

Launching a Virtual Special Issue on ESE policy research at ECER2015: Nourishing the ESER Network and dialogue with other networks?

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Why a VSI on environmental and sustainability education policy research coinciding with the European Conference of Educational Research (ECER) in Budapest?

This first Virtual Special Issue of *Environmental Education Research* has been prepared to address vital topics related to ECER2015's conference theme 'Education and Transition – Contributions from Educational Research'. It has also been developed for two further purposes: first, to nourish and showcase some of the initial work of the recently established [Network 30 on Environmental and Sustainability Education Research \(ESER\)](#); and second, to encourage dialogue with other networks and thematics at ECER.

The ESER Network grew out of initial collaborations at ECER conferences in Berlin 2011, Cádiz 2012, and Istanbul 2013. It was officially launched in 2014 in Porto, and has attracted both a heavily European and internationalized group of researchers to its membership.

The Network's core aims are three-fold: (i) to share, critically investigate and discuss research on environmental and sustainability education (ESE), (ii) to promote the development and impact of such research, and (iii) to advance this relatively new field of scholarship.

One of the most debated issues in this research field historically and internationally has been the relation between education and societal change. As a point of difference, the Network has also asked what any consideration of nature, environment and/or sustainability might add or subtract from this, e.g., given the notion of the Anthropocene. So this year's ECER conference theme, 'Education and Transition', is both strangely familiar and a challenge to many of the network's researchers.

Moreover, in their call for proposals for ECER, the conference organisers argued that 'we need to examine the very concept of *transition* and how over the past decades education and educational research *appropriated, interpreted and constructed it*' [emphasis added]. This VSI has been prepared to help meet such a challenge by guiding readers through a series of contributions from the field of ESE on policy research. Unlike a regular special issue though, it does not present largely new material focusing on a theme. Rather, it gathers a selection of ESE policy research articles from the journal in a virtual space, drawing from that which has been published in hardcopy over the past two decades, and what is about to be published.

We believe that identifying and discussing key concerns, arguments, debates, perspectives and approaches in the existing ESE policy research literature can help incite novel insights and inspire future ESE research and policy. Focusing on ESE *policy* research, a VSI from *Environmental Education Research* can also help address topics of vital interest for the ESER Network, such as curriculum, policy discussions, and implementation and approaches, in relation to the wider theme of ‘Education and Transition’ and the work of other networks.

Also, many of the Network’s members have already published in the journal, referee for it, or submit papers to it. Thus the journal, through its active connection with the research network, already stands to engage a wide range of perspectives and topics, such as addressing institutional change and regional, national and international societal transitions. But also, we recognise these aren’t something a standard special issue (and some other regionally focused journals) would presume to be able to produce from its home contributors, or for that matter, their archives. Furthermore, as we elaborate below, the contributions to this VSI may also encourage wider consideration of how to address transitions both within education, and education in relation to broader societal (socio-ecological or sustainability) transitions.

How does the collection of articles in this VSI address the conference theme ‘Education and Transition’?

In brief, in three main ways.

Some of the articles brought together in this VSI focus on transitions within education – and in particular, on transitions challenging the field of ESE.

Consider a standard policy research topic: examining and reflecting on transitions in national curricula. Over the past two decades, ESE researchers have addressed a variety of curriculum issues in relation to educational transition in the journal. In one of its earliest contributions, **Law and Baker** (1997), identified key dilemmas and tensions involved in the politically sensitive and contentious process of developing a National Guideline for environmental education in New Zealand. Their study serves to highlight twin processes of centralisation and neoliberal policy formations, themes picked up again more recently in a Special Issue of *Environmental Education Research*, Volume 21(3), on ‘Environmental Education in a neoliberal climate’. What Law and Baker offer, and, for example, Gruenewald and Manteaw (2007) and Huckle (2008) do so more recently, is a direct engagement with such questions as direction, distortion and ideology in curriculum, policy-making and policy.

