

van Dijk, Nicky

Playing the long game. Rethinking education for sustainability. A reply to Su and Su and Niebert

on education. Journal for research and debate 2 (2019) 4, 3 S.



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

van Dijk, Nicky: Playing the long game. Rethinking education for sustainability. A reply to Su and Su and Niebert - In: on education. Journal for research and debate 2 (2019) 4, 3 S. - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-230442 - DOI: 10.25656/01:23044; 10.17899/ON_ED.2019.4.9

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-230442>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:23044>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:

on_education

Journal for Research and Debate

<https://www.oneducation.net>

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Playing the Long Game: Rethinking Education for Sustainability: A Reply to Su and Su and Niebert

Nicky van Dijk

Both Su and Su (2019) and Niebert (2019) in this issue have argued against sustainability education.¹ Su and Su argued we should focus on educating adults instead of children if we want to tackle pressing environmental problems and achieve intergenerational justice. Niebert argued in favour of political education, as the effectiveness of sustainability education is questionable. Though I agree with both of their positions—that solving the climate crisis should be the responsibility of adults, and that political education is valuable—I do think they dismissed sustainability education too easily. In this reply I argue that sustainability education has the potential to be valuable and effective, but that this may depend on how comprehensively and invasively this is employed.

Su and Su give (at least) three reasons for why we should not use sustainability education—or, in other words, our children—to solve the problems we ourselves created. First, we simply do not have the time to wait for our children to solve the climate crisis. To prevent the worst effects of climate change, significant action should be taken before 2030 (IPCC, 2018, p. 14)—behavioural change through sustainability education will be too late. Second, Su and Su, following Hannah Arendt, argue that sustainability education ‘implicitly denies [adults’] responsibility’ (Arendt, 1959, p. 50). We use education as ‘an excuse not to solve our own problems and crises, our “ticket out”’ (Su and Su, 2019). However, educators (and other adults) should be held responsible for the current environmental and climate crisis—not young people. Third, Su and Su and Arendt warn that we should not aim to ‘create a new political order through education’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 177). ‘Indoctrinating our solution’ is impossible as we cannot foresee future problems, and unfair as it undermines future generations’ chances to a life of their own (Su and Su, 2019). Therefore, Su and Su conclude, intergenerational justice cannot and should not be achieved through education.

I agree with their criticisms of sustainability education: it cannot solve the climate crisis, it should not be used as a ‘ticket out’, and indoctrinating children is not justified. However, *if* education could promote intergenerational justice without indoctrination, then this would still be valuable. It may not solve the harmful short-termism of the current generation, but it could ameliorate harmful short-term thinking of adults-to-be influencing more distant future generations. We could play the long game. That is, *if* sustainability education could influence the attitudes, values, behaviour and habit formation of future citizens, consumers and political agents.

But, could it? Niebert questions the effectiveness of sustainability education. He summarises several studies about sustainability education, and shows that while they

did confirm positive cognitive effects, the influence on students’ attitude, values or behaviour is very minimal. Therefore, Niebert argues, we should instead focus on political education. After all, most great environmental challenges to date have been addressed by political and economic action, and not by a change in individual behaviour.

However, this criticism may just refer to *current* sustainability education. A different *form* of sustainability education could be more effective. A large meta-study by Stern, Powell and Hill (2014) shows the positive effects—though often small—of sustainability education on student’s attitudes and behaviour. They also formulate best practices for sustainability education, including the use of an holistic approach, including active and experimental engagement with nature, using affective (emotional) messaging, and using teachers as passionate, caring and sincere role-models (Stern, Powell, and Hill, 2014, pp. 600–602).

Next to changing the form of sustainability education, offering different *content* may also improve its effectiveness. Though this brief reply can impossibly offer a significant contribution to this, I will highlight a feature of current sustainability education that often remains uncontested, while there are good reasons for questioning it.

At the foundation of current sustainability education lies a Western ontology and epistemology. Alternative, local or Indigenous knowledge is not only underacknowledged, but often completely excluded. In a country with Indigenous Peoples, this has an influence on the learning abilities, self-esteem and self-confidence of Indigenous People (Breidlid, 2009, p. 147). Also, it has major implications on the distribution of power in a country. ‘The privileging of some knowledge over others will extend a degree of power to those who hold that knowledge’ (Sillitoe, 1998, p. 233). But it is also important for sustainability education specifically, as it leaves Indigenous resources and knowledge under-utilised (Breidlid, 2009, p. 147). For thousands of years Indigenous People have lived sustainably in peace with their land. This may be due to their completely different understanding of their environment, other species and their intergenerational relations.² It is worth examining how Indigenous knowledge and understandings of nature and sustainability could complement or improve our education.

