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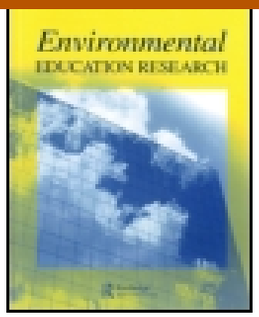

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Environmental Education Research

ISSN: 1350-4622 (Print) 1469-5871 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceer20

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To cite this article: Peter Sutoris (2019): Politicising ESE in postcolonial settings: the power of historical responsibility, action and ethnography, Environmental Education Research, DOI: 10.1080/13504622.2019.1569204

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2019.1569204

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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2019.1569204

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Politicising ESE in postcolonial settings: the power of historical responsibility, action and ethnography

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the mission of Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) is inherently political and that, by not acknowledging this, ESE interventions risk becoming part of the problem of sustainability rather than the solution. The article offers a theoretical framework for thinking about the (de)politicising effects of ESE rooted in three key elements: historical responsibility, action and the postcolonial condition. This framework builds on Ricoeur's phenomenology, Arendt's theory of action and the work of postcolonial scholars in arguing for a grounded understanding of ESE, which necessitates the use of ethnographic methods in ESE research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 May 2018
Revised 27 December 2018
Accepted 6 January 2019

KEYWORDS
Politics of education; ethnography; historical responsibility; action; postcoloniality; phenomenology; Ricoeur; Arendt; India; South Africa

Introduction

In what ways does *Environmental and Sustainability Education* (ESE) impact the political imagination of learners?[1] This question touches on learners' capacity to imagine alternative futures and bring them into being. It has crucial implications for the ability of ESE to help humankind preserve its future and the future of the environment (Hungerford 2009; Marcinkowski 2009; Tilbury 1995; Van Poeck, Goeminne, and Vandenabeele 2016; Van Poeck and Östman 2017). While it has long been recognised that formal education has a propensity to reproduce capitalism (Bourdieu 1990), the recent acceleration in the globalisation of education governance is imbuing education systems around the world with neoliberal agendas (Au and Ferrare 2015; Ball 2012; Morgan 2016; Robertson and Dale 2015), including the notion of infinite growth and the idea of nature as an object of instrumental value. Under these conditions, the 'sustainability' promoted by schools may actually undermine genuine efforts to promote environmental sustainability (Huckle 2008; McKenzie, Bieler, and McNeil 2015), as schools are expected to generate 'good environmental citizens'. These students are, 'broadly speaking, obligated to comply in a largely "apolitical" manner with behavioural norms that facilitate the continuance of the current social/political system' (Smith 2005, 51). ESE programmes, in other words, are often part of the problem rather than the solution. In shying away from difficult conversations about subjects like consumerism, definitions of individual and collective 'success', environmental justice and the role neoliberal capitalism plays in undermining global sustainability, ESE can obscure learners' understanding and effectively become a form of greenwashing (cf. Lyon and Montgomery 2015).

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ESE can only be successful if it cultivates learners' political imaginations—that is, the ability to think collectively about possible futures and simultaneously envisage individual agency in bringing them into being. This notion of politics rests on Hannah Arendt's (1998) reflections on the moral excesses of 20th-century totalitarianism. The ongoing environmental devastation and fundamental unsustainability of human societies are, arguably, concurrent with the dehumanising regimes Arendt studied. The idea of 'the political', according to Arendt, is rooted in the plurality of subjectivities and an agonistic pluralism that allows these subjectivities to generate political action. As Brunkhorst (2000, 180) points out, 'The outcome of the argumentative deliberation of such a plurality of agents is the full disclosure or illumination (in the Heideggerian/Greek sense of *aletheia*) of the matter in question'. Consequently, Arendt's idea 'of political action as "acting in concert" (derived from Edmund Burke) must be understood as including these contradictions and dissonances: it is a risky and never fully controllable *performance* within a context of intersubjective deliberation and judgment' (Brunkhorst 2000, 181). Bringing the political into ESE therefore means enabling pluralistic deliberation and political action. This is a difficult task, one for which many existing education systems around the world are at best arguably underprepared.

