

## **SUSTAINABLE CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION**

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### **A NEW FOCAL POINT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION?**

Currently, a conversion of environmental education to education for sustainable development (ESD) is internationally encouraged by policymakers. In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to install a UN Decade of ESD, spanning from 2005 to 2014 and designated UNESCO<sup>1</sup> to lead it. The Decade aims at integrating the principles, values and practices of sustainable development in education. In 2005 the UNECE<sup>2</sup> adopted a strategy to facilitate the introduction and promotion of ESD. Member states are encouraged to develop national implementation plans.

Making sustainable development the new focal point of environmental education is not a value-free move. It is not neutral concerning the nature and purposes of education, yet it is strongly connected with certain images of an 'educated citizen' and the kind of educational processes that are expected to enhance these images. Citizenship is a contested and historically evolving term. In the context of the environment and sustainability, the concept is pre-eminently open to a wide variety of interpretations (Barry, 2005). In this paper, we take a look at the way in which citizenship is conceptualised in the light of sustainable development. What kinds of characterizations are to be found in scholarly literature? What types of justification emerge for the promotion of sustainable citizenship<sup>3</sup>? Furthermore, we examine the roles and purposes attributed to education in the context of sustainable citizenship.

### **EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A MULTIFACETED CONCEPT**

In "Globalisation and environmental education: looking beyond sustainable development", Jickling & Wals (2007) present a heuristic for reflection on the nature, goals and processes associated with ESD and environmental education. The authors position different ideas about education alongside two fields of tension that characterize educational tendencies and perspectives: a transmissive versus transformative approach to education on the one hand and an authoritative versus participatory view of the educated person on the other hand.

If education is essentially about the transmission of facts, skills and values, then learning is a closed process. Content and learning outcomes are predetermined and prescribed by a small group of experts and education contributes primarily to social reproduction and social efficiency. By contrast, learning from a transformative point of view is a more open process providing space for self-determination on the learner's side. Knowledge and understanding are co-constructed within a social context and education creates the ability to criticise and transcend social norms, patterns of behaviour, and lifestyles without authoritatively prescribing alternatives.

These conceptions of education are related to corresponding views on the social role of an educated citizen. If education is seen as the key to social reproduction, citizens should work efficiently within existing frameworks. They are obedient, deferential and compliant individuals well prepared to accept their place within hierarchical and authoritative social structures and power relationships. If education is about social transformation, however, citizens are participants in ongoing decision-making processes within their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

<sup>2</sup> UNECE: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

<sup>3</sup> For pragmatic reasons, we will use 'sustainable citizenship' as an umbrella term. Authors use a variety of related expressions such as 'sustainability citizenship', 'ecological citizenship', 'environmental citizenship', etc. The scope of this paper does not allow us to address the differentiations amongst them profoundly, but in our outline of characterisations emerging in literature we will stick to the authors' original terminologies.

Starting from these fields of tension, Jickling & Wals distinguish three approaches to ESD. Education seen as 'Big Brother Sustainable Development' is an instrument among several others to realize the sustainable development agenda. 'Authorities' of all kinds determine the desirable course of action and the purpose of education is to implement it, often by using techniques of standardisation and benchmarks. Learning from a 'Feel Good Sustainable Development'-perspective provides more freedom to create new understandings and citizen participation. Yet Jickling & Wals consider this as bounded freedom, still framed by the language of sustainable development. It ignores the variable, unstable and questionable knowledge and value bases of sustainability and leads to false consensus. The capacity to think is diminished by reducing space for philosophical or political evaluations or mediations between contesting values. Education conceived of as 'Enabling Thought and Action', views sustainable development as just one stepping stone within a dynamic, evolving environmental thought. It is a social construct of our times, a more or less useful conceptual tool to stimulate effective and creative dissonance across disciplinary boundaries.

The basic dichotomy characterizing this typology concerns the tension between indoctrination and personal autonomy. On the one hand, predetermined learning processes encourage obedient citizens to play their role within existing structures and relationships. On the other hand, learning is a process with an open outcome encouraging self-determination and participation of citizens in social transformation.

