

People, Places and Cultures: Education and the Cultural Politics of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural politics of the concept of sustainable development by examining the role of education in the discourse of education for sustainable development (ESD). Using an international comparative framework, the author discusses cultural differences, particularly as they relate to Western industrialised societies and developing countries, by problematising taken-for-granted assumptions of *globalised* approaches to ESD. The United States and Ghana are used as case studies to highlight the different ways in which development is conceptualised in different cultures and settings. The author also critically explores what he describes as an *American Development Paradigm* and compares that to an *African Development Paradigm*. More significantly, he shows how unequal relationships, cultural differences, as well as different development aspirations shape people's understanding of sustainable development, and how that informs educational thinking and practice in different places and cultures.

Keywords: education, sustainable development, culture, power, inequality, school reform, Ghana, United States

Introduction

The role of education in sustainable development was affirmed in *Agenda 21* (UNCED, 1992), the official conference document of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. It noted that, '[e]ducation is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development concerns' (Section 36.3). This view was strengthened by the emergence of the discourse of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the subsequent declaration of a United Nations-sponsored International Decade of Education for Sustainable development (2005-2014). The Decade, as it is now widely known, has as its primary goal to encourage governments 'to consider the inclusion... of measures to implement the Decade in their respective educational systems and strategies and, where appropriate, national development plans' (UNESCO, 2005).

As the Decade unfolds and as the discourse of ESD begins to gain more international attention, there are questions regarding how different countries are responding to such calls, especially against the background of different development aspirations which attract different educational philosophies. Such variations in edu-

cational thinking and practice in different places and cultures also inform people's understanding of sustainable development and the role of education in the quest to attain it. As an African and an educator with cross-cultural experiences, my understanding of what constitutes development or sustainable development has been shaped by my lived experiences in different cultures in both developed and developing countries. These different experiences have been complementary and insightful, and have naturally influenced my interest and curiosity in the role of education in sustainable development in diverse cultures. I am convinced that fundamental differences in people's lived experiences have frequently been neglected in discussions on global sustainability, as have questions of how education could facilitate that quest. This, to a large extent, has led to the taken-for-granted assumption that generalised global actions, including education, can transform all people's attitudes and actions towards sustainability irrespective of their places and unique cultures.

My conviction is shared by Blowers (2003) who observed that central to the analysis and understanding of the possibilities and prospects for sustainable development are issues of spatial and cultural differences. Dei also commented on the need to question 'the appropriateness and applicability of such concepts as "development" and 'sustainability' framed within Western modes of thought for non-Western peoples' (1993: 98). These are central issues that inform my position; they raise critical questions relating to power, domination, and the imposition of ideology, thus making it imperative for current international campaigns to promote ESD to understand the political project that informs the debates on sustainable development.

This paper therefore focuses on the cultural and educational imperatives of sustainable development. It begins with the premise that current discourses on sustainable development ignore spatial, cultural, and structural differences of different people. It also argues that the sustainability discourse has evolved out of historical and contemporary discourses of development or human progress, and that this has to a large extent influenced how it is perceived in contemporary terms. Knowing the historical context in which the discourse has evolved is, therefore, important in helping to establish how it informs the current sustainability discourse. As Irwin observed, any meaningful discussion on the concept of sustainable development 'needs to be set in context to explain its emergence and influence' (2001: 35). Meyer underscores this by contending that '[a]ll discourses are historical and can therefore only be understood with reference to their context' (2005: 15).

Against this background, the paper begins with an examination of the role and place of education in the quest for sustainable development. Secondly, it will explore the historical and conceptual relationships between the original ideology of development – human progress – and sustainable development. Thirdly, it will discuss the cultural dimensions of the concept of sustainable development by foregrounding

the question: What does sustainable living mean to people in developing and developed countries, and how, if at all, do their different conceptualisations translate into the framing of a philosophy of education for sustainable development that suits their local needs and peculiarities? Ghana, my country of origin, and the United States, where I currently work, have been chosen as two contrasting cultural settings to explore different understandings and approaches to development, and how these approaches inform and direct educational approaches for sustainable development. As a conclusion, I will try to unpack the irony of the idea of a common humanity and a common destiny – what is generally referred to as ‘one human family’ – to make the point that as much as one big united effort is needed, it is also imperative that differences in culture and existential realities are taken into consideration in the global quest for sustainable development.