This became apparent to me during ethnographic encounters in India and South Africa with a model of ESE called 'handprint', a project-based approach to helping young people identify local challenges to sustainability and contribute to resolving them. While it was intended to empower young people and fuel action, in some cases I saw the handprint idea being interpreted in ways that contributed to the depoliticisation of sustainability among learners, due to its narrow focus on individual 'politically neutral' actions such as recycling and planting trees without giving attention to the underlying causes of unsustainable material practices (an issue criticised in previous ESE research, including Jensen and Schnack 2006; Kenis and Mathijs 2012; Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012). I witnessed this in communities where sustainability has been a politically charged subject due to histories of slow violence (Nixon 2011) against 'marginal peoples' and the environment; there, ESE acted to disrupt the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and contributed to young peoples' alienation from their elders—and from the political knowledge their elders held. In a world so polarised around environmental issues, ESE cannot afford to be politically neutral, for neutrality is in itself a form of politics that normalises the status quo.

Reflecting on the handprint model and its different interpretations by various educators allowed me to pursue a theory about the potential of ESE programmes to (de)politicise environmental concerns and in turn (de)politicise ESE research and practice. In this article, rather than provide an empirical account of my encounters, which serve merely as an entry point to the theoretical discussion, I focus on developing a grounded framework of ESE interventions that brings together three elements: the notion of historical responsibility rooted in the work of Paul Ricoeur, the idea of action as theorised by Hannah Arendt and the postcolonial condition.[2]

I begin the discussion by reviewing the literature and outlining my encounter with handprint, together with the questions it poses about the role political agency plays in educating young people about sustainability in postcolonial contexts. I then apply the notion of historical responsibility to the handprint model in demonstrating the analytical power of phenomenology to illuminate the mechanisms at work in shaping the subjectivities of political imagination. I bridge these ideas with postcolonial theory in order for the framework to articulate with contexts laden with histories of exploitation and imperialism often found in the 'Global South'. Finally, I argue that this framework is best operationalised through ethnography, which can make significant contributions to ESE research. The ethnographic method is uniquely positioned to move the field beyond a binary understanding of ESE interventions as politicising or depoliticising, and to study what the politics of ESE might mean in different cultural, social and economic contexts. Such understanding is in turn key in identifying the ways ESE programmes in postcolonial settings affect the political imagination of learners which, I argue, is a crucial consideration in designing

and implementing education interventions aimed at helping humanity preserve its future and the future of the earth.

Politics and ESE

A concern with politics has long resonated with the work of scholars who have theorised the interface between education and sustainability. Stephen Stirling argued in 1996 that education for sustainability that is suited to 21st-century challenges must be 'ideologically aware and socially critical' (Stirling 1996, 23). A decade later, Vare and Scott (2007, 194) made a distinction between 'ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) 1', which promotes behavioural change among students, and 'ESD 2', which lies in 'building capacity to think critically about [and beyond] what experts say and to test sustainable development ideas, [. . .] exploring the contradictions inherent in sustainable living'. According to these authors, the two approaches must be combined if ESD programmes are to be effective. They argue that a dominance of ESD 1 approaches has, in fact, undermined the sustainability agenda—a view echoed by Sund and Ohman (2014, 639), who argue that 'unmasking the political dimension' of sustainability discourse is necessary for ESE to succeed. McKenzie (2012) goes further in her critique, pointing to the need to interrogate critically the influence of neoliberalism on articulations of sustainability policy, including the sustainable development goals and ESE. Recognising the diverse understandings of 'politics' in this literature, Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck (2018) developed a typology of different kinds of what they call the 'political tendency' in ESE.