Viewing ESD as a problematic product and a carrier of globalizing forces, Jickling & Wals have created this heuristic to investigate the ESD debate. They want to provide "a critical tool that can be used to critique current discourses, evaluate new initiatives, and find one's own place within present debates, but also to support non-conformism" (p. 19). Undoubtedly, this outline encourages critical reflection on the policy-driven focus on sustainable development that is currently affecting environmental education. It also reveals the complexity that characterises the educational debate and practice in the light of globalisation and sustainability. Less obvious however is the extent to which the heuristic allows us to evaluate educational practices and policymaking. Is the complexity inherent in ESD grasped adequately? Or are there blind spots concealing significant issues intrinsic to education in the context of sustainable development? Jickling & Wals connect different ideas about education to the corresponding *social roles* of educated citizens. In the following section we examine whether a broader view on citizenship can add some meaningful and essential elements to the ESD debate.

## **CITIZENSHIP IN THE LIGHT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Sustainability discourses and current social phenomena such as globalization challenge the traditional discussion of citizenship, largely dominated by the distinction between the 'liberal' and the 'civic republican' branch of citizenship. In order to avoid a distorted and incomplete picture of citizenship, a plurality of aspects needs to be taken into account. The authors we discussed below present additional aspects for the reflection on ESD.

### **Globalization and sustainable ecological footprints**

Dobson (2003) argues for a multidimensional approach to citizenship theory considering at least four contrasts: rights and obligations, territorial and non-territorial conceptions of citizenship, the public and the private arenas as possible sites of citizenship activity and competing virtue-based and non-virtue-based ideas of citizenship. Starting from this multidimensional view he distinguishes a 'post-cosmopolitan' perspective on citizenship. It is based on the asymmetrical character of globalization, giving rise to structural relations that are the source of unilateral, historical obligations<sup>4</sup>. Inhabitants of globalizing nations are 'always already' acting on others. Dobson considers 'ecological citizenship' as a specific articulation of the post-cosmopolitan type because of its non-territorial view, its stress on duties and responsibilities from a non-reciprocal perspective, its focus on virtues drawn from the public as well as the private sphere and its recognition of that private arena as a legitimate site of citizenly activity.

The non-territorial view implies a material and historical conception of political space that is best expressed via the notion of the ecological footprint. This space, thus, is not given by the boundaries of nation-states but rather produced by the material relationship of individual people with their

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<sup>4</sup> Dobson is inspired by Shiva's ideas of globalization as an asymmetrical process in which both its benefits and the very possibility of 'being global' are divided up unequally.

environment. The principal obligation of ecological citizens is to ensure that ecological footprints make sustainable impacts. This is a non-reciprocal and normative approach to citizenship duties. Obligations are owed asymmetrically: "Only those who occupy ecological space in such a way as to compromise or foreclose the ability of others in present or future generations to pursue options important to them owe obligations of ecological citizenship" (Dobson, 2003, p. 120). The normative dimension implies that there are no determined answers to the question what a 'sustainable impact' means. Important virtues in ecological citizenship are those that enable citizenship obligations to be met. This contains both liberal and civic republican virtues, but also goes beyond them. The first virtue of ecological citizenship is justice. Furthermore, other virtues such as care and compassion may be instrumentally required to the effective exercise of that basic one. The private realm is a crucial site for ecological citizenship activity since private acts have public implications and because some of the required virtues are characteristic for private sphere relationships. Therefore, ecological citizenship requires collective as well as individual action.

### **Citizenship as a site of struggle**

From a liberal perspective is about "attempts to extend the discourse and practice of rights-claiming into the environmental context" (Dobson, 2003, p. 88). The 'environmental justice' movement reveals the potential of a vocabulary of rights in the light of sustainability and the environment, pleading for the fundamental right of every human being to live in a healthy environment and claiming that all social groups should be equally protected (Hill, 2003). Despite this potential, authors also point to the limitations of a rights-based discourse of sustainable citizenship.