Education in Sustainable Development

While education has been touted as humanity’s best hope or resource for sustainable development (Rest, 2002; Schumacher, 1973), it is also important to recognise its difficulties and contradictions. Gruenewald and Manteaw (2007) have talked about how the governing structures and processes of schooling distort the role of education in environmental and social sustainability. David Orr (2004) has also written extensively on ‘the problem of education’ as against ‘the problems in education’. In his *Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis*, C.A. Bowers (1997) examined the deeper assumptions, or what he describes as ‘root metaphors’, underlying modern industrialised cultures. He sees these ‘root metaphors’ exemplified in individualism, anthropocentrism, and the unflinching faith in economic progress. He argues that the processes of education will continue to produce ‘pre-ecological’ thinkers as long as existing ‘root-metaphors’ are taken for granted.

It is in view of this background that the UN Decade becomes timely even though challenging; it presents exciting opportunities as well as some debilitating challenges. While the Decade provides opportunities for countries and their educational systems to carefully analyse education within the context of sustainable development, it also challenges them to create appropriate philosophies and educational approaches to respond to our current social and ecological predicaments. The core challenge is how countries can produce an appropriate pedagogical logic to respond to current cultural, social, and ecological problems. While this challenge lingers, there are those who also believe that global inequality, cultural differences, as well as conceptual confusions inherent in the concept of sustainable development itself make the idea of global sustainability and the role of education problematic (Cartea, 2005; Dei, 1993; Jickling, 2005; Power, 2003; Trainer, 1990). Resources, they argue, are unequally distributed and utilised around the world; living standards, cultural beliefs, and lifestyles and development aspirations vary from culture to culture, and poverty and environmental issues are even per-

ceived and defined differently in different societies. While the current international momentum for educational actions for sustainable development has the potential to bring about locally-led and culturally-specific innovations in educational thinking and practice, it could also, under the guise of concerted and globalised educational actions, result in hegemonic influences through ideology transfers. In other words, as the discourse on the role of education in sustainable development grows, and as countries begin to take educational action, there is also a tendency for power arrangements that favour the imposition of Westernised versions or approaches to ESD on non-Western nations.

Education has featured in discussions of global environmental politics for a while now. From environmental education to education for sustainable development or sustainability, ideas about the role of education in bringing about desired social and ecological changes have evolved alongside different conceptualisations of development or human progress. In most such discussions, however, the role of education has been framed as an afterthought – an instrument to be employed to solve problems long after they have been created by our quest to develop or to bring both quantitative and qualitative improvement in human life. The growing crisis of this anthropocentric project on the planet has now made it clear that such an approach to education is unsustainable, thereby creating an urgent need for education to lead and direct our actions rather than to be employed as a tool to clean up our messes.

Sterling, for example, has called for 'sustainable education'. He observes that: 'Our paradoxical times – of both great danger and opportunity, rapid change and a search for grounding and identity – require new visions in education' (2004: 14). The term 'sustainable education' implies '[w]hole paradigm change, one which asserts both humanistic and ecological values' (2004: 14). This change epitomises the challenge for education in the global quest for sustainable development; it is not a change that will come about simply by linking education to sustainable development. As Jucker argues: 'We need to rigorously assess our unsustainable present and the reasons why it is unsustainable' (2002: 8). He adds:

All too often, proposals for education for sustainability refer to the current state of affairs and its unsustainability in passing and then move on to the educational small print, often with good intentions and admirable dedication. Yet this approach forgets entirely that the status quo is setting parameters which render much of what is done in education obsolete. (2002: 9)

This resonates with Orr's (2004) question: 'if education is the solution, what is the problem?' To answer this question is to make educational processes the focus of change.

It could also be argued that the status quo, as Jucker implies, could be perceived and conceived in different ways and in different cultures. While this is true, for the purpose of this paper I foreground both the historical and contemporary notions of development – the linear material and techno-scientific 'progress' – that have come to characterise the status quo in the American way of life, and to a large extent, in

Western lifestyles more generally. Ironically, it is our unwavering love for the trappings of this model of development that has contributed to our current unsustainable present, out of which sustainable development has emerged as an urgent necessity. Even though the link between the old notions of development and the current sustainable development discourse exists, current educational discourses on sustainable development have largely ignored this important connection, and failed to call for critical discourses that analyse the conceptual relationship that exists between the old notions of development and the current concept of sustainable development. Such awareness is necessary, as it helps to bring about what Chambers (1998) describes as 'self-critical epistemological awareness'. Literally, it helps us to realise where we have come from, and to see where we want to go. Even more importantly, it begins an assessment of how to get to where we want to go. It is in view of this that I consider a historical discussion of how the notions of 'development' have evolved into 'sustainable development' relevant; a grounding in its evolution facilitates an understanding of how newer approaches to educational thinking and practice should proceed.