Consistent with this line of work, in analysing the UK Government’s ‘Learning to Last’ initiative, **Blewitt’s** (2005) contribution to the VSI discusses the tension between a managerial approach aimed at realising predetermined outcomes, and an ecological, networked and synoptic methodology, that is argued to align better with the values of ESE. A theme that is also picked up by Ross (2015), the challenge such research studies (and their associated research imaginaries) present, is to (call into) question the political compacts and commitments between, for example the State and the ‘servants of the state’, e.g. teachers

and/as civil servants. While sustainability might well be treated as a desirable strategic and ecological outcome (in Scotland, if not the UK at the very least), for Ross (p.403) a key issue is as follows:

“Policy strategies to reward teachers for field-specific expertise have become internationally widespread and have been criticized for being manifestations of neoliberal globalization. ... Managerialism is a neoliberal technology, so these tensions are interpreted as traces of neoliberal ideology. Moreover, their negotiation is interpreted as de- and re-bordering engagements with globalization. The critical potential of these interpretations is in the revealed incompleteness of the engagements, leaving teachers and policy-makers with scope to manage responses to neoliberal globalization in SDE”.

We might also ask, how else might topics of policy, politics and key constituents of the ‘body politic’ be understood?

In his article on curriculum guidelines for environmental education in England, **Stables** (1998) offers a different perspective, addressing the gap between policymakers’ intentions and the ways in which these find concrete shape in policy pronouncements and documentation. Despite extensive lip service and good intentions, he shows that more open-ended and less ‘manageable’ educational outcomes labelled as ‘critical environmental literacy’ seem difficult – if not impossible – to translate into instructive curriculum guidelines. Thus, these three articles in the VSI (and related others also found in the journal), reveal how ESE policy researchers have investigated and discussed issues that are still present in contemporary debates on educational transitions – be those within or beyond the specific field of ESE.

A second topic of vibrant discussion related to transitions *within* education, but this time specifically focused on ESE, is the international policy-driven transition from environmental education (EE) to education for sustainable development (ESD). As noted elsewhere for this VSI, Huckle and Wals (2015) have likened this to little more than ‘business as usual in the end’ when it comes to a UN Decade of ESD. But in an open and generative research field, we argue, they simply can’t have the last or only words on this topic. Ever since the emergence of ESD on policy agendas, its pros and cons as well as its relation to the longer established notion of EE have been the subject of repeated academic debate, including (but not exclusively) in this journal. Hence, a VSI should not be without some theoretical (e.g., **Stables and Scott** 2002; **Stevenson** 2006, **Kopnina** 2012) and empirical (e.g., **Van Poeck et al.** 2014) contributions on the matter.

A related discussion about the naming (and, thus, focus and purpose) of what is deemed an educational priority arises in light of certain questions associated with the thematics of linking education to nature, environment and/or sustainability. This centres around the role of education in view of broader societal transitions. **Ferreira** (2009) presents an insightful meta-analysis and critique of the discussion about ‘environmental education’ versus ‘education *for*

the environment’ and shows how the latter had become an orthodoxy within the field, despite its *a priori* heterodox pretensions.

Whereas Ferreira urges ESE researchers to unsettle any attempt at orthodoxy and to question taken for granted assumptions that instrumentally frame education as a problem-solver for ecological or other societal challenges (see also **Stables and Scott** 2002; **Stevenson** 2006; **Rudsberg and Öhman** 2010; **Van Poeck et al.** 2014), **Kopnina** (2012), in contrast, is one of a few researchers offering an opposing standpoint. Kopnina argues that given the severity of environmental problems and predicaments, education should first and foremost aid their resolution. However, this is largely to the exclusion of those other understandings of environmental education’s goals, characteristics and objectives (key thematic in the seminal Tbilisi Declaration). Such exchanges reveal how environmental awareness, experience, appreciation, and interpretation, for example, as: (a) ends-in-themselves, or (b) only in service of behavioural or action-oriented outcomes, can become a test of doxa (see Reid 2009) for some environmental educators, policy-makers and researchers, and hence the journal’s editorial recommendation of moving towards, but also beyond, passionate and scholarly conversation in the pages of the journal (Reid 2013).

