



Review Article

Contributions of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to Quality Education

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Abstract

In today's interconnected world, information is easily acquired. Facts that professionals once collected as a result of years of study are now readily available on the Internet. Today's education requires knowing what to do with information, that is, how to analyze it; make sense of its abundance and complexity; cooperate with others to synthesize information; and communicate the results. Consequently, quality education is no longer based primarily on fact acquisition. As education based on fact acquisition becomes increasingly outdated, policymakers debate the basis for transforming their education systems. Yet, these transformations require more than a vision of what is possible: they require evidence that will justify such. Evidence-based decision making is both encouraged and of growing importance in the formal education community. The goal of this study is to provide evidence that ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) contributes in many ways to a quality education.

Keywords: Education, Sustainable Development, information

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Introduction

Yet, the definition of quality education is constantly evolving and is always contextual. There is no one definition, list of criteria, definitive curriculum, or list of topics that comprise a quality education. Quality education is a dynamic concept that changes and evolves with time and is modified according to the social, economic and environmental contexts. Because quality education must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate, quality education will take many forms around the world.

Three models of quality education:

1. The economic model of education deals with inputs and outputs. The 'economist' view of education uses quantitative measurable outputs as a measure of quality. For example, enrolment ratios and retention rates, rates of return on investment in education in terms of earnings and cognitive achievement as measured in national or international tests. This model is philosophically based on human capital theory which posited that education was important to economic development and reduction of poverty.
2. The humanist tradition emphasizes education as a process, with the student

at the centre of that process. Goals of education include wider social goals (e.g., human rights, social justice and democracy) and personal goals. The humanist tradition is based on the observation that children have an innate interest and ability to learn. It aims to develop the whole personality as well as creativity and problem-solving abilities. Currently, humanist approaches are described with terms such as learner centred, participative and democratic. Furthermore, they embrace contemporary concerns of human rights and environmental sustainability.

3. The 'learning as connection' model of quality arose from sub-Saharan Africa in the past decade. The learning as connection model of quality education stresses the importance of connecting existing learner knowledge of local context to the process of learning abstract concepts. A group of researchers in Southern Africa found that issues that threaten sustainability are essential to quality education in the African context.² Incorporating local issues is part of the learning as connection model of quality education in which everyday knowledge is brought into relationship with abstract and academic concepts so that both can grow together. The learning as connection model is grounded in a constructivist perspective of education.

The concept of quality education is based on the premise that educational aims are met and purposes fulfilled. In the Foreword to the 2005 *Global Monitoring Report* for EFA, UNESCO Director General Koïchiro Matsuura wrote,

'Quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education'.

ESD pedagogies are often place-based or issue-based. They encourage critical thinking, social critique, and analyses of local contexts. They involve discussion, analysis and application of values. ESD pedagogies often draw upon the arts, using drama, play, music, design, and drawing to stimulate creativity and imagine alternative futures. They work towards positive change and help students to develop a sense of social justice and self-efficacy as community members. (UNESCO, 2012a, p. 15)

Tilbury (2011, p. 29), in an international literature review, has identified essential ESD learning processes that encourage learners to: 'ask critical reflective questions, clarify values, envision more positive futures, think systematically, respond through applied learning, and explore the dialectic between tradition and innovation'. Some ESD pedagogies promote cooperation and collaboration, issues investigation, using multiple perspectives and real-world problem solving, as well as equity in the classroom by meeting all student. Admittedly, many ESD pedagogies have been in practice within different disciplinary traditions for years. These pedagogies are now in use in interdisciplinary contexts and applied to pressing issues of sustainability. This study shows that ESD pedagogies do more than facilitate learning of knowledge—they promote learning of skills, perspectives and values that sustainable societies require. Common questions were used to solicit education leaders and practitioners' views on the outcome and

implementation of ESD across countries. The questions were broad and open-ended to capture the breadth of ESD. Countries produced a report based on interviews conducted in their countries, and this research synthesizes the findings across the 18 reports. In April 2013, the UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability at York University (Toronto, Canada), in collaboration with the Working Committee on ESD of the Chinese National Commission to UNESCO, invited researchers from primarily high-scoring Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) countries to conduct research related to ESD's contributions to a quality education in their respective countries. PISA tests are designed to assess to what extent 15-year-old students

can apply their knowledge and skills to real-life situations and are equipped for full participation in society. The reason high-scoring PISA countries were selected for this study is that their methods of education are often studied and emulated by education officials and leaders from low-scoring PISA countries.

Five questions correspond to three main models of quality in education described in the 'Literature Review'. Because ministries of education around the world use different models of quality, the research design reflected that diversity by asking questions that are aligned to different models and dimensions of a quality education. Table 1 shows how the five research questions align with dimensions of quality education.

Table 1 Alignment of Research Questions with Dimensions of Quality Education

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Research Question	Dimension(s) of Quality Education
1. How can ESD update and improve educational purposes and outcomes?	Effectiveness
2. How can ESD help to improve and enrich school curriculum development?	Effectiveness
3. How can ESD guide students to have the knowledge, skills and values to care for and solve the sustainable development issues that will arise in their lifetime?	Equity, relevance & sustainability
4. How can ESD help strengthen the partnerships between schools and other stakeholders, including the surrounding community?	Efficiency
5. How can ESD promote innovation in the teaching-learning conceptual framework?	Reflexivity & responsiveness

Source: Authors' construction.

The data for this study are the reports from the countries based on the above-mentioned five questions. The presentations was based on interviews with senior education leaders and practitioners who had significantly embedded ESD in

schools within their jurisdictions. After the seminar, the presenters submitted written reports. Additionally, other researchers who could not attend the meeting submitted written reports. In total, findings from 18 countries³ were included in the

research project. It is important to note that these reports feature a small number of schools or participants within each country; they do not necessarily represent all primary and secondary schools in each participating country.

ESD can have a positive impact on academic outcomes but more research is needed to identify best practices. The three challenges noted here are typical for new educational domains such as ESD; and none are impossible to address. In fact, what is reported as challenging in some countries is reported as strength in others. Thus, opportunities abound for the worldwide ESD community to share and learn from each other's experiences and expertise.

The results of this research provide abundant qualitative evidence that ESD contributes in many ways to a quality education. When the curriculum includes sustainability content—delivered in terms of local, social, economic and environmental contexts—teaching and learning transforms primary and secondary education in all contexts. Research also provides evidence that ESD pedagogies facilitate the learning of knowledge, and promote the learning of skills, perspectives and values necessary to foster and maintain sustainable societies. Nevertheless, the authors recognize the need for more research which clearly demonstrates the contributions to quality education and the extent of those contributions.

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