Many of these tendencies align with Arendt's definition of 'the political'. Levy and Zint (2013, 568) suggest that the ESE field can learn from established research in political science and education in 'prepar[ing] students to participate in political processes to address major environmental problems', a notion that supports civic equality and which Arendt emphasises as a precondition for political action. Focusing less on participation and more on awareness, Räthzel and Uzzell (2009) argue for educating young people about the power structures underlying global production and consumption. This idea, too, would resonate with Arendt, who suggests that 'the more we think of the political realm as concerned with matters of subsistence and material reproduction, the more likely we are to accept hierarchy in place of civic equality' (Villa 2000, 10). Another concern prevalent in this literature is the importance of conflict, disagreement and dissonance in educating learners about the paradoxes of sustainability (Lundegård and Wickman 2007; Sund and Ohman 2014)—a theme aligned with Arendt's emphasis on agonistic pluralism. The ESE literature, in other words, already recognises many aspects of the kind of politics that I argue is necessary for ESE to contribute to sustainability.

However, with several exceptions (Andersson and Öhman 2017; Öhman and Öhman 2013; Van Poeck and Östman 2017), these theoretical discussions have remained largely disconnected from methodological concerns about how to generate research that illuminates the interface of ESE and the political. Similarly, although scholars studying ESE are at the forefront of promoting political participation as key to addressing sustainability challenges, 'few empirical studies have explored how to prepare youth for environmental political participation' (Levy and Zint 2013, 568). There also are exceptions in this regard. Lundegård and Wickman (2012), for example, have analysed democratic deliberation in classroom dialogue in the context of ESE; Van Poeck, Goeminne, and Vandenabeele (2016) have examined the conflicting values in different educational approaches in the context of nature excursions, behaviour modification workshops and documentary filmmaking. These studies, however, do not offer empirically grounded theoretical frameworks for understanding the politics of ESE interventions, nor do they engage the realities of postcolonial societies.[3]

A recent study by Van Poeck and Östman (2017) engaged the empirical and proposed a framework called Political Move Analysis which aimed to identify politicising and de-politicising

actions (moves) by educators in the context of ESE. While such an empirically grounded theory may address some of the concerns raised by scholars calling for a greater focus on politics in ESE research, the binary nature of this framework oversimplifies the different political forces at play in education. What Poeck and Östman call 'de-politicising' moves are not necessarily an expression of anti-politics; rather, they may be a manifestation of a different kind of politics, the understanding of which requires a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the cultural, historical and social forces shaping the political at any given research site. I return to this point in the conclusion of this article, where I argue for the value of ethnography in studying the politics of ESE in postcolonial societies.

My goal in the following sections is to propose one path toward a more nuanced and grounded analysis of politics in ESE and the methodological implications of such an approach. I specifically aim to demonstrate the importance to ESE research of phenomenological analysis that is rooted in concepts of historical responsibility, action and the postcolonial condition. I begin this discussion by outlining my encounter with handprint in India and South Africa—a concept whose implementation in different countries raises critical questions about what politics and action mean in the context of ESE.

Handprint: action in ESE

The handprint model has the potential to become a vehicle for the politicisation of ESE. It originated in 2005 in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where 'young students in primary schools often questioned why environmental issues were usually presented in terms of problems and negative aspects like environmental destruction and degradation' (Sharma and Gregory 2015, 1). Handprint offers a departure from this model in the form of a project-based, learner-centred approach that shifts the focus away from 'doom and gloom' ESE and empowers students to undertake hands-on projects designed to contribute to the social and environmental sustainability of their communities (Bangay 2016). According to the implementing organisation, the Centre for Environment Education in Ahmedabad, 'the handprint concept captures the energy which young people saw in themselves and their desire to do things for a better future' (Sharma and Gregory 2015, 1).

