

THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY: LINKING POLITICS, EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Review by Elaine Nevin

Hugh Atkinson and Ros Wade (eds.) (2015) *The Challenge of Sustainability: Linking politics, education and learning*, University of Bristol: Policy Press.

The concept of sustainability is a complex and contested one, often misunderstood or misinterpreted and because of its complexity requires the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders including politicians, educators and citizens on a local and global scale. And what does sustainable development look like anyway? This book highlights this complexity for us as well as outlining the challenges, difficulties and opportunities of engaging people in sustainability at many levels and the relationships between our political systems, the way we learn and education. Physically our environment is being degraded; our climate is changing, there is growing poverty and inequality; and even though this is the case, and the scientific evidence is there to show it, the great challenge of engaging people at all levels still remains. There is a need for a global response and a fundamental change in the way in which we do business. This timely book stresses the sense of urgency and the need for change to happen soon. There is hope provided with a belief that this fundamental change can happen and that we can ultimately live in harmony with our natural environment.

The contributors to this edited text provide us with an exploration of the interconnectedness of education, learning and politics. They highlight ‘the need to challenge the current education paradigm; the realisation that the current neoliberal growth models are proving problematic and yet remain a strong influence in government policy’ (6). Neoliberalism is also helping to shape formal education, both in the privatisation and the marketisation of the curricula, which in some cases is educating people for unsustainable development. It is also contributing to short-term politics and the lack of political will within our current systems to address the effect of high

consumption lifestyles on global ecosystems. And on the other hand, there are positive examples of governments, localities, education providers and citizens engaging with the sustainability agenda, at a local level both in policy and practice and it is these practical examples that show us that change and transformation are not only possible but are happening

The book is divided into four parts. Part One deals with challenges of sustainability, politics and education; Part Two looks at actions including case studies in politics, education and learning; Part Three looks at case studies from around the globe; and part four analyses future scenarios. In Chapter One, Hugh Atkinson highlights clearly the huge planetary challenges that exist today from climate change, environmental degradation, deforestation and poverty. He argues that we are in an age that many describe as the Anthropocene era, ‘an argument that the impact of human behaviour on the planet over a consolidated period of time has been so significant as to constitute a new geological era’ (11). He emphasises that the challenges we face are multi-faceted and, therefore, need a range of social, environmental and economic responses. He draws our attention to some of the positive actions that have taken place including recycling, fair trade and corporate social responsibility; there is also an abundant supply of renewable energy sources such as solar power but the missing ingredient is political will. Atkinson stresses the need for green societies, not just green economies and points to the importance of building on the many global agreements including the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the Millennium Development goals (MDGs).

He points to the need for change in the psychology of politicians and voters and this is one place where Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is needed. The politics of sustainability is the focus of Chapter Two and in it Stuart Wilks-Hegg asks if democracy ‘represents part of the problem or the solution’ for sustainability (43). He explores cases for ‘green authoritarianism’ and ‘green democracy’ and concludes that there is really not too much democracy but too little. But within democracy there are challenges and no ‘quick fix’ (8); there is the challenge of getting politicians

to be honest with their voters on some of the unpopular measures that need to be taken to achieve sustainability including some sacrifice on the part of voters. Wilks-Hegg draws our attention to the short-termism of politics and how the long-term thinking and acting required for sustainability poses a challenge for politicians in 3-5 year electoral cycles. He concludes that we should look at incorporating some form of informed consent for citizens.

Ros Wade in Chapter Three explores learning, pedagogy and sustainable development, giving a comprehensive history of the inclusion of education and ESD in international agreements including the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development for which UNESCO has played a leading role. There has been progress in ESD, highlighting policy integration in countries such as Denmark, Wales and The Netherlands but this progress has been slow. She looks at the important role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their successes in influencing government policy, in particular in the UK with the Centre for Environmental Education (CEE), Development Education Association (DEA) and WWF-UK. Wade emphasises the importance of non-formal as well as formal education sectors and the synergy between both and states that ‘some might say that they [non-formal sectors] are even more important, as this is where ESD can be applied directly and more immediately to sustainability issues and problems’ (78). Wade highlights that education is one of the largest resource commitments of the public sector and the increase of government control over the curricula. What we need, Wade stresses, are ‘policy makers and politicians who are prepared to lead the debate ... to reorient education systems towards sustainable development’ (82).

Part Two deals with practical case studies from around the world, in particular the US and EU from a policy perspective. In both the US and EU there has been significant integration of environmental concerns into policy. For example, in the US there was a golden era of environmental policy between 1964 and 1980 with legislation such as the Endangered Species Act passed as far back as 1973 and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set up in 1970. However, since then the US has failed to engage with

the Kyoto Protocol and there has been, as Hugh Atkinson points out, a policy gridlock. However, the picture is more complex and there have been some positive examples coming from the US with President Obama speaking of excessive energy use by the US and the effect of this globally. There have been a range of new policies such as a new energy for America policy and a President's Climate Action Plan. Atkinson also draws attention to some local sustainability actions and initiatives such as the Green City Index in US and Canadian cities.

