

Book Reviews

Education for sustainable development: a philosophical assessment (Impact 18), Randall Curren, Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Macclesfield, 2009, 57 pp., ISBN: 0-902227-20-3.

IMPACT is a pamphlet series addressed to policy makers and practitioners that highlights the critical perspectives that philosophy can bring to bear on current educational policy. This issue makes the case for education for sustainable development (ESD), claiming to articulate and defend a broad conception of an adequate educational response to the problems of sustainability. It was written by a philosopher at the University of Rochester Virtual Institute for Energy (New York), aided by research provided by three interns, just before the onset of the current global financial crisis.

The pamphlet contains an overview, five chapters, and a concluding call for action. Chapter one surveys the problems of sustainability that need to be addressed now and for the foreseeable future. It identifies five emerging 'sustainability crises' (population growth, borrowing against declining ecological capacity, endangered species, energy supply, and water and climate). The material here will be familiar to ESD practitioners and can be seen to focus on the ecological dimension of sustainability at the expense of the economic, social, cultural and personal. There is no attempt to name the underlying cause of the five crises, be it industrialism, modernity, global capitalism, risk society or whatever.

On turning to obstacles to sustainability in chapter two, the author comes closer to such analysis. He outlines psychological, economic and cultural factors that act against rational and well-informed reflection and action on our collective circumstances and together amount to mis-education with regard to sustainability. These include giving excessive weight to our antecedent beliefs (failure to think beyond what appears normal); being susceptible to magical thinking (something magical will turn up); procrastination; irrational acquisitiveness and the discounting of future costs; the search for positional advantage and status competition; consumer culture and its high ecological footprint; advertising; and corporate strategies designed to deny the existence of crises and/ or delay ameliorative action. The chapter concludes that sustainability is a political rather than a technical art and that its

constituent parts are education, regulation, and investment in sustainable landscapes and technologies. This is indeed the case and it is therefore regrettable that there is no philosophical speculation on the political systems (and related forms of political economy and citizenship) that precipitated the current crisis or those that may put us on a more sustainable development path in the future.

Chapter three begins by listing the elements of a comprehensive education in the 'sustainability facts of life' that are further developed in chapter five. It then provides a necessarily short overview of the current state of ESD policy and practice, with reference to the UN Decade of ESD (DESD; 2005-2014) and developments in the UK, before addressing a variety of charges that critics have levelled against ESD. At the root of charges is that ESD is incoherent and too prescriptive and undermines environmental education and does not rest on a sound conception of education. It fails to recognise the diverse ethical, philosophical and political discourses that underpin the diverse meanings of related concepts (nature, environment, development, sustainability, democracy, citizenship, sustainable development, etc.) and the ways in which a critical education and pedagogy can facilitate reflection and action on these in ways that avoid indoctrination and are truly democratic and empowering.

Curren fails to give sufficient attention to the constituent discourses of competing conceptions of ESD but does argue for locally relevant and coherent forms of such education that promote critical thinking and problem solving. Further, in defending UNESCO's vision of ESD, on which DESD is founded, he argues that it is not necessary to identify the terms of global justice and cooperation or insist that future global citizens choose equitable international agreements as a rational response to problems of sustainability: *It is enough to see that there is a prima facie case that it is rational to negotiate such agreements: success in addressing the problems is unlikely without global coordination and equality is essential to reaching agreement on the terms of cooperation* (p. 36). ESD should therefore prepare everyone for rational and informed participation in deliberation about the terms of possible international (and national and regional) agreements: an argument that clearly puts citizenship education at its core (Huckle, 2009).

An ESD that develops rational autonomy, political literacy, and a critical understanding of competing models of political economy, democracy and citizenship, can defend itself from charges of being too prescriptive. Curren argues that such defences are reinforced if at the same time ESD cultivates the virtues of self-restraint, justice, and respect for others, provided that teachers understand that no disposition is a true virtue unless it is guided by the learner's own judgement. While a technocratic ESD that supports the greening of capitalism can undermine critical environmental education, there is much in current ESD theory and practice that builds on the critical and transformative traditions in both environmental and

development education. Addressing the criticisms of ESD listed above begins to suggest that ESD does rest on a sound conception of education but grounding ESD in a guiding philosophy of education is the subject of chapter four.