The idea of the handprint model thus stands in opposition to the concept of a 'footprint-based' ESE. The latter is focused on theoretical awareness of the negative impacts (real and imagined) human actions have on the environment, while the former aims to generate actions that prevent such outcomes from occurring in the first place. Whereas the footprint education model focuses on thinking and can lead to a fatalistic view of the future, the handprint model focuses on action and empowers young people to transform the future.

In spite of the promise of handprint, however, what I saw during my ethnographic encounters with educational interventions based on the idea in several schools in India and South Africa could be described as a form of 'individualization of responsibility'.[4] As Maniates (2001, 33) writes, 'When responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society—to, in other words, "think institutionally"'. In the schools I visited, I found that planting trees was seen as consistent with the handprint model but writing a complaint to a local politician or attending a demonstration was not. In other words, a symbol intended to spark transformative action for sustainability in some contexts became subdued by the depoliticisation of ESE that recognised only non-radical individualised action as worth striving for. The symbol did not always stand for empowerment and in some cases actually represented the constraints the education systems placed on the young people's imagination of their political agency—in both the present and the future.

At my research sites—as in many places around the world—individualization of responsibility did not appear to be prevalent outside of school. Young people in these communities were exposed to activist movements and to efforts to maintain knowledge about the environment that was passed on from past generations. Intergenerational knowledge transfer has the potential to disrupt the depoliticising politics of formal education systems, and if ESE is to enable young people to reimagine the world it can—and must—benefit from this potential. What I saw in the field, however, was that, instead of aligning itself with the currents of intergenerational knowledge, ESE was contributing to their erosion.

At the root of the problem was the definition of 'action' that was being operationalised by the educators and administrators in these schools. As Smith (2005, 58) points out, in the context of neoliberal 'sustainability',

> the 'responsibilities' we are called on to exercise also involve little out of the ordinary—drive a few miles less, recycle plastic containers, compost organic waste, and so on. These 'acts' are, in fact, largely apolitical in an Arendtian sense [...] They usually do not initiate anything new, or offer any real possibility for the individual to change the world; rather they become a means for ameliorating some of modernity's excesses.

Whereas handprint, as interpreted by these educators and administrators, largely focused on exercising the learners' individual localised agency, action in the context of politics has the potential to reimagine and expand this agency. But as Arendt (1998, 188) points out, 'action [...] is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act'. In other words, action is only possible through the multiplicity of perspectives inherent in the shared human condition.

The idea of sustainability, with a focus on future and past generations at its core, also calls for action that emerges out of a multitude of temporalities—not merely with our contemporaries but with those whom we might never know. This intergenerational plurality has the potential to politicise ESE. At the root of the reorganisation of the political by the intergenerational is the idea of historical responsibility, and this is where I turn next.

Historical responsibility: the debt of sustainability and the debt of development

While many different definitions of 'historical responsibility' have been proposed (Tillmanns 2009), a particularly helpful way to think about this concept in the context of ESE is to engage Paul Ricoeur's (1984, 100) notion of debt. We can conceptualise an environmental footprint in the form of a 'debt to the dead' to be carried by future generations. Ricoeur first articulated his theory of debt in *Time and Narrative* in the context of describing the process of writing history: 'The historian's constructions have the ambition of being reconstructions, more or less fitting with what one day was "real." Everything takes place as though historians knew themselves to be bound by a debt to people from earlier times, to the dead'. To the extent that all people are historians engaged in the task of interpreting past events, all are also bound by the recognition that we carry a debt to the dead or to people from the past we may never have known. Environmental degradation, caused by the pursuit of modernity at the expense of future generations, is a form of debt to the not-yet-born—a debt impossible to repay.