From Development to Sustainable Development

The start of the 'age of development' according to Sachs (1996: 1) is traced to the now famous inaugural speech of US President Harry Truman in January 1949. The term development was first given political and ideological proposition by President Truman when he declared in his address that: 'We [the United States] must embark on a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of *underdeveloped* [sic] areas.' By this usage and in that context, President Truman not only invented a meaning of development, which linked human progress to industrialisation and mass production, but also affirmed an older European conceptualisation of what development implies (Cowen and Shenton, 1995). In sum, Truman created a clear distinction between the 'developed' North and the 'underdeveloped' South.

As an ideology and a standard for aspiration, such understandings of development divided the world into two unequal halves. More recently, the term 'developing' has replaced 'underdeveloped', but largely as a euphemistic preference. No matter how these dichotomies are perceived, they attest to the power of the philosophical grounding of the Truman ideology. Inherent in the ideology are underlying hegemonic assumptions that define the relationship between developed and developing countries. In other words, the protagonist, who in this case is the United States, determines another society's development deficiencies and prescribes remedies or interventions.

However, the element of superiority in this geo-political power dynamic is what Sachs (1996) believes has finally been shattered by the current global environmental problems – what I describe as our *unsustainable present* – which necessitate a new

vision and conceptualisation of development. In Sachs' view, the fact that global environmental problems have become so pervasive in almost all societies signals the end of the Truman idea of development, and even more importantly, Northern superiority. That is to say, the consequences of our present ecological and social predicaments have brought a level of equality in humanity in the sense that all humanity, irrespective of geopolitical position, stand to suffer the threats and consequences of unsustainable development patterns.

This position had earlier been proposed by the Brundtland Commission when it made the quest for a new development philosophy the central theme of its report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987:

Many present development trends leave increasing numbers of people poor and vulnerable, while at the same time degrading the environment. How can such development serve the next century's world of twice as many people relying on the same environment? This realisation broadened our view of development. We came to see it not in its restricted context of economic growth.... We came to see that a new development path was required, one that sustained human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet. (WCED, 1987: 4)

The need for 'a new development path' underscored the realisation of the irresponsible paths the old development philosophies have threaded. Namely, notions of human progress have, and continue to be, framed on narrow economic rationalities that have ignored ecological and social considerations. The call for new visions of human progress is, therefore, a quest for sustainable development.

Sustainable development: The quest for a new 'development'

The last few decades have seen the term sustainable development emerge as a popular development catchphrase. Its popularity came with the publication of *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), which marked a watershed in global development thinking (Sneddon, Howarth and Nogarrd, 2006). The report called for a recalibration of institutional mechanisms at local, national, and global levels to promote economic, social, and ecological development patterns that will ensure 'the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet' (WECD, 1987: 23).

Like the old development ideology, this new vision of development continues to emphasise economic growth as an avenue for human development. The conceptual relationships between the two ideologies remain strong, as is shown in the levels of faith and optimism which the Brundtland Commission placed on economic, scientific, industrial, and technological capacities. From the perspective of the Commission, such capacities provide a solid foundation for growth and human development:

Industry is central to the economics of modern societies and an indispensable motor of growth. It is essential to developing countries to widen their development base and meet growing needs. And though industrialised countries are said to be moving into a post-industrial, information based era, this shift must be powered by a continuing flow of wealth from industry. (WCED, 1987: 206)

Such pro-growth language and thinking only emphasises the ideological connection between the old development notion and the current concept of sustainable development. Irwin (2001) explains this relationship as a marriage of the old 'developmentalism' and the new 'environmentalism', implying that the only addition to the new vision is the need for environmental consciousness and inter-generational thinking in development discourses. Adams (2001) connects the two concepts by their vagueness in meaning and their ability to take on different meanings in different contexts: 'One reason for the overlapping meaning of sustainable development is the highly confused question of what development itself means' (2001: 6). Jucker (2002) summed it up by contending that the new concept of sustainable development was founded on the same shaky foundations of its predecessor – development.