In Chapter Five, John O'Brennan highlights the EU as a global leader in the fight against climate change by promoting sustainable development and through significant achievements at a policy level including the integration of sustainability into policy levels across the EU member states. This, he explains, has been achieved in different ways and by the engagement of a multitude of actors across many levels. Jenneth Parker in Chapter Six, outlines the importance of action research as a tool for working with different sectors including the environment and the development sectors, dealing specifically with the convergence workshop and framework and 'its potential to be used as a "unifying framework" for sustainability practitioners' (5). Convergence is a concept developed during the Kyoto climate talks by Aubrey Meyer (2001) promoting global eco justice and supports equitable use of the Earth's resources by allowing a per capita allocation. This would have the effect of contracting use of CO₂ in the developed world whilst allowing for a greater amount of development in the global South.

Part Three begins with a chapter addressing some of the challenges to sustainability in Sub-Saharan Africa. It examines issues related to sustainable development and ESD through case studies from Uganda, Rwanda and Lake Malawi. The case studies consider: the importance of indigenous knowledge in the fishing industry in Lake Malawi; oil exploration and its effect on local communities, including environmental degradation in Uganda; and the importance of community-focused and child-centred education in Rwanda. The case studies show the interrelationships between

local and global issues, highlighting the important links between politics and education and the role of good governance, transparency, and peace and security in sustainable development.

Chapter Eight focuses on the Regional Centres for Expertise (RCE) in Education for Sustainable Development as a positive example of ESD in action and as agents of change as demonstrated through case studies of RCE Saskatchewan, Canada, RCE Greater Sendai Japan and RCE Greater Nairobi, Kenya. The multi-stakeholder UNU (United Nations University) accredited RCE network provides opportunities for universities, NGOs, local communities and businesses to work together on areas of common interest focused on sustainability which are location-specific and locally relevant and provide an opportunity to share this local learning through a global network. In Chapter Nine, John Blewitt gives us an insight into the relationship between people and urban space; highlighting that currently ‘over half the world lives in cities’ and ‘that the “natural” world is predominately urban as is the global economy’ (205). He describes the city as a ‘product of capitalism trading in goods, services, natural materials and people’ (206); within the city through technology, flashing imagery and other media we are actively encouraged into consuming more. Blewitt also emphasises the positives of digital and social media where it can provide opportunities for communal participation. He stresses the need to reclaim these urban spaces as public spaces if we are to achieve sustainability.

Part Four provides a synopsis of the challenges we are facing from ‘traditional neoliberal growth models that are proving increasingly problematic for the people of this planet’ (229). This section warns that there are no quick fixes to sustainability, that technology and ecological modernisation are just part of the solution and what we need is a change in the policy agenda to not just deal with economic interests but focus on social and ecological needs. It emphasises the important role of ESD and the need for the knowledge, skills and values that permeate ESD to be at the core of education for all. It recognises the need for transdisciplinary approaches and highlights the synergies between formal, non-formal and informal education

and the important role of each. This section stresses that what we need is ‘vibrant and inclusive democracy at a local level’ and ‘a much more active citizen engagement and a well-informed public base’ (232).

What will our sustainable future look like? What kind of society do we need to build in order to make a sustainable living? How can people and planet live in harmony? These are some of the questions asked in this book and we are challenged as readers to help find solutions. The book highlights the positive actions that are currently happening to support sustainability worldwide including the success of recycling, fair trade, the RCE movement, education for all, the incorporation of ESD into some national policies, the role of NGOs, child-centred education and community focused work. It also clearly outlines persistent challenges, including the neoliberal agenda that equates happiness with possessions, the need for a paradigm shift in our education system and a change in the way we do politics. The book leaves us in no doubt that these obstacles will be difficult to overcome but are alive with possible solutions. There is hope and the hope lies in a multi-pronged approach including politicians, educators, academics and citizens within education, learning and politics towards achieving sustainability. It also lies in incorporating the values of ESD in all education, the recognition that we need new forms of learning and not more of the same education. And we need to look at the quality and the kind of education that we are providing.

The hope is also that as humans we can imagine a present and a future world where we can live sustainably, recognising our connection to the natural world, to other species and to other people as Atkinson and Wade highlight. They conclude: ‘Let us make this future our project. There is simply no alternative’ (237).

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of our environment. She has been involved in education for sustainable development since 1995 and has been actively involved in promoting ESD in Irish education and youth policy and practice.