The theme of historicity, which lies at the root of ESE, links education to our imagination of the future. This 'surplus of meaning', a core concept in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, is key to the logic behind ESE interventions: by becoming aware of the historical causes of environmental degradation, we simultaneously become aware of the likely effects our actions will have on the future environment—our debt to those we will never know. ESE may therefore be seen as relying upon a 'temporal arc' that links the past with the future through the present: 'The temporal arc of our lives is such that the past (as collected in the present) throws a deep shadow over our future, and so the primarily retrospective (or recollective) character of narrating does not prevent it from having prospective, indeed truly self-transformative, effect' (Dunne 2007, 152). This idea of

the 'storied self' (Dunne 2007) is especially applicable to ESE endeavours: 'Given the radically unsustainable nature of our current systems, environmentalism is first and foremost a critical endeavour. In criticizing an unsustainable status quo, environmentalists are engaged in imagining an alternative, even when they do not fully elaborate the proposed alternative' (Treanor 2013, 161). Indeed, ESE interventions contain elements of a social and environmental imagination of the future rooted in a critique of the histories of the present.

Examining the concepts of environmental sustainability and the related concept of development through Ricoeur's lens allows us to explore such questions as, 'To what extent do young people envision their environmental footprint as a "burden of history" to be carried by future generations?' 'How does ESE alter their perception of their personal and historical responsibility vis-à-vis the environment, as well as their obligation to reimagine the future, the dead or the unborn?' These questions link phenomenology with ethics in examining how students see the exteriority of their lives—their impact on imagined others—and the extent to which the production of subjectivities in ESE classrooms is influenced by 'positive' projections into the future that are rooted in cultural learning about the past.

Neither one of the debts—the debt of environmental degradation to the unborn or the debt to the dead of continuing the struggle for development—can be fully paid off. Ricoeur (1984, 142) addresses this 'insolvency paradox' relative to historians, whose constructions 'aim at being *re*constructions of the past. Through documents and their critical examination of documents, historians are subject to what once was. They owe a debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead, that makes them insolvent debtors'. Yet, as Ernst Gerhardt (2004, 246) noted in his analysis of *Time and Narrative,* Ricoeur 'does not consider insolvency a function of a structural impossibility as doing so would negate any ethical force the debt might possess'. Not being able to *fully* repay the debt thus does not mean one lacks the ability to imagine oneself as a capable, willing subject; indeed, it means that the process of reconstructing narratives of empowerment is a lifelong project. Importantly, Ricoeur (2010) does assume that we are capable of such acts of reconstruction and ought to be empowered to assert our capability.

Global aspirations for development and modernity also carry burdens of history, but they must be conceptualized in different ways. Traces of colonial encounters and their legacies, as they shape education practice, have often meant that such aspirations are uneven and unpredictable, particularly among populations subjected to the 'slow violence' of environmental devastation (Nixon 2011). The sacrifices previous generations made to achieve better living standards, particularly in the context of the (neo)colonial histories of many communities in the 'Global South', act as a burden on those now alive and may not easily translate into the practical application of often utopian perspectives on ESE. The incompleteness of the development narrative, the belief that 'we are still developing', seeks to render the present the latest stage in the struggle for development—a struggle whose temporal dimension is greater than individual lives, in which not participating means being seen to betray the moral and political obligation of honouring the dead. This kind of recognition speaks to our need to act in what Ricoeur refers to as 'horizons of the possible'. To understand the ways ESE interventions shape the perception of sustainable development among young people, it is first necessary to understand how such interventions interact with existing notions of historical responsibility that have been shaped by the cultural, political and economic landscapes of implementation sites.[5] In other words, what 'horizons of the possible' do young learners see for themselves and how do ESE interventions change these perceptions?

The three modalities of ESE

The 'debt to the unborn' of sustainability and 'debt to the dead' of material progress are not necessarily at odds with each other. The very concept of sustainable development at the heart

of ESE assumes that the two debts are in tune; in other words, pursuing development sustainably does not need to come at the expense of future generations. However, it arguably would be difficult not to see advancing the contemporary dominant paradigm of infinite growth and neoliberal development schemes that are fossil fuel-dependent as congruent with the debt to the unborn in most, if not all, societies. Promoting this paradigm as a sustainable form of human 'progress' or failing to challenge its fundamentally unsustainable nature while engaging in the individualisation of sustainability is where ESE can become a form of greenwashing.