For this reviewer, chapter four was the most insightful. This argues that all young people are entitled to an ESD that provides the understanding and ability to survive and meet one's needs in a world with sustainability challenges and opportunities. Needs are broadly defined (what is needed to 'live well') and preparation to understand and participate in global co-operation, or education for rational and informed global citizenship, is seen as central to responding to challenges, realising opportunities, and meeting more people's needs. Philosophical considerations lead Curren to claim *that educational institutions are inherently ones that promote forms of development conducive to living well* (p. 40). They are distinguished from other institutions by initiating learners into diverse practices that promote human flourishing, including those that contribute to economic and social opportunity, civic competence, and sustainable social and environmental relationships. Initiation into practices of critical thinking and critical and participatory citizenship are particularly salient and support claims that ESD rests on a sound conception of (critical) education.

Chapter four continues by considering reasons of morality and prudence for providing ESD. Morally we owe it to each other to discuss the ways our actions impair other's interests, and to settle what will and will not be recognised as wrongful violations of those interests. Practically there are no unilateral or regional solutions to global problems of sustainability and global co-ordinated action is prudent given such challenges as climate change. We have a duty to care for the rest of human and non-human nature and realise forms of global co-operation and citizenship that give expression to such sustainability values as those found in the Earth Charter. Moral and citizenship education are required to secure the legitimacy of emerging forms of global democracy and citizenship, but there are 'countless unresolved questions about the terms of cooperation needed' (p. 45). Such cooperation must rest on a rational, free, and informed understanding and acceptance of the terms of co-operation, and the prospects of reaching agreement on any such terms, and of securing compliance with them, rests partly on the quality and global reach of the kind of ESD the pamphlet advocates.

Chapter five makes twelve recommendations to which the preceding chapters point. Development educators will find much that is welcome and familiar here: environmental studies/science foundations; integration of ESD with history and economics; encouragement and enjoyment of environmentally friendly activities; critical thinking to distinguish truth from propaganda; preparation for global co-operation; collaborative civic and project-based learning. Other recommendations are less familiar but nonetheless welcome: encouraging resourcefulness, inventiveness and adaptability; de-commercialising schools; encouraging critical self-

reflection and creative living through literature and the arts; and preparing everyone for a world with lower fertility rates and the prospect of fewer human beings.

The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain launched this pamphlet at an event in London in April 2009 when Michael Bonnett cast doubt on its philosophical underpinnings. Drawing on his own writing on ESD (Bonnett, 2004) he suggested the pamphlet was too steeped in unreformed enlightenment thinking, giving too much weight to science and rationality and too little to other currents of thought such as romanticism, post-modernism, and radical and deep ecology. Science itself is deeply implicated in the crisis of sustainability and rather than promote sustainability as policy (the application of science to environmental management), ESD should promote sustainability a frame of mind (a responsiveness to nature and the environment that is open, caring and non-instrumental). For Bonnett developing the 'right relation with nature' lies at the heart of ESD, and hence the arts and humanities have a role that is at least equivalent to that of the sciences. To be fair to Curren, he does acknowledge the role of literature and the arts (p. 51), but the brief exchange between these two philosophers pointed to philosophical debates that the pamphlet largely ignores.

Of the around 65 references cited, very few are authored by philosophers. They have more to say about sustainable development and ESD than this pamphlet acknowledges (try for example a Google Scholar search with education, philosophy, and 'sustainable development' as the search terms), but it is nevertheless a timely and welcome invitation to yet more philosophers of education to get involved in the much needed debates about the ethical and philosophical foundations of ESD and their implications for policy. Curren might have given more attention to the causes of sustainability crises, the role of science in modern societies, the scope for a genuine ecological enlightenment, and the likely nature of those forms of global democracy and related forms of citizenship education that would help set us on the road to sustainability, but his pamphlet is well worth reading not least for its argument that ESD is an entitlement and for a list of recommendations that will both reassure and challenge development educators.