As a term, development has historically been used in two distinct senses: firstly, as a way to describe how progress is perceived or measured in societies, and secondly, as a normative term to set out what should happen (Goutlet, 1995). While Sachs (1996) sees development as a perception that models reality, Howard has concluded that it is a 'slippery value word' used by 'noisy persuaders' such as politicians 'to herd people in the direction they want them to go' (1978: 17). Like the current sustainable development discourse, many people of diverse backgrounds hold their own views and interpretations. However, irrespective of how the notion of development is perceived or defined, as an ideology it has evolved to become perhaps the single most important human aspiration in most societies. Esteva writes that '[t]here is nothing in modern mentality comparable to it [development] as a force guiding thought and behaviour' (1996: 282). It is no wonder, therefore, that the current vision – global sustainability – has also become one of the most serious political challenges of our time (Porritt, 1996).

The key issue as far as these development notions are concerned is that human progress, or what is generally termed as development, is perceived differently in different places and cultures, and they are also pursued and measured based on different concepts and values as generated by both past and present generations (Power, 2003; Sahlins, 1997; Shanin, 1997). For instance, while the concept of development in Western industrialised societies has for a long time focused on economic growth, technological and market innovations, as well as capital expansion, visions of development in most developing countries, particularly in Africa, are largely about survival – sustenance of human life almost on a day-to-day basis. It is about overcoming the causes of poverty and restoring dignity in individual and social lives. From an African perspective, therefore, a distinction could be made between *sustainability* and *survivability*, and it is such a distinction that characterises different cultural understandings of sustainable development, and to a large extent, determines how educational approaches for sustainable development should be approached in diverse settings.

The Cultural Dimensions of Sustainable Development

The above distinction between sustainability and survivability suggests a cultural dimension to the concept of sustainable development, and it is what I describe as the cultural politics within which education is trapped. To demonstrate this, I use Ghana and the United States to provide two contrasting perspectives: a 'developed' and a 'developing' country. Specifically, I discuss two different notions of human progress or development: the American Development Paradigm and the African Development Paradigm. I will also problematise what has become known as 'the American way of life' and show how it informs a philosophy of education which is contradictory to the ideals of sustainable development. These contrasting perspectives, I hope, will provide deeper insights into how differing cultural situations, including factors such as development aspirations, values, and standards of living, inform a people's understanding of what development or sustainable development should be. It will also provide critical insights into how such understandings inform and direct educational approaches for sustainable development in different cultural contexts.

The America Development Paradigm

As a world leader, the United States embraces policies of economic growth with religious zeal, and approaches market competitiveness with military combativeness. The American Development Paradigm, also known as the 'American Way of Life' reduces every problem to an economic or technological solution (Orr, 1992). It is a capitalist system, which depends largely on environmental resource utilisation and the domination of nature. The desire for America's competitiveness on the world economic stage is an effort to maintain a controlling grip on the global market and resources. The ultimate motive is profit, which translates into economic prosperity both for individuals and society. It is a development philosophy that is premised on competition and individualism, and at the expense of community building and democratic ownership of community and its resources. This way of life inherently contradicts the principles of sustainable living, which, among other things, calls for cooperation rather than competition. Sustainable living also implies the building of strong and healthy societies that meet the diverse needs of all people both now and the future. Social cohesion and inclusion rather than individualism and exclusion are the hallmarks of a sustainable society.

This desire for competition and global economic dominance is almost seamlessly connected to educational thinking and practice. The current No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, for example, calls on American school children to be academically competitive in math and science with their global counterparts. Government and educational policy leaders almost unceasingly link the rhetoric of education reform to the rhetoric of individual and national competition in the global economy (Spring, 1998). For instance, in his usual defense of the NCLB policy, President Bush

contends that the policy is an important way to make sure Americans remain competitive in the twenty-first century: 'We are living in a global world ... the education system must compete with the education systems in China and India' (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Such rhetoric from the President goes a long way in shaping public consciousness of the purpose of schooling in a globalised society.

The NCLB policy is a clear example of how particular educational ideologies can be contradictory and problematic within the discourse and ideals of education and sustainable development. It undoubtedly has good intentions: closing the educational achievement gap among young people from different ethnic groups in America. It seems to me, however, that the underlying political purpose of education in the United State and other Western societies has reduced the purpose of schooling, or at least of 'government schooling,' to preparing young people for competition in a global market economy. In the eyes of many international observers, such narrow economic rationalities that drive educational reforms around the world also contribute to the social and ecological problems of the world. As Gruenewald (2004) observed, this situation embodies the current international, multicultural conflict between a national agenda for global economic competition and a global vision for peace, security, and eco-social justice. It also clarifies how this makes the education for sustainable development agenda difficult within the context of schooling, particularly in the United States.