In light of this analysis, a politically charged ESE intervention can be seen to operate through several modalities:

1. It may challenge the dominant paradigm through the construction of a 'hierarchy of debts' in which the debt to the not-yet-born is seen as more pressing, which makes it morally acceptable (or indeed preferable) to focus on fulfilling the moral obligations attached to this debt, rather than on the debt to the dead of engaging in the struggle for material progress.[6]
2. It can be a form of increasing awareness of the ethical obligation of our debt to the not-yet-born and the future inhabitants and actors who are obligated to carry this debt forward.
3. It might take the shape of instilling a belief in solvency—in the ability to repay, or at least not further increase, the debt to the not-yet-born.

Sensitisation to the debt to the not-yet-born is associated with 'negative' ESE (i.e. programmes focused on increasing awareness of environmental issues), while the idea of instilling a belief in solvency is linked to 'positive' ESE (i.e. concentrating on empowerment for action rather than on the negative consequences of inaction).

Handprint can be conceptualised as a metaphor for the third modality.[7] Analogous to the capability approach to development articulated by Amartya Sen (1999), handprint tries to unlock students' potential—their capabilities—in order to empower them to act. Yet any education intervention that incorporates the concept of handprint within the context of ESE will likely rely on a fusion of modalities to accomplish its goals. The reason the 'increase of solvency' approach works only in tandem with other modalities is that what is embedded in the concept of ESE is not merely empowerment but also awareness. Learners are not only constructed as being capable of action; this imagined action is attached to a directionality. The concept is therefore intrinsically linked to the modalities of ESE that rely on making learners aware of their debt.

The notion of empowerment or solvency is key to this analysis. According to those who implement it, handprint seeks to convey the message that human beings, regardless of their age, can have an impact on environmental sustainability. It seeks to expand learners' perception of both the temporal and the spatial domain of their agency. Seen through the optics of capability theory, this effort is aligned with the goals of development work, which Sen (1999, 283) defines as the expansion of people's freedom to lead lives they have a reason to value. Capability theory recognises the need for collective responsibility in the process of expanding capabilities, as 'the argument for social support in expanding people's freedom can […] be seen as an argument for individual responsibility'.

In the case of an ESE intervention, individual and collective responsibilities (for the expansion of capability or solvency) are thus inextricably linked to awareness (sensitising learners to the debts they carry) and the construction and reordering of hierarchies of debts. Rather than perceiving ESE as a concept that is unquestionably aligned with expanding capabilities, one should ask *whose* history burden young learners are to carry. Are those living in societies whose dead (and living) made disproportionately smaller contributions to environmental degradation expected to carry a greater share of the debt than those in areas with considerably longer histories of industrialisation? To what extent do ESE interventions either clarify or obstruct learners' moral vision? In what ways does moral imagination differ between different sites and different programmes?

The postcolonial, the subaltern and the power in ESE

To answer these questions, it is necessary to consider not only the modalities through which ESE functions but also the power structures that legitimate these modalities. In the context of subaltern communities, so prevalent in the Global South, Spivak's (2010) question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is key. In assessing whether or not the ethical obligation of the debt of environmental degradation is imagined to be spread evenly among all without regard for the histories of inequality, colonialism and exploitation, it is necessary to ask *who* does the imagining. How much agency do subaltern groups have in defining the notions of sustainability and development they are expected to follow? *Whose* development is being promoted? Are subaltern voices essentialised in this process of cultural translation? What constraints limit their capacity for involvement? Who makes decisions about such involvement?