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References

- Bonnett, M. (2004) *Retrieving Nature: Education in a Post-Humanist Age*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Huckle, J. (2008) 'Sustainable Development'. In J. Arthur, I. Davies and C. Hahn (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy* (pp. 342-254). London: Sage Publications.

Journeys around Education for Sustainability, edited by J. Parker and R. Wade, London South Bank University, London, 2008, 295 pp., ISBN: 978-0-946786-43-5.

Higher Education cannot ignore the role that it needs to play with regard to Sustainable Development (SD): the solutions to the crises that we face now and in the future will lie with our students. The Higher Education Funding Council in England, through its Sustainable Development Action Plan is seeking to do more. Some universities such as London South Bank offer specific programmes; others (my own included) are strategically pursuing an agenda to embed SD. But for many the terrain is often less than clear and fraught with obstacles. It is hardly surprising that in trying to understand how to educate for sustainability, we often end up with more questions than answers. For some, these questions will be around the starting point for engagement, for others it will be a case of 'what should we be doing next?'. While directions are often lacking, what is absolutely clear (at least for me personally) is that if we are to deliver an education that is fit for purpose in the 21st Century, then sustainability needs to be pushed higher up the educational agenda and in the process of change we all need to share our maps along the learning journey. This is where this book by Parker and Wade makes an important contribution. The editors do not purport to have all the answers, but in publishing this book they offer a range of useful ideas, connecting theory and practice, drawing on their own experiences and sharing learning from personal journeys – their own and those of their contributors.

The contributions are a collection of 'pieces' from the participants and directors of London South Bank University's Education for Sustainability Programme – established in 1994. The pieces represent a diversity of experience and have largely been based on work submitted as coursework for the programme (either assignments or dissertations). Each piece comes with a useful commentary about the author – this helps not just to contextualise the chapter, but to help the reader connect with the writers' perspectives. The authors are drawn from a range of countries, different professional and educational backgrounds, and each shares a different slant on some aspect of sustainability. Wade offers a very good first chapter, which will help others in getting to grips with mapping the terrain. Parker in the subsequent chapter promotes a framework model to help organise the messiness of the conceptual domains that potentially lie beneath the 'big picture'. The framework offers a useful aid for thinking about how what may seem like diverse (and sometimes discrete) disciplines actually overlap in this endeavour. Parker also reminds us about the importance of personal and collective learning, and developing social learning that promotes co-existence and tolerance while at the same time valuing the integrity of communities and their 'knowledge resources.' I found these early chapters particularly insightful and useful for organising thinking around the complexity of sus-

tainability. They also point to possible pathways through which future research agendas might be taken forward.

The contributions which follow are organised under the themes of Working Together, Curriculum Innovation and Connecting Thinking. Some will be more or less relevant depending upon the background of the reader: some may prefer a case study of a practical intervention; others may prefer a more critically reflective piece linking theory and practice. At times I found that the diversity (in terms of content and style) resulted in a bit of a disjointed read, but the editors acknowledge this possible weakness and suggest that the content is offered so that we can learn from such diverse maps. I was also a little disappointed that the 'Afterward' was so short – perhaps my own personal weakness in liking a more rounded conclusion – but this might be appropriate given that the journey is so recently begun. As Wade suggests: '*Our challenge for the future well being of the planet and human life is to learn – very quickly – how to live sustainably*' (p28).

Overall, the book provides a useful platform which will stimulate learning and enable an exploration of possible directions. It will be helpful to anyone engaged in sustainability, either as an educator, practitioner or researcher. It will also be of interest for those who are interested in learning and development as a process of personal and social change.

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