The current emphasis on science and math in the U.S. public school system also underscores America's desire for techno-scientific innovations that have market advantage. My intent here is not to be overly critical; it is more about highlighting the reliance of such progressive endeavours on natural resources and how they impact negatively on the natural environment. As Shiva puts it: 'Technological processes can lead to higher withdrawals of natural resources or higher additions of pollutants than ecological limits allow... they contribute to underdevelopment through destruction of ecosystems' (1991: 233). Unfortunately, the ecological implications of such an approach to human progress have not received the needed attention in educational, social and political discourses in the United States. This is simply because the 'American way of life' is usually stated as if it is non-negotiable and needs to be protected at all costs. When President Bush defends an educational system that equips students with skills and knowledge in math and science for the purposes of advancing economic growth, he is not only justifying his flagship education policy, he is also reiterating the Truman view of human and social progress: industrialisation, endless production, expansive markets, and insatiable consumption patterns that ignore the philosophical underpinnings of the 'limits to growth'.

Contemporary discourses and international debates on climate change and energy issues have, to some extent, brought attention to current issues of environmental sustainability and the long term future of the planet in public consciousness of the

United States. Nevertheless, issues of environmental unsustainability that invoke discourses of lifestyle changes still largely remain an 'Inconvenient Truth' (Gore, 2006) in the United States. They are, as Orr (2004) puts it, 'unspoken taboos' which limit the honest questioning of economic growth practices that undermine biological diversity. So, while the No Child Left Behind policy galvanises support to close the achievement gap, and to urge excellence and competitiveness in math and science in schools, what it fails to do is to let young learners know and understand the ecological and intergenerational impacts of techno-scientific innovations that rely on natural resource exploitation and utilisation. This raises critical questions about the compatibility of the idea of sustainability in a growth-driven economy such as the United States, and even more so, on how education for sustainable development should proceed in the public school system in the United States.

The African Development Paradigm

The African development paradigm as I describe it here is more traditional and rural. While the purity and originality of such a way of life are fast eroding due to the pervasiveness and influence of Euro-American worldviews, values that underlie African-ness are derived from existing traditions and cultures and these continue to shape an African development worldview. An African development paradigm is, therefore, an approach to human and social development that is premised on the desire and willingness of the majority of people in African communities to bring a level of dignity to their lives (Matthews, 2004; Njoh, 2006; Zaoual, 1996). It is about survival: emancipation from poverty and the ability to control the causes of poverty. These are challenges faced by the majority of Africans on a daily basis. Emancipation from poverty and the conditions that create them, therefore, characterise the African development paradigm. While the American development paradigm sees development as growth, the African paradigm views development as freedom from dehumanising conditions that deprive people of their natural capabilities to maximise their full potentials as humans. As Sen puts it: 'Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systemic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance of overactivity of repressive states' (2000: 3). Human development is presented here as the expansion of human capabilities, which implies the availability of the social and economic resources and opportunities that are necessary for a people to be able to function effectively within their natural capabilities. The quest for these freedoms and the removal of 'unfreedoms', as Sen suggests, is the outlook that frames human progress among the majority of African people. It is a way of life that has been conditioned by the existential realities of the people in their places.

Unlike the American development paradigm, which is characterised by economic competitiveness and the craze for techno-scientific innovations that seek to

dominate nature, the African paradigm aims at dominating poverty and the conditions that create it. Notions of human survival or progress in an African development paradigm have, therefore, been constructed around a concept of nature which directs the relationship between humans and their environments. The natural environment serves as home – an inseparable anchorage for survival and sustenance. There is no distinction between people and nature; people live *in* and *with* nature. They also live off nature. In this regard, there is a symbiotic relationship between people and their environments: they are shaped by nature as they use surrounding life forms to direct their development aspirations. Croll and Parkin describe it thus: ‘environment is never a neutrally acting force, innocently shaping or interacting with human interests’ (1992: 13). This view is shared by Chambers who contends that: ‘The environment and development are means, not ends in themselves. The environment and development are for people, not people for environment and development’ (1986: 7).

The Euro-centric idea of the exteriority of the environment is foreign to the African development paradigm; such an idea has epistemological and ontological underpinnings which, for the most part, are incompatible within African modes of thought. For the majority of Africans, much as a distinction could be made between survivability and sustainability, sustainability could also imply survival – an innate desire to continue living through the sustenance of life and ecosystems. This involves a deeper awareness of the systems of nature and the nature of these systems. So, while people use the natural environment to navigate the vagaries of their struggles, they do so conscious of their multiple responsibilities to take, give, and care for Earth’s limited resources. van Beek and Banga (1992) have observed that contrary to the general Western perception and ill-informed conclusions on the effects of poverty on the natural environment, there is evidence that in many African communities critical and educated considerations are made before certain environmental actions are taken. In Ghana for example, local myths, proverbs, songs and traditions attribute quasi-human and communal qualities to the forces of nature and the human environment (Dei, 1993). This necessarily reminds people of their responsibilities in and to nature.