Further illustrating a long tradition in the ESE research community of reflecting on what is settled and contentious as the doxa of education, such as, as a tool for societal change at large, and/or for the development of informed individuals, other articles in the VSI reveal how notions such as ‘competencies’ (**Mogensen and Schnack** 2010) or ‘literacy’ (**Stables** 1998) can advance theoretical and empirical activity. Some papers elaborate the lack of solid foundations - be those universal ethical (**Sund and Öhman** 2014) or scientific (**Ashley** 2000) - and hence give voice to a sense of the erosion of warrant to reducing education to realising pre-specified outcomes in service of the transition to a desirable, ‘sustainable’ society - one that may simply be ‘uneducational’ in the final analysis.

Finally, discussing ‘contributions from educational research’ about education and transition, one cannot avoid those necessary questions about the role and position of researchers in the development, implementation or evaluation of educational transitions. Whereas educators and policymakers are increasingly urged to deploy education as part of the ‘policy toolkit’ in the pursuit of solving societal problems, researchers experience growing pressure to come up with evidence-based solutions and usable recommendations. As such, policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike seem to be caught up in a familiar ‘problem-solving’ logic when it comes to ESE, assessed largely in relation to realist/ic outcomes and tests of efficacy and traction. But what is the frame for being the most efficient and effective? Is it by becoming scholar-activists for an environmentalist agenda, or recycling, recirculating or resisting policy ‘that works’ from elsewhere (**McKenzie et al.** 2015)? If we take seriously the critique of the instrumentalisation of education policy in view of pre-determined societal transitions, shouldn’t we rather be striving for more reflexive and retrospective research? That is, instead of monitoring and evaluating pre-defined indicators, developing evidence-based guidelines for desirable practices (**Bengtsson and Östman** 2015)? And what about ESE researchers’ relation to policy and practice – the areas where transitions (are supposed to) actually happen? In our view, **Læssøe et al.** (2013) have thoughtfully addressed these issues, taking into

consideration researchers' struggles with balancing a critical detachment and an engaged involvement towards their field of study. Arguing for more 'documentary' ESE policy research, they call on researchers to act interactively, as 'critical friends', and to incite fruitful dialogues between research, policy and practice. This is achieved by documenting what is actually going on in different contexts, spheres and levels – many of which interact in hidden and not just public exchanges through the various ways that policy actors, experts and alliances form, shift and reform. This implies that research networks might do well to move beyond populating the field with largely individual case studies of policy, to an understanding of the systems and trends of policy formation and reformulation, if not their decay and disruption, and morphing and mobilization, beyond the pre-specified field of inquiry (Aikens et al. 2016).

How does this VSI contribute to the objectives of the Environmental and Sustainability Education Research (ESER) Network?

The honest ambition of the ESER Network is to become both a central and important meeting point where ESE researchers from all over the world can critically investigate and discuss the dynamics and relations between education, environment and sustainability issues. By bringing together examples of such work in relation to policy and policy research, and by calling for renewed attention to the history of this research field, we hope this VSI can nurture critical discussion and stimulate much-needed collective inquiry and reflection about the field's orthodoxies and priorities.

In view of the conference theme 'Education and Transition', ESER's current ambition is to challenge traditional educational discourses which focus either narrowly or solely on learners' attitudes and behaviours. As we hope our brief introduction to the selected articles has shown, this VSI can contribute to this ambition by further prompting the development of a historical consciousness of relevant patterns and tensions in the ESE research field too (Reid 2013).

Yet, in line with our commitment to work together on this, and with(in) a network, we also believe that drawing lessons from earlier research should be a collective endeavour. It demands the spaces and a commitment to open, critical and reflexive dialogue within the field, as well as challenging interdisciplinary debate with other related fields. Therefore, we keenly invite readers with an interest in these challenges and ambitions to (re-)read the articles gathered in this VSI, to explore some of the routes for transdisciplinary dialogue we suggest in the editorial, and/or to critically respond to the reflexive questions we formulated there, hoping that this can inspire authors, reviewers, editors and networks in the field to further develop ESE scholarship theoretically, methodologically and empirically.

This might happen through the pages of this and other scholarly journals, through network meetings, and through other research-policy forums. As the conveners of the ESER Network emphasise, 'it is up to us, together!' to develop Network 30. Likewise, it is up to us, together, to further advance our field, pursue path-breaking findings, and engage others in both the process and its outcomes.

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