent years the focus has turned to more regionally based initiatives. In the South West of England, a strategy ‘The Way Ahead?’ has been produced which aims to bring

together local government, civil society organisations and educational bodies to provide regional support structures, resources and programmes linked to community regeneration and skills development (see [www.sustainabilitysouthwest.org.uk](http://www.sustainabilitysouthwest.org.uk)).

However the importance of many of these initiatives became lost as Agenda 21 disappeared within policy statements and funding ended. In March 2005, the Ministry for the Environment by withdrawing strategic funding to CEE and DEA indicated that they no longer saw it as their responsibility to lead on education for sustainable development. It was now the responsibility of the education ministry.

## Policy Limitations

This decision to cease funding key civil society organisations coincided with the second parliamentary report on sustainable development education. In reviewing progress to date, the Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons re-visited sustainable development in early 2005 and the outcomes of their update were far more critical of DfES, the education ministry, than their earlier report in 2003. The new report concluded that the ministry has failed to sustainably development an integral part of its skills strategy and that it needed to give the area much higher priority and match this with long-term funding (see [www.parliament.co.uk/eac2005](http://www.parliament.co.uk/eac2005)).

These issues again relate to the aims within the UNESCO Implementation Plan that refers to both resourcing this area but also ensuring ownership and engagement from education policy-makers. What has happened in England is that the education ministry by stating that it sees it as their role to lead on the subject has by default resulted in lessening the effectiveness and impact of sustainable development within learning.

These challenges within the UK reflect wider questions as outlined by Juergen Rost: „Education for sustainability is to a greater extent a concept that stems from an expression of (international) political will. It could be understood as a kind of mission from the political arena, given to education professionals and academics, to design an educational concept that correctly deals with the necessary requirements for sustainable development in our world“ (Rost 2004).

Education for sustainable development has now grown organically within learning processes. Political pressures to achieve targets both at a national and international level have resulted in a series of short-term initiatives without any recognition that the concept is still contested and lacking in clarity and focus. There is also a belief expressed by a previous education minister in England that sustainable development education is all about changing people's behaviour, to drive less, to be more energy efficient and to recycle more goods.

Development and global issues have been perceived as an add on and not integral to the ministries sustainable development education plans and priorities. The implementation of a parallel strategy on 'international education' reflects this lack of understanding about what is meant by education for sustainable development.

William Scott and Stephen Gough from Bath University in England propose that learning has to be at the heart of what we understand by sustainable development education. Understanding sustainable development is complex and too many people it will seem impossible to achieve. They suggest that „sustainable development cannot possibly mean an 'end state' to be achieved because there are no end states. If sustainable development means anything it can only be a way of describing an adaptive approach to managing human-environment co-evolution“ (Scott/Gough 2003).

It is suggested here that until there is a clarity about these terms and the recognition of a long-term learning process, there is considerable evidence from the UK that sustainable development education will be reduced to environmental management indicators rather than empowering people to be responsible and active global citizens.

John Huckle, one of the leading thinkers on ESD in the UK suggests that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is about understanding the social practices that shape and are shaped by different discourses. It is also about cultivating critical choice amongst discourses. Classroom talk plays a key role for it is through dialogue that pupils (with guidance) can decide what is technically possible, culturally appropriate, and morally and politically right. Language enables them to critically evaluate discourse, judge knowledge claims, and arrive at consensus about those forms of technology and governance that may enable people to realise their common interests in sustainability. ESD requires that the ground rules for classroom talk are made visible (Huckle 2003).

Stephen Sterling, another leading thinker in this area has emphasised the importance of system thinking as a way of progressing debate on ESD. We need, he suggests to think out of the box, to shift our focus and attention „from things to processes, from static states to dynamics, and from parts to wholes“ (Sterling in Tilbury/Wortman 2004).

Others such as Ikeda (2005) and Maiteny (2005) take a more spiritual and emotive approach towards ESD. Ikeda looks at the area from a Buddhist perspective and says that sustainability can best be understood in terms of relationships and personal as well as social transformation. Maiteny, influenced by Laszlo argues that attempts to change attitudes and values and world views towards sustainability through rational persuasion have limited success. He suggests that educators need to embrace the psycho-emotional dimensions of motivation and learning if they are to contribute to the long-lasting behavioural change that is needed to bring about sustainability.

This range of views and perspectives on ESD reflects many of the challenges and dilemmas for the UNESCO decade. There is a danger of the subject being all things to all people with no focus and being used to re-inforce a wide range of views and perspectives on education and personal and social change.

It is proposed in this paper that whilst aspects of the above mentioned perspectives have some validity there is a need to frame the debate for the decade within the interrelationship of the environment, economy and society at local, national and global levels. But it above all needs to be about people engaging on their own terms in changing the quality of their lives and those of people in the future.

## Debating Education for Sustainable Development During the Decade

The UNESCO decade because it is a ten-year strategy provides an opportunity to think about long-term change. Central to this decade has to be engaging all sectors of civil society and education in dialogue, debate and above all learning about what form of societies and what sort of planet do we want to live in the future. This means as UNESCO states has to be 'fundamentally about values with respect at the centre: respect for others, including those of present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the resources of the planet we inhabit.' (www.unesco.org)

What has been missing from the implementation programme in England has been values and what are the learning outcomes we are all trying to achieve. If ESD is not seen as connected to developing greater understanding and skills of what is happening the world today, then what is its purpose?

Policy development and implementation on education for sustainable development has in the UK gone ahead of debating what we are trying to achieve, taking risks and encouraging innovation and reflecting on what is good practice. By rushing into producing policies and plans there has been a lack of debate and dialogue as to what is meant by the terms being promoted.

Central to any strategies for promoting ESD has to be the links between the agendas of ESD and people's active engagement in society. What makes education for sustainable development potentially so exciting and to governments and decision-makers so challenging, is the emphasis on a sense of responsibility, of involving people in decision making in new ways. Sustainable development is not seen by international institutions as about environmental economic indicators or statistics, it is about challenging values, attitudes, ways of living, of proposing that to live in a sustainable society and on a sustainable planet, the values of equity, interdependence, co-operation and citizenship have to be central. That securing changing involves both the consumer and the decision making.

Therefore ESD if it is really effective has to be rooted in approaches towards learning and education that are participatory, are about economic and social change and above all give people the skills, confidence and knowledge to improve the quality of life for themselves and for others at local, national and global levels.

Tim O'Riordan, a member of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, has said that he sees „education for sustainability as the creation of a sense of global citizenship in all humanity“. For O'Riordan, education for sustainability is linked to democratic development. „Democracy“, he suggests, „is both the necessary vehicle for the transition to sustainability and the greatest obstacle“ (see his reading in Scott/Gough 2004). This implies we cannot divorce discussions about sustainable development from participation and empowerment.

If sustainable development is about the interrelationship of environment, economy and society, it means including the agendas of citizenship and social inclusion, combating poverty at local, national and at a global level, and general public concerns about the quality of life. It is about learning about how we can move towards a more sustainable society for all.

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