These are time-tested educational approaches that undergird indigenous people’s lives (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2006; Reagan, 2005), and they also serve as social checks and balances for ecological sustenance and replenishment. They epitomise traditional African approaches to sustainability. Such unwritten norms are neither perceivable nor comprehensible to outsiders, particularly Westerners, who sometimes hurriedly dismiss such beliefs and practices as unscientific, illogical, and superstitious. These beliefs, values, and practices, according to Richards (1975), embody notions of African cosmologies which serve to protect the community, its resources, and people. Poor communities in Africa and many developing countries have been blamed for their roles in environmental degradation. Such conclusions, according

to authors such as Brokensha, Waren and Warner (1980), Dei (1993) and Richards (1985), have resulted in different discourses on the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation. Again, what most outsiders fail to realise is that it is in such beliefs, values, and practices that the social, ecological, and pedagogical imperatives underlying the African development paradigm become apparent.

At the same time, it is not my intention to propose or suggest an African development paradigm as an alternative for global sustainable development. The sole purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate the extent of disparity in cultures and worldviews, particularly between the African and American development paradigms, and to use such juxtaposition to highlight my concerns about the specific roles education should play in sustainable development in different cultures and contexts.

It is also worth mentioning that much as there is a notion of an African development paradigm in which I believe, aspects of the American development paradigm continue to penetrate traditional African lifestyles, and have created situations where some people, particularly the young, pursue their own versions of the so-called 'American way of life' in Africa. Traditional African ways of life continue to be impacted by the sweeping influences of American and Western cultures, what Ritzer (2004) describes as the *McDonaldization* effect – the inexorable influences of American values and cultures on the rest of the world. Appadurai (1990) has described this as the 'global cultural flow', and attributes it to the tendency of fast-paced global economies combining with the fluidity of technology and cultures to create tensions between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation. Like many indigenous cultures around the world, cultural flows from the United States continue to impact on Africa; however, there are forces of resistance who continue to affirm time-tested cultures and worldviews. My discussion here of an African development paradigm is essentially an approach to cultural affirmation.

While some of the arguments and claims made about the role of poverty in environmental degradation (Adams, 2001) may be valid, for most people in Africa living in and off the environment is at the core of African worldviews. It represents the political ecology within which the people of Africa lead their lives, and it is only through a careful immersion and a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics of culture and livelihood trends that the links between human action and environmental change can be understood. Understanding the political ecology of the majority of Africans, especially with regard to their development aspirations is, therefore, central to any analysis of their perception and approaches to sustainable development. This necessarily implies an awareness of how and why the different peoples of Africa experience the environment in particular ways. The centrality of politics – understood as unequal power relations – in attempts to explain such experiences, define what Blaike (1985) describes as political ecology. Such attempts, according to Adams (2001) are characterised by unequal power relationships and inadequate

understandings which result in conflicting discourses and knowledge claims about the environment and development.

It is such conflicting knowledge claims that make concerted global actions for sustainable development problematic, and particularly when it comes to the role of education. For example, the Euro-American obsession with science and technology, and the domination of nature is easily translated into a readiness to explain all realities in techno-scientific terms, thus providing the grounds to dismiss cultural and traditional knowledge forms that guide different aspects of the African survival worldview as backward or unscientific. Against the background of power, unequal relations, and contrasting cultures and development aspirations, the role of education in the discourse of sustainability becomes intriguing. Further, it becomes important to examine, within the context of the current UN Decade, the role of education and its capacity to make significant contributions towards sustainable development both in Ghana and the United States. Such an examination, I believe, will facilitate an understanding of how different worldviews direct different educational philosophies and approaches.