A theory of agency that examines the material practices and power dynamics at the root of these questions should recognise culture as a dynamic flow shaped by forces of globalisation. A key idea in this conception of culture is imagination, defined by Appadurai (1996, 31) as 'a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, [...] a negotiation between [local] sites of agency [...] and globally defined fields of possibility'. Imagination is not rooted in unidirectional relationships of dominance and subjugation; rather, the imagination of different agents responds to the shared impulses associated with globalisation. These tend to emerge as intersubjective understandings—that is, as shared but also acquired through collective and contested interaction and discussion. By using this lens, it is possible to see the contested nature of the conceptions of development and sustainability. This recognition allows us to examine the role intersubjectivity plays in any social transformations initiated within ESE interventions by understanding the ways these programmes allow for dialogue in the process of defining key concepts in and out of the classroom.

The presence of any such dialogue, however, does not automatically mean that power does not subsume culture or that the forces of global politics do not act to reconfigure the local politics of communities where ESE takes place. In the postcolonial context of much of the 'Global South', power has, for centuries, restricted individual agency in replicating 'undesirable' elements of culture (Fanon 2004; Nandy 2015; Said 1979). It is therefore imperative to examine the power structures that regulate the cultural processes of ESE. The concept of 'governmentality' (Foucault 2010)—social organisation characterised by the subjugation of agents to the governing body—is helpful in developing a theory of power when introducing ESE interventions in different contexts. Ferguson and Gupta (2005, 115–116) have argued for a notion of 'transnational governmentality', defined as 'the outsourcing of the functions of the state to NGOs and other ostensibly non-state agencies' which brings into question 'the taken-for-granted spatial and scalar frames of sovereign states'. This framework enables us to ask questions about the power structures involved in attempts to 'import' different forms of ESE, as well as their historical functions in these sites.

Operationalising a phenomenology of ESE through ethnographic research

The bridge between phenomenology and ethics afforded by applying Ricoeur's concepts of the debt to the dead and the temporal arc to the study of ESE is built over a complex terrain of power relations shaped by (post)colonial histories and the present-day political economy of development. It is a bridge that, like handprint, seeks to connect intersubjective interpretations of history to imaginations of ethical futures in relation to ESE. To build this bridge requires us to construct systems of understanding between the researcher and the researched and to allow the research site to become a place of knowledge production rather than merely a data source (Connell 2007). In other words, what is required is a depth of understanding that comes with the researcher's high degree of embeddedness in the communities studied. This can be achieved

through the method of ethnography which, 'at its best, provides a powerful and efficient way to read historical conditions' (Fortun 2012, 451), as well as its contemporary and complex landscapes of cultures as they operate on the ground and 'close up'.[8] In other words, ethnography—which has not been used extensively in the context of ESE research—needs to be given greater prominence in the field if we are to come to grips with (de)politicisation of ESE.

Ethnography has the potential to get beyond binaristic understandings of educational practice as politicising/depoliticising. It can instead illuminate what 'the political' might mean in diverse sites and challenge existing and often 'Global North-centric' notions of what constitutes political action. The different 'modes of ethnographic authority'—the experiential, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic (Clifford 1983, 142)—make it possible to engage deeply with multiple actors whose agencies shape (and are shaped by) ESE interventions. Indeed, ethnography allows the incorporation of multiple 'authorial voices' on ideas like sustainability in constructing what Van Maanen (2011, 136) has called 'jointly told tales'.

Crucially, ethnographic reflexivity allows researchers to recognise the limitations of their own authority in creating a representation of the cultural and political text of ESE. Just as my research into handprint started with disappointment in what I saw as a great idea being engulfed by global forces that are fundamentally incompatible with the notion of sustainability, my immersion in the field challenged this narrative. I came across outlier teachers who took their learners to demonstrations and rallies, and I met learners who drew on sources well beyond their schools in imagining alternative futures. The patterns of neoliberal agendas, greenwashing and education systems unprepared for the task of ESE that I observed in the beginning appeared less insurmountable after I let myself become immersed in the field. Ethnography allowed me to see my research sites as places of inspiration rather than of intervention. Ultimately, it challenged not only my working definition of politics but also of education, helping me realise that ESE goes well beyond schooling and into informal spaces of community exchange, activism and faith. It also made me realise that we need to get to know 'the political' intimately in any given cultural context before we can embrace cultivating 'politics' through ESE.