Winter (2017, pp. 19–20, 213–20) describes five tensions between Indigenous and Western philosophy:

1. *Holism*. Western philosophy holds many binary ontological distinctions, such as human vs. nature or civilised vs. wild. Here, often only humans are of moral significance, and cultural and natural environments are not only ‘different’, but also merely instrumentally valuable to the extent that it is (potentially) valuable for humanity. Indigenous philosophy dismantles these binary distinctions. All that is nonhuman has an inseparable relationship with humans. Humans are not privileged, and justice requires to consider all elements of the environment—living and non-living.
2. *Non-human subjectivity*. In Indigenous philosophy, all ‘things’—sentient and non-sentient, human and non-human, and alive, dead and inanimate—have subjectivity. Everything is a site of justice and is worthy of respect.
3. *Place-focus*. In the West the environment is often approached as measurable or quantifiable property, which can be accessed for wealth or divided into ownership parcels. Indigenous Peoples understand the environment in terms of custodial ethic. Here, place—including land, territories, waterways, lakes, seas—is the physical environment that is deeply entwined with one’s cultural identity and structure. There is a spiritual relationship with place, which prescribes relationships, obligations and one’s way of being.
4. *Communitarianism*. The community—not the individual—is of ultimate importance to Indigenous Peoples. The integrity of the community is necessary to support the dignity of the individual. Here, a community is understood to include ancestors and non-human beings. It acknowledges the gifts of the past, and the responsibilities towards the future.
5. *Past-in-present-in-future*. Instead of understanding time as something linear, where the past has passed and the future is yet to be encountered, both past and future are in the present in Indigenous philosophy. This means that the present is not privileged over past and future, which is contrary to Western thought where especially distant temporalities are of little moral importance.

The Western philosophy lies at the foundation of sustainability education and our conception of intergenerational justice. However, an Indigenous understanding of the relation between humans and nature, or between current and future generations, could open a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability. It conceptualises intergenerational justice differently, as both past and future generations and non-human beings are included in the realm of justice. Through the entanglement of past-present-future in Indigenous philosophy, there is no intergenerational competition, and intergenerational justice does not feel like a sacrifice (Meyer, 2015). Acknowledging Indigenous philosophy could open new innovative pathways to the Western conception of intergenerational justice, and through this to sustainability education.

However, including the above-named best practices—including striving for holism and going out into nature—and acknowledging Indigenous wisdom has an influence on our education system in a very fundamental way. Rather than questioning its value and effectiveness, there is a greater need to question whether it is justified and/or feasible in liberal-democratic societies.³

1. Different terms are used, such as environmental education, sustainability education, education about sustainability, and education for sustainability. For simplicity and consistency reasons I used ‘sustainability education’ in my reply.
2. Several studies suggest that our romantic idea of deliberate conservation of nature by Indigenous Peoples is a myth (Alvard, 1993; Krech, 1981). It either did not occur, ‘or was a side effect of low population density, simple technology, and lack of external markets to spur over-exploitation’ (Hames, 2007, p. 180; see also Hunn, 1982). Also, knowledge of how to harvest sustainably is essential for conservation practices in the first place, and this knowledge is often absent or mistaken in traditional ecological knowledge (Smith, 2001). An objection to this research is that Indigenous people may have failed to conserve, but this should be understood in the conditions they were put in, e.g. by European settlers: ‘native peoples were dispossessed of their land, forced into marginal areas or into areas already inhabited by other native peoples, required to share their resources with Euro Americans, witnessed the value of traditional resources reaching astronomical value because of the action of external markets, and acquired superior foreign hunting technology’ (Hames, 2007, p. 183; see also Burch, 2007; Hunn et al., 2003). Other research does show Indigenous Peoples’ positive motivation for conservation (e.g. Zavaleta, 1999). Moreover, more recent research shows that restoration of traditional owner decision-making and valuing Indigenous community knowledge is central to sustainability outcomes (see e.g. Godden and Cowell, 2016), as well as promoting social justice (Moorcroft, 2016).
3. For a discussion about whether (this more invasive and comprehensive form of) sustainability education is compatible with state neutrality (i.e. neutrality towards conceptions of the good life), see Schinkel (2009). Dobson (2003) argues that in order to educate in accordance with liberal neutrality also alternative ideas about sustainability should be presented. In other words, non-Western views about sustainability *should* be included in sustainability education to prevent non-neutrality by omission. However, as Schinkel rightly argues, this refers to education *about* sustainability where merely different views are presented, instead of education *for* sustainability which aims at behavioural and value change. Future research could investigate opportunities to use Indigenous wisdom and views of intergenerational justice in future education, while honouring state neutrality.

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Recommended Citation

van Dijk, N. (2019). Playing the long game: Rethinking education for sustainability; A reply to Su and Su and Niebert. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 2(4). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2019.4.9

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