Gilbert & Phillips (2003) assert that citizenship cannot only be understood as a set of formal rights granted by a government, but also as practices through which the limits of established rights are (re)defined and (re)affirmed. It is a continual process of construction and constitution. Jelin (2000) emphasizes that rights are subject to constant political and social dispute. Citizenship, then, "refers to a conflictive practice related to power, which reflects the struggles about who can say what in the process of defining what is to be considered as the common problems, and how are they to be faced" (Jelin, 2000, p. 53). From this point of view, a right becomes a claim upon society and a matter of social relatedness rather than an individual property concealing existing inequalities between citizens. Gilbert & Phillips argue in favour of 'the right to difference'<sup>5</sup> that allows the questioning of established rights by "engaging and participating in alternatives that reassert social realities into political ideologies and market strategies" (Gilbert & Phillips, 2003, p. 317).

Consistent with this relational view on citizenship and rights, both Jelin and Gilbert & Phillips refer to Arendt's perspective that the basic human right is 'the right to have rights'. This idea is built upon the fact that human beings belong to a political community and the recognition that rights stem from social relations. Pre-eminently in the context of controversial issues such as sustainability and the environment, rights are faced with the inevitable tension between universality and diversity. "The paradox is that the full enforcement of universal human rights (as currently defined) does not guarantee the prevalence of people's collective rights, and conversely, the right of a people to live its own lifestyle may at times imply the denial of basic human rights and even the practice of cruelty towards certain categories of members of a given culture." (Jelin, 2000, p. 54).

### **Resistance and vulnerability**

Central for a republican approach to citizenship is its openness to virtue-based moral and political perspectives. For Barry (2005) a civic republican approach is more ambitious, oppositional and transformative than a liberal perspective because of its focus on the underlying structural (political, economic and social) causes of environmental degradation and social injustice. 'Sustainability citizenship', then, "includes but goes beyond environmental citizenship"<sup>6</sup> (Barry, 2005, p. 24) and leads to lifestyle changes as well as political changes. It is a form of 'resistance citizenship' that exists within, and is a corrective to unsustainable development. Consequently, there is an obligation for sustainability citizens to engage in political struggle against market and state-based forms of inequality, injustice, and ecological unsustainability.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert & Phillips use this notion of H. Lefebvre.

<sup>6</sup> Barry uses the term 'sustainability citizenship' in contrast to 'environmental citizenship'. Note that his association of the term 'environmental' with a rather superficial and reproductive perspective and 'sustainable' with a more transformative one is just the opposite of the connotations Jickling & Wals (2007) attribute to '*environmental* education' and '*education for sustainable* development'.

Within a civic republican perspective one commonly held view of the good life is not necessary, as long as the variety of views “does not threaten or undermine the freedoms and practices of the common public/political life of the community” (Barry, 2005, p. 26). This commitment to plurality concerning potential views of the good goes to the heart of the above-mentioned tension between universality and diversity. The civic republican answer to this field of tension is the recognition of vulnerability as a key principle of sustainability. According to Barry, “citizens are made not born and [...] there is the ever-present danger that citizens can forget, become soft, and be lured by the attractions of a fully private life of consumption” (p. 26). Therefore, sustainability citizenship needs to be taught and encouraged and can also be forgotten. Barry takes for granted that contributing to collective responsibilities is “in the enlightened self-interest of individuals as well” (p. 27). He assumes that, from a republican view on citizenship, individuals are not expected to sacrifice their interests for the common good but that the fulfilling of individual as well as collective long-term interests, values, and goals can converge. The role of the state is to create the conditions for sustainability citizenship and to cultivate citizenly virtues and behavioural change.

### **The complexity of sustainable citizenship: beyond the social role of citizens**

Jickling and Wals’ (2007) heuristic integrates different perspectives on the social role of educated citizens. We explored a broader view on sustainable citizenship in order to find out whether we could detect additional issues relevant for the ESD debate. A more comprehensive analysis of sustainable citizenship shows indeed other meaningful and essential elements that can enrich the reflection on ESD.

Dobson is the most explicit in offering a more complex view on sustainable citizenship. His multidimensional approach goes far beyond the – rather abstract – ‘social role’ of citizens, encouraging a broader perspective, and offering opportunities for critical discussion on sustainable development and citizenship in a globalizing world. Furthermore, sustainable citizenship literature points to the requirement of collective as well as individual action of citizens and emphasizes the fact that citizenship inevitably takes place within social and political struggle. Another interesting element is the tension between Dobson’s justice-based view and the vulnerability perspective offered by Barry. Moreover, a key point of difference between them concerns the way in which the relationship between individual and collective goals and interests are addressed. Dobson (2007, p. 280) argues that “it is surely a fantasy to think that sustainability can always be a ‘win-win’ policy objective, in which each gain for the common good will also be a gain for each and every individual member of society”. Jickling & Wals, too, emphasize the bulk of divergent and sometimes conflicting interests and values lying at the bottom of a hazy notion such as sustainable development. However, they deal with this assumption in a different way.