Ghana: Educational Reforms and ESD

Within the context of development and sustainable development, Ghana's educational philosophies and practices have been formulated based on the country's development aspirations. In that regard, Ghana's new educational system, which came into effect in September 2007, aims at redirecting educational efforts to address the main development challenges that face the country. In Ghana, as in most of Africa, education, both formal and non-formal, has been seen as a vehicle for personal, social, and national development (Dei, 2005; Folson, 2006; Osei, 2007). Successive governments have, therefore, strived to give education the necessary attention. In the last two decades or more, the Ghanaian education system has undergone significant reform processes all aimed at making education responsive to the unique needs of the country, and also to the changing economic and social demands of a globalised world society. There has also been a sustained effort in Ghana to give education a national identity by reducing the impacts and legacies of colonial education. It is fair to say, therefore, that a central concern of recent educational reforms in Ghana has been to make education more place-based and place-conscious. That is, to use education to serve local needs as well as to help learners recognise the assets found in the human and natural environments closest to them (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008).

The current educational reform process in Ghana presents a complex package, because it offers an integrated approach to changing educational values, orientation, and learning outcomes. The quest for human capability enhancement for poverty alleviation is at the heart of the reform process. As the mission of the Ministry of Education in Ghana spells out:

Education is to provide relevant education to all Ghanaians at all levels to enable them to acquire skills that will assist them to develop their potential to be productive so as to facilitate poverty reduction and promote socio-economic growth and national development. (Ghana Education Service, 2004: 1).

Consequently, reform efforts are aimed at moving educational thoughts and practices from old colonial approaches that emphasised white-collar job training and opportunities, and orienting them towards technical, vocational, and agricultural education. These are changes conceived to correct an educational system that has long been perceived as elitist, foreign, and which has devalued vocational, technical, and agricultural education (Osei, 2007). The current policy lays a much stronger emphasis on the promotion of technical, vocational, and agricultural education among young people; it is an attempt to reorient educational philosophies by aligning educational practices to local needs and problems. It is a problem-based approach that aims at empowering young learners to acquire the skills, knowledge, and capacity to harness the rich abundance of natural resources to facilitate poverty alleviation efforts.

The logical characteristics of this new policy direction are broad and integrated; while the overall vision is to facilitate poverty alleviation, it seeks also to redirect young people's attention and interests to their local places and available resources. The reform process also has an underlying philosophy which acknowledges the implications of globalisation for Ghana's quest for sustainable development. The new educational reforms, therefore, take into full account the changing social and economic needs of a twenty-first century world by paying attention to the multi-faceted nature of globalisation, and the implications it has for national development efforts (Tettey, 2006). In this regard, information, communication, and technology (ICT) principles and practices are a part of the current reforms, and they constitute a part of the wider strategic vision for sustainable development through education and human capacity enhancement.

Cognisant of the fact that a reasonable standard of living cannot be maintained without conscious efforts to incorporate principles of sustainable living in education, the new educational policy acknowledges and accepts the UN Decade of ESD as part of the reform process. These concerns have been translated into educational policy which calls for curricular innovation to incorporate the principles and ideals of sustainable development. As stipulated in the Development of Education National Report of Ghana:

In addition to the integration of selected important themes with the syllabuses, themes like HIV/AIDS, Environmental Degradation, Sustainable Development, Conflict Resolution, Children's Rights, Communication, and other Psycho-social Skills such as Assertiveness and Confidence Building, etc. have been integrated into several subjects (Ghana Education Service 2004: 27).

As a clear indication of how a people's existential realities determine their educational philosophies and approaches, the document adds that:

It is hoped that the integration process adopted will help change the nature of the Ghanaian towards superstition, witchcraft, work/work ethics, and other important attitude building themes that will help build up the new type of Ghanaian with knowledge, positive attitudes and high thinking capacity to assist in the rapid socio-economic growth of country (2004: 27).

It is interesting to observe how national priorities shape and direct educational philosophies. The current No Child Left Behind Policy of the United States, which I discuss below, provides another lens to examine how cultural differences and worldviews translate into educational thinking and practice in diverse contexts.

ESD, NCLB and the 'American Way of Life'

In spite of the growing popularity of the ESD discourse in most countries, it is yet to be accepted into mainstream education in the United States. The Bush administration remained silent and uncommitted to the UN Decade. This is not surprising as the political hierarchy of the United States generally shies away from discourses of sustainable development and global sustainability. This is obviously because of the country's focus on international competitiveness and an economic growth agenda that thrives on international resource exploitation and utilisation. The delusion of endless frontiers and boundless resources makes the ideals of sustainable development and the role of education contradictory in the current educational policy.

With the obvious exclusion of issues of environment, society, culture, and the roles of humans in the dynamic, processes of teaching and learning are isolated from the realities of our currently unsustainable present and day-to-day experiences of learners. Learners, particularly young learners, are denied the opportunity to engage in critical reflections on their places and their roles in them. In particular, NCLB's focus on closing the achievement gap and ensuring global economic competitiveness necessarily invokes market efficiency models that foreground competition, accountability, managerial discourses, and market-oriented school reform practices that link educational policies to economic realities (Apple, 2004; Gruenewald and Manteaw, 2007; Hursh, 2007).