Operationalising a phenomenology of ESE through ethnography has radical consequences for both practice and research. It means rethinking the interface between society and education, and shifting away from social, cultural and political reproduction—and the associated continuation of slow violence and environmental degradation—that education systems around the world often facilitate in an increasingly neoliberal, globalised world. Putting historical responsibility at the core of ESE has the potential to give education the edge it needs to transform the relationship between society and the environment. Indeed, ESE's own 'debt to the unborn' is to help shape changes in global and local political and cultural systems that would help the radical agenda of sustainability to truly take off.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interests was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Peter Sutoris is a scholar of development, a documentary filmmaker and an educator. He is the author of *Visions of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) and director of *The Undiscovered Country*, a film about education, development and environmental degradation in the Marshall Islands. He has lived and worked in South Asia, the Pacific, the Balkans and South Africa. A history graduate of Dartmouth College, he is currently a PhD candidate and Gates Scholar at the Education Faculty of Cambridge University. His current research focuses on ESE in India and South Africa.

Notes

1. This article focuses on environment and sustainability education in the context of formal education. The term incorporates both Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) research and practice. I argue that the political and the attendant theoretical and methodological considerations presented in this article are relevant to both these areas, given the urgent environmental concerns facing humanity and the role of education in addressing these concerns.
2. By postcolonial condition I mean the historical baggage (including exploitation, racism, violence and uneven power relations) affecting much of the Global South, as discussed in the works of scholars such as Spivak (2010), Said (1979), Fanon (2004) and Nandy (2015).
3. Elements of postcolonial reflections can be found in the work of Pashby and Andreotti (2016).
4. The schools I visited were by no means representative of how handprint might be interpreted elsewhere in India, South Africa and beyond. My reflections therefore should not be seen as a comment on the effectiveness of handprint as a concept; I am merely mentioning them as an entry point into the theoretical framework presented in this article.
5. These landscapes are complex and multilayered. ESE programs rely on a number of socially constructed concepts, including 'progress', 'development' and 'sustainability'. The complex dynamics at play in ESE interventions lend themselves to a multi-layered cultural analysis that incorporates historical contextualisation, including existing factors that shape perceptions of 'sustainability' and 'development' in different contexts. Such an analysis should also consider issues of political economy, including power dynamics within communities that influence how well ESE concepts and interventions are received, and associated questions concerning the links between educational and economic development. Finally, it should examine overarching narratives of 'progress' as well as any resistance to them in the local contexts, such as nationalist narratives and development imagination fuelled by the forces of cultural and economic globalisation. These concepts are thought to interact in complex ways with local cultures, thereby creating fertile ground for exploration of the interface between ethical imperatives and diverse cultural systems and political configurations.
6. It is possible that such an effort would ultimately eliminate the need for a hierarchy, as a model of development not at odds with repaying the 'debt to the unborn' might emerge.
7. Even though my encounter with handprint was marked by a depoliticisation of sustainability in the way the concept was implemented, the idea of handprint itself is not (de)politicising. As noted earlier, the definition of action in the context of handprint is key to determining the extent to which any handprint-inspired programme contributes to the (de)politicisation of ESE.
8. The theoretical underpinnings are designed to lend support to an approach to studying ESE that reads 'underneath' the data in order to extract its underlying symbolic dimensions through interpretation. The conceptual apparatus may also be substantially challenged and/or reconfigured by the findings of the work, as all ethnography carries with it an iterative and dialectical function which speaks to earlier conceptualisations as part of recasting and gaining an ethnographic picture of the context.

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