Literature on sustainable citizenship offers a variety of ideas allowing a multidimensional approach to the conceptualization of ESD. They can roughly be captured in the following four, strongly intertwined dimensions:

- A *political* dimension, focusing on justice and on asymmetrical, historical obligations and giving rise to the questioning of dominant structures and power relations. A political approach makes it possible to challenge the underlying structural causes of unsustainability.
- A dimension of *scale*, arising from the acknowledgement that sustainable citizenship requires public/collective as well as private/individual actions. This allows both individual and collective learning and social action.
- An *ethical* dimension, built upon the recognition of sustainability as a normative notion and encouraging space for values and critical reflection in learning processes.
- A *relational* dimension, resulting from the idea that sustainability and citizenship are socially constructed within a continuing social struggle of ideas, interests, values, etc.

## **EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF SUSTAINABLE CITIZENSHIP**

In this section we take a look at the role of education starting from the above-mentioned, highly interrelated dimensions. A multidimensional view on sustainable citizenship can enrich the ESD debate.

### **A political perspective**

Justice is a key component of education in the light of sustainable citizenship and requires political commitment. Remedying injustice, after all, “is not simply a matter of lifestyle changes, but of

commitment to changing the institutional structures that underpin and serve to reproduce the injustice” (Dobson, 2007, p. 281). Therefore, ESD should encourage people to consider their opinions and behaviour in the context of justice and injustice. From a sustainability perspective, a starting point can be the fact that there are huge differences in ecological footprints within the world’s population, illustrating the profoundly unequal distribution of ecological goods and harms.

Environmental dilemmas and signals of environmental injustice can be firm triggers for education. Mainstream environmental education has the capacity to play a significant role in such processes, but in actual practice it often lacks attention to the structural causes of environmental degradation. In this form, it can be viewed “a substitute for the unpleasantness of political struggle and [...] social change” (Hill, 2003, p. 31).

Barry (2005) argues for ‘resistance’ citizenship, since disobedient and critical citizens, challenging dominant state and economic actors, processes and institutions, are indispensable in the struggle for a more sustainable society. His ‘activist notion’ of citizenship, recognizing the educative capacity of political struggle, fits in with Sumner’s (2003a) plea for ‘counter-hegemony’ as one of the building blocks for ESD. Learning should enable people to break through false consciousness induced by hegemonic relationships and engage them in a process of transformative learning that constitutes a necessary condition for sustainability. The fact that people can learn to change their relationships to structures of power is the underlying idea. Such a reconceptualisation and openness for commitment and action can move education from an individual orientation towards a transformative perspective of critical social learning<sup>7</sup> (Sumner, 2003b).

### **A scale perspective**

A political perspective on sustainable citizenship and education reveals that ESD cannot be restricted to individual learning. Every act has public implications. Therefore, “learning to be a sustainable citizen is about recognizing the ways in which your own economic, social and environmental decisions/actions affect distant others” (Bullen & Whitehead, 2005, p. 501). Moreover, social conditions influence the room for manoeuvre of the individual. Consequently, education for sustainable citizenship goes to the heart of the interrelatedness of the private and the public sphere.

Delanty’s (2003) focus on the complex relation between individual and collective learning can be illuminating in this context. He sees learning “not just in individual terms but also as a medium for social construction by which individual learning becomes translated and co-ordinated into collective learning and ultimately becomes realized in social institutions” (p. 4). It is on the collective level that social change can occur. By focusing solely on the individual level, education depoliticizes and privatizes a very political and public issue (Clover, 2003) and thereby contributes to the reproduction of social inequality (Hill, 2003). ESD is more than a matter of individual behaviour change. It is a participatory process of political and social learning, holding a message of state accountability and responsibility to its citizens (Clover, 2003).