The overwhelming support for NCLB – it was passed with large majorities in both the Senate (87-10) and the House of Representatives (381-41) – not only points to the popularity of its ideological stance, but is also a show of faith regarding where such a policy could take the nation. Hursh (2007) observes that one explanation for its popularity is that it represents a larger shift from social democratic to neoliberal policies. It is a shift that is reflected both in discursive and structural changes in education and the wider society, and one that is transforming dominant discourses on education and society (Guttmann and Thompson, 2004; Young, 2000).

Having said this, NCLB is not really a 'new' educational policy. It is a reinvention of the ideological stance taken by the 1983 landmark publication *A Nation at Risk*, a report which laid the groundwork for subsequent educational reforms in the United

States. The report made the following observation about the connection between the industrial economy of the United States and education:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged prominence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and people.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983: 5)

The implication is that the United States has 'an educational emergency' – the possibility of being left behind on the competitive world economic stage because of the lack of *well-schooled* competitors. The response is market-efficiency models of education which dominate the discourse and practice of schooling, and at the same time work against the possibility of education for sustainable development in public schools in the United States.

Even against the background of international support for the UN Decade, which urges all countries to take action, the NCLB policy remains unflinching and continues to show no sign of accommodating ESD or other traditions that remove the focus from economic imperatives. It seems that ESD has no place in the current policy especially as it shows no verifiable advantage or contribution to the testing and competition agendas. As Gruenewald and Manteaw write: 'the Decade is unlikely to be seen or heard at all by most educators [in the United States] and it has been totally ignored by an increasingly powerful federal educational bureaucracy' (2007: 183).

'One human family': Unpacking the Irony

The above observations bring us back the question of the compatibility of sustainability education in diverse social, cultural and political locations. It also raises critical questions about the notions of 'common concerns', 'common challenges', and 'common endeavours' that underlie the concept of sustainable development. Against the background of selfish economic and market interests, which narrow the development priorities of a world political and moral leader – the United States – the question becomes: What common challenges do the world face, what are the common concerns, and whose future really matters?

The fact that nations of the world are nested together in natural systems, and are ecologically and economically unified in diverse ways cannot be denied. However, the over-elaboration of the idea of 'one human family' overshadows the inherent differences in a common humanity. As a theme, human commonality has largely been employed in the sustainability discourse as a unifying tool, a tool that raises international awareness about *our unsustainable present* and the need for the world's peoples to work together to find solutions. It also underscores how interconnected our societies are, and how important it is for communities around the world to engage in common endeavours to unravel our world from its current pre-

dicaments. As appealing and convincing as this unitary discourse is, it excludes critical questions of difference in social structures, cultures, values, and the spatial characteristics of sustainable development (Gringer, 2004). The more the notion of a common humanity is popularised through various international discourses, the more successful it becomes in overshadowing place-conscious and context-specific approaches to addressing unique human, social, and ecological needs.

This is because, without critical explorations of the real implications of such discourses, countries and communities may employ approaches to sustainable development that are not necessarily applicable in their unique contexts. While the assumption of 'one global family' appears appealing to diverse audiences, it is essentially idealistic and obstructs the reality of our differences. Notions of commonality and a human family should not be overemphasised to suggest equality and homogeneity and to erase the intrinsic differences in cultures and worldviews. There are clear structural, cultural, and power disparities among the world's diverse peoples, and they need to be taken into consideration in the quest for sustainable development. The broader discourse of 'one human family' working together for global sustainable development has, to a large extent, reduced the significance of local actions to ensure global peace and wellbeing.

As I have shown in the discussion above, the intrinsic differences in cultural understandings of human progress go a long way in informing and directing specific approaches to how people pursue their development aspirations. They also inform educational thinking and practices in specific places. The role of education in the global quest for sustainable development should, therefore, not proceed from global prescriptions or generalised discourses that stress the aesthetics of global concerted actions rather than the purity, freedom, and authenticity of local endeavours. From an African perspective, the underlying principles of ESD in diverse places must be made clear in order to allow people to adopt and apply them in their local situations. Such an approach, I believe, will not only allow creativity and flexibility in local approaches to sustainable development, but also will empower smaller and poorer countries like Ghana to redefine their own development aspirations, and to design their own educational philosophies and practices to respond to local needs.

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