### **An ethical perspective**

Since sustainable development is a normative notion and education in the light of sustainable citizenship should encourage people to assess their behaviour in the context of justice and injustice, it is “at least as much about values as about techniques and technologies” (Dobson, 2007, p. 284). Rather than learning facts it encourages discussion of normative questions, exploration of the range of attitudes and values in society and consideration of the kind of society we want to live in. Moral development is therefore a crucial aim that can be achieved by a critical appreciation of issues of right and wrong, justice, fairness and rights and obligations in society.

It is important to see that ethical questions concerning sustainable development are a matter of justice rather than charity (Dobson, 2007). People with exorbitant ecological footprints are partially responsible for the suffering caused by environmental degradation. Justice, then, is the appropriate response. This is a powerful basis for obligation: whereas charity can easily be withdrawn, the duty to reduce your ecological impact remains, even while you’re not doing it. Furthermore, relations of justice presuppose equality. Paternalism characterizing charity and reproducing the vulnerability of the recipient is absent in issues of justice.

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the potential of social learning in the context of sustainability see Wals (2007).

## **A relational perspective**

Sustainability and citizenship are socially constructed. They are a temporarily, historical result of a struggle between ideas, values, interests and worldviews. Local communities offer great opportunities for a constructivist, relational kind of learning.

Bullen & Whitehead (2005) argue that a community is suited to emphasize the affective nature of sustainability and to address the actual relations which exist between itself and other parts of the world. Sumner (2003b), too, stresses that education should be grounded within local communities. From that firm grounding and based in commitment and action, ESD can reach out and embrace other localities. Concerns emerging there form a starting point for “critical analysis, global networking, and learning our way into new ways of seeing and being – not just in local communities but on the whole planet” (p. 44). Hill (2003) upholds environmental popular education as a basic element in the environmental justice movement. He argues for self-organized, action-oriented, problem-solving groups enabling people to recognize structures of social control and power relationships, to develop oppositional forms of action, to generate novel ideas and to create new kinds of knowledge.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jickling & Wals (2007) distinguish three approaches to ESD building upon notions of education on the one hand and of citizens’ social role on the other hand. Doing so, they narrow down the abundance of features and challenges of learning processes emerging from their initial analysis. The main focus of the typology is thereby to a certain extent condensed to the tension between indoctrination versus personal autonomy. According to Dobson (2003) this is a false dichotomy, neglecting the fact that indoctrination can also occur ‘by omission’. Autonomy and neutrality concerning ‘the good life’, he suggests, presuppose the acknowledgement of justice translated into sustainable ecological footprints. He puts into perspective the preference for a participatory approach *as such* arguing that “if harm is being done, then more *justice* rather than more talking is the first requirement” (Dobson, 2003, p. 26).

Jickling & Wals take offence at the prescriptive construction ‘education *for* sustainable development’ as it reduces the conceptual space for self-determination and alternative views. For them, it is a vague and problematic concept, forcing consensus on issues that are in fact characterized by conflicting values and interests. However Dobson explicitly acknowledges the ambiguous character of sustainable development, he approaches it as a normative notion that just allows the disclosure of the underlying conflicting assumptions. A multidimensional approach to education in the light of sustainable citizenship reveals that, maybe, the question whether education *for* something can be valuable is not the most pressing one. What matters first and foremost is the question ‘education *for what?*’. From this point of view, sustainable citizenship literature offers some valuable insights that give food for reflection on the way in which ESD should be designed and generate enrichment to the dichotomy emerging from Jickling & Wals’ heuristic.

Jickling & Wals consider globalization mainly as a threat for transformative and participatory learning processes. Dobson, by contrast, starts from the asymmetrical character of globalization to redefine citizenship. As such, he attributes to ESD the status of a Trojan horse concept for the achievement of more justice and sustainability. Others, like Barry and Sumner, too, exercise less restraint and emphasize the potential of ESD by putting forward a variety of guiding principles.

The key issue, then, concerns the way in which ESD is brought into practice. Our exploration of literature on sustainable citizenship gave rise to a multidimensional perspective on ESD. The four dimensions we have distinguished will be used for future research on international policy discourse as well as practices in the field of ESD.

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